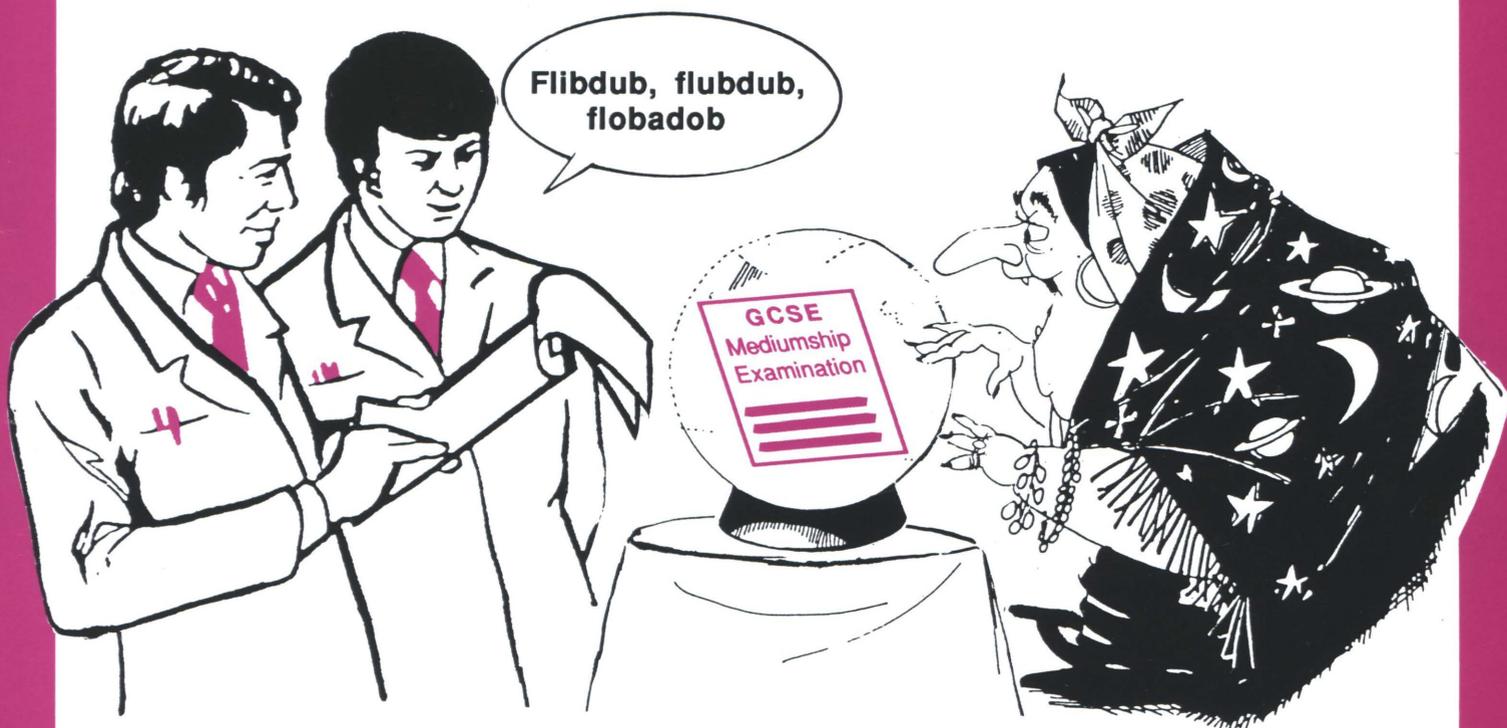


Volume 5 Number 3  
May/June 1991

# *The Skeptic*

## *Speaking in tongues*



## *Why not to test a psychic*

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*Czech pyramidology*

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**ISSN 0959-5228**

*The Skeptic* relies heavily on readers' contributions of articles, ideas, letters and newspaper clippings etc. Please mark clippings clearly with the name of the publication and the date. Articles may be reprinted only by permission of the author; however such permission is automatically granted for all in-house material (unsigned or by the editors) to the publications of skeptics groups in any country. UK subscription rates (six issues) are £12 per year (see back page for overseas rates). Any additional donations to *The Skeptic* will be most gratefully accepted.

A big thank-you to all our clipping contributors, who for this issue include: Tom Ruffles, Ernest Jackson, Chris Allen, William Dalgliesh, Chris Torrero, Chris Wright, Mavis Howard, Peter Hough, Marie Donnelly, Steuart Campbell, Redge Lewis, Frank Chambers, David Martin and Alan Remfry. Sorry if we've missed anyone out! Please keep the clippings coming!

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The *Skeptic* (formerly the *British & Irish Skeptic*) is published bimonthly from P.O. Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH, UK. Opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the editors.

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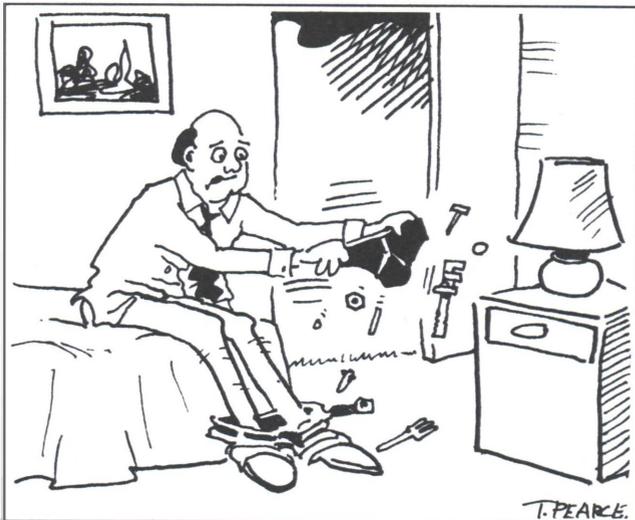
# Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

## A spell of shopping

If you have problems with virility or even with ineffectual premonitory dreams, the *Guardian* on 22 March reports on a service which could be the answer to your prayers and incantations. Firms such as Euroservice, Euromail, Le Chat Noir and Vencor operate from the northern Italian town of Bresica and specialize in the selling of amulets by mail order. Despite the dominance of the Roman Catholic church in Italy, hundreds of thousands of Italians seem happy to put their faith in anything from "mixed dust from ancient Egypt to be sprinkled in the shoes and wherever the intractable loved-one passes" (for lovers with athlete's foot?) to the "premonition dream headband"—to help you recall the dream which foresaw the winning lottery numbers.

And for all our male readers, the answer to the virility problem is simply a pair of magnetic briefs—yours for only 8 900 lire (about £4.50). "These special briefs contain metal plates which generate a magnetic field strong enough to transform you into macho-man." But avoid small metal objects.



## Turquoise saviour

It seems almost obligatory to cover the David Icke affair in this issue in view of the enormous amount of media coverage generated by the announcement of his new job—the Son of God.

David Icke, former footballer, sports presenter and Green politician was made aware of his psychic potential during a healing session with clairvoyant Betty Shine. According to Mrs Shine, during this session the spirit of Socrates appeared to give Icke 'desperately intense messages about what we are doing to the planet. They showed what path he must take'. The path led to Canada because of its 'geological importance in the make-up of the world' and to a relationship with Mari Schawsun (alias Deborah Shaw) a young

woman who claimed that she and Icke shared the same wavelength.

On his return from Canada in late March the holy trinity of Icke, his wife Linda and Ms Schawsun was complete and at a press conference on 27 March they appeared clad in turquoise track suits—turquoise being the colour of love and wisdom. The press conference was, in principle, to publicise Icke's new book *The Truth Vibrations* whose publication by Aquarian-Harper Collins had been delayed until May. However Icke was happy to explain that for the previous year he had been residing on a higher plane and that he was the Son of God—by which he meant that he was 'the spirit in the highest frequency which has the most perfect balance between the polarities.' He also made a number of predictions including a massive eruption of Mount Ranier in Washington State, major earthquakes in Martinique and Cuba and a hurricane in Londonderry and the Isle of Arran (caused by negative energies from Northern Ireland). These messages were being communicated to the turquoise threesome through voices and automatic writing. On its publication at the beginning of May, Icke's book did nothing to make his state of mind appear any more down-to-earth. Amongst other revelations he claims to hail from the planet Oereal and to have visited the planet Mercury, to have arrived here at the beginning of the Atlantean civilisation and to be a reincarnation of one of Napoleon's generals and an American Indian chief. His mission (should he choose to accept it) is no less than to heal our sick planet and prevent the world from ending in 1997. (It's a tough job but somebody has to do it).

A letter published in *Private Eye* on 12 April perhaps sums up the affair more concisely than most media comment. Mike Daly from Brighton writes to protest 'about the stealing of the famous "Icke Marbles" from Britain recently. These marbles although sadly perished and neglected are still fondly remembered here...'

## Medium rare

David Icke's television appearance on *Wogan* on 29 April elicited the comment from Terry Wogan that the audience was not laughing *with* Icke but was laughing *at* him. Whilst the mirth was not quite as widespread for Stephen O'Brien's appearance on the show earlier in the month, it has to be said that the Welsh medium's performance was somewhat less than successful. Admittedly with only five minutes to demonstrate his talents—difficult conditions for any psychic performer—O'Brien homed in immediately on a woman in the audience and utterly failed to provide her with one relevant piece of information despite the fact that he claimed to have a link to the woman's deceased husband. O'Brien seems to be hounded by ghosts obsessed with jewellery as

spirits frequently deliver messages for women in his audiences telling them that they have misplaced earrings. On this occasion, however, information concerning earrings and a jewellery box drew a complete blank. Finally, O'Brien passed on (no pun intended) information concerning a brother. 'His brother?' asked the woman. 'Yes, his brother,' replied the medium. 'No, he didn't have one!' came the reply.

On *Gloria Live* on 15 May the man who has been billed as 'the country's leading medium' explained that he had misidentified the woman for whom the message from the other side was meant—and he had a signed attestation from the woman in the *Wogan* audience for whom the information was *actually* intended. It seems that the woman's dead husband, who had been softly whispering in O'Brien's ear, had been able to give him all sorts of accurate information—but had failed to recognize his own wife.

On the same programme, London businessman, Gerald Fleming issued to Stephen O'Brien the challenge which he had previously issued to both Doris Stokes and Doris Collins. Fleming offered £250 000 to O'Brien or a charity of his choice for a successful demonstration of his skills as a medium or a psychic under controlled conditions (see below). Without claiming to have any clairvoyant or precognitive skills I confidently predict that, despite agreeing to consider the challenge, Stephen O'Brien will not agree to be tested.

Recorded Delivery

Stephen O'Brien Esq.,

16th May 1991

Dear Stephen,

This is to confirm my offer to pay you £250,000 (two hundred and fifty thousand pounds) if you are able to successfully demonstrate your psychic/medium claims under properly observed and controlled conditions agreeable to me.

At this stage I am not able to give exact details of such a test; these would have to be based on any specific claim in which you feel confident of success. The intention would be for you to demonstrate that you are supplying information which could only be obtained by 'psychic' means.

If you agree in principle to be tested we would start by meeting the people who would be asked to design the test in such a way that the result would be obvious and not subject to judging. If necessary we could have a preliminary meeting to discuss who we would both accept in this capacity.

I hope you will accept this opportunity to definitively prove the Spiritualist claims which have been made without evidence for nearly 150 years. Should you not wish to do this for the money – which could of course be donated to a charity of your choice – you could do it to show your sincerity and love of humanity. (I really cannot understand why Spiritualist mediums always refuse to prove the claims which they promote with such gusto; unless they fear that their claims are bogus.) In the event of your success without acceptance of the money it will nevertheless be donated to a charity of my own choice.

It would be a demonstration of your sincerity and confidence if you offered a smaller sum to be donated to charity in the event of your failure.

I look forward to receiving your acceptance.

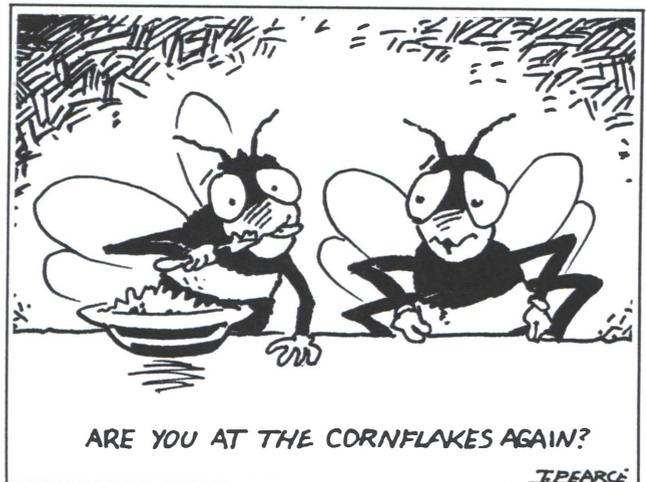
Yours sincerely,

Gerald Fleming.

## Food of queens

It may be the favourite health food of members of the Royal family—and luminaries such as Cliff Richard and Barbara Cartland may also swear by it—but a recent report indicates that an average dose of royal jelly contains fewer nutrients than a bowl of cornflakes. The report published in *Which? Way to Health* concludes that, despite annual sales of £17 million a year in Britain alone, there is no evidence that royal jelly does you any good whatsoever—except by the placebo effect; if you think it will do you some good it may do you some good.

Royal jelly is the food of queen bees and is believed by many people to have health-giving properties but according to the report: "A 30g bowl of cornflakes provides 30 times more thiamine and riboflavin; 90 times more niacin, and nearly 400 times more folic acid than a 500 mg dose of royal jelly... we found no clinical trials that clearly demonstrated any medical benefit from royal jelly."—and you get free plastic reflectors for your bicycle with cornflakes.



## Does hypnotism exist?

In *The Skeptic* 4.1 we highlighted the current dispute in psychological circles concerning the existence or otherwise of the hypnotic state. In that issue, H B Gibson explained why many psychologists continued to believe in the existence of the hypnotic state and Lewis Jones presented the views of Nicholas Spanos and others that no separate, clearly identifiable hypnotic state can be identified.

This latter view is clearly shared by 'The Amazing Kreskin' who regards himself as the world's foremost mentalist and who has recently announced that he will pay \$100 000 to anyone who can prove that hypnotism exists. He says that he is offering the money because hypnotism needs to be debunked. 'The only thing that's real about hypnotism is the bill that they get when they go through hypnotherapy. My subjects respond to me when they are wide awake, totally conscious and certainly not in any altered state. Who needs all this mumbo jumbo?'

Steve Donnelly is a physicist, a reader in electronics and electrical engineering at the University of Salford and a member of the Manchester Skeptics and the UK Skeptics.

# The Houdini File

## Number Six

### Frank Koval

Alexander Martin was recommended as a leading psychic photographer to Houdini by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Houdini had a session with Martin on May 9, 1923 in Denver, Colorado. On this occasion, Houdini was photographed with assistant James Collins at his side. When it was developed, several 'psychic extras' appeared. On the following day, Houdini sat alone with Martin and the subsequent photograph again showed 'psychic extras'. Leo Talamonti reproduces the first of these in his 1974 book, *Forbidden Universe*, with the caption: 'The extras are clear. Houdini did not try to duplicate this kind of psychic evidence. Nor did he ever try to "expose" Martin'. Talamonti's comment is incorrect in that Houdini produced many such photographs, usually by the double-exposure method. Martin's work is made suspect by a photograph of a lady he took after Houdini's death. One of the 'extras' is of Houdini's head—in exactly the same pose as when he sat for Martin together with James Collins. It is fascinating to read the portion of Houdini's letter which deals with the photograph taken by Van der Weyde. Planting a plate at the Photography Supply Co. which already had an 'extra' on, was ingenious at the time.

Harry Price ignored this information in later years when he chose to claim that Houdini believed this 'spirit photograph' to be genuine and taken under test conditions, as noted in the third of this series of columns. Houdini refers to the increasing strain on his friendship with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. While Sir Arthur was in Los Angeles, he had received newspaper cuttings from the Oakland Tribune which purported to quote Houdini as being critical

HOUDINI  
278 WEST 112<sup>th</sup> STREET  
NEW YORK N. Y.

June 16, 1923.

Mr. Harry Price,  
Arun Bank,  
Pulborough, Sussex,  
England.

My dear Harry Price:-

Enclosed you will find a spirit photograph taken by Alexander Martin, who, according to Doyle, is the best spirit photographer in America. I may tell you that I allowed Mr. Martin to do anything he wanted in fixing his plates. He used his own. I did not go into the dark room with him, but turned my back on him. As a matter of fact, it was immaterial to me what he did, and am writing this to you to let you know it was not taken under test conditions.

There is a report over here regarding a Mr. Atocherley of Nottingham. Do you know anything at all about him and his trick photographs.

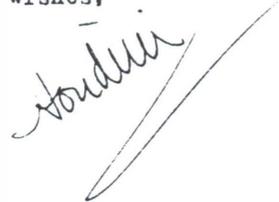
Regarding the Hyslop photographs taken by Van der Weyde, the whole thing was collusion, with the exception of the committee. It was arranged with salesman of the Photographic Supply Co. that when the committee came in for plates, he was to give them the one which had been prepared. Van der Weyde having photographed Hyslop, and having a number of unknown negatives, easily used a portrait for the purpose of test conditions. Know this will interest you as the photographer himself has publicly exposed his method, which releases me from my obligation of secrecy.

It is interesting to know that in California a newspaper reported five articles misquoting me and misrepresenting an interview, and I do not think there is anything I can do about it. This is the most unethical thing I have ever had happen in my life regarding newspaper work, and the peculiar part of it is that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is out west and labors under the impression that I inspired this material, which is not true.

With kindest regards and best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

HH/BP



of Sir Arthur. In his letter to Harry Price, Houdini clearly regrets the paper's misrepresentation of his views, and is not sure how to stop that sort of thing.

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Frank Koval is a teacher, writer and conjurer and is a member of the Manchester Skeptics.

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# Why Not to Test a Psychic—Part 1

Lewis Jones

## *Should we take paranormal claims seriously?*

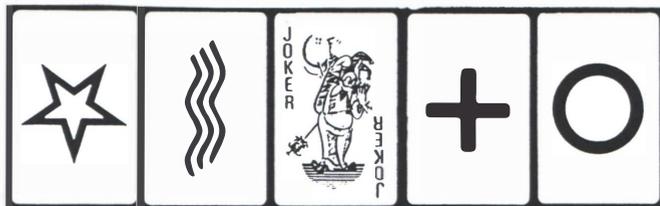
The right to be heard does not automatically include the right to be taken seriously—Hubert Humphrey

If someone suggested testing yeast organisms to see if they could respond to PK, would you be prepared to put up the money? If someone thought it would be a good idea to try with fruit flies, would you agree to drop everything and set aside part of your life to running a research programme? How about cockroaches—would you consider applying for a grant to acquire the equipment? Your pet cat—any offers to check out its ability to affect a random number generator merely by using its mind? How about checking out the mental powers of algae?

If not, why not? These experiments have not only been suggested: they have been carried out (by physicist Helmut Schmidt), and solemnly analysed and commented upon by others. In proposals like these, it is all too often the experimental setup that receives first attention. It has become a habit to begin by putting the fashionable question: 'Is this claim falsifiable?' I want to suggest that there is a question that takes priority: 'Is this claim absurd?' There is a notion going the rounds that as soon as any proposal whatever is put forward in the psychic field, skeptics must immediately assume a straight face, and be prepared to give full and serious attention to absolutely anything. Here is Paul Kurtz (chairman of CSICOP) in the Spring 1984 issue of *Skeptical Inquirer*: 'We can ask: Does sleeping under a pyramid increase sexual potency? Do plants have ESP and will talking to them enhance their growth? Do tape-recorders really pick up the voices of the dead? All of these claims have been proposed by paranormalists within the past decade. They should not be rejected out of hand.'

Why not?

Richard Gregory, Professor of Neuropsychology and Director of the Brain and Perception Laboratory at the University of Bristol, puts it like this: 'Suppose that someone puts up the hypothesis: *The moon is made of Danish Blue cheese*. Would support be found for gaining knowledge by refuting this hypothesis? It would surely be given too low a priority to justify the cost of refutation...' 'Without a sense of the ridiculous,' says Gregory, 'there can hardly be persuasion, other than by force, and we cannot begin to distinguish between illusions and realities or agree on what is true.' If you had a real-life problem, would you send for Indiana Jones? Would you invoke the aid of Apollo? Would you spend time experimentally examining the thesis that we are all actually fast asleep and merely pretending to be awake? Or that someone could change traffic lights to green by just making a wish as they approached a junction? Bill Boyd tells fortunes for teddy bears, does past-life readings



for them, and reads their auras (*Skeptical Inquirer*, Winter 1984-5): would you apply for funds to check it all out with a research team with statistical backup? In Martin Gardner's opinion, 'There's nothing that one can't research the hell out of. Research guided by bad judgement is a black hole for good money.'

How do you discriminate between these cases and some of those that actually do get funding? When did you last hear a skeptic on TV turn down an invitation to test a psychic with the words 'Because it's absurd'? But how often have you heard Professor Pussyfoot intone, 'Well, speaking in a purely personal capacity, I would be compelled to advance the opinion that the facts, insofar as we have been able to establish them hitherto, would seem to indicate that as of this moment in time we do not appear to have a quite sufficient weight of evidence to fully support all the claims made in connection with this particular issue—at least so far'. What the public gleans from this is that there must be something in this teddy-bear business. After all, here is a real live Doctor of Philosophy listening to all this stuff with a completely straight face and giving an understanding and sympathetic nod every so often. 'I am a caring person, and I absolutely agree that every idea is as valid and valuable as every other idea'—this is the message that comes across.

Skeptics have fallen prey to a strange phobia: an irrational fear of the accusation that they have closed minds. This dreaded charge is a weapon dreamed up by believers. It is a charge intended to define the issue in terms of the occultist—a tactic that Thomas Szasz warned us about long ago: 'In ordinary life, the struggle is not for guns but for words: whoever first defines the situation is the victor: his adversary, the victim.' You might think that an expert in the arts of deception would not be fooled by the open-mind ploy. But David Berglas (now president of the Magic Circle) is of the opinion that most scientists have closed minds. He has insisted: 'I still believe in the next medium I go to investigate. I still have a genuinely open mind...' You would be hard put to find a more explicit misunderstanding of the null hypothesis.

I am well aware that absurdity is not precisely defined. (What is?) So for the benefit of the faint-hearted, I intend to spell out two simple criteria that narrow the issue.

**Criterion One:** 'Is this claim meaningless?'

(I take up Criterion Two in the next issue.)

Much of the discussion in this field is of this quality:

Q: How do you manage to read minds?

A: By telepathy.

This reduces to:

Q: How do you manage to read minds?

A: By my ability to read minds.

Setting up an inquiry to elucidate this kind of claim would be sensible as making a study of bachelors to find out how many of them were married.

But occultism is riddled with such linguistic bogeymen. Back in the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes washed his hands of this kind of nonsense. 'And therefore if a man should talk to me of a *round Quadrangle* or *accidents of Bread in Cheese*; or *immaterial Substances*; or a *free Subject*; a *free-Will*; or any *Free*, but free from being hindered by opposition, I should not say he were in Error: but that his words were without meaning; that is to say, absurd.' Hobbes would have groaned in despair at the number of immaterial substances still being peddled at the end of the 20th century. It was J B Rhine who invented 'extrasensory perception' and its abbreviation ESP in 1934. Eight years later, R H Thouless came up with *psi*, being under the impression that this label was an advance on ESP.

When the American Association for the Advancement of Science decided to allow parapsychologists an affiliate status in the Association, physicist John Wheeler warned against two fashionable ideas: that information can be transmitted faster than light, and there is any 'quantum interconnectedness' between separate consciousnesses. 'Both,' he said, 'are baseless. Both are mysticism. Both are moonshine.' It was Wheeler who substituted the useful abbreviation SCESP (so-called extrasensory perception), but the term never caught on. More than half of the members of the Parapsychological Association hold doctorates in science, engineering, or medicine, but in 1980, 68 per cent of them said they firmly believed that *psi* was a real thing. Alas in this area nothing remains simple for long: James Alcock warns us that 'it now seems that one must differentiate between *psi* and *parapsi*.'

What is parapsychology anyway? A not over-bright practitioner has defined it as the study of 'the paranormal'. But what does that mean? Susan Blackmore asks, 'So does the paranormal "really" exist?' and she answers herself, 'I have no idea'. What does the question mean? What does the answer mean? I have no idea. Antony Flew makes the point like this: 'I admit that the psychical researchers use phrases like 'by paranormal means': but I submit that, from their accounts of what happens, or rather from their lack of any account of what happens, they are not entitled to such phrases, or, if they are, can only use them in the same sense as the phrases 'by unknown means' and 'without means'. He points out that *extrasensory perception* can only mean *extra-perceptual* perception. 'So each phrase is just as much of a nonsense as the other'. Statements like 'This was a paranormal event' are of a piece with 'There's ne'er a villain living in all Denmark but he's an arrant knave' or 'Wagner's music is better than it sounds'.

We are seeing a resurrection of the antique idea than any noun represents a thing; that if it is a thing, it exists; and if it exists, you can in principle go out into the world and look for it and find it. The notion has clearly also irritated the philosopher Richard Taylor, who kebabs it in his essay *How to Bury the Mind Body Problem*. 'It is sheer redundancy to say that men think things called 'thoughts', sense things called 'sensations' 'imagine 'images' and feel 'feelings'. There are no such things'. In the Land of Labels, there are no experimental problems: needed entities are simply defined into existence. And minds are things with a life of their own, and can travel the world like invisible tourists, affecting what they will.

Meaningless questions ('Was backwards causation at work here?') are solemnly put to the test (let's hear it for Helmut Schmidt again), without ever considering their *implications*. Is really being suggested that yesterday's car crash can be made to unhappen? Can the dead driver become alive again today? Does this mean that newspaper reports of the event are automatically expunged? Does this leave a blank space in the newspaper? Or is the page cunningly made up afresh by unseen hands, so as to fill in with other material? How? Who by?

Labels like 'the paranormal' are dreamed up to fill in the blanks in sentences such as 'This happening must have been caused by ———'. It is just as likely that puzzlingly events have been caused by the Average Taxpayer. It was Gilbert Ryle who made the observation: 'So long as John Doe continues to think of the Average Taxpayer as a fellow-citizen, he will tend to think of him as an elusive insubstantial man, a ghost who is everywhere yet nowhere'. Ryle's head-shaking was directed at people who make category-mistakes. 'Their puzzles arose from inability to use certain items in the English vocabulary'. Psychics, please note.

The mystically-minded get a great deal of mileage out of simply smearing the distinction between truth and belief. It achieves the peak of nonsensicality in Tolstoy's *A Confession*: 'All that people sincerely believe in must be true; it may be differently expressed but it cannot be a lie, and therefore if it presents itself to me as a lie, that only means I have not understood it'. William James caught the bug: 'The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief'.

It takes us back to musty philosophical disputes about the pre-existence of the soul. (I've always liked Darwin's dry comment 'read monkeys for pre-existence').

Criterion one therefore amounts to 'Is this subject bounded by the two covers of a dictionary?'

The psychically-inclined need to be more often confronted by the kind of cursed person whose challenge is reported by Dr Rob Buckman: 'I remember when I was a casualty officer at St Nissen's a patient turned up and actually said that he had a red rash in circles that spread outwards and I looked it and said, Aha! this is *erythema annulare centrifugum*, and he said what does that mean, and I said a red rash in circles that spreads outwards, and he said I just told *you* that, what are you a doctor or a parrot?'

---

Lewis Jones is a freelance editor and writer.

# Passing the Torch

Ian Woods

*'We need super-skeptics like Marcel Marceau needs a megaphone'*

In the Jan/Feb issue (the one mailed out in late March, ha ha) David Fisher argued the case for what he called 'super skepticism'. Spiffing piece of writing though this was, I'd like if I may to just hint at an ever so slightly different view on the matter, namely that we need super-skeptics like Marcel Marceau needs a megaphone.

Now for the benefit of newcomers, and anyone who was *not* paying attention at the time, David's argument goes something like this: Most people these days wouldn't recognise a good argument if it was anvil-shaped and dropped on them from a chimney (I'm paraphrasing, by the way). Also, media people are biased halfwits. Therefore, 'wet' skeptics who favour the calm and reasoned argument approach will never get anywhere. Therefore, we should become very 'dry' skeptics, and use more effective tactics to overcome the 'miracle-mongers'. Like ridicule, slanging matches, and napalm. End of summary.

Okay, I admit I made up the bit about napalm. But you get the gist. It's Rottweiler Rationalism, and the extremely 'dry' David is tired of faint-hearted 'wets' who go round proposing scientific tests and giving people the benefit of the doubt. It's about time we gave 'em the benefit of the clout, says David, handing out the knuckledusters.

Macho stuff, and not entirely unappealing. It's perfectly true that oodles of people seem to have drossy beliefs (some of them—can't think why I'm mentioning this—with impressive academic qualifications). And offering skeptical input to the media often seems about as productive as giving a fish a concertina. Okay, it's a difficult and challenging world we must deal with. But deal with it we must, and I think we can do better than spouting the unfounded tenets of 'super-skepticism'.

'The media are a major cause of the problem; not part of the solution'. Agree with the first half, disagree with the second. Parts of the media do peddle nonsense, but equally we should recognise the contributions of Stephen Fry, Peregrine Worsthorne, Simon Hoggart, Patrick Moore, Johnny Carson, Ludovic Kennedy and others not so well-known who persistently espouse the skeptical view. I'd say their efforts were definitely 'part of the solution', and should be commended as such.

As for 'skeptics must avoid the media like the plague', that's like saying we want skepticism to become a secret. Randi used the Carson show to reach an audience of millions with his now famous exposure of the faith-healing racket. Closer to home, Ian Howarth of the Cult Information Centre has taken the trouble to cultivate excellent media contacts, resulting in very good coverage targeted on dangerous beliefs and religions. It can be done. The lesson is



not to ignore the media, which would be a fat lot of use, but to get smart about exploiting it.

I think the gem of the piece has to be David's contention that 'Some would argue that one must distinguish between those who are innocent followers of the paranormal, and those who are unscrupulous leaders. I refuse to draw any such distinction; the gullible are as culpable as the criminal'. To my mind, this argument holds water like a string vest. If the followers are being led astray or conned, then that is their misfortune and not their crime. It's rather like saying that if someone broke into David's house and stole all his books (whether new or coloured in), he would be just as guilty for being thieved from as the thief would be for thieving.

Moreover, David completely overlooks the possibility of sincerity. Some psychics are working a con game and they know it. In such cases, let Justice Fisher sit in judgement on their wickedness, and flog 'em at dawn. But many others are fooling themselves as well as their followers, and believe in their powers no less than David believes he knows how to use a semicolon. Such mistaken belief, sincerely held, warrants my concern and not my censure.

The point is that credulousness is essentially a sort of illness. It may last a lifetime, without even being properly diagnosed, and can lead to wasted time and money, disappointment, desperation and bewilderment. It can strike anyone (perhaps even being passed from parent to child), and there are not many sources of remedy. As David himself notes, this is not a society which exactly encourages people to think for themselves. Rational thought simply isn't high on the agenda any more, if indeed it ever was. Somewhere

along the line from Socrates to Stallone, facts and figures got slung in a box marked 'BORING', and any day of the week you can see the papers, the politicians, the advertising men and the TV controllers busy sticking another piece of tape down over the lid. Small wonder that not everyone acquires a taste for rational thought.

There is one more very important parallel between credulousness and an illness: intelligence plays no part. A wise man may catch measles, and a bright TV viewer may be exposed to things which he lacks enough specialised knowledge to evaluate properly. I have often seen wonderful 'psychic' happenings on TV which can only be explained if you know at least a little about (a) sleight of hand plus (b) the mechanics of how TV shows get made plus (c) human psychology and perception. I'm lucky. I either know enough to work out exactly what's going on, or I have access to literature and friends who can help me figure it out. Not everyone watching the TV show is so fortunate. From their frame of reference, lacking specialised information, a pro-psychic conclusion may follow perfectly logically from what they have seen. It's the same with the many who lack sufficient knowledge of cold-reading, or statistical techniques, or laws of physics, when such knowledge is essential armour against flim-flam.

Our cause, as skeptics, is to be a curative influence on this rotten illness called 'gullibility'. 'Super skepticism' fails this cause. It fails because a truculent, dismissive, superior attitude always does fail, in any sphere. It fails because we are servants of reason, not its masters, and we serve it badly if we make it despised and derided by our indulgence in slanging matches and generally behaving like a demented puff-adder. It fails because if we denounce bias and prejudice, and then go and adopt these as our stock in trade, we reap only contempt. It fails because skeptics are in a position to offer some insight, and 'super-skepticism' manifests all the insight of a spent match in a sump.

Skepticism is precious. If the let's-invade-Poland mentality is all you have to offer, please don't go in for the role of skeptic. It's a coveted role, it's demanding, and it isn't yours to play.

Against the odds, some of us acquire the notion in our heads that facts matter, reasoning counts, evidence is important. We are the lucky ones. We somehow squeezed past the heavy in-swinging doors of the cultural asylum and its drip feed of intellectual muzak. You made it into the fresh air, David. Well done. Be glad of it, breathe deeply, and have yourself a party. But don't take swipes at those who didn't make it. Their lives aren't so cheap, your advantage not so slight, that you can offer no more than a slanging match and a 'V' sign over your shoulder. Instead, yours can be a helping hand, holding out a little sense and truth in a confusing world. Not everyone is going to take that hand, for sure, and rejection stings. But eventually, someone may reach out to take the hand that's offered—maybe when they've tried everything else and found little of substance. When that time comes, make sure it is a helping hand they find, not a clenched and angry fist. That's how the torch gets passed.

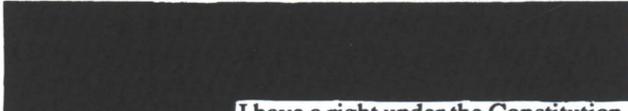
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Ian Woods currently works in the software industry.

## Randi in Trouble

*The following is the text of a letter reprinted in a mailing from the Association of Local Skeptics' Groups, an open letter from James Randi dated May 13, 1991:*

Uri Geller has announced that he intends to sue me "in every state and in every country." He currently has four lawsuits against me, two of which I have won (at a cost of over \$155,000 in legal fees) and one of which he has told me he is bringing in Japan, with one just served on me in California. This latter case concerns two statements I made about him in response to questions by a reporter for the *International Herald Tribune*: (1) Geller has fooled some scientists, (2) His tricks are the same kind that used to be on the back of cereal boxes when I was a kid.

 I have a right under the Constitution to fairly say what I know to be true, and I will not surrender that right.

I have resigned from the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) since the Committee is always named in the suits, and in order that CSICOP will be spared further involvement in such suits if and when I again mention Geller's name.

This has been a very difficult thing for me to do.

Should these actions continue, I will be forced into silence from my inability to support further legal costs. CSICOP has been silenced, and I'm next, it appears.

I now have no further funds to continue my defense. It has been suggested that a legal fund might be set up for my defense of these harassing actions by Mr. Geller. I hope that can be set in motion.

I'm in trouble, folks. I need help.

**James Randi**

*Anyone wishing to contribute to Randi's defence fund please contact Mike Hutchinson, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG10 4PZ.*

This letter has been edited for legal reasons.

## New Writers

*The Skeptic* is always searching for new contributors who can write informative articles on paranormal issues.

Although we present a generally skeptical attitude we also publish articles by proponents of the paranormal as our aim is, where possible, to present both or all sides of controversial issues.

If you have some interesting, lively, or unusual thoughts on pseudoscience and the paranormal then why not put pen to paper (or better still, fingers to word-processor keyboard) and write us an article? Your article does not have to be academic in nature (although it could be) as our aim is to entertain as well as inform. Although we cannot guarantee publication, all manuscripts will be carefully considered.

# Another Look at Scientology

Allen Hunt

*Scientology is more dangerous than we might think*

I was surprised to read John Clark's article on L Ron Hubbard (*The Skeptic*, 4.2). Madame Blavatsky was described by Richard Hodgson of the Society for Psychical Research as one of the most accomplished, ingenious and interesting imposters of history. Hubbard might well be described in a similar manner. Ron Hubbard had the ability to anticipate future trends and to exploit them. Up to the second world war, psychotherapy was the province of those who had been medically trained. It was concerned with the rooting out of forgotten experiences of childhood buried in the unconscious mind, which were assumed to be the cause of adult neurosis.

It was implicit that there was something wrong with the patient. Analysis was time consuming and elitist. Hubbard introduced Dianetics and suggested that anyone without medical training, could—through a knowledge of Dianetics—achieve results easily and more effectively than the blundering psychoanalysts.

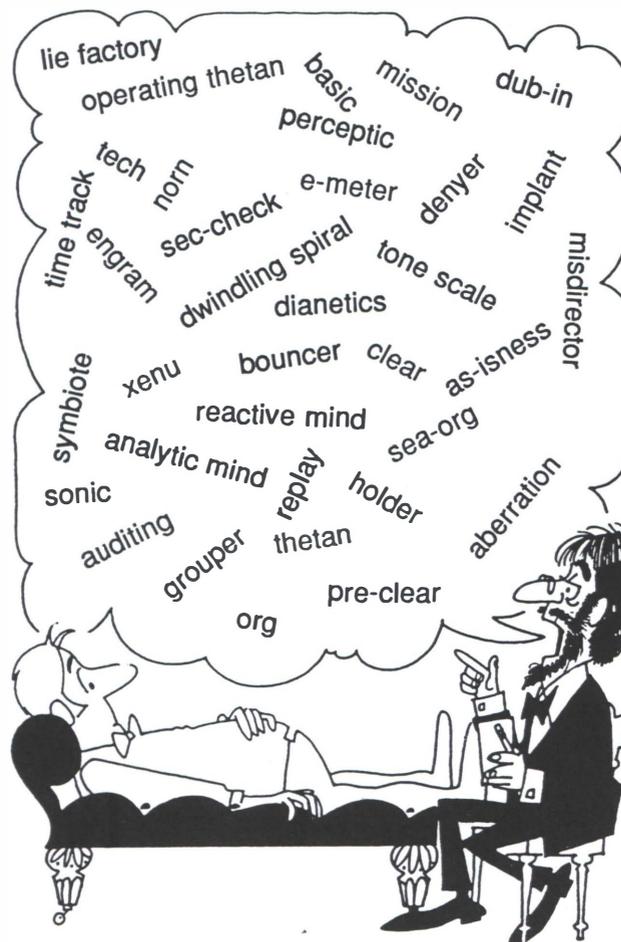
One of the main troubles with the Freudian analysis was that non-directive free association could take years in finding the buried seat of trauma. The patient would protect the guilty knowledge from the therapist. Hubbard, by the use of his E Meter (actually a primitive lie detector) claimed he could quickly (and any Dianetic Auditor, or therapist) locate the source of the trouble, thereby saving hundreds of therapy hours. Dianetics was therefore a streamlined system of analysis, very much influenced by Freud, disguised the use of Hubbard's own invented jargon. The buried cause of the neurosis, called by Hubbard 'aberration', was an 'engram'. This term had been used by Immanuel Velikovsky

when he was in close contact with the Viennese analysts to describe 'a permanent trace recorded on biological tissue'. Velikovsky has been described by Martin Gardner as 'a almost perfect textbook example of the pseudoscientist'.

Hubbard did claim that total recall of all we had experienced was possible even though we were in the womb at the time. He also claimed that we recalled what we 'heard' even when we were time unconscious. All this seemed to the layman as rather incredible, although Dr Wilder Penfield, a Canadian neurosurgeon, had noted this phenomenon while operating on epileptic patients. This phenomenon has now been generally recognised and has also been observed in hypnotized subjects.

The danger is that the hypnotizer may produce by suggestion, false memories in the mind of the subject. Hereby lies the danger. I suggest that Dianetic therapy, called by Hubbard 'auditing', produces a mental state which is analogous to the hypnotized trance. This gives the Dianetic auditor considerable power over a suggestible person, and Dianetics is not controlled by a strong professional code.

It was also suggested by Hubbard that past lives could be recalled while undergoing Dianetic auditing. This was some years before the 'Bridey Murphy' craze hit America. It is now relatively common for some individuals to search for imagined past lives whilst hypnotically regressed. But Hubbard was there first. Another first for Hubbard was his experimentation with plants. He would wire tomatoes up to E Meters, and decided that plants could feel pain. Clyde



Backster was to hit the jackpot some ten years or so later with his book about the psychic powers of plants. Many people are now convinced that plants are now more likely to flourish if spoken to kindly. It is not usually suggested, although the reverse might easily apply, that if they do badly plants could be threatened with the compost heap.

Hubbard's fantastic idea that the embryo can hear in the womb and can be influenced by the words expressed would seem to have support from Dr Michele Clements of the City of London Maternity Hospital, who in 1979 wrote an article 'What the foetus hears, an adult remembers'. It was claimed that it had been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the foetus hears things external to the womb after four months, and reacts to these sounds and memorises them. It has also been claimed that surgeons now recognise this danger to patients while unconscious in the operating theatre and those in the theatre are warned to be careful what they say.

Scientology emerged in 1952. Whereas Dianetics was directed to the body, Scientology was directed to the 'soul'. The existence of the latter was said to have been incontrovertibly scientifically validated by Hubbard. What is true is that Hubbard claimed that the aim of Scientology was to make 'the able more able'. So whereas the emphasis of Dianetics was to cure the individual of mental or physical disability, the aim of Scientology was to raise the level of a person's ability and consciousness.

Hubbard had again anticipated the leap which so many Freudian and other analysts were to make in launching the Human Potential Movement (HPM). The HPM did not come into the general public consciousness until after the Esalen Institute was set up at Big Sur in California in the 1960's. Scientology introduced the concept of a 'Tone Scale'. The aim of method was to raise a person's consciousness up the tone scale. There were graduations from zero up to an unspecified upper limit, and for normal individuals four was the desired goal. If one was stuck on zero one was dead. It was sometimes implied that it might be possible for some elite members within the movement to achieve such a high level on the tone scale that they would be immortal. If one ignores the later absurdity it is possible to see Hubbard's approach reflected in the HPM. Their aim was to concentrate on the present, not the past as the analysts had done. Hubbard told people that they should be in present time, both aimed at raising consciousness and abilities. The techniques used by the Scientologists included mind expanding exercises, creative visualisation and guided fantasies which were to be used later by the HPM and followers of the New Age movement. Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' produces a scale which reminds one of Hubbard's Tone Scale. So, one must admit how perceptive the founder of Dianetics and Scientology was in anticipating future trends and enthusiasms.

I strongly disagree with the advice given by John Clark that one should try Scientology and see if the results are beneficial. Clark may have survived his involvement unscathed, and in fact, he seems to have believed that he has benefited over the years. Perhaps he merely grew up and matured. In any case if a person devotes time, energy, money and emotion to a particular cause it is extremely

difficult to later decide that it was not worthwhile. This is done to avoid a mental state known as cognitive dissonance. Individuals who are highly suggestible, those who are emotionally vulnerable, those with a weak sense of their identity, and in fact all inadequate personalities should avoid involvement with Scientology like the plague.

An article in *The Listener* (30 April 1987), based on a BBC *Panorama* programme, told how the psychological techniques of Scientology could be used to swindle inadequate personalities, mentally entrapped by the cult, out of increasingly large sums of money. It was claimed that the organisation deliberately targeted young people who were possibly lonely and idealistic who had access to large sums of money. Once enmeshed by Scientology such young people could be swindled out of all they possessed. Those who tried to escape would be threatened and put under immense psychological pressure.

Cyril Vosper tells how, as a young man, he was attracted by Scientology, and the hold that the movement gained over him. After fourteen years it took strength of will, great fixity of purpose, resolution and courage to escape from the toils of the organisation. The attraction of Scientology and other cults of psycho-salvation can be understood by reading Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer*. Hoffer was writing mostly about the attraction of revivalist religious movements and totalitarian political parties. Scientology claimed to be a religion and was certainly totalitarian. It attracted the idealistic young and those who needed genuine sympathetic counselling. It then perverted their idealism and exploited their weaknesses. Perhaps, worst of all, it resulted in people (as in all totalitarian groups) in handing over their ethical judgement and conscience to an imagined infallible leader.

Whether Hubbard was an original thinker, I would doubt. That he had a considerable flair for anticipating future fads and trends cannot be doubted. But how could any rational person take seriously a person who could write that 'Dianetics was a milestone for man comparable to man's discovery of fire and superior to his invention of the wheel and the arch'. Or in his *History of Man*: 'This is a cold blooded and factual account of your last sixty trillion years'. An earlier book was *Excalibur* (1938); the title again shows the author's facility for anticipating future trends. The title is suggestive of the 'sword and sorcery' phase of science fiction. Hubbard was, about this time, a freelance writer of science fiction. He claims of *Excalibur* that four of the first fifteen who read the book went insane. Hardly a good selling point, I should think. It was withdrawn but re-issued later with the author's personal signature for the price of \$1,500. It has been suggested that those who went mad were driven insane when they realised what rubbish they had spent so much money on.

#### Notes

1. *Fads and Fallacies in the name of Science*. Martin Gardner. Dover Publications. New York. 1957.
2. *The General Practitioner*. 13 April 1979
3. *The Mind Benders*. Cyril Vosper. Mayflower Books. 1973
4. *Dianetics, the Science of Mental Health*. Ron Hubbard. Scientology Publications.

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Allen Hunt is not a scientologist and lives in London.

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# Sharp Blades or Sharp Practice?

Harry Edwards

## *Czechoslovakian pyramid power*

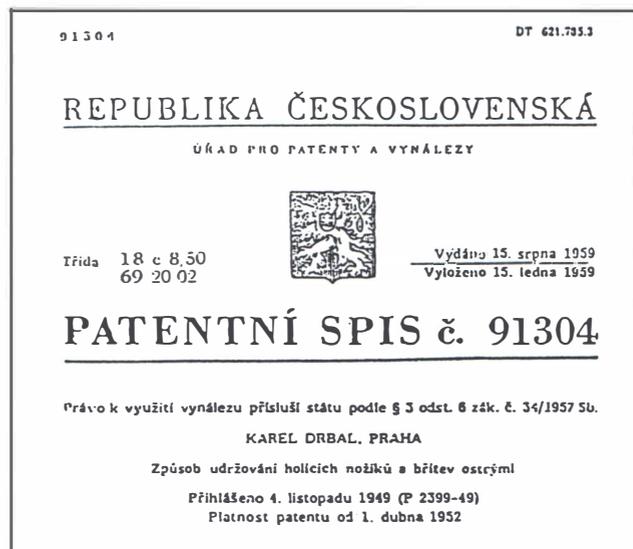
Clinging tenaciously to the myth of pyramid power, New Agers will expound at length on stories about the mysterious and miraculous properties that they ascribe to pyramids, erroneously supporting their beliefs with 'authoritative' quotations from 'reliable' researchers such as Erich von Daniken.

Occasionally, the name of a Czech electrical engineer, Karel Drbal, crops up as the man who not only allegedly discovered that a razor blade, placed under pyramid shaped container, will be re-sharpened by 'magnetic energy curves', but who actually patented a device which will harness the force to do just that. Further it is claimed that various foodstuffs, organisms, wine etc will remain fresh or preserved from decomposition by the properties inherent in the pyramid shape. (See 'Pyramids, Pyramyths and Pyramidiots' by Barry Williams, Vol. 3 No. 3 of *The Skeptic*.)

Drbal's line of reasoning appears to have been motivated by the observations of a Frenchman by the name of Bovis, who had observed that the corpses of small animals in the Cheops pyramid in Egypt had been mummified. Although the interior of the Great Pyramid is humid, it is well known that the hot dry Egyptian climate and/or hot air currents are conducive to the rapid dehydration and preservation of corpses in a mummified form. Since time immemorial in the Far East, fish have been laid out in the hot sun to dehydrate and preserve them and, once dried, they will keep almost indefinitely. Drbal decided, however, that there was a more mysterious force at work and the multi-purpose, multi-functional mini-pyramid was the result of his experiments.

Patenting an invention does not necessarily imply viability—plans for perpetual motion machines and rungless ladders for legless painters litter the archives of many a Patent Office. For reasons beyond the cognizance of even a moderately rational mind, Drbal's idea caught on in the U.S.A: the Toth Pyramid Company of New York was formed to manufacture and sell cardboard replicas. Since then the concept has proliferated in many forms, shapes, sizes and materials, from pyramid hats to aid meditation and temper psychic awareness, to pyramid shaped dwellings for psychic and therapeutic benefit. It is doubtful, given the generally unquestioning and naive acceptance of the weird and wacky by your average New Ager, that any have ever bothered to enquire further. Had they done so, those, who in a weak moment, may have succumbed to critically examining the evidence would have had their faith shattered, for not only is the description of the invention completely devoid of any supporting scientific evidence, but the inventor actually negates his own hypothesis.

On the next page is a facsimile of page one of the patent and a marginally abridged translation. Reading it, I find it



difficult to believe that the inventor, whose exposition appears to be inconsistent with the attributes one would normally associate with his profession, is serious. This leads me to conclude that there must have been a devious motive behind the registration of such a patently transparent concept. Either there was a sinister communist plot to undermine the production of razor blades by private enterprise, or this was a ploy to help the Czech steel industry to meet its quota. Coincidentally, the patent became valid on April 1.

By using the invention, 16 razor blades, Czech Trade Mark 'Dukat Zlato' completed 1778 shaves, giving an average of 111 shaves per blade. The lowest number was 51 and the highest 200. From the national economy point of view the advantages are as follows: One razor blade of the above trade mark weighs 0.51 g. We will consider as average 50 shaves when the blade is sharpened in the pyramid against 5 shaves without the aid of the pyramid. Thus in one year we use 73 blades, without using the pyramid, against 8 blades with pyramid sharpening—a saving of 65 blades annually, or 33.15 g of stainless steel. For the registration of the invention, only the pyramid shape has been tested but the invention is not restricted to this particular shape. It may consist of another geometrical shape made from dielectric materials and used in the same method. Consider the following references to dielectric materials, artificial magnetic fields, alignment, geometric shape and the mathematics and geometry in Mr Drbal's description of his invention.

### Dielectric materials

I can claim a rudimentary knowledge of electrical components gleaned from an apprenticeship in the era immediately following the invention of the germanium crystal and cat's whisker detector set (those readers under the age of 60 not familiar with the terms should consult *The Early Days of Wireless* by Mark Oney) and seem to recall that dielectric material is simply another name for insulation such as par-

affin wax paper, mica, glass and even air found between the plates or aluminium foil of a condenser or a capacitor. It can be stated unequivocally that to function, a condenser requires the application of an electrical potential and its dielectric is not affected by or has anything to do with magnetism, which works on stationary ferrous metals and moving things such as electric motors and generators. Drbal's dielectric serves no purpose other than to keep the dust off its contents. Paradoxically, if magnetism was not subject to Kepler's inverse proportional law, then an increase in the dielectric constant (air plus an additional insulation) would inhibit not enhance the effects of magnetic flux.

#### Artificial magnetic fields

Although Drbal omits any reference when he claims that 'it is known further that razor blades can be sharpened by artificial magnetic fields', this unsubstantiated claim implies that a razor blade placed in proximity to a refrigerator motor or between the poles of a horseshoe magnet would be just as efficacious as his pyramid.

#### Alignment

The earth's relatively weak magnetic field notwithstanding, the inventor invalidates the requirements of N-S-E-W alignment by saying that while it is preferable it is 'not necessary'. And later, although he recommends a certain alignment of the razor blade, he abrogates the requirements by adding that 'it is not basically required'!

#### Geometric shape

This is where any credence, if any can be had at all in the putative powers of a pyramid shape, evaporates. Drbal states 'It [the container] may consist of another geometrical shape' and, using another shape 'regeneration of the razor blade will take place too'. This statement negates completely any suggestion that the uniqueness of a pyramid shape enhances

in some way the focus or concentration of the Earth's magnetic field.

#### Mathematics

A complete absence of mathematical and geometrical precision is evident in the physical construction requirements where Drbal says 'the sides of the pyramid should preferably be equal to the height multiplied by Ludolf's number' and whose 'height should be between 1/5 and 1/3 of the pyramid's height', and finally 'its height can be different'.

#### Conclusion

Drbal would have us believe that a razor blade can be placed at any height, facing any direction and under any non-metallic container regardless of shape or size, and a mysterious honing energy will act upon it. In view of the contradictions, ambiguity, arbitrariness and assumptions replete throughout Drbal's description, it is difficult to isolate any resemblance to a coherent and plausible hypothesis. Given the unrestricted parameters, it vaguely implies that a pyramid shaped container somehow focuses geomagnetic fields to interact with the atomic structure of metals. While this would have immense industrial and

scientific value, a consideration of the materials and methods used place it in fantasyland.

#### Acknowledgements

My thanks to Pani Helena Simlova, of Prague, who went to a great deal of trouble to obtain a copy of the patent, and to her brother Josef Holman for his translation.

Harry Edwards wrote this article for the Australian *Skeptic*, from which it is reprinted with kind permission.

#### PATENT DOCUMENT NO. 91304

*Rights to use the invention are reserved by the State as per p.3 vol.6. official no.34/1957 Sb.*

Karel Drbal, Prague

#### Method of maintaining razor blades and cut-throats sharp.

Registered on November 4 1949 (P2399-49)

Validity of Patent from April 1, 1952

The invention applies to a method of keeping razor blades and cut-throats sharp without the aid of any helpful source of energy. During sharpening of razor blades as per invention no mechanical means are used, or means of heating or chemical interference and electrical means from artificial electrical sources. For the sharpening of razor blades up till today, various means of mechanical sharpening devices are in use in which the blunted sides of razor blades are sharpened by rough interference, which results in a certain amount of wear or loss. *It is known further* [my italic emphasis throughout] improving sharpness of razor blades and cut throats by using an *artificial magnetic field* into which these items are placed so that their cutting edges point in the general direction of the (magnetic) energy curves. As per the invention, the razor blade is placed in the magnetic field of Earth under a hollow pyramid made from dielectric material such as cardboard, paraffin paper, plywood or some other artificial substance. The pyramid has at its base an opening in the shape of a square or oval, oblong or similar, through which the blade is placed inside the pyramid. *Best suited* is a pyramid with four sides and a square base, while the side of the square is *preferably equal* to the height of the pyramid multiplied by half Ludolf's Number (Ludolf's Number is a common German appellation for the ratio pi. It derives from the name of 16th Century German mathematician, Ludolf van Ceulen who worked out the ratio accurately to 35 decimal places). For instance for the height of 10 cm, a base of 15.7 cm is chosen. The razor blade or cut-throat is placed on a pad of similar material as the pyramid or other material (cork, wood, stone, paraffin paper) whose height is chosen *between 1/5 and 1/3 of the pyramid's height*.

The dimensions of the pad (placed inside the pyramid) should be such as to allow the sharp edges of the razor blade or cut-throat to be free of obstruction while its *height can be different to the measurement given above*.

*Even though it is not basically required*, it is recommended to place the razor blade on the pad so that its sharp edges point to the East and West respectively. This position improves the effect. *However it is not necessary for utilisation of the invention's principle*.

After correct placement of the razor blade, it is covered with the pyramid so that its side walls *preferably* face North, South East and West.

# Speaking in Tongues

David Christie-Murray

*An explanation for a strange phenomenon*

There is a New Testament miracle that can be witnessed any Sunday in every population centre large enough to sustain a Pentecostalist church—that of ‘speaking with tongues’. The phrase is biblical and describes a process whereby a worshipper springs to his feet and spontaneously pours out a flood of sound that resembles a language and was originally thought to be ‘tongues of men and of angels’. This phenomenon is technically known as glossolalia (or glossolaly) and xenolalia (or xenoglossy). The former is patterned gibberish, not language, but ‘language types’, the latter the alleged paranormal speaking of identifiable foreign tongues.

The practice of speaking in (or with) tongues is an integral part of Pentecostalist worship and is sometimes carried on privately or in groups by charismatics (that is, those who believe in the conferring and practice of a divine gift or power) in other denominations. Pentecostalism bases its belief in the necessity for tongues on a theology derived from New Testament passages that speak of baptism with the Holy Spirit with signs following. Its adherents believe that, following a conversion experience, Christians must seek Holy Spirit baptism, the mark of which is an exhibition by believers of a spiritual gift. The gift most recognizable by a congregation is that of speaking with tongues, and this has come to be the standard sign by which worshippers prove that they have received the baptism. Charismatics in other churches use tongues as a form of private worship without accepting Pentecostalist theology.

The New Testament passages upon which the theology leading to the practice is based are *Acts*, Chapters 2 and 11 (plus some minor references) and 1 *Corinthians*, Chapters 10 to 12. These recount experiences of the first generation of Christians and comment in some detail on the use of tongues in the congregational worship of the Corinthian church. Since the tongues can now be recorded and analyzed, a researcher can discover their nature and compare them with what can be surmised from the Biblical accounts of similar phenomena.

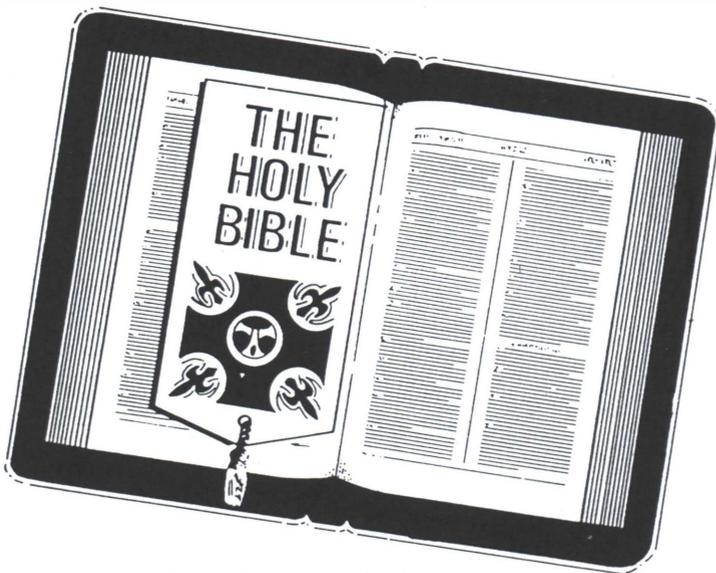
The feast of Pentecost—our Whitsun—some six weeks after the Passover at which Jesus Christ was crucified, was the first occasion on which ‘tongues’ occurred. *Acts*, Chapter 2, which recounts the experience, was clearly written not by an eye-witness, but, although the details are vague, there is no reason to doubt that xenolalia occurred as recorded, partly because of the great influence the experience had on the early church, partly because modern knowledge can explain how it could have happened. Some background information is needed to understand both the experience and the explanation.

Pentecost was one of the Jerusalem Temple feasts which

every Jew from all over the then known world was supposed to attend. Such a requirement was obviously impracticable; nevertheless, contemporary censuses show that between two and three million visiting Jews attended the major festivals. These would have used as their native tongues every vernacular spoken in Mediterranean Europe, North Africa and the Near and Middle East. Pilgrims often travelled to Jerusalem in national groups, chanting in their own languages religious choruses and probably some of the Davidic psalms of praise. Jewish religious regulations allowed substantial parts of the Temple liturgy to be repeated in any language, and in the special week preceding Pentecost the disciples would have heard religious addresses, acclamations, prayers and hymns in many tongues. As conscientious Jews living not far from Jerusalem they would, over the years, have attended as many of the great feasts as circumstances allowed and would therefore have been exposed to hearing the praises of God expressed in dozens of languages without necessarily understanding a word of any of them.

Every Jew was required to worship in the Temple at some time on the Day of Pentecost. The gates were opened at midnight, nine hours before the hour of public worship, and it is probable that like-minded groups, such as Jesus’ disciples, would worship together, occupying one of the rooms affixed to the interior of the Temple courtyard wall. There certain phenomena occurred. A ‘rushing mighty wind’ was heard. An appearance of fire separated into individual tongues that flickered over the heads of the worshippers who were seized by an ecstasy that caused each to burst out into praises of God expressed in foreign languages. If the surmise that these events occurred in one of the Temple’s assembly rooms is correct, one can further reasonably suppose that as each of the disciples emerged praising God in a different foreign language, those whose tongue it was gathered around to listen. Their astonishment was the greater when they discovered that all those speaking were Galileans, who would have spoken their own language with a marked provincial accent, ‘We hear them telling in our own tongues the great things God has done’.

The disciples praised, not preached. There is no suggestion that the gift of tongues outlasted the ecstasy, that their content was Christian or that the speakers understood what they were saying. It needed a vernacular sermon from Peter, addressing the crowd attracted by the noise, to give a Christian interpretation of what had happened. Christians and others have misunderstood the record and thought that the tongues were given miraculously so that the first missionaries could preach to all nations in their own tongues; but there is no indication that the first Christians either



thought this or tried to practise it.

But why and how did this ecstasy occur at Pentecost? To understand this, we have to use historical imagination to put ourselves into the position of Christ's disciples. They were a group of men and women who, whatever modern sceptics believe, were convinced that a month earlier some at least of their number had on a number of occasions over a period of some days and in different places met, talked with and touched their resurrected leader, Jesus, who had been crucified and interred for something like 36 hours. This fact had for them turned defeat into victory, convinced them of survival of death and prepared them to expect some wonderful happening in the near future which some of them, mistakenly, thought would be the return of their Lord to set up his kingdom on earth. Elated and expectant, they formed a 'psychological crowd', susceptible to any suggestion that might trigger off experience.

Pentecost, the first major feast after the Passover at which Jesus had been crucified, was an occasion celebrating the power of God—and Jesus had promised them that they would receive 'power from on high'. The festival was also associated with the giving of the Law and could therefore be the time in which the law of Christ's kingdom might be revealed. Logically, the first major feast after the resurrection should be the time when the next step in the Messianic progress and plan should be revealed. The group was expecting something to happen.

But why whirlwind, fire and tongues? The readings and commentaries from the Law, Prophets and Psalms appointed for Pentecost are crammed with references to fire, whirlwind, power, exultation, the voice of the Lord making flames of fire burst forth and such expressions as 'in his temple doth everyone speak of his glory'. The wind and fire may have been collective subjective hallucinations, but there is no need to doubt that the xenolalia happened as recorded.

There are literally hundreds of cases in the literature of medicine and abnormal psychology in which patients in trance, ecstasy or delirium have spoken with astonishing fluency languages of which they were ignorant in their normal states. But it can always be shown that they have been exposed to these languages in the past—living abroad

or next door to a foreign family or in an enclave in their own country (an Englishman in a Welsh-speaking village, for example). Their xenolalia is nearly, if not quite always repetition of what they have heard and absorbed unconsciously, and they are unable to carry on an intelligent conversation with a native speaker of the language or reply to questions asked in it. It has been shown above that Christ's disciples had been exposed at intervals all their lives to the praise of God expressed in many languages, and it can be argued that if the events of Pentecost were accurately recorded, these were the sources of their xenolalia. The explanation has the advantage that it can equally satisfy sceptics and reasonable believers!

The only form of xenolalia that could be regarded as paranormal is responsive xenolalia, that is, the intelligent carrying on of a conversation in a foreign language which the speaker had never learned and to which he had never been exposed. A case of this is that of a Pennsylvania housewife who, under hypnosis, became Jensen Jacoby, speaking in a deep male voice in either broken English or Swedish. Jacoby claimed to have been a Swedish peasant who had lived some centuries ago either in Sweden or New Sweden (in America) and had met a violent death. The case was thoroughly investigated by Dr Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia (*Xenoglossy*, The University Press of Virginia and Bristol, John Wright & Sons, 1974) who has done more investigation into 'cases suggestive of reincarnation' than any other researcher in this field, and six other Swedish-speaking scholars plus one who understood Scandinavian languages. A 165-page transcript of conversations taped over seven years and a 68-page report and discussion gives the reader the data from which to form his own judgement. The case has not been without its critics, notably Ian Wilson in his *Mind out of time*.

The other major occasion of speaking in tongues mentioned in *Acts* (there are several minor references) is in Chapter II, which recounts that a Roman centurion, Cornelius, and his family were converted by the apostle Peter's visit and preaching to them, as a result of which they received the Holy Spirit and burst out into ecstatic speech. This is likely to have been glossolalia, the more usual form of tongues and the kind which was almost certainly used in the worship of the Corinthian church, as commented on by St. Paul in 1 *Corinthians*, Chapters 10 to 12, and is normally heard in charismatic services today. Glossolalia is gibberish patterned into 'languages types', that is, formations of sound which resemble languages but have certain features that differentiate them from known tongues. No linguist can know every language that has been spoken in the history of the world or is being currently used by mankind; nevertheless, one who has studied the patterns of sound in languages and language-types of glossolalia can normally distinguish one from the other, the more so as it is now possible to record and analyze glossolalia at leisure.

Its features are as follows. In glossolalia, although the patterning of sound may superficially resemble that of real language, the phonemes (syllables and analyzable sound units), micro-segments, ('words') and macro-segments ('phrases' and 'sentences') are more repetitious and have an



# Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

Such is the cult of the modern celebrity, that for many people it is impossible to accept that the Grim Reaper has closed the dressing room door for the last time. The worship of Elvis Presley, for example, is as strong (if not stronger) in 1991 as at his death in 1977. There are a multitude of books which 'prove' that Elvis faked his own death, snuck off to a tropical life in South America, and still telephones his fans now and then. In a similar vein, the current nostalgia for the summer of 1967 and its aftermath kindles the darkly suggested 'did Jim Morrison really die in his Paris room?' questions. (If he didn't, there's an awful lot of chalk, paint and booze been wasted at Père Lachaise cemetery.)

Some of the most persistent rumours concern Walt Disney. There are those who will tell you that Walt—well-known to be a technology enthusiast—had himself frozen at the end, hoping to be revived (and revivable) when medical science was sufficiently advanced. Using liquid nitrogen to keep people colder than a British Rail sausage is easy, but expensive to maintain. The hard bit is to warm them up without bits dropping off. What puts me off the idea is that in the 23rd century, who's going to bother putting in the work to defrost these 20th century would-be time-travellers? On the other hand, I reckon they've still got a better chance than the Eternal Flame brigade.

So, what grounds are there for believing that Walt Disney has been in cold storage since 1966? Like the Presley and Morrison cases, you can find 'clues' if you try hard enough. First, Disney's funeral was subject to a news blackout, and the actual location of his grave has never been made public by the Disney estate. You can interpret this as either simple family privacy, or (more excit-

ingly) the initial phase of a *strange cover-up*. Next, it is widely reported that Disney had an unnaturally active interest in death and the macabre (there is a FOAF story about a cartoon he made in 1933, in which a mad scientist tries to sever Pluto's head and graft it onto a chicken. The film has since mysteriously disappeared...) Unfortunately, the bad news for cool-Disney-ites is that a death certificate was duly filed, and it states that his body was cremated. In his book *Big Secrets* (Corgi, 1985) William Poundstone tracked down Disney's final resting place to the Forest Lawn Garden of Rest in Glendale, California, putting paid to the speculations that his remains were interred in a secret chamber in one of the spires of the Cinderella Castle in Florida's Disney World. (There really is a secret chamber there, by the way...).

Disney's legacies are also the subject of numerous rumours, and odd facts. At Disneyland, for example, male employees are not permitted to sport beards, certain songs are never played on PA except to indicate an emergency to staff (the wonderfully jolly "Whistle while you work" means EVACUATE THE PARK!), and there is a secret club called 'Club 33' serving hard liquor.

The parks attract urban legends too: one tells of a child disappearing from Disneyland, to be found weeks later with a new hairstyle, mysteriously dyed by the abductor. Another concerns a woman who is allegedly molested by the Three Little Pigs. The mind boggles. Next time you're at Disneyland, and you see good ol' Pluto coming up behind you, my advice is—RUN!

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Toby Howard is a lecturer in computer graphics, a member of the Manchester Skeptics, and disappeared in 1967.

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# Skeptic at Large

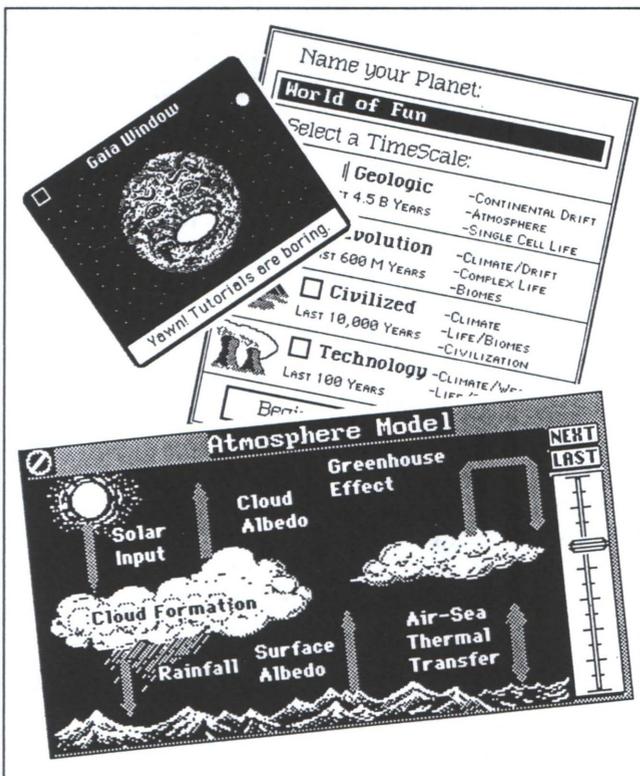
Wendy M Grossman

*Manage the planet from the comfort of your living room...*

Just when you think things are sort of normal, along comes someone like David Icke to restore your faith in human nature. He's mad, of course, completely mad—though not because he's predicting the world is going to come to end. People have been predicting that since the human world began; it's a fine, old, honourable tradition, and why shouldn't Icke be part of it? No, Icke is mad because he's making extremely precise predictions which can be checked, and soon. The Jehovah's Witnesses learned the folly of that kind of behaviour long ago, and Icke should have profited from their example. Instead he's nailed himself to the padded cell with the disappearance of New Zealand before Christmas. Personally, and I know this is cynical and snide, I have a theory that Icke's new philosophy has something to do with finding it hard, without it, to explain to his wife why this young woman should move in with them...If Icke's predictions fail, he still has a way of making them come true: a nice little software program called *SimEarth*. This program tracks the formation and evolution of the Earth. It's all a bit complicated, and I haven't had enough time (or a colour monitor) to play with it, but basically you can watch the planet evolve in front of your eyes. More than that, you can

manage the evolution of the planet. For example, you can plunk a dinosaur into the turbulent screen. This ups the amount of energy the ecosystem uses—and part of the game aspect of *SimEarth* is managing energy.

Part of the intentions of *SimEarth*'s designers was, as you may have guessed from this, to educate people about planets and their problems. To get into the program, for example, you have to answer a question about the solar system—the distance from the Earth to the Sun, for example, or the diameter of Venus. The answers are provided in the users' manual (the technical writer must have loved that: how else do you get people to read the manual?). I guess they figure after you've answered each question a few times you'll have learned a few facts. *SimEarth* is not easy to learn: it has all sorts of displays, windows, and options. The authors tell you it is simplified: there is online help, and the planet simulation is infinitely simpler than the real Earth. Meanwhile, they suggest some things for you to do: burn off the oceans, spell your name in the landmasses, cause wars, inflict earthquakes, improve the quality of life for your sentient species (this does not have to be human, so cat lovers this is your chance), try to control pollution. See what I mean? Tailor made for David Icke. There are various time scales, too—remember, you only have about 10 billion years or so before the Sun goes cold. Once you get to the civilisation time scale, things become even more complicated, as the simulation includes the effects of civilisation on the planet. The user's manual includes a brief history of the planet, to help you understand what's going on. *SimEarth*'s underlying principle is more questionable than the rest of this, however: it is James Lovelock's Gaia theory. Among the windows listed on the menu is a Gaia window. This shows the planet with a face and a message, something like, 'I am alive!' The caption tells you not to poke Gaia in the eye. Who can resist something like that. If you poke it in the eye, it says 'Ouch'. The manual, very honestly I thought, tells you that the Gaia theory is not widely accepted in scientific circles. If you decide you don't like running the Earth, you can design your own planet. For some people this would probably be a good idea. I can only hope that in future the world's politicians and maniacs—Saddam Hussein, George Bush, *et al* (I am deliberately not saying who goes in which category)—are given a planet simulator to fight in instead of a real planet.



Wendy Grossman is the founder of *The Skeptic*, a member of the UK Skeptics and a writer and folksinger.

# Reviews



## Ye of too much faith

Steve Allen, *Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion and Morality*, (Prometheus, \$21.95)

This is a book aimed primarily at the American market, where the author, Steve Allen, is a well-known songwriter/entertainer. It covers what skeptics in Britain will probably consider a somewhat ante-diluvian subject, that of biblical criticism.

The concern with pointing out the inconsistencies, absurdities and abominations in the Bible may have been the bread and butter of our intellectual forebears; today, however, its place has been taken over by the investigation of 'New Age' phenomena, from channelling to UFO abductions.

The same cannot be said of the situation in the United States, where the old battle against biblical literalism has had to be resuscitated as, since the 1960's, so-called scientific creationism has blossomed into a formidable movement.

Allen has designed the book to be an easy read, by adopting a straightforward alphabetical listing of appropriate headings. The majority of references are strictly biblical, though a few tackle thorny moral questions for the Christian (such as abortion) from a liberal viewpoint.

Allen's critique is aimed solely at the fundamentalist wing of Christianity and is quite compatible with most current Christian positions. In fact, most of the arguments are culled from liberal Protestant and Catholic sources, in which the Bible is reduced to a collection of historical adventures, myths and moral fables. So don't expect to see much in the way of deep philosophical discussion on the existence and purported attributes of God.

This is ruled out by Allen's overt deism, which he describes as 'a matter of belief not of knowledge'. In his own words 'my respect for the beloved figure of Jesus arises from the *fact* [my emphasis] that he seems to have been one of the most virtuous inhabitants of earth.' Obsequiousness replaces an examination of evidence against the historicity of Jesus.

This brings me to the main question which, for me, this book raises. Where do skeptics draw the battle lines with faith? There appears to be an unspoken convention in CSICOP to confine criticism of the paranormal to claims that can be tested by physical means. The underlying 'untestable' assumptions of such world-views are left aside and not subjected to 'philosophical' criticism. Thus although weeping and dancing Catholic statues are considered fair game, the 'faith' of the orthodox believer, however absurd, is never challenged.

Maybe this is a good policy, establishing a broad alliance against the most blatant exponents of pseudoscience and leaving God-bashing to committed atheists like myself. But

it really grates on my skeptical sensibilities to see the end of an introduction to a Prometheus book (and by no less a personage than Martin Gardner) espouse the sentiments that the book 'may lead a few away from their narrow biblicism and back to God'. The major problem is, however, that those who should buy such a book (that is, fundamentalists) *won't*, and skeptics need something more skeptical of the whole religion business to add to their bookshelves.

—Mike Howgate

## The supernatural world

Derek and Julia Parker, *Atlas of the Supernatural* (Mitchell Beazley, £14.99)



'In writing this book we take the risk of upsetting both believers and sceptics: the first because we are not credulous enough, the second because we are insufficiently sceptical', state the authors in their introduction to this handsomely produced (and surprisingly cheap) full-colour coffee-table compendium of the 'supernatural'. To read this book is an infuriating experience, precisely because the

treatment of the topics covered does waver so diametrically from tedious credulous acceptance of paranormal activity (Uri Geller, fire-walking, precognitions), to welcome critical rejection (the Bermuda Triangle, pyramidology, psychic surgery, Knock). On the other hand, it is remarkable to see even this much skepticism in a book of this nature, which is to be applauded.

The book is in two parts: the first is a survey of the supernatural in history, covering the general aspects of witchcraft, healing, dowsing, ley-lines, ghosts, mediums and channelling, PK, ESP and so on. The second part is a gazetteer, surveying the supernatural across the world: Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Great Britain, Ireland, Eastern Europe, and so on. To those interested in the paranormal, this book will play a useful role, at least as a well-stocked sourcebook catalogue of weirdness and nonsense throughout the world. The picture research is excellent: there are archive and contemporary photographs of many well-known personalities in the field, including famous mediums and parapsychologists, and colour photographs from cultures all around the world. Some of the illustrations, however, are inadvertently hilarious (and are presented deadpan): for example, we read that when an innocent photograph was developed

of an altar in a North Yorkshire church, a strange hooded figure became visible to the right of the altar. Looking at the photo, if this isn't a double-exposure of man in a cape wearing a cheesecloth mask with eye-holes, I will consume my hat with gusto. Nevertheless, it is probably wise to concentrate on the pictures and their captions, and to read the text with several bushells of salt to hand.

The authors claim to have trodden a middle line, stating that one of them has 'never had a psychic experience of any kind', while the other admits to experiencing precognitions, but denies any 'psychic' connection. In fact, the line they take appears to be markedly uncritical. As they say in the introduction: 'Some events which have too often been experienced to be dismissed remain *impossible* [my italics] to explain: ghosts, poltergeists, fire-walking, metal-bending, finding a lost object by means of a pendulum . . .'. I would suggest that the authors consult their own list of relevant journals in the book's bibliography, and in future refer more often to two publications mentioned there: *The Skeptic* and the *Skeptical Inquirer*.

—John Yates

## A brief history of science

Ivan Tolstoy, *The Knowledge and the Power—Reflections on the History of Science*, (Canongate, £15.95)

One of the most striking things about the knowledge and power described by Ivan Tolstoy is how rarely the two have rested in the same hands. For, in the picture this book presents, while the scale and content of science have changed out of all recognition even over the last half century, the essentials of a scientist's life appear to be little altered since the middle ages. Though the alchemist's cellar has become a concrete university laboratory block, the local princeling the SERC, and the orthodoxy of the inquisition has been replaced by the marginally more benign orthodoxy of the Royal Society the need for working space, finances and a reasonable relationship with the intellectual hierarchy has remained constant. Whether this is an accurate impression or the result of looking through Professor Tolstoy's science-tinted glasses is largely irrelevant since the book is an overtly personal view, sliding from fact to whimsy and back in the blinking of a paragraph.

The first three chapters together form a sort of extended introduction to the chronologically arranged historical chapters which make up the bulk of the book. Via descriptions of Einstein's work, the concept of inherent uncertainty and a brief overview of the philosophy of science, Tolstoy manages both to cover the current condition of science and to argue plausibly that a study of its history is a prerequisite to its understanding. It would be difficult to even start to discuss twentieth century science without using some technical language, but it is kept to the bare minimum required to explain the significance of the ideas described. Terms such as 'quantum chromodynamics' and 'probability waves' are used in such a way that a complete understanding of them is not essential to enjoyment of the book.

The historical section of the book is a portrait gallery of pretty much the standard list of the men (and Mme Curie)

who made science. The first chapter, 'Beginnings', makes passing reference to Indian and Chinese technology and, elsewhere, the influence of Islamic scholarship on mediaeval European thought is acknowledged. But, otherwise, this is a firmly western male viewpoint which leaves room for few surprises in the choice of subject matter. However, though the list of characters is familiar, some of the perspectives offered on them are less so. Galileo, for instance, comes across as a stridently colourful character; showing open contempt for his rivals, inveigling money out the local aristocracy on the promise that he would name newly discovered stars after them and hurriedly cobbling together a telescope so as to preempt it's inventor, Lippershay's planned sale of the instrument to the Venetian authorities.

The final chapter, 'The Post Modern World', deals with the science of beginnings—the beginning of everything in cosmology and the beginning of us in evolution and genetics—and compares belief in the current theory with religious faith. Inevitably the conclusions are personal and whether you agree with them or not will depend very much on your own beliefs. But, the discussion is interesting enough and the point that, despite the available evidence, belief in, for example, the big bang is ultimately still a matter of faith is well made. All-in-all this could be a valuable book for both the layman who is trying to avoid an overly deferential view of science and the scientist who wishes to see his or her work in a wider context.

—Steve Brooks

## Anecdotal phenomena

D.Scott Rogo, *Miracles: A Scientific Exploration of Wondrous Phenomena* (Aquarian Press, £7.99)



I didn't really get off to a good start with this one as it arrived the day *The Life of Brian* was being shown on TV. Rogo catalogues a considerable number of Wondrous Phenomena largely from the Middle Ages to mid-eighties and mostly, but not exclusively, connected with Catholicism. This includes tales of levitation, 'bilocation', stigmata, divine images, weeping statues, healing etc. There are complete chapters on the 'Miraculous Hailstones of Remiremont' (falling madonnas) and the supposed timely uncongealing of St. Janarius' blood. Strangely, miracles from the time of Christ aren't covered.

The recently-deceased Rogo was a parapsychologist. (He references earlier work of his own about conclusive proof that Keith Harary could physically be in two places at once.) His thesis is that miracles are related to psi and it's not too clear where he draws the distinction. He uses claims for the miracle-worker of other psychic abilities like bilocation (out-of-bodying) in support of the genuineness of the miracle at hand. His credibility is somewhat strained. Including mediums Home and Palladino in the evidence for

levitation is at best naive and it is difficult to take seriously references from the *National Enquirer* equivalent to the *Sunday Sport*. In the introduction to this updated edition he does at least acknowledge the Turin shroud as a fake, in contrast to what he wrote on it earlier but without introducing doubt about any other cases.

There is quite a bit of coverage from the British Isles, not confined to Irish weeping statues. I was interested to find that for two years I lived unbeknownst across the road from a miracle in Christchurch Cathedral, Oxford. Apparently, a portrait of who I take to be the father of Alice (in Wonderland) Liddell appeared gradually on a wall in the 1920s. You might be suspicious of it in a place of merry japes even without my partisan distrust of 'The House'.

All-in-all this is too credulous a treatment. There is little evidence of the science promised in the sub-title, to which miracles seem inimical by definition, despite Rogo's interpretation. The largely anecdotal evidence presented hardly seems to me a suitable counter to Hume's objection to miracles as Rogo claims in the first chapter that it does.

—Dave Love

## Vanitas Vanitatum

Morris Berman, *Coming to Our Senses*, (Unwin, £8.99)

Eager to be away, he ailed for his darkness  
and the company of devils; the dealings he had there  
were like nothing he had come across in his lifetime.  
Then Hygelac's brave kinsman called to mind  
that evening's utterance, upright he stood,  
fastened his hold till fingers were bursting.  
The monster strained away: the man stepped closer.  
The monster's desire was for darkness between them,  
direction regardless; to get out and run  
for his fen-bordered lair, he felt his grip's strength  
crushed by his enemy. It was an ill journey  
the rough marauder had made to Hereot. [1]

These words were produced by a culture that, Berman suggests, didn't have 'love, friendship, intentionality, logical argumentation...that simply [had] no experience of inwardness.' But one must expect breath-taking novelty from an author who is, to quote the back cover blurb, 'emerging as one of the most creative and original thinkers of our time.'

*Coming to Our Senses* is written with the humility of a von Däniken, the careful scholarship and breadth of scope of a Velikovsky, and the robust logic of a Freud. Your humble reviewer has ploughed through 200 pages of this 350 page tome, and I feel as if I have been trapped by a cocktail party monologue for a week.

Of course there is much of interest in the book. It would be quite a challenge to quote from so many sources and fail to come up with something worthwhile. Sadly, the main thesis is muddled, or this reader is, possibly both. It seems to concern a gap, the nemo, or basic fault—resulting from alienation between our minds and our bodies. Then there is the problem with historians, who have failed to grapple with the question of how history felt to its participants. All this is established by the species of punning, metaphorical argument beloved of psychoanalysis. One is left wondering whether any of this is meaningful, let alone falsifiable;

certainly the author does not raise the issue of falsifiability in the first 60% of the book.

He does considerably throw in a few howlers for a skeptical reader, most notably his assertion that psychic metal-bending is a reality. His authorities are Pinch, Collins and Hasted, by the way. Makes me wonder about all his other authorities, the ones I've never heard of. Despite this comic relief, it's really a bit of a drag, and I would advise you not to bother, unless you're rehearsing for *No Exit*.

Notes

[1] From the Penguin Classic *Beowulf*, 1973 edition, page 75. Set in fifth century Scandinavia, the composition of *Beowulf* was completed in England in the eighth century.

—Martin Hempstead

## Cosmic visitors

Donald K. Yeomans, *Comets: A Chronological History of Observation, Science, Myth and Folklore* (Wiley, £24.95)



I have a vivid memory of Patrick Moore almost jumping through my TV screen with enthusiasm. It was 1986, and the first blurry pictures of the nucleus of Comet Halley were appearing. It was fascinating to be able to look closely at an object which was again returning to the Earth after having visited the furthest reaches of the solar system. I am sure that Patrick's excitement was not just that of an astronomer. For millenia comets have been regarded with mystery and awe: all through history their appearances in the skies have been taken as god-given portents of death and destruction.

For once the blurb on the jacket of this book is close to truth: Donald Yeomans' book really is 'a monumental achievement'. The subtitle might equally be 'everything you always wanted to know about comets, but were afraid to ask'. For here is not only everything you ever wanted to know—here is everything that you now *can* know!

In fact, this is really two books in one: the first is an erudite description of the progress of knowledge about comets; the second is a collection of anecdotes about the personalities involved with the study. We hear of the metal nose of Tycho Brahe (severed in a duel with another nobleman to ascertain who was the better mathematician, a method, alas, now scorned by academics); the belief that comets led to increased egg-laying; the astrological mistakes of seventeenth century John Gadbury; meet Charles Messier, 'the

ferret of comets'; discover Isaac Newton's predilections for alchemy, and so on.

In the main text, Yeomans begins by following the development of the cometary ideas of Aristotle, Seneca, Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy, through to mediaeval views, and then Kepler, Galileo and Newton. Lest this quest should appear dull, let me assure you that it definitely is not: never have I read a more lively and concise description of the ideas that circulated in these great minds. The remainder of the book pivots around what is probably the most famous comet of all: Comet Halley. In 1682 Halley successfully identified several historical sightings of a comet as being the same object, and predicted that the comet observed in 1531, 1607 and 1682 would reappear in late 1758 or early 1759 (it was actually first observed by Johann Palitzsch, a German amateur astronomer on Christmas night of 1758). The most recent study of Comet Halley is described in detail, and with extensive use of charts, photographs and diagrams the physics of comets, and their birth and death, are all explained in detail for the lay-reader.

It is a pleasure to see what is essentially a 'scientific' book give so much attention to the personalities involved in the quest for knowledge, and to give space—without mockery—to the historical superstitions and folklore which surrounded comet sightings. This is a superb book, written with clear authority and genuine love for the subject. Save up and buy it.

—Les Francis

## Your destiny in the stars

Roger B Culver and Philip A Ianna, *Astrology: True or False*, (Prometheus £9.50); John Anthony West, *The Case for Astrology*, (Viking-Arkana £20.00)

Ectoplasm, phrenology and fairies may come and go but I suspect that astrology in one form or another will be with us for another 5000 years or more. There seems to be a fascination with the idea that the movements of the celestial bodies may influence human characteristics and destiny that the relatively recent increase in our understanding of the mechanics of the universe has done nothing to diminish. *Astrology: True or False* by astronomers Roger Culver and Philip Ianna is a Prometheus publication which in earlier editions was entitled *The Gemini Syndrome* and is a must for the skeptic's bookshelf in that it shows clearly that modern advances in scientific knowledge have indeed had little influence on astrological theory and practice. But of course one could not dismiss astrology out of hand—even if it lacked a sensible theoretical basis—if there were a substantial body of evidence indicating that human characteristics could unequivocally be correlated with the positions of the planets at the time of birth. Culver and Ianna, as well as presenting arguments as to why astrology *should not* work, also present a great deal of evidence to show that it *does not* work.

The second book, *The Case for Astrology* by John Anthony West, on the other hand, certainly does not take a skeptical look at astrology—in fact the dustjacket proudly proclaims that: 'Sceptics will never dismiss astrology again'. Nonetheless I feel that this too is a book which should not be missing from the skeptic's collection. The book, unlike so

many books on the subject, is well written and researched and presents a number of different threads of argument in support of astrology's basic premises, namely that 'correlations exist between celestial and terrestrial events' and that 'correspondences exist between the position of the planets at birth and the human personality'. The author does not however always argue in favour of either ancient or modern astrological practice. The book provides a useful and detailed presentation of evidence apparently in favour of the astrological hypothesis including the Gaulequin statistical evidence concerning the Mars and Jupiter effects (evidence which I feel has not yet been adequately dealt with by skeptics). Modern astrological theories, including that of Percy Seymour, are also discussed but the author expresses the view that 'astrology is not reducible to hard science any more than music is'. This book did not convince me, in the slightest, that the practice of astrology is valid or meaningful but it at least helped me to understand the arguments of the believers.

—Steve Donnelly

## A Ghostbuster's manual

Emily Peach, *Things that go Bump in the Night: How to Investigate and Challenge Ghostly Experiences* (Aquarian Press £5.99)

I suggest you read this book as two distinct parts starting at Chapter 11: 'Investigation'. But then neither I nor parapsychology have ever been accused of logical progress. The range of natural phenomena which may be confused with paranormal manifestations set out by Peach is really impressive. The psychological states which may prompt hallucinatory or simply mistaken perceptions are laid out in an easily followed series of illustrations.

As a basis for interviewing witnesses on the perceived phenomena there is a list of thirty-nine simple questions requiring only simple answers (if there are such things) and these are followed by a further twenty-two more personal questions to find out about the witness, how he may have been misled or why he may be trying to mislead the interviewer. The questions are simple, but the implications which may be drawn from the answers allow subtle insights into the character of the witness. As Peach points out, it is not just the witness who should be observed but also his family and friends. Perhaps a psychologist should comment on how valid are the questions and possible inferences from the answers; perhaps only a psychologist should draw inferences or conduct the interviews. Either way it is refreshing that the validity of perceptions should be investigated in this manner. The personal questions must be asked by someone showing great tact. 'Have you ever taken hallucinogenic drugs for any reason? 'What are your assets and financial status?' These are questions which could call forth a hostile response or even a complete refusal to answer. Peach gives reasons for the questions and the relevance of answers to situations other than the other-worldly is made clear. As Peach points out that by her reckoning ninety per cent of reports can be explained by natural phenomena these enquiries must dispose of many without even trying a physical

investigation.

The short section on researching the history of 'haunted' sites could usefully be expanded. Sources of information are only vaguely hinted at. 'Go to the library' is sound advice, but if you know the sort of document you require and go prepared with other information you will find the research much easier. Librarians are tolerant and helpful people (yes, I am) but will be better able to help if you can present a cogent enquiry.

When it comes to the actual investigation of phenomena, the book does sometimes read like a *Blue Peter* guide to ghostbusting, but on reflection that only goes to show how practical and useful *Blue Peter* projects are. Here there are some novel uses for a bag of sugar and a jar of honey. This sounds like the voice of experience: 'As this will involve making a lot of notes, performing a lot of painstaking labour, completing a lot of routine checks and spending a lot of time waiting about, solitary, tobacco-less and alcohol free, sometime in darkness and usually in total silence, it is not often the unmitigated fun expected. Frequently the site is cold, wet, dirty, toiletless, spider-ridden or uncomfortable or all of the above'.

I cannot agree with Peach that it is ever useful to use a medium in investigating hauntings. I cannot see how it could be useful to investigate a controversial phenomenon using a controversial technique. Likewise I cannot agree that should an investigation uncover fraud it should be quietly ignored. The less responsible type of ghost writer is quite able to ignore even evidence made plain. Hiding the conclusion will only make it easier to misrepresent the case to future readers. Although it is unlikely to make any difference to the miracle-monger or his publisher it must be more satisfying to say 'You have misrepresented my conclusion' rather than 'I would have made plain my conclusion but I didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings'.

Having reached the end of the book I now turn to the beginning. Chapter One, 'Preconceptions', starts: 'The evidence for the existence of ghosts is vast and incontrovertible'. Well, there is a preconception if ever I saw one. This is followed by case histories taken from the Proceedings of the SPR (the better ones) or secondary sources of reported hauntings. These are included so that they may be judged by the later theories and methods. Discarding the anonymous and pseudonymous accounts which cannot be checked, then the hearsay and traditional stories which are potentially unreliable does not leave much. Most of the interesting hauntings seemed to have stopped around the end of the last century so even here the difficulties of investigation are considerable—the witnesses are no longer alive. Few of the cases contain sufficient detail to enable conclusions to be reached. What should have been the most valuable part of the book is sadly lacking in substance.

The second section of the book dealing with theories of ghosts is very like an exercise in the classification of dragons. You have to assume they exist and then assign them to whichever extraordinary category best fits. The Komodo dragon of this classification is hallucinations and the others are the fire-breathing, flying, knight-killing, maiden-devouring type of theory. It is difficult to see how any test may

be made of these theories especially considering the sporadic and spontaneous nature of the reported apparitions and the possibility that one or other of the competing theories can be made to fit the case. Unfortunately some of these theories are contradictory so the chances of finding a suitable match are increased and the general theory attains a level of undisprovability that is less than scientific. The only testable theory is that of hallucination in that it is possible to create ghosts by stimulation of the brain surgically or naturally—a sound brings to mind a scene, a smell conjures forth a person, the taste of a madeleine sends you off to write umpteen volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Now producing an apparition as etheric image created by a mental act. Peach does in fact try to explain some of her case histories using the techniques in the last part of the book but her insistence that the ghosts are real handicaps her objectivity.

The best advice I can leave you with is this: you have been separated from the rest of the investigation group and an apparition manifests: you can watch, note and follow or call for someone to witness and risk causing the apparition to dissipate. What do you do? 'Probably the best thing to do is to strike a happy medium.'

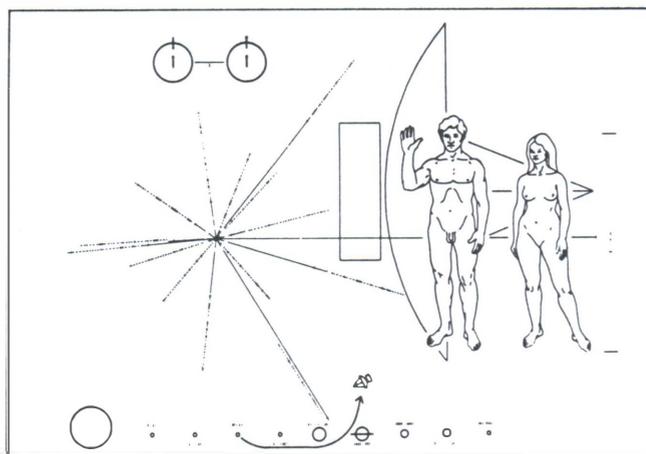
—Ernest Jackson

## Contact

Ben Bova and Byron Preiss (Editors), *First Contact: The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence* (Headline, £5.99)

Assuming we can agree on what 'intelligent' means, the question of whether intelligent life exists in the Universe somewhere other than here on Earth has a simple resolution: yes or no. The ramifications are equally disturbing, however, whichever answer turns out to be true. If yes, then we must come to terms with the loss of our self-importance, and our exclusivity. If no (and I cannot see how this can ever be proven) then we are truly alone, a thought which is chilling to many people.

At the present time, we don't know whether we are alone or not. However, a growing number of scientists (and



An image from the plaque being carried by the Pioneer spacecraft to the stars. It bears a schematic of the Pioneer's path out of the solar system, the hydrogen molecule, and the directions from Earth to various pulsars — along with codes for their frequencies. This information would give alien astronomers the date and place of origin of the spacecraft.

enthusiastic amateurs) are actively trying to find out whether there is anyone or anything out there, by listening for their traces using a worldwide network of radio-telescopes. This is SETI, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence.

Anyone remotely interested in SETI will be thrilled by this excellently compiled book. Ben Bova and Byron Preiss have collected more than twenty essays and short stories by many of the most active (and entertaining) personalities in the field, including Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov and Philip Morrison. The introductory chapters feature Asimov throwing caution to the wind as he discusses the nature of terrestrial intelligence, and the efforts to create Artificial Intelligence, and Hal Clement suggests some ways in which life may evolve in environments radically different from our own. In 'E.T.: Phone Aristotle!', Thomas McDonough, co-ordinator of SETI for the Planetary Society (founded by Carl Sagan), considers our historical fascination with alien life, and focuses on the Dogon myth (successfully explained by Ian Ridpath) and the many misconceptions about Mars.

It is possible to make many informed guesses about the likelihood of extraterrestrial intelligence, and where best to look for it. In the 1950's Frank Drake proposed his famous equation for estimating the number (N) of technological civilisations in the Galaxy, based on a number of estimated factors:

$$N = R \cdot f_p \cdot n \cdot f_i \cdot f_c \cdot L$$

Here, Drake reassesses his equation, and suggests some improvements for a better estimate. In the following article David Brin asks why we haven't already been contacted, and offers some highly imaginative explanations. The remainder of the book is concerned with the details of various SETI programmes, and explains how amateur astronomers can play an important role.

This is an optimistic book. The enthusiasm of the contributors is infectious, and it is quite clear that the one dream they all share is to be the first to establish contact with extraterrestrials. We should wish them luck.

—Peter Piper

## Events

### Randi report

*Adventures of a Psychic Investigator*, Conway Hall, London, Saturday March 30th.

It's an odd thing to say about a skeptic, but Randi can foretell the future. Talking to him on the day of the lecture, I expressed concern that with it being Easter Bank holiday and all, and nice weather, maybe not many people would show up for his talk. They will, he predicted. And they did. All in all we got about 220—almost exactly the number of seats laid out in the hall. Eerie, isn't it? Speaking with barely a few scribbled notes (I think he's done this sort of thing a few times before), Randi provided a fascinating and lively account of his twenty years or more combating flim-flam

wherever it dares raise its head. Keenly aware that he was working to a very mixed audience (including skilled magicians, skeptics, scientists and Joe Public) Randi blended explanation (e.g. the dowzers' ideo-motor reaction) and entertainment in equal measure, maintaining a brisk pace throughout. Many will tell you Randi is extremely well-versed in his field, and an impressive showman. He is both, but it's not always mentioned that Randi is also extremely funny when he chooses, and he frequently 'brought the house down' with his accounts of fraud and fakery around the world. Some of the case histories were drawn from his published work, but Randi also referred extensively to new material from his forthcoming Granada TV series, which he had completed only a few days prior to the lecture (the first episode of which will be screened nationally on July 17). We heard of graphologists, psychometrists, dowzers and mediums all of whom had agreed to take part in controlled tests, and all of whom had proved once again that the laws of chance are as dependable as ever, while 'psychic powers' are shy to the point of invisibility in the face of correct protocols. Randi was quick to stress that you don't have to be stupid to be fooled by a good charlatan. To prove his point, he treated us to a little instant mind-reading of a word freely chosen from a book, some psychokinesis, thought-photography *à la* Serios, and good old fashioned ESP with Rhine cards. It was easy to see why there are many who claim Randi is more psychic than he lets on. With the help of video playback, Randi next revisited two of his most successful investigations in detail. We saw him demonstrate the techniques of psychic surgery (messy!), and also watched his famous TV exposure of American evangelist Peter Popov apparently getting messages from the Lord, but really wired for sound to his wife, backstage, reciting audience details by the dozen. Towards the end of his talk (which included several healthy plugs for *The Skeptic* and Prometheus Books!), Randi took up the general theme of the choice to be made between the primitive superstitious ignorance of our cave-dwelling ancestors, and the intellectual exploration which had made the moon landings possible. We can, he said, stay back in the caves as the fortune-tellers and quacks would prefer, or we can trust our intellectual heritage, shed the superstitions, and reach for the stars. 'Come with me to the stars' he urged, and I'm sure he had more than made his case as far as everyone present was concerned. A lively question and answer session, spanning everything from the nature of belief to the dangers of 'black' magic, concluded the hour and a half of superlative, and thought-provoking, entertainment.

Postscript: May I grope this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to all who came along, also to Toby Howard, Mike Hutchinson, Lewis Jones for paranormal navigational talent, David Britland for having more contacts than MI5, Wendy Grossman for her relentless publicity campaign, Steve Norley, Bob Hamilton and the Magic Video company, John Gordon and the Magic Circle, the London Student Skeptics and my friends Mike Walsh, Adrian Owen and Binu Sethi. I'd also like to thank the hotel and catering industry of Great Britain for absolutely nothing at all.

—Ian Rowland



# Letters

## Talking mongooses

It has been truly said that every Believer believes as his/her neighbour believes, but each skeptic is skeptical in her/his own way. However, I couldn't help being amused by the disparity between two pieces in your last issue (*The Skeptic*, 5.2) where on page 7 you have Tim Axon counselling us to look beneath the surface of New Age nonsense, while on page 15 John Lord provides an example of what happens when we don't.

Of Gef the Manx Mongoose, he writes: 'For those of you who are acquainted with the story, and know the background, I am sure you will line up with me as super-skeptics, to dismiss it out of hand, without further investigation. as a piece of gross and impudent imposture... Some cases, to put it bluntly, do not merit serious, open-minded scientific investigation.'

Well, I think I'm reasonably well acquainted with the story, though perhaps John Lord knows more about the background than I do; and I have to say that I would not at all be happy at the thought of lining up with him. Certainly I share his disbelief that Gef the Mongoose existed, not even as 'poltergeist familiar' or 'earthbound spirit', let alone as a living, talking mongoose. But if he was an invention on the part of the adolescent Voirrey, that leaves unexplained *why* she invented him. Visiting Virgins, Cosmic Brothers from Outer Space, we know and understand up to a point: but though the existence of mongooses on Man is a known fact, an 80-year old *spirit* mongoose is an improbable communicator from the beyond.

Alternatively, Gef may have been the invention of the Irving family ensemble. But again, if so, *why*? It seems totally out of character with what we know of the parents, and it is easier to believe they allowed themselves to be convinced by their daughter. Yet they went to remarkable lengths to back up her story, giving their own detailed descriptions of the

animal, and, moreover, maintaining the charade—if charade it was—over a period of several years.

Either way, there remains, still unaccounted for, the apparent ESP demonstrated by Gef: or, if he was a figment of Voirrey's imagination, by Voirrey herself.

All this, however, is beside the point, which is that we should, as Tim Axon suggests, look beneath the surface of these absurd manifestations. Cases like the Talking Mongoose *do* deserve investigation, for the light they throw on the processes of human belief. By dismissing them out of hand, we learn nothing: but if we knew what motivations, conscious and unconscious, brought into being the Talking Mongoose, we would understand better the credulity and the charlatanism which are such a complex puzzle to us all.

Hilary Evans  
London

## Belief systems

Tim Axon's piece on the decline of religious belief and the upsurge of New Age thinking (*The Skeptic*, 5.2) failed to mention that the church is a social institution which formerly enforced conformity, by social pressures as well as inquisitions.

I dispute that 'we all need some kind of system of belief'. Axon equates religions, political and philosophical worldviews, but an ideology, attitude or code is not the same as a belief system. A humanist lifescape, for example, makes sense of the world but doesn't involve belief in things that are highly questionable.

In his article he welcomes the prospect of a new religion arising out of the ashes of the old, since people need to believe things which are not true. I find this cynical and patronising. By the way, fundamentalist Christians are anti-New Age, seeing it as a rival millennialist religion.

Lucy Fisher  
London

## Homeopathic mystery

I can assure fellow readers that whether or not homeopathic remedies can bring about a cure, they do have an effect, however diluted it may be. Actually they made me worse—a fact which can scarcely be attributed to the placebo effect. To be fair, I must mention a friend who tells me that she will be forever grateful for homeopathy, and while one could perhaps point to the placebo factor in this instance, one would then be left wondering why it didn't take place in connection with the numerous 'orthodox' drugs she had taken in vain. The mystery of it all joins that of the universe.

Vivien Gibson  
London

## Information on SHC

Jenny Randles and I are in the process of researching and writing a book on the alleged phenomenon of Spontaneous Human Combustion. This is intended to be an objective work which we hope will add to our understanding of the subject.

We are searching for information on possible cases, and informed comment which will help us in our task. This can be material for or against the possibility of SHC—we want to reflect all shades of opinion. If any reader has any information of whom we should contact (relatives of alleged victims, police officers, fire officers, forensic scientists etc.) please let us know at the following address: Peter A Hough, 6 Silsden Avenue, Lowton, Warrington, WA3 1EN, Gt Britain.

Any help will be acknowledged in the book.

Peter A Hough  
Warrington

## Room replies

I am mortified to read that Ian Saunders (*Letters*, *The Skeptic* 5.2) takes me for a creationist and a proponent of the paranormal. Did I

really express myself so badly?

Let me try to make myself clearer. I have no doubts about evolution, I know of no theory more acceptable than Darwin's, and I think the paranormal is codswallop. The point of my short article (*The Skeptic* 4.6) was to pass on the information that some creationists are intellectually respectable.

In choosing between competing theories, science and skepticism follow the rule of accepting the theory with fewest hypothetical entities ('Occam's Razor', or 'the principle of parsimony'). This is an arbitrary rule (the absence of evidence for something's existence is not proof that it does not exist). Another way of deciding what to believe is to abide by some authority.

'Creation Scientists' decide what to believe by following authority, then pretend to be using Occam's Razor. They advance absurd arguments and spurious data to 'prove' that the theory of evolution is false, so convincing themselves that creation is the most parsimonious theory. This is intellectually disreputable.

Creationists who agree with Alan Hayward, on the other hand, openly set Occam's Razor aside. Hayward accepts the facts on which Darwin's theory is based, but shows that the facts are also consistent with creation. Scientists and skeptics prefer Darwin's theory because it has fewer hypothetical entities. Hayward prefers the creation theory for a reason which, he frankly acknowledges, has nothing to do with science. This is not a skeptical argument, but intellectually respectable.

Donald Room  
London

## Soft woods, hard facts

Sorry to be a pedantic smart-arse, but a modern myth in the making crept into the letters of the last issue of *The Skeptic*, and I feel it is about time that this particular bit of nonsense was nipped in the bud.

In Anthony Garrett's astrology reply he resorted to one of the most frustrating clichés to have arisen in recent years, namely the purported use of Amazonian trees for paper

making. Indeed, every time someone consigns a sheaf of paper to the bin in my own office you will hear the cry 'Well, there goes another rain forest!'

Please let's get this straight: rain forest trees are hardwoods and are *not* used for making paper. Paper is made from softwoods (i.e., conifers), growing mainly in temperate regions such as Scandinavia.

Ian Saunders  
Surrey

## Strangeness in Zambia

Macklin's 'Stranger than Fiction' series (mentioned in Hits and Misses, *The Skeptic* 5.2) has been running for over two years in the *Zambia Daily Mail*. I have written letters refuting some of the stories, and the paper has published some of them.

Other stories have needed more research; in particular one about the British Museum's 'unlucky mummy' which gave one of its porters a broken leg and the other a heart attack, then when photographed 'incinerated the film' in a locked cabinet. In reply to my query the British Museum Head of Egyptian Antiquities described the tale as quite untrue and based on a misunderstanding by Messrs D. Murray and T.W. Stead. In an issue of the *Sunday Times* from 1934, the Curator Wallis Budge explained that Murray and Stead had decided the face on the mummy case lid looked 'tortured' and wanted to 'exorcise' it; this story got mixed up with a much older and obviously unverifiable story about a mummy and some broken crockery, and the whole thing 'took off'. The mummy ('sold to an American collector') was even said to have caused the Titanic disaster while in transit. Dr Budge denied that the lid was sold to an American or had ever caused any strange events at the museum, where it was still safely kept. But the story would not lie down, and hence entered Macklin's repertoire of incredible tales.

Another Macklin tale claims that two months before the sinking of the *Princess Alice* by the collier *Bywell Castle* on the Thames in early September 1878, Woolwich school-boy Ernest Moseley described this accident in great detail in a school essay ('still in the possession of the

Moseley family'). In Moseley's version he and his parents were saved. In the actual event two months later, '650 men, women and children died'), including Moseley and his parents.

A misprint ('1978' for '1878') in the *Zambia Daily Mail* version had me writing to the school concerned for confirmation; this was in early 1989, before the *Marchioness* disaster made the *Princess Alice* story well known. Lloyds Register and the Department of Transport were helpful, though neither could confirm the Moseley connection.

Macklin claimed that the vessels' courses were 'strange' implying there was a supernatural influence at work. Each side accused the other of suddenly changing course. However the Court found that the collier, on realising the impending collision, veered to port, as required by the Regulations of the Thames Conservancy, and stopped engines. The *Princess Alice* however, veered to starboard and was run down by the collier. The simple reason for this was that the Master of the *Princess Alice*, like most Thames Watermen of the time, was unaware of these poorly publicised Regulations. There is nothing supernatural about this. My letter to the *Zambia Daily Mail* explaining these findings was rejected because of the delay. With a thoroughly researched analysis of Macklin's series to hand the delay could have been avoided.

David Simpson  
Lusaka, Zambia.

## Mysterious 'Marie'

In his very interesting article on the mystery of the *Mary Celeste* (*The Skeptic*, 5.2), H.H. Trotti points out that the name *Marie Celeste* was 'a mistake in the British record of this event'. Why, then, does *The Skeptic* perpetuate this mistake, both in the title of the article, and on the front cover? I give you fair warning that any explanation you may offer will be received with complete 'skepticism' by the undersigned.

John L. Broom  
Orkney

*Mr Broom has of course spotted last issue's deliberate mistake!*

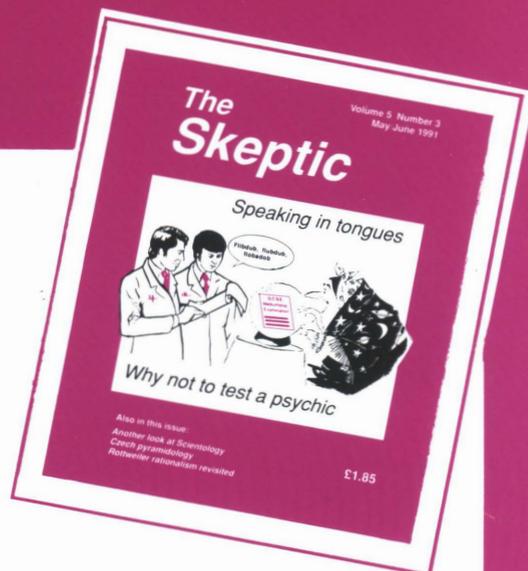
—The Editors

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Postal area	Subscription (1 year)	Back issue
UK	£12	£2.10
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Rest of world (surface)	£15.50	£2.70
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- 6 **Creationism in Australia** (Martin Bridgstock); Noah's Ark founders on the facts (Stephen Moreton); Hunting Nessie (Steuart Campbell); The Royal Nonesuch of parapsychology (H.B. Gibson); Predictions for 1988.

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- 3 **Findhorn** (Steuart Campbell), Paul Kurtz interview-2 (Wendy Grossman), The case against ESP (Anthony Garrett), Telepathy: a mechanism? No! (Steve Donnelly); Recognizing pseudoscience (Sven Ove Hansson).
- 4 **A Thorn in Geller's Side** (Michael Hutchinson); (Wendy Grossman); UFO days (Steve Donnelly); Comparative astrology; dreams and visions of survival (Antony Flew).
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- 6 **Bristol Psychic fair** (Hocus Pocus); The incredible Mr Newman (Frank Chambers); Predictions for 1989 (Marjorie Mackintosh); Joe Nickell on the Shroud of Turin.

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