

By Dwight Garner — *The New York Times* 20 February 2023

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It All Started, In A Way, With Hunter S Thompson. In “Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas” (1971), His Gonzo-Psychedelic, Thompson Described Ingesting A Rare And Illicit Drug Called Adrenochrome. You Could Obtain It Only From The Adrenaline Glands Of A *Living* Human Body.

“That Stuff Makes Pure Mescaline Seem Like Ginger Beer,” Thompson’s Lawyer Tells Him. “You’ll Go Completely Crazy If You Take Too Much.” The Lawyer Had Gotten It — The Freaky Details Matter — From A Hobby Satanist And Possible Child Molester.

The Scene Is Brilliant. On Adrenochrome, Thompson Feels He’s “Wired Into A 220-Volt Socket.” And, Like So Many Scenes In H.S.T’s Anarchic Corpus, It’s Fiction. Adrenochrome Does Exist (It’s A Byproduct Of Adrenaline), But It’s Not A Recreational Drug, You Don’t Harvest It From Living People, It Has No Current Medical Use And Its Effects Are Said To Be Negligible. It’s More Sarsaparilla Than Smack.

Flash Forward To 2017, Early In The Trump Presidency. From The Wastewaters Of The Internet, Cryptic Comments Float Up From An Anonymous Figure Known Only As Q. He’s Thought, By The Credulous, To Have A High-Level Security Clearance. His Words Are Taken Seriously, As If Delivered By Diplomatic Pouch.

Q Keeps Typing, Albeit Rarely. He (Nearly Everyone Agrees That Q Is Male) Thinks Hillary Clinton Will Be Arrested, Secret Military Operations Will Commence And So On. Q’s Ideas Are Picked Up, Augmented, Remixed And Amplified On Facebook, Twitter And YouTube, And Before Long, The Following Has A Name — QAnon — And People With “Q” Flags Are Turning Up At Trump Rallies.

The Going Gets Weird , To Paraphrase Thompson, And Adrenochrome Turns Pro. It’s A Core QAnon Belief, Feeble But Sprawling, Like An L Ron Hubbard Novel — That Elites From The Democratic Party, Hollywood And Big Finance Are Keeping Thousands Of Children In Underground Tunnels (!) Where They Are Tortured By Pedophiles (!!) Who Harvest Adrenochrome From Their Blood (!!!) Because It’s An Elixir That Wards Off Aging; It’s Beelzebubian Botox. When You Believe That, And Millions Do, There’s Merch, Dietary Supplements And Get-Rich-Quick Schemes That May Also Interest You.

In His Short, Punchy And Well-Reported New Book, “Trust The Plan: The Rise Of QAnon And The Conspiracy That Unhinged America,” Will Sommer Traces The Rise Of This Obsession, And Others Like It, Finding Them To Be Direct Echoes Of Blood Libel, The Antisemitic Myth, Pervasive In The Middle Ages, That Jews Murdered Christian Boys To Use Their Blood In Religious Rituals.

Sommer, A Reporter For The Daily Beast, Does Much More. He Traces The Rise Of Lawless Message Boards Like 8chan, He Profiles The Key Players, He Chronicles QAnon's Influence On The Jan.6 Attack On The Capitol, He Sneaks Into QAnon Rallies, He Analyzes Republican Reactions To The Blight In Their Fields, And He Breathes Deep Of The Madness, While Staying Blissfully Sane Himself.

Sommer Resorts To Wearing Disguises At Rallies, As Would You If You Had To Spend Time Around Excitable, Apocalypse- Minded Shouters Will Never Believe That The Name Of The Website You Work For Is A Reference To A Newspaper In Evelyn Waugh's Satirical Novel "Scoop" (1938). There Is A Similarity Between Fleet Street's Sensational Newspapers, Of Which Waugh's Imaginary Daily Beast Was One, And QAnon And Fox News. For All Three, The Workaday Method, As The Old Credo Has It, Is: First Simplify, Then Exaggerate, Then Repeat.

Up To Now, I've Mostly Avoided Reading Too Deeply About QAnon. From A Distance It Seemed Dumb, Confusing, Boring And Scary All At Once, And I Had Worldle To Do. I Hoped The Story Would Go Away, Like Smallpox, Rinderpest And Madison Cawthorn. But QAnon's Influence Has Metastasized. Its Believers And Former Boosters Now Hold Public Office — Exhibit A Is That Subtle Thinker And Georgia Congressman Marjorie Taylor Greene — And Thus Have Influence Over How The Rest Of Us Live.

Sommer Is The Perfect Person To Tell This Story. He's A Media Obsessive, Almost Morbidly Well Informed. His Interest In Broadcasting Skews Republican.

I Was Raised In A Conservative Texas Family, Where Road Trips Meant Listening To Rush Limbaugh's Talk Radio Show And Ayn Rand Audiobooks. I Cried Over Ronald Reagan's Funeral, And Pored Over A Bill O' Reilly Book For Teenagers For Advice On How To Handle Dilemmas Like Smoking And Premarital Sex. But Even After I Left The Party Behind, I Nursed A Perverse Appetite For Republican Media Personalities And The Ideological Struggles Of The American Right.

Among The Takeaways From "Trust The Plan" Is The Cynicism Of Most Major Figures In The QAnon Universe. To Paraphrase Christopher Hitchens On Jerry Falwell: If You Gave Them Enemas They Could be Buried In Match Boxes. Their Followers Are Sheep To Be Shorn.

These Leaders Are Taking Dangerous Advantage, And They Know It Of Marginalized And Disrespected People, Many With Debts Or Serious Health, And Promising Them Redemption In A Coming "Storm," Led By The Messianic Figure Of Donald Trump, That Will Wipe Away Institutions And Thus Their Problems. It's A Violent Fantasy That's Goading People Into Violent Real-World Actions. A Ridiculous Sticky Bomb Has Been Attached To The Underside Of The American Experiment, And It Could Still Go Off.

A Surprise About Sommer's Book Is How Moving It Frequently Is. "Trust the Plan" Ripens Into Tragedy. It Describes Those Moments When Family Members Realize That Dad Has Leaped The Hedge Of Rationality — That He Isn't Kidding When He Talks About Trump And Conspiracies And Experimental Vaccines And The Impending Storm, And He Wants You To Believe His Ideas Too. People have Often Called Sommer For Help. How To Expel This Virus. He Isn't Sure What To Tell Them. His Book Makes You Homesick For The Oldest And Simplest Of American Virtues: Knowledge, Skepticism And Sanity.