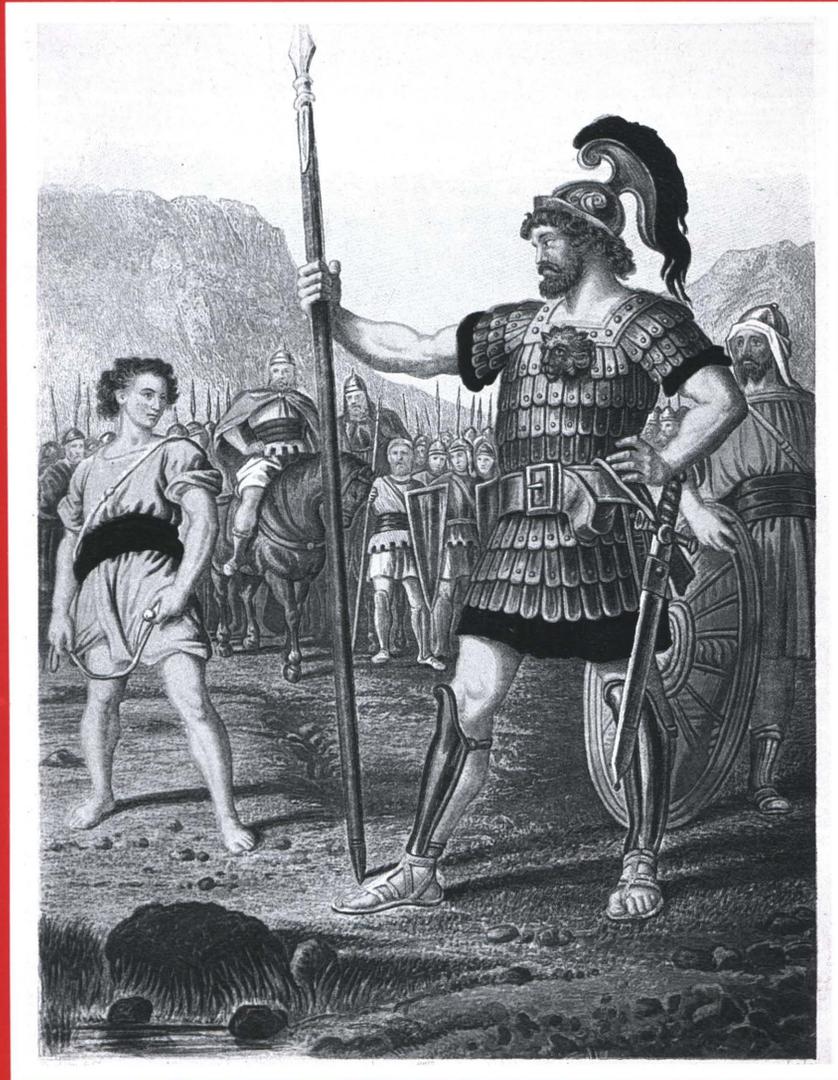


Volume 9 Number 3

The Skeptic



Fighting Creation 'Science'

Also in this issue:

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Catalogue of daft gadgets
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Hilary Evans' *Paranormal Picture Gallery*



Care bears and feral children

Winter is harsh in the mountains of Turkey, and the peasant woman from Osmançik feared the worst when one of her children went missing for a couple of months. But when she was found again, in December 1934, the little girl was in good health. She had been living all the time with a family of bears: her foster family had treated her as one of themselves. Indeed, so well had she been cared for, she cried when her mother insisted on taking her home.

Source: Aldo Molinari in *Illustrazione del popolo*, Torino, 1935.

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

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

Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

Black Russian magic

It was bad enough to learn a few years ago that President Ronald Reagan took the advice of an astrologer when planning meetings and itineraries. But Reagan's irrational behaviour pales into insignificance compared with the superstitions of Russian President, Boris Yeltsin. On 12 February, the *Sunday Times* reported that, following in the tradition of Tsar Nicholas II and Rasputin, Yeltsin has appointed a mystic healer and 'channeller of biomagnetic energies' by the name of Dzhuna as a personal adviser. However, Dzhuna represents only the latest addition to a team set up for the purpose—amongst other things—of studying the president's astrological chart. An article in the *European* on 5 May explained some of the background to this worrying state of affairs and laid responsibility for Yeltsin's increasing obsession with the occult at the feet of a KGB general known to staff of the Kremlin as The Black Magician. General Georgy Georgievich Rogozin purportedly prepares Yeltsin's horoscope daily, uses other occult techniques—including spinning saucers—to divine the future and goes to considerable lengths to ensure that the President is surrounded only by auspicious magnetic fields. Yeltsin's obsessions, though perhaps surprising by Western standards, should be viewed in the context of a country released from the shackles of anti-religious indoctrination in which superstition in general is running rife. For instance, amongst other recent bizarre stories reported in the Western media, officers of the Ministry of Defence apparently often also consult astrological software to predict the future and a well-known scientist is leading a campaign to remove Lenin's body from the mausoleum in Red Square. According to the *Daily Telegraph* on 27 May, he believes that Lenin's embalmed corpse is emitting 'Satanic energy' and has placed a curse on Russia. Any future report of Boris Yeltsin communing with the spirits will contain a certain ambiguity . . .

Unlucky black cats

Although as reported previously in Hits & Misses, the supposed presence of large black cats in some parts of Britain has been attracting media attention, in other parts of the kingdom it is the absence of little black cats that is causing a stir. According to the *Daily Mail* on 13 March, in the seaside resort of Clevedon in Avon over a period of just a few weeks more than 100 cats went missing. A spokesperson for an animal sanctuary in the town claimed that the disappearances normally occur at night and 'almost always involve black cats or fluffy tabbies . . . It is not an exaggeration to say this has created a mood of fear and near hysteria among some of our more elderly ladies.' Although the RSPCA suspect that there may be a link with the occult (perhaps this means that the cats are simply hiding from social workers), local cat owner Mike Bisacre believes

that: 'our cats are being skinned and ending up as furry hats in the Eastern Bloc'. However, according to information recently received from the Hits & Misses spirit guide, Clevedon residents have missed the true explanation: their moggies are being abducted by aliens to provide pets for the thousands of humans that are abducted every month from here and the United States.



Tim Pearce

Spreading the myth

That quintessentially British breakfast treat, Marmite, may have qualities other than its salty, yeasty taste if the *Daily Mail* on 27 March is anything to go by. And hordes of middle-aged men all over Britain may soon be spreading the sticky brown substance on their scalps rather than their toast. According to urban myths researcher Jonathan Langley in a letter to *Marketing Week* magazine: 'Appreciable and sometimes spectacular regrowth is said to result when Marmite is liberally and regularly applied to balding heads and left overnight. Follicly challenged Marmite users are easily recognised by their 'curiously coloured ebony hair and a pervasive odour'. Unfortunately, Mr Langley goes on to add that 'As with all classic urban myths there is naturally not a hair of corroborative evidence to substantiate this highly dubious story'. Any male troubled by a slight thinning of his crowning glory might, however, do better to put his Marmite jar back in the kitchen cupboard and contact a group of researchers who have been studying an abnormal gene that makes some men so hairy they have been called werewolves. According to the *Daily Telegraph*

on 7 June, a group of American, Mexican and Italian scientists have been studying a rather hairy Mexican family that suffers from a rare disorder known as congenital generalised hypertrichosis. They hope that finding and studying the gene may yield a cure for baldness—perhaps coupled with a monthly desire to howl at the moon.

Silent aliens

Any alien races out there in our galactic neighbourhood are clearly not feeling very chatty. The Australian Phoenix Project involved more than five months of measurements using radio telescopes during which time 23 000 observations were made from 200 stars in our galaxy with similar characteristics to our own sun. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) none of the signals appeared to have been produced by intelligent aliens. According to the *Daily Telegraph* on 7 June, there were a number of heart-stopping moments in the course of the project when interesting, non-random signals were recorded but further investigation revealed that in every case these arose from earthly sources such as signals from communications satellites. Of course it may be that no signals were heard from aliens because they are all too busy taking holiday excursions to Earth.

Chinese earth energies

The 3000-year-old Chinese philosophy Feng Shui is based on the idea that a positive life energy flows invisibly around us at home and in our places of work and, when controlled properly, makes us feel happy and peaceful. It is perhaps no surprise to learn that some companies in Hong Kong are paying Feng Shui advisors to help them arrange their offices but, according to a report in the *Sunday Times* on 21 May, this philosophy is finding increasing favour in the West as well. Many blue-chip companies including Marks & Spencer and Virgin Atlantic have adopted aspects of Feng Shui but the most enthusiastic follower of this particular brand of ancient mystical nonsense is the telecommunications company Orange. The company carefully positions furniture in its Bristol office to avoid blocking energy lines and will not allow parking in front of the office building as cars are said to represent violent tigers. In addition, company cars are given lucky number plates and directors are advised to wear lucky colours. And of course all plants have rounded rather than pointed leaves, and tanks of koi carp are strategically placed around the building. Gina Lazenby, chairman of the Feng Shui society claims that interest from businesses is overwhelming. 'Companies know that they have to provide the right environment for staff. Happier employees means a more productive workforce.' Perhaps even more worryingly, an urban renewal initiative in Bethnal Green in East London has approached an American Feng Shui advisor for advice—they fear that problems such as crime and poverty in Bethnal Green may simply be due to its location rather than any attributes of the inhabitants. It is not clear whether the intention is to move Bethnal Green to a more suitable location or simply to place fish tanks and rounded-leaved plants on appropriate street corners.

As the typical daily fee for a geomancer with the appropriate psychic powers is £2500, Feng Shui would seem to be a highly lucrative area of activity for any would-be charlatans looking for a new profession after reading Edzard Ernst's article in *The Skeptic* 9.2.



Tim Pearce

Fields and trees

There is considerable concern both here and in the United States about the possible detrimental effects of electromagnetic fields from electric pylons, radio transmitters and even domestic electrical wiring on human health and well-being. The majority of scientists with expertise in this area believe that if there really are any effects then they have not yet been unequivocally demonstrated and certainly research carried out or sponsored by electricity companies—perhaps unsurprisingly—seems to show no effect. However, recent observations in a forest in Michigan, reported in the *Daily Telegraph* on 15 January, must raise some concerns about the possible effects of low-frequency radio waves on plants in particular and biological systems in general. A 60 mile-long wire antenna was installed in the forest in 1986 for low-frequency radio communication with submarines. Observations of trees in the immediate vicinity of the antenna since that time have revealed that the trunks of nearby aspen and red maple trees are now 50% thicker than similar trees at a control site 30 miles away. Red pines near the wire, on the other hand, are on average 10% taller. Strangely other species of tree such as northern red oak and paper birch appear unaffected. Perhaps it would be useful to conduct statistical research to determine whether obesity (or a propensity to play basketball) is more common in people living near radio transmitters.

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

Psychoanalysis or Psychobabble?

Valeria Woodville

The strange world of modern literary criticism

DID YOU KNOW that *The Silence of the Lambs* is really about psychotherapy? No, neither did I until I came across a strange literary discipline known as 'psychoanalytic criticism'. This consists of applying Freudian theory to literary texts, films and anything else that will bear close analysis. In the hands of over-serious academics, it can produce some very strange results.

Modern psychoanalytic criticism is based largely on the work of French psychiatrist and cultural theorist Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), who pioneered the idea of studying literary texts in conjunction with Freud's writings. Lacan's interpretation of Freud focused ways in which the unconscious is communicated through language. A Lacanian interpretation of a text is not concerned with what the writer *intended* to portray: it concentrates on revealing a 'sub-text' of hidden meaning previously unknown even to the author.

Lacan expounded his theories in seminars from the mid-1930s onwards. By the 1960s his seminars were drawing large crowds. By the 1970s and 1980s his ideas were becoming widely accepted, and were influential in the growth of the structuralist and deconstructionist schools of critical theory. One of Lacan's seminal works is his seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Purloined Letter* [1]. Widely (if erroneously) regarded as the first detective story, Poe's story involves the search for a stolen letter. After police have unsuccessfully searched the thief's rooms, taking up carpets and taking furniture apart without finding the letter, the detective Dupin discovers its whereabouts in plain view on the letter-rack.

According to Lacan, the discovery of the letter is concerned with symbolic rape. The letter belongs to a woman, and is placed in a letter rack in the centre of a mantelpiece. Lacan equates the middle of the mantelpiece to the middle

of a woman's body, therefore taking the letter from the mantelpiece is a symbolic violation of her body. Most readers would feel that this interpretation adds little to the story, and tells us more about Lacan than about Poe.

Unfortunately, psychoanalytic criticism seems to have become flavour of the month with modern academics. It is becoming virtually impossible to open a film studies journal without reading about the supposed 'homosexual sub-

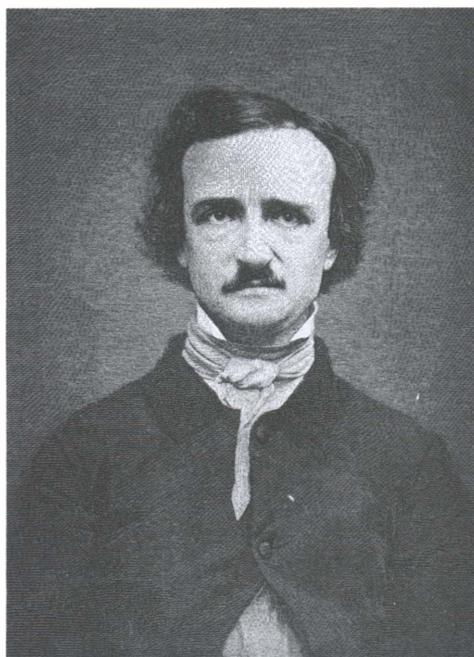
text' of Hitchcock's films [2] or the phallic symbolism of the heroine's shaven head in *Alien* '3 [3]. I am sure that not all authors would be as generous as Umberto Eco, who feels that a novel 'is a machine for generating interpretations' [4] and that 'nothing is of greater consolation to the author of a novel than the discovery of readings he had not conceived ... the large majority of readings reveal effects of sense that one had not thought of' [5].

In the urge to discover a 'subtext', the meaning of the text itself is in danger of being lost in a flood of psychobabble. US academic Carolyn Heilbrun (writing as Amanda Cross) points this out in one of her detective stories, where a disenchanted academic complains

that: 'Meaning [is what] we do not strive for nowadays. We have taken a leaf from the French and strive for theory, the better to impress you with' [6].

Films and popular fiction offer rich pickings to the Lacanian critic. Film theorist Slavoj Žižek argues that, 'The public fascination with figures like Hannibal Lecter, the cannibal serial killer from Thomas Harris's novels... ultimately bears witness to a deep longing for a Lacanian psychotherapist' [7]. I do hope not! Apparently Lecter's relationship with policewoman Clarice Starling reflects that of the analyst with the patient. With his tongue firmly in his cheek, Žižek concludes that, 'Lecter is not cruel enough to be a Lacanian analyst' because he does not expect his victims to pay for his services. [8]

Some universities now offer courses in the study of



Edgar Allan Poe: a victim of deconstruction?

critical theory—surely the ultimate in academic navel-gazing. Being an old-fashioned sort of person, I'd always thought getting an English degree was about the study of English literature, but apparently this is no longer the case. Never mind the primary texts—nowadays what you really need to know in order to get a degree is what Lacan thought about what Freud thought. Does this really add to anyone's appreciation of films or literature? I doubt it.

Even some exponents of critical theory are becoming skeptical about its over-use. At the end of a discussion of psychoanalytic criticism in his excellent book on literary theory, Terry Eagleton points out the following [9]:

The reason why the vast majority of people read poems, novels and plays is because they find them pleasurable. This fact is so obvious that it is hardly ever mentioned in universities. It is, admittedly, difficult to spend some years studying literature in most universities and still find it pleasurable at the end: many university literature courses seem to be constructed to prevent this from happening, and those who emerge still able to enjoy literary works might be considered either heroic or perverse.

Who could disagree?

Notes

1. 'The Purloined Letter' in Jacques Lacan (1966), reprinted in Robert Con Davis & Ronald Schliefer (eds): *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Longman, 1989), p.301ff.
2. Marty Roth: 'Hitchcock's Secret Agency' in *Camera Obscura*, No 30 (May 1993), pp.34–49.
3. Ilsa J Bick, M.D. ' "Well, I Guess I Must Make You Nervous": Woman and the Space of Alien 3' in *PostScript*, Vol 14, Nos 1 & 2, pp.45–56.
4. Umberto Eco: 'Reflections on *The Name of the Rose*' (Minerva, 1994), p.2.
5. *op cit*, p.3.
6. Amanda Cross [Carolyn Heilbrun]: *Sweet Death, Kind Death* (Ballantine Books, 1985), p.44.
7. Slavoj Zizek: 'In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large' in *Everything you always wanted to know about Lacan but were afraid to ask Hitchcock* (Verso, 1992), p.262.
8. *op cit*, p.263.
9. Terry Eagleton: *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 1983), p.191.

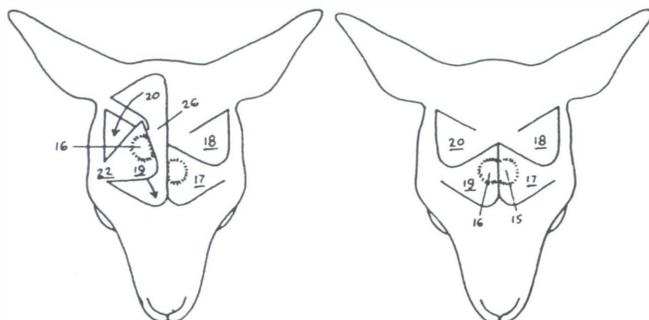
Valeria Woodville is a student at the University of London.

Patently absurd

Les Francis

As a postscript to Tony Wheeler's article 'On the horn of a dilemma' (*The Skeptic*, 9.2), readers might be interested to know that a US Patent has been granted to one Timothy G Zell, for creating an artificial unicorn from an ordinary goat.

United States Patent 4429685, filed on 14 July 1982, describes a surgical procedure for moving two flaps of skin, each including a horn bud, from the sides of the head of the animal, to a central position at the front of the head. If this is performed during the first week of the animal's life, the two horns will grow as one, and connect to the skull as a single horn. Mr Zell says that his invention 'enhances the overall development of the animal'.



The full Patent Specification is in the public domain, and readers wishing to pursue the somewhat gory details of this invention may obtain a copy from the Patent Office or from the British Library.

Les Francis is a freelance writer living in Manchester.



'Yes, I can give you liposuction and a face-lift, Mrs Gribbs, but I must warn you that it won't change the fact that basically way down deep and underneath it all you're really a duck.'

A Miniature Armageddon

Martin Bridgstock

A personal account of a battle against creation science

I AM WRITING THIS in my room on Griffith University's beautiful campus. Australian forest—mostly eucalypts—rolls away in all directions. Beyond it, the city of Brisbane goes about its business.

It's a beautiful place to work. In one direction, though, things are different. Almost due south, amid factories and repair shops, the Creation Science Foundation lurks in its warehouse lair. I think of it as a wounded monster, and it was me who hit it the hardest. In an adventure story, the husky hero would go in and finish it off. Reality is a bit different. I think I'll let it lurk.

So how did it happen? How did a fairly non-combative academic—not even a scientist—get pitched into a battle against the massed hordes of fundamentalism? How did the good guys win, and why isn't it finished?

Like many dramas, this one began by accident. I was a mild Skeptic, and had worked up an entertaining little talk debunking Erich von Däniken and his *Chariots of the Gods* nonsense. It went down well with schools and business groups, and I ended up talking to a group of science fiction fans. The von Däniken talk went down well, but at the end I made the remark that changed my life. I pointed out that other sorts of pseudo-science existed too, like astrology and creation science.

And of course there was a fundamentalist in the audience. There are more of them about than you'd think. He tackled me afterwards and asked if I'd actually studied creation science. Well, no, I hadn't. Would I be prepared to look at some literature with an open mind? Well yes, of course I would... what else could I say?

And so I found myself looking at about a dozen magazines titled *Ex Nihilo*. They were the publications of the Brisbane-based Creation Science Foundation, and they challenged the whole of modern science.

What do creation scientists believe?

I don't remember clearly my first reactions to those glossy, well-produced magazines, but it was clear that they contained a massive amount of evidence. And their case was radical. Creation scientists believe that the universe is very young—perhaps only ten thousand years old—and was created in six days. The bible, they believe, is a literal and infallible guide to how creation occurred.

Most people's reactions to this are snorts of laughter. This often turns to bewilderment when they try to argue with creation scientists. Using Noah's Flood and the Tower



Many Evans

of Babel incidents, creation scientists can account for many features of the world. Fossils? Laid down by the flood. Radioactive dating? Unreliable—and they have some scientific references. Human races? Dispersed after the Tower of Babel.

This phenomenon isn't new. Pseudo-scientists are usually well versed in their beliefs and can make mincemeat of ordinary objectors. Given knowledge and determination, you can make a plausible case for anything!

The creation scientists are very sophisticated in their use of democratic rhetoric. In political debates, most of us accept that if there are two viewpoints, both should be heard. The fundamentalists used this cleverly, arguing that in the 'creation-evolution debate', both sides deserve an equal hearing. And that means, of course, equal representation in school science lessons.

This sounds pretty plausible. It's only on close examination that the flaws show up. For a start, why are there only two sides? Why are 'creation scientists' and 'evolution scientists' the only people with views on the subject of the origins of humanity? In fact, there are many other views, such as those of the Hindus, the other Christian churches and so on.

Again, science does not work like politics. There are vigorous debates within the scientific community, but that does not entitle every crank to a say. Once agreement has been reached on an issue, scientists tend to regard it as closed and to go on to the next point. Flat-earthers, anti-evolutionists and so on have no support within the scientific community. In the creation science issue the fundamentalists obscured this point by using political pressure—from outside science—to force their way into scientific acceptance. They made no effort to convert scientists to their view in the normal way.

Queensland: the Deep North

It's easy for outsiders to forget that Australia is a federation, formed from six states and a couple of territories. The Federal government, based in Canberra, is the most important, but the states still have a good deal of power. In particular, they control the police and the school system.

In the 1980s, Queensland was the source of horrified amusement to other Australians. An extreme right-wing fundamentalist, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, had ensconced his National Party in power, and wasn't going to let go.

Bjelke-Petersen had support from country folk—and manipulated electoral boundaries so that their support counted for the most. In the city of Brisbane, it took over 30,000 voters to elect one state MP. A couple of hours' drive out of Brisbane, in National Party territory, it took only 8,000.

Things are different now, but in the 80s there was a pervasive feeling of helplessness in the state. The National Party was pushing its nominees into top jobs in the police force, the courts, the schools and so on. The local press was poor, and easily intimidated. Public opinion was torpid in the hot climate. As a recent immigrant, I saw it as a slide toward dictatorship.

Of course, friends of the state government benefited. Government contracts were awarded to friends of the Party, and government funds were used to prosecute its enemies. In this climate, it is not surprising that fundamentalists saw their chance. Not only was Bjelke-Petersen a fundamentalist—so was his Minister of Education, Lin Powell, and the Leader of the opposition, Keith Wright.

Creation science began in America, but Queensland was a fertile field. I suspect that there are more fundamentalists around than you'd expect, but in Queensland they are a substantial minority, perhaps 15% of the total population. By the early 1980s, the Creation Science Foundation, based in a Brisbane warehouse, had built up an annual income of over half a million dollars (nearly £250,000). It employed 14 people and pumped out an endless stream of propaganda. Its free news-sheet, the *Creation Science Prayer News*, went to over 12,000 people.

And, of course, they lobbied the politicians. One MP told me that he'd walked into a parliamentary committee room by accident, and found the Minister for Education sitting round a table with his friends the creation scientists. A seminar convened by the Minister for teachers was designed to tell them how best to present creation science in the classroom. Could the teachers object? Not really—teachers who spoke out could be relocated to the parched far west at short notice.

Back to the story

So there was I, a fairly shy academic without an ounce of public influence, gazing dimly at a dozen fundamentalist magazines. Most scientists, I know, turned away. There's no profit in arguing with fundamentalists. Far better for the career to do a few more experiments, crank out a few more arcane academic papers. Should I be proud of my decision to bore on in, to get involved with creation science?

Maybe I had nothing better to do. My marriage had withered from anger via misery to indifference. I'd got



Mary Evans

involved in science fiction for a while, presided over a convention and lost interest. So, here was something.

I think there was a better reason, though. Pseudo-science can hurt people, but for the most part it injures one person at a time. The real danger comes when pseudo-science gains the influence over government. The biological crank Lysenko laid Soviet agriculture waste for decades, because he had the ear of Stalin. 'Aryan science' wrecked thousands of scientific careers in Nazi Germany, and crippled German research. It was clear that creation science was gaining influence with the Queensland government, and the results could be dire.

One handicap was that I wasn't really a scientist. My background is in sociology. Throughout the whole controversy I waited with fear and trembling for a denunciation from the creation scientists. It never came. They seemed to figure out, in some dim way, that I wasn't a proper scientist, but it went no further.

What should I do? Tentatively, uncertainly, I did the obvious. The most impressive parts of *Ex Nihilo* were its heavily referenced scientific articles. Evidence was quoted from major scientists and from major journals like *Nature* and *Science*. So I took the pile of glossy magazines down to the university library, and checked the references. And the horror emerged. The references were hideously, grossly wrong. Quotes were often misquotes, figures were misused and evidence was torn from context to fit the creation science case.

Normal scientists are human. They make mistakes and they may misquote evidence. But this was a mass of misquotes, a tower of corruption. My shocked sniggers echoed down the library aisles.

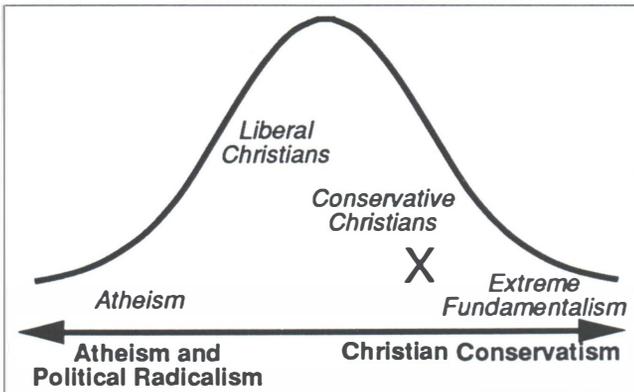
About this time I decided, rather vaguely at first, that Something Ought To Be Done. I put on what I hoped was a saintly expression. I used my research money to buy a full run of *Ex Nihilo*, and got myself on their mailing list. I checked a mass of references and quotations, hundreds of the things. Then I set to work.

Strategy

I needed a strategy. What should I do? Well, it struck me that the first thing to do was to communicate to key people in the education industry. So I wrote a series of papers about the errors and misrepresentations I'd found in the creation science literature, and sent them off to some journals. Their names are self-explanatory: *The Australian Science Teachers' Journal*, *The Queensland Science Teacher*,

The Journal of Queensland Schools Librarians Association. I also sent papers to the magazines of the state teachers' union and the independent teachers' union. All were published.

I'd got a mental map of how people probably thought about the issue. It looked something like this:



Now, I thought, the raving militant atheists, lefties and anti-clerics are against creation science anyway. No point in talking to them. The crackpot fundamentalists are beyond my reach. To win this I need to convince the conservative Christians. That is, people who are staunch Christian believers, and who think that the bible might have something to say about science. Hence, the tone of my message should be pitched somewhere over about point X. I would stress issues of integrity, I would make it clear that I was not an atheist and had no quarrel with any religion. And I would attempt to pin the creation scientists in the corner they belonged—extreme fundamentalism.

I would flog one other point too. The fundamentalists were keen to have their religion privileged above others. If creation science were taught in science lessons, their views would be formally taught in state schools, but the views of other, larger, churches would not. The Catholics spotted this. So did the Uniting Church. I never did find a clear position from the Anglicans, though they were threatened too.

Fire and brimstone

The first papers were scheduled to appear in March 1985. About that time all hell broke loose. The Australian Skeptics became involved. They decided to hold a public meeting at which a number of speakers would criticise the creation scientists and their claims. The media heard about this and I ended up arguing on the radio—live—with the chief creation scientist, John Mackay.

Remember I'd no experience at all of this kind of confrontation, while John Mackay had had hundreds of hours of meetings expounding his views.

February is notorious in Queensland. It's the height of summer. The sun burns mercilessly, and humidity makes every movement a sweat-bath. On a blazing February morning I found myself wedged into a tiny studio with John Mackay—he seemed twice my size in all dimensions—and local broadcaster Hayden Sargent. The discussion was so vigorous that Sargent extended it from half an hour to an hour. Afterwards, I walked round the city for the rest of the

day, shaking.

I've got a tape of most of the discussion. Rather to my surprise, it's a pretty clear win to me. Whatever he said, I was able to bomb him with some unexpected reply, and my evidence about false quotes and errors went completely unanswered.

The debate had an unexpected consequence. From that day to this, no Australian creation scientist has met me in debate. Their opinion of my performance seems to have been higher than mine! (A scientist, a little later, approached Mackay and asked why he wouldn't debate. His reply: emotional reasons.)

The public meeting came. I had it marked with a skull and crossbones in my diary. I was terrified! Hundreds of people poured into a University of Queensland lecture theatre. I was the first of five speakers attacking creation science. There were a couple of fundamentalist hecklers, but it became clear that most of the audience was friendly. At the end, in a question session, I got quite angry and hammered on the arm of a chair while I denounced the fundamentalists. The meeting erupted in applause.

The next week was farcical. John Knight—a lecturer in Education—and I agreed to appear on a radio show. The idea was that we would face a couple of creation scientists and argue and answer phone-in questions. The radio station offered the creation scientists any date over a week. They refused to turn up, and John and I had a good time fielding questions and denigrating the fundamentalists. Next week the creation scientists turned up and demanded equal time! It was pathetic, and gave us the first inkling of just how rattled they were.

Through the rest of 1985, the creation scientists and their opponents continued to flail away at each other. The fundamentalists ignored some of my articles and wrote angry denunciations of the rest. I heard of lecturers at Colleges of Advanced Education giving out photocopies of my articles to whole classes. I received abusive letters from fundamentalists. The Vice Chancellor got a poison pen letter, trying to have me sacked. *The Creation Science Prayer News* made shriller and shriller attacks upon me. Finally, it stopped mentioning me by name and just attacked me anonymously.

I messed up some things terribly. I completely botched a visit to a school in central Queensland, and probably turned a whole class against science. I made a scattering of errors in my papers. In one case I had to apologise to a creation scientist when I accused him of lying: it wasn't him, it was another one. Most important, I was making no impact on government policy. I only faced the disgusting Minister of Education twice on TV. The first time he chewed me up. The second time I clobbered him, but this had no effect. After all, the fundamentalists were his friends and I certainly wasn't.

Nuking creation science

Late in 1985, things began to look a little more hopeful. The Australian Skeptics decided that they wanted to sponsor a book on creation science, highlighting its fallacies. This was quite a commitment. The book would cost thou-

sands to produce, getting on for half the Skeptics' annual income. Ken Smith, a mathematician, and I edited the book and produced it.

It was hell. Ken and I worked well together, but we knew nothing about typesetting and the Skeptics kept sending us odd bits and pieces from down south. The University printers did the book for us, but they couldn't do A3 printing, so the hideous result was an A4 pile of pages stapled at the edges. The book was ready in 1986. And inside it was our nuclear bomb. Our custom-made warhead for the Creation Science Foundation.

Tony Wheeler, the Queensland Skeptics secretary, and I had dug out the records and accounts of the Creation Science Foundation, from the state Department of Corporate Affairs. I don't really know what we expected to find. I wondered vaguely about links with some disreputable American organisation.

We didn't find that. Oh no, much better! We found that the Foundation had lost over \$92,000 (about £41,000) a couple of years before. This wasn't a simple trading loss. They'd sunk the money into some oddball investment, and blown the lot. What was worse, they hadn't told their supporters about it. This was especially significant, as a huge fraction of the Foundation's income came from donations.

We kept our little nuke under wraps for several months. Finally we released the book at the same time as the Creation Science Foundation's annual conference, in January 1986. Some of the press and TV coverage was disappointing, but some was great. We found ourselves on the front page of the *Age*, Melbourne's best newspaper ('A large lump of Mammon lost in God's Vineyard' said the headline). More important, I ended up on state-wide television blowing the story of the financial loss. During the program, a press release from the Minister appeared, denying that he had ever supported the introduction of creation science into classrooms. Ah, the beautiful sound of political feet back-peddalling!

Apparently the Foundation's phones ran hot for days. All my evidence and intellectual arguments had counted for less than the financial revelations.

And that was the win. The Creation Science Foundation still exists, but Queensland has changed so much that its prospects seem to be nil. The year after, a corruption scandal began to shake the Queensland government. Eventually, after a Royal Commission, four cabinet ministers and the police commissioner ended up in jail. Bjelke-Petersen avoided conviction by the skin of his teeth. In 1989, a rejuvenated opposition swept the Nationals from power.

The Creation Science Foundation has split. John Mackay left—not amicably, I gather—to set up his own organisation. Occasionally the fundamentalists turn up on campus, but the issue is effectively dead.

Aftermath

The Queensland fundamentalist churches have suffered several more scandals, one financial and a couple sexual. The fundamentalists are withdrawing into themselves, hurt and ridiculed.

I think that, intrinsically, there is something self-destructive about the fundamentalists. Their asset is their vociferous self-righteousness: singly they can be intimidating, en masse they are terrifying. However, that and their loyalty to each other is about all that they have.

Fundamentalists seem to assume that once someone has been reborn, converted to fundamentalism, then they are a different kind of person. Within the fundamentalist community there is precious little check on behaviour. The churches tend to be independent businesses, with little check on what happens financially. Hence the eruption of a chain of financial and sexual scandals within fundamentalist organisations. But these organisations are directly dependent upon their supporters, so the scandals are uniquely destructive. In a big church, a scandal might mean the congregation moving to another church, or a bishop taking action. In a fundamentalist church, it means severe damage for the organisation.

As the fundamentalist community shrivels and turns in on itself, I suspect that the creation scientists are becoming immured within it. They remain one provider of comfort and entertainment to fundamentalists. One week, at a fundamentalist church, there might be faith healing. The next week, perhaps muscle-men will demonstrate that Christians aren't wimps. The week after that the creation scientists may turn up to demonstrate that science really does support their view of the bible. So don't expect the disappearance of creation science. As long as there is a fundamentalist movement, there will be creation scientists.

I'll hazard a prediction, though. The next time fundamentalism erupts into aggression, it won't be on the evolution issue. They'll find some other way to curry support and publicity in the larger community. Watch for it, in a decade or two.

The affair changed my life, of course. The University declined to promote me on the basis of defending Queensland science; pure academic papers only, Dr Bridgstock, and preferably in sociology.

I developed a pretty vicious style of arguing. It stood me in good stead recently. I was cross-examined by a nasty lawyer about how much maintenance I could afford to pay my ex. I wiped the floor with her.

The Australian Skeptics did well from the book, which sold and sold. They made Ken and me life members. Though I'm only a lukewarm skeptic, I'll never forget that they pitched in heavily when needed.

I found I hated politics. I got involved a couple of years later with the campaign for equal electoral areas in Queensland. We won that too, but I've no desire for more.

So, Bridgstock, sheathe thy sword. Get back to marking essays and giving lectures. But hold on to that nice warm glow inside. For once in my life. I did something right.

Martin Bridgstock lectures in the Faculty of Science and Technology at Griffith University, Brisbane. In 1986 he and Ken Smith were declared Australian Skeptics of the year.

A slightly different version of this article appeared in the Australian magazine Metascience.

Ishtar Descendant

Martin Kottmeyer



Part two of an investigation of earthly origins of alien stereotypes

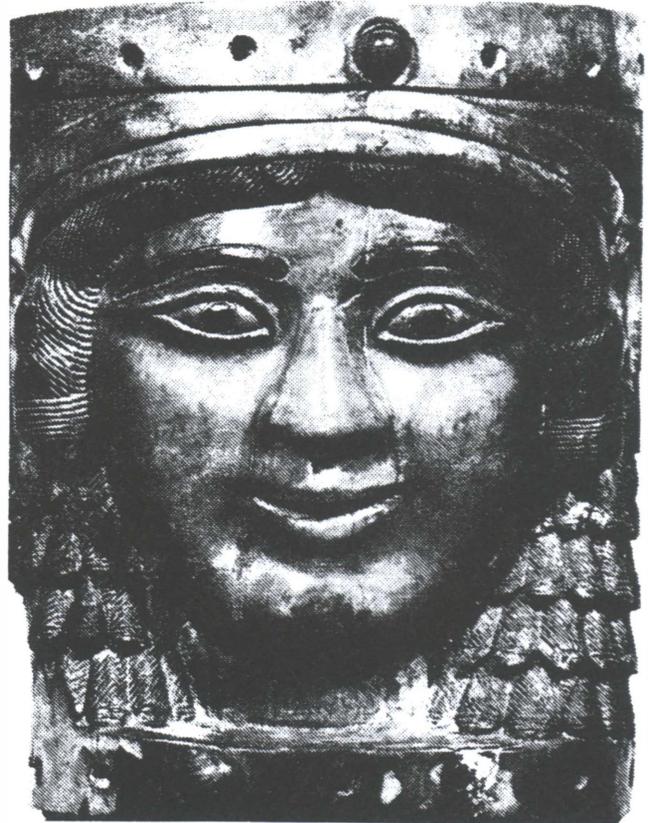
THE IMAGE WHICH STARES OUT from the cover of Whitley Strieber's best-seller *Communion* (1987) must be regarded as the most important representation of UFO beings in the history of the UFO mythos to date. No other representation has saturated the popular culture so thoroughly. It was seen by millions of people, not just in bookstores but in magazines, cartoons, artwork, video, tabloid TV, made-for-TV movies, T-shirts, and so on. It surprises nobody that drawings of UFO aliens in the years since *Communion* have shown a marked preference to be identical to or slight variations upon that cover image.

Like a number of people I have been wondering where Strieber got it from. Strieber himself offers this comment:

The closest thing I have been able to find to an unadorned image of these beings is not from some modern science fiction movie, it is rather the age-old glaring face of Ishtar. Paint her eyes entirely black, remove her hair, and there is my image as it hangs before me now in my mind's eye, the ancient and terrible one, the bringer of wisdom, the ruthless questioner. [1]

This leads him to speculate if his experience derived from a past life in the gray goddess's temples. He goes on to fantasize how Ishtar saved the so-called mitochondrial Eve of thousands of centuries ago from a panther attack to become a God that saved humankind. Never mind that Ishtar's Mesopotamia is not North Africa, or the sizeable chronological disparity. Never mind, too, that most references refer to Ishtar as a goddess of fertility who obliged sacred prostitution in her temples or what that awkwardly means in the context of Strieber's nightmare.

What is most annoying in this observation by Strieber is that he doesn't indicate which representation of Ishtar it was that had impressed him. I've found several and there are differences among them. None of them seem interesting, let alone compelling, matches to the *Communion* cover. None have the triangular face; one is close to square-shaped. None have the long, thin neck. The nose is always prominent: large and sometimes broad. The lips tend to be full and strikingly unlike the *Communion* image. The eyes are larger than normal, like the *Communion* image, but usually lack the tilt. Pupils are evident in the larger works. One variation has the right tilt to the eyes, but their size is close to normal. The earliest version has eyes that tilt down instead of up. The situation is so puzzling one is tempted to quip, since Ishtar was the goddess of the Morning Star, that Strieber has brought a whole new dimension to the concept



Ishtar, goddess of the Morning Star

of mis-identifying Venus [2].

A flip through a recent edition of *Larousse's World Mythology* (Hamlyn, 1973) turns up significantly better matches than Ishtar. My choice for the best would be an unknown deity from 2nd century BC Denmark represented on the Gundestup bowl, symbolizing the forces of nature. It has a long triangular face, thin lips, an oddly narrow nose with visible nostril holes. The eyes are somewhat larger than normal, but the pupils are visible and the sockets lack the proper tilt [3]. A second candidate is a reliquary for the dead from the Congo. This Bakota head is roughly triangular, has a thin-lipped mouth, and a narrow, smallish nose. The eyes are featureless and so immense it would work as a caricature of the *Communion* face. The sockets tilt slightly down instead of up [4]. Interesting as they are, they are both imperfect enough to dismiss as representing the same beings as Strieber reported. They can also probably be dismissed as plausible influences on Strieber. There is such a broad variety of creative play in the art of mythology, the resemblances are easily put down to coincidence.



Ishtar (left), with Ninurta, god of thunderstorms (far left), Ea, god of fresh water (right), and two-faced Usmu, Ea's vizier (far right)

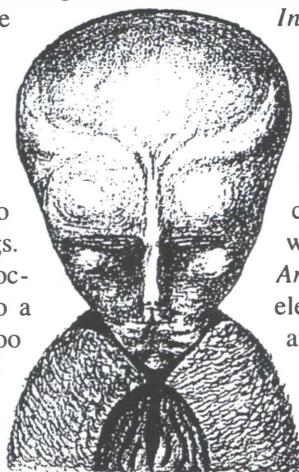
Ed Conroy in *Report on Communion* (William Morrow, 1989) has offered an alternative to Ishtar. He observes that Aleister Crowley did a painting of an extraterrestrial named Lam. He calls its resemblance to the Strieber image remarkable save for the eyes. He describes it as 'an egg-headed face characterized by a vestigial nose and mouth and two eyes in narrow, elongated slits' [5]. Ian Blake also has looked into Lam because of a resemblance to contemporary reports of 'greys.' He states it was first exhibited in 1919 and has a haunting inner quality to it. He is impressed by such features as the large, hairless, smooth head, its tapering to a pointed chin, a slit-like mouth, the absence of ears, and eyes which extend around the sides of the head [6]. George Andrews has similarly described Lam's resemblance to Greys as remarkable, but observes the nose is slightly more pronounced and the eyes are smaller. He helpfully adds, 'if one meditates on the portrait the eyes become larger' [7].

The reprint of Lam I've seen is not top grade, but is adequate to show that Andrews is right and Conroy wrong about the nose being pronounced rather than vestigial. The massive size of the upper cranium with the eyes being well down in the lower half makes Lam look more like a refugee from *Spaced Invaders* (1989) than a precursor to Strieber's visitors. Lam lacks the high neck, the tilt to the eyes, and has fuller cheeks. Is a triangular face, a slit mouth and a bald head enough to make for a remarkable match? It seems far too imperfect to regard them as representing the same beings. While Strieber seems well enough versed in occult thought to maybe have been exposed to a drawing of Lam, the differences seem far too blatant to consider it a likely source of influence.

The observation by Strieber that his visitor resembles Ishtar without the hair more than contemporary science fiction films seems

vaguely improbable given his background in horror. Could he really be so unfamiliar with science fiction horror films that he can think of nothing better than Ishtar? Ed Conroy at least couldn't avoid seeing that Strieber's visitors 'somewhat' resemble other aliens in UFO publications and those in the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). Conroy still insists Strieber's abductors break 'just about every possible cultural stereotype that has been created regarding aliens' [8]. One it most definitely does not break however is the futuristic tendency of aliens to have smooth, bald pates. Consider this list of precursors: *Flash Gordon's* Ming, *The Thing*, *Phantom from Space*, the Mastermind from *Invaders from Mars*, *Earth vs the Flying Saucers*, *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*, *Twilight Zone's* 'To Serve Man', *The Outer Limits's* 'Bellerophon Shield' and 'Wolf 359', *Star Trek's* 'The Corbomite Maneuver', 'The Menagerie' and 'The Empath', *Lost in Space's* 'Invaders from the Fifth Dimension', *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, *Starship Invasions*, *Ilia*, and the Coneheads.

Large eyes and eyes that are blank, though less stereotypical, are often prominent and defining in SF film: see *Rocketship XM*, *War of the Worlds*, *Killers from Space*, *Invasion of the Saucermen*, *Not of this Earth*, *Brain from Planet Arous*, etc. I can't resist digressing here to mention that the cover on Conroy's *Report on Communion* has a portrait of Strieber with his eyes coloured jet black like the visitor portrait. This had the consequence of reminding me of John Agar wearing black contacts in *Brain from Planet Arous*. I expected Conroy's book to have a comic element since the film has a small notoriety among bad-film buffs. Agar suffered for his craft on that film. The paint on the contacts flaked while in his eyes causing severe discomfort. The illustrator presumably was ignorant of this potential allusion; Conroy was respectful throughout his report.

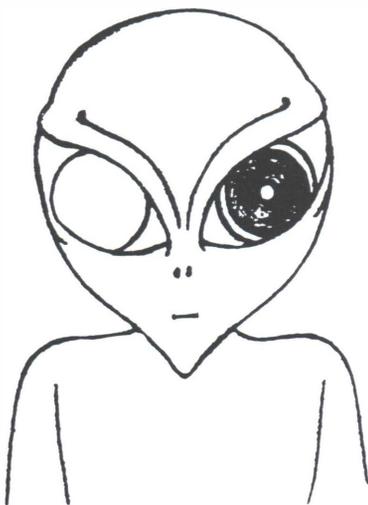


Aleister Crowley's 'Lam'

My favourite potential precursor to the *Communion* cover image is a drawing of the Grand Lunar for the movie poster to *First Men in the Moon* (1964). The face is triangular, albeit narrower. The mouth seems slit-like. A nose is uncertainly present, but properly placed. The eyes are black with no evident pupil and one eye has the suggestion of a proper tilt, though the opposite eye's horizontal aspect would argue the tilt is due to a brow shadow. The neck, rare for this period, is high and pencil-like. The biggest bar to accepting this as a match-up is a huge cranium with a structure suggesting a mohawk haircut though one could point to a brow crease which mimics the curve of the top of the head of the *Communion* image as suggestive of a cut-off line. The eyes really should be larger as well, though one could mention defensively that the Grand Lunar in the film does have clearly larger and blank eyes. This however opens up a nest of troubles since the movie alien differs from the poster in more than this one respect. An additional point worth mentioning if one wanted to argue Strieber was influenced by this film is that the Selenites are insectoid and live in a hive-like structure with galleries and honeycombs. Their society has division of labour like insect societies. Strieber discusses the possibility of his visitors possessing a hive mind in *Communion* [9]. The expression 'hive mind' does not however appear in this movie, so this is not entirely compelling. Also against the likelihood of influence is the long lag time required for this recall to take effect—22 years. There are precedents for cryptamnesia over such time spans, but a more contemporary source and one less obscure than a poster would seem more probable.

I have yet to find a precise match to the Strieber image and I do not regard the probability as high that one will ever turn up. There is a small chance an exact source is hidden away in the huge cultural environment: forgotten bad-films, a horror fanzine, an African icon, for example. I'm doubtful though. Strieber's experience seems put together like a nightmare and dreams are known to composite characters from more than one source. A dream character might be constructed by adding a sister's hair to a taxi-driver's face and adding the father's voice.

The long pencil neck points straight to one of the



'Quazgaa appeared like a bee'

sources for the *Communion* image, and that is the alien who does the hand signs at the conclusion of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). This alien was not based on any specific alien drawing or drawings from the UFO literature [10]. Its creator was given some verbal notions from Spielberg, including the idea for a long, thin neck. Such a feature was not present in any prior major UFO case. It has been whimsically suggested Spielberg was making a visual pun on J Allen Hynek (high-neck), his consultant on UFO matters for the picture. Whether it was intentional or unconscious or purely fortuitous is unknown, but its creative origin is difficult to dispute, given what has been documented in interviews with the builders of the aliens in film zines like *Cinefantastique*. This alien would likely be the source of the smooth skin texture and soft features to the face. There is a match concerning hairlessness, the vestigial nose and visible nostrils, the absence of ears, and the black and featureless eyes. The size and the tilt of the eyes however are quite wrong. The absence of lips also is shared by the two images, but expression on the mouth doesn't link up with anything on the film. Strieber, we must note, said the mouth had an elusive quality which the artist wasn't able to capture suggesting 'implacable will leavened with mirth' [11].

It may be relevant to note that Spielberg asked the maker of the CE3K alien to put a smile on it like the ancient lama from *Lost Horizon*. Strieber also described the visitor's mouth as having 'one of those rich and complex lines that come to the human mouth with the advance of years' [12]. This sounds right, but one would prefer a situation where the artist had got it right. One other point on which the CE3K alien doesn't match is its basically oval or circular face.

The disparities point to a second source. This second influence is most likely a drawing of Quazgaa by Betty Andreasson [17]. The eyes are enormous and tilted at the proper angle upwards. They extend to the edge of the portrait and, above the intersection, both Quazgaa and the *Communion* face show a faint bulge. Quazgaa also has a basically triangular face. The face is shorter and forehead taller, but this seems a compromise with the long oval peering out from the brilliant light of the Mothership. The drawing is captioned with 'Quazgaa appeared like a bee' which is probably why Strieber can be heard to say, '...at some point I almost thought it looks like a bug. But not—you know, more like a person than a bug... but there were bug-like qualities to it' [13].

Strieber did not believe in UFOs prior to his abduction experience [14] and his knowledge of UFO literature does not seem to have been extensive given his mis-recalling a John Fuller article as 'The Incident' and his never having read Hynek [15]. He avers he doesn't know if he saw the image before, and admits there is so much media around he can't be sure. If we are dealing with a composite creation, he didn't. The drawing of Quazgaa is more accessible than most ufonaut images in the literature. *The Andreasson Affair* was probably second only to *The Interrupted Journey* in status among abduction cases by the eighties. It would be a rare UFO buff who hadn't been exposed to it. While Strieber himself never had time for UFO study, he



Mary Evans

Ishtar in Hades is treated like a mere mortal

revealed in an interview of 2 March 1988 with Tom Snyder (WLS radio) that 'My brother's been interested in the subject for years...' The possibility of exposure to the Quazgaa drawing seems thinkable. Whether one chooses to regard the repetition of elements from Quazgaa in the *Communion* face as corroborative of exposure to similar beings or as cultural borrowing will depend to a large extent on how sound one feels the Andreasson case is. My doubts about this case have been expressed elsewhere [16] so I don't feel this resemblance much helps in making a case for the image on the cover of *Communion* representing anything materially real.

While this interpretation of the *Communion* image lacks the mystical appeal of ancient Mesopotamian goddesses, I don't feel it detracts from its aesthetic fascination. The combination of elements resulted in a product that was greater than the sum of its parts. The creative synthesis is more powerful emotionally than either Quazgaa or the CE3K alien singly. The immense tilted eyes stimulates and magnifies primal associations we all carry about eyes both instinctually and from the concourse of life and culture. It is at turns disturbing, scary, dangerous, haunting, alluring, ageless, and knowing. There is no question it contributed to the popular success of the book. No inquiry into its origins can undermine the originality of the combination and the synergistic effects of the choices involved.

If correct, such an interpretation gives us some idea of the evolutionary character of the UFO abduction phenome-

non generally and the cultural nature of the Grays specifically. Maybe there is a little bit of Ishtar in the *Communion* image after all. The image has bestowed an almost god-like fertility to the imagination of ufology. I think we are going to keep seeing that face for years to come.

Notes

1. Strieber, Whitley, *Communion: A True Story*, Avon, 1987 p. 123.
2. *Larousse's World Mythology*, Hamlyn, 1959 edition Hamlyn, 1973 pp. 57, 65+ p. 58; *Britannica*, entry 'Adad'.
3. p. 338.
4. p. 524.
5. p. 283.
6. Blake, Ian 'Aleister Crowley and the Lam Statement', *The Excluded Middle* #2 (c. 1993) pp. 6-9.
7. Andrews, George *Extraterrestrial Friends and Foes*, Illuminet, 1993 p. 117.
8. Conroy, *op. cit.* p. 258.
9. pp. 230-1.
10. Kottmeyer, Martin 'Pencil Neck Aliens', *REALL News* #1 (Feb. 1993) pp. 3-4.
11. Strieber, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
12. *ibid.*
13. *ibid.*, p. 61.
14. *ibid.*, p. 49.
15. *ibid.*, p. 61.
16. Kottmeyer, Martin 'The Curse of the Space Mummies', *Promises and Disappointments* #1 (1994) pp. 4-8.
17. Fowler, Raymond E, *The Andreasson Affair*, Figure 38, p. 121, Prentice-Hall, 1979.

Martin Kottmeyer lives in Carlyle, Illinois, and writes widely on 'alien abductions' and Ufology.

SKEPTICAL CONTACTS

UK Skeptics

Committee: Susan Blackmore, Steve Donnelly, Wendy Grossman, Ian Rowland, Chris Nash, Mike Howgate, Richard Mather, Michael Hutchinson. 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG10 4PZ.

London Student Skeptics

Convenor: Bill Harman
21 Manville Road, London, SW17 8JW.

Wessex Skeptics

Secretary: Martin Hempstead
Optoelectronics Research Centre
Southampton University, Highfield
Southampton, SO9 5NH.

The Skeptic on the Internet

For information on skeptical information by email or for subscription, back issues, or other magazine enquiries email skeptic@cs.man.ac.uk. World Wide Web: <http://www.cs.man.ac.uk/aig/staff/toby/skeptic.html>.

Gadgets Gone Crazy

Andy Brice

Has consumerism gone mad?

SKEPTICISM IS A PHILOSOPHY. While it is normally associated with outlandish subjects such as UFOs, Loch Ness monsters and ghosts, there seems to be no reason why it shouldn't be applied to more mainstream aspects of culture. The ugly sisters of advertising and consumerism are ripe targets for some debunking.

Offering itself up as my victim is one of the mail order 'gadget' catalogues that regularly flops, unrequested, onto my doormat. The latest one I received provoked quite a few audible chuckles. But, amusement value aside, I think these gadget catalogues tell us a lot about the consumer society we have created for ourselves and are worth a closer look.

Take for example the 'Big toe straightener for sufferers of inclined big toes'. This is a fairly trivial example of the worst excesses of the consumerism. Doesn't everyone have a lump that corresponds to the first joint of their big toe? It's there in *Gray's Anatomy*. But in the catalogue, the evil lump is shown in a 'before' cartoon in red with radiating lines, rather like the lump on a cartoon character's head. However help is at hand. The big toe straightener, a rather strange looking wrapping, will 're-align your big toe'. Interestingly there is no 'after' photo, no doubt because nothing short of surgery is going to remove that lump. It occurs me that the ad men are trying to sell us big toe straighteners every day, only most of them are a bit more subtle about it.

More consumer madness is visible in the varicose vein and age spot cover cream. This features the standard 'before' and 'after' photos, but the impact is somewhat lessened by the fact that the leg apparently belongs to a model or athlete in her twenties. Perhaps a pair of wrinkly, saggy old legs in the after photo (albeit with invisible age spots and varicose veins) would reduce the selling power. In the topsy-turvy world of advertising even the ugly has to appear attractive. In fact there are no ugly people in the



Mary Evans

catalogue. The rather obvious underlying message is that you are ugly/stupid/poor/old, but if you buy product X you will be beautiful/intelligent/rich/young (like the person in the picture).

The 'better mousetrap' is a standard consumer cliché, so it is no surprise to see several variants on this theme in the catalogue. The priciest one relies on 'electromagnetic interference and ultrasonic sound' using 'your existing electrical wiring to distribute the effect around your home'. It 'provides the most powerful protection available against most creepy-crawlies... plus mice, rats and other rodents' but is 'utterly harmless to children or pets'. What about hamsters, gerbils and pet mice? Do these devices work? The marketing men probably don't know or care. Marketing is about creating a need, not fulfilling it. I could go and buy one of these devices and test it, but that would rather be playing into their hands.

For more standard products, such as clocks, scare tactics and life-style advertising are less likely to work, so you have to try hard to differentiate your product from the rest. This is where the clock 'accurate to within 1 second in a million years' comes in. Is this useful? Its accuracy would certainly be hard to test. It would just mean that I would be exactly 5 minutes late for work, rather than approximately 5 minutes late. Similarly, I probably wouldn't get much additional use from their pen on account of the fact that it

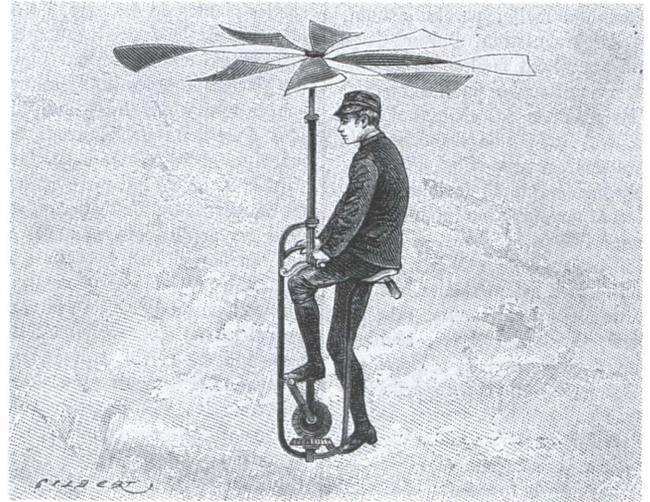
can write underwater.

Another gadget you could perhaps live without is 'park-a-plug'. This is used 'for stowing away bath plugs', which we are reminded 'can be a real nuisance, hanging around untidily, cluttering up the place and generally getting in the way'. A bargain at £2.99—and made in Britain you'll be proud to hear. For the incurably lazy there is an iron that irons clothes 'while still on their hangers' and allows you to 'press curtains without taking them down'. This reminded me of the old schoolboy joke about the stupid man who died ironing the curtains—he fell out of the window.

Some of the gadgets fail all attempts at analysis. I was particularly intrigued by the device that you insert into rubbish bags to make them rigid and easier to fill. But it wasn't the fact that you could save yourself £8 by using a piece of cardboard instead that intrigued me, it was the pictures at the bottom of the advert. There were two pictures of someone shovelling something into a rubbish bag. One had a large cross through it, but other than that the two pictures were completely identical. I still haven't worked this one out.

It's hard not to laugh at some of the ads. For example, the Scandinavian hair growth supplement that, judging by the 'before' and 'after' photo, will turn you from Yul Brynner into one of the Jackson Five. But I guess it's not quite so funny when you think that unfortunate individuals, unable to come to terms with their baldness, may be forking out £45 a month for this treatment. Of course if hair deficit is not a problem then hair excess may be, so there are also various gadgets for removing excess hair from other parts of your body. One is accompanied by a picture of the device being inserted up a nostril. Is this how photographic models get their first break, modelling nostril hair removers?

If you haven't got too much hair or too little you might have 'embarrassing dark circles' around your eyes. The model in the accompanying photo is applying the dark circle remover to one eye; the other eye looks like it was the recent recipient of a left hook from Frank Bruno. One can only assume that she hasn't applied the remover to that eye yet. Perhaps she would probably be better off putting a large steak on it.



An aerial velocipede from 1888

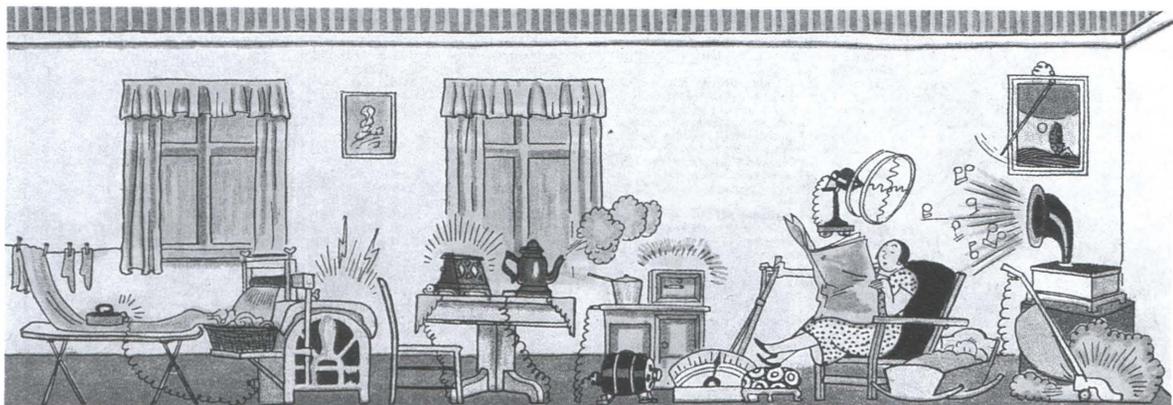
Mary Evans

Some gadgets are obviously aimed at these who enjoy minding other people's businesses. You can 'enjoy super-sonic hearing with the magic ear', for example. Although it emphasises that it 'fits discreetly behind your ear—instantly magnifying all sounds' (their emphasis) it suggests that its uses are 'music, cinema and theatre'. Heaven forbid that you should use it for listening in on other people.

The teach-yourself audio tape has obviously been replaced by the teach-yourself video. You can learn tai chi, a musical instrument, ballroom dancing and of course there is a whole range of hypnotherapy videos. The hypnotherapy videos include 'Sleep like a log', which no doubt contains a lot of 'you are feeling sleepy...'. You can also buy a storage unit to stack all your videos in.

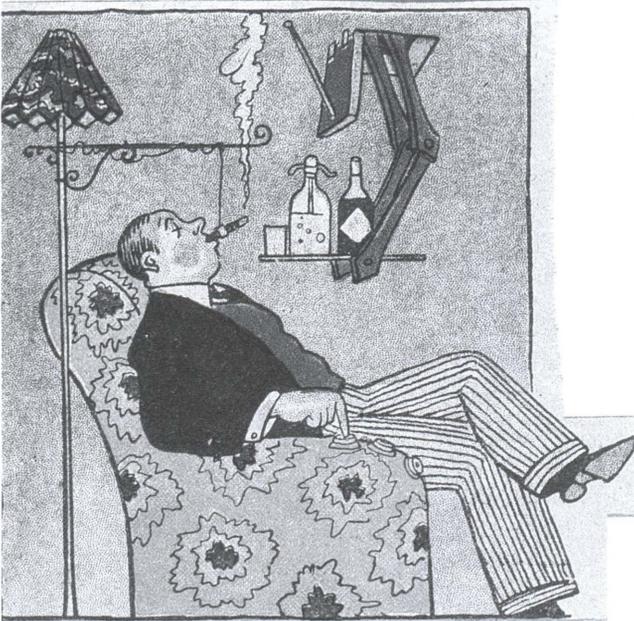
You can even buy your own free dental pick and mirror 'to help scrape away dangerous plaque build up'. I'm sure it's only a matter of time before you can buy the drill and pink mouth wash as well. Dentists across the country are probably rubbing their hands together in glee at all the expensive work DIY dentistry will be bringing their way.

New age mumbo-jumbo and pseudo-science is well represented in the catalogue, but it hedges its bets by



A housewife enjoys the easy life in the automatic home of the future (Allens Family Journal, 1927)

Mary Evans



Automatic barman (Allens Family Journal, 1927)

mixing and matching several forms of pseudo-science and sprinkling in some respectably scientific sounding jargon. Amongst the gadgets with dubious scientific heritage are air ionisers, magnetic bangles, acupressure pads to relieve insomnia (that seem to go in the same place as those that combat travel sickness), magnetic acupressure ear clips, bio-feedback snore preventers, electro-magnetic/ultrasonic pest controllers, head bands to relieve migraine, magnetic massage in-soles, copper impregnated elastic supports and magnetic massage seat covers. The magnetic acupressure ear clips produce an 'electromotive force' which cause 'impulses'. The 'Rumaton™' magnetic copper bracelet is accompanied by a picture of a wearer with various arrows pointing around their body, as if they were wearing an old convict suit. What these arrows are meant to be is unclear. Something to do with magnetism no doubt.

However, the catalogue is always very careful in its claims. The sonic mole-chaser 'could be' the answer to

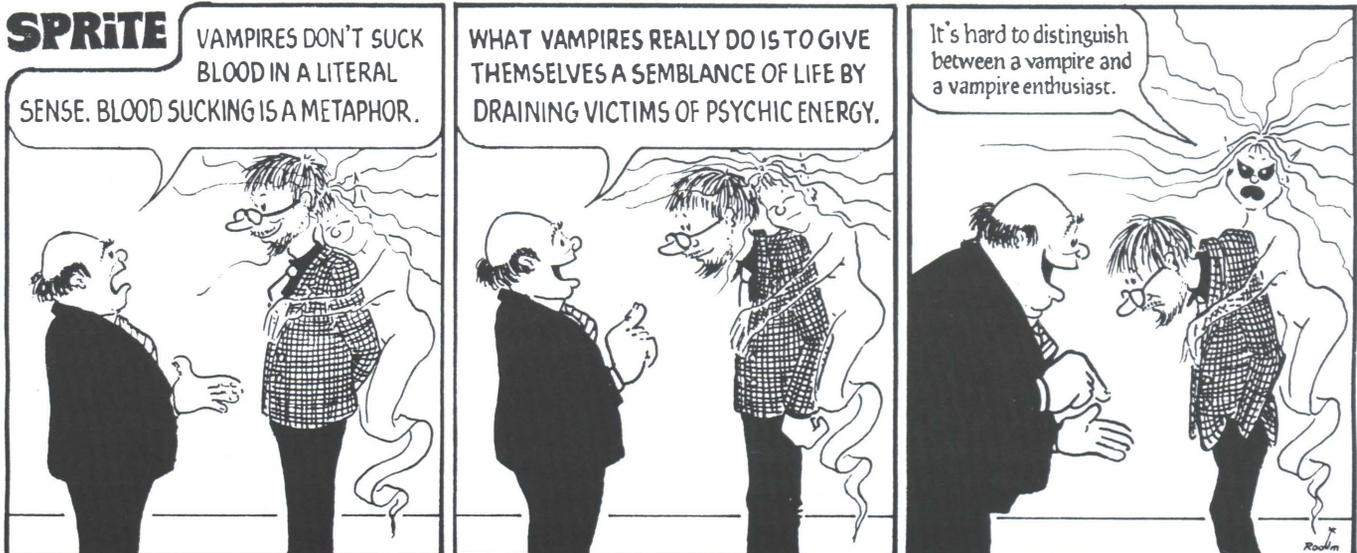
your mole problem. Through acupressure 'control points' are only 'said to' relate to 'cravings, appetite, stress, sleeping or stomach disorders'. And so on. Also if the acupressure doesn't help you lose weight you always can buy bra extenders, trouser extenders, and special buttons that allow you to button your shirt or collars that bit looser.

Some of the gadgets even carry obligatory warnings that make it clear that they cannot be legally used for the purpose they are intended for. But that doesn't seem to bother the catalogue. Probably the 'play the mouth organ in one easy lesson!' kit should carry some form of warning (notice they don't say how well you will be playing it after one lesson). The more I read the catalogue the funnier it got. But I must admit that the laughter had a hysterical edge. Deconstruction as a parlour game is good fun, but between the chuckles I found myself thinking 'where did it all go wrong?'. Millions of years of evolution, of struggling and evolving, all those brilliant minds grappling for the truth—for what? Surely not for nostril hair removers and big toe straighteners?

What would an alien intelligence reading one of these catalogues make of us? Probably they would assume we were chronically lazy, overweight, incapacitated by back-pain and sore feet, unable to tell science from pseudo-science and entangled by unruly bath plugs. The ultimate fruits of technology appears to be allow us ever more freedom to indulge our insecurities.

No doubt some of these items are genuinely clever inventions that might actually do something useful, but it is difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff. Who buys all this stuff? I know half the population is of below average intelligence, but I still find it hard to believe that these gadget magazines can prosper. But prosper they obviously do: one recently celebrated its tenth year in operation. The gadget catalogue may be just a taste of things to come, a softener for 50-channel TV shopping. Of course I never buy anything from these catalogues myself... oh, but there was that one time I ordered a useful-looking hanger that could hold several pairs of trousers...

Andy Brice is a software engineer and writer.



Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

The terrible WDIBI mystery

FORGET CROP CIRCLES, rains of blood, alien structures on Mars, and the Beast of Bodmin Moor. These are minor irritations to our understanding of the world, when measured against the greatest mystery of all time, which I intend to describe. If you have a nervous disposition, now is the time to put down this magazine and do something else; for here is a mystery so terrible that it touches us all. Forget SHCs, UFOs, MIBs, BVMs, ETs, and NDEs. I am talking about WDIBIs.

The WDIBI, or *Why Did I Buy It?*, is an enigma of such cosmic proportions that it threatens to undermine the very principles of our existence, and can result in a terrifying loss of personal identity. Strange questions enter an otherwise placid mind. Who was the 'other' me who somehow once thought a particular Hawaiian shirt was stylish? Did I really think I would ever actually eat that jar of liquorice and vinegar pickle from the Garden Centre? Will the day come when I shall read again that £7 programme from the Pink Floyd concert? Or stretch for a second time the springs of that rusting chest expander under the bed?

Can it really have been *me* responsible for these aberrations in good sense, taste and decency? Or do I possess a mysterious 'otherself', a twisted doppelgänger from a parallel universe, who occasionally takes my place on this plane and purchases exercise equipment, juggling balls, and Body Shop cocoa butter hand lotion, before returning to a higher vibrational plane?

What has long been only suspicion is now reality. I have discovered irrefutable evidence of the existence of my evil twin. I have been spring-cleaning my bookshelves.

No doubt because of a repressed memory of some terrible childhood trauma, I suffer from a serious psychosis: the inability to throw books away. This, coupled with a similar inability to avoid buying books in the first place, means that a large percentage of my living space is given over to the printed word. My dream home is a book warehouse. And it is among the literary WDIBIs that lies the ample evidence for the regular interference of my impostor from the Nth Dimension.

Space does not, you will be relieved to hear, permit detailed coverage of my WDIBI catalogue, and I will mention only one item. Exhibit A is *A World Within a World: X-7 Reporting: Transmissions from Russia on the Theory and Practice of Solar Light Radiations*. Although a slim paperback, this book is a WDIBI the size of Jupiter. It carries the kind of blessings that any New Age author would kill for: a foreword by Sir George Trevelyan, and a letter of endorsement from Peter Caddy, of Findhorn fame. No doubt your skeptical antennae are already twitching



like those aerials children once strapped to their heads in that bizarre 70s playground craze (another WDIBI probably still lurking in someone's wardrobe). The book comprises a number of messages received telepathically by the late Anne K Edwards, one of a group of seven sensitives in Chicago who, under the guidance of 'the Master DK', a Tibetan er . . . Master, had telepathically linked up with 370 groups and 'centres of light' around the world, to form a sort of psychic Internet. One comprised a number of individuals incarcerated in a salt mine in Siberia. This was the group called 'X-7'.

Between 1953 and 1957, X-7 transmitted its cosmic wisdom worldwide to sensitives lucky enough to have their vibes on the right wavelength. Although this might yet be the first kind of global broadcasting operation not to attract the attentions of Rupert Murdoch, it was nevertheless apparently quite effective, and X-7's outpourings about the influence of Solar Light Radiations resulted in their eventual publication by Neville Spearman, and subsequent purchase by my supernatural stand-in, some time in the 1980s.

Whether or not the communications of X-7 are wisdom or nonsense I cannot definitely say, because those few pages I have read defy rational interpretation—at least by my puny intellect. This, however, is a common feature of a WDIBI, and need be no cause for concern.

It's easy to scoff. Finding the right reaction, however, is much harder. Should skeptics allocate any brainpower whatsoever to artifacts of the New Age, the Occult, the paranormal, or whatever you want to call it? Some skeptics look at it all and see folly, and laugh; others see folly and worry; others see folly and see normal human variety and smile benignly; a minority rant and rave, demanding bannings and health warnings, and activism which only just stops short of tattooing 'I am a loony' on the foreheads of all New Agers. My own viewpoint changes almost daily, and when I look at my collection of WDIBIs I sometimes feel in no position to preach rationality to anyone.

X-7, however, saw no folly. The final pages of the book are quite blank, apart from the following caption:

These pages are provided for notes which the reader may wish to make on these remarkable scripts.

After several hours of meditation, I was lucky enough to experience a visitation from the Master DK himself, who spelled out in golden light five letters of cosmic wisdom. I have written them in the book: WDIBI.

Toby Howard (the real one) is a lecturer in computer graphics at the University of Manchester.

Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

Understanding the misunderstanding

A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO I spent a pleasant day at Oxford's Templeton College listening to what was wrong with the public understanding of science and how it might be corrected. It wasn't quite what I'd expected—the conference was called 'Blinding With Science', so I'd thought we were going to hear a lot of stuff about the complexities of statistics, and how science can be used to confuse people.

Well, it wasn't quite like that, although we did see at least one presentation that was confusing enough to be an object lesson. Instead, we got a succession of cases where the media got it wrong. A few of the scientists present were decent enough to admit it wasn't all our (I'm allying myself with the press here) fault. Nonetheless, one interesting incident proved their point to some extent.

The speaker involved in this incident was Dr Simon Barton, who works with AIDS patients at the Chelsea & Westminster Hospital. As such, Barton clearly has a problem with the media, and he named several incidents where relatively mundane reports generated sensational, even absurd, headlines. At one point, after a mention or two of the *Sunday Times* campaign against the idea that HIV causes AIDS, he picked his words carefully, in an effort to be both scientific and fair: 'I don't know,' he said, 'if HIV is the sole cause of AIDS, but it is a good working model for me and my patients'. By the afternoon session, one of the TV producers present named that statement as the most important story of the morning session. It wasn't, even if you could see the *Sun* headline writing itself in your head as Barton spoke.

Quite a few speakers had interesting stories about what they'd told the press and how the press had reported it. Ian Hindmarch, Professor of human psychopharmacology at the Robens Institute, had several. A 1970 study, for example, that showed that more kids took pills, primarily amphetamines, from medicine cabinets or sniffed glue than used marijuana, came out as, 'Gymslip junkies turn to dog pills', with a note that the pills not only turned them on but improved their sex lives. Apparently the reporter misheard Hindmarch's 'pep pills' as 'pet pills'. In another case, that of a report on the now-controversial drug Halcyon, studies that showed a 0.1% overall frequency of memory problems were seized upon by journalists, who focused on a small subset of the sample, people over 60, and extrapolated from that to imply that 62% of all users were experiencing memory problems. In fact, said Hindmarch, 99.4% of patients experienced no adverse effects on memory.

Even so, at a conference where he presented comparative results for the tranquilizers flurazepam (99.8% with no

memory problems) and triazolam (99.6%), one of the French delegates felt moved to point out that 0.4% is twice 0.2%. True. So you could legitimately write your news lead: Twice as many patients suffer from memory problems using triazolam as flurazepam, a new study shows.

Then there was the case of John Wood, the man whose job it was to sell the public on the idea of irradiated food. He didn't do too well at this, as he admitted, saying in his own defence that PR is difficult when you have to deal with negative and unfamiliar words like 'radiation' and 'bacteria' and have benefits like 'reduced wastage' which sound like they benefit only greedy supermarket owners. Also, the idea that irradiation would kill bacteria on and in food raises a whole other set of issues, like: what's wrong with our food handling that all these things are so dangerous? Shouldn't we be cleaning up the food chain instead?

Wood also had bad luck. Chernobyl blew at about the time all this was going on, and kind of turned people off the idea of radiation even more. But the good news is he's having an easier time with biotechnology, which suggests that people really must be perverse: I personally find the idea of genetically engineered tomatoes a lot scarier than poultry that's been irradiated to kill all the salmonella. Which reminds me that recently I ran across an Internet 'Gopher' service (in Jerusalem) that runs a column called 'Ask the Rabbi', and one of the recent questions was whether a tomato with a pig gene in it was kosher or not. (The Rabbi opined that yes, as the process of creating the tomato involved inserting the gene into bacteria and growing those for many generations before extracting the gene again and inserting it into the tomato.)

Over lunch, the appropriately named Michael Swallow, the director of the Water Industries Association, sympathised with Wood. He's got a similar problem: convincing people that despite all the fancy marketing for designer water the public water supply really is safe to drink. Safer, even, than the bottled stuff that looks and tastes so pretty. It's a myth, he concluded, that we live in a scientifically educated community.

Anyone who's read *The Skeptic* for more than a few months knows he's right about that one. But it was a later speaker, Elizabeth Fisher, a biochemist and molecular geneticist at St. Mary's Hospital, who put her finger on one reason why: almost all those editors out there commissioning the science writers—are arts graduates.

So am I, come to think of it.

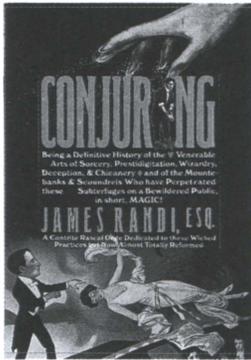
Wendy Grossman is the founder of *The Skeptic*, and a writer and folksinger.

Reviews



The magic of magic

James Randi, Esq., *Conjuring* (St Martin's Press, hardback, 314 pages, available in the UK from Prometheus Books, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG10 4PZ, for £15 plus £2.50 p&p)



This book, a splendidly produced and lavishly illustrated tribute to the conjurors' muse, is clearly a labour of love, dealing as it does with Randi's life-long fascination with all things and persons magical.

Magic originally derived from 'magi' (the priest-scholars of the ancient world) and 'conjure' meant to summon spirits from the vasty deep by occult rites. However, the author uses both terms strictly in the senses of stage illusion and sleight-of-hand. From Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, India and China, down the years to contemporary practitioners of every nationality, James ('The Amazing') Randi shows us how magicians have delighted and deceived an admiring public with tricks of manipulation, transformation, and levitation, with displays of mentalism and daring feats of self-liberation (as he testifies from personal experience, relating with disarming candour the attempt to escape from a locked safe that went wrong and nearly cost him his life).

The 'Cup and Balls' routine goes back, through the Middle Ages, to the Classical world, while the 'Headless Chicken' trick seems to be described in ancient papyrus, millennia old. Suspension of an assistant on the point of a sword was known at least from medieval times in India, where the *Jadu-wallahs* (street performers) have for centuries delighted all classes of society with their *Indrajal* (Net of Magical Deception).

I was a little disappointed ('disillusioned'?) to learn that the famous Indian Rope Trick is no more than a legend, and that the many popular accounts of how it is performed are all completely impossible. Randi also exposes certain traditional Indian feats of 'supernatural levitation' as mere conjuring tricks, which have however in their time fooled many.

However, the Mango Tree trick has always been a firm favourite, and in this century such conjurors as P C Sorcar, H Shimada and Ali Bongo have brought us genuine marvels (of stage illusion) from the mystic East.

In fact, so popular were oriental magicians in the first half of this century that two Dutch illusionists, Toby (Theodore) and David Bamberg, took oriental stage names (Okito and Fu Manchu respectively) and performed their acts in Japanese and Chinese robes. Another, slightly earlier practitioner of the time, Chung Ling Soo, had in fact been born plain Billy Robinson.

Randi describes the history of many old favourites, such as pulling a rabbit (or anything else) out of a top hat, the 'Inexhaustible Bottle' trick (where any drink can be poured out on demand—this once led to a conviction for violating local liquor laws), sawing a lady in half, and the infamous trick of catching bullets, which has claimed the lives of many magicians.

Randi reproduces posters advertising the feats of such conjurors as Kellar, Thurston and Carter with a hint of supernatural or demonic powers. In most cases this was just a PR gimmick; however, certain unscrupulous practitioners, such as the Davenport brothers, claimed (and were believed) to be genuine spiritualist mediums with psychic powers, until unmasked by irate honest magicians Maskelyne, Cooke and Devant.

Mention is made of many great performers, such as Anderson, Georges Mèliès (magician turned film-maker), Heller, the Herrmanns, the Dantes, the Blackstones, and the two Mandrakes—one a cartoon character, the other a live conjuror, moulded in each other's image!

A special chapter describes the life (and death) of the great Houdini. Born Ehrich Weiss, he took his stage name from an earlier magician, Robert-Houdin. Like Randi, he specialised in both escapology and the exposure of fake mediums, of whom he encountered many.

This is a book to dip into and return to many times. It has an ample bibliography and index, together with a glossary of magic terms and lists of practitioners, magic dealers, and magic periodicals and organisations. I must confess that on reading of all these fantastic effects I kept wondering (as will most readers) 'How did they do *that?*'. Unfortunately the author, true to the ethics of his profession, never discloses any pertinent details.

However, this is a minor point, and the book should prove fascinating to anyone who has ever been thrilled by a display of conjuring. All skeptics (and indeed all New Agers) should read it, also, for an understanding of the ways in which the unwary eye can be fooled into seeing supernatural forces where in fact there is only (highly skilled) trickery. This is an excellent book, and one which deserves the greatest success.

—Mike Rutter

Equal enlightenment

Melissa Marshall, *Novacosm: The Original Zodiac* (Arrow, 1994, paperback, 258 pages, £4.99)

Were you horrified recently when you heard that the sun-based astrological star signs are out of kilter? The 'discovery' broadcast around the world had many of us concerned that we might not be vivacious, quick-thinking, devil-may-care Geminis after all, but stolid, unimaginative boring old Taureans.

Never fear, help is at hand with the 'original' lunar zodiac devised by Melissa Marshall, or rather by the ancient Babylonians who predated the parvenu Greeks and their zodiac system by 800 years or so. Of course, given our lack of detailed knowledge of the Babylonian system, Marshall has had to include a large number of 'may', 'might', 'probably', 'could' and other suitably defensive conditionals in her description of this ancient art.

Even total lack of knowledge, or information that is outright contradictory, does not dissuade our intrepid Ms Marshall. She lists the symbol of the 12th lunar cycle, for example, as being a swallow, but adds that nothing is known of the swallow image and sometimes it's depicted as a swan. Given that she later states that people's personalities have a direct correlation to the cycle's symbol, it would seem important to get this right—swans and swallows have quite different 'personalities' themselves, as any ornithologist will tell you.

Despite the obvious problems in Babylonian scholarship, the lack of information does not seem to have deterred her from laying down absolutes in her descriptions of the 13 lunar cycles which purport to represent our true selves. She knows it's right because she's conducted a test—surveying friends and associates and classifying the common characteristics for those born in the same cycle. Her naïveté at times is touching:

Some of the predictions made by the Babylonian astrologers initially seem less methodical. On what logical grounds, for instance, did they foretell that someone born in the sphinx month could expect the arrival of surprise news in the month of the serpent?

What indeed! I can't see this catching on—unfortunate irregularities in the Moon's phases mean you need a chart to figure out what your sign is. This might make it appear more scientific, but it won't wash with tabloid readers. In the interests of true investigation, I duly checked out my own new sign to find that I'm an Assari—a winged ibex (no goat jokes, please, Ms Marshall equates this with the beautiful winged horse Pegasus, despite the creature being Greek).

The section on Assari has a very familiar feel to it, with all the classic hallmarks of the astrological system: *Equivocation*: 'Although the realms of imagination are sought by Assari, most are realists'. *Caution*: 'Envy is sometimes an Assari trait'. *Flattery*: 'This is a sign of grace and charm'. *Sweeping generalisations*: 'Many of the world's most successful gamblers ... are born in this sign'. *Silliness*: 'Many Assaris have problems with their feet and breaking in new shoes can be agony'.

So when we get down to the nitty-gritty, of what use is this 'novacosm'? Marshall sums it up best in her preface, when she says:

Novacosm: The Original Zodiac is not intended to challenge the traditional horoscope; rather it presents an alternative and equally enlightening astrological system.

Enough said.

—Vicki Hyde

No evidence

Kris Sky, *Clairvoyance: The Truth* (Robert Hale, 1994, paperback, 200 pages, £6.99)

In this book the author, a practising clairvoyant, presents over twenty anecdotal tales describing readings she has performed. The cover of the book features a photograph of the author surrounded by tarot cards floating in mid-air. This is very convenient as Kris Sky claims that she wrote the book because of a psychic vision, in which she:

...saw myself walking down a street ... As I strolled past a fairly well-known bookshop I glanced in the window. There before me was my own face, emblazoned on the front of a book, surrounded by tarot cards.

This quote gives an all too accurate portrayal of the breathless style in which the whole book is written. The early part is mostly autobiographical and details how the author became aware of her psychic powers—she had the usual premonitions of danger and disaster which later were apparently proved to be true. She attempts to explain how her psychic ability works and offers guidance to help the reader use their own psychic abilities. As with many clairvoyants, she claims to have a psychic guide who has prevented her from making disastrous mistakes and helped her to perform readings. It is intriguing that his name is Psy. I wonder if there are any psychics whose guides have less theatrical and melodramatic names.

The remainder of the book gives details of clients and how she has helped them. Unfortunately, for the sceptical reader, the author has prevented verification of her stories:

If you are one of my many clients you may be just a little worried that I have had the audacity to include your ... consultation ... don't hit the panic button yet ... I have changed the names to protect the innocent!

On only one occasion in the book does Kris Sky make any testable predictions. In the chapter, 'Meeting the Media', she describes predictions she made to a TV crew. Some of them were vague enough to appear to have been verified by time, but at least one was very wrong:

Charles and Di's marriage is good. People keep reading about drifts and splits but in truth it's quite a good marriage. They will be seen to be working better and closer together this year [1991].

This book adds nothing new to the subject. It offers no evidence beyond the anecdotal and unverifiable and should not be considered as a reliable source. Only the naïve and credulous will find much truth here.

—Toby O'Neil

A giggling guru's life

Paul Mason, *The Maharishi* (Element, 1995, hardback, 310 pages, £16.99)

THE MAHARISHI



The Biography of the Man who gave Transcendental Meditation to the West
PAUL MASON

This book is a biography of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (MMY), the man who gave the world 'Transcendental Meditation' (TM), later known as the 'Science of Creative Intelligence' (SCI). Born Mahesh Prasad Varna at Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, in India in 1917/1918, he studied physics and mathematics at Allahabad University, and then turned to

more spiritual studies, under the direction of his 'Guru Dev' (Holy Teacher), Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, a wandering ascetic of some renown who eventually became Shankaracharya (supreme head) of Jyotir Math, one of the four great centres of Indian spiritual learning.

After the death of his teacher, Mahesh retired to an ashram in the Himalayas, where for eighteen months he meditated on the way to bring spiritual enlightenment to the world. Eventually he formulated the system that was later to be known as TM, and set out to save mankind, now taking the modest title of 'Maharishi' (Great Sage).

After a successful reception in Kerala, Southern India, Bombay, Calcutta, Hardwar, Kashmir and Bangalore, MMY decided to go via south-east Asia to the USA and eventually to the UK, where he met, among others, the Beatles, who became for a time his disciples. The rest, as they say, is history.

Known as the 'Giggling Guru', his message of self-realisation without stress, and fulfilment without renunciation, attracted many followers in the era of flower power and LSD. Effortless repetition of a meaningless word, or 'mantra', was said to bring the mind naturally to the 'source of thought', releasing all physical and mental tensions and allowing one's natural clarity to shine forth, bringing immediate poise in daily living and success in all one's ventures. Who could resist such a message?

Later developments included the 'Siddhis', traditional occult powers claimed to be developed by Yogic meditators. MMY's 'TM-Sidhi' (*sic*) program offered to teach such abilities as levitation ('Yogic flying'), invisibility, and the power to walk through walls. However, these amazing feats were only side-effects of the higher consciousness gained by devotees, which was supposed to radiate out into the surrounding world, generating peace, love, and light, together with decreased unemployment and crime (the 'Maharishi effect').

More down-to-earth ventures included a couple of Universities (MIU in Fairfield, Iowa, and MERU in Switzerland), a yogic village in Skelmersdale, and Maharishi Ayurved, a system of alternative health-care supposedly based on ancient Indian traditions and involving herbal medicines, magical gems, and various extremely expensive 'yagyas' (ceremonies intended to placate the Hindu gods).

The most recent step—or hop—took the TM movement

into politics, when their newly-founded Natural Law Party contested elections across the globe in the name of spiritual enlightenment, no doubt hoping to attract floating voters. Universally, their hopes crashed to the ground.

The author, himself a meditator for many years, chronicles the growth of the TM movement in minute and intimate detail—warts and ail—without polemic or proselytising. An interesting glossary of Sanskrit terms is included. He occasionally indicates critical questions that might be raised, but never pursues the analysis very far.

Other systems of Yoga and meditation seem to be disparaged by MMY, who claims that his method is the genuine article, while the rest fall short. Himself a Hindu swami, MMY has always described TM (later SCI) in non-sectarian, even (supposedly) scientific terms. However, the mantras seem to be taken from the names of Hindu deities, the initiation ceremony itself is a 'puja' (religious rite) in honour of Guru Dev and preceding teachers, and in 1977 the teaching of TM in schools was banned in New Jersey as a violation of the First Amendment (separation of Church and State in the USA).

MMY tries to bring in scientific theories to support his system, not always felicitously. Readers of this magazine and *Skeptical Inquirer* will be familiar with some of his efforts to link the Vedas with modern ideas such as quantum mechanics and the unified field theory.

Again, scientific support for the physiological benefits of TM has always been sought from the experts. However, Herbert Benson found that similar benefits (the 'Relaxation Response') could be gained by chanting entirely secular mantras (the number 'one', for example). Indeed, many practitioners of TM have now left the movement, claiming that instead of peace and bliss they have developed distinct psychological problems as a result of their meditative disciplines.

As for the Siddhis, demonstrations of 'Yogic flying' seem to involve meditators bouncing around on their bottoms on foam mattresses. Spokesmen for the movement say that, of the three traditional stages of levitation—hopping, hovering, and floating—only the first has as yet been demonstrated. So all those old photographs of levitating TM-ers are fakes after all?

I was unfortunately able to find only one even remotely skeptical reference in the entire book—a critical comment by James Randi which, while welcome, did not go very far.

No mention is made of CSICOP or the standard skeptical authors, or of references such as Randi's detailed critique of the TM movement given in his book *Flim Flam* (Prometheus, 1982)—which amply discredits talk of occult powers and the supposed 'Maharishi effect'—and the devastating analysis of levitation claims made in Stein's 'The Lore of Levitation' and Premanand's 'Levitation "Miracles" in India' (*Skeptical Inquirer*, 13.3, Spring 1989). And did you know that MMY owns a fleet of helicopters in India? Rather odd behaviour for a man who claims to be able to float through the air whenever he wishes. Mason makes no mention of this disturbing fact.

I also found disingenuous the author's brief, and unilluminating, reference (on page 286) to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, which in 1991 pub-

lished first an article endorsing the practice of Maharishi Ayur-ved, and later a retraction and exposé. The first article was written by authors who failed to mention their professional and financial involvement with the TM movement and Maharishi Ayur-ved itself. A full account of the issues involved is given in Andrew Skolnick's 'The Maharishi Caper' (*Skeptical Inquirer*, 16.3, Spring 1992).

On balance, while this book gives an interesting historical overview of MMY and the growth of the TM movement, I felt it was entirely lacking in the kind of critical thinking needed to evaluate the physiological, mental, spiritual, and paranormal claims of these and other similar movements. As usual, that is something that we skeptics will have to provide for (and by) ourselves.

—Mike Rutter

DIY séances

Tom Cowan, *The Book of Séance: How to reach out to the next world* (Boxtree, 1995, paperback, 202 pages, £6.99)

This book presents an easy to follow step-by-step guide to holding séances and becoming a medium. The author presupposes that the survival of bodily death is a reality and that séance phenomena represent actual contact with the dead.

Unfortunately, he allows this somewhat accepting and uncritical attitude to permeate the entire book. For example, the first chapter presents a brief, but overwhelmingly positive, review of the history of séances and Spiritualism. It contains almost two pages outlining the virtues of D D Home but only one line which even mentions the issue of fraud ('...some of the activities spawned by the Fox sisters were fraudulent and some genuine').

The remainder of the book discusses the theory and practise of holding séances. The reader is told that the séance can be many things, including: 'the first step in dealing with hauntings', a way of receiving messages from beyond, a vehicle for discovering personal spirit guides and can cause profound healing of physical illness.

Next, the reader is given advice on how to become a medium. Individuals are encouraged to enter trances, meet their spirit guide and channel messages from the dead. The book also discusses the setting up of a sitter circle, starting the séance, using a Ouija Board, dealing with hauntings, physical manifestations and 'bad' spirits.

Interestingly, some of the advice helps readers overcome any scepticism that they might have. For example, readers are told that they should avoid testing the spirits by asking questions which 'arise out of self-centred curiosity', such as 'Can you name the book I was reading last night?'. Also, readers are told that they should not be put off by contradictory spirit messages: spirits, the book says, are just as fallible as humans!

In short, the book gives down-to-earth advice for apparently contacting the spirit world. It presents a useful insight into the practicalities of the séance but other than that it would be of little interest to sceptics.

—Richard Wiseman

A bewildering trip

Lorna Todd, *A Healer's Journey Into Light* (Bantam Press, 1994, hardback, 166 pages, £14.99)

Some strange things have been happening in my life recently. Firstly, this book arrived for review; then an acquaintance (who should know better) is currently trying to persuade me to market Herbalife; and thirdly, *The Vitamin Pushers* has arrived, also for review. Perhaps there is a connection.

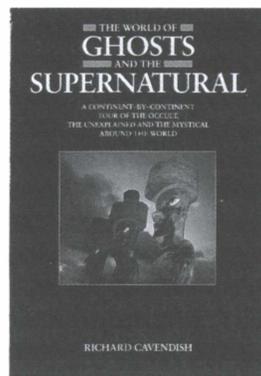
Ms Todd packs a lot into about 160 pages: everything from Atlantis to the Zodiac, including orthodox religions. But I think she muffs her myths a little when she claims that Master Ragozcy is Joseph—the father of Jesus. What ever happened to the Virgin Birth?

The book is a bewildering mixture of beliefs. Now I understand that a great many people feel it necessary to believe in a supernatural entity, particularly when it comes to responsibility for their actions. This lady requires the lot all thrown together in an incredible pot-pourri. The major problem for me, and probably an awful lot of other people as well, is that in her utopian world there is love but no sex. Overall I have to say it is such a flight into fantasy that I believe even the most ardent New Age believer would have difficulty in taking this seriously.

—Harriett Moore

Not of this world

Richard Cavendish, *The World of Ghosts and the Supernatural* (Waymark Publications, 1994, hardback, 160 pages, £14.99)



This is an attractively presented book, not so much a coffee table volume as the sort of book your aunt in Australia might buy you for Christmas because she knew you were interested in this sort of thing. There are lots of pretty pictures and the style of writing is lively and journalistic. Moreover, the text is organised in short subtitled entries

making it easy to dip in and read a few pages—whenever the spirit moves you, so to speak.

The book, as the subtitle tells you, is 'a continent by continent tour of the occult, the unexplained and the mystical around the world'. The chapters are organised by continent beginning with Europe and Great Britain. In the European chapter, most of the sections cover familiar territory (ghosts, witches, werewolves—the lot). Discussions are illustrated with the usual unsubstantiated anecdotes of the 'a curious case occurred in Paris in 1860...' variety. The North American chapter contains much similar material as well as some everyday stories of abducted folk and some fairly standard tales that must come under the heading of urban legends or modern folklore.

But in the chapters on other continents, the book seems to change direction and becomes less *Lord Halifax's Ghost Book* and more an encyclopaedia of world religions. Each chapter has a potted history and description of the cults and religions of that particular continent. Often excellent colour and black and white photographs accompany the text which, judging by those areas I am familiar with, are perfectly sound. The lively style makes this good introductory material on world beliefs for school-age children. Even the sections on Indian linga cults are pretty tame considering what children of ten or twelve seem to know these days.

The author's view of his material is interesting. While he clearly accepts much of the anecdotal material, there are certain types of phenomena about which he is sceptical. He gives little credence to mediums and channellers. But he believes firmly in poltergeist activity, describing case after case where no human agency could have caused the outbreak and sceptical outsiders (usually newspapermen) changed their minds after seeing the phenomenon in action. Psychic surgery is real—with some not very convincing photographs to prove it—but not all psychic surgeons are the real thing. If you were thinking of having your appendix removed, be warned.

Alien abduction stories do not convince him and he questions them with reasonable rigour. But, it actually seems to be only North American abductions he dislikes. Curiously, he is less sceptical of a particularly silly erotic fantasy recounted by a young Brazilian who was, by his own account, abducted and seduced by a naked female alien before being returned home. The author comments that although this does sound 'wildly improbable', a doctor who examined the young man the following year 'said he showed symptoms consistent with exposure to radiation'. This last sentence illustrates the main problem with this book. The author seems to turn his critical faculty on and off like a tap. Why should we believe in this doctor or his examination? What kind of examination was it? Where did it take place? What were the doctor's credentials? No answers given; we are simply expected to accept what the author tells us.

But even these faults would not be too worrying if the book contained notes or a bibliography giving further information about the anecdotes and phenomena described. We could look up the Brazilian adventure for ourselves. We could track those ghosts seen at Versailles or in the Tower. But alas there is not a single note. This is all the sadder because the material on world religions is surely interesting enough to stimulate some readers to want to find out more. (They might, for example, discover that Cape 'Reinaga' (page 148) on the North Island of New Zealand is really Cape Reinga.)

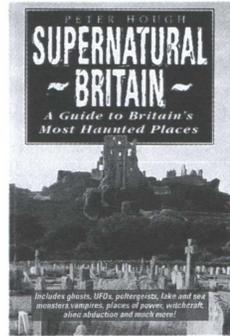
This book gives a taste of the joys out there in art, religion, folklore around the world. Too bad there is not a word about further reading.

To sum up: easy reading, good pictures, nicely presented and relatively cheap, but with an odd mix of fact and fiction.

—Marjorie Mackintosh

Ghostly gazeteer

Peter Hough, *Supernatural Britain* (Piatkus, 1995, hardback, 216 pages, £12.99)



I hadn't realized how popular following ghosts around was supposed to be until sometime in the last year or two, when I reviewed a new version of a piece of software called AutoRoute Express and discovered that one of the overlays lets you show, on the map, the most popular haunted sites. The idea, I suppose, is that if you're travel-

ling from Romsey to Stockbridge and you're passing a haunted house you might want to stop and take a look at it. This book is probably the guide book you'd take with you on such a trip, although it would be handier if it were smaller and lighter.

Hough, who is a member of the Association for Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (ASSAP), isn't an obvious first choice for a skeptic's tour guide. He is, according to the jacket copy, author of ten books on subjects like spontaneous human combustion and life after death, besides being co-author, with Jenny Randles, of *The Complete Book of UFOs*. But he's not wholly credulous about these sites, even remembering to use the word 'allegedly' about some apparitions and to point out research that's controversial about others.

The range of supernatural sites Hough covers is fairly broad. Geographically, he covers most parts of England, plus Scotland and Wales. Cornish people will be offended by his lumping Falmouth in with 'South-West England'. Supernaturally, he mostly concentrates on haunted houses, but you get some witches (Lancashire), Dracula (Yorkshire), magic (Glastonbury), monsters (Falmouth and Loch Ness), and miscellanea (Warminster, for crop circles and UFOs). Borley Rectory is included, of course, as is the Tower of London. Each entry is accompanied by basic travel information—directions for getting there, plus the address and phone number of the nearest tourist information centre.

Overall, this book is kind of fun, even if you don't agree with half of what it says.

—Wendy Grossman

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Letters



Calling skeptics

As a skeptic, I tend to find myself, regrettably, in a minority of one whenever the subject of the paranormal/spiritualism/psychics etc is mentioned. Most of my family and friends feel that whilst there might well be a lot of trickery and bogus psychic phenomena, they still err on the side of belief and/or apathy.

It is only fairly recently that I discovered that actual card-carrying sceptics existed and was delighted when I discovered *The Skeptic* along with other wonders such as *Skeptical Inquirer* and Prometheus Books.

I live close to the Derbyshire/ Nottinghamshire border, and to help avoid 'sceptical burnout' and perhaps contribute something tangible to the sceptic cause I would be interested in hearing from anyone who would like to start a local(ish) sceptic group.

Tony Youens
32 Meadow Street,
Nottingham Lane
Ironville
Derbyshire NG16 5NU

Mystery of flight

Steve Donnelly's *jeux d'esprit* about aircraft flight (*The Skeptic* 9.1) offers too big a hostage to mystics. The 'conventional' explanations of aircraft flight to which he refers seem to assume pure streamline flow, i.e. that neither friction nor viscosity affects the flow of air around a wing. Near the surface of the wing this is nonsense. In fact, the undersurface of the wing 'facing' the airstream tends to drag air in its immediate neighbourhood along with it, so that compared with the zero viscosity flow assumed there is a component of flow forward along the facing surface and backward along the top, giving some circulation of air about the aerofoil section. When this is properly taken into account calculations made at a moderate distance from the wing surfaces using the

Bernoulli theorem give reasonable results for the lift.

One phenomenon associated with this circulation is the downwash of air from the trailing edge of the wing, and further to the rear of the aircraft a compensating upcurrent, like the one exploited by birds such as geese when they fly in skeins. Another is the shredding of vortices from the aircraft wingtips. The vortices shed from heavy aircraft like jumbo jets can endanger other aircraft if they fly too close behind.

A stunt pilot flying upside down adjusts his elevator so that what is normally the top of the wing becomes the one 'facing' the airstream. Even a symmetrical airfoil section generates lift, positive or 'negative' according as the angle attack is positive or negative, i.e. according to which side 'faces' the airstream.

C F Coleman
Oxon

Reeling in the years

In his article 'Don't Point That Comet at Me' (*The Skeptic*, 8.5), David Bradbury writes that 'It's a historical fact that as a millennium approaches, people tend to get the jitters. The end of the tenth century, for example, was greeted with much disorder and strife'. Bradbury has, in fact, reproduced a fairly recent historical myth. For a start there has only been one previous 'millennium', so the tenth century is not one example, it's the only example.

Unfortunately there is no evidence that anyone got the jitters as the year 1,000 approached, as is made clear by Bernard McGinn in his *Visions of the End* (1979). In the late eleventh century few uneducated people would have been aware of what year it was in the Christian calendar, as it was customary to count the years since the accession of the most recent monarch, while educated people would have been using calendars and ephemerides (planetary tables)

copied from the Muslim world and set for the Hejira. Scriptural numerology derived from other sources is far more likely to have provided the basis for a millenarian outburst—as happened in 1260. In general, millenarian eruptions are produced by socio-economic pressures, and numerology provides only a superficial justification. See my own *The Great Year* (Penguin, 1994).

Nick Campion
Bristol

Milton responds

I read Jim Lippard's review of my book *Forbidden Science* with great interest (*The Skeptic*, 8.5) only to find Jim doing the very thing my book complains about.

As *Forbidden Science* is an explicit attack on the scientific censorship that some skeptics have been instrumental in bringing about, it is no surprise when Jim finds the book is 'deeply flawed' and, of course, I would man the barricades myself to defend Jim's right to express his opinion.

However, when we get two thirds of the way into his review we encounter his real agenda...my previous book *The Facts of Life*. Here Jim makes very similar sounding remarks of disapproval. But now, instead of his opinion, he writes what purports to be a statement of fact:

The same flaw is endemic in what I've seen of Milton's earlier book, *The Facts of Life*, which uncritically relies on young-earth creationist literature, much of which is at the crackpot level.

The facts are that my earlier book does not rely on creationist literature, it relies on empirical evidence. If that evidence is flawed, let Jim Lippard say where and how. Among the work of more than one hundred scientists, I have quoted numerical data from two scientists who are creationists. If their measurements are wrong, let him say where.

What Jim must not do, if he

wishes to keep the respect of the scientific community, is to use deliberately damaging words like 'crackpot' in an attempt to smear serious research that he is unable to refute by rational means, simply because he does not like its conclusions.

**Richard Milton
Tonbridge**

Inquire for free

I have over 30 early copies of the American publication *Skeptical Inquirer*.

If anyone would like them as a gift, please contact me.

**Peter Hoggarth
Barn House, Hammonds Lane
Ropley, Alresford
Hants SO24 0DZ**

Archaic eyes

With reference to Martin Kottmeyer's 'The Eyes that Spoke' (*The Skeptic*, 9.2), it may be true that beings with 'wraparound' eyes were 'largely, perhaps totally, absent from the UFO literature' prior to the Betty and Barney Hill abduction case, but they have been gazing at humanity for a very long time, as becomes clear when one studies areas outside UFOlogy.

In particular, one thinks of the so-called 'eye goddess' and 'eye god' idols from the archaic Middle East. These effigies had eye indices much greater than occur naturally in human beings.

Princeton psychologist Julian Jaynes, in his *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Houghton Mifflin, 1976, and in more recent edition) argues that this was because eye-to-eye contact is indeed a powerful factor in communication (an infant looks at its mother's eyes when she speaks, for instance, not her lips) and that the effigies were used in a kind of organised system of auditory hallucination. He has contentiously proposed that up until the proto-historic period of the eastern Mediterranean area, human beings had bicameral mentation, and auditory hallucinations originating in their right brains were taken to be the

voices of the gods.

His case is well-argued and complex, and can hardly be gone into here. In my book, *Symbolic Landscapes* (Gothic Image, 1992, ISBN 0-906362-19-9) I explore it at some length, then go on to study archaic (and certain contemporary non-Western) states of consciousness in the context of 'imaginal' realms of the mind, to use Henry Corbin's term. These were organised to hold archaic societies together, and to feed their religious and cosmological conceptualising, but when they erupt in our culture today they do so to a greater or lesser extent pathologically, set in a techno-scientific fantasy context. It is only our experiential ignorance of ranges of consciousness outside the monophasic limits imposed by our culture that allows anyone to take the abduction experience as a literal event.

Whether as supernatural beings in an archaic religious scene, or as extra-terrestrials in a modern, mechanistic nightmare of alienation and victimisation, those eyes still stare at us out of the unconscious. And they haven't blinked yet.

**Paul Devereux
Penzance**

Not the best book

I cannot agree with Hilary Evans's glowing review of *UFO: The Complete Sightings Catalogue* (*The Skeptic*, 9.2). It is certainly not 'the best book on the subject ever compiled'; it is badly laid out and hard to read.

The fact that Brookesmith regards many cases as continuing to challenge explanation 'even after extensive investigation' does not make him a skeptic 'in the best sense'; it makes him a skeptic in the worst sense—someone who tends to Pyrrhonism, a doctrine that we can never come to a conclusion about anything. In fact Brookesmith is not a skeptic in any sense; he is a Fortean.

His 'assessments' are a joke, being far too short (only 88 words on the Arnold case) and unbalanced. In a comment on my explanation for the Trindade Island case (p. 62), he

mentions criticism of which I have never heard, and which in any case is incompetent. Elsewhere he ignores my explanations.

I do agree that the book is not 'Complete'. How could it be when it mentions neither the Livingston nor Rendelsham cases? The book dwells on unimportant mystical cases and skates over important well-researched ones.

Perhaps Hilary was flattered that he (but not me) is listed in Brookesmith's 'who's who of UFOlogy'. It is a book for the ufoist not the sceptic; it confirms and encourages belief instead of challenging and undermining it.

**Steuart Campbell
Edinburgh**

See-through ghosts

A footnote to Roger Sandell's illuminating article 'Desperately Seeking Satan' (*The Skeptic*, 9.1) states that the transparency of ghosts can be traced not to witness accounts but to 'early cinema trick photography'. This is not so. Transparent ghosts were around well before the invention of cinema: *Spectropia* of 1863 (reviewed in *The Skeptic*, 8.5) describes a typical ghost as 'usually indistinct, and so transparent that objects are easily seen through it'.

Double exposures could be seen in spirit photographs, and Pepper's Ghost, dating from the 1860s, used the principle of reflections on an angled pane of glass. Even earlier, Phantasmagoria shows sometimes projected magic lantern images onto smoke to create an ethereal effect. Undoubtedly these forms influenced early filmmakers, although Méliès, who is generally regarded as the progenitor of trick films, favoured characters clad in skeleton costumes, an iconographic style which harks back to the Danse Macabre.

**Tom Ruffles
Norfolk**

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