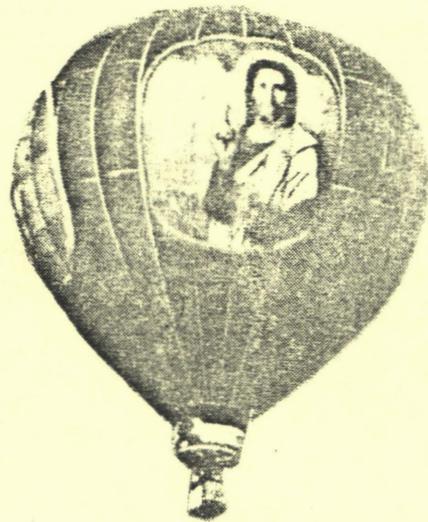


September/October 1987

The British & Irish
SKEPTIC



Abductions in Perspective

Magicians, Mediums & Psychics

Carl Sagan's Universe

Science vs. Pseudoscience

Uri Geller's Hot-Air Balloon

I Saw a Dupe

THE *British & Irish* SKEPTIC

A Publication Dedicated to Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal

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winner of the "Name This Newsletter" contest announced; Skeptics' Predictions for
1988 (see back cover); plus Hits & Misses, Psychic Diary, Press Gallery, more...

COPY DATE: NOVEMBER 15, 1987.

HITS & MISSES

EDITORIAL BOARD FORMS

We are in the process of forming The British & Irish Skeptic Editorial Board. Interim members are: Karl Sabbagh, free-lance writer and TV producer; Toby Howard, of the Manchester University Computer Graphics Unit, and Peter O'Hara, a clinical psychiatrist, and Wendy M. Grossman, folksinger, writer, and editor of The British & Irish Skeptic.

RESEARCHERS WANTED

We would like volunteers to come forward to research the following topics (or any other topic of their choice), with an eye to publication of the results of their investigation in The British & Irish Skeptic:

- the claims of Doris Collins
- the claims of Doris Stokes
- seasonal patterns of paranormal reporting (for example, readers Alan Remfry and A. Bloomfield have already pointed out a connection between the reporting of paranormal claims and the journalists' "silly season")
- Liberal and Labour proposals to include alternative therapies under the National Health Service
- the faith healing experiment at Leeds General Hospital, and other faith healing experiments in progress around the UK
- British and Irish psychics' recorded predictions compared with what actually happens
- celebrity beliefs

TELEVISED SKEPTICISM

Karl Sabbagh's production company, InCA, are in the final stages of production on their 90-minute documentary on why people believe in the paranormal, to be broadcast on Halloween on Channel 4 at 8:30 PM. Written and presented by psychologist Nicholas Humphrey, the documentary includes interviews with Carl Sagan, James (the Amazing) Randi, Uri Geller, James Alcock, Ray Hyman, Kathleen Raine, and Rupert Sheldrake (of morphic resonance fame). Stories to be covered include: the Enfield Poltergeist, Ireland's Knock apparition, the Ballinaspittle moving statues, the Rendlesham Forest UFO, and medium Tarum Krive. Don't miss it!

BBC SCOTLAND

Edinburgh reader Stephen Moreton reports that BBC Scotland are planning a series "on Scottish television this winter on various topics which will include programmes on faith healing, religious experiences, and life after death." The BBC has approached the Scottish Humanist Council about finding representatives of the skeptical viewpoints in each case.

TELEVISED SUPERSTITION

The following letter appeared in the Irish Sunday Tribune on 23 August:

"I am currently involved in research for a forthcoming television documentary on Irish superstition.

"The subject matter for the film will range from the banshee and fairies to holy wells and haunted houses, through the broad spectrum of superstitious practices and beliefs relating to birth, death, nature healing, etc.

"I would be greatly assisted in my research by personal accounts of superstitious happenings or beliefs."

The letter is signed Aisling Byrne, 58 Pembroke Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4.

WEEPING STATUES

Our thanks to reader A. Bloomfield, who sent in a clipping from the "Daily Telegraph" explaining Ireland's weeping statues. An informed reader wrote to the reporter to explain that plaster statues naturally retain a lot of water. Therefore, they are sealed with a plastic coating. However, if you poke a hole in the plastic coating, water will seep out. If the hole or holes are in the eyes, the statue will appear to weep. The 39-inch statues weep more than the 18-inch ones because they are larger, and therefore retain more water.

The article does not try to explain the ancillary claim that these statues have turned rosaries to gold.

MONEY VANISHES

The "News of the World" reported on 23 August that Doris Stokes' fortune is missing, and that private detectives have been called in to investigate. The "Sun" reported on 4 August that medium Lee Lacey claimed to have been contacted by Doris Stokes...

SPECIAL REPORT:

Geller in Reading

by Michael Hutchinson

Having heard on a London radio broadcast that Uri Geller was due to give a charity performance in Reading, British Committee member Lewis Jones and I decided that it was too good an opportunity to miss.

I telephoned the local newspaper on the morning of the show, asking if they were interested in doing an expose of Geller. They said they would be interested in talking with me and an appointment was set up.

We met with two of the Reading Evening News journalists. Tim Boone had met Geller at his home. Having been unable to explain the fork-bending he had witnessed, he was convinced Geller was "genuine". Jackie May was due to cover Geller's evening performance and, with Boone, would interview Geller afterwards.

Lewis Jones and I explained to Tim and Jackie the previous dubious claims of Geller and put forward our point of view that he did not possess psychic powers. I tried to explain how Geller could have bent the fork for Tim, but found it difficult to do so without a fork. I asked him if he could get one for me from the canteen where he had obtained the Geller fork. He returned with two forks, handing me one which he said was identical to that given to Geller.

I then proceeded to demonstrate the Geller fork bend, subsequently breaking the fork into two pieces. Commenting on the bend, Tim said that it looked exactly the same as Geller's had done.

Both Tim and Jackie were very sympathetic to our views. We agreed to meet after Geller's performance to explain what he had done.

As a magician, Geller leaves a lot to be desired. At the end of the performance, he

said that he left it to the audience to decide whether he was genuine or whether he was the "world's greatest magician". Well, he is neither. I have seen better magicians at children's parties.

Geller started his performance by naming colours and capital cities which were written by members of the audience on a blackboard behind him. He failed to get the first one, either because "pink" is not a colour which could be signalled to him or because he wanted to get the audience's sympathy. His excuse was that pink isn't a proper colour.

Geller then did all of the tricks for which he has become famous: identifying a cat drawn on the board; levitating a hefty man from a chair with three helpers; moving a compass needle; bending keys and spoons; moving the hands of a spectator's watch.

After the show, Lewis and I met Jackie and Tim, who had not been impressed by Geller's act. They thought that the levitation--which is an old parlour trick--was an insult to the intelligence.

The following day, an article headlined "Uri branded fake at show" appeared in the Evening Post. In a separate, short article, Tim Boone wrote:

"When I met Uri Geller at his Berkshire home a few weeks ago I was convinced he was genuine. Now I'm not so sure. I personally worked out how Geller did roughly half his stage feats, and the other half were explained to me afterwards."

Considering that the Evening Post had promoted Geller's performance as it was in aid of a local charity, it is to be congratulated on its subsequent critical attitude. A rare case of a newspaper with morals, perhaps. ●

EDINBURGH SCIENCE FESTIVAL

As if the International Festival and all its offspring (the Fringe, the Film Festival, and the Book Festival) and the Folk Festival weren't enough, the spring of 1989 will see the inauguration of a new Edinburgh Festival: the Edinburgh International Festival of Science and Technology. The city fathers hope that the Science Festival will attract its own version of the Fringe, and they are exploring suggestions for widening the popular appeal of the Festival (one of these is to run a science fiction film festival concurrently).

The 1989 theme will be "Intelligent Communications" and one of the exhibits already announced is one of animatronics--that is, mechanical movement of animal and extraterrestrial characters in film. Individuals and groups will be encouraged to promote their own shows, and we would be interested in hearing from volunteers to look into the possibility of representing skepticism. The theme for the 1990 Festival has been announced as the science of food (which is described by "The Scotsman" as including "the technology of food processing and advances in biotechnology and nutritional medicine).

JINXES AND FOLKLORE

Robert Morris, Arthur Koestler Professor of Parapsychology at Edinburgh University, is pursuing several lines of research, according to the (Scottish) "Evening News" on 5 and 6 August. Morris' activities were written up in the Scottish press during the Parapsychology Association Conference held in Edinburgh at the end of July.

Morris and his team are collecting stories of odd events, even of events that have been explained. Morris is quoted: "I'm convinced there is a problem in this whole area, but I am not convinced that there is psychic activity involved."

Morris and his new team, who "are to specialise in the application of computers to psychic research", are looking for common themes in mail from the public and stories in the files of the School of Scottish Studies that might be promising lines of inquiry.

On 4 August, the "Scotsman" described Morris' point of view: "He thought that [the study of odd phenomena] could soon become the province of mainstream science...even if there was no cohesive theory to explain why the strange phenomena happened."

MORE UFO CONSPIRACIES

Following the publication of Jenny Randles' recent The UFO Conspiracy, Timothy Good's new book Above Top Secret (Sidgwick & Jackson, £14.95) was reviewed in the Star on 18 July. The Star points out that "[the word claims] has to be used a lot about his book because much of the evidence is hearsay."

According to the article, Good makes a number of allegations in his book, among them that:

astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin saw UFO's on the Moon during the 1969 Apollo mission, and that these revelations were transmitted live, but censored, and diverted to another channel, where they were picked up by radio hams,

a number of flying saucers and their occupants have been taken away for examination after landing in the United States.

former President Jimmy Carter was thwarted in his promise to open all UFO information to the public and to scientists,

not only lights were seen in Rendlesham Forest (see Ian Ridpath's write-up of this case in The Skeptical Inquirer, Winter, 1986), but American and British researchers saw "a triangular object on legs and had the impression it was occupied by robot-like creatures," and

there has been, in the words of the Star, "a global cover-up by leading nations to prevent the undoubted shock and the moral and social collapse that would follow proof we are not alone in the universe."

The Star adds, "Or perhaps the reaction would be rather different. When people in Detroit were asked how they would react to visitors from space one man said: 'I'd teach them to stay on their own planet. We've got enough people on welfare without supporting a bunch of Martians.'"

CSICOP forwarded us a copy of another, scathing review from The Spectator. Reviewer Adrian Berry said, "It is an evil book. Little of it is original, much of it is false. The implications seem to recommend a witch hunt...I have called this book 'evil' and I mean it. Mr Good's ideas are those of a maniac..."

And The Guardian's review, "Little Green Menuhin" (Good is a professional violinist) concluded, referring to Good's claim that thousands of aliens visit Earth regularly, "Perhaps the aliens want to serve man, but find the taste needs further improvement."

NO GHOST IN SHEFFIELD

The "Sheffield News" reported in July that design student Caroline Bell discovered a ghostly face in a panelled wooden door she had photographed at Sheffield Manor. During her return visit, she verified that the ghostly face was not a trick of the light: by wedging the door at a specific angle to the window the face was indeed visible.

The "Sheffield News" investigated, and found that the face was "a coincidence caused by light falling on blobs of varnish and polish which have built up on the door over the years."

"But," the article goes on, "the face, which several observers say resembles Charles Dickens, will become a point of great interest to visitors to the Manor."

Probably. We congratulate the "Sheffield News" for taking the trouble to check out the story, and we thank reader Chris Wright for sending in the article.

THE COLOSSUS OF RHODES

July saw a genuine test of a psychic's predictions: Mrs Ann Dankbaar, a Dutch psychic performer now living in Australia, claimed to have located the first of the Colossus of Rhodes during a 1985 holiday. The giant stone raised from the Aegean seabed turned out, however, to be, in the Guardian's phrase, "an unassuming stone."

The Guardian, whose preliminary reports were favorable to Mrs Dankbaar's claims, pointed out in their last article on the subject, "Psychic hand of destiny" (7 July), that Mrs Dankbaar had nowhere near the recognition in Australia that she had claimed for herself.

In "The Colossal Mrs Dankbaar," in their autumn, 1987, issue, the Australian Skeptic reports that following Mrs Dankbaar's claims that her psychic powers had been acknowledged by the University of Adelaide, the South Australia branch of the Australian Skeptics issued an A\$20,000 challenge to her to prove her psychic powers under strict scientific conditions. Local Australian media soon discovered (and reported to The Guardian) that Mrs Dankbaar's "acknowledgement" took the form of a personal letter from a senior lecturer in electrical engineering, Mr George Karolie. But Department of Psychology lecturer Dr Peter Delin is quoted as saying the results of his work with her were "without great interest."

UFO-LINE

Science writer Stuart Campbell has been following up the transcription we published from Derek C. Sampson's UFO-Line (B&IS I.3), and reports as follows:

"On June 26 I wrote to British Telecom complaining about the service and in the middle of July I received a reply from Geoff Dare of their Network Information Services (2-12 Gresham St., London).

"Dare pointed out that UFO-Line is provided not by BT but by Audio Text PLC of Pembroke House, Campsbourne Rd., London N8. Incidentally it is one of what BT call their 'Premium Services' and is charged to callers at the 'm' rate (cheap rate is 12 seconds for 4.4p exclusive of VAT).

"As a result of the Telecommunications Act 1984, BT operates under a licence which obliges them, on request, to provide telecommunications service to anyone, without discrimination, on normal published terms and conditions, provided that they keep within the law. It is an offence under section 43 of the Act for anyone to send a message over the system which is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene, or menacing nature. Any person can institute proceedings under Section 43, but it is difficult to determine what is 'offensive'. BT does not consider that it is appropriate for it to act as an arbiter of public taste and so drew up a Code of Practice in association with the Association of Telephone Information and Entertainment Providers (ATIEP), the service providers' association, to guide service providers on the advertising, promotion, and content of information and entertainment services. An independent Committee chaired by Louis Blom-Cooper, QC, was established to oversee the application of the Code. Dare sent me a copy of this Code and invited me to contact Blom-Cooper if I felt that I had any specific complaint.

"The Code contains 8 pages, most of which are uninteresting. Only two sections seem relevant. One, under 'Child Protection' states that messages specifically designed for or targeted at children should not (among other things) 'alarm, frighten or encourage children to act in a violent, careless or dangerous way'. Another, under 'Adult Services' states that messages should not offend against the good taste and decency of reasonable people and should not be offensive to public feeling.

"In view of the general nature of these clauses I did not see how I could complain

clauses I did not see how I could complain about UFO-Line. In any case, according to Ray Hyman, we should not try to censor.

"I did write to Audiotext PLC complaining. I received a letter dated 23 July informing me that the contents of my letter had been referred to Mr Derek C. Sampson. He has not contacted me."

We would like to thank Steuart Campbell for taking the trouble to collect and write up this information for us.

GELLER'S HOT-AIR BALLOON

The Guardian commented on Uri Geller's Sun escapade of 27 August in "Flying psychic bends to will of the winds". "There was no immediate and detectable effect at Ilkley police station, where a duty officer was eating his lunch of ham and eggs at 3 PM precisely. 'Nothing happened,' he said. 'But then I wasn't thinking about it.'"

Reporter Andrew Moncur went on to draw parallels between the Sun "bender" and the 1978 Daily Mirror stunt: "The major victims on that occasion were a pair of cows in Arbroath, which dropped dead." Moncur further noted that the Sun news desk was reluctant to give out information about the story of the boy who had miraculously begun to talk. 'You'll only take the piss,' the Sun news desk is reported to have told him.

See our "Reviews" section in this issue for Lewis Jones' critical summary of the event.

FAITH HEALING

According to the (Scottish) Sunday Express, faith healers are "treating sick horses in an experiment to try to prove their value in animal medicine." And, according to The Independent, the Western world's first research centre for fringe medicines has been opened at Exeter University. Plans include the teaching and research of acupuncture, herbalism, homeopathy, naturopathy, and yoga and meditation.

BEASTS

BBC Wildlife reported in their September issue that their Yeti hair had been identified as that of a Himalayan brown bear. However, the Wool Industry Research Association, which identified the hair, told BBC Wildlife they had Yeti hairs of their own, which are so far unidentified. The New Scientist, 27 August, ran an article suggesting scientists

should be more open-minded about the possible existence of such creatures as the Yeti. The Observer reported on 26 July that a new type of large cat may have been found in eastern Scotland. And The Guardian reported on 24 August that an electronic search of Loch Ness, Operation Deepscan, is scheduled for October 9-19.

BERLITZ'S ARCHAEOLOGY

Charles Berlitz's book, Atlantis: the Lost Continent Revealed has been published by Fontana (£2.95), and was reviewed by Trevor Palmer in Archaeology Today in July. Palmer dissects Berlitz's claims and examines his reasoning, and concludes that "there is simply no evidence at present for an advanced civilisation in the late Pleistocene."

OBE EXPERIMENT

An article in She magazine, August 1987, on Out of Body Experiences (OBE's) discussed personal experiences and the research of Dr Susan Blackmore and others. The article also announced that Dr Charles McCreery is conducting research on OBE's at the Institute of Psychophysical Research. McCreery is quoted: "My position is that anything that exists is part of the material universe and can be explained in a normal, material way, as part of the physical world. Paranormal is not a term I care for. My aim is serious and the OBE project is purely scientific and aims to bring OBE's into science. For far too long the study of these phenomena has been regarded as beyond the pale because of associations with spiritualism."

McCreery wants to hear from people who have had or think they have had OBE's, or people willing to fill out a personality quiz for purposes of comparison. She magazine listed McCreery's address for those interested in participating: Charles McCreery, The Institute of Psychophysical Research, 118 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX26JU.

PRESS CLIPPINGS WANTED

Both "Hits & Misses" and "The Press Gallery" rely heavily on your sending us newspaper and magazine clippings. Please mark all clippings with the name of the publication and the date the article appeared. Thanks!

Things seem to have been pretty quiet over the summer, however we do have information from a couple of places.

AUSTRIA

Professor Wolfgang Gombocz, the Austrian Convenor, writes from Graz that three regional groups are in the process of formation, one in Vienna, for Lower Austria and Burgenland, one in Linz, for West and Upper Austria, Salzburg, Tyrol, and Vorarlberg, and one in Graz for South Austria, Styria, Carinthia, East Tyrol, and parts of Burgenland.

Professor Gombocz also sent a German article about Uri Geller's comeback and his claims to have successfully dowsed for gold and oil and to have worked for the CIA.

SPAIN

Luis Alfonso Gamez Dominguez, editor of "La Alternativa Racional", the Spanish newsletter, sent two batches of clippings which there was no space to summarize in our last issue. The first, and much smaller batch, was of skeptical articles, including a press report of the UFO story we ran in our last issue (B&IS I.4) about the Soviet rockets that had been taken for a UFO. The other skeptical articles included a story from "El Correo Espanol--El Pueblo Vasco" that the earth may have been hit by a comet in Siberia in 1908 and that there were plans to test this theory by comparing particles from Halley's Comet with the meteorite, and two long pieces about the search for signs of intelligent extraterrestrial life.

The "credulous" articles (so described by Luis Alfonso) were as follows:

"In favor of natural medicines", a short piece from the same newspaper as the above-mentioned articles.

"A lemon in the shape of a dog's paw revolutionizes Basque parapsychologists": this deserves a bit of explanation. The dog had been buried under the lemon tree with great sadness, and then the lemon grew and was said to look exactly like the buried dog's paw. The owners are quoted (our translation) as saying, "the sentiments which were produced by Mori's death were such that his energy was able to change the genetic code of the tree."

"Homeopathy, an alternative to so-called "orthodox" medicine.

"Practical workshop of parapsychology," an announcement of a May 1-3 workshop.

"The USSR receives signals from a highly intelligent extraterrestrial civilization" explains that although TASS affirmed nothing, the reporters were given to understand "that the discovery was a serious one and that it opens a new road in the investigation of space."

"Palmyra L. Mora: 'The hands faithfully reflect the human being as if they were pictures of the brain,'" from Deia, 2 May, with another short article announcing the parapsychology workshops.

"Man needs depression in order to benefit from euphoria and happiness", another story from Deia in connection with the parapsychology workshops, about Pedro Carrasco's techniques for using mental control to combat all illnesses.

"Fooled by clairvoyance," the story of an attempt at lynching a psychic.

"Confirmed speech with extraterrestrials" "10,000 people waiting for 'miracle', a story about a child, Alba Navarro, who had announced the Virgin would appear.

"A 'UFO alert' will watch the skies over Alava and Vizcaya Saturday night"

"Parapsychology course to teach ending fear and insomnia"

"The United States investigated the bodies of four extraterrestrials in New Mexico", from "El Correo Espanol--El Pueblo Vasco, 2 June, with a London dateline, referring to the Majestic-12 case, apparently taken from the Observer review of Timothy Good's Above Top Secret, discussed in "Hits & Misses" in this issue. The article does not mention Good's book, but is written as though the information came from a news story from the Observer.

"UFOlogists watch the sky over Pradejon tonight."

"A group from the Colegio de San Viator will use parapsychology on Saturday to regress to infancy" from Deia, 9 June. The group was to be led by an Augustine priest, Miguel Lucas, who, the caption under his picture said, "can read a person's life with the help of his pendulum." Lucas was to teach a course on "Total equilibrium through parapsychology" and planned to regress his students "to life in the womb."

"Null result with weekend 'UFO alert.'"

And, finally, a short piece from El Pais (one of Spain's most important national daily newspapers) about the Naples company's decision to replace Diego Maradona's picture on their football equipment with that of San Genaro, following the miraculous liquification of San Genaro's blood the previous Saturday.

STATE of the ART

by Frank Chambers

HOW TO BUILD A LIE DETECTOR, BRAIN WAVE MONITOR & OTHER SECRET PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL ELECTRONIC PROJECTS...

A book with this name is published by TAB Books, Inc., an otherwise reputable American publishing firm specializing in instruction in simple electronics and related hobby subjects. The UK publisher is W. Foulsham & Co., Ltd., Slough, and this and other TAB books are offered here by Maplin and other UK electronics supply houses.

The "Other Secret Parapsychological Projects" include (but I cannot list them all):

- how to build a simple telepathic message receiver
- how to imprint a message for telepathic transfer
- constructing a lie detector for your philodendron
- a machine that runs on psychokinetic energy
- viewing the human aura: four experiments
- the bio-meter for locating acu-points
- dowsing devices and techniques
- Kirlian photography
- how to build a UFO detector/communicator
- stalking ghostly voices in radio noise.

Now some of us have trained ourselves not to believe everything we read in the papers or see on TV, but when we see a book with "How To" in the title, we are likely to have an

insidious reaction to the effect that the author must know what he is talking about. Besides, the two gadgets specified in the title of this book are known to exist, so why shouldn't the others as well?

Are such books dangerous? They are read more often than not by people with young, impressionable minds eager to joust with the secrets of the universe. They clothe themselves with an aura of respectability (usually in the introduction if not sooner) by mouthing OK names such as, in this case, the Menninger Foundation, Stanford Research Institute, Princeton University, the Newark College of Engineering, the University of London, Sir William Crookes, Maxwell, Faraday, Ampere, Einstein, and The Journal of The Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers.

By printing parts lists and schematics and giving tip on soldering and reading the colour code on resistors, the authors imply that all the devices described will not only work, but have been tested and approved by scientists.

I would like to construct a lie detector for my philodendron, but unfortunately I don't have a philodendron. Would some other reader like to try? ●

ABDUCTIONS in PERSPECTIVE

by Hilary Evans

Abduction reports are the most dramatic manifestation of the UFO phenomenon. If they are valid-if abductions are really taking place as reported--we need look no further for an explanation of the UFOs and their visits to our planet. They would be clearly seen to be part of a larger scenario of extraterrestrial contact.

What is more, they would be, quite simply, the most important event in the history of mankind. So there's a lot depending on the answer to the question: are abductions taking place as reported?

There can be no doubt that something is taking place. That the abductees are having an experience of some sort is something we need not question; but we may question their interpretation of their experience. In one sense or another, abduction reports are real: what is in doubt is whether that reality is the everyday reality of the physical world, or the private reality of the witness's mind.

Like many other anomalous phenomena, abduction reports have a compelling plausibility. Reading an account such as Hopkins' *Intruders*[8b], we find a bewildering assortment of elements which, at first sight, seem, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, to fit together in only one way. It is only when we stand back, and view the puzzle in a wider perspective, that we start to wonder whether there may be an alternative picture?

Abductions in the UFO Perspective

If we are to accept that abductions occur, the problems raised by their association with UFOs must be resolved.

Abductions are by definition related to

the UFO phenomenon, for it is in UFOs that the abductors travel to our planet, and onto UFOs that most abductees are abducted. Every abduction case, therefore, involves a UFO, whether or not one is actually reported.

But the moment we recognize that accepting the abduction story involves accepting the UFO without which the story cannot take place, we are faced by the UFO paradox in all its horror. For if physical human beings are being abducted onto UFOs, unless we are prepared to premise some temporary metamorphosis of the material substance of the abductee's physical body, those UFOs must be physical flying machines and the abduction act must be a physical act involving a flesh-and-blood human body being carried/beamed up/teleported through the air.

Yet though abductions are alleged to have occurred on hundreds if not thousands of such occasions[8a], not one abduction-related UFO has been conclusively detected by an independent witness, nor has anyone seen an abductee in the act of being taken on board or returning from a UFO.

Nor have the abductees themselves been more successful in obtaining material proof of their experience. Every attempt to procure mementos and souvenirs has unfortunately been prevented.

Abductions in the Contactee Perspective

If we are to accept that abductions occur, it must be shown that they are different in kind from contactee experiences, which are ostensibly similar in many respects but almost certainly do not really occur.

The UFO phenomenon in its current form was only a few years old when it was "enriched" by the claims of the contactees to have met their occupants, who were for the most part benevolent Space Brothers or Cosmic Guardians. Concerned for the well-being of our planet, these beings selected from the entire human race a George Adamski, a George King, or an Orfeo Angelucci, and entrusted him with a mission to save the world. The world, for the most part, found these claims unconvincing.

But then came the abductees, who have a more plausible story to tell. We are not asked to believe that abductees like Barney and Betty Hill[4] or Kathie Davis[8b] were chosen because they were remarkable people, only because they were suitable--for physical examination or for genetic experimentation.

This certainly makes their stories easy to believe. We can--and many of us do--devise plausible scenarios, in which the visiting ETs reach a point in their study of Earthpeople where they find it necessary to conduct physical examinations and breeding experiments with specimen humans.

But it is not enough to show that the abductees are more believable than the contactees, it must also be shown that they are different in kind. If the abduction stories are true, why were they preceded by a spate of contact stories, likewise offered as true but manifestly spurious?

Until such time as these questions are answered, the suspicion will remain that today's abductees are simply yesterday's contactees in an updated, more sophisticated form. And if we are inclined to explain the contactee wave on psychosocial grounds, the possibility will remain that the abductee wave can be explained in the same way.

Abductions in the Perspective of Imaginary Abductions

If we are to accept that abductions occur, it must be shown that they are distinct from other, similar "experiences" which are known to be imaginary.

Alvin Lawson's "imaginary abductee" experiment[9] showed that subjects in a suitable state of mind are capable of concocting an elaborate, detailed and dramatic "encounter" story--yet which is entirely fiction. Moreover, these stories are strikingly similar, not only in outline but in specific detail, to the stories told by the "true" abductees.

Because neither Lawson nor anyone else has replicated or developed these experiments, we should not draw more than preliminary conclusions from them. But the central finding is unequivocal: while the experiments do not prove that the "true" abductees are fabricating their accounts, they do suggest that anyone who subconsciously wishes to do so can find within himself the necessary resources to fabricate a detailed and coherent abduction story.

The Lawson experiments did indicate one major area of difference between the "imaginary" and the "true" abductees: the emotional effect, and sometimes the physiological effect, on the witness. The volunteers were not in a strongly emotive state, they had no psychological aftereffects such as amnesia, dreams, nightmares, or psychic experiences; "true" abductees are liable to have all these things, including physiological effects.

This is often interpreted by critics of the experiment as a demonstration of the reality of the "true" experiences. But it demonstrates nothing of the kind. True, it demonstrates that the "true" abductees are in a truly emotional state; but it is just as likely that the abduction experience occurs as a result of the emotional state as that the emotional state is the consequence of an abduction experience.

Nobody will question that the abduction witness has a genuinely emotional experience; no one who sees the videotapes of Yorkshire policeman Alan Godfrey's recall of his alleged abduction experience under hypnosis could be in any doubt of that[10]. But while this shows that he had something to be emotional about, we must not jump to the conclusion that the abduction experience was the cause; it may have been part of the cure. The abduction experience may be a means whereby the individual externalizes an internal psychological problem[2b].

Abductions in the Perspective of Psychological States

If we are to accept that abductions occur, it must be shown that they are distinct from the imaginary experiences characteristic of persons in altered states of consciousness.

The storytelling capability to which the Lawson experiments drew attention is just one of the astonishing range of "abnormal" abilities manifested by people in exceptional



'Victorin Enlevant Christine' from Romance by Restif de la Bretonne, 18th century.
Courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library.

seeing of "crisis apparitions", dissociation of personality--many explanations have been offered for these experiences, but there is certainly no consensus. The fact that there is no consensus model for abduction experiences is merely an indication that it is another of the many facets of human experience of which our understanding is incomplete.

The literature of psychology--the case reports of Pierre Janet for example--not to mention the literature of parapsychology, are full of experiences comparable in many ways to the abduction experience. Before we are ready to accept that abduction experiences are different in kind from, say, the hysterical illusion of diabolical possession, we need a lot more evidence than we have.

Abductions in the Perspective of Traditional Belief

If we are to accept that abductions occur, it must be shown that they are different from similar events which have been claimed or reported throughout human history.

circumstances. Hallucinations of various kinds, enhanced "psychic" awareness, roleplaying as in "possession" and "dissociated personality" scenarios--these are just some of the manifestations triggered in people who are, for whatever reason, in the appropriate state[2].

Jerome Clark wrote recently in International UFO Reporter[1]: "Every professional who has participated in this kind of direct investigation asserts that there is no known psychological explanation for these experiences." But any behavioral scientist knows that there are many forms of human behavior for which no formal explanatory model is available: amnesia, precognition, the

The existence of a folklore tradition of kidnapping by fairies and other otherworldly entities[3] shows that the idea of abduction is widespread and deeply rooted. While this is not an objection to the abduction claims per se, it reminds us that it is a mistake to think of the abduction experience as a novel phenomenon born of the Space Age. Abduction has served as the basis for fantasy experiences in the past, and it may be doing so again.

UFO abductions are not the only kinds of experience in which an apparent internal plausibility is balanced by an external implausibility. Other examples include "possession", believed by fundamentalist Christians to

involve molestation by the Devil, but interpreted otherwise by others: "poltergeist" experiences, once thought to be the work of "noisy spirits" but currently attributed to subconsciously manifesting psychokinetic powers; and witchcraft, once believed to be the devil's work, but today regarded as a manifestation of induced hysteria.

It is noteworthy that the traditional explanations for all these phenomena gain their force from a specific belief system. We must consider the possibility that the same things may be happening with the abduction experience. If so, we should consider some such alternative scenario as this:

At any given time there are a number of individuals who are, as it were, shopping around for a suitable framework into which to project a private psychological hang-up. Such a framework would not only have to meet their personal need but also conform to current socially acceptable beliefs. In former days diabolical "possession", witchcraft, lycanthropy and the like offered a suitable framework; later came communications with spirits of the dead; today the "authorized myth" is one of extraterrestrial visitation, derived from science fiction, space-age thinking, and a millenarist "Cosmic Guardian" alternative to traditional religious belief.

Since the myth is shared by the community, not only do the abductees find it easy to "believe themselves into" the story, but others find it easy to believe them.

For and Against the Abduction Experience

Abduction experiences, then, offer us only stories--told in good faith, no doubt, but none the less subjective and unsubstantiated, and with much in common with other categories of story which are known to have no basis in external reality. And as every psychologist and every schoolteacher knows, and as Lawson has shown to be no less true in this specific context, everyone can tell a story.

Nevertheless, those who, like Hopkins, feel that the weight of the evidence is in favor of real experience have persuasive grounds for their belief that in this case the stories are true:

The abduction scenario, in its most elaborate form--for example, in the Kathie Davis[8b] or Whitley Strieber[13] cases--offers an internal plausibility which gives us the best explanation yet for the UFO phenomenon.

Abduction experiences are spontaneously reported by witnesses who are not ostensibly

seeking material advantage.

They involve a genuine emotional response. Lie-detector tests confirm that the stress is real enough.

In multiple abductions the accounts tally closely enough to persuade us that the witnesses participated in the same experience.

Recurrent features, reported by witnesses who could not be aware of others' testimony, suggest that the same external process is happening to many people. The discovery of scars, related to childhood incidents--often traumatic--is just one recurring example.

Independent tests[4] have shown that abduction witnesses have no obvious pathological background or discernible predisposition to paranormal experience.

Abductees often report a change in lifestyle and outlook. The Gansbergs, who carried out follow-up investigation of several American abduction witnesses, reported that in almost every case the witness felt his life had benefitted[6]: the same was true of the Aveley case in England[12]. Such real benefits suggest a real event.

This is a formidable challenge; however, the objections are hardly less forceful:

The stories of ET/UFO visits are improbable in themselves--it defies reason that so many spacecraft should successfully avoid detection while visiting our planet, particularly since no two ET crews seem to be the same, implying a vast number of points of origin.

The behavior of the abductors towards the witness is in many respects illogical, despite an overall plausibility. Clearly, we must allow for the possibility that ET logic may be different from ours. But how, for example, can we reconcile such contradictions as their frequently stated intention that the witnesses will not recall their experiences, with their apparent ignorance of recall under hypnosis? Or their detailed telepathic monitoring of witnesses with their ignorance of such basic facts that a witness destined for genetic experiments has undergone a vasectomy?[8b]

There is a total lack of hard evidence. When witnesses try to retain souvenirs, they are always prevented. There are no convincing photographs of spaceships, not to mention the entities.

No abduction has ever been independently witnessed. The closest we come to it is the 1975 Travis Walton case, but no one saw Walton actually go aboard the craft. The investigation of this case has in any case

been criticized and the findings remain ambiguous[12].

Though psychological tests suggest that abduction witnesses are normal people who are telling the truth as they know it, they also indicate that they suffer from "a mild paranoia"--hypersensitivity, wariness etc."[5] Hardly enough to build a case on, admittedly, but a reminder that we rarely have psychological data on witnesses before their experience. We do often have anecdotal testimony, however, and this often points to some kind of predisposition. Both Betty Hill[4] and Charles Hickson[7] have testified to anomalous experiences previous to their abduction.

Not only do we know little about witnesses' psychological state, we are often not well informed about the outward circumstances of their lives, though these could well have a bearing on their attitudes and behavior. John Rimmer[11] noted that out of eleven abduction witnesses whose personal circumstances are known, eight were widowed, divorced, or having sexual or marital difficulties at the time. He suggests that this would make them particularly vulnerable to suggestion.

Apart from psychological factors relating to abduction witnesses as individuals, there is little indication that those who write about these experiences are familiar with the enormous range of behavior which can occur to anyone who, through whatever circumstances, is in an altered state of consciousness.

The discovery of scars, and other such recurrent features, is at first sight a formidable challenge. Psychologist Aphrodite Clamar says: "The question persists: is the UFO experience genuine, or are those who claim to have been abducted the victims of hysteria or their own delusions? After spending more than fifty hours with a dozen subjects under hypnosis, I still cannot answer that question...It is the curious similarity of their experiences that gives pause."[8a,5]

The fact that one witness after another, who could not be aware of one another's experiences, come up with similar stories containing similar bizarre details, is probably the most impressive feature of the abduction experience. It is this which seems to have convinced Budd Hopkins that abductions are physical and literal fact: "For me, the conclusion is inescapable: They (the ETs) are already here...Though I do not want to believe this, and feel decidedly unnerved by it, I believe it is true: extraterrestrials have been observing us in our innocence for many years."[8a]

Apart from the similarity of the stories, he finds that a great many of his subjects have inconspicuous scars, usually on their legs, and that these are often associated with some rather mysterious incident in childhood. The implication is that they relate to some kind of surveillance, and may indicate the implant of a monitoring device, or be the result of a blood test or some such.

Hopkins has more than once been able to successfully predict that a witness will find a scar on his body that he didn't know he had, and this certainly points to the reality of the phenomenon. But difficulties remain. If ETs are putting implants in substantial numbers of children, surely by now some doctor somewhere, examining a child, would have come across one? Again, our earthly surgeons can make incisions which leave virtually no scar: surely we could expect these advanced beings to have found a way of carrying out their tests without leaving tell-tale traces?

What alternative explanations are on offer? Coincidence; have you ever examined your body to check whether you, too, have such a scar you have forgotten or never even noticed you had? A form of stigmata, subconsciously created by the witness himself to back up his story? Or could it be that we have it back-to-front: was it the discovery of such a scar that prompted the witness to fantasize an abduction story? Admittedly, these suggestions are only speculative, but they show that it would be premature to abandon the search for alternative explanations.

Sociologist Ron Westrum has noted a "contagion effect" whereby a rash of abduction reports occurs immediately after the publicizing of a story like that of Barney and Betty Hill[5]. This is a complex sociological phenomenon which can be interpreted in different ways; but one of the possibilities is that the abduction experience has become as much part of American folklore as the phantom hitchhiker. That virtually every abduction encounter occurs in the Americas may simply relate to the social acceptability of being an abductee, but there could be a deeper explanation.

Setting these two sets of factors side by side, it is evident that neither adds up to a clear case for or against the reality of the abduction experience. Nor are they likely to until more satisfactory evidence is offered us.

Meanwhile, though, there is one simple consideration which may outweigh all others. Here we have accounts which, if they really

(cont. on p 26)

SCIENCE vs. PSEUDOSCIENCE

by Peter O'Hara

PART ONE: THE NATURE OF SCIENCE

Because the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Paranormal (CSICOP) and similar local groups are dedicated to exposing pseudoscience, it is important to be able to distinguish pseudoscience from "real" science. In this article, I hope to explain the nature of genuine science.

My first contact with science in childhood was with the end results of scientific investigation, such as "everything is made of atoms", and "electricity really consists of the flow of electrons." This is the usual introduction to science: nobody could keep up an interest in a history of all the experiments that finally led to these theories about atoms and electricity. However, although the experiments and their history are usually given later on in the same book or magazine, these escape most people's notice, and they are left with the lasting impression that science is about atoms, forces, and similar ideas.

Since then, things have changed, so that nowadays science is most commonly brought to people's attention when new technology is introduced. The pace of technological advance is becoming faster, and the science on which the new technology is based is becoming more complex. People see the technology changing their home or their work, but there is no system for bringing them up to date on new scientific knowledge. They know how to push the buttons on the machine, but they don't know how it does what it does. So, many people think technology is science. A popular magazine-turned-encyclopedia in the early 1980's added to this confusion: it was entitled "Science Now", but it was almost entirely about technology.

You may gather that I don't define science either as being about a particular range of subjects ("atoms", "forces", etc.), or as technology. I define science as one, a method of obtaining knowledge which tends to reduce mistakes, and two, the knowledge thus obtained. In general, there are two sources of mistakes. The first is called a "counfounding variable" (there could be many of these operating at one time). This is a variable (any kind of quantity that varies) which is affecting your results but which you have not measured. The second is called experimenter bias. This means that you have allowed your own expectations to influence the results you actually get.

To illustrate the first source of error, I will give an old but continuing example: the fall of bodies under gravity. Folk knowledge has it that heavier articles fall faster. This idea has lasted for over 2000 years in spite of science teaching in schools. The usual illustration involves the comparison of a heavy weight and either a feather or a leaf. In the sixteenth century, this was properly tested by dropping a cannon ball and a musket ball simultaneously from the Leaning Tower of Pisa (this experiment is usually attributed to Galileo). The two balls fell the same distance in the same time. Our folk knowledge is based on the assumption that light objects either have low density or shapes with extensive surface area; these variables are confused with variation in weight. Because the Pisa experiment did not use the popular light body (a feather), it reached no conclusion as to how gravity affected its fall. Many years later, experiments were carried out with objects falling in a vacuum chamber: the feather fell at the same rate as the metal ball. What makes the feather fall slower is air resistance. This

variable could not be removed in sixteenth century Pisa as they didn't have a vacuum pump, but it was reduced a great deal by picking two bodies that differed a lot in mass but were only slightly different in air resistance.

The second sort of error poses more difficulties. One plan is to have experiments repeated by different people. This is usual nowadays: when a new experimental result is reported all over the world, other workers try to replicate it. To make this possible, the report must contain all the necessary details of how the experiment was conducted. However, it is clear that a widespread, if not universal, prejudice among experimenters about the results of a particular investigation could end in all of them producing similar but mistaken results. This was not really a problem with the investigation of gravity: the trouble then was that the previously prevailing attitude to obtaining knowledge didn't much favour conducting experiments at all.

This kind of widespread experimenter bias is more of a problem in social and psychological sciences: nearly everyone is their own "expert" on psychology. The methods used to reduce errors here include making explicit and standardising the methods of observation and interview, and having several experimenters interview some or all of the subjects. With the latter technique, the report usually states how closely the several observers agreed with each other. This is a measure of how much or how little the differences between experimenters affected the results, and it is hoped that reduction in these differences signifies reduction in their personal effects on the results. In some psychological experiments, the workers dealing directly with the subjects are kept in the dark about the details or purpose of the experiment (except what they absolutely need to know) in order to reduce any inadvertent suggestion to the subjects or bias in observing them.

Science involves finding whether one variable has an effect on another variable. To measure this, you must be able to change the variable. In the gravity experiment, for example, mass (weight) was varied by having a heavy ball and a light ball. In many cases this amounts to having a "control" group (which has the variable present). The value of the comparison between the two groups is that before you can say what the effect of the variable is, you must know what things are like when it is absent. In some sciences (social sciences, medicine), control groups also

help to deal with variables not under investigation which cannot be manipulated out of the way: if it can be assumed that these variables are randomly spread among the subjects, then the subjects are randomly divided into a control and an experimental group; then the influence of these confounding variables should be about the same in both groups. For example, to determine if a new treatment has any effect in alleviating some particular illness, the results of giving people that treatment must be compared with the course of the illness without it. The natural, untreated course of this illness may be known already: but diseases change over time, and as demographic variables (age, sex, social class) influence illness and the present sample may differ from the older one in these ways, we must make a present-day comparison. A random division of patients into two groups will nearly equalise all these variables. A further confounding variable is that the experimental group could improve somewhat just by believing they are getting treatment (the "placebo effect"). Therefore, the control group must receive an identical-seeming treatment, and both groups must be treated directly by people who don't know which treatment each patient is receiving.

I hope this brief sketch has given some flavour of the principles of reducing errors in our knowledge, and some particular ways of doing this. It can be applied to nearly any subject matter that involves events continuing in the present day. Events in the past cannot be manipulated, and neither can some events at great distances. In these cases, we extrapolate from the results of present-day experiments. However, knowledge of historical and distant events can not be as complete as knowledge based on experiments that can be repeated over and over again.

In my next article, I hope to describe the main features of pseudoscience.

FURTHER READING

- Asimov, Isaac: Asimov's Guide to Science, Vol I, Chapter 1, "What is Science?" pp 3-19. Pelican.
- Kurtz, Paul: The Transcendental Temptation, Part One, Section III, "The Scientific Method", pp 41-54. Prometheus.
- Popper, Karl: Conjectures & Refutations, pp 33-65. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Sagan, Carl: Broca's Brain, Chapter 2, "Can We Know the Universe? Reflections on a Grain of Salt," pp 16-22. Coronet.

MAGICIANS, MEDIUMS & PSYCHICS

by David Alexander

Perhaps the second most asked question we get, behind "What is a skeptic?", is "What harm is there in belief in the paranormal?"

From my perspective the answer is two-fold. First, an unquestioning acceptance of the paranormal indicates, to me at least, the abandonment of our unique human ability to think and reason. On all levels our world is becoming more complex. More involved issues face us and require well-thought out and reasoned answers. Unfortunately, you cannot wake up one morning and decide to think critically. It is a skill that is refined and developed over one's entire lifetime.

Second, unquestioning acceptance of the paranormal opens one up to exploitation by unscrupulous individuals and/or organizations. A recent example is Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple tragedy. Jones was noted for his "psychic healings" of Temple members and telepathic readings, all of which were later exposed as having been staged by Jones for the purpose of gathering more converts and further binding the faithful to him.

Apologists for the paranormal will say Jones was unique, an aberration, a psychopathic drug addict who went psychotic and took his trusting followers into his madness with him. Unfortunately, the unique thing about Jones is not what he did, but the magnitude of his madness and the resulting publicity. With regard to his callous and cynical attitude he is rather typical of his breed.

In order to fully understand what I mean by exploitation of credulous individuals, it is necessary to examine the side of "psychic phenomena" that is rarely examined. I am talking about the exploits of spirit mediums, a subspecies of human that I put on a level

with pimps and heroin dealers. If you think that judgement is too harsh, read on.

I am certain that the average sophisticated reader will chuckle knowingly at the incongruity of spirit mediums existing in our technological civilization. Sorry to disappoint, but they not only exist, they are flourishing, albeit very quietly. They don't actively seek out publicity or newspaper space. They don't need it. They seem to have a virtually unending supply of sheep to shear.

I was told of the following case by a Los Angeles Co. Deputy Sheriff. Naturally, we cannot name participants, but a general outline of what happened is sufficient to make the point.

A woman's husband was washed out to sea and the body was never recovered. Although it was almost a complete certainty that the man was dead, the woman began to consult psychics out of desperation.

One of the psychics she contacted sensed a real opportunity to exploit this woman's emotional need. He stated that the woman's husband was alive but suffering from amnesia. He could locate the man, but his psychic powers were strangely dependent upon the amount of money the woman was giving him and how much "cooperation" she showed him. Slowly, but surely, the amounts of money increased. His control escalated to the point where he was using her sexually.

The entire matter came to a head when the "psychic" began to make demands that the woman's teenage daughter sleep with him as well. The daughter refused and blew the whistle on the whole scam. When the woman came to her senses, she was acutely embarrassed at the entire matter.

David Alexander has been both a professional magician and a private investigator; currently he is an editor and publisher; recent projects include editing James Randi's new book, The Faith Healers. He is a Special Consultant to the Committee for Scientific Examination of Religion (CSER), and has participated in several major investigations of faith healers.

While this case may sound unusual, sex and the occult are traditionally linked. Many people purporting to be mediums seem to have a high sex drive. Writing in "The Psychic Mafia", M. Lamar Keene, a reformed medium, tells of mediums who would provide a "spirit lover" for sitters requesting it. The "spirit lover" would "materialize" sufficiently for the sitter to have intercourse. Other mediums had intercourse with sitters by telling them that they were going to receive special spirit ministrations that would "open their psychic center".

Keene's book, originally published in 1977, was a devastating exposé of mediums at two "camps", one in Indiana and the other in Pennsylvania. One would think that after such a blast of bad publicity the operators would quit or move on. Not true. Today both camps are doing very well, thank you. In preparing this article, I called the camp in Pennsylvania and was told I had my choice of several mediums as well as various "healing services". Séances are conducted every day except Mondays, when, apparently, the spirits get a day off.

The most amazing and alarming thing about all of this is the willingness of many people to put their lives completely into the hands of ill-educated, emotionally unbalanced individuals who claim a hotline@ to heaven. Mediums are routinely asked for advice about business decisions, marital problems, how to improve sexual performance, whether to have an abortion, etc.

Why do people become mediums? Money! Lots and lots of money. Keene reports collecting up to \$18,000 in one service. This was from a congregation in his Florida church of only 300. While he was at Camp Chesterfield, in Indiana, neither he nor the other mediums there kept any records, and they dealt mostly in cash. In one summer season when Keene was in residence, 65,000 people went through the camp leaving literally piles of cash as donations. In many cases the idea of a large donation came from the "spirit world". The take by mediums at various camps, "churches", and private readings around the U.S. must be in the millions: all of it very legal and quite tax-free.

The connection between the spirit medium and magic is quite real. For many years the late Bob Nelson operated a magic shop/medium supply center in the Midwest. To magicians, he sold trick decks of cards and standard magical apparatus; however, to the professional mediums of the country, he sold the tricks of their trade; collapsible

reaching rods, luminous items that could be presented as ghosts, spirits, or ectoplasm; and all sorts of specialized apparatus that would allow the mediums to appear genuine. Bob also wrote dozens of books on mentalism and mediumship. Many of them are out of print, but his books on cold reading are still available and constitute the apex of the reader's art. Bob's widow, Betty, still runs the business, only now she just sells astrology supplies.

Bob's apparatus allowed even a mediocre medium to present any and all aspects of spiritual phenomena. The list of apparatus was amazing: imported crystal balis which concealed tiny hand-rollers that communicated information to the medium secretly; miniature radios, available long before the transistor, to whisper in the ear of a blindfolded medium onstage, and dozens of other exotic items.

Why do mediums still flourish in spite of exposure after exposure? The answer is quite simple. I can explain it best by quoting The Rev. Canon William W. Rauscher: "In my pastoral ministry I quickly learned how vulnerable the bereaved are to any promise of reassurance that their beloved dead still live. People who have lost one they cherish will travel anywhere, pay anything, believe anything, it seems, to hear again the voice that was stilled." As Lamar Keene said, "The need to believe in phony wonders sometimes exceeds not only logic, but seemingly, even sanity."

In his opera "The Medium", Gian-Carlo Menotti has the central character, a fake medium named Madame Flora, admit to her sitters that she was a fake and that they had been cheated. They refuse to believe her and beg her to let them have their seance, as it is the only joy in their lives. Things haven't changed a great deal since those times, as there seems to be an unending supply of people willing to throw away the one thing that separate us from the lower animals: the ability to think and reason.

Next time: a full disclosure of how the mediums do their stuff.●

Hello UFOs

Most UFOs in these parts disappeared about the same time as the Hillman Imp, but Brazil is still infested with the things, when they are not pestering the Panamanians. However, Brazilians seem to have got used to them, and work is about to start on a UFO landing strip as part of Brasilia's new City of Peace University. Equipped to accommodate flying machines of nearly half a mile wide, the spaceport will boost the country's reputation for warm hospitality.

SAGAN'S UNIVERSE

by William Steele

Carl Sagan is known to many as novelist, talk-show guest, popularizer of science, and peace activist. Almost forgotten by the public is Carl Sagan the scientist, who drives all those other personalities. Like most scientists, Sagan is passionately in love with his work. Unlike most scientists, he is the sort of lover who will shout the virtues of his loved one from the housetops and feel bitterly disappointed if others fail to find her as beautiful as he does.

If the shouting sometimes irks his colleagues, it has nevertheless accomplished much of its purpose, bringing both the wonder and promise of science and some of the technological problems that threaten humanity to public attention. The television series Cosmos, which Sagan helped to create, was seen by ten million people--more than any other Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) series in history. Sagan's testimony has enlightened Congress on such matters as the nuclear winter, Star Wars, and the greenhouse effect, at least two of which he would have been unprepared to discuss had he not spent a good part of his life studying the atmospheres of Mars and Venus.

Out of his string of awards and prizes far too long to publish here, only about a third are for scientific accomplishments; the rest are for promoting peace and for excellence in "communicating science". Among the latter are the Peabody Award for Cosmos and a Pulitzer Prize for The Dragons of Eden, one of his twenty books so far. The citation for one of his most recent honours, the Federation of American Scientists Annual Award for Public Service, seems to combine all three areas of achievement: "The most visible spokesman of the scientific community of the planet Earth...Sagan has ever greater potential for leading humans away from destruction."

Sagan is disturbed by the suggestion that he may be the only living scientist the person on the street could name. "To the extent that that's true," he says, "it's just another indication of how poorly we communicate science. I think the average person ought to be able to come up with a list of scientists at least as long as the list of basketball players. And I'm a big basketball fan."

Like many legendary love affairs, Sagan's began in childhood: at about the age of six he became fascinated by the stars and the idea that they represented other worlds like ours. At about twelve he ran across Astounding Science Fiction magazine (now called Analog) with its tales of space travel and extraterrestrial life. It seems that inside Carl Sagan, the David Duncan Professor of Astronomy and Space Sciences at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, Director of Cornell's Laboratory of Planetary Studies, and president of The Planetary Society, the small boy is still around, trying to make the stories come true. "The only thing I wanted to do from childhood was learn about planets and stars," Sagan says. "I think everybody is born a scientist. Knowing things and building things is what human beings are good at. Unfortunately so many kids get turned off. Parents and teachers tell them it's not practical, or they get nervous when kids ask deep questions that the adults don't know the answers to, like 'Why is the moon round?' or 'Why is grass green?'"

Sagan's parents didn't discourage his interest, though it was probably outside their experience. His father, a Russian immigrant, was a cutter in the garment industry, his mother a traditional housewife. They were cultured people, but not involved in science or technology. "They never told me that being an astronomer was an impractical thing, that

they'd never heard of such a thing," he recalls.

He attended public schools in Brooklyn, skipping a few grades. After his father was promoted to factory manager the family moved to New Jersey, where Sagan graduated at sixteen from Rahway High School.

He went on to the University of Chicago, which attracted him with a brochure that promised an emphasis on learning in preference to sports and social life. He had planned to major in astronomy, but discovered Chicago didn't believe in specialization. "The premise was that if you arrived there you were confessing ignorance," he recalls, "because if you knew stuff you wouldn't be there, and if you were ignorant you were in no position to say what you wanted to specialize in." Completion of fourteen year-long courses earned a B.A. "in nothing." You could, if you liked, take additional courses and get another degree, so Sagan graduated with an additional B.S. in physics. "I am eternally grateful to them," he adds, "because I learned about all sorts of things I never even knew existed, art, architecture, Freud, music, Russian novels, Greek playwrights, cultural anthropology. I was phenomenally ignorant."

He went on to get a Master's degree in physics and a PhD in astronomy and astrophysics, working under Gerard Kuiper, the leading astronomer at the time in the new specialty known as planetary science. During the summers he studied biology at Indiana University, part of a careful plan to prepare himself to study extraterrestrial life and the origins of life. He was "fortunate," he says, to be accepted to work in the laboratory of H.J. Muller, winner of the Nobel Prize for the discovery that radiation could cause mutations. Significantly, the first scientific paper he ever published, at the age of 22, was in biology, with a little physics on the side. Titled Radiation and the Origin of the Gene, it suggested that solar radiation might have provided the energy to form the first DNA molecules in our planet's youth.

Sagan was in the right place at the right time. It was the early '50's and NASA'S great push to explore the planets was just beginning. Kuiper was not only the leading planetary scientist, but practically the only one, and his students were in demand. While still a graduate student, Sagan was asked to consult with NASA on the design of spacecraft. He went on to work on Mariner II, the first interplanetary probe, which flew to Venus, then the two Mariner missions to Mars, and practically every interplanetary mission since.



In 1962 he became an Assistant Professor of astronomy at Harvard and a researcher at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge.

Meanwhile, Cornell University had hired Professor Thomas Gold away from a full professorship at Harvard and given him a mandate to develop his dream of the Center for Radiophysics and Space Research, an interdisciplinary program which included construction of the Arecibo radiotelescope. Like Sagan, Gold was aware of NASA's research push, and wanted to add some planetary astronomers to the staff. He had met Sagan at a NASA conference and was impressed with him, and "I knew by the grapevine that he considered himself underprivileged at Harvard," Gold says. Although Sagan was extremely popular with students (or perhaps because of that), Harvard had not granted him tenure after seven years. In 1971, he accepted Gold's offer.

As the department grew, Sagan suggested other planetary workers, including Professors Joseph Veverka and Peter Gierasch, both also trained at Harvard.

"He was the driving spirit in enticing these other people here," Gold says. "There's no question but that the planetary group gained a lot of strength from his presence."

For many years, Veverka recalls, Sagan remained the "senior" planetary astronomer in the department and determined its direction. But, he adds, "Some people have a tendency to surround themselves with people who are less competent and can't function on their own. Carl always looked for the best people and most independent people. He wasn't looking for a bunch of flunkies." In the late 1970's, when Sagan took a leave of absence to go to California and work on the Viking program and began writing books and television shows, that independence asserted itself and the department became more diverse. Sagan also brought from Harvard an intriguing research effort into the origins of the chemicals of life on earth and the possibility that such chemicals exist on other worlds. Most of the rest of his work has focused on the atmospheres of Venus, Mars, and Jupiter. He was the first to suggest that the thick carbon dioxide atmosphere of Venus might trap heat by a "greenhouse effect", raising the temperature of the planet to a previously unlikely 600 degrees. A Russian space probe eventually proved him right.

A study of the opposite effect--how Martian dust clouds might block the sun and cool the planet--led to the prediction that dust and smoke from the fires following a nuclear war might drastically alter the earth's climate and perhaps even wipe out all life. The prediction, based on computer modeling of earth's atmosphere, was published in 1983 in a report co-authored by Richard P. Turco of R & D Associates, Marina del Rey, California, and three workers at NASA's Ames Research Center in California, O. Brian Toon, Thomas P. Ackerman, and James B. Pollack. Toon is a former graduate student of Sagan's, and Pollack worked with him as a post-doctoral research associate in the early 1970's. From the initials of the authors, the study has come to be known as the "TTAPS Report."

Nuclear winter, Sagan points out, was "an entirely unexpected finding that the defense establishments of the United States and the Soviet Union completely missed. It raises the uncomfortable question: what else have they missed?"

The TTAPS Report's conclusions have been challenged, with most of the challenges on the order of "Well, it won't be quit that bad, some people will survive." Starley Thompson and Stephen Schneider of the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in Boulder, Colorado, argue that the TTAPS model is too simple, not taking into account such matters as the capacity of the

oceans to store heat. Using a different computer model, the NCAR researchers predict more of a "nuclear autumn", with an average temperature drop of only about 12°C for a short period of time, and with not all parts of the earth suffering extreme cold. Sagan responds that just a 4°C drop would devastate Canadian agriculture, and that areas of the world that escaped extreme cold would still be in big trouble without the agricultural and technological support of the superpower nations.

The TTAPS group is working to support and refine its predictions, but Sagan nowadays spends much of his time trying to convince the government and the military that the possibility of a nuclear winter calls for policy changes. He agrees there is uncertainty on the subject, but argues that where the future of the human race is concerned, policy ought to be based on the steepest possible case. Much of this battle depends on making our scientifically untrained leaders understand science and technology.

Meanwhile, Sagan has been working at the other end of the scale to combat the spread of non-science. He is one of the founders of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), an organization devoted to exposing phony psychics, faith healers and other exponents of pseudoscience. "I was drawn in by the utter credulity of the news media on subjects I knew something about--UFO's, ancient astronauts, astrology, and so on," he explains. "People don't see the distinction between science and pseudoscience," he adds. "I blame the media and the scientists for not doing a better job of explaining what science is all about." As a small step in this direction he has begun teaching a course on "critical thinking".

From the beginning of his career, Sagan was crusading to make science accessible to the public. While still a graduate student at Chicago he had written popular articles for the alumni magazine and organized a lecture series on cosmic evolution, and he continued such activities at Harvard and Cornell. "All of these quite amateurish attempts on my part were wildly successful," he recalls. "It wasn't because I was good at it, it was because there was a great hunger."

But although seeking publicity was a natural part of that work, his rise to celebrity status was largely an accident. It began, he says, when he delivered papers at a scientific conference and reporters zeroed in on him because they found his subject matter interesting. He was interviewed for

ON TITAN, HINTS OF HOW LIFE BEGAN ON EARTH

While Carl Sagan was a student at the University of Chicago, another scientist there, Stanley Miller, did an experiment that shook the world of biology--and perhaps the worlds of philosophy and religion as well. Miller mixed the gases that were believed to be in the atmosphere of the Earth shortly after it was formed (mostly methane and ammonia), zapped them with high-voltage sparks to simulate primordial lightning, and got amino acids, the chemical building blocks of the proteins essential to living creatures. (Ideas of what the primitive atmosphere was like have changed since then, but other experiments have shown that many different mixtures of gases can produce amino acids, as well as the chemical building blocks of DNA, the material that carries the genetic code. How all these chemicals got together into organisms that could reproduce is still a mystery.)

When he joined the faculty at Harvard, Sagan decided to repeat and expand on Miller's experiments. through an advertisement in Physics Today, he recruited Bishun Khare, a physicist experienced in working with gases and vacuums. They extended Miller's experiments by replacing the sparks with ultraviolet light, which had bathed the Earth generously before it developed a protective layer of ozone. They also tried charged particles resembling the solar wind. They added hydrogen sulfide to the gases and got sulfur-containing amino acids, which are essential to life. They calculated that under conditions existing on the primitive earth, the ocean might have contained a one percent solution of amino acids, a surprisingly high number.

Sagan and Khare took out a patent on this method of manufacturing amino acids; it's of little value now, but some time in the future, if the need arises, it could lead to a process for making synthetic proteins with solar energy.

When Sagan moved to Cornell, he brought Khare, senior research associate James Pollack, and the entire research effort with him, dubbing it The Laboratory of Planetary Studies. Later joined by W. Reid Thompson, another post-doctoral researcher, they began applying the same techniques to the study of conditions on other planets, including Jupiter, Uranus, and some of the moons of those planets. Their most successful work has focused on the atmosphere of Titan, one of Saturn's larger satellites.

Photos taken by the Voyager spacecraft show Titan's atmosphere to be filled with an orangey-brown, smoglike haze. Sagan's group prepared a mixture of methane and nitrogen similar to what astronomers believe to be the atmosphere of Titan, exposed it to the kinds of radiation believed to be there, and got an orangey-brown powder which absorbs the same bands of light as Titan's atmosphere. "We claim to have bottled the clouds of Titan," Sagan says.

The stuff resulting from these experiments consists of very large, complicated molecules, the sort of thing a chemist might call "tar" if it appeared unwanted in the bottom of a test tube. Somewhat to the annoyance of some chemists, Sagan and Khare coined the name "tholins" from a Greek word meaning "mud", which is what the material looks like.

Once again, when you add Titan-style tholins to water you get amino acids. "And suddenly," Sagan says, "there's the prospect that the kind of chemistry happening on this remote outpost in the outer solar system is relevant to the origin of life on this planet!"

There's no liquid water on the surface of Titan; it's so cold there that water would be hard as granite. But there may be oceans of hydrocarbons, and Thompson visualizes vast quantities of tholins raining down from the atmosphere and collecting as sediment on the ocean bottoms. There, he says, water and ammonia may be blown from inside the planet by volcanic action, or the sediments may be pushed down into watery regions by movements of the planet's crust. "We're getting a picture of a very exotic world," Sagan says.

Other work in the laboratory has produced tholins in frozen gases like the methane-water frost that may exist on the surface of some of the outer planets and moons, on comets, and in interstellar space. According to Thompson, spectral measurements suggest that tholins may exist in interstellar dust and in comets, including Halley's, that have their origins beyond the solar system.

Now the group is trying to find out more about the chemical structure of tholins, and particularly what gives them their color. That in turn will provide something for the next space missions to look for, to confirm that what's seen on Titan is really the same as what's been made in the lab.

television documentaries and invited to appear on talk shows. Johnny Carson, an amateur astronomer, saw him on one of those and invited onto the Tonight Show, where he still appears regularly. Carson probably helped to make his name a household word by doing impressions of him. "(Just as Cary Grant never said 'Judy, Judy, Judy,' Sagan claims never to have uttered the reverberant 'Billions and billions.')

"I don't want to blame Carson for any of this!" Sagan says quickly.

But it all made *Cosmos* easier to sell. The television series grew, Sagan says, out of "immense frustration" over poor network coverage of space research. Mariner IX photographed Mars from pole to pole, and later the Viking spacecraft actually landed on the planet's surface, and network television gave the events only a few minutes on the evening news. "At that point it was clear we had to do it ourselves," Sagan says. He was in California at that time, working on the Viking program, and was able to interest a Los Angeles PBS station in the project. What had first been envisioned as a one-hour special on space exploration grew into a series embracing, in a way, all of science. (Despite its success, there is still almost no prime-time coverage of science on the commercial networks; a recent attempt at a science series hosted by Walter Cronkite was dropped after two or three episodes.)

Sagan's popularity and his ability to make science interesting and understandable caused publishers to beat a path to his door. Repeatedly, he was invited to write fiction as well. After resisting for a while, he succumbed and produced the science fiction novel *Contact* because, he says, "I'd written a lot of non-fiction about [the search for extraterrestrial intelligence], and here was a chance to present it to a much broader audience." With a movie deal signed, the audience will soon become broader still. Sagan reports with satisfaction that the screenplay is being written by Ernest Thompson Seton, writer of *On Golden Pond*, which means that the movie should end up being about people, "not just gadgetary razmatazz".

The Martians Sagan read about as a child in the works of Ray Bradbury, H.G. Wells, and Edgar Rice Burroughs have not materialized, but Sagan still believes the "contact" he envisions in his novel may come about some day. As president of the Planetary Society, the largest private organization supporting space travel and research, he oversees a project by Professor

Paul Horowitz of Harvard to scan the skies for radio signals from intelligent inhabitants of other star systems. Horowitz uses a sort of super version of the familiar police-band scanner; this one covers four million separate channels over most of the radio spectrum, and methodically scans the sky one small area at a time. Sagan has also helped to get federal support for an even more extensive search by NASA.

It's fair to ask how all this extracurricular activity benefits Cornell. "First of all," Sagan replies, "there's very little I do that's outside of teaching and research; I consider the public lecturing and public writing that I do to be teaching. And I hope it gives a kind of intellectual vibrancy that attracts students. A lot of youngsters write to me and say that they're applying to Cornell University because I'm here."

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SKEPTICS in the NEWS

Healing can work — in many, many ways

I READILY accept that faith-healing works (sometimes) and that people who have been very ill do occasionally make spectacular recoveries. I do not deny that the individuals writer John Vass mentioned recently were genuinely sick and did get better — what I do reject is the notion that their recovery was due to the intervention of God or of any other supernatural agency.

As one who is scientifically trained and presently engaged in scientific research (albeit in chemistry rather than medicine), I would be the first to admit that, "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

That is why science demands research — to find these things out, but where there is no need to invoke supernatural forces there is no justification for doing so. It is perfectly possible to account for so-called "miracle cures" in mundane, down-to-earth ways as wrongful diagnosis, placebo effect, cure by conventional medicine, spontaneous remission, coincidence, brain influencing the body, hypnosis, alleviation of psychosomatic symptoms and even downright fraud in some cases.

One of the problems with faith-healing is that much of the evidence is anecdotal and people with a strong desire to believe in something are prone to embellish their stories to make them more convincing.

They may also suffer from selective amnesia, forgetting the many occasions when the healing failed but remembering those times when it appeared to work.

Even apparently well-attested cases with allegedly baffled doctors confirming the recovery are not immune. Such is the power of people's desire to believe and desire to convince others that when they tell us of someone making a spectacular recovery they may forget that the recovery actually took days or weeks or that the person had had previous remissions or that he was also being treated by conventional medicine or that it was an ailment which could have got better on its own anyway.

It is well known that many illnesses are largely or entirely

PLATFORM

By STEPHEN MORETON



From the "Evening News," of April 29

psychosomatic. That is, the person thinks that he or she is ill and shows real physical symptoms, but the cause is psychological or emotional. Convince such a person that he or she will recover and the symptoms will vanish, so it is no surprise that faith healing works here.

A similar phenomenon is the placebo effect. When people who have definite organic ailments, not psychosomatic ones, are told that they will get better, about a third of them actually do feel better and many show measurable, physical improvements. So powerful is this effect that it has to be taken into consideration when conducting clinical trials of new drugs.

The brain can affect the body far more profoundly than people realise. Hypnosis provides some striking examples of this.

For instance, a subject is

hypnotised and a coin placed on his or her arm. If the subject is then told that the coin is extremely hot a sizeable blister will often develop where the coin had been placed. Other effects which have been reported range from stopping cuts from bleeding to increasing the size of ladies' busts!

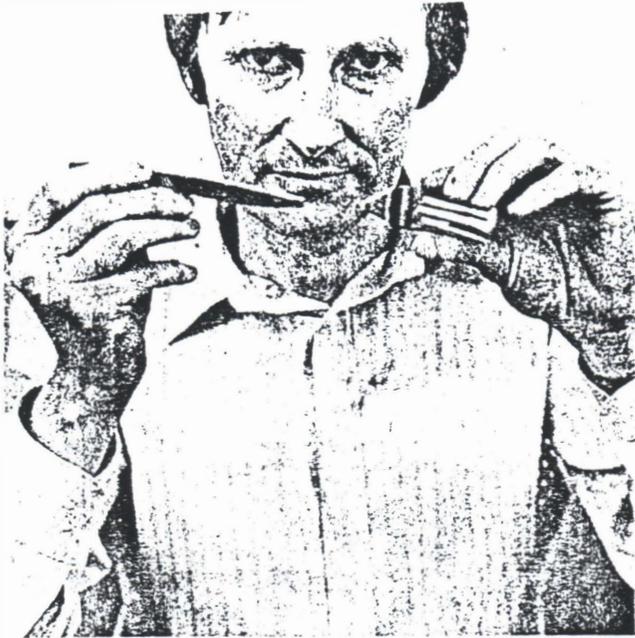
One particularly interesting case is that of a man with an incurable (by ordinary medicine) congenital skin disease caused by the absence of certain glands in the skin. After treatment with hypnosis he was almost completely cured and his skin contained the glands which since his birth had been absent. Now if the brain can influence the body to such an extent that it can generate blisters where there was no injury or create glands where previously there were none, is it not conceivable that it might also perform many other wonders which to ordinary people would seem like miracles?

The other explanations I offered — wrongful diagnosis, spontaneous remission, etc — are rather obvious. Doctors are only human and they are bound to make mistakes. I sometimes wonder how many people have wrongly been told they had such-and-such a disease when in fact there was nothing seriously wrong. If such a person went to a healer he may well attribute his subsequent recovery to the healer rather than to his doctor's mistake.

As for spontaneous remission, it goes without saying that illnesses often get better of their own accord and if a recovery happens to coincide with a visit to a healer then the healer may get the credit for what would have happened anyway. The healer may also get the credit if the patient happened to have been cured by conventional treatment received alongside the healing.

I have briefly covered the main explanations for faith-healing. I do not expect to convince the believers as their minds are already made up. Such people want to believe in their faith and no amount of reason and commonsense will sway them. I would like to point out though that it is not up to the sceptic to prove that "miracle cures" are not the work of God, it is up to the believers to prove that they are. The burden of proof is theirs.

(SCOTTISH) EVENING NEWS FRIDAY 9 MAY 1986



■ Mike Hutchinson demonstrates how easy it is to send cutlery round the bend ©

Uri branded fake at show

SPOONBENDER Uri Geller amazed Reading and was branded a fake by sceptics.

The controversy came after the mind-boggling performer was on stage yesterday for a charity night at The Hexagon for his first ever live performance in Britain.

After the 90 minute show — which raised at least £1,000 for the Royal Berkshire Hospital cancer appeal — his critics claimed they could explain away all but one of his feats.

But the cool Israeli laughed off the disbelievers claims and thanked them for giving him more publicity.

Hundreds watched spellbound as master showman Geller:

■ correctly identified colours projected to him by the

audience;

■ Identified a city and a cat drawing transmitted from the crowd;

■ Levitated a hefty man from a chair with three helpers;

■ Seemed to move a compass needle with the power of his mind;

■ Made several spectators' watches start to tick again;

■ Bent spoons and keys by the handful.

But critics say it's all a con. Mike Hutchinson, secretary of British Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal was not impressed.

After the show he said: "The whole thing was a load of rubbish. We know how he did it all but one of those things, but I have a pretty good idea about that.

"Mysterious he is not. A clever conjuror he is."

Other members of the committee found the show a complete farce

But Uri shrugged off their claims, which include charges he has helpers in the audience.

He said "It is not a trick and that is I am not collaborating with anyone."

POST REPORTER TIM BOONE writes: When I met Uri Geller at his Berkshire home a few weeks ago I was convinced he was genuine. Now I'm not so sure.

Looking into the legend behind the man, it's full of grey claims of success under laboratory conditions.

Last night did nothing to cancel my fears. I personally worked out how Geller did roughly half his stage feats, and the other half were explained to me afterwards.

In fact two of them — a so-called levitation and psychic movement of watch hands — were so completely obvious I found them an insult to the intelligence.

But that said, Geller is a master showman who brings entertainment to millions, and last night he did it for a very good cause.

And his entertainment value is true enough.

READING EVENING POST 18 JUNE 1987

(Evans, "Abductions in Perspective," cont.)

occurred as we are asked to believe, are the most extraordinary and most significant events which have taken place throughout the history of mankind. Yet how do we learn about them? By purchasing commercial books published by commercial publishers and sold in neighborhood bookstores!

This incongruity between the events on the one hand, and how we learn of those events on the other hand, must induce doubt, if not outright disbelief, that abductions occur anywhere outside the imaginations of those who, for whatever reason, experience them, and of those who, with whatever motive, report them.

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Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

One of the difficulties with keeping an eye on psychic phenomena is the danger of inadvertently wandering into religious territory. Take spiritualism, for example: from the spurious beginnings of the Fox sisters, the movement now considers itself to be a "religion", complete with internecine bickerings. The proliferation of mediums is interesting, and the sheer banality of the majority of their utterances infuriating; but what are we to think when apparently accurate testimony is delivered from the other side? How can the medium have access to private information of a *total stranger* without some kind of paranormal assistance? The simple straight answer, as often purveyed in these pages, is that the medium cheats. Experience has shown that exposing a medium as such can have no effect *whatsoever* on devotees of the faith (or personality cult). This is a truism, but I think it's worth recalling a recent illustration. In his book *The After Death Experience* (Sidgwick & Jackson), Ian Wilson reports that he caught Doris Stokes out by the simple expedient of interviewing a woman who had attended one of Stokes' performances at the London Palladium, and who had received an extraordinary spirit message. The accuracy of the message to the woman in question was nothing short of miraculous: she was told that not long after the birth of their first baby, her husband had been fatally injured after falling from scaffolding, and that she had been right to allow his life-support machine to be disconnected. The rub comes when the woman revealed to Wilson that while her husband was critically ill she had *actually telephoned* Stokes, explaining her situation, to ask her advice. Then, a week before the Palladium performance Stokes—out of the blue—rang the woman to offer her front row tickets for the show. And in spite of knowing all this the woman remained absolutely convinced that the spirit message delivered by Stokes was genuinely from her late husband. No doubt the audience that night were deeply moved to see the love of a husband for his wife transcending the spirit barrier. Appalling.

Earlier in the Summer, I spent an illuminating July afternoon at the Alternative Medicine Exhibition in Kensington's Rainbow Exhibition Centre. This was a four-day event at which many different practitioners came together under the general heading of "Alternative Medicine and Natural Living". I am not qualified to consider the validity of many of the approaches on display, nor is it my intention to impugn the sincerity of many of those taking part, but I thought I'd mention two therapies which caught my attention.

One stand attracting a lot of interest was that of the Radionic Association. What is Radionics? To quote the official introductory leaflet it is "a method of healing at a distance using specially designed instruments in conjunction with the radiesthetic faculty". As Christopher Evans remarks in his *Cults of Unreason*, strange ideas may often be given a veneer of respectability by the introduction of the appropriate gadgetry: the suitably knurled hazel-twig for the dowser; the E-meter for the Scientologist; the Cosmic Energy Accumulator for the Aetherius Society (!); and if a gadget looks technological, the argument goes, surely it must actually do something important, and if it's complicated, with lots of controls, surely the operator must be skilled. So, we have the gadget and we have the operator; presumably one is useless without the other. One of the key ideas of Radionics is that various bodily parts and malfunctions thereof have corresponding "vibratory rates", the numerical values of which can be set on the front panels of Radionic instruments. Other values, representing health and energy, can be similarly selected and beamed to the patient over any distance. It's as simple as that. Another group practising Radionics is the Delawarr Laboratories, and

their recent catalogue includes some quaint examples of these instruments, their huge gauges and Bakelite knobs giving every impression that behind the doors of the labs, technology came to a grinding halt *circa* 1950. I spent some time with the representatives of the RA, honestly trying to understand the explanation of how it all works. The sticking point was very simple: given that the box doesn't need any internal parts, why have it at all? Why not just think about it? At this point the RA and I agreed to differ.

Crystal healing seems to be very big business, with the advantage that the method of application is apparently very simple—you just hold them and relax, or wave them around a bit. I would imagine that the healing properties are offset somewhat by the damage done to one's bank account. For example, the Crystal Research Foundation—a particularly "respectable" choice of name—has available gadgets such as crystal light boxes and electro-crystal scanners, and offers "Crystal Healing Certified Courses". The lady at one crystal stand was dismayed when I was unable to report picking up the "vibrations" which she assured me were emanating profusely from the brittle red crystal I was holding. "Most people feel a tingling", she said . . .

Some items from the pages of *Psychic News*:

The Froude Squad—Recalling (from *B&IS* 1/3) Peter Froude, the Bournemouth automatist who is receiving £40 a week from the Enterprise Allowance scheme, it transpires that he is getting some interesting help on his novel-in-progress. One assistant is "Jasmine", a Kurd goatgirl regrettably murdered a hundred years ago at the hands of cruel Persians. I find it charming that the Mr Froudes of this world are exceedingly fortunate when it comes to establishing contact with extremely *interesting* spirits; more interesting, a cynic might ask, than anyone they know on this side of the eternal curtain?

Phone-y things—Hot on the heels of *UFO-Line* comes *Psychic Line*, a dial-a-message service operated by the London-based "Audiotext" company. The line features a series of messages from the dead delivered by astrologer/medium/researcher/author/lecturer (*sic*) Michael Colmer. Waving the banner of "research" I listened to two minutes of this placatory nonsense, to find that in time-honoured fashion the messages are so vague that they are certain to score a hit with someone, somewhere. In a similar vein, Manchester now has its own *Dial-a-Medium* line, which mercifully concentrates more on philosophy than "messages".

Medium Radio—From September London medium Jim Elliot will have a regular slot on London's LBC commercial radio station, where he will work as a roving reporter investigating "haunted" pubs and people's psychic experiences.

Still more ghosts on the rates—Implausibly, there is yet another "haunted" council house: this one is in Stoke-on-Trent and the unhappy residents are complaining of light switches that do their own switching, self-propelled living-room furniture and—horror of horrors—curtains that close on their own! I must admit to being stumped: can any reader think of a possible connection between council houses and poltergeists?

Dead heat—The competition between the two Liverpool clairvoyants (*B&IS* 1/4) for the most number of correct predictions has ended in a draw. With predictions as precise as "changes at Liverpool Football Club", "new developments in dockland" and "an earthquake abroad", it must be hard to lose.

I'd like to close with a plea: please write to me, c/o *B&IS* if you've got any news about the Psychic scene, or if you've come across something that you feel ought to be investigated.

THE PRESS GALLERY

Helen Rock's Sunday Diary in the (Irish) Sunday Press, announced on 9 August, "Beginning his annual pilgrimage to Dublin today is world-famous clairvoyant David Young. Dublin-born David [is] a friend of the Longfords and medium to British royalty, stage and screen stars and many well-known Irish people...David Young has his own television and radio programmes in Canada and America, which make him wealthy enough to fly to Paris for lunch on a whim, is very modest in his charges to individuals, I'm told.

"Voted Medium of the Year and considered to be the best in the world, he is used by the New York police to help in murder investigations."

Witchcraft seems to be getting a fair bit of notice in The Daily Telegraph: on 21 July, they ran an article about a devil-worshipping father who used black magic to persuade teenage girls, including his own daughter, sexually. Then on 18 August, "Sorcery casts spell on mayoral poll" details a mayoral primary in Salem, Massachusetts: a self-proclaimed sorceress entered the race claiming that she knew one of the other candidates to be a warlock. However, she dropped out of the campaign shortly afterwards.

There were lots of write-ups of the 'harmonious convergence' that took place in mid-August in various locations around the world to celebrate the beginning of the Age of Aquarius (we understand several prominent skeptics attended the one in Niagara Falls, NY). The Independent's "Good vibes to keep the spheres in harmony" notes that the rituals planned at the standing stones in Callanish in Lewis, Outer Hebrides, "have been condemned by clergymen as the work of Satan," the (Irish) Sunday Tribune, in "Now all join hands for a cosmic humdinger," explains the movement's origins. "And at the back of it all, as one might expect, is someone hustling a book," and goes on to note the existence of an Irish branch of Harmonic Convergence, based at Inns Quay, Dublin 7. In "Planets not in harmony but faithful converged," the Irish Times pointed out that according to US astronomer John Carlson, Mr Arguelles (the man whose book, The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology began this particular movement) "Mr Arguelles got his maths wrong," and that the planets were not in fact lined up as predicted by Mr Arguelles' interpretation of the Mayan calendar. According to the Irish Times, Mr Arguelles

also claims that the Mayans were aliens from outer space. The Guardian adds the information that Shirley MacLaine would be flying to Lake Baikal in the Soviet Union to join the festivities. A few days later, it was reported that a UFO had been spotted over Highgate, but that the BBC had managed to identify it as a high-flying silver-foil kite. Today, on the same date, 21 August, reported that crowds were flocking to a small California town to see a picture of an angel that had appeared on a television set during the harmonic convergence gathering at Mount Shasta. Today pointed out that a local TV repairman had been able to create the same effect on a set in his shop.

The Daily Telegraph and the Guardian both noted that a hippy convoy was moved on by police at Glastonbury Tor, where it was feared they would disrupt, among other things, the harmonic convergence group.

On 22 June, The Independent published a long, careful article about astrology pointing out that "because of an error in the way astrological charts are compiled our 'starsigns' should all move back one." The article details some of the critical studies of astrology and the reporter describes as "disturbing" findings that knowledge of astrology affects its students' personalities, and that American companies have used astrological interpretations of birth information to eliminate job candidates.

Meanwhile, Prediction magazine ran an article detailing Dennis Elwell's claims that the Zeebrugge disaster was "astrologically aligned to the sinking of the Titanic."

The Irish Evening Press ran an article on 19 August, "Ouija boards danger--priest": "Teenagers were warned today not to experiment with ouija boards, following a strong sermon from the pulpit by a priest worried about their effects."

An article from an unidentified publication about "Britain's most amazing psychic couple", details Anne and Peter Owen's claims to be getting pictures of the whereabouts of Terry Waite, Suzy Lampiugh, the Brinks-Mat Bullion, and Lord Lucan.

Self-described clairvoyant Stephen Alexander predicted in the Sunday Mirror of 26 July that Jeffrey Archer will be the next Prime Minister, and that Margaret Thatcher will step down in his favor after she wins the next election. We will be watching for the outcomes of these predictions.

(cont. on p 34)

REVIEWS

CONFERENCES

NESSIE IN CONFERENCE

Steuart Campbell

The International Society of Cryptozoology (ISC) and the Society for the History of Natural History held a joint meeting in Edinburgh the weekend of the 25th and 26th July. Steuart attended on the 25th, which was an all-day symposium, 'The Search for Nessie in the 1980's'.

There was a time when the staff of the Royal Museum of Scotland (Department of Natural History) were circumspect in their involvement with the Nessie myth. They were inclined to be sceptical of the Monster's existence, but were willing to examine any evidence. In recent years, only the late Ian Lyster became involved, sometimes visiting Loch Ness.

Reorganization of the Scottish Museum into the National Museums of Scotland (NMS) seems to have brought a change. Not only has the Museum hosted a meeting of a controversial organization (ISC), it has tolerated discussion in its Lecture Theatre of both Nessie and other mythical animals such as the British Big Cat. Indeed, the meeting was welcomed by the Director of the NMS, Dr Robert G. W. Anderson.

There could be no objection to all this if the symposium on Nessie (to say nothing of that on the Big Cat) was balanced and objective. But all the speakers on the search for Nessie were either Nessie buffs or neutral. No sceptical view was expressed (I had not been invited to speak).

Despite the title of the symposium, few speakers dealt with the 1980's. Richard Fitter of the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society gave a somewhat tedious review of the history of the search. Because they have done little in the 1980's, Roy Mackal, Robert Rines, and Tim Dinsdale merely reviewed their earlier work (in the case of Dinsdale, his 1960 film). Rines gave a rather incoherent and emotional speech in which scepticism was ridiculed. None of these speakers referred to my published criticism of their work. However, my analysis of the Wilson photograph (1934)

was the basis of a talk by Professor Paul LeBlond from the University of British Columbia; he used a method of wave size analysis to calculate the probable height of the object in the photograph. His conclusion was very close to my own (which was based on a geometric analysis).

It was evidence that no-one had any new evidence for Nessie, and that all the results pointed to her non-existence. For instance, Mackal could not match the reported characteristics of Nessie with any animal alive or extinct.

The occasion was hardly more than an indulgent reminiscence which perpetuated the myth. My one sceptical question was quickly passed over. However, I did sell 14 copies of my book to attenders (including one speaker)! So, scepticism was spread surreptitiously.

UFO CONGRESS '87

Steuart Campbell

Steuart was an invited speaker at BUFORA's '4th International UFO Congress', held in London the 10th to 12th July. Congress '87 received a lot of press coverage, as it coincided with the publication of Jenny Randles' book The UFO Conspiracy, Timothy Good's book, Above Top Secret, and the appearance of novelist Whitley Streiber's Communion: A True Story, the story of his abduction by visiting aliens.

American attenders at Congress '87 were puzzled as to how a sceptic came a) to be a member of BUFORA, and b) how it was that I was tolerated. They compared the situation with that in the USA, where sceptics are outside the UFO movement and despised by UFO buffs. I could only point to British tolerance and courtesy. In case, BUFORA's aims are broad enough to include even a sceptical approach.

Hilary Evans noted other differences between Europe and America (as a result of his attending MUFON's Washington, DC, conference). American UFOlogists, he noted, are preoccupied with the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis (ETH) and (recently) obsessed with the phenomenon of alleged abductions. European UFOlogists are sceptical of stories of abductions and are not convinced that UFO's are extraterrestrial craft. Apart from Professor Allen Tough from Canada, who examined the status of the ETH, hardly anyone at Congress '87 discussed either the ETH or abductions. Walt Andrus of MUFON described the Texan Cash-Landrum Case and

also last November's incident over Alaska when a Japanese aircraft was allegedly buzzed by a UFO (but neither in sufficient detail to satisfy me). Also from the USA was Dr Willy Smith, describing his computerized catalogue of UFO reports.

British speakers included Yorkshire UFO Network's Philip Mantle, who believes that UFO's prefer Yorkshire, writer Paul Vereux, who believes that UFO's are the luminous result of tectonic strain, engineer Roy Dutton, who believes that alien ships orbit Earth, and writer Jenny Randles (BUFORA's Director of Investigations), who claimed that 'UFO's can seriously damage your health'!

A sad occasion was an attempt by lawyer Harry Harris, tailor Mike Sachs, and the two original 'investigators' (Dot Street and Brenda Butler) to make something of the notorious Rendlesham Forest incident (the subject of a book called Sky Crash by Butler, Parsons, and Street). They had arranged for the appearance of US Colonel Halt, a central figure in the affair. Unfortunately due to their embarrassment (because they had invited the press), Halt changed his mind and refused to attend. This was seen as more evidence that there is an official conspiracy of silence (an idea propagated by recent books, one by Randles and one by Parsons and Good).

Other speakers came from Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. None had any solutions to the UFO problem. Indeed, they didn't seem to understand the UFO problem (which is why people make UFO reports).

In my own paper, I explained why many UFO reports, particularly those most difficult to explain, were caused by sightings of, usually mirages of astronomical objects.

Formerly an investigator for BUFORA, Stuart Campbell is an Edinburgh science writer. He is author of The Loch Ness Monster: The Evidence.



MEDIA

GELLER'S HOT-AIR BALLOON

Lewis Jones

The Sun, August 24-29, 1987, various articles: "Britain's Bender," "Uri Geller tests his amazing powers on the whole of Britain," "Thanks for a miracle, Uri," "How Uri bent the world to his will," etc.

Did anything good happen to you at 3 PM on Thursday, 27 August? Uri Geller brought it about. Did anything bad happen? Uri's mental vibrations upset the natural state of things. Did nothing at all happen to you at that time? Uri inhibited events that would have taken place if his psychic powers had not interfered. Don't you wish you had powers like that? It only needs a) practice and b) cheek.

I shall be beaming my psi forces to all of you on the Thursday after you receive this newsletter and I guarantee to achieve the same results.

I suppose there may be people who, when asked where they look for scientific information, say: "I read The Sun." The rest of you may need an updated account of all these goings-on.

From three days before that fateful Thursday in August, The Sun allowed Geller to treat it as a free publicity machine. He was accorded front-page pictures of his staring eyes, and the accolade, "psychic sensation of the century."

The Sun solemnly informed its readers that Geller uses his psychic powers mainly for mining. "All he needs is a map, a visit to the area being prospected, and those astonishing abilities of his."

So far, according to The Sun, Geller has discovered "goldfields in Brazil, vast coal deposits in Zimbabwe, and he is even on the bring of discovering diamonds in the Solomon Islands."

The Sun gave its readers a hop, skip, and a jump through Geller's life, managing to navigate round any fact that would tarnish their image of a mastermind at work.

But The Sun was not going to be fooled by a mere conjuror. Oh, no. So first it sent round someone to test Geller. And who was this person with the specialised knowledge of methods of deception? A Sun reporter of course. And what precautions did he take before handing over his kitchen spoon? "First I

insisted he washed his hands, then allowed me to dry and examine them carefully to ensure there was no possibility of using some chemical."

At this point, amateur magicians among The Sun's readers must have been wiping tears of mirth from their eyes. And my guess is that Geller's most difficult time in the whole interview was keeping a straight face at this moment.

He promptly bent the spoon (probably in between yawns) and duplicated a drawing for The Sun's photographer (another unsung expert in detecting deception). In fact, a mere glance at this Micky Mouse drawing, with its misplaced teeth and eyes, is enough to tip off any magician to the standard method for producing a quick sketch AFTER being shown the original drawing.

But The Sun's "greatest-ever experiment" to demonstrate Geller's abilities was reserved for 27 August, when the mastermind would "test his amazing powers on the whole of Britain." The Sun predicted that cutlery would bend, broken clocks would start ticking, dud car engines would start up, and lifeless radios and TV sets and toasters would work again. Ornaments might fall from their shelves and paintings leap off the walls.

Readers were urged to place their broken gadgets on a picture of Geller's face which The Sun would print for the occasion. And finally Geller would make a simple sketch and beam it across Britain--all from a hot-air balloon floating above Ilkley Moor in West Yorkshire.

Came the Big Day, and within minutes of the witching hour of 3 PM, The Sun claims, its switchboard was jammed with calls: "Uri Geller blows millions of minds in great Sun test."

Uri did his stuff from a helicopter instead of a balloon because the winds were too strong. Nevertheless, the crowds below "watched Uri's psychic force at work as he calmed the Force Eight gales that threatened his flight." The grounded balloon pilot said, "I can offer no meteorological explanation." It seems that no opinion was sought from a meteorologist, and Uri (opportunist to the last) is not the man to disclaim a miracle.

With the whole of Britain as the sample population, you won't be too surprised to hear that a cooker blew up in Lancashire, a cable car stopped in Bedfordshire, an insurance company's sales figures went up in Essex, and some people had difficulty opening their locks.

There was the usual crop of stopped watches that started up, including one battery-operated one that "started working WITHOUT a battery."

Naturally, some spoons bent. Amusingly enough, the two that appeared in The Sun's photographs still showed the characteristic kink of a handle that has been firmly bent with fingers and then straightened again.

The most sickening exploitation in the Geller circus concerned Clifford Fedder, a five-year-old child who according to The Sun was suffering from a rare illness, and had not uttered a word since birth. His mother told The Sun: "I heard a bang and saw the curtains had fallen down--and then Clifford started reeling off words like biscuit, cheese, and butterfly."

The next day, The Sun featured a front-page picture of Geller hugging the child: "It's a mind-blowing moment as little Clifford Fedder meets Uri Geller--the 'miracle' man who gave him the gift of speech."

The Sun quoted an (unnamed) "top neuro-surgeon at an (unnamed) "London hospital" as saying: "I believe it is quite possible that this child has benefited from Mr Geller's psychic power."

Uri modestly agreed that it was "a tiny miracle."

A week later, the results of the drawing test were in. Geller had drawn a sailboat.

Surprise! This is one of the great favourites of mentalist magicians who produce drawings for a sizeable audience.

When David Marks and Richard Kammann did their experiment on population stereotypes (see their excellent book The Psychology of the Psychic), they found that the three most popular sketches that people guessed (apart from geometrical designs) were:

1. a house
2. a stick figure
3. a boat.

Geller himself, who appears to be barely numerate, announced that "the odds against all this happening by chance" were "a billion to one at least."

Indeed The Sun was able to dig up an (unnamed) "top statistician" who told them: "That is simply stunning. It is far too high a success figure to have occurred by chance."

Alas, nothing quite so amazing. Marks and Kammann found that the chance of getting a drawing of a boat from their subjects was 1 in 16. The Sun's results were little different: 1 in 11.

Where does The Sun find these copy consultants who have so little confidence in their own pronouncements that they insist on hiding their identity?

It would be much more useful to forget all about Geller, and find what percentages of the well-known population stereotypes were sent in by Sun readers. After all, the sample of 2500

was more than three times as large as the Marks and Kammann group, and the information could be of real use to psychologists.

But if you'd like to demonstrate your own amazing psychic drawing abilities for a fair-sized group, you could do worse than bear the Marks and Kammann results in mind.

In case you're interested, the next most frequent population stereotypes are a tree and a cat (another Geller favourite).

Alternatively, you could just stick to card tricks. Then at least no one could be conned into believing you could cure rare neurological illnesses by sitting in a helicopter and just thinking.

Lewis Jones is a writer and editor and a member of the British Committee.

BOOKS

I SAW A DUPE

Kari Sabbagh

I Saw a Ghost..., by Ben Noakes. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. £5.95.

Sorry, You've Been Duped!, by Melvin Harris. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. £9.95.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the British public is charged with extreme gullibility in the face of accounts of allegedly supernatural events. I offer two recent books as conclusive evidence of my case.

I would draw your attention first to a book called I Saw a Ghost: Eye-Witness Accounts by the Famous of Supernatural Encounters, by Ben Noakes. I put it to you that a more appropriate title for this book is "Some Answers to a Letter from a Young Etonian with Nothing Better to Do who was Trying to Cobble Together Some Sort of a Book and Didn't Care What Rubbish Hye Put into It." In fact, of the words in the subtitle, only "by", "the", and "of" are used correctly. The rest are an indication of how gullible the author thinks the public is. Most of these accounts are not "eye-witness", many of the people are not famous, and few of them are, by any definition, supernatural.

Can you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, hold your hands on your hearts and say that any of the following people are famous: Lady Silvy Thynne, French Chang-Him, The Knight of Kerry, Beatric Hanss, Ranald MacDonald of

Clanranald, The MacDermot, Baroness Josef von Franckenstein, and, as a final insult to the intelligence, "Anonymous"? These and many others tell dog-eared and implausible anecdotes, very few of which are in any sense eye-witness. Many have been handed down by relatives, some were passed on by people encountered in restaurants or on journeys, and the few that involve personal experience boil down to not very extraordinary coincidences or noises heard while dropping off to sleep.

The book includes such irrelevant items as a "joke" from Mr Les Dawson and a story by Sir Nigel Brookes of finding a pearl in an oyster. Far from being supernatural, ladies and gentlemen, this latter event had been observed frequently in the natural world, and is a well-known side-effect of irritation in molluscs. Professor Hans Eysenck's "eye-witness account" occupies five lines and tells of the time he dreamed of the Grand National and could clearly identify the winner. The following day he watched the race and an entirely different horse won. General Sir John Gilmour tells of a slip of the tongue made by his grandmother which, however you turn the book or hold the page up to the light, has absolutely no supernatural implications at all.

Most of the stories that actually mention ghosts have obviously been retold so many times that it is impossible to place any credence in them at all. And yet a whole chain of people from Mr Noakes, through various publishing executives who must have read the manuscript, to the book-buying members of the public, have raised not a whimper of incredulity at this farrago of nonsense. There is just one item in the book which, unwittingly, gives a clue to the origin of some of the others. The MacDermot (what he?) reveals his childhood escapades where by a mixture of invented rumours and staged incidents he convinced a household that the house was haunted. We are not told who the guests were but their stories could well have given rise to other "eye-witness" accounts in the book.

Let me now turn to another book, Sorry, You've Been Duped, where Mr Melvin Harris has painstakingly explored many of the most widely publicised "paranormal" events of the last hundred years and shown how, as the stories are traced back to their sources, any supernatural element disappears. The Amityville Horror? A put-up job to produce a best-selling book. The Angels of Mons? An Evening News short story that was repeated around the world as if, when no eyewitness account was ever verified. Hypnotic

regression to past lives? A phenomenon where, under hypnosis, people regurgitate pulp historical novels they once read and appeared to have forgotten. Nostradamus' Predictions Verified? Only by the insertion of extra words. Psychics Help the Police? No, they never have.

The cumulative effect of Mr Harris' meticulous researches, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, is overwhelming astonishment at the amount of lying, fraud, and other types of journalistic activity that have been, and continue to be, devoted to promoting stories of the supernatural in the teeth of the facts. There can be only one explanation. The public would rather have titillating lies than boring truth. My case rests, M'Lud.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, do you find the accused gullible or not gullible?

Gullible, your honour.

Prisoners at the bar, you have been found gullible by a jury of your peers. I therefore have no alternative but to sentence you to life in a world in which the laws of science rarely operate, and where the paranormal is the norm. I do not need to remind you that it is not a pleasant world. It is a world where every thought may be transmitted over any distance to anyone in the world; where every nasty car accident or plane crash is preceded by nightmares throughout the land; where your minds will continually be bending spoons and door keys, sometimes as you are about to eat your soup or enter your houses. Dead friends and relatives will constantly be sending footling messages via decidedly odd people of the sort you would not normally pass the time of day with, who appear to regurgitate cloths as they speak. Perhaps in the future, when you have experienced this world you have created by your gullibility, you will apply a little common sense and resist the temptation to believe a single world of any future "eye-witness accounts of the supernatural" you might come across.

Karl Sabbagh is an independent TV producer and a free-lance writer.

URBAN FOLKLORE

Andrew Tomlinson

The Vanishing Hitchhiker (Urban Legends and their Meanings), by Jan Harold Brunvand. Pan (Picador), 1983. 156 pp. £2.95.

Have you ever heard the one about the alligators in the sewers of New York, the hippie babysitter on LSD who cooked the baby in an oven, or the one about the black

widow spider which made its nest in a lady's bouffant hairdo, eventually biting and killing her? If so, they may well have been told as true stories, for these are just some of the modern American myths and legends included in The Vanishing Hitchhiker by folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand, a professor of English at the University of Utah. This highly entertaining book examines many of these "urban legends", offers theories about their meanings, and tries to determine their origins. They're the sort of 'true' bizarre incident that happened to the friend of a friend of the person telling it, or the 'real life' nightmare someone claims to have read in a newspaper, but can't remember in which one.

Take, for example, the legend the book is named after, which Brunvand describes as the "classic automobile" legend, and which one Toronto teenager explains "actually" happened to his girlfriend's best friend and her father. It appears that upon arriving at the house of a hitchhiker to whom they had offered a lift, they looked around toward the back seat of their car, only to find her vanished. They then discovered that the owners of that house had a daughter who answered to the description of the hitchhiker, but that she had disappeared some years before on the very road where the mysterious girl had been picked up. This account is just one of many Vanishing Hitchhiker tales collected over the years which are listed in the book, with variants of this story being traced back to the 1890's. Brunvand also points out that a prototypical Vanishing Hitchhiker story is found in the New Testament (Acts 8:26-39) involving the Apostle Philip and a vanishing chariot-riding Ethiopian, but doubts this is the true ancestor of the legend.

It must be stated that this book is not a debunking exercise, but attempts are made to trace the alleged first-hand sources of these stories. These attempts are relatively fruitless. Usually the fact of there being many different versions of each legend is the only evidence against credibility (apart from common sense). There are, for example, fifteen accounts of the Vanishing Hitchhiker legend documented in the book, apparently a mere sample of the many variants collected over the past forty years.

Some of the legends listed bear more plausibility than others. Take, for example, the ubiquitous "dead mouse in the coke bottle", just one of the food contamination legends analysed. The numerous variations of this are, according to the author, all too easily dismissed by folklorists, who are often unaware of actual court cases dealing with such claims. Between 1914 and 1976 forty-five

such cases were appealed in the States. The book points out, however, that in the majority of the legends a woman is the victim of the unwelcome rodent, but in reality it was usually discovered by a man. Brunvand also toys with the idea that some of these actual cases may even owe their existence to people's knowledge of the legend, either hoaxers or company employee saboteurs. The analysis of food contamination narratives on a national scale also proves quite revealing. The stories told in the US tend to criticize the impersonality and carelessness of large organisations, and report accidental contamination by employees. In Germany, a xenophobic trait surfaces. The culprit in their versions is usually a small, privately-owned restaurant, and the act deliberate.

Tracing a legend right back to its dawn appears to be an impossible task, but a detailed study of its recent evolution and means of transmission is provided. For the most part, these tales are spread by word of mouth, however, "Xerox-lore" is now with us. Here folklore is circulated by photocopied or typed accounts, and it is hardly surprising that many of these legends deal with naked office bosses or farcical office parties.

The mass media have also played an important part in circulating urban legends, even when only attempting to expose them. A prime example of this occurred in the US in the late 1960's. In the scenario known as "the snake in the blanket", an unsuspecting shopper at a local discount store is bitten by a venomous snake whilst looking at imported goods. This myth was initially spread verbally, but newspaper and radio reports seeking to explode it only served to strengthen it, spreading it further.

Throughout the book, attempts are made to unveil the psychological significance of these legends, and it must be said that while Brunvand's conclusions are not earth-shattering, they are refreshingly down to earth and sensible. Anxieties about modern technology, mistrust of large organisations, and fear of strangers undoubtedly contribute to the promotion of "the Kentucky Fried Rat", "the Poisoned Pussycat at the Party", and even the "Vanishing Hitchhiker". But one can't help agreeing that the continued popularity of these stories surely lies in our love of a good story, and in our imagination in asking, "What if...?"

PUBLICATION NOTED: *Jack the Ripper-
The Bloody Truth*, by Melvin Harris.
Columbus Books, October 1987, £14.95.

(The Press Gallery, cont.)

And we have lots of ghosts: a chair that is possessed by an evil spirit (the London Evening Standard), a spirit woman who appeared in photographs of a Hampshire hunt (the Sunday Mirror), sounds of a haunting (only audible through hi-fi equipment) in Galway (the Galway Advertiser), the story of a woman who fought a long custody battle for her "possessed" children (In Dublin), a poltergeist has taken over a house in West Lothian (the Scottish Evening News), and the Star has been running a series about hauntings in local pubs.

Fairly Serious Monthly magazine ran an article on hypnotism, reporting on the careers of several prominent stage hypnotists, including a first-person account of hypnotic regression. In contrast, The New Scientist ran an article (27 August) "Have we been mesmerised by hypnosis?" explaining the psychologists' debate over whether such a thing as hypnosis really exists. The article quotes Graham Wagstaff, of Liverpool University's psychology department: "There is 'no conclusive evidence that hypnosis enables people to transcend their normal capabilities.'" Wagstaff went on to answer the argument that hypnosis acts as an anaesthetic, by pointing out that people in their normal state are often able to tolerate the pain of, for example, injections, that the internal organs are more insensitive to incision than is commonly thought, and that the relaxation and lessening of anxiety induced by the hypnotist may play a strong part.

And She magazine shows evidence of schizophrenia. In the same issue (August), they ran a skeptical article on OBE's, and an uncritical article preferring "natural immunity" to medical vaccination, a review of Vaccination and Immunization: Dangers, Delusions, and Alternatives by Leon Chaitow. The reviewer, Simon Martin, summarizes Chaitow's counter-arguments to the medical establishment's claims about the success of vaccination: improved hygiene, sanitation, and housing; a decline in virulence of the harmful micro-organisms themselves, and greater resistance to disease due to better nutrition. Martin concludes: "As we teeter on the brink of an AIDS-fuelled panic, we must have a proper, public debate on vaccination, so that we can uphold our rights to refuse to submit to unproven high-tech medicine."

LETTERS

Further to the comments on Doris Stokes, there is no doubt that whatever one thinks of her she did give much hope and comfort to many, many people over their bereavements. This must be borne in minds when assessing her value to the public.

The remarks by Mark Plummer on Rosemary Brown suggest an avenue to show whether psychic communication with the dead is possible.

There is a famous theorem in mathematics which was first stated by the Frenchman Pierre de Fermat in about 1637. In the margin of a text on number theory he wrote: "On the other hand, it is impossible to separate a cube into 2 cubes, or a fourth power into 2 fourth powers, or generally any power above the second into 2 powers of the same degree. I have discovered a truly marvellous proof of this, which this margin is too small to contain."

Unfortunately, Fermat never wrote out his proof and his manuscripts disclosed nothing. Despite the efforts of many eminent mathematicians over some 350 years, this remarkable theorem, in the general state, remains unproved to this day. However, some people still firmly believe Fermat did indeed have a proof.

Therefore, any psychic who can contact Fermat, extract this "marvellous proof", transcribe it, and have it accepted as genuine by an appointed panel of, say, three competent mathematicians, would have demonstrated (to me, anyway) that communication with the dead is possible.

I admit there is still a very slight possibility of fraud, but it would certainly cause an upheaval in spiritualist circles, and in science in general, were this theorem to finally be demonstrated in this way.

C. D. Allan

...I feel that I have gone "beyond the call of duty" buying the Sun for a fortnight! My newsagent thought I'd gone through a sinister personality change!

J. A. Remfry

KNOCK

...I was at Knock in August and managed to locate Ballinderris for Steuart [Campbell] but it was on the wrong side of the village for his mirage theory!

Stephen Moreton

I was intrigued by Steuart Campbell's new "astronomical mirage" hypothesis to account for the Knock apparition. I admire Campbell's excellent detective work (with Christopher Allan) in elucidating the UFO hoax of 'Cedric Allingham' (Magonia, July 1986).

However, it is asking a lot to accept that a mirage on a church gable should be a unique event in a single Irish village!

Moreover, this theory is apparently confined to the visions on August 21, 1879, which were the subject of the ecclesiastical commission's investigations. It is often overlooked that the apparitions were reported over a period of seven months. There were scenes of great religious fervour when similar visions were witnessed on January 5, 1880, followed by other gable visions on February 9, March 25 and 26. Amongst several witnesses on the night of January 5 were two policemen. Of three young men who witnessed the visions on the night of February 9, two gave spoken evidence to a Daily Telegraph special correspondent, the third gave written evidence.

I cannot accept that an astronomical mirage could be

sustained consistently over a period of seven months. That would indeed be miraculous!

Leslie Shepard

We sent a copy of Steuart Campbell's piece to Professor John C. Brown, head of the Department of Astronomy at Glasgow University, and got this reply:

...I can imagine that temperature inversions can occasionally produce an 'elevated' astronomical mirage and maybe even some image magnification or intensification but the idea of a Jupiter image so 'magnified' as to make the Galilean moons resolvable and so intensified as to render the enlarged image bright enough to be seen, seems quite ludicrous to me. Should this be possible, would we not expect to occasionally see huge, intense images of the moon floating in the sky (the moon is 10,000 times brighter than Jupiter, let alone its moons)? If Campbell can persuade me there is a prima facie case to examine, I will be willing to make the relevant calculation, but at the moment I would prefer to believe almost any other Knock theory--gossip, imagination/mass hysteria, or even genuine spiritual apparition! If Jupiter played a role, it would most likely lie in the rather startling effect on the uninitiated of the brilliant appearance of the planet (without mirages) in an otherwise dull sky. (The even more startling Venus at brightest always produces a spate of calls about UFO's, Stars of Bethlehem, etc., etc.).

I...am thoroughly enjoying [Randi's books]. After reading these and Peter Wright's Spycatcher, it is hard to believe anything!

John C. Brown

CAN SKEPTICS PREDICT THE FUTURE?

SEND US (BY NOVEMBER 15) YOUR TEN PREDICTIONS FOR 1988. WE WILL PUBLISH THEM IN OUR NEXT ISSUE (NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1987)

AT THE END OF NEXT YEAR, WE WILL COMPARE YOUR SUCCESS AT PREDICTING THE FUTURE WITH THE BIG-TIME PSYCHICS. YOU COULD FIND YOU HAVE A NEW CAREER!

PREDICTIONS ACCEPTED FROM ALL READERS OF THE BRITISH & IRISH SKEPTIC IN ALL COUNTRIES.

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