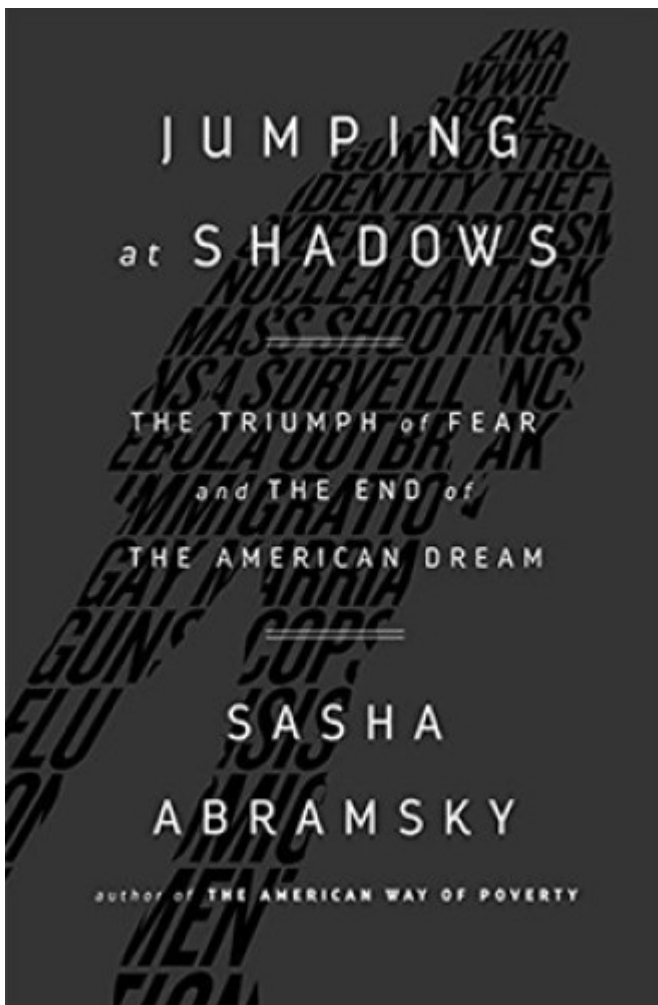


The fear loop

In our current crisis, fear is both cause and consequence.

by [Mark E. DeVries](#) in the [November 8, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Jumping at Shadows

The Triumph of Fear and the End of the American Dream

By Sasha Abramsky

Nation Books

Perfect love casts out fear, says 1 John 4:18. I've often wondered whether it's also true that perfect fear casts out love. This book, which provides a timely examination of the sources and consequences of fear, suggests that it does.

Sasha Abramsky's 2013 book *The American Way of Poverty* examined economic inequality in America. In his new book, Abramsky describes how fear plays a role in our political estrangement and argues that it gave us a president who inspires paranoia and division rather than hope and unity. The crisis that faces us is one in which fear is both cause and consequence. We are caught in a self-reinforcing loop of fear. The irony is that it's this dynamic of fear itself that should make us most afraid.

Abramsky explains how fear is mediated by the limbic system, and particularly the amygdala—the part of the brain that responds in a lightning-fast manner to potential threats and helps determine whether to fight or to flee. This evolutionary adaptation has been essential in identifying dangers and mobilizing defensive resources. The assessment of potential threats involves accurately positioning in-group members versus out-group members. Since this process has meant the difference between survival and death, it has become a finely tuned mechanism. It is a fundamentally human tendency that all of us share. Unfortunately, Abramsky argues, it has spiraled out of control to the extent that we now often perceive threats where none realistically exist.

Abramsky's examples of fearful people include survivalists, antivaccine crusaders, Trump supporters, and surveillance-obsessed parents. These examples illustrate how fear has become irrational to the point that legitimately feared things (automobile travel, climate change, autocracy) are ignored while less realistic fears (abduction, terrorist attacks, random violence) consume people's thoughts.

Abramsky's analysis of how fear played an important role in electing our current president lacks nuance and is likely to alienate the very readers he hopes to sway. Gentler language might have helped him reach a broader audience.

Abramsky seems to miss the point that impassioned resistance itself can be fueled by fear as well as by a constructive critique. Those of us who smugly view ourselves as nonfearful risk getting too comfortable in identifying *those other people* as the

fearful ones while ignoring our own fears. When we project our own fearfulness onto others, we engage in the very thing we accuse them of. Yet Abramsky rightly identifies fear as the motivator that has gotten us into our current plight. How then to conquer fear?

While not explicitly religious, the book's examples of people who choose to act contrary to fear hint at how communities of faith might respond. I found particularly inspiring the stories of the "Tucson Samaritans" who roam the desert providing comfort and provisions to refugees and paying respects to those who have perished on the way. These stories provide a glimpse of activism fueled by empathy and courage. Abramsky also hints at the idea of starting a "slow news" movement modeled after the slow food movement, suggesting that we would do well to digest our news more contemplatively and less reactively.

This book can help us examine ways in which our faith is fueled by fear, and it can also help us to move beyond it. To the extent that faith is about excluding outsiders and making us feel safe within clearly defined boundaries, it is driven by the primal evolutionary fear in which paranoia protects the clan from the threat of the other. To the extent that faith is about opening the heart, trusting divine grace, and expanding boundaries, then perhaps it can be about facing and conquering fear. The task that faces followers of Jesus today is to decry the fear that enables demagoguery while remaining attuned to the ways in which our own hearts are filled with fear. In other words, the task is to stay vigilant toward the fear that casts out love while being open to the love that casts out fear.