

## Book Review: 'The Scope of Skepticism'

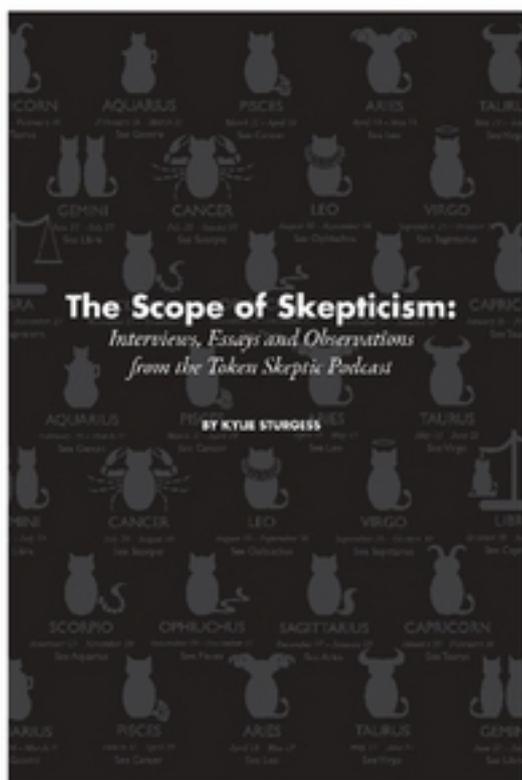
Written by D.J. Grothe

Tuesday, 28 August 2012 15:39

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I first met Kylie Sturgess a number of years ago at Dragon\*Con, the large Southeast science fiction and fantasy fan convention, which at that time was just beginning its skeptical programming, [SkepTrack](#). In addition to speaking at Dragon\*Con, she has spoken at the World Skeptics Congress, The Amazing Meeting, QEDCon, and has twice hosted the Global Atheist Convention in Australia. She also writes for a number of skeptical organizations and publications, teaches philosophy at the high school and college level, and serves on the JREF's educational advisory panel. But all of this is in addition to her regular podcast, the [Token Skeptic](#). (The woman is a whirlwind of skepticism.)

She recently compiled various interviews and transcriptions from her podcast, and made them available as a book: [The Scope of Skepticism](#). For folks interested in the important conversations skeptics have among themselves, this is a good read. Featuring scientists like Bruce Hood, Caroline Watt and Pamela Gay, skeptic journalists and writers like Sharon Hill and Daniel Loxton, investigators like Ben Radford and Hayley Stevens, and celebrities such as Tim Minchin and Stephen Fry, the book compiles some of the best content from the nearly 150 video and audio programs that Sturgess has produced over the years.



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The transcript of her interview with Daniel Loxton is a standout. They explore well-traveled ground for the serious skeptic: what science has to say about religion, how to inculcate the scientific spirit in youngsters, if skepticism is different from atheism. But they also manage to provide fresh insights. Loxton defends a limited scope for skepticism, and, as an example, explains why he thinks that the application of scientific skepticism to ideological claims is a “catastrophe for skepticism,” pushing back against the eagerness others show to “turn skepticism into a partisan political position or a religious affiliation . . . [which] is a misuse of the language of skepticism and science.” I appreciated that when his science book for children came out ( [Evolution: How We and All Living Things Came to Be](#) ), he unwittingly stumbled into an “ongoing turf war between different brands of atheists” — contrary to his basic intention when addressing religion in the book, which was merely to “emphasize that the skeptical project should be closely tied to science and . . . the burdens and responsibilities of science.”

The Loxton interview echoes important points that Pamela Gay makes in her section of the *Scope of Skepticism*

. In 2010, Gay, who is a Christian believer and science educator, wrote a blog post on “[separating scientific truth and belief](#)

.” In her interview with Sturgess, she argues for keeping personal ideology out of the skeptics’ project: “We [skeptics and science advocates] are in a public setting where we’re trying to bring new people to the skeptics’ movement, to get more babies vaccinated, to get more people to believe [the evidence] that we landed on the moon [and so] we have to stay on message with the scientific method.”

This is an important decades-old debate, and reading these conversations between Sturgess and Loxton and Gay, I feel heartened that serious thinkers are continuing to engage on the topic.

Other interviews in the book cover the sleeves-rolled-up skepticism of Bruce Hood (who details his involvement in the investigation and [exposure of the GT200 dowsing rod bomb detector](#) ) and Ben Radford describing his investigations of various Lake Monsters and various other

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cryptids.

She interviews Sharon Hill and Hayley Stevens, who talk about their experiences with local paranormal investigations groups that pretend to be scientific. Hill, who runs the [Doubtful News](#) website, studied local paranormal investigations groups for her Masters Thesis, and discovered that while most of these groups pride themselves on being “scientific,” very few actually practice the methods of science, instead frequently veering off into deeply unethical territory, such as insisting that their clients or their homes are possessed by demons or haunted by ghosts. She found that the vast majority of these groups avoided dispassionately investigating paranormal claims like a scientific investigator would. Haley Stevens, founder of the psychic-busting [Project Barnum](#)

, recounts how she started out as a ghost hunter, a credulous paranormal investigator, and not as a skeptic. She learned through the process of sitting in various seances and hunting for countless ghosts that there is no compelling reason to believe such claims, and that even so, humility is especially important for skeptics when they engage believers who are themselves investigating such claims — she argues that skeptics should maintain an open mind about the existence of the paranormal if they want to be taken seriously by the community of the credulous, and not reject paranormal claims out of hand.

There are many other parts of the *The Scope of Skepticism* worth exploring. If you consider yourself the sort of skeptic who wants to delve a bit deeper into the arguments that giants of skepticism like Carl Sagan and James Randi and Paul Kurtz and Eugenie Scott have had over the decades, this book will serve both as an introduction and as a continuation, with bright new voices adding to the conversation.

*The Scope of Skepticism* is available in [paperback](#) for \$15.00, and for the [Amazon Kindle](#) for \$5.00 and in [Adobe Digital Edition](#) for \$7.06.



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