

## A CONVERSATION WITH SHAWN LAWRENCE OTTO

### What inspired you to write *Fool Me Twice*?

I organized the first presidential science debate, in 2008, between Barack Obama and John McCain. At the time it was the largest political initiative in the history of science, which was weird when you think about it. Science is always political. But scientists had disengaged from the debate and basically ceded the definition of reality to other social forces.

When we came on the scene and put up a website calling for a presidential science debate, we had 38,000 scientists and engineers sign on within a few weeks. We'd clearly touched a nerve. I ran into so much opposition to the idea – from the media, from the campaigns, and from scientists themselves – that I decided to write a book about it and how we have arrived at a place in our national dialogue where most of our major unsolved challenges revolve around science policy issues. And yet, it's more taboo for candidates to talk about science than it is about religion.

### What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing your award-winning book?

The most interesting thing was how hungry everyone was to talk about this topic,

and the amazing access I had to the top minds in the country. It was really a pleasure and an amazing, humbling experience downloading their knowledge and putting it all together in a grand picture.

### What research did you undertake in writing *Fool Me Twice*?

Through the science debate initiative I had developed relationships with hundreds of leading scientists, journalists, members of Congress, university and organization presidents and corporate CEOs. I started by conducting a lot of interviews with them and the book began to take shape as I condensed their wisdom.

Then I went back and did a lot of reading of the foundations of science and democracy, and how Western science emerged from religion as a way of understanding the will of God through observing His creation, what they at the time called Natural Philosophy, which was a sort of radical, anti-authoritarian thing. All those ideas from the Gutenberg Bible and Luther's do-it-yourself religion on down through Bacon, Newton, Coke, Locke, Hume, and on to Jefferson and Franklin helped form the basis for the relationship between science, democracy and anti-authoritarianism.

### How long did it take to write the book?

That's sort of a trick question because much of the research and thinking I did evolved over time as I worked on the Science Debate initiative. And in some ways this reminds me of the old Picasso story – a woman runs into Picasso on the street in Paris and asks him for a portrait. He takes ten minutes and hands her an incredible work of art, and charges her an incredible fortune for it. She objects, "That just took you ten minutes!" "No," he tells her, "it took me my whole life." I'm no Picasso and this isn't a painting, but in some ways the book took me my whole life. That said, I wrote the first draft in about two months.

### How does being a Minnesotan inform your writing?

The Loft is a tremendous resource we have here in Minnesota. My college education at Macalester and learning how to be a critical thinker really helped me as well. My experiences with Minnesota statewide and local politics taught me a lot of nuances that I learned so much from and that I draw on in the book. Plus, everybody's quirky in Minnesota, as Garrison Keillor frequently reminds us. So, to be a good writer all I had to do was let my quirky Minnesotan flag fly. But also keep it politely reserved at the same time.

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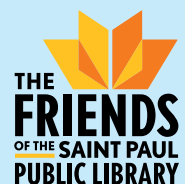
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A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards & The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library

24TH ANNUAL

# MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

**General Nonfiction Winner**

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## FOOL ME TWICE

FIGHTING *the* ASSAULT  
on SCIENCE in AMERICA

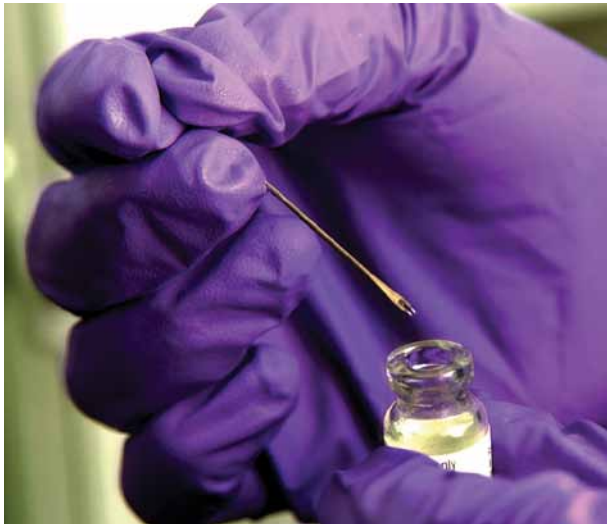


***Fool Me Twice:***  
***Fighting the Assault on Science in America***

by Shawn Lawrence Otto

RODALE

# Fool Me Twice



## SUMMARY

Shawn Lawrence Otto's book is an exposé on anti-science views in modern-day America and the ramifications misinformation is having on society. *Fool Me Twice* explores the scientific values that our country was founded on, and traces the relationship between science and politics throughout history. The book explores how anti-science views – from climate change denial to creationism to vaccine refusal – have become mainstream.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with the premise of *Fool Me Twice*?
2. In speeches the author often says, "Science is never partisan, but science is always political." Do you agree?
3. If you were in President Obama's position in 2009, would you have focused on health care or climate change?
4. What risks did the author take in writing the book? In what situations are you willing to take risks?
5. Which is more important to good government: values or knowledge? Give one or two examples of a politician's effectiveness based on his/her values and knowledge.
6. Do you agree that all of the world's major problems revolve around science and technology? If not, give some examples of problems that don't.
7. What areas of your life are not affected by science and technology?
8. If you wrote a book on a controversial topic, what topic would you choose?
9. Does having a global economy require us to have a global government? Is it possible to have an effective global government?



10. What feelings did you experience in reading *Fool Me Twice*? In what ways, if any, did the book change your understanding of science in America?

## ABOUT SHAWN LAWRENCE OTTO



Shawn Lawrence Otto is the cofounder and CEO of Science Debate 2008, the largest political initiative in the history of science. He is also an award-winning screenwriter best known for writing and co-producing the Academy Award-nominated "House of Sand and Fog." Shawn and/or his work and writing have appeared on and in many publications and stations including NPR, PBS, CBS, FOX, NBC, ABC, New York Times, and Science.

Learn more about the author at [www.shawnotto.com](http://www.shawnotto.com)



Minnesota Department of  
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