

# Review of The Quiet Damage: Qanon and the Destruction of the American Family

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ABSTRACT: Review of the book *The Quiet Damage: QAnon and the Destruction of the American Family*, by J. Cook

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Journalist Jesselyn Cook's new book, *The Quiet Damage: QAnon and the Destruction of the American Family*, is an intimate, harrowing portrait of five Americans forever changed by the QAnon conspiracist movement. Cook's immersive reporting takes the reader into the lives of Matt, Emily, Doris, Alice, and Kendra, and explores the reasons why this demographically diverse group begin to believe QAnon's central tenets: that there is a globalist cabal of liberal elites engaged in child trafficking and ritual child sexual assault that former President Trump is secretly combatting and that justice will be served in a (perpetually deferred) future day of reckoning referred to as "The Storm," which will bring about "The Great Awakening," a mass change of consciousness for a previously denialist public.

Notably not an academic text, where *The Quiet Damage* excels is when Cook uses the detail and texture of her conspiracist believers' lives to explain what makes QAnon compelling to them. The elderly Tuscaloosan, Doris, for example, is the victim of an unethical pancreatic cancer misdiagnosis in 2016 that undermines her faith in the medical establishment, and this provides her with a gateway to QAnon through exposure to Facebook groups devoted to exposing predatory healthcare professionals and sharing alternative health practices. In contrast, Alice is a lapsed Berniecrat in the San Francisco Bay Area who sees in "The Storm" and "The Great Awakening" a continuation of the emancipatory political ideals that she so fervently supported during the Sanders campaigns. Different still, Kendra, a black woman in Detroit, turns to QAnon to explain American racial injustice and to contextualize her lifelong distrust of government. While Matt, a God-fearing Missouri Republican, delves into QAnon alone in his basement on disability leave as a way of continuing to play a masculine protector role for his family. Finally, Emily, a progressive lawyer in Tennessee, falls into QAnon when she becomes an empty nester, having not fully contended with the trauma of her late husband's death by suicide over 20 years previous.

In librarianship and LIS, we often conceive of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation as abstract phenomena at work in society—as problems to be remedied by way of journalists' and librarians' teaching of programmatic source verification heuristics or their provision of the right, carefully vetted information itself (Sullivan, 2018). What Cook powerfully emphasizes, instead, through her account of five particular individuals, is that information problems are rarely, if ever, so simple. Rather, these problems arise out of a unique combination of a person's affect, individual history, and material circumstance. Cook, in her afterword section, plainly states that the (post-)truth crisis is actually a hidden, material crisis:

In QAnon, the lonely found belonging, the aimless found direction, and the hurt and angry found validation. The truth is that *the truth* is almost beside the point. Facts alone won't fix this; to get bogged down in debunking falsehoods is to tackle the symptom, not the cause. What we're facing is as much a wellness crisis as it is a disinformation crisis. Our interventions need to reflect that. (p. 230)

If, as Cook puts forward, the "disinformation crisis" is actually a shadow wellness crisis, where does this leave librarianship and LIS? This is a complicated question to ask, of course, because information literacy (IL), as a discursive construct, has been central to librarianship's professional legitimation (O'Connor, 2009; Zvyagintseva & Blechinger, 2023) and intra-institutional and societal demonstration of value (Nicholson, 2018) over the past 50 years. Facing

down the prospect of a second Trump presidency—perversely, another potential boom period for IL librarians?—at a time when significant figures in IL theorization are openly grappling with its limits and proposing the idea of de-centering a particular, “stuck” version of it within academic librarianship (Seale & Nicholson, 2024), the question of whether IL is materially useful feels live in a way that it has never felt in my (admittedly short) professional career as a librarian.

Along these lines, Cook’s book leads one to soberly wonder whether the best remedy for the “disinformation crisis” in American life isn’t CRAAP, RADAR, or SIFT, but, instead, affordable housing and fully socialized medicine. Though Doris’ story is the only one in *The Quiet Damage* that directly involves healthcare, other writing on QAnon like Will Sommer’s excellent *Trust the Plan*, has interpreted the movement’s obsession with debt forgiveness and the revelation of miracle drugs withheld by the cabal post-“The Storm” as cognitive dissonance-relieving fantasies that help believers cope with contemporary American life’s in-built structural violence. For a recent example of this current within the movement, one has to look no further than the obsession with “medbeds” (Klepper, 2024; Saslow, 2024).

Where *The Quiet Damage* proves to be less compelling and truer to its status as a trade book is when Cook strays too far from the specificity of her individual conspiracy believers’ lives into pop psychologizing them. For example, Emily, the widowed Tennessean lawyer, is said to have narcissistic personality disorder, though this is, bizarrely, only speculated by the therapist of one of her children. Having very tenuously established that Emily has narcissistic personality disorder, Cook can then thread the needle by stating, “[n]arcissism was one of very few personality traits that was a robust predictor of conspiracy theory thinking” (p. 23). Examining Cook’s notes, we can see that she is attributing this sweeping claim to one paper from *Current Opinion in Psychology* published in 2022. Critiquing a trade book for using research in this fashion may be somewhat unfair, but moments like this where Cook feels the need to zoom out from the specific circumstances of a person’s life to what she interprets to be some consensus in the study of conspiracist psychology are, by far, the book’s weakest sections. Thankfully, however, they arise only occasionally, and the rest of the time, Cook’s accounts of becoming Q-Pilled and—in some but, strikingly, not *all* cases—deprogrammed, prove to be compulsively readable.

*The Quiet Damage* is a valuable book for librarians and LIS scholars to read because of its attention to detail. The damage wrought by conspiracy theories like QAnon has always been manifest in unique lives and specific families. Reading clinically and abstractly about a phenomenon like the “backfire effect” is drastically different than experiencing it narrativized, as it is in Alice’s story in *The Quiet Damage* when she posts about QAnon on Facebook only to get excoriated by her liberal friend network and driven even deeper into conspiracist online circles. *The Quiet Damage*’s specificity and relatability may also make it a strong text to use pedagogically with students. In Matt, Emily, Doris, Alice, and Kendra, students may see facets of their own experience online reflected back to them in ways that they may not when running through rote source evaluation activities or being lectured about the peer review process. If, as Hannah (2023) has provocatively demonstrated, IL itself and the ACRL *Framework* are remarkably amenable to conspiracist thinking, it may be worth exploring other ways of convening conversations about some of these issues with students—ways that do not shy away from affect, personal history, and material circumstance.

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