Dr. Frankenstein, I Presume? A Cultural Studies Expert Gets to the Roots of Our Feelings about Scientists

*From Hawthorne to Dr. Strangelove--a comprehensive examination of how American scientists have been portrayed in the popular media*

Baltimore, MD (PRWEB) October 15, 2009 -- What does a murder at Harvard in 1849 tell us about American scientific education? During the McCarthy era, is it possible we weren't really afraid of Communists so much as our own scientists? And how is Robbie the Robot a 24th-century Puritan?

These and other provocative questions about how America perceives scientists and what they do for us--and to us--are at the heart of Glen Scott Allen's new book, Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards: Images of the American Scientist as Hero and Villain from Colonial Times to the Present (University of Massachusetts Press, Paper, $29.95).

According to Dr. Allen, our ambivalence toward the men and women who unlock nature's secrets dates back to our country's very inception. He argues that the American preference for pragmatism in all things has always favored "Master Mechanics" who bring new conveniences to life over "Wicked Wizards" intent on revolutionizing our concept of nature and America's place in it. In American culture, it seems, while we glorify wise Thomas Edisons for inventing useful gadgets, we condemn evil Robert Oppenheimeres for attempting to invent new theories of international relations.

"While American culture doesn't mind being fixed," explains Allen, "it has no interest in being changed."

It takes a scholar of Allen's considerable abilities to trace back the cultural threads of such a dichotomy--a job Mr. Allen does with insight and style in Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards.

"There's a story to be told about America's pride in its technological achievements versus its prejudices about 'mad scientists' undermining the laws of nature," explains Allen, who co-developed and directed the Cultural Studies Program at Towson University. "Three hundred years of American popular culture shows us how and why certain kinds of scientists have been lionized as American heroes, while others have been demonized as anti-American villains."

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Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards is nothing if not comprehensive. Nobody has ever brought this much material together on this topic, covering the entirety of American history, and knitting it all together in a single, sustained argument.

Dr. Allen treats us to an immensely enjoyable and imaginative travelogue of U.S. cultural history, examining an impressively wide range of topics: the literature and philosophy of the Romantics; the technology fairs and utopian fiction of the nineteenth century; political movements of the 1930s and 1940s; the science fiction boom of the 1950s; the space and arms races of the 1960s and 1970s; and the resurgence of pseudosciences in the 1980s and 1990s. From religious tracts, political cartoons, and theater, to advertising, murals, comic books,
television, music and film, Allen leaves no evidence unexamined in analyzing and explaining some very basic American cultural predilections--particularly American anti-intellectualism--by tracing these influences all the way back to the Puritans.

His book builds a compelling argument, making its point gradually and methodically as he progresses through American history; and it provides unique insights into how America's past is influencing current debates over global warming, cloning, evolution, and other scientific controversies. It is impressively broad-based, connecting fields as diverse as American history, literature, political science, philosophy, film theory, international relations, military strategy, education policy, and many other components of the American psyche.

Unafraid to generate controversy

The book is likely to provoke debate. It suggests that early American attitudes toward science were shaped as much by our hatred of Europeans as Yankee ingenuity; that we have long misunderstood the anti-Communist paranoia of the 1950s; and that we have never fully justified putting people rather than robots into outer space.

It is to Allen's considerable credit that he's able to synthesize these arguments and evidence in a way that is entirely accessible to a non-academic audience. The book is filled with interesting historical anecdotes and behind-the-scenes accounts of key episodes in American history, many of which challenge our traditional beliefs. Allen is clearly an intellectual with eclectic interests--but he's also an engaging writer able to make the context and particulars of American cultural forces vivid, exciting and fun for anybody interested in the subject.

For further information, visit the author's website at http://www.GlenScottAllen.com

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Questions for Interviewers

1. How did someone with a PhD in literature become interested in the history of American scientists?

2. What makes America's attitude toward its scientists different from Europe's?

3. You argue that Americans distrust theoretical scientists. Then how did a theoretical physicist like Albert Einstein manage to be seen as an "absent minded professor" instead of an evil "mad scientist"?

4. Other historians, such as Richard Hofstadter, have written about American anti-intellectualism. What do you think your book adds to their arguments?

5. Most people think of science as free of cultural prejudices. Are you saying that the cultural biases you
discover actually effect the ways science is practiced in this country? In what ways?

6. You suggest that this American emphasis for the practical over the theoretical has actually handicapped American science and education. In what ways? How do we change this situation?

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Dr. Glen Scott Allen co-developed and directed the Cultural Studies program at Towson University, one of the first such multidisciplinary undergraduate programs in the country. He has taught a variety of courses on science, literature, and culture, first as Writer-in-Residence at Reed College, and then as Professor of English and Cultural Studies at Towson University. He has done numerous interviews about science fiction films, and published extensively about such varied subjects as alchemy, cloning, artificial intelligence, the paranormal, chaos theory, and aliens.

Dr. Allen is currently working on Films that Made America, a book about iconic films that have shaped the symbols, rhetoric, and representations about what it means to be an American. Next year, St. Martin's press will publish his "historical thriller" (The Shadow War) that combines Colonial with Cold War conspiracies.

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