

Fiction dereliction

Computer animators have long known that blurring the line between fantasy and reality can lead to problems. Moviegoers like cartoon characters with human traits — ants that talk, rats that cook, cars that fall in love. But a funny thing happens when animators render humans in pixel form: the more accurate the image, the more uncomfortable the viewer.

Digital *Homo sapiens* appear somewhat zombie-like on screen and, as evidenced by the 2001 bomb *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, they repel audiences.

Similarly, fiction writers who dip their pens in the real world sometimes make a mess of things. When they inaccurately tackle certain issues, things can get more than just messy — things can get downright dangerous.

The American Broadcasting Company (ABC) recently debuted a legal drama called *Eli Stone*. In the premiere episode, the title character represents a mother suing a vaccine manufacturer for causing her son's autism. It's a classic fiction setup: underdog versus Evil Corporation. And we all know how these stories end.

A drama that doesn't champion the "little guy" is a drama destined for failure. In this case, the noble lawyer brings big pharma to its knees, netting his client \$5.2 million in the process. This fictional victory may benefit ratings but it perpetuates a myth that has done considerable harm outside Televisionland.

The vaccines-cause-autism fallacy stems from a 1998 British research paper that linked the neurological disorder to the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine.¹ Because children are often diagnosed with autism around age 2, the same time they receive vaccines, the theory rang true to many parents of autistic children.

During the next few years, vaccination rates in Britain and Ireland plummeted. Children contracted measles by the hundreds. Many were hospitalized. Three died.

The paper's principal author was later discovered to have received money from

parents planning to sue vaccine makers. His findings were discredited. Since then, many reputable health organizations — including the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration and the World Health Organization — have studied possible links between vaccines and autism. Each reached the same conclusion: none exists.



So science claims the vaccine-autism link is bunk. But *Eli Stone* is fiction. It's entertainment. So who cares? Turns out, plenty of people do.

The directors of Infection Control and Pediatrics at Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates wrote that associating vaccines with autism is "no more credible than the belief that snake oil cures rheumatism."² The president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Dr. Renée R. Jenkins, took it a step further, appealing to the American Broadcasting Company to cancel the program. In a letter to the network's president, she wrote: "ABC will bear responsibility for the needless suffering and potential deaths of children from parents' decisions not to immunize based on the content of the episode."

The episode aired, unaltered and as scheduled, on Jan. 31, 2008. It did, however, include a disclaimer that directed viewers to a website that discredited the vaccine-autism link.

Ultimately, when writers stamp the word "fiction" on a book or television

script, they can get away with just about anything. And health officials have no right to censor creative work. That being said, it is socially irresponsible for television producers to infuse their programs with realism for dramatic effect at the expense of children's health.

Furthermore, the executive producer of *Eli Stone*, Greg Berlanti, claims he wants his show to do more than just entertain; he wants it to make people think. "A lot of TV these days is not talking about the same things that the nightly news is talking about," he told *The New York Times*. "As a show, we want to keep the conversation going after people turn off the television."³

Sounds good. Our televisions are overflowing with spouse-swapping, bug-eating, pop song-croaking "reality" stars; we could use more entertainment that provokes discussion on important topics. Let's just hope television producers realize conversations based on misleading fictional "facts" can do more harm than good.

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