Pastels and Pedophiles takes the reader on a wild ride through the world of QAnon and its adherents and raises some important questions and points on what can be done to minimize its impact and dismantle the movement in a post-January 6th world. The book is written for a popular audience but will serve scholars well as the footnotes are rich with the primary source materials Mia Bloom and Sophia Moskalenko used to document the creation and spread of the movement from 4chan to Facebook. The book’s main purpose is to illuminate why QAnon, with its roots in incel-dominated forums, was so successful in attracting middle-class white women through its focus on puzzles and supposed crimes against children. Through careful reporting and psychological analysis, Bloom and Moskalenko explain how Q (an anonymous poster or posters of conspiracy theories, originally on the internet site 4chan in 2017), the Donald Trump campaign, and Russian intelligence used a combination of pandemic-intensified loneliness, frustration with mainstream media, and distrust of the government to convince millions of people around the world that a cabal of pedophiles and child murderers were colluding to steal an election from the one man who could save America.

Pastels and Pedophiles opens with two chapters documenting the history of QAnon as an online movement and its links to the failed attempt to disrupt the certification of the US presidential election on January 6, 2021. In this background section, the authors also give an all too brief analysis of how QAnon harnesses antisemitic rhetoric around blood libel. This section is too thin and misses much of the work done by historians of religion and politics, particularly the work of Thomas Lecaque, who has published extensively on the links between QAnon, the Crusades, and medieval antisemitism. A richer historical context for the threads of white supremacy, antisemitism, and conspiracy theories that support the stories Q spun for his followers would help to explain why and how they resonate with a particular demographic. Despite the brevity of the historical context, Bloom and Moskalenko give a succinct and
thorough account of the recent history of conspiracy theories and their culmination in QAnon.

With this background of QAnon's origins in the dark web message boards and its proliferation into mainstream social media, Bloom and Moskalenko unpack how the largest segment of QAnon adherents, white middle-class women, were sucked into the conspiracy. The key is that Q and his supporters gamified their movement through leading posts that provided “clues” to lead readers to the conclusion that the originator wanted and then used the sense of accomplishment and community created by the game to lead participants deeper and deeper into the conspiracy theory. Once engaged, QAnon adherents were radicalized through appeals to their emotions, a need to help, and a desire to be part of a community. QAnon filled social and emotional needs in ways that quickly became addictive and encouraged followers to buy into increasingly outrageous claims.

With the failure of the January 6th attack on Congress and the subsequent arrest of hundreds of the violent protestors who stormed the Capitol building, Bloom and Moskalenko assess life after the ultimate failure of QAnon. They break QAnon- ers into three groups—die-hards, doubters, and dissenters—and discuss how family and friends can help to bring each group back into mainstream life and help them repair their relationships to prevent future re-indoctrination or radicalization. It is in this final section that Moskalenko's psychological training takes the lead, and the chapters are filled with practical advice for people who love someone who has bought into the conspiracy and those who want to build a life after QAnon. The book does not have a traditional conclusion but instead ends with an FAQ that summarizes the book's argument and main instructions for helping to deprogram and deplatform QAnon and other conspiracy theories.

Like QAnon itself, this book is also a product of its time. The authors are honest about the speed at which the book was written and published. As more information emerged about the people who manipulated QAnon followers to attack the US Capitol only six months before the book was published, the story they tell is incomplete. This book tells only part of the story, the part of the story that the media told over the past three years. Bloom and Moskalenko tell the story succinctly and in detail, but until the findings of the congressional committee are published, we will not know how deep government officials were in the QAnon conspiracy. I do hope that when the investigations are complete, the authors will return to release a second edition and tell the end of the story. The ways middle-class white women are manipulated by political groups is central to understanding the power of current attacks on democracy, civil rights, and bodily autonomy currently underway in the halls of state capitol buildings, in Washington, DC, and around the world.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57558

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.