

## Selecting Book for MFA Book Club

September 6, 2012

I have been involved with the Memphis Freethought Alliance Book Club from the beginning. I want to briefly describe the original intent of the book club; some proposed criteria for future books; and where these books may be found. **I want to emphasize that I am only describing the traditional point of the Memphis Freethought Alliance Book Club, which book club members may want to partially or wholly modify.**

I also wanted to write this down because the MFA Book Club is associated with a freethought organization; therefore, it has been a freethought book club and not a general non-fiction (or fiction) book club.

### **Original Intent**

MFA members began the book club in 2006, primarily to discuss freethought books, including those that were more popular (e.g., NYT bestsellers, such as The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins) and less popular. The implicit goal was to educate our members about freethought, science, and other related topics.

The choice of books has generally fit within the scope of freethought that includes science, separation of church and state, religion, philosophy, current events, and books critical of various sacred cow topics. The key was that the authors took a skeptical, controversial, and thought provoking look at an issue. Most of the books have been nonfiction; however, we've also read some popular fiction associated with freethought, such as The Flying Spaghetti Monster by Bobby Henderson and Animal Farm by George Orwell .

### **Where can you find freethought books?**

You can find freethought books anywhere. However, I listed some places in which members can frequently find books that fit within the scope of freethought, that is, science, separation of church and state, religion, philosophy, current events, and books critical of various sacred cow topics.

1. **Bookstores:** The philosophy, science, biography, autobiography, and current event sections of the bookstore will have a number of books that are appropriate. In addition, there are fiction books that are also appropriate and associated with the freethought community, including The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams, Silas by George Eliot and so forth. Some of our members have also enjoyed reading autobiographies of freethinkers, such as Infidel by Ayaan Hirsi Ali.
2. **Freethought Organizations:** Organizations associated with freethought (The Skeptic Society, The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason, Americans United for Separation of Church & State, The Reason Project: Sam Harris, American Humanist Association, National Center for

Science Education, American Atheists, Freedom From Religion Foundation, Center for Inquiry, etc.) will often have recommended books on their respective websites or publications.

3. Freethought Magazines and other Publications: Freethought magazines and newspapers (Skeptical Inquirer, Free Inquiry, American Atheist, Freethought Today, etc.) will have writers recommend books or review various relevant freethought books (or authors) for their publications.
4. Mass Media: BBC, NPR, and the Point of Inquiry podcast will also frequently interview authors who've written freethought books.
5. Prometheus Books: Prometheus books often will publish freethought books that other publishing companies may choose not to print because of their lack of mass popularity (or popular appeal).

### **General Criteria for a Good Memphis Freethought Alliance Book:**

IMPORTANT: Don't interpret these guidelines as the Gospel Truth! Be flexible. These criteria are only suggestions for determining if the books are appropriate for MFA Book Club.

1. MFA Mission: The book fits with the mission of Memphis Freethought Alliance, which is to "advance reason, science, and secular government through education." Some people will naturally be very loose with their opinion of what fits and does not fit. Most of the authors of our books have relied on critical thinking (not emotional appeal, wishful thinking, etc.) to address controversial topics and sacred cows, that is, religious or non-religious but popularly held beliefs.
2. Quality of the Author: The quality of the author, writing and the accomplishments of the writer should count for something. However, it is not absolutely necessary. Some MFA Book Club books have been chosen that were written by freethinkers who are not full-time or professional writers. For example, a local freethinker may write a book that people want to read. Or, a MFA Book Club member may have bought a book from a freethought conference by an unknown writer who is relevant and interesting.
3. The Arguments and Intent: The intent of the author should be very relevant. MFA supports critical and honest thinking over propaganda; therefore, some questions may be as follows. Is the author being critical about a topic and presenting coherent and logical arguments for his or her point of view? Is the author engaging in a number of logical fallacies to argue the points? Does the author provide some evidence for his stance when possible? Reading propaganda books is generally discouraged unless, for example, the book is very popular and MFA Book Club members want to become familiar with it.
4. Discussion: Will the book generate thinking and discussion among the book club members?

Sincerely,

Jason Grosser

President, Memphis Freethought Alliance