

Volume 8 Number 6

# *The Skeptic*



## *Alternative Medicine Special*

*What's wrong with alternative therapies?*

*Acupuncture: does it really work?*

*Investigating traditional Chinese medicine*

**£1.85**

# Hilary Evans' *Paranormal Picture Gallery*



## *Jacques Cazotte's prophecy*

**E**ARLY IN 1788, a number of eminent French men and women were at dinner, when conversation turned to the revolution which most regarded as inevitable. How many of those present would live to see it? All, said author Jacques Cazotte, and most would have reason to regret it.

Addressing each in turn, he told mathematician Condorcet that he would poison himself in prison to escape the guillotine; aristocrat Chamfort would cut his veins for the same reason. The critic La Harpe, a notorious atheist, would survive the revolution but be converted to Christianity. Six others—including Cazotte himself—would be victims of the guillotine.

And so it turned out: each met the gruesome fate predicted for him. It's a great story. Sadly, though, the only report we have is La Harpe's account, and this was not published until all the events had taken place: more sadly still, among his papers, after his death in 1803, was found a note claiming that he himself had invented the entire story as a practical joke.

*Hilary Evans is co-proprietor of the Mary Evans Picture Library, 59 Tranquil Vale, London SE3 0BS*

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*The Skeptic* is published bimonthly from PO Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH, UK. Email: [skeptic@cs.man.ac.uk](mailto:skeptic@cs.man.ac.uk). WWW: <http://www.cs.man.ac.uk/aig/staff/toby/skeptic.html>.

Opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the editors.

ISSN 0959-5228

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A big thank-you to all our clipping contributors, who for this issue include:

Mark Butler, Steuart Campbell, Arthur Chappell, Jock Cramb, Marie Donnelly, Gerald Fleming, D L Foster, Vivien Gibson, Earnest Jackson, Dave Langford, Eddie Mizzi, Eamonn McNulty, Austen Moulden, David Rydeheard, Donald Room, Tom Ruffles, Mike Rutter, Gillian Sathanandan, K P Shah, H Sivyver, Brian Slade, C L Torrero, Chris Willis.

Sorry if we've missed anyone out! Please keep the clippings coming!

# Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

## Ghost in goggles

Identifying a ghost can be somewhat difficult at the best of times—viewing conditions are often less than ideal and people don't look as they used to when carrying their heads under their arms. However, ghost enthusiasts in Surrey have recently experienced particular difficulty when trying to determine whether a ghost seen near a motor racetrack is that of Percy Lambert, the first man to drive at speeds in excess of 100 mph. According to *The Scotsman* on 31 October, the problem lies in the spectre's attire and the proximity of a former airfield (now a museum) on a site claimed to be more haunted by 20th century ghosts than anywhere else in Britain. Percy Lambert died on 31 October 1913 when a tyre burst on the Brooklands Banking at 110 mph and, since that time, a ghostly figure wearing helmet and goggles has often been reported in the area, walking out of the mist. Unfortunately, the Brooklands racetrack and airfield are somewhat overrun with mysterious figures walking out of the mist and, almost all of them wear the helmet and goggles that were *de rigueur* for both drivers and aviators. However, investigators at the racetrack on Hallowe'en were taking a picture of Percy with them to the Banking in order to establish the ID of any mysterious figure who appeared.



Tim Pearce

## Refugees from Tibet

A group of long-haired, vegetarians spotted in Shennongjia National Park in Hubei Province, Central China were not thought to be New Age travellers taking extreme measures to avoid police harassment in southern England. According to the *Sunday Telegraph* on 6 November, the three six-foot-tall figures with protruding foreheads and large feet, spotted at sunset by a group of engineers were, in fact, yeti (and Chris Bonnington was nowhere in sight). The Chinese Academy of Sciences is sufficiently sure of this identification that they have set up a Committee for the Search of Rare and Strange Creatures.

## Doctor of Ufology

In a move intended to enhance the credibility of UFO buffs when dealing with the media, author on all-things-paranormal, Jenny Randles has recently made a suggestion that will undoubtedly yield the opposite result to that intended. Writing in the Christmas 1994 edition of *Northern UFO News* she writes: 'Indeed I now may even recommend that UFOlogists use doctorates before their names in interviews (let's invent some generic UFO doctorate amongst ourselves so we can give this to people who we think deserve it and they can claim a daft title legitimately in public). I know it's a cheap trick, but sceptics, media and science appear to respond to such things from others so we have to play the media game.' I wouldn't like to comment on this from the point of view of media or science (?) but, as far as sceptics' supposed high regard for doctorates is concerned, I can't do better than to quote arch-skeptic James (The Amazing) Randi in an interview with *The Skeptic* in 1991: 'I have a theory about PhDs: I suspect that when the doctorates are handed out there is a secret chemical in the degree certificate that is absorbed into the skin. The chemical goes directly to the brain where it paralyses specific parts of the speech centre. This part of the brain controls two sentences only and those sentences are: "I was wrong" and "I don't know", because I've never heard a PhD give either of those answers. Now, it's possible that I'm wrong and that the speech centre can handle these sentences perfectly well, but I have a feeling that the person with the PhD would just go "beedee beedee beedee bee" when they tried to pronounce the words.' Actually, thinking about it, this phrase is somewhat reminiscent of the outpourings of some of the more ardent UFOlogists, so perhaps a bogus doctorate is appropriate after all.

## Return to sender . . .

What is it about Elvis Presley that makes sightings of him (both alive and as a visitor from beyond the grave) so popular? According to an article in *Woman's Own* on 12 September, Elvis (deceased) has been making regular visits to Brenda Brown in North London—and proved he was who he said he was by correctly describing the colour of his bathroom at Graceland (his former home). He also described the shape of a mole on the bottom of his daughter, Lisa-Marie—at whose wedding the *Daily Mirror* on 19 September assures us Elvis (white-haired and wearing a baseball cap) was a secret guest.

**Steve Donnelly is a physicist and a reader in electronics and electrical engineering at the University of Salford.**

*Hits & Misses will return to its normal two-page length in the next issue.*

# Skeptical Predictions for 1995

by our resident seer Marjorie Mackintosh

**JANUARY** *The Observer* newspaper leaks secret government papers detailing plans for the privatisation of Christmas. Half the reindeer will be made redundant to provide a slimmed down service and the North Pole pension fund will be used to buy in contract toy workers to make Santa's Workshop assets more attractive to private buyers.

**FEBRUARY** Shops selling ouija boards, crystal balls and tarot cards in the Westminster area report record sales as Conservative MPs try to discover who will be next to have his financial deals probed and how long the Prime Minister will then support him before asking for his resignation.

**MARCH** American fundamentalists join sceptics in rejecting the authenticity of the Turin Shroud. The skinny, long-haired figure looks like a hippy or New Ager, they say, so it can't be Jesus. The founder of America's greatest religion simply couldn't be that scruffy.

**APRIL** Easter, and word is spread of a miraculous weeping Easter Bunny. A shrine is established and pilgrimages made. Scientists, however, protest that it is just water condensing on the cold chocolate.

**MAY** Yet another book is published claiming to prove the truth of alien abduction stories. Its author argues that the abductions must have taken place because this is the only way that aliens could have learned to speak such perfect American English—as anyone who watches *Star Trek* knows they do.

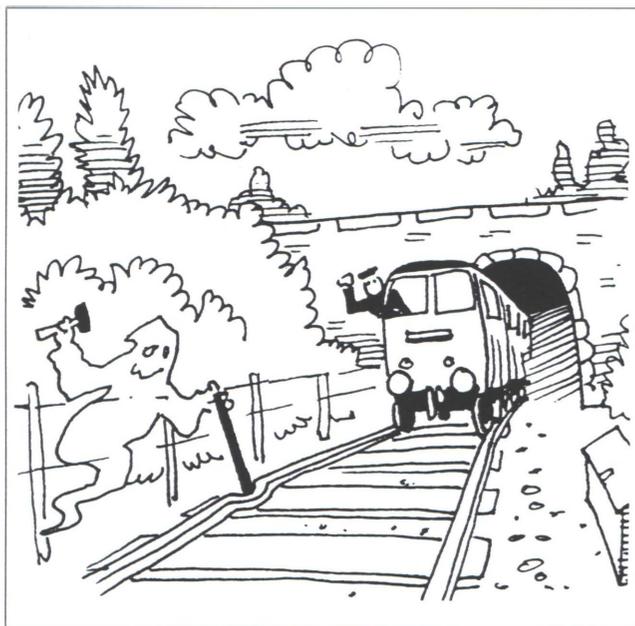
**JUNE** Rumours that Bill Clinton has been seeing another woman are denied by the President who says that it is, in fact, his Guardian Angel, come to protect and guide him during difficult international negotiations. Hilary says she believes this as she also has a Guardian Angel; only hers is male, six feet tall with broad shoulders and wavy hair. Both Prince Charles and Princess Diana express an interest in acquiring this divine protection.

**JULY** The effect of crystals on health is confirmed when a large one falls on its owner's head and knocks him out.

**AUGUST** A-level results arrive and the government announces another cut in student grants. Students are told to adopt homeopathic principles and live on microscopic amounts of food dissolved in gallons of tap water.

**SEPTEMBER** The water companies announce large increases in water rates and meter charges owing, it is said, to increased pressure on water reserves in university areas. Critics claim you did not have to be Nostradamus to see it coming.

**OCTOBER** British Rail announces that trains are being delayed owing to poltergeist activity. Passengers find this more believable than the old 'leaves on the line' excuse.



Tim Pearce

**NOVEMBER** The appearance of mysterious snow circles excites cerealogists who have been terribly bored and inactive since the harvest.

**DECEMBER** Concern has been growing among clairvoyants and crystal-gazers that the high number of misses they score in their annual predictions is undermining their credibility. Therefore, a new approach to prediction has been developed which, it is expected, will prove more successful. Seers are now telling the world that in 1996: Princess Di will not study physics at Oxford; Iceland will not invade the United States; Tranmere Rovers will not win the FA Cup and France will not adopt English as its official language. There are high hopes for 100% accuracy.

**Marjorie Mackintosh** works for the Open University.



need to believe it, *long* to believe it, get a *thrill* out of believing it—and will therefore exaggerate the accuracy of the diagnosis or prognosis given. It seems that part of human nature is in love with magic and that it is sometimes a relief to switch off our powers of reasoning and believe implicitly in such things, rather than just keep an open mind about unlikely possibilities.

As to treatment, one of the most remarkable things about the history of medicine is that until recently scarcely anyone saw that the best way to assess how much was being achieved was to compare results. Why was this basic common sense approach not always obvious?

However (as with 'league tables' purporting to measure the performance of schools, hospitals and so on) if the groups being compared are not as alike as possible apart from the method of treatment, there is a big danger of coming to false conclusions. Hence—whenever nobody knows which of two treatment policies is best—there is a need to ask patients if they will agree to take part in a careful randomised comparison.

They lose nothing by doing so. On the contrary several studies suggest that they may gain something just from joining a trial. In fact, when doctors and nurses find *themselves* ill or injured, they should encourage this attitude by asking to be included in such comparisons. This is a very different matter to research aimed at new discoveries; or at a better understanding of mechanisms. It is simply comparing outcome. It is answering a very practical question— which policy gets the best results?

In HealthWatch we don't see how any reasonable person can argue against this in principle, no matter what the type of remedy, no matter what the theory behind it and no matter to what extent treatment is individualised. Once you have two groups that are broadly the same, apart from how they are treated, you can make any comparison between two policies that you like. All the advantages and all the disadvantages—physical and psychological, short term and long term—can be compared. Anything that anyone wants to compare can be compared. For example, alongside more objective aspects, there is no reason why the *percentage* of patients who merely *feel happier* than they did before the treatment cannot be compared. Whichever way you look at it, valid comparison is the key.

Is this approach really, as some critics claim, no more than just the current thinking of Western medicine and Western science? On the contrary, is it not rock hard, inescapable logic? And is it not the honest, common sense way to get at the truth? And is it not surprising that for many centuries reasonable human beings worldwide have not urged that it should be done? If 'amazing' results occur after a particular form of treatment, *how often* do similar results occur (a) after this treatment (b) after other treatments (c) after neither? If there is a difference we want to know which policy gives the patient *the best chance* of doing well.

To take one very small current example, how many of the thousands of women who take Evening Primrose Oil for pre-menstrual tension are aware that a Swedish double blind trial has found that this very popular 'alternative' remedy (with a name like that, how could it fail?) had no

more effect than ordinary liquid paraffin? Perhaps customers should have a right to this sort of evidence before they decide how to spend their money.

### Then Why So Many Grateful Patients?

The history of medicine shows all too clearly how easy it is for both doctors and patients to be convinced that a remedy is beneficial when, in fact, it is doing no good—or even doing harm. It has happened many times in mainstream medicine as well as in fringe medicine. There is no 'remedy', however worthless, that does not have its quota of grateful patients. This is due partly, but not entirely, to the placebo effect. In HealthWatch (which has an updated position paper on this subject, if anyone is interested) we fully recognise the powerful and vital subjective help that one or more kinds of placebo therapy can give, together with listening, understanding, encouragement, relaxation, and so on. However, though many people long to believe that equally powerful *objective* effects can occur—including measurable physical healing and cures that would not otherwise have occurred—the evidence for this, though important and interesting, is only slight.

It is often forgotten that there are at least three other explanations, quite apart from the placebo effect, for patients feeling convinced that a treatment has helped them. First, many medical conditions are self-limiting. Those people who always take a remedy of some kind—or always want their doctor to give them one, even if he or she doesn't think it is necessary—fail to appreciate this, because they have so little experience of it. Many, though they talk a lot of natural healing and self healing, seem surprisingly reluctant to take no remedy in situations where this is appropriate. Ironically they often seem to have *less* confidence in this policy than do many in mainstream medicine.

Second, in many long standing conditions spontaneous improvements and remissions—lasting weeks, months, or even years—are common. In fact, nobody is more keenly aware of the self healing powers of the human body than the men and women who practice mainstream medicine.

Third, belief that a remedy has been successful is often based on a false assumption—the assumption that without it there would have been no improvement, or steady deterioration, or perhaps even death. People love to say that they *know* they would now be dead if it wasn't for some fringe medicine remedy. But this may not be true at all—the same thing happens to patients who have had nothing but standard treatment.

Following the completion of mainstream medicine for a cancer, for example, all trace of the disease may be gone and the patient may now feel completely well (perhaps cured, but with no guarantee of this). Then fringe medicine of some kind is added—and if the patient does exceptionally well, that's great, but no prizes for guessing which treatment then tends to get the credit. 'Living longer than expected' is by itself worthless as evidence, unless it can be shown to happen *more often* after this extra treatment than without it. It is quite common in mainstream medicine for patients to do not just better than average but far better than average. It happens all the time.

Another reason for misplaced gratitude is when completely healthy people (in so far as any of us are ever *completely* healthy—it would be very surprising if we were, given the amazing complexity of the ingenious mechanisms that keep our bodies ticking over) are conned into thinking that if they want to stay well they had better have a fringe remedy of some kind. Many people do this for years, the total cost mounting up to large sums, which they can ill afford. Those who stay well would probably have stayed well anyway.

### Two Personal Experiences

All doctors have been patients at certain times in their life. Though they don't often talk about it ('it's funny to think of the doctor being ill' is still sometimes heard in wards or clinics) some have had more experience of being ill or in pain than have many of their patients. Here are two very ordinary, commonplace experiences of my own that illustrate two of the points I've made.

The first time was when I was recovering from major surgery and had a day when I felt very ill, but no cause was evident, so I got nothing for it. No suggested explanation, no reassurance, no hopeful suggestion that I would probably feel better next day, no humour, no mock chiding for feeling sorry for myself (too much sympathy is as bad as too little) and no placebo. A brief word of encouragement, combined with a spoonful of pink peppermint water—or something equally cheap and harmless—would have cheered me up. This is an example of modern hospital staff sometimes failing to live up to the traditions of simple old fashioned common sense mainstream medicine.

The second time was when after months of severe sciatic nerve root pain (possibly made a little easier by the soothing and comforting hands of a sympathetic masseuse, but that's all—no real change) I was given a very gloomy prognosis by a senior neurosurgeon. However, *without any remedy of any kind*, it then all cleared up and I had no trouble whatever for the next 15 years. The point here is that had I visited, say, an osteopath or chiropractor or acupuncturist, what happened would have been regarded by many people as impressive evidence for the effectiveness of alternative medicine.

### Contradictory Theories

To return to the 1993 BMA report, many of the dozens and dozens of different types of fringe medicine are based on some all embracing theory regarding the way in which one part of the body is supposed to influence all other parts; or on some vague idea of imbalance and loss of harmony; or on the need to cleanse the body, or on the importance of unblocking channels of energy. In the past these sort of theories were popular in mainstream medicine. But as soon as science and reason and hard work solve a problem and the real cause is discovered (of malaria, for example, which used to be thought due to 'bad air', hence its name) such guesses are no longer needed.

Most fringe theories contradict each other, but the BMA are too polite to point this out in their report, contenting themselves with urging a register of all groups, so that after

training they become 'competent' and have the necessary 'skills' for 'good practice'. Not wanting to offend anyone or sound patronising, they make little or no attempt in this report to demarcate the absurd or the undesirable. Isn't it rather probable that the *competent* and *skilled* 'good practice' of nonsense, *following a course of thorough training* in nonsense, will remain nonsense?

Some branches of fringe medicine are now behaving in a much more honest and realistic way. Most osteopaths and chiropractors, for example, seem now to have quietly given up the claim that they stuck firmly to for more than 100 years—that spinal manipulation was capable of curing or alleviating almost any disease in any part of the body. Since half the population suffers from intermittent back-ache, just sticking to that problem alone can no doubt keep them busy and earn them many grateful patients. Most are also very well trained in anatomy and much else from mainstream medicine, though obviously without as much practical experience of both diagnosed and not yet diagnosed patients, as they would have if they had been through medical school.

An increasing number of fringe practitioners also now support proper randomised trials. But no single clinical trial can provide complete confirmation (or complete negation) of any theory or belief, and it seems likely that some hold so strongly to their convictions that they will believe only those trials that seem to confirm them. Only a small minority seem to have a reasonably open mind.

### Reasons At Least Not To Encourage It

So does yet another wave of enthusiasm for fringe medicine (there have been many previous ones in history) do any real harm? Mainstream medicine has always believed in 'curing sometimes, relieving often and comforting always'. This basic, traditional teaching cannot be denied



merely because some doctors fail to live up to it. And fringe medicine, even if it is 95% placebo therapy (compared with mainstream medicine's equivalent figure of perhaps 60% in the early part of this century and perhaps 30% now) can at least help with the comforting. So why not let people spend their money this way if they wish?

Well, here are a few points that at least should make us pause before we do anything that encourages still further the recent huge expansion of fringe medicine:

1. *Diagnosis.* Possible serious delay before the correct diagnosis is made. And a possible failure, due to lack of training in a medical school, to recognise the nature of later changes or complications. Less training of the medical school type also means less ability to give confident reassurance when there are needless fears.

2. *Treatment.* Possible serious delay before the best treatment is given. Perhaps it is never given. Perhaps what is actually done is either worthless or second best.

3. *Psychology and morale.* Whenever patients suffer from some condition whose cause remains unknown, they may at first be comforted by some alleged explanation based on one of the numerous fringe medicine beliefs—and by the treatment or ritual that follows from it. But later, if they relapse, some of these theories can do harm. For example, the currently popular idea, especially with cancer, of pretending to be 'in control' (rather than calmly and philosophically hoping for the best, which used to be preferred and admired) can sometimes, in the event of relapse, make patients feel that this is due to their own inadequacy or to their failure to follow some regime of dubious value.

4. *Money wasted*—often money that can ill be afforded. True, many healers are very sincere in their wish to help people for a reasonable charge—or even for nothing at all. But there is a wide range and it goes all the way to what most people would call gross overcharging. Some innocents are being really ripped off by those who see the rapid expansion of fringe medicine as a chance to make quite a lot of money. And, though those who hate the mainstream drug companies would love to think otherwise, there are obviously commercial vested interests in the manufacture of remedies for both camps.

5. *Attitude to mainstream medicine.* Some healers give patients a false picture of the aims, ideals and teaching of mainstream medicine. Several examples have been given.

6. *The big increase in the popularity of fringe medicine,* with its frequent emphasis on 'ancient' or 'natural' remedies is to some extent a step backwards to the superstition, sorcery and magic of the past. Fringe medicine has not substantially changed. In general, it is stuck where it always was—and in a situation not very different to where mainstream medicine used to be more than 100 years ago.

7. *The language and behaviour of much of fringe medicine is basically that of magic rather than reason.* For example, there is little exchange of information, or attempt to iron out contradictions or inconsistencies. There is little

or no talk of failure or of disappointment after initial hopes. There is very little puzzling over unsolved problems, or hope of progress and better results in the future. It's all black or white and you either believe it and think it's marvellous or you don't.

8. *Priorities and Progress.* Though life is without question safer and longer than it was 100 years ago (with far fewer children dying, far fewer young adults dying and a more active old age) there is still much work to be done, and many baffling mysteries to unravel, if the incidence of premature death is to be further reduced. In terms of society's priorities—and in terms of public attitudes to science and rational problem solving—there is a danger that the present big increase in fringe medicine will tend to slow down progress. Avoidable tragedies will be the result. It seems that some of us are more comfortable with mysticism than with progress, no matter how many problems remain unsolved and no matter how many people continue to die before their time.

**Thurstan Brewin is an oncologist and a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. He is the current Chairman of HealthWatch (see page 11 for contact details). This article is based on a talk he gave at the 5th European Skeptics' Conference.**

## LONDON STUDENT SKEPTICS



**Programme:** Winter term  
**1995 Venue:** Room 3D, ULU Building, Malet Street (opposite Dillons).

### Monday 16 January

Donald Rooum (Cartoonist): A Fresh Look at Creation Science.

### Monday 30 January

Lynn Picknett and Clive Price (Authors) will talk about their new book on the Turin Shroud.

### Monday 13 February

Bill Harman (London Student Skeptics) The Liquefying blood of St Januarius/Skeptical Video.

### Monday 27 February

Alan Bradley (London Student Skeptics) Babel and beyond: a skeptical linguist's report.

### Monday 13 March AGM

*All meetings will be at the above location and will start at 7.30pm. Enquiries: Bill Harman, 21 Manville Road, London, SW17 8JW.*

# Acupuncture: Elusive or Illusory?

Ian Johnson

*A hospice doctor describes how he twice tried acupuncture and was twice disappointed*

**M**Y FIRST EXPOSURE to these concepts was about 20 years ago when as a medical student, I read Dr Felix Mann's book *Acupuncture, Cure for Many Diseases*. The attraction of this form of therapy was impressed on me again a few years later. As a newly qualified GP in a busy inner city practice, I grew increasingly disenchanted with the Cartesian view of the human organism upon which my medical training had been based. Although the idea that there was a 'pill for every ill' was no longer currency, nonetheless the practice of holistic medicine was still very much in its infancy. Furthermore, I found that much of what I had been taught and thus had on offer for my patients seemed inadequate for their needs. Worse still was the realization that my knowledge and skills were largely irrelevant for the problems which were daily brought to surgery. I also became increasingly aware of the very real dangers of side effects from some drugs. In one instance an elderly lady bled almost to death from a gastric erosion caused by a drug which I had prescribed only a few days earlier to relieve her arthritic pain. Acupuncture seemed a much better proposition; reputedly safe, very effective and popular with patients. If only the sceptical medical profession would wake up!

I think my experiences were not untypical judging by the number of doctors signing up for the short courses on acupuncture such as the one I subsequently attended.

But, despite the numerous satisfied patients who were recruited by the tutor for demonstration purposes, in my hands the success rate never exceeded that achievable by the use of any powerful placebo (for example one that hurts or in some other way impresses the patient). Thus my interest soon waned. My tutor, on the other hand, had a flourishing private practice.

Acupuncture, together with herbal medicine are the principal component parts of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). TCM antedates most of the anatomical and pathological discoveries upon which western medicine is based. The 'organ systems' which are recognised by practitioners of TCM frequently bear little resemblance to those familiar in our medical schools, being based on a traditional notion of function rather than structure. 'Chinese medicine sees

each organ as a complex system encompassing its anatomical entity and its corresponding emotion, tissue, sense organ, mental faculty, colour, climate and more' [1].

A good example of this is the spleen, which in TCM is considered to be one of the most vital of all organs, essential to the process of digestion and without which life is not sustainable. In short, in Chinese medicine, anatomy, physiology and biochemistry are irrelevant to clinical practice.

In 1987 I started working in a hospice and joined the emerging specialty of palliative medicine—the treatment of symptoms without changing the course of the underlying disease. Most of my patients had advanced cancer and presented such a plethora of very difficult problems that I once again considered exploring the potential of traditional acupuncture. My determination

to understand the subject more thoroughly led me to enrol on a two year part-time course at a self styled leading specialist college. After a year of study it became apparent that the principles being taught as fact could only be taken at face value, since little or no scientific evidence for their validity was on offer. The college had no research program and no library. Reference to published work was entirely absent during the whole of that year's teaching and my repeated requests for evidence were singularly unfruitful.

Rather than enrol for the second year of the course, I



Mary Evans

decided to explore the literature and to try to assess for myself the quality of published material and hence the efficacy of acupuncture. Using *Index Medicus* in the local medical school library I manually scanned the extensive lists of publications for the past 10 years, my attentions being directed primarily towards papers dealing with the sorts of problems presenting in hospice work. Apart from pain, this included nausea, vomiting and breathing difficulties.

My initial impression was that most published work was generally of poor overall quality, far worse than would be tolerated in orthodox medical research. Whilst Chinese acupuncturists may accept *a priori* that theirs is an effective treatment and are content to publish uncontrolled case reports and anecdotes (some even regarding placebo control as unethical), it is difficult to understand how so many western workers could apparently disregard even the most basic tenets of good research practice.

Even more baffling is that much of this work should have ever seen the light of day in journals which would be expected to insist on rigorous peer review of articles submitted for publication. Typical of these deficiencies are; studies with far too small a number of subjects to allow statistically meaningful conclusions to be drawn, lack of randomization or biased selection of subjects and hopelessly poor statistical presentation and analysis of results.

These issues were highlighted in a recent paper from the Netherlands in which the authors assessed the quality of publications dealing with the acupuncture treatment of chronic pain, using a technique called 'criteria-based meta-analysis'. Their literature search revealed 51 controlled studies meeting their basic criteria and they concluded that 'the quality of even the better studies proved to be mediocre and that the efficacy of acupuncture in the treatment of chronic pain remains doubtful', conclusions with which I totally agree.

They also drew attention to the fact that the better designed studies tended to be those which reported negative results, and so failed to show any benefit for acupuncture. Given that there is a natural bias amongst authors and editors alike, against publishing negative findings, then it is probable that the less critical reader will gain a very misleading impression about the efficacy of acupuncture. In other words, the literature seems to contain an unrepresentatively high proportion of favourable reports which tend to be the least reliable because of flawed design [2].

Against this must be set a small number of very well designed studies which do show beneficial effects. Writing about the acupuncture treatment of nausea for instance, a professor of anaesthetics considered the case 'to be proven beyond reasonable doubt', although his main justification for this statement was work that he himself had published [3].

Complementary medicine commands a great deal of public support and there is increasing demand for moves to assimilate such techniques into the National Health Service. In the highly competitive internal market that now prevails, there is always the danger that decisions about resource allocation are open to influence from political

expediency. This is particularly so where a treatment is claimed to be unprovable but of self evident worth on the basis of widespread, albeit uncritical, acclaim and popularity. Without the benefit of good scientific research and evaluation to inform rational debate, then the opportunity cost of wholesale adoption of popular but worthless remedies may be very high. Something else will have to go.

Human illness is a complex business. A minority of conditions yield to a specific remedy; antibiotic treatment of meningitis for instance, and it matters little how the medicine is administered or by whom. As I discovered in my early days as a GP however, most other health problems involve an intricate interplay of physical, psychosocial and yes, even spiritual influences. In this respect, orthodox medicine has much to relearn. In my opinion the success of so many complementary techniques rests in the fact that practitioners are able to offer the therapeutic relationship which is so often missing from modern fast-track medicine. Many complementary therapists of my acquaintance are practitioners of undoubted integrity who adhere to a very high, self imposed code of professional ethics and for whom an honest search for truth is every bit as important as their orthodox counterparts.

Skrabanek [4] suggests that what is at issue is the complex problem of demarcation between science and quackery, between reason and faith, between honest search for truth and unscrupulous exploitation of human suffering.

Like me, Felix Mann, at first so enthusiastic, finally became disillusioned. In a later publication, *Scientific Aspects of Acupuncture* Mann writes: 'After some years, I felt I had to a certain extent mastered the subject: I knew what the ancients said, and also what was preached in this century in the East and the West. It was only then that I seriously examined the validity of all that I had learnt, only to discover most of it was fantasy. Acupuncture points do not exist, meridians do not exist, and most of the laws of acupuncture are laws about non-existent entities' [5].

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# Qigong: Chinese Pseudoscience

James E Alcock

*An investigation into the 'miracles' of contemporary China*

**T**RADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE grew out of an ancient Chinese philosophical and cosmological belief system which eventually came to be known as Taoism. The concept of *Tao* (pronounced 'dow') is somewhat enigmatic from the perspective of Western philosophical and religious thought, for, although *Tao* is said to have existed before the universe was created, and indeed created the universe, the concept refers neither to a deity nor simply to nature itself. *Tao* literally means 'the way' or 'the way of the world'. It keeps the world running through the release of its energy (Ross and Hills, 1956). Around 600 BC, the great moral philosopher Lao-Tzu wrote his highly influential *Tao Teh Ching* (Classics On Morality), which instructed people on how to carry out the *Tao* of life. He taught that one must accept life as it comes rather than trying to change it, and he stressed the importance of relaxation and calmness (Shen, 1986).

Since antiquity, *Qi* (pronounced 'chee', and sometimes transcribed as *Ch'i*) has been the fundamental concept of traditional Chinese medicine. The term means vital breath (somewhat similar to the *élan vital* of early European philosophy), and Lao-Tzu taught that it is the unimpeded flow of *Qi* through a network of invisible meridians throughout the body that keeps a person alive. This flow of *Qi* maintains an essential harmony between the two basic energies, yin and yang. When the flow of *Qi* is impeded or disturbed in some way, one falls ill. Acupuncture is aimed at restoring the proper flow by directly stimulating a particular part of the network of meridians. By stimulating the appropriate spot, often far from the site of sickness, the flow of *Qi* is restored, and sickness is overcome. However, one does not need acupuncture if one can learn to control the movement of *Qi* in the body.

It was Lao-Tzu who first developed Qigong (a term which means 'manipulation of *Qi*' and pronounced 'chee gung'), as an art to be practised both for martial and therapeutic reasons. Through Qigong, Lao-Tzu said, one can maintain the proper flow of *Qi* and therefore prevent or overcome illness. Lao-Tzu taught that it was necessary to learn how to close oneself off from external stimuli, to focus one's attention inward, and to breathe in a particular way. He said that one must achieve a state in which one has no desires; only then can one manipulate the flow of *Qi* within the body.

While Lao-Tzu stressed a focus on one's body—promoting health through relaxation and calmness, some of

his disciples added some additional features to the practice of Qigong. For example, they claimed to be able to see with the ears and hear with the eyes, and to be able to hear conversations which were being conducted hundreds of miles away. Thus did Qigong come to be associated with what in modern Western terms would be called paranormal powers.

Taoism as a religion all but died away, although its influence carried on through the impact it had on both Confucianism and Buddhism. Qigong survived over the centuries only through the devotion of small numbers of monks and martial arts practitioners. However, unlike acupuncture, it had little medical impact in China until it was rediscovered by Chinese physicians in the 1950s. The effects of Qigong practice on ailments such as hypertension were examined, and it was found—not surprisingly since Qigong involves extensive relaxation training—that there was a therapeutic effect. However, this renewed interest in Qigong did not last long, for it was swept away by the tide of political and social upheaval brought about by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Qigong was denounced as anti-Marxist (due to its quasi-spiritual basis) and even as witchcraft. (It was in good company: psychology was declared to be a pseudo-science!)

As has so often been the case throughout history, periods of great social or political upheaval are often very fertile ground for paranormal and occult belief, and China was no exception. With the eventual downfall of the Gang of Four and the end of the Cultural Revolution, there was a new intellectual freedom which quickly spread across China, and with that freedom, Qigong flourished. To allay any concerns that it contradicted Marxism, a new term was introduced for those Qigong features which seemed to be paranormal or spiritual in nature: Extraordinary Functions of the Human Body (EFHB). Just as Western parapsychologists have generally tried to separate their field from the spiritual domain by considering ESP and PK to be as yet undiscovered but natural properties of human beings, Qigong proponents could now refer to EFHB as something mysterious but natural, rather than supernatural.

In 1981, a film entitled *Do You Believe?* was widely shown on Chinese television and in cinemas across the country (Zha and McConnell, 1991). It included footage of a twelve-year-old boy whose EFHB enabled him to break wooden matches that had been sealed in a match box, or restore broken matchsticks, again while they were in a

sealed matchbox. Just as hundreds of British children were mysteriously able to bend spoons after watching a television demonstration by Uri Geller, so too did large numbers of children across China suddenly manifest EFHB.

Hundreds of researchers were drawn to the study of these children and their amazing abilities. It was reported that they could see with their ears—by holding a crumpled ball of paper next to the ear, they could read what was written on the paper even though they had apparently had no opportunity to see the inscription. They were able to move the hands of watches without touching them. All sorts of other miraculous feats were demonstrated for eager researchers. It was soon recognized that EFHB was something that at least half of all children possessed (Zha and McConnell, 1991). Young girls between six and twelve years of age proved to be the best practitioners, but it was observed that their abilities waned at puberty, in line with some speculations about what happens to the flow of Qi at the time of first menstruation.

Enter Dr Qian Xuesen, a man revered as the father of the Chinese space programme. He studied in the United States, both at MIT and at the California Institute of Technology where he obtained his PhD. He subsequently was named Goddard Professor of Jet Propulsion at that institute. He also was made Director of the rocket section of the United States National Defense Scientific Advisory Board. However, he wanted to return to China, something which was problematic for the US government because of his extensive involvement with defense research. In 1955, in exchange for a group of US pilots captured during the Korean war, he was allowed to go home. He was of major importance in helping the Chinese quickly develop atomic weaponry and satellite-launching ability.

It was Dr Qian who in 1980 publicly advocated support for Qigong research. He believed that EFHB exhibited by Chinese children is attributable to their ability to manipulate Qi. He saw Qigong research as vitally important. One Chinese psychologist told me that Qian had described Qigong as the leading edge of the leading edge of technology, and he has also been quoted as saying that Chinese Qigong is modern science and technology—high technology, absolutely top technology (Zha and McConnell, 1991, p. 132).

Qian was and is a very influential man in China. His call for a significant investment in Qigong research fell on receptive ears. However, not everyone was impressed. The Vice-Chair of the Chinese Academy of Science, Mr Yu Guangyuan, challenged Qian, and condemned Qigong as pseudo-science (Yu Guangyuan, 1982a, b). He set out to put a stop to Qigong research, and to this end, a conference of several thousand scholars met in Beijing in 1982 to criticize EFHB studies. The controversy between Qian and Yu was now out in the open, and as a result of that conference, it seemed that Yu had won, for it was decreed by the Communist party that EFHB/Qigong research was not to be officially sanctioned, although a concession was made in permitting such research to be conducted on a small scale.

Dr Qian was not to be so easily side-tracked, and he set up the Institute of Space Medical Engineering, which in reality was a research laboratory dedicated to the study of

Qigong. Just as Uri Geller performed his amazing demonstrations for scientists at SRI in California, so did Qigong masters demonstrate to Chinese scientists their remarkable ability to extract marked pills, and even live insects, from sealed pill bottles without breaking the seal. And just as Geller had done, the Qigong masters admitted that for some unknown reason their powers sometimes failed them, and they did not know why—conveniently accounting for unsuccessful efforts.

Through the efforts of Qian and others, interest in Qigong had mushroomed by the late 1980s. Now in the 90s, Qigong is highly respectable in China. Government ministries fund Qigong research and training courses in Qigong are offered at a number of universities upon the official authority of the Education ministry. Hundreds of Qigong clinics have opened up. Qigong research is supported by the Chinese National Science Foundation, and in 1989, a Qigong Cancer Treatment Research Association was formed as part of the China Cancer Research Founda-



tion. The Qigong Cancer Treatment Research Foundation comprises three research institutes, two recovery centres, and 14 regional organizations (Zha and McConnell, 1991)

The distinction between internal and external Qigong has become an important one. Most individuals practice internal Qigong—in the manner originally advocated by Lao-Tzu, using a breathing exercise and relaxation techniques to focus inward on the body to promote healing and maintain fitness and health. External Qigong, on the other hand, refers to the apparent ability of Qigong masters to emit Qi from their finger tips, in order to heal others, or move objects, and so on. And the applications of external Qigong are almost limitless, it seems. Some masters claim to be able to hear conversations thousands of miles away, just as some of Lao-Tzu's disciples had supposedly done. Others claim to be able to start fires with their thoughts, to deform the paths of laser beams or to see through opaque objects such as walls. Qigong masters are said to be able to diagnose illness by hearing with their ears, and some claim to cure cancer, AIDS, and broken bones.

The embracing of Qigong has become a virtual mass movement in China. In 1991, according to a report in the

*Toronto Globe and Mail*, 60 million Chinese were practising Qigong on a regular basis. And just as psychics have commanded considerable attention in the West, Qigong masters have become celebrities in China, appearing on popular television programmes to demonstrate their powers. Feats such as standing on a piece of plate glass balanced on a balloon, without breaking the balloon, are treated by television hosts as major miracles. Before we smile at such naivete, we need to compare this to the reaction of people in the West to the equally silly notion of using psychic powers to—of all things—bend spoons.

Consider this newspaper account (*Globe and Mail*, 13 August 1988): 'Qigong masters have no problem renting auditoriums such as the Workers Sports Stadium, which seats 13,000. On a recent night, people flocked to see a demonstration. In the centre of the stadium, like a faith healer at an old-fashioned revival meeting, a Qigong master stands slowly waving his arms. He is, he tells them, emitting Qi. As the Qi supposedly starts flying around the stadium, a woman in a white dress starts wailing uncontrollably. Another shrieks, then swoons. A young man beats his breast. People twitch and shake. Others cry, some laugh hysterically. An old man talks in tongues, then screams that he is cured'.

Yan Xin is a leading Qigong master who has given many scores of lectures carrying the Qigong effect (Zha and McConnell, 1991). These lectures attract many thousands of people, as many as 30,000 at a time and go on for between six and fourteen hours each! As Yan sends his Qi around the room, it is reported that the lame throw away their crutches or rise from their wheelchairs and walk, that pain disappears, and cancer goes in to remission. Now watch some of the more popular evangelical healers on US television. Is there really much difference? I think not.

In 1988, a CSICOP team consisting of Paul Kurtz, James Randi, Phil Klass, Ken Frazier, Barry Karr and myself went to China at the invitation of Mr Lin Xixin, editor of the *Science and Technology Daily* of Beijing. We were asked to evaluate Qigong claims, and to give a number of lectures at various universities. The visit was of two weeks duration and included stops in Beijing, Xian and Shanghai (see Kurtz, *et. al.*, (1988) for a fuller report).

It very quickly became clear that the proponents of Qigong were in a position of dominance in China and that critics were fearful of speaking out, lest—as one professor told me—they be sent to the farms to slop pigs in the event of some sudden turning of political sensibilities. We were told that people high up in the party believed in Qigong and thus, it was risky for Chinese to be too critical. There was also the suggestion that some viewed our visit in terms of us being CIA agents out to discredit Qigong research in order to stop the development of Qigong technology by the Chinese.

Two special demonstrations were presented to us at the Beijing College of Traditional Chinese Medicine. This is an imposing institution. Founded in 1956, it involves 120,000 square metres of floor space, over 2000 staff members, 600 teaching staff, 1500 students, including Masters and Doctoral degree students. It comprises the Faculty of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the Faculty of Chinese

Pharmacy, the Faculty of Acupuncture, Moxibustion and Massage, and among other institutes, the Institute of Qigong Science. It also has a central laboratory which boasts an electron microscope, liquid chromatographs, and other precision research tools. The College edits and publishes the journal *Chinese Qigong*. In other words, this is a serious institution of considerable magnitude.

The first demonstration was of psychic diagnosis. A woman was introduced to us who claimed to be able to see into our bodies. She told me that she could see three pens in my inside pocket (there were in fact only two), and then she pointed to Phil Klass, who had one pen, and explained that this made up the three. She said she could see some sand-like substance in my gall bladder, and that Phil Klass was experiencing a heart irregularity and a problem in the coronary artery. Neither of these diagnoses corresponds with any symptoms we have experienced or anything we have learned about ourselves from the point of view of Western medicine.

The second and major demonstration was by Qigong master Dr Lu. He had been treating a woman who had been



suffering for 11 years from a lump on her spine at lumbar 4/5. Western medical techniques had failed, we were told. His treatment had reduced the size of the swelling, reduced the pain, and restored movement. His power apparently radiated from his fingertips, and we were assured that it could pass through walls. He stood about eight feet from the foot of the table on which the patient was lying, face down. She could not see him. He began rhythmically moving his hands and arms. Gradually, the patient began to move on the table, sometimes in a slow fashion, sometimes in a violent manner. Dr Lu said that the Qi emanating from his fingertips was making her move. He said the power would be effective even if he were in another room, and he agreed to a test of this.

We set up ten three-minute trials. On each trial a coin was tossed to decide whether or not Dr Lu would send out Qi. If the coin came up heads, he would send for the first 15 seconds of the trial; if it came up tails, he would remain seated and do nothing. Randi and I stayed with him, while

the others in our group observed the woman on the table. Using synchronized time intervals, the observation team made careful notes of all the woman's movements, and when she did move, she was asked to stop after 15 seconds so that there would be no carry-over into other intervals. Her behaviour proved to be independent of what Dr Lu did. Indeed, the only two trials on which the woman did not move happened to be trials when Dr Lu was actually sending his Qi, and on a series of four contiguous trials during which he did not send—he did not transmit for almost a full 15 minutes—she writhed continually.

It is interesting that Chinese scientists had apparently attempted to detect radiation emanating from Dr Lu's fingertips, but no-one had stopped to consider whether or not there was a significant correlation between his movements and hers. Indeed, it was clear to us that when they were in the same room, Dr Lu's movements followed rather than preceded the woman's movements. Each was, I am sure, totally honest; each was involved in tacit coordination and each was a victim of self-deception. Dr Lu appeared genuinely puzzled by the results of our test. He did not offer explanations for the failure. He had just always believed that he was causing her to move.

Another Qigong master came to visit us at our hotel in Beijing, with a bundle of news clippings about his powers, taken from a German newspaper. He brought along his psychic sister who could do diagnosis at a distance. She eagerly tried to demonstrate. This, too, failed.

In Xian, we met with officials of the local Qigong Institute. They too, claimed that Qigong can cure a variety of illnesses. We were presented with two students from the local police academy who were apparently able to see into the body and do psychic diagnosis. Randi proposed a simple test: They were to tell us who amongst us still possessed tonsils and appendixes. This meant two decisions for each of us. We each wrote down in advance our own state with regard to appendix and tonsils. They passed on two of the twelve decisions, and of the remaining ten, were correct five times. They were distressed when we told them that this is what one would expect by guessing alone and they assured us that they are usually 100% correct. Of course, they had never had the opportunity to do such a simple test with such immediate feedback before. It struck us in this instance, and repeatedly during our travels in China, that there is little knowledge of basic statistical reasoning. Had we not introduced the idea of a guess rate, they would easily have been content to view the five correct decisions as evidence of their powers.

We next met with Mr Ding, the secretary-general of the Xian Paranormal Function Application Association. He was the first to have made public the now celebrated tests of the children with clairvoyant and psychokinetic powers (EFHB). He told us that EFHB provides diagnostic scans that are more precise than X-rays and match CAT scans in accuracy. We were introduced to some eleven-year-old children who, it was claimed, could read with their ears: If a Chinese character were written on a piece of paper without the children seeing, and then was crumpled up, the child, after holding it to the ear, (and sometimes to the buttock), would read the character. Earlier in Beijing, a

Chinese psychologist had spoken to us about how he had secretly video-taped the children when he was allowed to observe them, and he had found that while transferring the paper from ear to buttock and back, the children were copping a look at the character as they passed their hands briefly under the table.

Thus we opted for a little more control. The children claimed that they could just as readily read characters written on paper which was then sealed in an envelope—or rather, Mr Ding made this claim on their behalf. When tested, they totally failed to do so. They were also supposedly able to break wooden matchsticks which were sealed in matchboxes, solely by the power of their minds (and Qi), or to restore matchsticks which had previously been broken. When tested under our careful conditions (on two separate occasions), they did not show any success. We then observed another test under Mr Ding's direction, and we were astonished to find that the children were allowed to run from the room with their respective matchboxes, and play in the park. When they returned, they announced that they were tired and so Mr Ding allowed them to return home with their matchboxes, and they returned eight hours later, after having had supper! One matchbox failed to return. We were told that one of the children had been consumed by curiosity and had opened it. Randi noted that of the three remaining matchboxes, two appeared intact, while one appeared to have been tampered with—dirt and a bit of grass were found on the underside of the sticky tape with which the box had been wrapped. The two intact boxes when opened revealed no miracles, but the third box, which had contained a broken match, now held an unbroken one—and to top it off, the colour of the head of the match had changed from green to red! This initially concerned Mr Ding, but after consultation with the child who had been in charge of that matchbox, he told us that the boy had been challenged by his father while at supper, who had told him that if he had such power as to be able to mend the match, why not really show his power by changing the colour as well! Mr Ding accepted this as evidence of a double miracle.

In Shanghai, we visited the Shanghai College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, where the focus is primarily on internal Qigong, and the staff are somewhat skeptical about external Qigong. Again, we found a great lack of statistical knowledge; they were excited by the concept of double-blind studies, and informally asked if they could arrange to have us come back to China to teach them about this concept.

Our trip to China did not involve a set of carefully controlled experiments—such was not possible. Hence, we cannot claim to have demonstrated that there is nothing of the miraculous in Qigong. However, we were able to run a number of short, impromptu studies—some described above—aimed at eliminating cheating, self-deception and extraneous variables.

We found no miracles in China. We saw nothing that could not be done by a good Western tele-evangelical faith-healer or performing psychic. What we did observe was much the same as what we see at home when supernatural or paranormal claims are made. In every instance, the

Chinese researchers either:

1. were mistaken in their belief that they were using research methods impervious to cheating and self-deception;
2. were so impressed by their subject's ability that they allowed the subject to control the conditions of the experiment;
3. believed that Qigong powers are so obviously real that they did not have to worry about self-deception or cheating;
4. were unsophisticated in their analysis of the results, taking chance levels of success as meaningful and indicative of the success of Qigong.

With regard to those claiming special powers for themselves, we found, as we find here at home, that some of them seemed to be very sincere, while some others were almost certainly deliberate in their cheating. As Randi has suggested, others, such as the children, were possibly caught up in a game that pushed them to prove to their researchers that they could continue to fool them, regardless of supposed controls.

The researchers we met were markedly unsophisticated regarding research with human subjects. Such lack of research sophistication made them easy targets for self-deception. They lacked knowledge acquired over many years in the Western research community about how we can so easily fool ourselves, and how researchers working with humans can be readily misled if proper precautions are not taken. They were not familiar with the literature that deals with research problems such as experimenter effects, subject effects, placebo effects, base rates, spontaneous remissions, regression towards the mean, or the Clever Hans effect. Their statistical acumen was weak to non-existent.

Although the Western public has no leg up on the Chinese when it comes to critical thinking in the face of nonsense, Western science has developed procedures to offer protection against both cheating and self-delusion. The use of controlled conditions to eliminate extraneous variables, the use of control groups to establish base rates of response, the use of sophisticated statistical analysis to reduce the likelihood of misinterpreting chance effects, the use of double-blind techniques, the demand for independent replications, all of these practices came about as Western scientists learned from their own mistakes—about the power of self-deception. The formal procedures of science are vital since within each of us is a propensity towards self-deception, and towards magical thinking.

Let me conclude with a personal anecdote which reminds me of my propensity to think magically. (By magical thinking, I mean the linking of two events in a causal way, assuming one to have caused the other, without any evidence about the nature or even the existence of an actual causal link.)

Beijing was very polluted when we were there, and perhaps because of that or because we were giving lectures every day, or perhaps because of something going around, I developed a severe case of laryngitis. It seemed to be worsening, and I wanted to have it attended to before leaving Beijing to go to Xian. With the help of our interpreter, I asked at the desk of the large hotel where we were staying if there were a hotel doctor. There was, and I was sent to the 10th floor, only to be met by the hotel doctor—an acupuncturist who assured me that he could cure laryn-

gitis. I decided instead to find a treatment more within my own range of experience, and ended up at the outpatient unit of Beijing Hospital. I was cursorily examined by a physician, whose only actions were to peer quickly into the oral cavity, tap my tongue with what appeared to be a hand-carved tongue depressor, and then write out a prescription. I was alarmed to find that he was using the same tongue depressor on all the patients!

The prescription was quickly filled in an adjacent room, and I left with two boxes, labelled in both Chinese and English. One label identified the contents as entromycin—obviously an antibiotic of some sort, it seemed to me. The other box contained a medicine made from snake bile! Its label further stated that 'This is an efficacious drug for sputum crudum, cough, asthma caused by cold, bronchitis and bronchitis chronic etc'. At any rate, although one of our Chinese associates assured me that she always used the snake bile for her children's sore throats and that it was very effective, I chose the antibiotic. Indeed, by a couple of days later, I was cured.

When this incident was later mentioned in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, a physician wrote in saying that my symptoms were in all likelihood the result of a virus, and that antibiotics don't touch viruses. Most likely, then my throat would have cleared up without treatment. I attributed the cure to the pills, while had our Chinese associate persuaded me to use the snake bile, she would have credited the improvement to that intervention. This is magical thought—take substance X, feel better, give the credit to X, without knowing anything about what X really does or does not do. Without the safeguards of scientific inquiry, we all are prey to magical thinking, much more often than we realize. Anyone who is not aware of that is as open to self-delusion as were the Chinese researchers we observed.

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*This article originally appeared in the National Capital Area Skeptical Eye, and is reprinted with kind permission.*

# The Indian Rope Trick

Brian W Haines

*Trick, illusion or delusion?*

**F**EW HAVE NOT HEARD of the Indian Rope Trick. Mention it, and an image of India with all its mystery befuddles the brain. Yet the words themselves say what it is: a trick. It is the Indian rope 'trick', and yet the myth of the illusion is accepted as such a reality that rewards have been offered for a 'real' demonstration of the effect.

For those who are not familiar with this most famous of all magical illusions, a description of the classical effect is most engaging. An Indian fakir arrives at an open space in a small village. An audience assembles and seats itself on the ground and waits while the fakir displays an ordinary rope some inch and a half in diameter. After a few preliminaries of ritual obeisances the fakir causes the rope to rise in the air. When the rope has reached a height of perhaps ten or fifteen feet his small assistant rapidly climbs the rope and disappears at the top. The fakir then takes a sword, climbs up after him and slashes at the air as if fighting some unseen enemy. Immediately the limbs of the assistant tumble to the ground severed into separate pieces. The fakir descends, assembles the pieces together and promptly the assistant jumps up whole from the ground and takes his bow to much applause.

Clearly such an act is impossible. Yet the myth of the Indian Rope Trick continues, perpetuating itself as the acme of the magician's skill within that land of hidden mysteries. Today it is virtually impossible to trace the origins of the legend. It is said that in the ancient manuscripts there is the story of a young prince who never smiled. Some magicians came one day in the hope they would succeed in making him laugh where others had failed. First the magicians cause a mango tree to grow spontaneously out of the ground. Then they throw a rope up to catch in the branches. One magician climbs the rope followed by another who dismembers him. The pieces of the body fall to the ground. Another magician gathers up the pieces, sprinkles them with water and the body comes back to life. They all dance a merry jig together and the performance finishes. Unfortunately the prince does not think it very funny and fails to smile. He is not amused. History does not record what subsequently happened to the magicians, although the usual penalty for failure is beheading—a matter that should not have concerned them very much given their singular expertise to assemble bodies.

Down the ages the rumour of the trick continues unabated. When British finally arrived in India with their very Victorian practicality, in spite of many attempts to witness



Harry Price Collection

an actual demonstration no-one seemed to be able to provide positive proof such a performance really existed.

A reward of 10,000 Rupees—at the time a great deal of money—was offered in 1911 by Felix Blei in conjunction with 'The Great Jansen' (later known as Dante) during a magical tour of India. This offer was repeated by Charles J Carter in 1931 and published in all his advertisements of magical entertainment in *The Times of India*. The reward was for anyone who could perform the Indian Rope Trick in the open air.

Some of these names may now have been forgotten, but Charles J Carter became better known as the friend of Harry Houdini who entered into a joint pact that whoever should die first should endeavour to make contact through a medium to give proof of an afterlife. Both magicians were keenly interested in testing the claims of psychics. Neither reward was claimed (nor did either magician later return from the dead) and the lack of any fakir ready to accept the challenge was proof enough to the skeptics that the whole thing was a myth. The contrary view was that few real Indian fakirs would be bothering to read the publicity for English magical entertainment designed for a more sophisticated audience of the ruling class.

Such fakirs as were available to comment upon the singular lack of interest in such a small fortune explained it away in terms that would be a credit to any politician. First of all, they said, the adepts of the art only performed in the remote regions and not only would not see any newspapers containing the offer, and they would not have been able to read anyway. And secondly such occult powers as they possessed were not to be used for such material gain, and if they were, the powers would be lost. No one bothered to ask the obvious question as to why they bothered to perform the trick at all, if some sort of gain were not the

purpose.

In the previous century, when there was a projected tour of India by the Prince of Wales another offer was made, in 1875, by the then Viceroy of India Lord Northbrook, who felt an exhibition of this notable trick would add a high point to the entertainment to be provided. It was well publicised from the *Times of India* down to small local journals. The amount on offer was £10,000, a tremendous fortune to even a well-to-do family in Britain, let alone a poor country like India. There is no record of any serious contenders coming forward and the project seems to have been dropped. However, it should be noted that these were eminently responsible people making these offers. Other names who have made similar offers include the great J N Maskelyne, Charles Bertram and Harry Goldwin, all notable illusionists and entertainers in their own right. This is a clear indication that at heart they wanted to believe such a feat was possible. It was not dismissed as an obviously ridiculous story.

This does not mean to say that there is no such illusion known as the Indian Rope Trick. The wide variety of effects conjurers use to entertain the public are endless. Cutting people in half, suspending bodies in mid-air and making animals disappear are the common currency of the magician's art. Yet none of these attract the offer of a reward for a performance. The belief in the trick rests somewhere in the subconscious which accepts myth above evidence.

Lee Siegel in his book *Net of Magic—Wonders and Deceptions in India*, found as good an explanation as any for the perpetuation of the legend. In searching for the trick, Siegel heard of a farmer in Ghaziabad who swore he could do it. On being asked to perform the trick the farmer excused himself saying it would be very expensive and take much time in preparation. Siegel refused to be put off, saying he was a rich American with plenty of time to spare, and was willing to pay as much as was required and wait as long as was necessary.

The farmer could find no more excuses and eventually confessed he was no magician and could do no tricks of any sort. Then he explained how his reputation came about: 'Many years ago, just after Independence, someone came to my farm to buy vegetables. The man noticed a rope on the ground and asked what it was for. I in jest replied, "the rope trick". The joke was taken seriously and the man boasted to his friends he had seen the rope trick'. More people came to the farm and the farmer had to accept the acclaim accredited to him. Evidently people were quite satisfied to accept his excuse for not performing. As the farmer said, he could not call his customers liars. The lie was theirs, not his. This is but one explanation and goes to prove even in India the story is well accepted without the evidence. It does not of course explain how the trick originated in the first place.

From the beginning of the century there were repeated claims by various travellers that they had witnessed the trick in performance and they produced photographs to prove it. Much like UFO photographs, the temptation to be flexible with the truth was too great to resist. Double exposures and a gullible public were easy targets. It is

incredible how uncritical some 'experts' can be in the face of obvious fraud; the Cottingley fairy photographs are a case in point, and some later 'UFO' photographs are laughably absurd. Most Indian Rope Trick photographs were cropped at the top to hide the support for the rope.

Interest in the trick suddenly resurfaced in the mid-1930's, following yet another challenge by the Occult Committee of the Magic Circle. Colonel R H Elliot published and broadcast an offer of 500 guineas to anyone who could perform the Indian Rope Trick. A modest sum by comparison with earlier offers, perhaps, but given the hardship of the inter-war years still a considerable inducement to anyone who was hard-up, and enough to buy a reasonable house. This time there was a response. A man calling himself 'Karachi', whose real name was Arthur Claude Derby, claimed he had learned the trick from a Gurkha warrior whose life he had saved. The warrior on his deathbed shortly afterwards made him swear not to perform it in public except in a case of necessity. It would seem that necessity had arrived in the need to convince a skeptical world that the secrets of the East had not vanished, and there was the additional fact that he needed a spot of cash. Karachi, who was living in Plymouth at the time, had earlier issued a challenge to perform the trick to anyone who would put up 200 guineas, to which he claimed there had been no response. He was therefore willing to perform the trick for the Occult Committee of the Magic Circle for this sum. It is unclear why he was willing to accept the lesser figure unless it was because he was aware he could not perform the complete trick. During 1934 Karachi had performed his version of the rope trick at Roborough Down, near Plymouth. The performance was photographed by Mr J Lewis of Plymouth and reported in the *Western Morning News*. From an examination of the photographs a number of 'experts' concluded there was nothing either magical or psychical in the performance, it was a 'mere hoax'.

In the face of these challenges there was a reluctance on the part of the Magic Circle to take up the offer. The BBC sent a reporter to Birmingham where Karachi demonstrated the trick for them with a view to making it the subject of an outside broadcast. The report was unfavourable and the project was dropped. The reporter seems to have been unduly severe, for he does say he examined a length of manila rope that Karachi subsequently caused to stand up so it stood on its coiled end like a cobra. The reporter did not like the fact that the rope rose in 'jerks' rather than in a smooth continuous movement.

There are a number of reports that indicate Karachi had at one time performed the trick in 1931 in Cheltenham to the satisfaction of a Professor Bofeys, a professional magician. The Magic Circle Occult Committee had decided this performance in common with many similar stage performances was 'was a mere trick' and did not meet their conditions, and taken with the reports of the Plymouth performance asserted Karachi should not be considered as a contender for the prize. This was a somewhat bizarre decision, given none of them were present.

In April 1934, after a lot of negotiation and pressure, Colonel Elliot for the Magic Circle, together with Harry Price, invited Karachi to give his performance in London at

the Oxford House Theatre in Marylebone. For a number of reasons this did not take place and it was not until 31 December that the matter was moved forward, by which time the Magic Circle had bowed out. Harry Price continued to make further arrangements with a very distinguished audience for the performance to take place on an open air site in a large field at Wheathampstead. It took place on 7 January 1935, a cold day of drizzle and light snow—the very opposite of the conditions found in India.

Karachi had with him his young son 'Kyder' as his assistant. Karachi squatted on a rug, then passed to his audience a rope about six feet long. It was examined and passed back. Another rope about eight feet long was also passed round for examination and returned. Karachi then placed the ropes beneath a cloth. The first rope rose into the air for about five feet and was then withdrawn. Then the other rose up with a jerky motion, and when it had attained the height of eight feet it stopped. Kyder was commanded to climb up it, which he did with great agility. The cutting up of the assistant was not performed, possibly because of the snowstorm, however everyone agreed the trick of causing a rope to rise into the air in the open, and a boy climbing up it had been demonstrated under extremely adverse conditions.

Those present at the show were: the editor of *The Listener*, Mrs Mary Adams (Talks Department of the BBC), Mr J W Brown, (General Manager of the British Film Institute), Professor C Daryll (Forde University College, Aberystwyth), Mr W E Williams (Secretary, British Institute of Adult Education), Miss Ethel Beenham (Secretary of the University of London Council for Psychological Investigation), Mr Alex L Dribbel (a student of the Occult), and Mr Harry Price. As Gaumont-British Films were also present there should somewhere in the archives be a record of the event on film.

Harry Price wrote a report of the performance and gave his version of how he thought it was achieved. Karachi replied by letter and implied the guess was not good enough. Karachi then issued his challenge again to the Occult Committee of the Magic Circle. The actual terms of the challenge were that the Committee would give 500 guineas to anyone who, in an open space away from trees, throws a rope in the air and causes it to remain suspended, but unsupported by any physical means, while a boy climbs up it, and disappears at the top.

It has to be admitted that Karachi failed to fulfil the last criterion of causing his assistant to disappear at the top and therefore the prize could not be claimed. Many correspondents to the papers felt it was nit-picking in the extreme for the Committee to refuse to make an award considering the difficulties under which Karachi had

worked. There was the additional burden that no officials of the Occult Committee were present. Colonel Elliot as Chairman of the Occult Committee of the Magic Circle explained their attitude. What they wanted to see was an actual supernatural performance which did not rely upon any magician's 'tricks' or 'hoaxes'. Their objective was to prove the 'Rope Trick' was a ridiculous superstition. In this the offer still stood but it was not open to those who were no more than showman, of which Karachi was just one amongst many. The impasse was not resolved and interest faded. Whether or not a realistic Indian Rope Trick can be performed or is still being performed to the satisfaction of those who want to see real blood is a matter of conjecture.

A number of explanations have been put forward for the illusion. One of the front runners for many years has been that of mass hypnotism. When performed in the heat of an Indian evening with the sun in the eyes of the audience the powers of suggestion are enormous. Against this hypothesis the detractors say it would need a showman with the abilities of a great orator to cast such a spell. On the other hand such oratory is possible and who can deny such powers do not approach the realms of the paranormal.

The more pragmatic explanation is one of trick ropes made variously of sectioned cylinders of either steel, bamboo or bone vertebrae with a

central cord to pull them stiff. The trick could be performed this way but it would take great manual dexterity to cause such a rope to rise from the ground as described and stand freely while a child climbed it, especially in the open under the conditions which Karachi experienced in the winter.

Strangely enough the effect of dismembering the body is comparatively easy. The magician who clammers up the rope conceals beneath his voluminous clothes imitation parts of a body. These drop to the ground while the child, who is small and agile takes their place under the magicians costume. On descending to the ground the procedure is reversed. A little misdirection covers the transposition. There are no doubt many other ways of producing the illusion, for the ingenuity of the human mind in its capacity to deceive is endless. Karachi, however, claimed none of the above was his method. On the other hand, Kyder might still be alive, and perhaps he could come forward and give his version. The intriguing question is why so many rewards were offered for the secret of this particular effect. People who do not believe in psychic phenomena hardly need to buy their agnosticism.



*Karachi and Kyder*

**Brian W Haines** is a writer, living in London, and Information and Publicity Officer of the London Student Skeptics Society.

# Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

*To publish and be damned*



**T**HE LATEST ISSUE of *Musical Saw Monthly* please' is an unlikely request to hear in your local newsagent, but it would actually be quite reasonable. As reported recently on Radio 4, there is indeed a regular magazine published for musical saw fanciers. And why not? Is this any stranger a pastime than being a malt whisky enthusiast, able to tell a Laphroaig from a Talisker ten miles downwind from an exposed cork? Or knowing who scored the second goal in the 1954 FA Cup? Or who guests on slide guitar on track 2 of Van Morrison's 1979 album *Into the Music*? (answers on a postcard please for a special prize).

But the fact remains that there are regularly-published journals for musical sawers, fanzines for footballers, newsletters for alcohol fanciers (I almost said 'alcoholics'). In fact, if a topic holds any interest at all for anyone, the chances are that there'll be a publication devoted to it, produced by fellow enthusiasts. And as we edge towards the millennium, the increasing availability of PC and Macintosh Desktop Publishing systems means that anyone with a few hundred pounds can make their own publications that look—to some extent—professional.

This is WYSIWYG ('What You See Is What You Get') publishing. Unfortunately, WYS is sometimes WY'd rather you didn't get. When you're doing it yourself, anything can go. You have no editor except yourself, no poles up which to hoist flags to see if they flutter. No external control at all. In some cases, the Editor may be the only reader. This is the brave new world of the 'zine' (pronounced *zeen*).

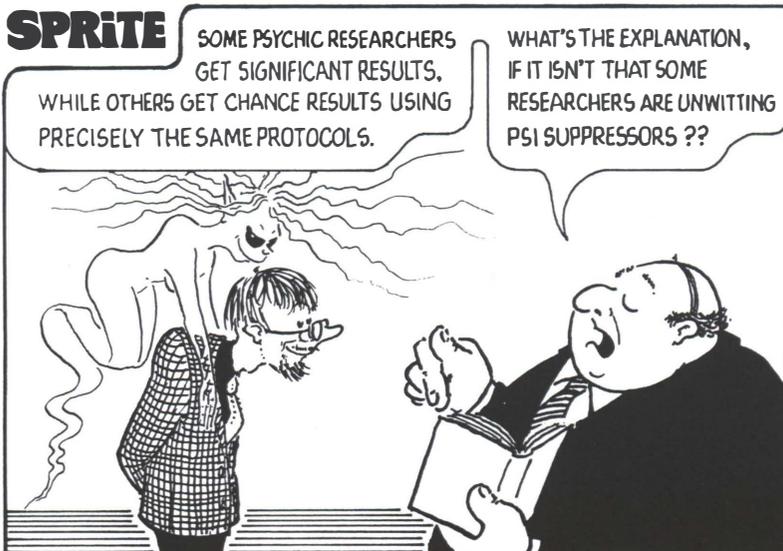
What sets a zine apart from a mainstream available-in-WH Smiths-publication is 'Attitude': zines are published for passion, not profit. I'm sure you won't be surprised to hear that in the murky waters in which *The Skeptic* dips its

toes, there are many publications which are far from mainstream. Although some might balk at being described as zines, most would enthusiastically embrace the zine culture and feel proud to be a part of the phenomenon. Of course, self-publishing is nothing new. There have always been pamphleteers and independent publishers, but until recently, to imbue your printed output with any credibility took money—big money—to pay a 'vanity publisher', or to hire your own typesetters, proofreaders, printers and distributors. No-one is likely to take seriously a mimeographed rant printed in alcoholically aromatic purple ink on thin paper, handed out at Hyde Park Corner. But today you can make your own magazine on your kitchen table, and with a little ingenuity, persuade the world that you are worth taking seriously.

No-one knows the details of all the zines in the world, but some work very hard to keep up with the flood. The nearest one can get to a master index is *Factsheet Five*—itself a zine—covering the independent publishing scene, albeit with the emphasis on the USA. In the UK we have *Bypass*, amongst many others, which plays a similar role.

Zines are important, because they empower the voice which traditionally has been confined to sounding off in the pub. In the mid-1990s, our privileged western culture is fragmenting, and the zine is a new forum for voices of dissatisfaction, argument, dissent, and plain anarchy. In next issue's *Psychic Diary*, we'll look at some zines from the world of the 'paranormal'. Until then, I think I'll award myself a special prize for getting this far without even mentioning the Internet... damn, I just mentioned it.

**Toby Howard** is a lecturer in computer graphics at the University of Manchester.



# Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

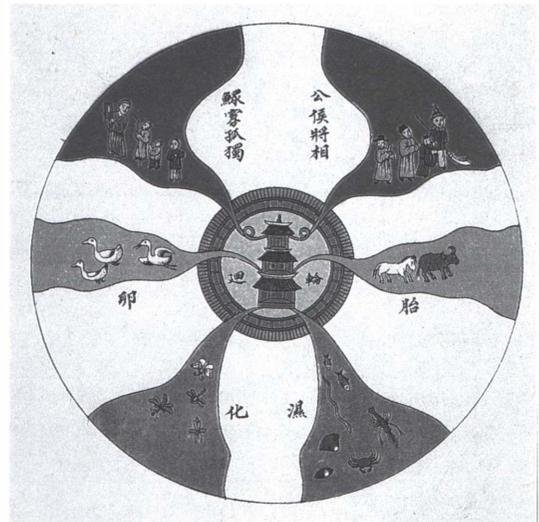
*You only live (at least) twice...*

**T**HE TRUTH IS, it was a frightful thing to do. It all started with a phone call from a researcher at Central Weekend: there was a child that the *Daily Express* was claiming was the reincarnation of Mary, Queen of Scots. They were having the child and his parents on the program, and they wanted a skeptic to come and throw darts at reincarnation. The kid—a seven-year-old with a small, pinched face—was not going to be the only re-liver on the show. There would be Jenny Cockell, a 39-year-old Englishwoman whose researches led her to identify an 80-year-old Irish man as her son from a past life—and the man himself, who believes her. There would be Bob and Peter Hume; Bob regressed Peter and discovered he was a reincarnation of a roundhead. They came with a woman, who was watching TV one night, saw them on the air, and recognized Peter as her father from Cromwell's time. There would also be the actress Debbie Arnold, who I remember from the 1987 production of *The Sleeping Prince*; she believes she is the reincarnation of a gay Viking. That's right: a male, homosexual Viking.

So my reasoning went like this: Mary, Queen of Scots is such a famous historical figure that there have to have been others who have also claimed to be a reincarnation of her. And I asked Mike Hutchinson—who after some thought remembered a radio show last Easter in which Mike Howgate, representing the skeptics, had debated such a person: Rosie Andreas. So the Central researchers tracked her down and got her in the show—in costume, no less. Reincarnationists are not lazy: these people do an awful lot of research. But that in and of itself is part of the problem; struck by the idea that they might have lived in a certain place or been a certain person, they then research that area or person's life to death, scouring it for hits. Naturally, they find some—which makes them more convinced, even obsessed.

Back to the little boy. He and his parents huddled together all evening in the Green Room before heading onto the set where, in thick Welsh accents, the mother (mostly) tried to explain why they'd thought he must be a reincarnation. The boy himself was very quiet. Shy, you might say; but when James Whale, hosting the evening, asked him questions about Mary, he looked exactly like my ten-year-old friend Owen does when he knows he's supposed to know the answer to a question but can't remember it. Whale tried to make it easy, by asking questions the boy had been quoted as answering in the newspaper article.

Then came Andreas. Had it been an adult she was going up against, she would have been wonderful, a skeptic's dream. No, there couldn't be more than one Mary at a time,



*Luen-hoei, the Buddhist cycle of metempsychosis*

and since she was it, the boy couldn't be. She had proof—she'd been born with her head lolling to one side, and you always come into a life the way you left it. The boy, she thought, was a talented psychic, and would be a wonderful medium when he grew up. But he was not Mary. At some point during her disquisition, the boy's father pulled his son's head over onto his chest and covered the remaining, exposed ear with his hand.

You have to wonder what the dynamics of that family are. It's hard to believe, for example, that the impetus behind the claim that the boy is Mary isn't coming from either the parents or another adult. The claim is that the boy has been saying things for three or four years that he couldn't possibly know any other way. But much of what a three or four year old child says is open to parental interpretation—they babble, they say words you don't understand.

One wonders, too, about Andreas's personal relationships. She was, she said on the radio show, 25 and on her way to Blackpool to sing in the clubs there when the Mary similarities hit her. She was travelling with her godfather, and was overcome by an inexplicable terror on the train; later, he told her it had come over her at Fotheringay, the place where Mary was executed. They seem to have researched the business together, and by the end had found that not only was Andreas connected to Mary but everyone around her was also connected to the people around Mary. The godfather himself was identified as Darnley, Mary's third husband, who killed her second husband. So you wonder...

'I didn't want to be Mary,' she wailed to Mike Howgate, who hazarded that she was getting something out of the situation. 'I was married, I had a good career.' When I was 27, I, too, was married and had a career as a singer. Within a year, I had divorced my husband, sold my house, and given up singing. I also heard Randi speak for the first time. I may have been luckier than I knew. Makes you think...

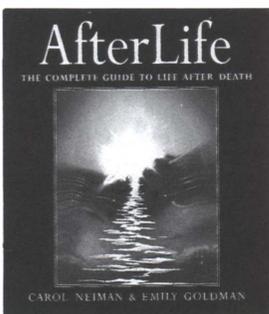
**Wendy Grossman** is the founder of *The Skeptic*, a member of the UK Skeptics, and a writer and folksinger.



# Reviews

## The Fodor's for the next world?

Carol Neiman and Emily Goldman, *Afterlife: The Complete Guide to Life After Death* (Boxtree, 1994, 224 pages, hardback, £14.99)



A normal travel guide, such as Fodor's, aims to acquaint the intending traveller with the basic features of the country to be visited. Thus, one expects to learn the local customs, cuisine, nightlife, tourist highlights, and whether they take Visa or Mastercard. Not so for this particular

'travel' guide, however. One has a deep suspicion that a cold blank stare is all St Paul will give if offered 'American Express?' for swift passage through the pearly gates.

In five chapters the authors cover a multitude of different perspectives on the meaning of death and afterlife, dealing with the evidence for survival of bodily death, near-death experiences, and reincarnation along the way. Almost every page is accompanied by an illustration, most in colour, and these in themselves justify the price of the book for me as they quite beautifully complement the authors' text. As for the text itself, the authors write plainly but elegantly for a lay audience, and consequently the book reads as well as it looks. Although the authors do cover a wide terrain, dealing with views on death and the afterlife from antiquity through to the present day, they do fail in one respect—they largely ignore the sceptical position. Indeed, as they themselves say in their introduction, 'while in the following pages we will acknowledge the facts reported by the skeptics, and investigate several possible explanations for them, we will set aside their underlying assumptions as faulty and get on with our business' (p23).

Unfortunately, the result is that a book claiming to show that death can, and has, been treated as an opportunity for a greater understanding of life, neglects to do justice to a perspective that, if adopted, requires a radical reorientation of many people's views with respect to self and the afterlife—namely, that there is no such thing as heaven, and we must of necessity make the most of it here and now. Nevertheless, given the exotic constraints imposed on a travel guide to a place where the tickets are all marked 'ONE WAY—all passengers requiring return passage must purchase a new body at the departure lounge', and there is considerable disagreement over its location,

government, customs and worse still, whether the place exists at all, Neiman and Goldman have produced a book which not only looks great on one's coffee table, but which also makes a lasting contribution to one's understanding of this 'last great adventure'.

—Tony Lawrence

## Foodplay

Penn Jillette and Teller, *The Unpleasant Book of Penn and Teller, or How to Play With Your Food* (Channel 4, 1994, paperback, 203 pages, £9.95)

Penn and Teller, the self-styled bad boys of magic, will probably be familiar to most people from their TV show *The Unpleasant World of Penn and Teller*. Penn is big and talks a lot, Teller is small and doesn't talk at all. On one of their first big TV breaks they poured hundreds of live cockroaches all over chat-show host David Letterman. They are the antithesis of Paul Daniels and Debbie Magee. Their magic tricks are generally unconventional, often in dubious taste and they reveal how they do some of their tricks. But what's more—they are *funny*. Their book may not seem an obvious candidate for a review in *The Skeptic* but it bears closer examination. Penn Jillette is a contributor to the US *Skeptic* magazine, there are references in the book to well-known skeptics James Randi and Martin Gardner, sections on how to amaze your friends with spoon-bending, and some pretty scathing comments on deceitful uses of deception. There are also interesting insights into how magicians and fraudsters achieve their deceptions.

The book tells you how they did some of their tricks on the TV show, such as the watch in the fish. But they don't give away all their tricks. For example they don't say how they did the trick where Teller apparently drowned. However most of the tricks are ones that you can carry out on friends (or enemies) and, unsurprisingly, they are mostly related to food. On the back of the book they even claim you can get back the cost of the book by using one of the tricks to scam a free meal. But beware, they have included fake pictures to catch out the casual browser.

The contents of the book are very mixed and include pranks, silly games, party tricks, tricks for kids, fake recipes, a story, discussions of tricks off their TV show and more conventional magic tricks. Only one of them involves playing cards and none of them require any great sleight of hand. Most of the tricks involve some simple form of misdirection or dishonesty (such as paying off the staff in a restaurant) and you will need to be a very skilful

liar to carry some of them off, especially if you have sceptical friends! The US origins of Penn and Teller show up in quite a few places, and the Chinese fortune cookie trick, for example, might be difficult to do in the UK. Also the more dangerous tricks are surrounded by (humorous) warnings to keep the lawyers happy. Some parts of the book may offend those with less robust sensibilities. For example, there is a tongue in cheek section on shooting melons with a high velocity rifle to check out theories on which direction JFK was shot from. Thankfully the section 'How to get your ethical-vegetarian friends to eat veal' is not serious.

This is pretty much a love-it or hate-it book. Penn, who seems to have written most (but not all) of the book, writes in much the same way that he speaks. If you didn't like the TV series you probably won't like the book. But if you liked the TV show, would like to find out a bit more about deception and like playing pranks on your friends, then this is definitely the book for you. Anyway, who can resist a book with sections entitled 'Spoon-bending, a really lousy trick for really lousy people', 'Stabbing a fork in your eye', 'The incredibly dangerous glowing pickle machine' and 'How to lop off your thumb and make people scream'? Not me.

—Andy Brice

## The sadness of stigmata

John and Anne Spencer, *Spirit Within Her: The Story of Heather Woods and the Stigmata* (Boxtree, 1994, paperback, 191 pages, £6.99)

There are apparently some eighteen stigmatics in the world today. This is the story of one who died recently. I suspect it is a story with many parallels to be found in other cases.

Heather Woods was born in 1949. Her mother suffered from severe mental illness, resulting in a leucotomy and ultimately in suicide. She had abused drugs and alcohol and had been quite unable to manage her family. Heather was consequently brought up in children's homes. Before that happened, however, she was sexually abused at the age of seven. Further abuses of various kinds happened in the homes which are generally portrayed in a poor light. Not surprisingly she was later to have sexual difficulties in her marriage.

Much of this story is told in Heather's own words from recorded interviews. It has a childlike quality, enmeshing matters of substance in irrelevant details. She describes her various exploits such as absconding or standing up to tyrannical house parents with adolescent glee. The prose is poor and histrionic. She clearly had a great capacity to talk about herself, and the principal authors, overawed by the outpourings of this mystic, tend to take it all at face value, rarely providing any proper critique of what they record. The tale itself is sad enough; the overall result makes for grim and tedious reading.

The account of the stigmata does not occur until the final third of the book. The marks began in 1992 with a blister in the middle of her palm, which she attributed to painting skirting boards over a Bank Holiday. She had an intense relationship with a priest, with whom she discussed

visions, healings and channelling. She immediately phoned him to tell him about it because for some unexplained reason, she thought he would be interested. He visited her the next day and by then the blister had ruptured leaving a raw area. She had also acquired a similar area on her other hand.

'I think I know what it is. I think that's stigmata,' he said. At that stage she claimed that she did not know what stigmata were. He explained they were the marks of the crucified Christ and told her to keep looking at her feet and to phone him as soon as the marks appeared there. That night she found that her feet became very itchy. Lo and behold, before very long, marks appeared on her feet. She obtained a letter from her doctor saying that he believed these were spontaneous lesions and he could offer no medical explanation. There is nothing to suggest that these were penetrating holes, but merely superficial abrasions. No dermatological opinion is recorded. They healed up within a few months without scarring.

The following year she said she had a message through her 'channelled' writings to say that the stigmata would reappear. Lo and behold, they recurred. This time the priest notified the media. The religious affairs reporter Ted Harrison was at that time working on a documentary for BBC TV. Needless to say, he arrived with a film crew.

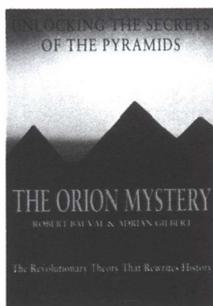
The relationship with the priest seems crucial to the whole story. Heather was clearly emotionally very involved with him. So, for instance, she records, 'Betty (his wife) was downstairs and Eric and I sat together holding hands and hugging. We said that we loved each other'. The authors, clearly embarrassed by this revelation, interject 'As Heather made clear, this was a spiritual sharing, the love between two people whose work is love'. They offer no further reflections on the relationship. Within a few weeks, Father Eric died from cancer. Heather herself was also very ill, apparently also with cancer. The dust-jacket boasts the unlikely sentence, 'For years this terminal disease spread throughout her body'. Six months later, Heather drowned. A suicide note was undated, allowing the coroner to record an open verdict, though he stated that suicide was probable. She had had a long history of depressive illness. The authors record that at her inquest, 'it was a surprise to hear that, contrary to her own beliefs, she was free of cancer at the time she died. It does seem that she thought herself much more unwell than she was'.

The phenomenon of stigmata is unrecorded prior to the marks on St Francis in the 13th century. Since then there have been around 300 examples. Ted Harrison's book (*Stigmata: A Medieval Mystery for a Modern Age*, Fount, 1994) notes that cases occur in geographical clusters and that the individuals concerned have similar personality profiles. They are usually Roman Catholic women with traumatic psychiatric histories and low self-esteem. Dermatitis Artefacta is the name given to self-inflicted skin lesions. They are generally an hysterical manifestation carrying some particular gain for the patient. Confirmation is obtained by occlusive dressings under which the lesions heal speedily. Whether this was ever demonstrated in the case of Heather Woods is not recorded in this book.

—Dr Peter May

## Pyramids and stars

Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert, *The Orion Mystery* (Heinemann, 1994, hardback, 225 pages, £17.99)



If pyramids, Egyptology and mysteries associated with ancient and primitive religions are an acute fascination, then *The Orion Mystery* may be just the thing for those long dark winter nights. For the layman it may all prove to be too much of a struggle to get through to the end. But for the aficionado

this book will provoke thoughts, ideas and discussion.

Essentially, the book describes the theory developed by the authors that, contrary to popular and commonly held views, there was a master plan that governed the placing and design of the pyramids, and this master plan had its roots in a previously unconsidered star religion. This then makes the pyramids a bit more religiously significant than just monumental burial mounds that pumped up the dynastic egos of now long dead Pharaohs.

The main thrust of the theory is that the ancient Egyptians were star worshippers with a belief in a stellar pharaonic rebirth. Hence they laid out their pyramids, and possibly other architectural structures, according to rigid rules governed by astronomical and religious strictures. Much of the argument centres around the positions of the stars at that time, particularly the Orion star constellation and the orientation of some features of the pyramids themselves that have only recently been discovered and have been attributed a significance in the arguments.

Unfortunately the hard evidence for this theory is fairly scant and open to other interpretations. This invariably leads to dissension between experts with leanings in different directions and some such arguments are described in the book. The supporting documentary evidence is as usual compiled historically by the then dominant characters of the time who were able to write, very often the ruling religious class, who had the opportunity to colour the writings with their own ideological views. History is littered with the views of the victors and the survivors and has very little input from losers and failures, thus requiring careful consideration of the content of the writings. I can see no reason not to apply similar strictures to any texts discovered and attributed to the ancient Egyptians. In addition the subsequent translation will almost certainly have lost a lot of the subtlety and nuances that would have been present in the original text. Robert Bauval does draw our attention to this, but more as a support for his arguments than as a general point. As with all historic writings, a pinch of salt is highly recommended when tasting the flavour of the times.

The book itself is moderately well-written but at times difficult to follow, since its overall style has a strong tendency towards wandering through chronological interweavings of the authors personal life with events on the long road to his theory. Intermingled with all this is the

supportive and corroborative historical evidence. Often the author seems to draw conclusions based on insufficient evidence or suppositions that appear to be coloured by his own theory. In essence the theory supports the facts and the facts support the theory generating a circular argument. For example, at one point he describes how the chronological dating of the pharaonic dynasties and the construction dates of the pyramids has been adjusted by many different historians over the years. He then uses this as a justification for his own adjustment of the dates to fit his theory.

Regrettably the proof copy did not have any of the plates which often enliven books of this kind and I had to be content with the line drawings which go some of the way to illuminating the text.

In conclusion, not the most thrilling of reads and it's unlikely to top the best-selling book lists, unlike Stephen Hawking's book on the nature of time which many people never understood but is often considered de rigeur to have on the bookshelf. *The Orion Mystery* is unlikely to achieve a similar status. For the Egyptologist and those interested in ancient religions it may well be essential reading.

And finally full marks to the publishers. The copy I was given to review was well constructed and printed on a reasonable quality of paper and was nicely topped by an almost linen like soft cover. Maybe it will end up on the coffee table after all.

—A J Smith

## Knight time

John Matthews, *King Arthur and the Grail Quest* (Blandford, 1994, hardback, 156 pages, £16.99)

I must admit that my knowledge of the Arthurian legends has been garnered chiefly from the films 'Excalibur' and 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail', so I was delighted to have my knowledge extended from a more scholarly reference. At first, I couldn't quite see what appeal the legends of Arthur and his knights could have for the average skeptic reader, but as I read on I realised what lessons we could all learn.

This pleasantly illustrated book can really be split into two sections; the first which deals with the somewhat scanty historical facts concerning Arthur and the Grail, and the second which deals with the more mythological aspects of man and chalice.

In the first instance, we are treated to a potted history of the British Isles which, in about the early 5th century was a shambles of its former self after the Romans had upped chariots and gone. The ancient Britons were being assailed on all fronts from a variety of tribes and were almost defeated, but gradually overcame the difficult odds, and, at the battle of Badon Hill won a decisive victory, under the

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guidance of a new and powerful chieftain—Arthur. This historical Arthur appears to have been a tough battle leader in charge of a mobile cavalry force who led the Britons to eventual victory over the invading Saxon hords. This first part also deals with the various (if rather vague) historical aspects of the Holy Grail.

The second part of the book then deals with rather more fanciful and romantic accounts of the deeds of Arthur and co., the roots of which begin with references from Celtic mythology appearing some 400 years after Arthur's death. These tales also placed him in some form of historical context, but also begin to weave a more legendary and romantic account of his deeds, and introduced characters who have assumed just as great a mythical standing—Guinevere, the knights Kay, Bedivere, and Lancelot, and of course a magical sword.

Matthews concludes the book by offering conjectures as to the reality and possible whereabouts of the Grail, dragging in mentions of the Knights Templar, Prester John, The Nazis and Glastonbury.

This fascinating and informative account has a key point to make for skeptics, namely on the strong dissociation between historical fact and romanticised mythology. The important issue to come from this book is not whether the Grail or indeed Arthur existed, or exist still, but of what can happen to historical truth when it has been molested over a good many centuries. The person who once started out as a probable warrior and chieftain became not just a king, but an enduring mythical legend. To this mighty Christian king and his army of knights were ascribed heroic deeds of valour which only existed in the fertile minds of mediaeval storytellers. The comparison between the making of the Arthurian legend and the stories of Jesus (and other religious figures) is obvious. What may once have been fact has the capacity to be turned into something completely different as it is passed down the centuries.

We all love a good story and the tale of king Arthur and his quest for the Holy Grail became one of the very best. I wonder what other fantastic and awe-inspiring tales have a rather more mundane and factual origin?

—Nick Neave

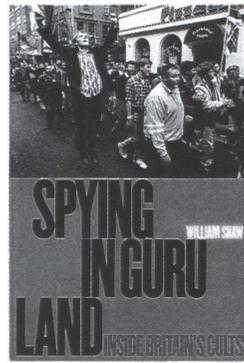
## Inside story

William Shaw, *Spying in Guru Land* (Fourth Estate, 1994, hardback, 217 pages, £14.99)

Subtitled 'Inside Britain's Cults', this slim but engaging book asks why ordinary, apparently sensible people join strange organisations such as the Hare Krishna Movement, the Jesus Army, or the Branch Davidians of Waco, sometimes (as in the last-mentioned case) with tragic consequences.

Against the advice of the experts, the author decided to tackle this question directly—by joining several cults, as well as interviewing cult (and anti-cult) members.

In the West Country, he found a hippy commune awaiting the resurgence of Lyonesse from the waves and the coming of the Great Goddess to renew the world and reward the virtuous (mainly the commune members), while



in Totnes God was manifest in the Chrisemma foundation, which preached self-realisation by detachment and guru-inspired sex.

In the capital itself, Hindu missionaries are winning souls for Krishna Consciousness or the Brahma Kumaris with regimes of ascetic celibacy and ritual devotion (not to mention free food), both sects being against female emancipation, free thought and twentieth-century values and technology generally. Oddly enough, identical remarks apply verbatim to the Jesus Army, no obvious supporters of such (to their eyes devil-worshipping) East-ern spirituality.

Other groups, for example the Emin Way, seek to weave ancient and modern ideas into their doctrines. Therapies such as est, Insight and Exegesis combine Zen, Gurdjieff and New Age psychological techniques for self-knowledge and personal growth (at appropriate charges).

The Aetherius society (founded by George King, ex-taxi driver, Liberal Catholic Archbishop, Knight of the Byzantine Royal House, and Primary Terrestrial Mental Channel chosen by the Interplanetary Parliament) seeks to save mankind through the superscience of the UFOs, who beam Yogic psychic energy into our planet's subtle centres. Jesus figures as a Venusian Master (Aetherius), an advocate of free love (Children of God), as the Maitreya now living in London's Asian community (Benjamin Creme) and as the familiar apocalyptic figure of the New Testament (the Jesus Army). One wonders if they would recognise each other. (I'm afraid Monty Python's *Life of Brian* kept coming to mind here.)

Unfortunately, while this book gives a fascinating, highly personal (and very readable) glimpse into the world of the modern cults, it has neither index nor suggestions for further reading, nor could I detect any reference to CS-ICOP or other skeptical sources in the text.

The author only touches on the psychology of cult membership, and never analyses the philosophical beliefs involved. (Since all these groups have incompatible world-views, they clearly can't all be right!) The author rarely mentions claims of the paranormal such as levitation, psychic powers, etc.—there are a few references to visionary experiences (for example, the Lyonesse commune), psychic energy and healing (such as the Aetherius society), and the occasional aura reading, tarot session or astral projection (for example, the Emin Way), but these are not discussed in any way skeptically.

While clearly an unbeliever himself, his experiences have made the author sympathetic to those who Join cults searching for a more meaningful way of life. He feels that the prevalent 'anti-cult' and deprogramming movements stress a too-negative vision of 'cult mind-control' used to brainwash believers into submission, claiming that people who Join these groups do so freely, and that only those few whose psychological needs are truly met will become long-term members. He also claims that the Waco disaster

resulted from FBI incompetence rather than any actual evil intentions; of the cult leader himself.

I can't help feeling that all the groups he mentions are basically similar in offering total (and authoritarian) world-views, with no room for free discussion, questioning of belief, or skeptical analysis. All are anti-scientific, all are male-dominated (with women playing a subservient social role), and most are ascetic and celibate.

Converts seem to find an illusory emotional and intellectual security at the price of their personal freedom and integrity, often with disastrous results (especially when they leave and try to rejoin the outside world). Perhaps no good would be served by trying to ban such movements outright, but potential members should surely be encouraged to examine the wider evidence critically before they make a commitment. In such a (thankless) task, we skeptics clearly have a vital role to play.

—Mike Rutter

## Wasted time

Jenny Randles, *Time Travel: Fact, Fiction & Possibility* (Blandford, 1994, paperback, 204 pages, £8.99)

J W Dunne believed that dreams preview the future. So fascinated was Randles by this idea that she adopted his method of recording dreams and convinced herself that it was true; she admits that she also wanted time travel to be real. But this book is not about time travel in the conventional sense. It charts the author's progress towards the conviction that major events 'ripple ahead' (she means backward) in time so that they can be anticipated and even avoided, but without changing the actual event. Thus crop circles are warnings from the future about 'the [sic] coming ecological disaster', good guesses are evidence of remote sensing and coincidences are evidence of telepathy. Uncritically accepting anecdotal evidence, she records the experiences of many people who claim to have dreamed the future.

No idea is too strange for Randles, a dedicated mystic. Reincarnation, ghosts, altered states of consciousness, they are all here. Her method eschews The Razor; she endlessly speculates and multiplies hypotheses well beyond necessity. This can be very irritating for the scientific mind. One longs to scream 'STOP; let's examine the last idea before we rush on to another!' She also indulges in bet-hedging; conclusions are hedged about with so many alternatives that they are not what they seem. To Randles, life is much more than the sum of its parts.

Randles purports to use the scientific method but she is no scientist, as her attempts to explain science demonstrate. Frequently she condemns science and scientists.

Her errors include the claim that H G Wells's time machine accomplished what Einstein predicted, that the brain is an instrument which the mind uses to communicate and that Heisenberg's uncertainty principle showed that, at the quantum level, 'you can never measure or predict anything for sure'. In addition she misunderstands Special Relativity, Schrödinger's Cat and Unified Field Theory and confuses quantum mechanics with particle physics. She also makes an error in claiming that the actor Roy Kinnear

died when he fell off a horse (he died later in hospital). This was alleged to be foreseen in a dream. There is evidence of a Procrustean approach to dreams; they are adjusted so as to better fit real events.

Naturally UFOs are time machines from the future, even the Trindade event, where there is a reference to the 'absurd' theory of 'one sceptic' (she means me) that the object was a mirage. Modern artifacts found in coal were placed there by time travellers, who also walked with dinosaurs (as at Paluxy River in the USA).

The book ends with a series of 'practical experiments'. They include suggesting to very young children that they may have lived a previous life, searching old newspapers for historical anachronisms and trying to correlate UFO reports with major events!

There is no discussion of the philosophical implications of the future being as fixed as the past. This does not bother Randles at all; she merely asks, 'is the future mapped out for us in minute detail, or can we—alter what is yet to be?' Yet the whole book is predicated on the former.

The only nod in our direction is the recognition that sceptics claim that so-called precognition is merely chance 'hits' among millions of 'misses'. There is also an admission that the forecasts of psychics are no better than those of futurologists, but she ignores the implications.

The book includes sixteen pages of largely irrelevant monochrome photographs.

—Stuart Campbell



# Letters



## Religious affairs

In Jean Dorricott's article, 'A Matter of Faith' (*The Skeptic*, 8.4) she dismisses my portrayal of god ('The Creation, What Really Happened', *The Skeptic*, 8.3) as a 'straw god' and criticises my article for underrating the readers' intelligence. She advocates greater understanding of religious believers, whilst in the same breath encouraging the exposure of charlatans and rogues.

I'm sorry, Ms Dorricott, that just won't do. There is no logical reason why sceptics should ignore religion when considering bogus and dangerous so-called paranormals. Religion is fair game. There are more charlatans and rogues walking this earth in the trappings of one religion or another than all the spoon-bending, mind-reading miracle-healing crooks put together.

Religion teaches bigotry and intolerance. Religion causes the bloodiest of wars. Religion persuades young men to act suicidally in the mistaken belief that their reward is to come in a later life. Why do you think men have been and are still murdering one another in Northern Ireland? Or Iran? Or Iraq? Or India? I could go on and on.

Ms Dorricott's article expounds her own theories for the existence of a god, quoting Mankind's consciousness, self awareness, the ability to show compassion, love of beauty and art and so on, as well as something called 'top-down Causation'. In the end, however, absolutely no scientific evidence is offered.

It may be true that the theological colleges are filled with thinkers who hold Ms Dorricott's views. The trouble is that almost none of this filters down to the ordinary churchgoers. Do you think this is the sort of thing being preached from the pulpit on Sundays? Do Maurice Cerillo and Oral Roberts expound such ideas? Does the Pope? Most frightening of all, do you think Jim Jones did?

The god I described in my article

is the god worshipped in Christian churches every day. These people are constantly being told that he (I use the word 'he' deliberately) created the world, that Mankind is created in his image, that he is omniscient and omnipresent and that those who do not recognise this and do not regularly attend church to praise him face eternal damnation. I hope I didn't underrate anyone's intelligence when I took these ideas to their logical conclusion.

Of course my article was light-hearted. It was meant to be. I happen to believe that the use of humour is an extremely effective tool in conveying a serious message. Was I offensive? Well, possibly. The fact is that attacking any dogmatic beliefs with satire is bound to be labelled offensive by some

As to Ms Dorricott's theories on the existence of a god, I am not qualified to confirm or deny them. I would simply recommend to her the excellent Richard Dawkins book, *The Blind Watchmaker*. Unlike my rather frivolous efforts, and Ms Dorricott's reliance on esoteric theories and poetry, Mr Dawkins takes a truly scientific approach and has an enviable ability to put the facts across in a way that laymen such as I can understand.

Meanwhile I shall continue, as Ms Dorricott exhorts me, to speak out against charlatans and rogues.

**Mike Walsh**  
London

## Less is more

Congratulations on the excellent *Psychic Diary* in the *The Skeptic* (8.5). In particular I was greatly impressed by the depth and subtlety of your treatment of the abstruse material relating to out of body experiences and the 'conjunctural relationship between mind and matter—myth and reality'.

I hope that in 1995 your readers will enjoy such high standards of

quality and insight not simply in *Psychic Diary*, but throughout the journal.

**E Bach**  
Oxon

## A Mars a day . . .

In answer to Vivien Gibson's question (*The Skeptic* 8.3) regarding why the Mars Effect in relation to sportsmen has not been applied to other professions; the simple answer is it has and with small but significantly valid results. Actors show a Jupiter Effect, writers and scientists in turn show a slight tendency to be born respectively with the Moon and Saturn in the Gauquelin sectors (which are roughly angular). The Mars Effect was the most successful statistically and therefore is the best known, possibly because athletic ability is more easily measured. Despite the correlation between Saturn and scientists there are few scientists who have been suitably impressed with the research for them to acknowledge astrology as worth further study (Eysenck, Professor Alan Smithers, statistician and the astronomer Percy Seymour being exceptions). However, Saturn is traditionally felt to be of a cautious, sceptical nature, consequently their reticence should be understood and forgiven with good grace. As the saying goes 'there are none so blind as those that will not see'.

Meanwhile whilst waiting for this inertia on the part of the scientists to pass, it is a pleasure to welcome a new convert—especially through the pages of *The Skeptic*. Hope Springs Eternal.

**Greg Young**  
Manchester

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