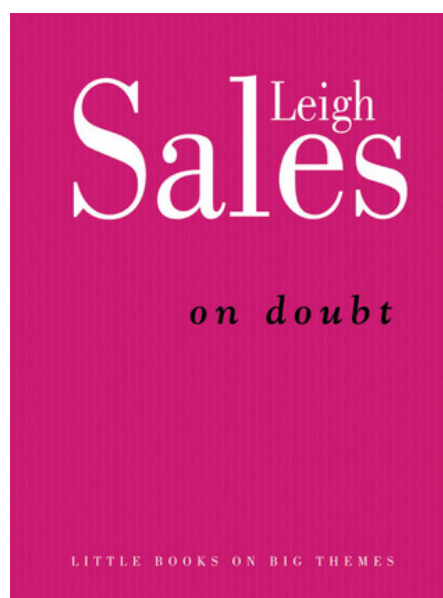




On Doubt

Leigh Sales

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On Doubt Leigh Sales

In this personal essay, one of Australia's most respected journalists argues in favour of a doubtful mind.

When society seems to demand confidence and certainty, how much courage does it take to admit doubt, especially self-doubt?

MUP's Little Books on Big Themes series pairs Australia's leading thinkers and cultural figures with some of the big themes in life.

On Doubt Details

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From Reader Review On Doubt for online ebook

Sarah Jones says

5/5 easy to read essay and well argued

Andrew says

There is certainty. Then there is doubt. There is opinion. Then there is objective truth. There is faith. Then there is trust.

It is a strange state of affairs when we have a journalist, such as Leigh Sales, telling us all about doubt. Journalists might practice doubt, but they certainly don't produce it, package it, and push it to the public. Journalists peddle certainty, not doubt. This happened. That happened. This person's an expert. That person's a victim. Never does a 'maybe' or a 'might' make the front page headlines. But maybe that's just a matter of news style and form. Maybe that's why Leigh Sales wrote an essay on the subject rather than put together a Lateline news bulletin. A news report that could have been followed by an interview with an expert on doubt. An expert that would probably be Leigh Sales now, she has, after-all, produced a book on the subject, albeit a very little book.

For Leigh Sales, doubt is instinctive, a natural state of being. She is uneasy about those who don't doubt. According to her, people like Sarah Palin, with their "unwavering certainty in themselves and their beliefs and opinions," suffer from a form of "moral vanity." But Sales isn't certain about this. If Sales was certain, she would fall into league with the rest of Australia's high-profile commentators. That obnoxious bunch of people "who act - in public at least - as if they have never experienced a second of self-doubt or entertained the thought that they might be wrong." So Sales might be wrong about doubt, but that doesn't mean we should disregard her 10,000 word essay. It is after-all an essay. On doubt. Which is what the essay form is all about. Doubt.

According to Sales, most contemporary commentary stinks of certainty. Yet she has a nostalgia for journalists such as Walter Cronkite, Edward R Murrow and Walter Lippman who "were the voices of reason and cool authority". Surely a writer with a voice of authority would also stink of certainty. But possibly the difference here is a matter of hot authority versus cool authority. Sales infers that the hot authority of the contemporary commentator is achieved by shouting "more inflammatory invective louder than anybody else".

Cool authority is probably accomplished by following the sage advice of 12th century French philosopher Pierre Abelard, a man that would be the doubt expert sitting opposite Sales in a Lateline interview, that is of course if he wasn't long dead. The philosophy of Abelard informs much of Sales' ideas 'on doubt,' she even chooses to open the book with a quote from him:

The beginning of wisdom is found in doubting; by doubting we come to the question, and by seeking we may come upon the truth.

Sales shares the view of the former face of Meet the Press, Tim Russert, who says that he tries "very, very hard not to tell people, 'This is what I believe', or 'This is good', or 'This is bad'. But rather, 'This is what I'm learning in my reporting'." So cool authority comes from learning, not necessarily from what you have

learnt, but rather from acknowledging that you are still learning. Sales writes that the “application of a doubtful mind is the best way to wisdom and insight” and that doubt is “is enshrined in journalism’s foundations - objectivity and balance”.

But objectivity is a tricky concept, especially for the doubtful mind, and Sales acknowledges this. Sales writes that “no reporter can be perfectly objective - every day every story involves subjective judgments - but if we give up striving for objectivity, if we stop examining ourselves for closed mindedness, then all is lost”. Striving, learning, seeking, and most significantly trying or trialling, these are the tenets of a doubtful mind, but these are also the functions of the essay form.

The word essay was born from the French *essayer*, to try or to attempt. Sales is in a sense arguing for the essay form. The doubtful mind attempts to understand, or to know. But the doubtful mind never knows, the doubtful mind always has another question to ask, and the doubtful mind is always ready and willing to hear another’s answer.

Sales mentions the recent dispute between Robert Manne and Gerard Henderson. Manne had written an article for the Monthly about radical journalist Wilfred Burchett and Gerard Henderson disagreed with some of what was written. Henderson and Manne debated the topic via email, and then decided to publish all of their email correspondence through their respective journals, the Sydney Institute Quarterly and the Monthly. Sales couldn’t comprehend how each could have such an immovable sense of rightness:

I can’t understand how each could have felt so certain of his own rightness and of the value of his own opinion that he was prepared to move so many pages of an argument from the private inbox to the public domain.

A true essay expresses no illusion of rightness. An essay is an exploration, an attempt. An essay doubts. An essay writer doubts themselves. Sales writes that this is the problem of contemporary commentary. Not enough doubters. I would argue that the problem is that there are not enough essayists. Essayists who write that they lived, they experienced this and they think that. They think. They consider. But most of all: they try. This is the beauty of Melbourne University Press’ Little Books on Big Themes, of which ‘On doubt’ is a part of. Writers are invited to choose a topic, and write a 10,000 word essay on it. They try the topic out. Sales chose doubt. Her second choice was embarrassment. The Little Books bring essays onto the bookshelves and out of the journals. The independent publication of each essay, in its own little book, also seems to withdraw the writer from any particular scene or sphere of influence. There are no battle lines drawn, no binaries, and the culture wars seem to be far off in some distant land.

The Monthly, under Sally Warhaft, was one of the few regular publications that was beginning to foster an essay culture in Australia, but that too, under the influence of Robert Manne, began to regress into the kind of commentary that Sales describes as “more concerned with point-scoring than with educating audiences,” a commentary that plays to its ‘own cliques, neglecting the wider public’. The Monthly’s downfall commenced when Manne stonewalled a decision by Warhaft to publish an article by Peter Costello.

According to Gideon Haigh, “Manne stated weightily that The Monthly was a ‘social democrat’ magazine,” and that Warhaft was wrong in believing The Monthly to be independent of any cultural or political bias. It is probably naive to expect any publication to be completely independent in the same way it is naive to expect any journalist to be completely objective, but the Monthly under Warhaft strived to be such a publication.

The Monthly doubted itself, it never seemed to be sure of what it was; was it a political journal, was it a cultural magazine, was it a literary review? The Monthly experimented and meandered. It was a publication that always seemed to be attempting to be something, and because of this, it was a publication of doubt. It could have been the journal of essays this country needs, a journal that documents people trying to work

things out, a journal where we could read about what people are learning, not what people know. Instead it's a social democrat magazine.

After reading 'On doubt,' I have become a certainty sceptic and a doubt seeker. Sales writes of the culture of certainty in the Bush administration, where Bush told his advisors 'I don't need people around me who are not steady... And if there's a kind of hand-wringing attitude going on when time's are tough, I don't like it'. People want certainty in their leaders. We never hear the Prime Minister say "It might work, it might not work, but goddamn-it, we're going to bloody try". Rudd can't even admit that the treasury projections are only a possibility, and he doesn't want to doubt his treasury, they're experts, and he is a man of faith. In a culture of getting-things-done, doubters aren't doers, but as Sales writes doubts "prevent us from acting recklessly without regards for consequences." The world would probably be in a little less trouble if we had a few more doubters, but what do I know, I'm just trying things out.

Review originally posted at my blog The Jackette

Brona's Books says

Leigh Sales is an ABC journalist and current affairs presenter who has been curious and sceptical all her life. She was the quintessential, questioning, ever-doubting teenager that grew up to do the same thing throughout her career.

She aims to challenge blind faith and over-confidence, but living life with a doubtful mind has it's own pitfalls including anxiety and a lack of an all-consuming passion to name two.

The essay is dotted with fascinating little stories about her childhood, George Bush, Sarah Palin, old style journalists and public disputes between journalists & historians.

There's even a 12th century philosopher, Pierre Abelard...
Full review here - <http://bronasbooks.blogspot.com.au/20...>

Kelly Anderson says

A great essay on the essential qualities our media and many of our leaders are lacking. The capacity to question, challenge and use evidence to justify the truth, instead of producing "fake news" via opinion. Worth a read! Proves why Sales is one of Australia's greatest Journalists.

Lia says

Cracker of an essay.

Life in the modern age.

Leigh Sales is an ABC journalist here in Aus who is known for her forthright and probing journalistic style. Initially published in 2009 with an updated afterword at the end.

Stay tuned for my Essay a Week video coming up.

Sam Schroder says

Short, sharp and to the point, this essay, written in 2008 and re-published recently with a 2017 postscript, examines the notion of facts from the perspective of doubt. Sales explores the values of truth and accountability, arguing that it is only when we are curious and demand scrutiny that we begin to form an objective understanding. Blind faith, over-confidence, a certainty that our opinions are facts - these are the enemies of reasoned logic in our post-truth world. And Sales believes that doubt - the desire to ask and seek clarity - is the only real answer to overcoming the instability and 'shouters' of our time. An informative read.

Loki says

A plea for reason and skepticism, Sales originally wrote this essay in 2008. (In a postscript, she wryly comments on how every issue she brings up in the original text is worse in 2017.) It's a calm, reasoned plea for healthy skepticism - not so much denying the existence of fake news as asking that we be able to prove the fakeness if we're making that claim. Sales positions doubt as a virtue, seeing it as a necessary precondition to open-mindedness and truth-seeking. It's also, strangely enough, a fun read, enlivened with personal anecdotes and the odd example from her work and that of her colleagues in the world of journalism. Definitely worth your time.

Francesca says

Read it in about 2 hours and was blown away by how lovely the stories were given their content.

I may be biased by my admiration of Leigh Sales rigour as a journalist, but now even more so for the views she presents here.

Would read again, to remind myself to question more...

Ernest says

This work is an extended essay on doubt, aiming to challenge blind faith and over-confidence while still realising that constant doubting carries its own issues. No mere polemic written to burgeoningly champion curiosity or dryly approach it from an overly theoretical view, Sales shares the moments and thinking in her life that have led her to her views and successful journalist career, melding insightful observations with gentle yet forensic thoughts.

Let it not be said that I agree with everything presented. For example, I differ on the conclusions she draws regarding the nature of religious faith and doubt. I actually think that there is a very real and needed place for doubt within faith, and that it is possible (however paradoxical it seems) for faith and doubt to coexist.

However, the strength of this slim and very readable work is not in whether one agrees with the premise or the various thoughts presented. Instead, it is in how it provokes thoughts and questions about important ideas

of truth, scrutiny, and doubt.

This work was first published in 2009. Since then, the very nature of truth and language in public debate and life has (unfortunately negatively) changed, dramatically so. Sales muses on this in her 'Postscript 2017' (pages 91-144), reflecting on international personalities like President Donald Trump and local incidents like interviews in the leadup to the 2016 Australian federal election with then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten. This addition adds to what was already a very worthwhile read.

Karen says

I have to admit (sheepishly) that I don't know Leigh Sales' work all that well; but the moment I read about her incurable stickybeak tendencies, and her lack of faith (How to believe when you can't know whether it's true?) I felt we were kindred spirits. On Doubt is Leigh's defence of the importance of neutrality in journalism. It's an eloquent manifesto of what, how and why she does it. It is disquieting to notice that, in the 8 years since first publication, things seem to have gone backwards, with fake news and opinionated reports more common than ever.

This edition contains a substantial postscript reflecting on changes to the political and media landscape between 2009 and 2017.

Rosalie says

4 1/2 stars

A little gem in the Little Books on Big Themes series. On Doubt was first published in 2009 but this more recent edition includes a postscript written in 2017.

Leigh Sales begins her discussion on the topic of Doubt by revisiting her early childhood when she was always in trouble for constantly asking questions and/or demanding "But why?" Even at any early age she was not simply rebellious but persistently inquisitive. Due to her mother's stance on religion she had little to no formal religious education but again being curious she willingly joined church groups after she left school but she found it difficult to acquire faith when she could not prove the events in the Bible – "she needed answers based on reason, evidence and logic".

Sales had personal doubts about her own abilities, her attractiveness, and other general pursuits but found being doubtful rather than being certain, enabled her to have an open mind which she believes was beneficial to genuine learning. Her doubts about religion spread to doubts about politics and her quest to find out more about current events lead her into journalism.

In this book she argues that the great thinkers who sought truth historically; scientists, philosophers, writers, artists, revolutionaries, and explorers – all had to have doubts about the status quo so that they could push beyond what was presumed certain and break away from the traditional thoughts. Hence contemporary science is not based on faith and all new ideas must be tested and peer evaluated before gaining acceptance by the scientific community. Sales continues "that the application of a doubtful mind is the best way to wisdom and insight" and this she believes should be the foundation of journalism if it is to be objective and balanced. She laments the growing influence of 'opinion' in the mainstream media as this is based on an individual's "certainty" so that existing beliefs and biases are broadcast without making any attempt at offering a diversity of views.

An additional concern regarding doubt over certainty arises when influential people "make doubt seem like heresy or stupidity". If you "have second thoughts.... or are less confident in your own opinions.... you are weak"... And "it encourages a culture of dishonesty". Sales uses George Bush as an example of a leader who

was not prone to doubt and did not want advisers who offered uncertainties.

Additionally, in her postscript she identifies how far we have come from honesty via social media distorting the truth in our daily lives and showing only our “best possible selves to the world”. Also, the deployment of propaganda to discredit all and sundry has now become the norm. President Trump is a master of media manipulation when he uses the term ‘fake news’ to “discredit legitimate investigative journalism that simply is not to their liking”.

An enjoyable little modern philosophical read.

Nick says

A well written and easy little read. An argument for doubt in an age of false confidence and blind faith.

However I was left a bit short with wondering about Sales meta-theory of doubt. Doubt is good, but how much exactly? The essay seems uncomfortable in trying to answer this. Are we to emulate Descartes and doubt even our own existence? Or are there some things we can have ‘blind faith’ in. The post-script does address this in part (I.e. that not all doubts are created equal). The position taken in this book is a difficult one to defend: seemingly arguing for both fundamental truth on one hand and relativism on the other.

However this is my internal conflict as well. So maybe it was just hitting too close to home. There may be some projection here. And I probably shouldn’t expect this 50 page essay to sort that for me.

Andrew Doohan says

A very enjoyable and insightful essay from Leigh Sales on the question of doubt or, more specifically, how the presence of doubt should make someone infinitely wiser - because of the constant questioning and exploration that doubt engenders - yet seems to be seen as a weakness in contemporary society, which highly praises certainty, particularly in some political leaders.

Originally published in 2009, this edition has been updated to include a 2017 postscript which, interestingly enough, all but proves the position that Sales enunciated in her original version. The saturation of social media, blogs, and 'niche news' highlights the way certainty is praised and doubt rubbished in contemporary society, and which, as a result, has led to a decline in the nature of public discourse.

Though short in length, this updated version of her original works strikes a chord with those who see something fundamentally diseased with what passes for contemporary dialogue. Sales' original essay would have been worth reading in and of itself; this updated version must surely be considered compulsory reading for anyone who seeks to understand the society in which we live.

Very highly recommended.

Tracey says

For those who don't know Leigh Sales is an Australian journalist who has fronted news programs such as Lateline and the 7.30 Report on the ABC. The one thing that is universally accepted by all is that there is no pleasure to be had by politician when they are being interviewed by Leigh Sales. She is determined to cut

through the carefully rehearsed talking points, uncover the truth and is respected by all.

'On Doubt' was originally penned by Sales in 2009, with an additional chapter being included in 2017. For a short essay, Sales manages to cram in a lot of big ideas and themes. From her own beginnings as that rebellious child always asking why to a journalist wondering about the future of the profession.

A short, highly insightful read and if you are budding journalist you need to read this.

Sarah-Jane says

Leigh Sales' On Doubt is a thought-provoking meditation on the value of constant questioning and testing of accepted truths. Originally published in 2009, this edition was re-released in September 2017 with a postscript from Sales in which she describes 2009 as a "golden era" compared with today. It should be required reading for the "post-truth" world.
