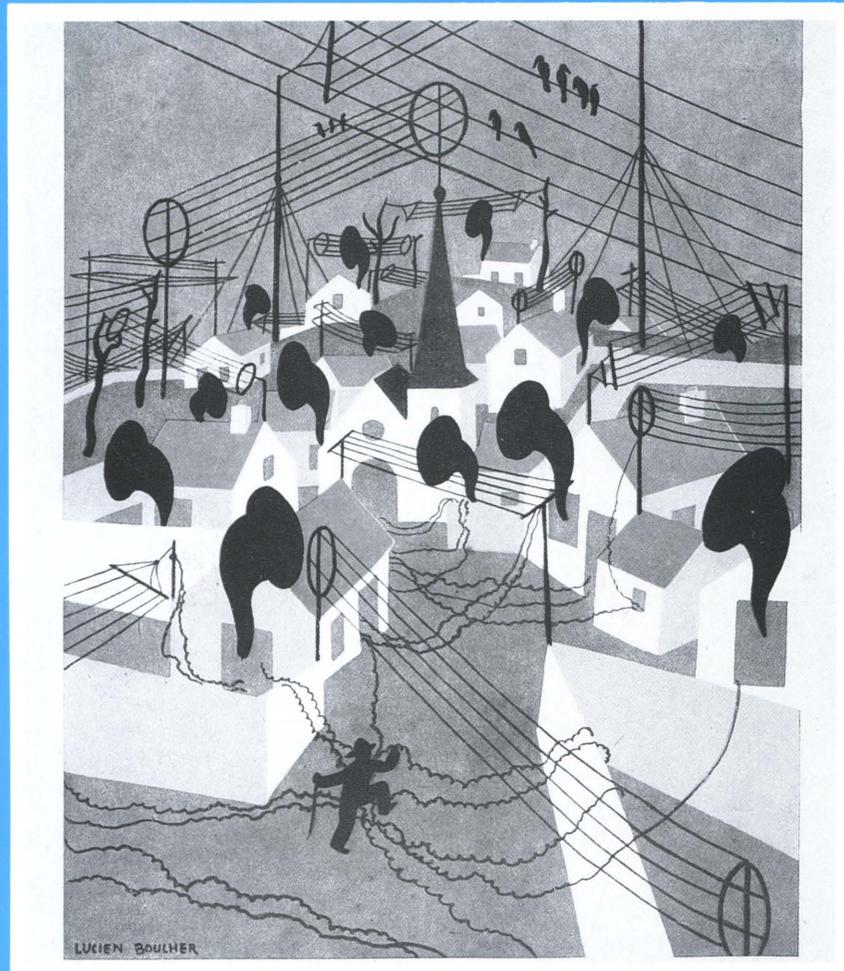


Volume 9 Number 5

# *The Skeptic*



## *Health-care for your Hi-Fi*

Also in this issue:

*Pills, potions and poppycock  
Parapsychologist Susan Blackmore in Australia  
The Age of Aquarius  
Spiritualism, ancient and modern  
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# Hilary Evans' *Paranormal Picture Gallery*



**T**HERE IS SOMETHING about Christmas which drives otherwise rational people to trivial pursuits. *The Times* crossword swells to fill half a page; the inquisitions inflicted on Manx schoolboys, who doubtless deserve no better, are inflicted on the rest of us, who do; while adroit channel-switching will enable keen masochists to watch TV quiz shows most hours of the day or night.

For skeptics to stand aloof from this nonsense might be taken as implying they have no brains to tease: so a prize will be awarded to the reader whose explanation for the incident depicted in this picture comes closest to what actually occurred.

All we will tell you is that it is a true event, which took place in 1938. There are these men, who happen to be in this boat, in the open sea, when this live goat comes shooting vertically out of the water close by. . .

Answers on a postcard, please, to *The Skeptic*, PO Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH, or by email to [skeptic@cs.man.ac.uk](mailto:skeptic@cs.man.ac.uk).

Picture source: G Avai in *Il Mattino Illustrato*, 1 August 1938

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

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Toby Howard

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Donald Room  
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Nick Kim

## Proofreading

Jane Bousfield  
Angela Cernoculski  
Daf and Mike Tregear

## Special Consultant

Cyril Howard

## Printing

Chapel Press, Stockport

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PO Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH, UK.

**Email:** skeptic@cs.man.ac.uk. **Web:**  
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# Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

## Electromagnetic integrity

In Hits and Misses in *The Skeptic* 9.3, I made the throw-away remark that ‘research sponsored by electricity companies – perhaps unsurprisingly’ seemed to show no negative effects of electromagnetic fields on health. I was rightly taken to task for this slight on the integrity of researchers in a complex research area in a letter from a reader who has himself been employed for the last six years by the electricity industry to research this topic. The letter queries the mechanism whereby the suppression of scientific data implied by my remark would operate. Is it that the industry is somehow able to predict which studies will yield a positive result and avoid financing these or are positive results simply suppressed by the industry (presumably with the agreement of the scientists)? Alternatively, do the researchers stop doing the research or falsify their results as soon as they see that it is going ‘in the wrong direction’? I would like unreservedly to withdraw my implied allegation – I have every confidence in the honesty and integrity of scientists in this industry.

Unfortunately, the generally negative results that have been revealed by well-conducted studies in this area have not prevented exaggerated claims being taken seriously, particularly in the US. An article in *Insurance Day* on 1 July called for the insurance industry to respond to the possible dangers of electromagnetic fields now—even though there is as yet no clear evidence of any link between low level fields and health. The article referred to a recent case in the US in which a property owner won a suit against an electricity utility company in which he claimed that installation of power lines on his property had ‘reduced its value because of public fears of electromagnetic fields’.

## Autopsy hoax

*Skeptic* readers who saw scenes from the alien autopsy film screened by Channel 4 on 28 August may be extremely surprised to learn that an article in the *Sunday Times* has queried their authenticity. The film was supposedly made some time after the famous Roswell incident in which extra-terrestrial bodies were purportedly found in the wreckage of a flying saucer near Roswell in New Mexico in 1947—almost certainly actually the wreckage of a complex experimental package launched by the American military as part of Project Mogul. The scenes broadcast by Channel 4 show the dissection of two white humanoid figures of odd appearance and with six fingers on each hand. However, the *Sunday Times* on 30 July claimed that there were a number of flaws in the black and white footage that the film’s owner Ray Santilli claims comes from 16mm film shot by a US military cameraman in 1947. These include the disappearance of security coding from the film when

its authenticity was challenged, a ‘letter of authentication’ from Kodak signed by a salesman and symbols on particles of wreckage entirely different from those remembered by eyewitnesses. A final nail in the coffin is provided by the Harry S Truman library of Missouri who have found that the former American president, who Santilli claims is clearly visible attending the autopsies, was not in New Mexico during the period when they supposedly took place. A source close to the documentary said: ‘We have had the special effects guys look at it and they say it’s a fake’. However Ray Santilli remains confident: ‘I have been offered a blank cheque for the footage. It is genuine’.



Tim Pearce

## Suck up a pinta

Perhaps it was a reassuring demonstration that human idiocy is not limited to any one culture or religion. Or simply another demonstration of the power of the mass media to spread nonsensical ideas? Whatever it was, the milk-drinking Hindu statues certainly provided some light relief to the newspapers on or around 23 September. According to *The Times* on that day, the story had begun two days earlier when rumours, from a New Delhi suburb, that a statue of the elephant-headed god, Ganesh, had drunk half a cup of

milk came to the attention of the Hindu world. By the next day huge crowds brandishing containers of milk had formed at temples all over the world. Statues of Ganesh and of other Hindu gods were apparently joining in the worldwide drive to promote the sale of milk. Meanwhile, spoilsport skeptics were, predictably, at work proposing boring materialistic explanations as usual. The *Daily Telegraph* quoted James Randi who suggested that the statues might not only be drinking with their mouths: '... when a teaspoon is held to any portion of the idol – and I don't suppose they try it on the elbow – it is being absorbed by capillary action'. And why only milk, asked Randi, why not try ink? 'I predict that a plaster statue of Margaret Thatcher will drink tomato sauce'. The preferred non-miraculous explanation was that of capillary action – a sort of reverse weeping-statue effect which should certainly occur for plaster statues as Randi suggested and which might conceivably occur for marble idols. However, according to Professor Julia Higgins in the *Independent*: 'I'd be adamant that brass wouldn't do it'.

But let's leave the final word to the believers. Ekta Marwaha, president of the Hindu Temple Association in Glasgow told *The Scotsman* that he had seen the disappearing milk with his own eyes: 'It is a message from the Almighty but at the moment I am not sure what it means'.

## Handy miracle

If you think that statues of a god with an elephant head supping milk are a little odd, read on. The Hindus did not have a monopoly on miracles over the summer – the Catholics had a cracker of a miracle of their own in July involving the severed hand of St John Kemble who was hanged, drawn and quartered in 1679. According to the *Daily Mail* on 22 July, the hand of God took on a fairly tangible (if rather dry and shrivelled) form when it was used to heal one Father Christopher Jenkins. The leathery and fairly unattractive relic of the Catholic martyr was brought to the bedside of the 63-year-old Father Jenkins who was gravely ill following a massive stroke. The *Evening Standard* on 21 July reported that the hand was then placed on the forehead of the ailing priest by his colleague Father Anthony Tumelty. Within hours he was making an astonishing recovery. A spokesman for Hereford County Hospital, where Father Jenkins had been taken following his stroke, refused to comment on the therapeutic power of the severed hand saying only: 'Father Christopher is stable and comfortable'. Perhaps it could be made available through the NHS.

## Fishy stories

Never a season goes by without mysterious lights in the sky somewhere in the world inspiring theories of alien visitations and this summer was no different. A particular favourite was a report in the *Daily Telegraph* on 9 September that discs of light seen in the skies over Torquay which had given rise to UFO reports all over the area were traced to a fishpond. The ultra-violet filtration system used by Joseph Martin in his pond at his home in Woodland Park was responsible (although the article doesn't explain exactly how the effect occurred). At the beginning of August, however, *New Scientist* reported that jellyfish-shaped giant red

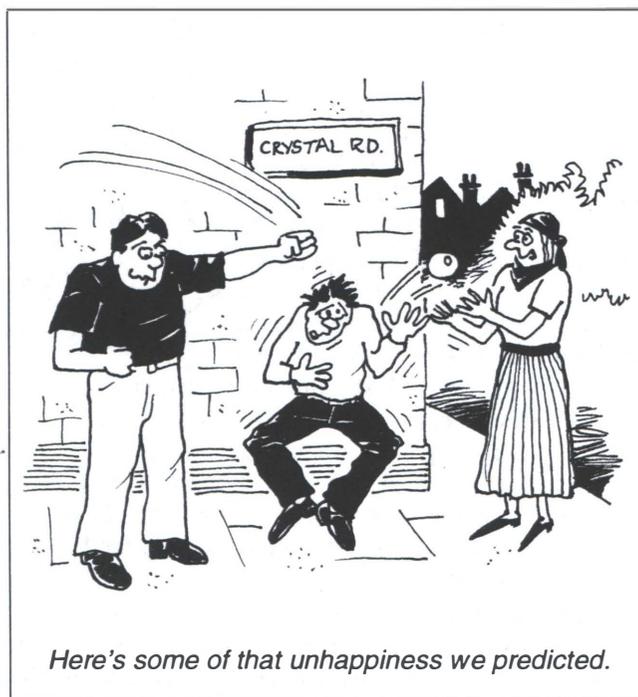
blobs and blue jets of light that have been observed on numerous occasions high in the sky above thunderstorms cannot currently be explained. The 'jellyfish' appear in clusters up to 90 km high and last for only a fraction of a second whereas the blue jets burst out of the tops of thunderclouds lower in the atmosphere. Perhaps researchers should be looking for a garden with an extremely large fishpond?

## Pitdown puss

It appeared at the end of July that incontrovertible proof of the existence of that tabloid favourite, the Beast of Bodmin had turned up in the form of the skull of a large cat found in a Cornish river. But according to *The Times* on 8 August, specialists at the Natural History Museum have since identified the skull as being from a young male leopard. The animal did not, however, die on Bodmin Moor recently but in India a long time ago and most probably came from an old leopard-skin rug. A spokesman for the Ministry of Agriculture was unsurprised by the finding, given that a six-month survey that they carried out this year concluded that there was no evidence of big cats on the moor.

## Give us our ball back

Finally, a pair of psychics from Maidenhead have lost a crystal ball which they fear could be a danger to anyone who finds it. The bright blue ball is used to drain sickness and emotional problems from people who visit healers Amanda Bedford and Barbara Waller and contained a few weeks worth of negative vibes when it was nicked. In a prominent article in the *Maidenhead Advertiser* the two ladies claim that their 'psychic time bomb' may cause illness and unhappiness to the thief who should return the ball to them for its overdue psychic cleansing.



Tim Pearce

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

# Confessions of a Hi-fi Enthusiast

Richard Ward

## *Homeopathic remedies for your sound system?*

**I**T'S TRUE: I'm a fully paid up member of the nutty hi-fi fraternity – and I love it. There are no greater pleasures in life (well, I can think of at least one, actually) than to wallow betwixt loudspeakers, bathing in the open acoustical mirage of a grand opera or Megadeath, live on stage in my own living room. And for the past six years or so I have been so hooked, with hardly a month going by without swooning my way through the hallowed portals of some hi-fi or CD retailer. Coincidentally, it's been about the same length of time since David Fisher's excellent diatribe against hi-fi pseudo-science appeared [1]. So what, you may ask, is the state of the art like today, and what lessons, if any, have been learnt?

### **Sonic Nirvana**

Yep, I've really got it bad. Give me your spare twenty grand and I'll happily slap it on the counter at my local dealer's in exchange for my dream hi-fi. That's right: twenty thousand pounds. It just so happens that the best system I've ever heard cost that amount and, considering that it's possible to pay ten times that price, it's got to be a bargain. I say this in all seriousness to contradict the sceptical friends who love to tell me that most amps or CD players sound the same and I should be happy with a stack system. Well, I say to them, there's more to it than meets the eye (ear?), and thus begins yet another attempt to convert the uninitiated in the blackish art of the audiophile.

Sound quality in hi-fi is everything. Anyone who has not been beguiled by the uncanny ability of some systems to put Joni Mitchell on their coffee table hasn't lived. 'One lump or two, Joni?', you feel like saying as she haunts the room like some kind of sonic holographic projection. Now you don't get that when you listen to a tranny in the bath,

or from your Japanese speakers stuck behind the cheese plant. Some enthusiasts, on the other hand, are more impressed by rhythm and timing, which relate to a system's ability to get the foot tapping, the head nodding, and so on.

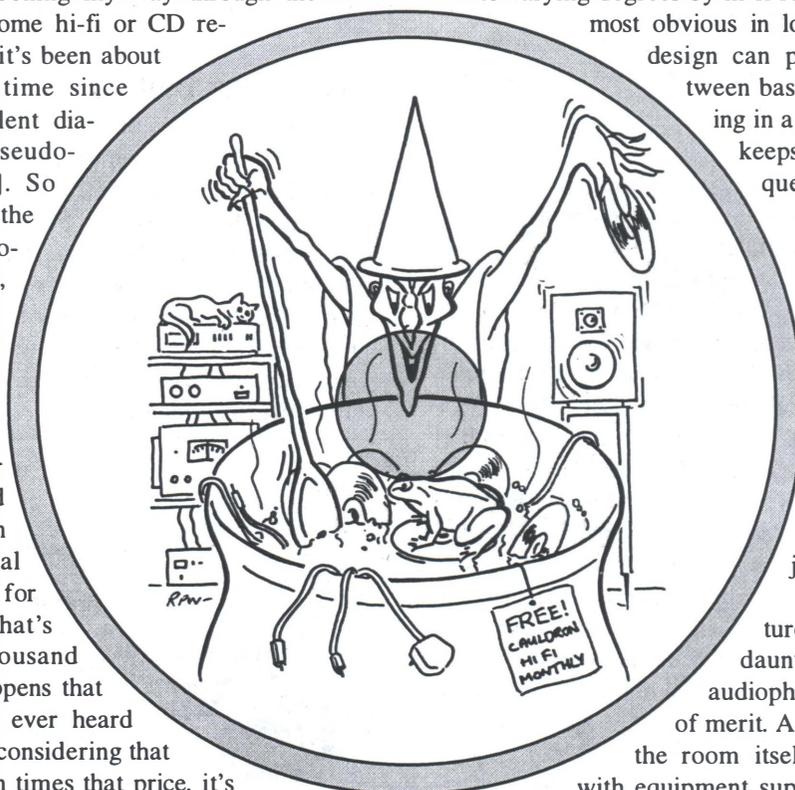
There's an almost indefinable sense of involvement when a live band really gels, when the interplay of different rhythmic sections match perfectly, and this is reflected to varying degrees by hi-fi reproduction. It is perhaps most obvious in loudspeakers, where poor design can produce a mismatch between bass and treble units, resulting in a bass line that never quite keeps up with the higher frequencies.

Stereo imagery and timing join a long list of characteristics that describe how near a hi-fi can get to a real and emotionally involving performance. Speed, rhythm, tonal balance, dynamics, detail, and so on, can all vary, making it a somewhat subjective business.

With so many manufacturers around, it can be a daunting job for the budding audiophile to assemble a system of merit. And when the acoustics of the room itself are mentioned, along with equipment supports, and the thousands of ways to tweak a system, it's enough to drive you to drink.

But wait. Help is at hand. Before visiting a dealer, why not digest the contents of a hi-fi magazine? No effort is apparently spared to demystify hi-fi by the handful of journals currently available and they nearly all contain helpful glossaries of technical and subjective terms [2].

More importantly, they each represent an opportunity to guide consumers by setting out a clear philosophy regarding the subjective quality of sound, backed up by accurate objective measurements and proper blind testing. At least, that would be helpful if such editorial policies existed but, as we shall see, this is sadly not the case.



### One box of new powder for two old ones

During and after the recession, competition to produce the gaudiest cover has led hi-fi magazine editors to adopt the 'soap powder syndrome', with tabloid-like headlines proclaiming the latest product 'set to trounce all opposition'. Because such claims are made with alarming regularity, like whiter-than-white washing powders, one wonders how startlingly different each new model can be. Hi-fi journalists however, have no such qualms. Technology, for one, is advancing so fast we are told, that rapid and continual change is inevitable. Well, that might be self-evident in the case of more megabytes in your computer, but sound quality is a lot less tangible than that. Aside from technology, we are also told that changes are made exclusively for certain markets. So we are flattered to learn that the Marantz CD52 compact disc player, after becoming the CD52 II, evolves into the CD52 II SE. And that's a 'Special Edition' version, for British ears only.

A more likely reason for such rapid change is that makers of budget hi-fi rely on a continual roll of new products. They sell stuff relatively cheap, so they expect consumers to be able to replace anything fairly easily when a 'better' model comes along. This fact is not shouted out from the rooftops by your average hi-fi reviewer, of course. For their credibility rests on clearly showing their ability to distinguish differences between products. A string of reviews always concluding that 'there ain't no difference' just wouldn't look good at all.

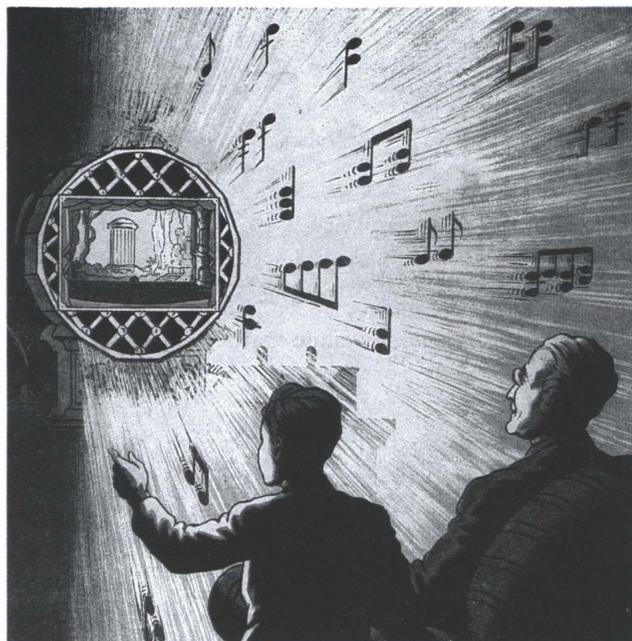
To be fair, it is perfectly possible that each new model sounds better, given the exhaustive lab measurements and double-blind listening tests we expect to back up any positive reviews. It is therefore a great pity to learn that proper blind testing has virtually never taken place in any of the review magazines [3].

This flaw in reviewers' methodology has not escaped the attention of editors in recent years, if only because of a virtual bombardment of letters to all of them, mainly, it seems, from myself. And it's been an interesting, if rather unrewarding, experience.

### Little green pens

The need to question reviewing practices was not initially prompted by general deficiencies in editorial policy, but by the sheer number of incredible reviews endorsing highly dubious products. The first of any note since David Fisher's article was the green ink treatment for compact discs. According to several reviewers, the improvements were 'surprisingly high at around 20%'; treated CDs gained 'clarity and focus' and 'images were focused and strengthened' [4]. And all this from simply running an opaque layer of green ink or paint around the inner and outer edges of each disc.

The ink works by absorbing stray laser light that apparently bounces around, causing all sorts of nasties, in a spinning CD. This was confirmed in a Loughborough University of Technology test research report by one Dr Peter R Smith [5]. Though a number of different pens and colours were tested (some considerably cheaper than the 'genuine' green pens known as CD Stoplight and Lassa), the pens being flogged by dealers and in gadget catalogues



Mary Evans

'Spektrophone' provides visual accompaniment to radio

were judged OK for the job [6].

Well, having just read an issue of *Skeptical Inquirer*, I fired off a letter to *Hi-fi World*, which had made favourable noises about the pens, quoting results of a different test (by audio engineer Fred E Davis [7]). This showed that stray laser light does not affect sound quality at all because, when it does manage to get directed back to where it came from, the stray light is overwhelmed by the main beam.

My letter duly appeared, with responses from two reviewers [8]. Jimmy Hughes wrote: '...my ears tell me it does [work], and many thousands of sceptical but open-minded hi-fi enthusiasts worldwide have tried it and found likewise'. Mr Hughes has apparently no problem accepting that the absorption theory may be wrong but, he writes: '... isn't it often the case with science that... repeatable phenomena are witnessed long before a convincing explanation demystifies things?'. He implores us to not dismiss the green pen treatment out of hand, despite having cited no real evidence in its favour. But the real gem in his reply, still arguing against the absorption theory is: 'And how to explain the fact that green pens work very effectively on vinyl LP records'. Vinyl! I've still no idea where this claim originated or what possessed anyone to try it, but again, where is the evidence?

After suggesting a few multicoloured CD edge treatments, the implications of which he finds 'pretty staggering', Mr Hughes quotes Thomas Huxley, urging us to 'give up every preconceived notion' and to go into 'whatever abysses nature leads, or you shall learn nothing'. Humbling stuff, indeed.

The second reply, from one Eric Braithwaite, tried to convince its readers that they simply had a choice, of accepting the results of either Fred Davis or Dr Smith. This totally ignored the fact that Dr Smith's findings, whilst being probably accurate, were also completely irrelevant. Mr Braithwaite also trotted out the old 'let's live and let live' argument, saying in effect that if we fool ourselves but enjoy it, where's the harm?



Mary Evans

'Grammophonkonzert' at the Beethovensaal (1904)

Well, I wrote back [9], picked fault, exposed illogicality, threw in a dollop of Bertrand Russell and it changed nothing. And what did I expect? Probably a humble refusal to deny the undeniable, and a *volte-face* from *Hi-fi World*. But boy, was I naive... [10]

### Misguided Lasers

My second urge to change the world forever was inspired by a free sample of LaserGuide [11]. This is a cream cleaner for CDs and it supposedly brings improvements in clarity and imaging, like the Green Pen. I sent *Hi-fi World* the results of a double-blind test I conducted with two friends, using four pairs of identical discs; one set cleaned, the other untouched. The results by the way, were doubly disappointing because no one could pick out a treated disc to save their lives and, in one case, the disc had also been covered in green ink [12].

It was Mr Braithwaite who responded. He had apparently conducted his own blind test with friends that was: 'even more blindfold than usual, for they had no idea what I was doing, even if anything, nor to what'. Quite how a man, who's paid to tinker around with hi-fi all day, can hope to convince anyone that he's not up to something when he says 'Listen to this!' is beyond me. But more importantly, we have here an admission that blind testing is considered by at least one reviewer to be a strong form of proof. And for the first time it begged the question: why not do such testing as a matter of course? But as has already been intimated, the apparent integrity of hi-fi experts can be dependent on things other than making changes in the name of good methodology, or for consumers' benefits.

### Sticky Flying Saucers

Meanwhile, at the offices of *Hi-fi News*, a new product was being reviewed by Ken Kessler and Martin Colloms. Sixteen strange furry coated discs, each about the size of a two

pence piece, were being put through their paces [13]. But first, Kessler tells us about his introduction to these discs in a demonstration room hired in a Las Vegas hotel. He strolled in, knowing the company made tweak products, and reported that: 'I – like many visitors – noticed that the room was more comfortable and more serene than the others... I was told later that the room had been treated with [the discs] which tuned the room for a better sound'.

You see, these neat little discs are taken out of their nice wooden box and stuck with tape (supplied) onto the walls and ceilings of your room corners. Now that's three in each top corner, with two pairs left to treat the walls/floor/skirting board behind your speakers. You can experiment with combinations and positions of course, to get them tuning just right.

Kessler goes on: 'Already I had admitted that [the discs] did something... instinctively and without knowing that they were in use'. This is clearly a very special listener who cannot be fooled, for how else could he know? (Is his real name not Kessler, but Kreskin?). The fact that rooms can vary acoustically anyway, not just because they've been 'tuned', seems to escape Kessler, but never mind. He takes some discs back to England and – lo! – he asks a friend round, doesn't tell them anything, has the discs in place and asks them if they can hear anything different.

This is yet again the variation on the good old blind test routine apparently favoured by hi-fi experts: don't actually *do* a proper blind test, but imply that you have, whilst you offer not a shred of evidence for your perceptual abilities, or the products you endorse. Kessler's colleague, Martin Colloms, then offers his own opinion 'after a carefully organised and exhaustive listening session', one that, alas, did not include any blind testing. He writes: 'Vocals sounded more intimate; the room appeared larger and drier, better resolution in the spaces between the notes'. He concludes: 'I was ultimately impressed with the subtle effect of these latest ... products. Once again the company's fanciful claims are proved true'. Proved? What proof? Since when do highly subjective opinions constitute proof of anything? I vowed to try them out for myself, but I didn't get round to it. There's nothing stopping any interested reader however. Just dig deep into your pocket, fish out five hundred and forty-five pounds – it's a really pretty box – and sixteen Harmonix RFA-78 room tuning devices are all yours...

### Fish fingers, peas... and CDs

Earlier in 1993, Jimmy Hughes reported in *Audiophile* about amazing improvements to CDs being wrought by cryogenic freezing [14]. So it was with some surprise that I read of his own efforts to do the same, wondering just where he was getting all the necessary and expensive equipment from. Well, the place in question was probably Comet or Rumbelows, because Mr Hughes's ingenious equivalent of cryogenic freezing is achieved using the space in your average kitchen freezer compartment next to the frozen chips. The trick is not just to freeze the discs, but to control the thaw rate. So having been in the freezer overnight, they must be put in the fridge for several hours and then transferred to a cool box. Best results are gained by doing this twice in order to fully 'relax the lattice structure of the

polycarbonate substrate distorted by heat and pressure during the pressing process'. Freezing 'realigns the molecular structure of the material leaving it less vibration-prone.' Hmm. Much to the chagrin of *Audiophile's* managing editor, Jonathan Kettle, the frozen CD story was picked up by the *Sunday Telegraph* and Radio 5, both having a chuckle about it at *Audiophile's* expense. Kettle countered with the observation that many things sound daft on the face of it: '...imagine telling a 1970s music centre owner that they would be using laser optics to play five inch silver discs... They'd have branded you a loony'. Kettle went on to describe the antics of dedicated enthusiasts in quite heroic terms, implying how often their trusted ears come up with anomalies, leaving science floundering for an explanation. Mr Kettle had of course picked an unfortunate example in laser optics because they certainly weren't the product of crackpots messing around on the fringes of science. But then, I can't really think of an example Mr Kettle could have used. The comparison of this type of special pleading with similar claims made for 'heroes' like Erich von Däniken, Velikovsky, Targ and Puthoff, *et al*, will no doubt not be lost on sceptics.

Undaunted, and fully behind Jimmy Hughes, *Audiophile* joined in a Radio 5 challenge; a blind test, no less, of frozen CDs. And blow me, having been asked to pick out the frozen CD from tracks played live down a BT line (!), Mr Kettle guessed right. They were dreadful circumstances, he admitted, but his ears were skilled enough not to be fazed by them [15].

Crucially, this test represented a big step forward for reviewers; the willingness to take part in blind testing, however badly it was organised. Moreover, it was a willingness to accept the validity of blind test results and to trumpet them when they supported previous claims.

Only five issues later, we come back down to earth with a bump. *Audiophile* had heard about a huge blind test done in Germany, and they didn't like it one bit. 160 people, including hi-fi buffs, were asked to identify CD and vinyl formats, and the experts were the least able [16]. But it wasn't just the results that editor Richard Charnley didn't like, it was blind testing itself. He put the poor results down to 'stress', 'unwanted pressures' and the wrong frame of mind, thus echoing the excuses of the string of psychics and charlatans who have performed abysmally in the laboratory. This pathetic refusal to accept the validity of blind testing because of some disagreeable results, was partly echoed in the editorial of *Hi-fi News* [17]. At least, editor Steve Harris expressed concern about how reliable it was to switch rapidly from one source to another, when it can take years to appreciate some of the subtle differences between formats. If this is a real problem, the solution is easy: set up a blind test, pop in the pipe, ease into the slippers, relax on the sofa and take as long as you like to listen to the test products. And yet so much has been and continues to be written about the 'problems' of blind testing; gaining the 'right states of consciousness', the length of time it takes, the expense, the difficulties of statistical analysis [18].

*Hi-fi News* went on to reflect a frustrating ambivalence: having conceded that 'there is room, and even a need, for

more blind testing [19], a reader who pleaded for more rigorous controls was told that he seemed 'to have neither read nor understood the contents of the magazine' (it seemed quite the contrary to me). Then, in a subsequent issue, there were the results of a properly controlled blind test, but they were negative and there have been no more tests reported since [20]. The most depressing comment of late came from the pen of Ben Duncan, who railed against hard-line objectivists and the 'crass psychology' of all blind testing [21]. When challenged, he argued in all seriousness that if listeners have to be 'blindfolded', then why, if we ask photographers to pick out their favoured photographic film from a row of different prints, don't we fit them with ear plugs? [22].

And so it seems there is really no willingness to change reviewing practices, in spite of one or two glimmers of hope. The press continue to find sonic benefits in all manner of cables, magic black boxes, cleaners, creams, potions even 'acoustic rugs'. Readers continue to write, enthusing about covering their CDs, and even their players' interiors, with loads of green ink; and two readers have extolled the virtues of deep freezing complex electrical equipment, as well as CDs, in spite of the obvious dangers [23].

As David Fisher concluded, there is something desperately worrying about all this, especially the cynical and disingenuous nature of the trend. Ken Kessler has written that he worries about the 'levels of weirdness' he and his hi-fi colleagues are willing to accept, and that dedicated enthusiasts are 'highly susceptible to nonsense' [24]. And yet he has also argued that the sheer volume of sales of hi-fi 'accessories' is a clear indication that they must work [25]. Just like all those photos of ghosts and UFOs must prove something? It's all a bit rich considering his reluctance to root out any nonsense and judging by the burgeoning list of dubious accessories sold through his own magazine. So we shouldn't really be quite so surprised at the dearth of scepticism, integrity and scientific competence.

The hi-fi press has had an opportunity for at least two decades to marry the best of objective testing and subjective listening to produce reviews of valuable insight, but they shun it. Though I am well aware of hi-fi dealers who scoff at all the mumbo-jumbo, it is the press who leave many consumers wallowing in ignorance, confused and captivated by claptrap, eagerly waiting for the next miracle tweak to come along, dragging sonic nirvana way, way, way behind it. It reads like some kind of conspiracy theory, in which everything possible is done within a collusive industry to sell us anything, instead of what we would be perfectly happy with. And believe me, the number of enthusiasts with a drawerful of discarded nine-day wonders is astonishing. Sadly, of all the crazy theories around, it's one of the most plausible ones.

## References

1. D Fisher, 'Homeopathy for your Hi-Fi?', *British & Irish Skeptic*, July/August, 1989.
2. Current magazines available are: *What Hi-Fi?*, *Hi-fi World*, *Hi-fi Choice* and *Hi-fi News & Record Review*. *Audiophile* published its last issue in May, 1994. It has subsequently been incorporated into *What Hi-Fi?*. The same fate befell *Hi-fi Answers*, which became part of *Audiophile*.

3. Blind testing of products does take place, notably in *Hi-fi Choice*, but this is simply in comparison reviews of, say, a dozen loudspeakers. Extraordinary claims are never tested and no reviewer has stuck his neck out and tested his own expertise. Personally, I believe the gap between a reviewer's sense of his own expertise and his actual performance would be a direct measure of how badly he is deluded by sighted conditions.

4. Quotes taken from Lassa's advertising in *What Hi-fi?*, December, 1991.

5. E Braithwaite, Letters, *Hi-fi World*, March, 1992, p.79.

6. Lassa's green pen – sorry, make that 'Digital Audio Applicator' – has unwittingly found its way into my graphics studio in the form of a poster colour marker. It's a Uni Posca, made by the Mitsubishi Pencil Co. of Japan. Apart from a sticky label and a 'Uni' logo, the pens are identical. The Lassa costs £9.99, the Uni £2.99.

7. F E Davis, *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 16, no.1, p.91.

8. As 5.

9. Letters, *Hi-fi World*, June, 1992, p.46.

10. In 1992 I feigned interest in buying a green pen from a salesman at a hi-fi show in Heathrow's Penta Hotel. I said I'd tried a rival pen, but with no success. He asked what system I owned and told me it was probably 'too good' to reveal what the pen can do. I ambled past the stall some hours later and spoke to another salesman, this time explaining I had the same problem but with a 'cheap' hi-fi system. He didn't hesitate to tell me that cheap CD players are far less likely to show any benefits than more sophisticated ones.

11. *Hi-fi World*, December, 1991.

12. Letters, *Hi-fi World*, March, 1992, p.81.

13. *Hi-fi News*, July, 1993, p.41-42.

14. J Hughes, 'At the Sharp End', *Audiophile*, January, 1993.

15. J Kettle, 'Comment', *Audiophile*, May, 1993, p.15.

16. R Charnley, 'From where I sit', *Audiophile*, October, 1993, p.9.

17. S Harris, 'Comment', *Hi-fi News*, January, 1994, p.7.

18. B Duncan, 'Black Box', p.23; Dr R Graham. Letters, p.8, *Hi-fi News*, April, 1995.

19. As 17.

20. A Watling, 'Golden Ears?', *Hi-fi News*, May, 1994. Alan Watling tested the theory that high grade components, when substituted for cheaper versions, improve sound quality.

21. B Duncan, (see 18).

22. B Duncan, Letters, *Hi-fi News*, June, 1995.

23. Ken Kessler reviewed an Italian 'AudioCarpet' in June, 1995 (*Hi-fi News*, p.25). Although he commented that, for a price ranging from £575 to £1555, they ought to fly, he couldn't resist writing: 'I see the carpet the entire time I'm listening... It's presence makes me feel good... it makes my mood more relaxed and my hearing more acute. Ergo, my system sounds better...'. As for freezing equipment, John Peter and Tom Marsden, both *Audiophile* readers, reported positive results for cables, cassettes, personal stereos, etc. Mr Marsden lamented: 'Size alone has prevented my deep freezing the power amp and television – but I'm working on it'. The editor was quick to point out the risks of short circuiting, electrocution and burning down one's home (See the July and March, 1993 copies of *Audiophile* respectively).

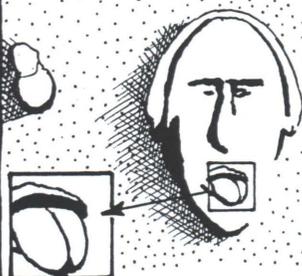
24. As 13.

25. Letters, *Hi-fi News*, May, 1994.

Richard Ward is a freelance illustrator and voluntary worker. He lives in London with Michelle, two cats and more CDs than he cares to mention.

## STRANGE SIGHTS IN OUR SOLAR SYSTEM ....

The face on Mars....



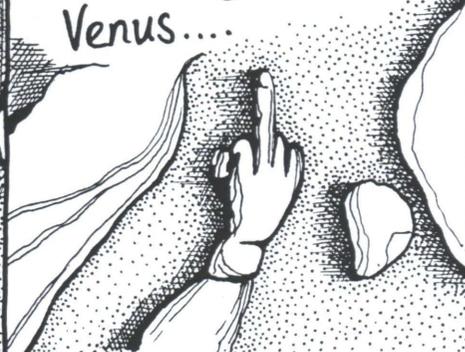
Is this region really a giant tongue-like formation?

The mooning buttocks on Mercury...



What were these people like??

The rude gesture on Venus....



Still highly classified....

... IS SOMEONE TRYING TO TELL US SOMETHING...?

# Traveller in Black

John Brunner, 1934 – 1995

Dave Langford

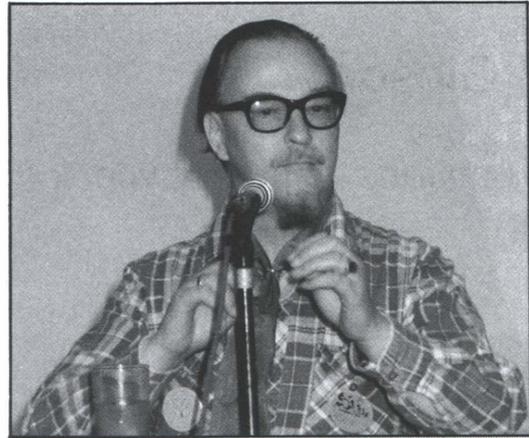
**T**HE BRITISH SF AUTHOR John Kilian Houston Brunner died on 25 August after suffering a stroke at the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow. At the convention's awards ceremony, his friend Robert Silverberg recalled John's SF achievements and suggested that rather than a minute's silence, he'd have liked a last round of applause. The standing ovation continued for four minutes.

John was indeed a giant of SF, dealing at his best with lived-in futures combining extrapolative exhilaration and the nightmare of future shock. *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968) with its focus on overpopulation was his recognized blockbuster, winning the coveted Hugo award (the SF Oscar, usually monopolized by Americans). It slightly overshadows its companion volumes *The Jagged Orbit* (1969), *The Sheep Look Up* (1972) – a scaring polemic against pollution which ends with the stench of all America burning – and *The Shockwave Rider* (1975), prophetically mapping problems of information overload, computer viruses, rampant hacking and the Internet.

His hatred of superstition and cant combined with wide-ranging erudition to make him a longtime supporter of the skeptical movement, even before it took shape in Britain. One belief he regarded as rank superstition was the value of nuclear deterrence as a route to world peace: not a safe political position in 1958, when John was in the first Aldermaston march and wrote the song *The H-Bombs' Thunder*, later the anthem of CND. As for religion... someone in *The Stone That Never Came Down* (1973) bitterly challenges a religious fanatic to name one, just one, weapon of mass destruction not invented by a nation supposedly honouring the teachings of Jesus Christ.

In 1975 the Institute of Contemporary Arts ran a lecture series as part of its SF festival. John Taylor appeared, mentioning how he'd seen the famous spoon-bending phenomenon 'occurring under conditions in which there was no chance of fraud'. By coincidence, John Brunner had long been fuming over the widespread notion that all SF readers are gullible idiots ripe for any pseudoscientific drivel. In a speech entitled 'Science Fiction and the Larger Lunacy' he lambasted the counterfeiters who pass off their grubby imaginings as science fact.

The boot went into Velikovsky, Erich von Däniken and 'T Lobsang Rampa', as preface to John's assault on 'the single most wholly dishonest book I have ever had the misfortune to set eyes on', being Pauwels' and Bergier's



Nick Shears

*The Morning of the Magicians*. Penicillin is a phallic mushroom! Plutonium was well known at the Gas Board in Paris years before being synthesized in California! Best of all, Professor and US Senator Ralph Milne Farley is cited as a scientific authority: but John recognized 'Farley's' theory as a bad summary of *The Immortals*, a dire 1934–5 SF novel by a hack whose pen-name was Ralph Milne Farley. The polemic broadens into a lament over the old 'two cultures' division: when *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* contains hopeless scientific howlers and a contemporary encyclopaedia says there are 1580 feet in a mile, how can we ever clean the crap out of the stables? This talk is reprinted in *Science Fiction At Large* edited by Peter Nicholls (1976), reissued as *Explorations of the Marvellous* (1978).

Alas, John Brunner was cursed by sanity. He felt he'd said all he had to say in those big, ambitious, acclaimed novels of the 60s and 70s... which by sheer ill luck failed to provide him with a continuing income. Afterwards, despite the exuberance of his early works, he found himself increasingly unable to write lucrative potboilers with wish-fulfilment themes; he seemed to grow embittered. The death of John's first wife Marjorie in 1986 cast a long shadow. She had handled all his business affairs for nearly three decades, and without her John found it difficult to maintain diplomatic relations with publishers. He is survived by his second wife LiYi Tan Brunner, a Chinese immigrant: they married in 1991.

Characteristically, John's one major excursion into the never-never lands of pure fantasy – *Traveller in Black* (1971) – stars an enigmatic figure whose goal is to purge the universe of irrationality, drive back chaos, force magic to give way to scientific law. It proves a lonely and thankless job. In this sense, John too was a traveller in black. He is much missed.

**David Langford** is an SF author and critic (also, between times, software developer), and currently one of the ant-like workers on a monumental *Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* scheduled for next year.

# The Triumph of Alternative Therapy

H B Gibson

## *Pills, potions and poppycock in health care*

**T**HERE IS NO DOUBT ABOUT IT: 'Alternative Therapy' is a huge success in terms of its popularity and the millions of pounds that are spent on it annually. Even such a conservative shop as Boots the Chemist now displays numerous gadgets and nostrums that many of us of a more sceptical outlook regard as simple hocus pocus.

One of the many factors that contribute to this popularity is, oddly enough, the growing honesty and efficiency of conventional medicine. Up to about the 1950s, conventional medicine had few really effective drugs and treatments to offer. My sister, who was a medical student long ago, described how she and her fellow students visited the laboratories of a large drugs firm. There they were introduced to many medicines that were neutral in terms of pharmacology (as useless as modern homeopathic medicines) but were in common use because of their placebo effect. I remember that she brought home a bottle of a 'tonic' which tasted absolutely awful. They were told what ingredient was added to give it this foul taste, and it was explained that a medicine had to taste so terrible for patients to believe that it would be effective. Only with such a horrible mixture would patients cease plaguing their GP with demands that they should be cured of their various intractable ailments.

### The penalties of honesty

When orthodox medical practitioners began to have a greater range of effective drugs at their disposal and a proper system of diagnostic testing and referral to specialists, they had less need to prescribe inert placebos, and they began to be more honest with their patients. They could drop the mask of pretended omniscience and take patients into their confidence. There are many conditions of unknown aetiology for which no known remedies have yet been discovered. The honest modern GP will admit this, and consequently some of his more neurotic patients will then seek out some sort of quack – a herbalist, a toe-puller (reflexologist), an iridologist (who gazes into their eyes), a homeopath (who sells them plain water at a fancy price), an acupuncturist (who feels their 12 pulses and shoves in needles here and there), a quack who examines not them, but a lock of their hair or a spot of blood on blotting paper (radiesthetist) – need I go on? There are so many brands of quacks that the list would be long and tedious.

None of these quacks will frankly admit that they do



Mary Evans/Guy Lyon Playfair

*Reflexologists at the London Festival of Mind/Body/Spirit*

not know what is wrong with a patient or what would be a sensible treatment – hell no! Patients would not pay fees to be told this! They will pull their toes, or examine their irises, and so on, whatever the complaint is, and charge accordingly. This is 'alternative therapy' backed up by a load of flimflam to appeal to the credulous who are impressed by the superstitions of The New Age.

It should be admitted that there are a few – fortunately a small minority – of properly qualified medical doctors who will lean towards this sort of hocus-pocus. If they are pretty well convinced that certain patients have nothing much wrong with them – or nothing that orthodox medicine can remedy, instead of being honest with such patients, they are content that those patients with more money than sense should consult quacks.

After all, if one believes in a quack treatment, however ridiculous, the placebo element associated with taking it may have a beneficial effect and aid natural processes of healing. And of course (most importantly!) such patients will no longer clutter up the surgery with their demands for treatment of their impossible ailments. I have discussed this aspect of medical practice elsewhere [1].

### My own case

A while ago I had a horrid condition of pain and stiffness in the muscles of my left shoulder and arm, following an attack of flu. As it didn't clear up I went to see my doctor, and he gave me a series of tests. All these tests gave negative results. At least I hadn't got brucellosis or half a dozen other nasty diseases that might have been responsible for the condition, but he frankly admitted that he did not know what was causing the continued pain and stiffness. After some weeks of continued disability he referred me to the consultant in the Department of Medicine for the Elderly at the local hospital. Here I was given yet more tests, all of which proved negative, as well as being asked many searching questions, such as whether I had ever been bitten by a tsetse fly (or was it a warble fly?), scratched by a lemur, or suffered from frostbite in the arctic. Perhaps these weren't the exact questions but the investigation certainly was thorough. In the end the consultant told me exactly what my GP had told me – that he hadn't the faintest idea what was wrong with me. I was grateful to him that, being a sensible bloke, he did not suggest that it was all in the mind and advance any daft psychoanalytic diagnosis. The painful condition lasted for about 18 months unchanged, and then quite suddenly it went away. I have no idea why it went away; I had not changed my diet or my way of life – the condition just disappeared.

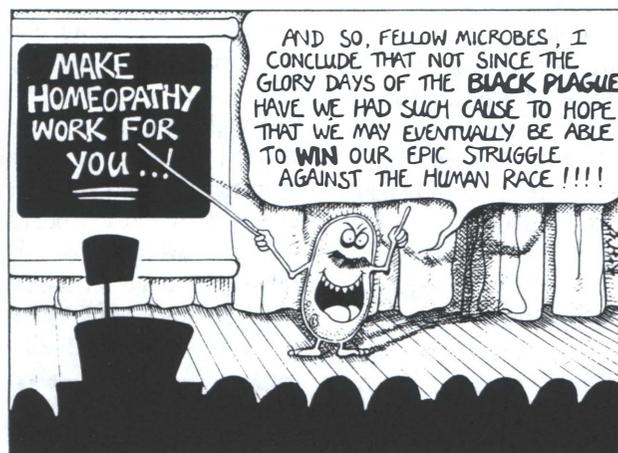
If after about a year of suffering I had despaired of conventional medicine and gone to some quack who pulled my toes, fed me a mixture of mysterious herbs, pricked my ears with needles, or given me plain water to drink assuring me that it was a powerful medicine, when the natural remission occurred six months later, as it did, I might have been convinced. The toe-pulling, herb-eating, needle-pricking or whatever would have been followed by an apparent cure, so would not that have proved the triumph of 'alternative therapy'?

### The New Age

It is natural that unconventional treatments should appeal to young people if they are in a state of rebellion against the orthodoxies of society, and hence orthodox medicine. There is something appealing about chewing ginseng when Pluto is in the house of Venus, or some other astrological twaddle, as a cure for facial acne ('Well, no-one has ever proved that it doesn't cure it, have they?') but there are signs that the quackery business is now targeting older people as a potentially lucrative market. There is a growing number of papers and magazines aimed at older and retired people, and all sorts of advertisements, cleverly worded so that they escape condemnation by the Advertising Standards Authority, are appearing in them offering a variety of products, some obviously fraudulent, designed to cater for the health needs of

elderly people. It is hardly surprising that they should be a target group for this kind of quackery, for later life brings with it disabilities such as rheumatism, arthritis, heart trouble, failing sexual potency in men, osteoporosis, wrinkles, hair loss and a general failing of physical power. Orthodox medicine does not claim to be able to abolish all these ills, although there are sensible treatments that alleviate them and may delay their progress, but the quacks are all for claiming wonders.

At every stage of life health is a relative thing, and one must realise that although an adequate income is necessary for the maintenance of well-being, health is not a commodity that can be bought. What is it, then, that the clients of quacks are seeking to buy as well as, and perhaps more importantly than, relief from their ailments or sub-optimal health? I suggest that it is support for an attitude of mind that wants to reject the realities of the twentieth century. They may know very well that in Britain in 1901 the life expectancy of males at birth was only 45 years, and that now in the 1990s it is 73 years, and for females the figures are even better. This gain of approximately 30 extra years added to the life-span has largely been due to improvements in public health, the population becoming better educated and able to take advantage of the great strides that orthodox medicine and allied health sciences have made in conquering disease and promoting positive health by medical and surgical care and advising on hygiene, better diet and housing. They may know this, but for psychological reasons they may wish to reject such knowledge. They wish to perceive themselves as living in a ruined world: the atmosphere is being polluted by exhaust gases; the crops are being sprayed with harmful pesticides; electricity may be leaking out from power lines and, perhaps, domestic power sockets, ruining our health; radioactivity may leak out from smoke-detectors and clobber us; fluoride salts and other poisons are added to our drinking water by mad scientists; doctors menace our health by harmful drugs and 'unnatural' procedures. There is no actual proof that contraception ruins women's health, makes them sterile and promotes cancer, but well it might, for it hasn't been proved that it doesn't! While there is a certain amount of truth in some of these statements, it is merely foolish to regard ourselves as living in a ruined world, and to reject the benefits that a proper application of science may confer on us.



Do all such people really believe in the poppycock advanced by quacks of the New Age? Well, there is a difference between believing in something, and believing that we believe. Do a lot of people really believe that wine can literally be turned into blood, and biscuit to flesh? The question of what constitutes belief is important and has been well explored by George Wells [2].

It may be argued that the procedures offered by the al-



# The Age of Aquarius

Val Dobson

## The making of a New Age myth

*The belief in a coming renewal or millennium or new age [...] is nothing more than a projection onto history of the basic human experience of a cosmos in which every day the Sun rises and defeats the terrors of the night.*

– Nicholas Cainpion, *The Great Year*

**N**EW AGERS CONSTANTLY TELL US that the Age of Aquarius is almost upon us, that it may even have started. But ask them exactly what it is and when it started/is going to start, and they will either look blank or waffle vaguely about conjunctions, consciousness and channelling. It is an all-purpose cliché that is hardly ever seriously examined.

The Aquarian Age myth is largely a conflation of two concepts: The Great Year, and the Precession of the Equinoxes.

The Great Year is an extremely old idea; the ancients, observing that the stars and planets moved in cycles, concluded from this that human history must also unfold in cycles. These Great Year cycles varied in length between cultures. Determined by a mixture of numerology and astronomical observations, they could be anything from a few centuries to millions of years long. They were also divided into phases; the number of these phases also varied, with three, four and seven seeming to be favourites. Whatever the number, the first of these phases was always a Golden Age of peace and plenty and the final phase was always an Age of Destruction. Surviving documentary evidence from pre-Christian times suggest that people (or, at least, the writers and thinkers) always considered that they were living in the decadent final days of the Last Age, with the new Golden Age – their particular Age of Aquarius – just around the corner.

It was the Greek philosophers and scientists of the first millennium BCE – Aristotle, Pythagoras, Herodotus, Heraclitus and (especially) Plato who were most influential in embedding the idea of a millennia-long Great Year permanently into Western thought.

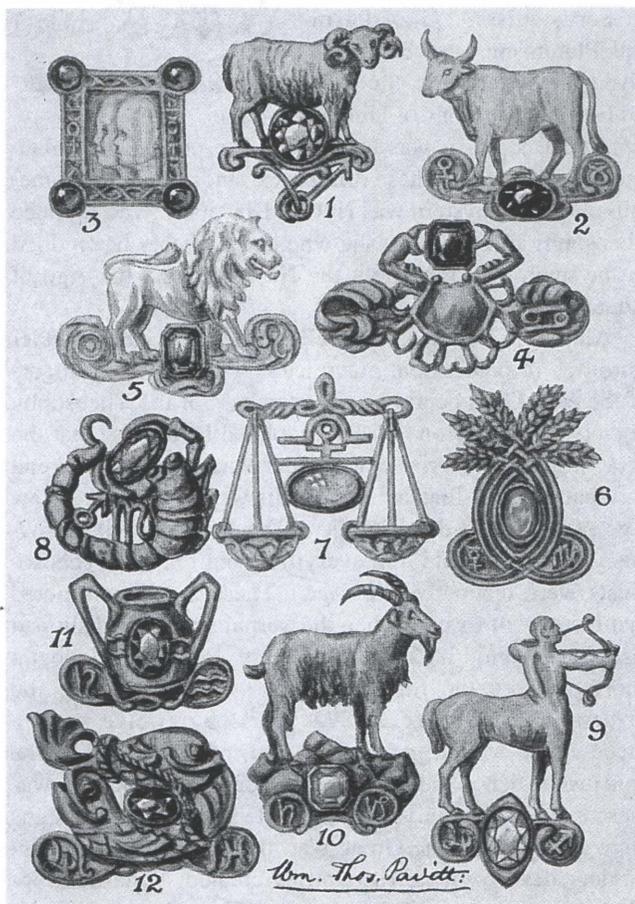
Plato formulated a Great Year of 36,000 years that began and ended with worldwide destruction, marked by a conjunction of all the planets. He was obviously influenced by Mesopotamian science in this – for at least the previous 1500 years, the numbers six, 360 and 3,600 had been regarded as sacred numbers by the various cultures of the Mesopotamian Basin. And for the next 1500 or so years, this Platonic Year cycle was accepted by Western



thinkers as more or less self-evident historical fact.

Around 130 BCE and some three centuries after Plato, another Greek, Hipparchus, wrote the first known description of the Precession of the Equinoxes (it is not known if he discovered it or was merely restating an already-known fact).

Precession is an astronomical phenomenon; because of a slight 'wobble' in the Earth's rotation, the Sun, when observed over many years, appears to be moving slowly backwards in the sky relative to the background Zodiac.



The 12 signs, from *The Book of Talismans* (1914)

This effect is best observed at sunrise on the two annual Equinox days (in March and September), hence the name.

In Hipparchus' time, the Vernal (Spring) Equinox Sunrise was in the beginning of the constellation of Aries. Therefore, in Greek astrology (from which developed our modern Western astrology), 0 degrees of Aries was designated as the beginning of the Zodiac. Hipparchus calculated the rate of precession as being 1 degree per century. (The actual rate is 1° 23' 5" per century, giving a Precessional Year of 25,872 years.) There is no evidence that Plato was aware of precession – he certainly didn't link his Great Year to solar cycles or the constellations – but as there are 360 degrees in the Zodiac, it was a natural assumption of later astrologers that a complete precessional circuit of the Sun through the Zodiac was the same as Plato's Great Year of 360 centuries, and that this Great Year could be divided into twelve historical periods, known as Great or Precessional Months, corresponding to the Zodiac signs. So began the conflation.

The idea that human history followed the form of a Precessional Great Year, neatly separated into Precessional Months with characteristics set by the corresponding astrological sign, really took off in the 19th century.

Europe was at that time in a ferment of new political, philosophical and religious ideas. Older mystical/magical traditions such as Quabbalism, Rosicrucianism, Gnosticism and Platonism were being revived and interest in the new (to Europe) religions of Hinduism and Buddhism was rocketing. The person who managed to combine all these different strands (and then some) into one belief system was Helena Blavatsky, who founded Theosophy in 1887. It is she who can probably be credited as the main author of both the New Age and the Age of Aquarius.

Although Blavatsky herself wrote little about either astrology or precession, many leading Western astrologers of the early 20th century were members of the Theosophy Society. A cornerstone of Theosophical belief was that the present gross, material world order was coming to an end and that a World Teacher was on His way to usher in a New Age of enlightened spirituality. (The World Teacher obviously had to be male – in everything but religion, Theosophists were distinctly Old Age.) These astrologers noted that the Age of Pisces (when the Vernal sunrise had slipped backwards into the constellation of Pisces) had begun shortly before the time of Christ's birth. Dividing the Precessional Year (of 25,872 years) by twelve gave a Precessional Month, or Zodiac Age, of 2,156 years. The conclusion that a New Age was indeed approaching was inescapable. Not only was the date close, but the signs were all around – the Great War, the Russian Revolution, borders destroyed, new countries created, dynasties toppled, governments reformed, scientific and technical advances in every field.



With popular interest in astrology burgeoning, these Theosophist astrologers were able to spread the idea of the coming Aquarian Age far and wide. With the typical New Ager's contempt for scientific enquiry and rational thinking, they failed to ask themselves some rather obvious questions.

For instance, did previous historical eras really correspond to the astrological characteristics of the relevant Age? The Age of Taurus (approximately 4,300 – 2,200 BCE) was, according to astrological Precessional theory, marked by agricultural advances and bull-worship. Major advances in agriculture had been made long before then, and bull-worship was barely known outside central Europe and Egypt. Likewise, the Age of Aries (2,200 – 100 BCE approx.) was supposedly uniquely characterised by warfare and ram-worship. Warfare has, unfortunately, never been confined to one particular Age, while the people of Australasia, Africa, the Americas and most of Asia have never indulged in ram-worship.

As for the present peaceful, tolerant, spiritualised Age of Pisces – well, squaring that with reality did present

some difficulties. Here, the new science of Jungian psychology came to the rescue – the Age of Pisces was in fact characterised by Pisces' repressive, violent, intolerant alter-ego, or 'Shadow'! (And anyway, didn't the first Christians use the Piscean symbol of the Fish?)

And when is this New Age supposed to be starting anyway? The British astrologer Nicholas Campion has done some admirable

historical research into the whole subject of the New Age and has come up with about eighty different dates to choose from, ranging from 1761 to 3500! The major difficulty with dating is working out exactly where a constellation's borders begin and end – the real stellar sky is untidy and sprawling, nothing like the beautifully-drawn antique Zodiac maps you find in coffee-table type astrology books. Additionally, the constellations of Pisces and Aquarius overlap in a major way, so that the Vernal Sunrise will be taking place in both signs for several centuries to come.

Finally, hardly anybody seems to have noticed the real problem with the whole idea of astrological ages. Namely, that when and if the Age of Aquarius puts in its long-awaited appearance, it will only be the Aquarian Age in the Northern Hemisphere. South of the Equator, the Zodiac signs are reversed and the Vernal Equinox takes place in September. The entire population of the Southern Hemisphere will therefore be enjoying the Age of Leo!

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Val Dobson is a Gemini Rising. She lives in Preston.

# An Antipodean Odyssey

Susan Blackmore

## *A skeptical trip down-under*

**T**HE AUSTRALIAN SKEPTICS held their 1995 Annual Public Convention, in Melbourne, Victoria and invited me all the way to the other end of the earth to take part.

Melbourne is right down in the south of Australia and I was warned about the weather. So if you are enviously imagining me lazing about in glorious sunshine on golden beaches, think again. It was mid-winter and just like home – wet and windy. Indeed it didn't stop raining the entire three weeks of my tour, while you were all enjoying that wonderful best summer for two centuries!

But that was the bad bit. The conference itself was a great event. Its slogan 'Use it or lose it' adorned pictures of what I can only think was meant to be a human brain, with all the cortical folds labelled 'auras, astrology, runes, psi, UFOs, and Friday 13th'. I now wear my T-shirt proudly in its memory.

The first day included sessions on fraud in science and the placebo effect. I gave a lecture on 'The Adventures of a Parapsychologist'. This was really just a chance to tell all my favourite stories of twenty years in parapsychology (hoping most of the audience had never heard them before!), from my days as a convinced believer, through the discouraging laboratory experiments with ESP cards, twins, and children, to my recent work on why belief in the paranormal is so strong. There were lots of questions and a very lively, and apparently varied, audience.

The second day began with Paul Davies asking 'Are we alone?'. Davies, professor of Natural Philosophy at Adelaide University, is probably best known for his book *The Mind of God* and for the large research grant he recently obtained from a religious foundation. He gave a fascinating lecture on the search for extraterrestrial intelligence but I never did learn whether he can really be said to believe in God.

Another session dealt with alternative medicine and led to some heated arguments, especially about chiropractic. There were clearly several practitioners in the audience and they were not reticent in giving their views. Dr Ray Lowenthal spoke about the dangers of alternative cancer treatments in 'On eye of newt and bone of shark'. Steve Basser, a doctor in Melbourne, talked about alternative therapies and asked 'Can a billion Chinese be wrong?'. His answer was: 'they sure can'. I was able to gain some insight into the scale of the problem in Australia, and his own determined and even-handed attempts to provide in-



*The author at a meeting in Sydney, receiving a gift from John Wren-Lewis, a Professor of Physics, who has had an extraordinary Near Death Experience*

formation about the effective and ineffective remedies, when he and I did an hour-long phone-in on the local radio station together.

Creationism is also a problem in Australia, which I had not realised before I went there. Steve Roberts told of the battles going on in the schools and the media, and the problem of scientific illiteracy in Australia. Ian Plimer, whose recent book *Telling Lies for God* caused much of the furore, should have spoken on the topic, but was here in England at the time, receiving an award!

On the last day I gave a lecture on Near-Death Experiences (yes, I had to give two lectures to justify my trip!) and finally there was a fascinating, and moving, session on cults. Ed Ogden, a forensic physician with the Victorian Police, spoke on Satanic cults and especially on the local cult, 'The Family', run by Anne Hamilton-Byrne. Hamilton-Byrne apparently adopted many children to take them into her cult and brought them up in complete isolation from the outside world and under conditions of horrific cruelty and abuse which left some of them permanently injured and all of them scarred for life. Sarah Hamilton-Byrne is one of the very few of the children to have survived their release into the outside world. She is now a

qualified doctor and spoke movingly, not of her ordeal, but of the psychology involved in the operation of such a cult. It certainly gave me new insight into how easily such cults can, and always have, drawn people in.

In true skeptic fashion, Bent Spoon Awards were given, magic and music were enjoyed and delegates argued long and hard about belief, disbelief, the psychic and the deceitful. One thing I especially enjoyed about the conference was the odd mixture of people there. This was clearly a public, not an academic, conference and people seemed to have come for all sorts of reasons and – as far as I could tell – to enjoy it.

After the conference I visited Adelaide, Perth, and Sydney. In each city there were local groups who took me to Australian restaurants (I declined the kangaroo steaks), arranged lectures and media appearances for me, and showed me the delights of Australian vineyards and beautiful beaches (though still in the rain I hasten to add). In Sydney I met the editors of the excellent Australian *Skeptic* magazine, and in Perth I spent many hours discussing the possible artefacts in the Gauquelin effect with Geoffrey Dean. I might add that I am rather convinced that he has found the answer to this mystery.

Finally I was able to spend just a few days in New Zealand, for more lectures in Christchurch and Wellington. Both cities have thriving skeptics groups and kind hosts to look after me. I even managed a day's skiing at the other end of the world, which was a special treat for me.

It was interesting to compare the antipodean skeptical approach with the European and American. I have always rather liked our own somewhat haphazard approach, and especially the fact that there is quite some overlap between parapsychologists and skeptics. I don't feel uncomfortable belonging to the SPR and to the UK Skeptics, for example.

### Skeptics groups down-under

**The Australian Skeptics** are based in Sydney, and publish their magazine *the Skeptic* four times a year. They also publish a number of books, host an annual Convention, and award a 'Bent Spoon Award' for 'the proponent of the most pernicious piece of paranormal or pseudoscientific piffle'. **Contact:** PO Box A2324, Sydney South, NSW 2000, Australia. **Email:** skeptics@spot.tt.sw.oz.au.

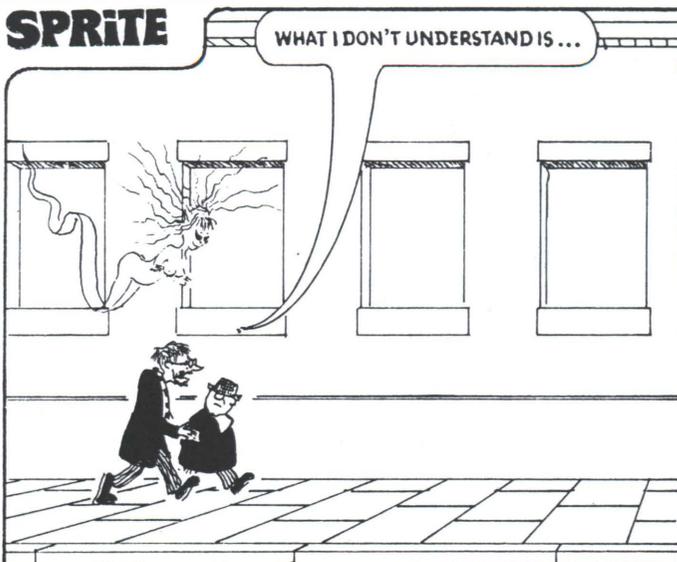


**The New Zealand Skeptics** are based in Christchurch, and publish the *New Zealand Skeptic* magazine. Their Tenth Annual Conference was held this August at Auckland University. Contributions by NZ skeptics Vicki Hyde, Nick Kim and Russell Dear appear regularly here in *The Skeptic*, and Donald Room's *Sprite* is syndicated by the *NZ Skeptic*. **Contact:** 2 Watchman's Road, RD1 Karekare, Auckland, NZ. **Email:** omcshane@deepthink.kiwi.gen.nz.

In the States I get the impression that things are more polarised, with the two groups having fewer contacts and very little overlap of personnel. I sometimes feel I am a very odd creature – a parapsychologist inside CSICOP! In this respect Australia and New Zealand were clearly more like Europe. At several of my lectures there were parapsychologists and people from New Age groups, as well as skeptics, present. Indeed in Adelaide parapsychologist Michael Thalbourne had helped provide the University venue for the lecture and in Sydney the Transpersonal psychology group were involved in the organisation of my visit. It was there that I met John Wren-Lewis whose extraordinary near-death experience I had written about in *Dying to Live* and whom I was delighted finally to meet in person. I much enjoyed this cooperative and open approach to the topics that interest me most.

I would like to thank all the many Australians and New Zealanders who made my visit possible.

**Dr Susan Blackmore** is a parapsychologist at the University of the West of England.



# Spiritualism, Ancient and Modern

Max Sexton

*From mystery cults to psychological research*

**S**TRIP AWAY THE VICTORIAN PARAPHERALIA of Spiritualism and you uncover a palimpsest of mystical belief going back to late antiquity.

The Roman world resembled the modern West and suffered the same social ills. Urbanisation was responsible for snapping traditional social bonds; alienation and anxiety flourished. Our word 'agoraphobia' recalls the *agora*, the large market square at the heart of every Hellenic city. Out of this sense of not belonging and rootlessness came an upsurge of interest in spiritual development.

During the first century B.C. the mysticism of Pythagoras was enjoying a revival, with its belief in a personal transcendence. It was one of several cults loosely called 'mystery cults' which shared a belief in spiritualism. The spirit, sometimes thought of as a divine spark and sometimes referred to as genius or 'nous', served two purposes: first, it validated the belief in an immortal soul and survival after death. Second, it supported a supernatural cosmology which was used to explain a moral and ethical system: through ascetic purification and enlightenment, ascension to the godhead became possible. The development of the mystery cults in the first centuries A.D. helped to lead to Neoplatonism, which taught that the abode of the soul was not located in the tomb or a nether region beneath the earth, the Greek Hades, but in the upper zone of the universe.

When in heaven the souls of the dead might be contacted by a form of magic known as 'theurgy'. Theurgy means *acting on* the gods as distinct from theology or *talking about* the gods. Theurgists claimed to be able to put a human medium into trance and let the spirits speak through the medium. Iamblichus, a successor to Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, said that young and simple-minded people made the best mediums.

At theurgist séances, levitation of the medium was observed, recalling D D Home's supposed feats in Victorian times. Sometimes mysterious lights appeared, and apparently ectoplasm was produced. But a word of warning: in his book *De Mysteriis*, Iamblichus uses vague phrases and some later writers have built too much on what he had to say. For instance, the ectoplasm is adduced by the

suggestion that the operator may see spirit forms entering the medium's body when the medium is falling into or emerging from trance. No description of these forms, their texture, or precise shape, is forthcoming.

Of the mediumistic utterances delivered at these private séances, several examples have survived. Most come from the collection of oracles made by Prophyry, another notable Neoplatonist, which suggest the possession of the medium by a god, or else an intermediate spirit between the gods and the souls of men known as a 'daimon'. Daimons, later to become the 'demons' of Christianity, were also troublesome lower spirits thought to be nature spirits and readily blameable for things going wrong. A modern spiritualist often blames mischievous 'lower astrals' whenever a prediction made during a séance fails to materialise.

Another danger to the medium was the intrusion of a violent spirit that the medium could not contain. Something like this was reported by Mrs Sedgwick, SPR investigator, concerning medium Mrs Piper in 1915.

The symptoms of trance were said to vary widely. A female automatist might speak in a deep male voice similar to the girl at the centre of the Enfield Poltergeist case, investigated by the SPR. An automatist will, it was claimed, discuss matters outside his or her normal range of interests and knowledge, and sometimes do so in a foreign language, presumably an example of glossolalia. When brought back out of trance the automatist would have no memory of what they had said. The parallels with 'past-life hypnotic regressions' are obvious.

In the end, Christianity replaced the mystery cults. Or rather, it absorbed them and was changed by them. Theurgy was banned under the Christian emperor Justinian but it never entirely went away. When Christianity started to fail, theurgy was revived in 1848 by the Fox sisters, although its religious underpinning had by now been shaken by the scientific outlook. The spiritual cosmology of daimons and gods was quietly dropped in favour of 'occult science' and psychical research.



Pythagoras, 540 – 510 B.C.

Max Sexton is a lecturer in Media Production at a Further Education college in Bracknell.

# Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

*Now there's a (not particularly) funny thing*



**C**OINCIDENCES ARE WEIRD, spooky and far-out, windows into a deeper level of reality, a glimpse of unseen connections between apparently unrelated parts of the Universe. Actually, coincidences are a pain in the bum.

**Case No. 1.** I am driving from Manchester to Fort William. Although I love him dearly, after three hours of Van Morrison on the CD player I can't bear to hear another note. I turn on the radio, which searches for the strongest local station. After a few seconds of silence I suddenly hear a familiar voice. It is Steve Donnelly, my *Skeptic* co-editor. I am so surprised that I spin around, expecting to find Steve crouched inexplicably in the back seat. He isn't. But he's here – live – on Radio Scotland, at the moment I happen to have tuned in.

**Case No. 2.** A colleague discusses a new software system he is developing, called 'MAVERIK'; Ten minutes later I receive email from a friend in the USA recommending a new band he has discovered: 'The Mavericks'; on the way home that evening I find myself behind a 4-wheel drive vehicle with a spare type labelled 'Maverick'; two minutes later the word 'maverick' is spoken on Radio 4's 6pm news.

**Case No. 3.** I receive email from someone I do not know: a BBC radio producer. He has been searching the Internet for his own name (a suitable Displacement Activity for the 90s). But instead of finding himself (metaphorically speaking), he has found me. He has four given names, the first two of which are 'Toby' and 'Howard'. We communicate. He, like me, is a member of the Association of British Science Writers. He reads *The Skeptic*.

**Case No. 4.** I am trying the *Guardian* crossword, with the radio on in the background. I scan the clues but can solve only one. At the exact moment I start to write in the solution – 'united' – that same word is sung by the band on the radio.

**Case No. 5.** I sit down to write this column, with the idea to mention these recent coincidences, and say something suitably and witheringly skeptical about them. I take a break to look through *The Skeptic's* postbag. The first letter I open is from parapsychologist Susan Blackmore, who sends a copy of a paper she has co-written with Robert Matthews of the University of Aston. The paper's title? *Why are coincidences so impressive?*

These examples are, of course, utterly puny. I'm sure you will have many of your own, or perhaps know some of the more famous 'celebrity' ones. Nevertheless, puny or

impressive, the 'coincidence' is a chimera of the first order. Even a superficial analysis of my examples would show that they are really not very surprising at all. But people rarely undertake any analysis, preferring instead to remember the 'coincidence', recounting it as an event of only slightly less magnitude than a miracle.

However, the fact remains that I can be as skeptical as James Randi watching a spoon bend, and still stand around fulminating at these damned 'coincidences', whose only cosmic significance is that they get on our nerves and waste our time.

In their paper (published in *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 1995, 80, pp1121–1122) Matthews and Blackmore try to pin down exactly why people suffer 'coincidences'. They cite the well-known 'Birthday Problem', where one is asked to estimate how many people it would be necessary to assemble to give even odds that at least two of them share the same birthday. The answer, extremely surprising to most people who haven't heard it before, is 23 (see 'Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics', *The Skeptic*, 9.4).

But *why* is it so surprising? Because, suggest Matthews and Blackmore, our mental models of how likely it is that events may occur are just *wrong*. They propose a measure of this wrongness, called the 'astonishment factor', defined as the ratio of our mental estimate of the likelihood of some event occurring, and the mathematically computed correct likelihood. They conducted trials with 124 subjects, presenting them with a series of questions based on a generalisation of the Birthday Problem, asking them to estimate how many people (N) you would need, to give even odds of at least two belonging to one of a number (G) of different groups. When the average results were compared to the correct mathematically computed values of N, it was found that the mental models used by the subjects operated in a linear fashion. For instance, if G doubled, so would the mental estimate of N. The correct mathematically derived prediction, however, is *non-linear*: N increases more slowly, as the square root of G.

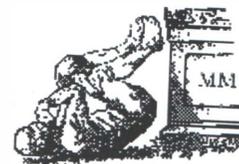
These results suggest that 'coincidence' is a ghost: a shadow of the mismatch between our mental models of probabilities, and the real probabilities of the world. And unless we can wise up our mental models, coincidences are likely to remain a pain in the bum.

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

# Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

*Improbably speaking*




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You are airhead number **021918**

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**T**HE GUY from *Scientific American* nudged me: 'Two hundred people who can't get a date on Friday night'. Pause. 'I'm going to lead with that'.

The occasion was the 1995 Ig Nobel awards, a shindig run by the same folks that bring you the *Annals of Improbable Research* (some of whom are some of the same people who used to bring you the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*). This year, the ceremony was held at Harvard University on 6 October, with five (real) Nobel Laureates in attendance to hand out glowing DNA helices as awards.

The 200 people in question were the many delegations that turn up to support the 'Ig'. There were bunches, sporting strange costumes, from the Museum of Bad Art, the Society for the Establishment of Efficient Bureaucracies (rumored to have 116 assistant presidents), Non-Extremists for Moderate Change (from Finland), Kids for DNA, Mensa, and Mutants for Biodiversity. I assumed they were all fake (except perhaps Mensa) until the day after the ceremony, when I was browsing through an issue of *People* magazine and found a write-up of the Museum of Bad Art. So it's anyone's guess which is real. They're all improbable, anyway.

Highlights of the ceremony included the Interactive Dance of the Nucleotides, performed by a local group of female dancers and the five Nobel Laureates, each holding a letter representing one of the bases of DNA or RNA. William Lipscomb (Chemistry, 1976), the oldest of the Laureates present, in particular seemed to be having a whale of a time: he played clarinet in the band that entertained the arriving and departing audience, and he danced with great energy and a broad grin on his face. What was Bill Lipscomb doing there? *He was having fun.*

Laureate Dudley Herschbach (Chemistry, 1984) put his finger on this when he told me the program had a serious message: 'Science can be fun', he shouted, before dashing off to find the food downstairs.

But you'd probably just like the complete list of 1995 winners. Here it is, straight from the AIRheads who organise the event:

- **NUTRITION:** John Martinez of J Martinez & Company in Atlanta, for Luak Coffee, the world's most expensive coffee, which is made from coffee beans ingested and excreted by the luak (*aka* the palm civet), a bobcat-like animal native to Indonesia.

- **PHYSICS:** D M R Georget, R Parker, and A C Smith, of the Institute of Food Research, Norwich, England, for their rigorous analysis of soggy breakfast cereal, published in the report entitled 'A Study of the Effects of Water

Content on the Compaction Behaviour of Breakfast Cereal Flakes'.

- **ECONOMICS:** Awarded jointly to Nick Leeson and his superiors at Barings Bank and to Robert Citron of Orange County, California, for using the calculus of derivatives to demonstrate that every financial institution has its limits.

- **MEDICINE:** Marcia E Buebel, David S Shannahoff-Khalsa, and Michael R Boyle, for their invigorating study entitled 'The Effects of Unilateral Forced Nostril Breathing on Cognition'.

- **LITERATURE:** David B Busch and James R Starling, of Madison Wisconsin, for their deeply penetrating research report, 'Rectal foreign bodies: Case Reports and a Comprehensive Review of the World's Literature'. The citations include reports of, among other items: seven light bulbs; a knife sharpener; two flashlights; a wire spring; a snuff box; an oil can with potato stopper; eleven different forms of fruits, vegetables and other foodstuffs; a jeweler's saw; a frozen pig's tail; a tin cup; a beer glass; and one patient's remarkable ensemble collection consisting of spectacles, a suitcase key, a tobacco pouch and a magazine.

- **PEACE:** The Taiwan National Parliament, for demonstrating that politicians gain more by punching, kicking and gouging each other than by waging war against other nations.

- **PSYCHOLOGY:** Shigeru Watanabe, Junko Sakamoto, and Masumi Wakita, of Keio University, for their success in training pigeons to discriminate between the paintings of Picasso and those of Monet

- **PUBLIC HEALTH:** Martha Kold Bakkevig of Sintef Unimed in Trondheim, Norway, and Ruth Nielson of the Technical University of Denmark, for their exhaustive study, 'Impact of Wet Underwear on Thermoregulatory Responses and Thermal Comfort in the Cold'.

- **DENTISTRY:** Robert H Beaumont, of Shore View, Minnesota, for his incisive study 'Patient Preference for Waxed or Unwaxed Dental Floss'.

- **CHEMISTRY:** Bijan Pakzad of Beverly Hills, for creating DNA Cologne and DNA Perfume, neither of which contain deoxyribonucleic acid, and both of which come in a triple helix bottle.

More information about the Ig Nobel awards and AIR is available electronically from [info@improb.com](mailto:info@improb.com), or on the web at <http://www.improb.com>.

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

# Reviews



## Bewitched, bothered and bewildered

Jonathan Lumby, *The Lancashire Witch-Craze: Jennet Preston and the Lancashire Witches, 1612* (Carnegie, paperback, 212 pages, £6.99)

The seventeenth century was a bad era to be unconventional in. Anyone whose beliefs or behaviour veered from the Protestant norm was in danger of being accused of witchcraft. Hundreds of supposed 'witches', mainly women, were executed throughout England before Parliament removed the death penalty for witchcraft in 1736 (G M Trevelyan, *Illustrated English Social History Vol 2*, Longman, 1951). Little or no evidence was needed: the word of a 'witness' was often thought ample. In 1633, seventeen 'witches' were arrested on no evidence other than the word of an eleven year old boy who supposedly had the gift of identifying witches at first sight (W R Mitchell, *Lancashire Witch Country*, Dalesman, 1966).

One of the more famous cases resulting from this seventeenth century obsession with witchcraft was that of the nine witches of Pendle, in Lancashire. Two novels, Harrison Ainsworth's *The Lancashire Witches* and Robert Neill's *Mist Over Pendle*, made their story well-known to nineteenth and twentieth century readers, and shops in Pendle still do a thriving trade in witchcraft 'souvenirs'. In *The Lancashire Witch-Craze* historian Jonathan Lumby considers the truth behind the fiction. He takes a careful look at the events leading up to the witches' trial, notably the trial and execution of another local 'witch', Jennet Preston.

Preston was hanged in 1612 for the murder by witchcraft of Thomas Lister, a Lancashire landowner. On his deathbed in 1607, Lister had cried out: 'Jennet Preston lies heavy upon me'. This rather dubious piece of 'evidence' against her was produced by Lister's son (also called Thomas), who also claimed that Preston had bewitched his property and cattle after his father's death. Preston was initially acquitted, but Lister, not to be defeated, then claimed that she and other 'witches' had plotted to murder him in revenge. At her second trial she was found guilty of this and of the older Lister's murder.

Lumby's book investigates possible reasons for young Lister's vendetta against Preston, and the delay in making the first set of charges. He speculates that Preston may have been the older Lister's mistress, and that she and those accused with her could have been secret Catholics and therefore liable to violent religious persecution.

At least one of the accused, Alice Nutter, was known to be a devout Catholic, and was believed to be related to a priest who had been hung, drawn and quartered for his beliefs in 1583.

The book is a serious scholarly work with a good index and bibliography, and a useful appendix reprinting a contemporary account of the trial. It is well-illustrated and reasonably priced, but the concentration on one case means that the book will be of limited appeal to anyone without a specialist interest in the subject.

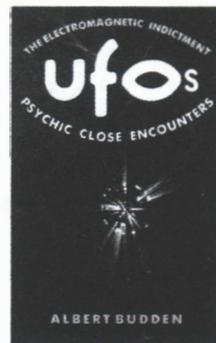
Perhaps it is slightly churlish of me to feel that it would be more interesting to the general reader if it was a little more concise. At times, the wealth of detail Lumby provides is so overwhelming that I found myself in danger of losing track of his argument.

However, the book will be invaluable to students of folklore and Lancashire history.

— Chris Willis

## Tag with extra-terrestrial ghosts

Albert Budden, *The Electromagnetic Indictment: UFO's Psychic Close Encounters* (Blandford, paperback, 256 pages, £9.99)



Most skeptics would agree that UFOs do not exist as space ships or other physical vehicles out there. The very idea of foreigners or extra-terrestrials playing tag with the air forces of the world for decades is a little ridiculous. Besides, why fly around with lights blazing when a little dark paint or camouflage would make their crafts well

nigh invisible? Since the nearest possibly inhabited planet is light years away, only nuts would come this far merely to play games. Those close encounters, abductions, inspections, operations, and sexual unions reported by individuals must be going on in their minds. Budden would agree with most of the foregoing.

Budden's contends, however, that the encounters are not psychological but psychic. In other words, there really is something happening. Budden compares close encounters to hauntings and apparitions, to ghosts and entities familiar from descriptions in the psychic literature, which he refers to extensively. He sees it as a form of psychokinesis akin to the appearance of poltergeists. In close encounters the unconscious mind stages magical, reality-defying events which actually manipulate physical reality. Hence, others can see these mind-created events or beings, and they may leave physical changes in the landscape, such as burns on the ground, footprints, depressions from UFO

landings, snow or rock melts, scorched vegetation, watch malfunctions, 'sun burn', nausea, 'blackouts', amnesia, and so on.

Budden sees himself as bringing together two major research traditions, psychic research (or parapsychology) and ufology. He clearly believes both have shown acceptable results. His theory, the hypothesis of the title, states: 'The ability of the unconscious to manipulate the perceptions and, therefore, the reality of the witness, is facilitated by its interaction with electromagnetic radiation' (p. 17). The radiation he refers to is generally either man-made such as from radio emissions or power lines, or natural such as from ball lightning or 'earthlight' described by Paul Devereux (*Earth Lights Revelation: UFOs and Mystery Lightform Phenomena, the Earth's Secret Energy Force*, Blandford, 1989). The UFO events, or 'case studies', which Budden describes are accompanied by large orange balls of light or take place under or near power lines, radio masts, and quarries.

Psychologists would agree with Budden that the quasi-human, 'extra-terrestrial' images reported in UFO events are drawn from the conscious and unconscious images stored by the witnesses. Ghosts in the past came from historical novels, extra-terrestrials now are drawn from the popular science fiction media. Indeed they may wear a cross between space suits, medieval armour, and modern uniforms.

I find Budden's thesis unconvincing, because I can give little credence to the literature of psychic phenomena and seances, nor do I find ufology acceptable. Because electromagnetic radiation from power lines was suspected of causing cancer among nearby residents, there is a large body of research into their effects in the United States. If UFO events were associated with power lines, regardless if they are psychic or psychological, surely this research would have reported the fact.

— Wolf Roder

## Academics vs science

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P Gross and N Levitt: *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrels with Science* (The John Hopkins University Press, hardback, 314 pages)

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Have your editors gone off their heads, you ask. This is a book about a tendency among American humanities and social science academics. What on earth has it got to do with skeptics?

The answer is, quite a lot. Gross and Levitt are both involved in science: Gross is a veteran biologist, Levitt a mathematician. Their important book is about a new form of hostility to science which, in their view, might endanger university research.

The main points of the book are that this hostility exists, that it is based upon a (rather incoherent) ideology and – perhaps most important – that its protagonists are profoundly ignorant about how science really works.

Gross and Levitt use a few new terms. The 'Academic Left' is one of the remnants of the upheavals of the 60s and

70s: established left-wing academics in the humanities and social sciences, committed to theorising about revolutionary mass movements, but without any movement to actually theorise about.

As a result, argue Gross and Levitt, they adopt a variety of approaches which can be summarised as 'perspectivism'. These approaches share the view that there are various, equally good, perspectives on many events and that Western culture's claims to universally valid perspectives must be debunked. Being left-wingers they are also committed to advancing the perspectives of the oppressed and ignored: racial minorities, women, gays and so on.

Science, of course, is regarded as a perspective associated with (white Western male) power, and needing to be exposed as such and debunked. As a result, attacks on science come from Marxists, feminists, environmentalists, African studies specialists and many more. In each case, it is argued that science speaks for the dominant minority, and that other perspectives deserve to be heard.

This doesn't mean that left-wing academics in general are necessarily hostile to science. Many aren't. Furthermore, many scientists are committed lefties: Stephen Jay Gould may be the best-known example.

A large part of the book is taken up with debunking the attacks on science. Gross and Levitt find it fairly easy to exhibit pathetic ignorance on the part of many of science's critics. Interestingly, *Higher Superstition* grants a good deal of validity to the different perspectives: women have not had a fair deal in science, environmentalism is a key issue, and so on. Their point of difference is when the Academic Left attempts to characterise science as just another perspective.

This question is vital to skeptics. The essence of skepticism is the finding of natural explanations for paranormal claims. Thus, UFOs may be shown to be planets, clairvoyance the result of clever fakery, and so on. If natural explanations are no better than any other – or, worse, covering up for white Western male dominance – then skepticism simply cannot exist. It's just your perspective!

Gross and Levitt suggest that scientists should begin arguing back: visiting seminars where perspectivism is used to attack science, and registering dissent.

*Higher Superstition* is well written, and entertaining to read. I suspect skeptics will like its fearless forays into the higher baffle-gab, and its irreverence. On the other hand, I suspect its alarm may be a little over-stated.

Worldwide, science is very strong, spreading through the rapidly developing Asian region and with massive worldwide budgets. By contrast, proponents of the Higher Superstition spout their impenetrable jargon in a handful of countries' universities. My feeling is that a backlash is already in process.

Gross and Levitt's suggested remedy is certainly right: Scientists probably should come out of their labs and engage more in general discussion. The resulting exchanges might well benefit everybody. And, as a first step in opening up discussion, I strongly commend *Higher Superstition* to skeptics.

— Martin Bridgstock

## UFO detectives

Wim Van Utrecht and Frits Van der Veldt, *Unidentified Aerial Object Photographed near Zwisch-bergen, Switzerland on July 26, 1975: A Case Analysis* (Caelestia, Kronenburgstraat 110, B-2000, Antwerp, Belgium, paperback, 226 pages, 780 BEF/£15.)

If the UFO believers have found it difficult to persuade skeptics that UFOs exist, skeptics have found it no less difficult to prove that they don't. Quantitative arguments based on probability fail because notions of what is probable are so subjective. More persuasive, if more laborious, is the 'best case' approach. William James, challenged by spirit mediums, invoked the 'white crow' effect: if one white crow could be found, it would suffice to show that not all crows are black. Caelestia, the international project under whose auspices this book is published, proposes to re-examine selected alleged cases to see if any could be the white crow, a UFO that resists mundane explanation.

In July 1975 three Dutch tourists claimed that, during a walking tour in Switzerland, they saw and photographed an object whose nature they could not explain. Though they did not assume it to be an alien spacecraft, they were sufficiently puzzled to show their photo to a colleague they knew to be interested in such matters. Scientific analysis ruled out the simpler forms of hoax; but though it confirmed that the photograph had not been tampered with, it could not determine the nature of the object itself. So, while their photo has become known to UFO researchers worldwide as one of the most credible photos of UFOs, its true nature has remained undetermined.

The chief witnesses are still alive and willing to be interviewed; they are friendly, co-operative and seemingly sincere, and they stick to their original story. The original photograph survives and is available for study. The circumstances are fully documented and lend themselves to checking. In short, it is an ideal case for re-investigation, and the authors have taken full advantage of it: their book is a meticulous study which is a model of its kind. Their step-by-step presentation of the accumulating findings offers the fascination of a detective story.

For that reason, I shall not here reveal the conclusion they reach. Read it for yourself and make up your own mind. Transcripts of interviews, abundant diagrams and photographs (including a high quality colour print taken from a negative of the original transparency) and lucid, clear writing and presentation make this not only a superb piece of investigation but a pleasure to read. Even if your interest in UFOs is only minimal, you will enjoy treading in the investigators' footsteps as they follow up each clue which points to the truth.

— Hilary Evans

### • Calling contributors old and new •

We welcome ideas to consider for publication. Please send submissions, preferably saved on a 3.5" disk as plain ASCII text, to PO Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH, enclosing a SAE. Or email [skeptic@cs.man.ac.uk](mailto:skeptic@cs.man.ac.uk).

## Reaching new heights

Ann Walker, *Little One: Message from Planet Heaven* (Arrow, paperback, 291 pages, £5.99)

Although the name on the cover is Ann Walker, after the first chapter I felt sure that it had been a joint effort from Lobsang Rampa and David Icke. Or maybe there is some sort of psychic peer group pressure to produce the most far-fetched story and present it as fact.

The ultimate message of his book is the depressingly familiar cry that 'The End is Nigh', nigh in this case being about 50 years from now. While this may well be so I find myself reluctant to accept the author's source of this sombre information.

Her main ally in the fight to save the world is her spirit guide 'White Arrow'. Sadly, although not surprisingly, he cannot be seen or heard by anyone except Ms Walker. He was once the adopted son of Sitting Bull but whilst living he was known as 'White Feather'. Ms Walker, in a previous incarnation, was his wife (or should it be squaw?). Indeed we discover that they knew each other even before this, when they both lived as aliens on a distant planet.

She is also assisted by various other alien beings, one of which is 'Michael', originally a friend from the past who had died of bone cancer. Luckily, Michael was given the chance of returning to the land of the living after being dead for only a couple of days. However, for reasons best known to himself, he decided to come back as an alien. The planet White Arrow and Michael come from, we discover, is 'beside heaven'.

The Earth's demise is to be brought about by deforestation, which is causing the planet to gradually shift 5 degrees from its present orbit. This fact combined with the rapid approach of a comet will mean our certain destruction. Now God, who created the universe, didn't plan this to happen (so much for omnipotence) and needs White Arrow *et al* to persuade us to take corrective action. Ms Walker rather perceptively asks herself how she can tell the world this terrible news 'without being dismissed out of hand as a crank'. A good point.

Putting aside the bizarre subject matter, the style of the book gave me the impression that the author had attempted to write it as some kind of adventure novel – a sort of Power Rangers story but without the realism. It's probably blasphemous to say so, but I found White Arrow particularly irritating with his constant 'Have patience. All will be revealed soon Little One'. And finding out that we are all doomed took ages.

But there is though something here for everyone: aliens, UFO's, crop circles (which, it turns out, are Indian symbols left by aliens), dead spirits, and for the science buffs the late Albert Einstein obligingly provides equations and other information for 'The Report', which makes up the final part of the book.

This book reaches new heights of absurdity. Why anyone would want to buy it when for another 1p they could have six lottery scratch cards, I'm afraid I just cannot understand.

— Tony Youens

## What's all this, Zen?

Gerry Thompson, *Astral Sex – Zen Teabags: An illustrated Encyclopaedia of New Age Jargon* (Findhorn Press, paperback, 110 pages, £5.95)

'*Astral Sex – Zen Teabags* is to the 1990s what *1066 and All That* was to the rest of history' – or so says Sue Limb in her foreword to this guide to New Age jargon. I don't recall whether I found *1066* very funny at the time, but this book made me groan at least as much as it made me laugh. I was also surprised, coming as it does from the heart of Findhorn, that it had no gems of real wisdom amongst the laughs. Still, there are some good laughs and some classic cartoons for light-hearted skeptics.

And in case you're wondering; astral sex means doing it during an out-of-body experience, though actual orgasms are reputedly a bit of a non-event, and you might even end up needing a pack of etheric condoms (see 'Astral Protection'). As for 'Zen Teabags', I still don't know what they are, except that Oscar Wilde is supposed to be the Patron saint of Zen Teabagism.



Actually there is a lot you'll end up *not* knowing after reading this book. I thought I might learn something about my favourite subject – consciousness. What I did learn was that it's another term which no one knows the meaning of, but it's still a good word to use a lot because no one will ever dream of asking you what it means. The only trouble is, people *do* ask me what it means. Perhaps I need to practice harder at my 'integrational structuring through psychodynamic cognitive awareness' (i.e., thinking).

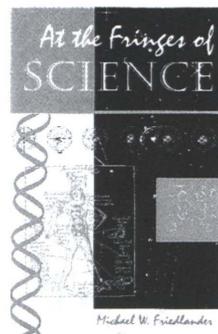
There are lots of good products advertised in the cartoons. I wouldn't mind buying my friends some Apré's Therapy Splash Brut or a copy of *Advanced Meditation for Beginners*, or how about a nice can of 'Dolphin's Revenge – Canned Fishermen'?

You might prefer to buy your friends a copy of this book, and if you think you've made a mistake spending £5.95 on it, don't worry. There isn't any such thing as a mistake nowadays – there are only 'learning experiences'. You should know that!

— Susan Blackmore

## Fringe views

Michael W Friedlander, *At the Fringes of Science* (Westview, hardback, 181 pages, £14.95)



Many physicists (and editors of skeptical magazines) will have correspondence on file from enthusiastic amateur scientists who point out the fundamental flaws that they have found in accepted scientific theories. The favourite areas for amateur attack are quantum mechanics and relativity – and new theories, sometimes in the form of expensively self-published volumes, may have been worked out using nothing more complex than high-school algebra.

A recent report in *New Scientist* cited the case of physicist Arthur Swift who received precisely this type of correspondence from enthusiastic amateur Gerald Pellagrini. Pellagrini's letters, which Swift ignored at first, concerned an experiment carried out early this century to test aspects of the application of Einstein's special theory of relativity to moving electromagnetic fields. Pellagrini's claims that there was something amiss with the classic experiment turned out to be correct and led to a collaboration by amateur and professional in which they applied the appropriate theory (general relativity) to the experiment. Alas, this happy outcome is extremely rare with the bulk of this type of correspondence being (correctly) filed by the recipient under 'C' for 'cranks' or 'crackpots'.

But how can the scientist, let alone the layman, judge whether any new and perhaps iconoclastic new idea is utterly absurd or of paradigm-breaking importance – or anywhere on the scale in-between? In a highly readable and informative book, physics professor Michael Friedlander addresses this very topic.

*At the Fringes of Science* has as its central theme 'the separation of science from pseudoscience and the identification of correct science against a background of errors and imposters that is often present'. The book takes a detailed look at a number of examples of pseudoscience in a variety of contexts – from old chestnuts such as the work of Velikovsky to 'respectable maverick ideas' on the extinction of the dinosaurs and the so-called fifth force. Along the way, Friedlander attempts to paint a picture of the manner in which scientists think, work and communicate their ideas with peers and the public at large. This, he contrasts with bad, dubious or pseudo-science wherever it arises. Although many of the cases discussed (e.g., cold fusion, the Jupiter Effect, Lysenkoism and N-Rays, to name but a few) will be familiar to skeptics, it is valuable to have the discussions all housed in a single volume with a reasonable index and bibliography – and one or two of the cases (e.g., the AD-X2 battery additive case) were totally unfamiliar to this skeptic.

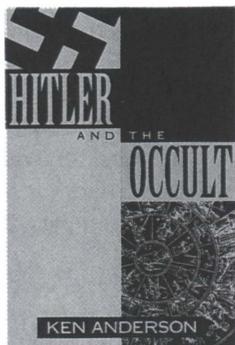
Michael Friedlander of course does not succeed in drawing a clear demarcation line between science and

nonsense (an impossible task) but, after reading this book, you may just come away with a clearer picture of what science is and what science is not – and of what is and what is not science. Highly recommended.

— Steve Donnelly

## Did he have magic?

Ken Anderson, *Hitler and the Occult* (Prometheus Books, hardback, 244 pages, £22.00)



Among the thousands of books written about the Third Reich, a small number ascribe mystical, magical, or occult powers to Hitler. Ken Anderson, a journalist, examines what some of these have to say, and how true or realistic their claims may be. He spends most of his words on *The Spear of Destiny* by Trevor Ravenscroft, which

claims that Hitler was guided by the Holy Lance which had pierced the side of Christ on the Cross, and which he stole from the Austrian Crown Treasure. Debunking this junk is equivalent to using a tractor to dig out a window box.

Anderson concludes there is more evidence for Churchill's involvement in the occult, than for anything of the sort by Hitler. Rather, Hitler persecuted occult groups and individuals after he came to power. Nor is there any evidence he ever consulted astrologers, as did President Reagan and his wife. Nor is the swastika any more a magic symbol than the pyramid on the back of the US dollar bill, or the crosses of Saints Andrew, George, and Patrick.

The idea will not die that someone who caused six million persons to be murdered must have been an extraordinarily potent, brilliant, or magical individual. In fact Hitler was not very intelligent; he was poorly educated, and a high school dropout. Nothing in his thought was new or original. His racist ideology was the commonplace received wisdom, the social darwinism, the eugenic science of his growing up at the turn of the century. He did have a great talent for swaying an audience. It is the talent possessed by American televangelists, used to preach the gospel and raise money, but Hitler preached chauvinism and raised votes.

Anderson recognizes that 'Hitler was the first of history's mass media figures. No political leader had before him used rallies, broadcast, and film for propaganda purposes' (p. 235). He compares him to today's rock stars, who 'are, like Hitler, accused of involvement in the occult, devil worship, and sexual excesses to a disproportionate extent' (p. 234).

Anderson evidently doesn't read German; at least no German publication is referenced. The book is marred by a number of errors, which competent proofreading could have avoided: Hamburg as the capital of Bavaria (p. 17), repeated misspelling of Hitler's birthplace, and of various German words.

— Wolf Roder

## Deja vu?

Soozi Holbeche, *Journeys Through Time: A guide to reincarnation and your immortal soul* (Piatkus, paperback, 200 pages, £8.99); Dr Brian Weiss, *Through Time into Healing: How past life regression therapy can heal mind, body and soul* (Piatkus, paperback, 196 pages, £8.99)

Regression therapy claims to solve mental problems by enabling the patient to recall previous lives, and is popular here and in the USA. In *Journeys Through Time* regression therapist Soozi Holbeche discusses reincarnation, karma and religious belief, describing case histories from her own career.

Reincarnation was part of Christian belief until the sixth century, after which time those who believed in it were persecuted as heretics. Holbeche rightly comments:

As Christianity was introduced to the world by a teacher of righteousness, love, compassion, peace and forgiveness, the fact that professed Christians could kill and condemn to eternal damnation other Christians holding different opinions on some issues, is quite extraordinary' (p. 16)

It is lucky for some that the modern church is more tolerant: I dread to think what the Spanish Inquisition would have made of the 12 women who

each separately told [Holbeche] in hushed tones: 'I want you to be the first to know! I was the Virgin Mary.' (p. 49).

Dr Brian Weiss is an American psychiatrist and regression therapist. *Through Time into Healing* is an account of his work, and contains many fascinating case histories. Unfortunately some of them seem to owe more to imagination than to reincarnation: one 'superb regression subject' gave a remarkably vivid account of a past life which bears a strong resemblance to Wilbur Smith's historical novel, *The Sunbird* (p. 92–3). Regular readers of *The Skeptic* may recall an article in which another well-known case of past-life recall seemed to be taken from historical novels ('Many Happy Returns', *The Skeptic*, 4.6) Researchers would do well to explore this area before offering case-histories as 'proof' of reincarnation.

Weiss includes a reading list and suggestions for DIY regression techniques, including the script of an audio tape to induce past life recall. This carries the warning 'DO NOT PLAY THIS TAPE IN A CAR'. Presumably it could prove awkward if one regressed to a past life while driving.

Wisely, neither author claims to offer 'proof' of reincarnation. Both books are entertaining reading for anyone with an open mind, and provide plenty of material for arguments for and against regression therapy. I hope I don't incur bad karma by saying that they are interesting, entertaining, thought-provoking and to be taken with the largest possible dose of salt.

— Chris Willis

### Typesetting gremlins

In 'Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics' (*The Skeptic*, 9.4), the expression on page 19, column 2, line 6 should have read: 1 – 0.9999<sup>365 × 19</sup>, not (1 – 0.9999)<sup>365 × 19</sup>. Thanks to several eagle-eyed readers for pointing this out.

# Letters



## Unicorns

So Les Francis is 'a freelance writer', is he? Well, tell him that his mockery of the unicorn patent ('Patently Absurd', *The Skeptic*, 9.3) is futile and self-serving. Not only do I know Otter G'Zell (his name is so spelt, not as you print it, deriving from the German word *Gesell*, friend or partner) and his lady Morning Glory, both of whom are qualified zoologists; I have met one of their unicorns and possess a photograph of myself with it. Or more exactly him; he was certainly the gentlest and most charming billy-goat I ever encountered, and his name was Bedivere. He was one of six, at the time; his creators proved what they set out to, that in cultures where dogs had not been domesticated as herd-guards, male goats, rams and other two-horned animals were doctored in early life to present sharp straight single horns when predators came charging at them. And having demonstrated their belief that the operation rendered the creatures docile, more intelligent and in general ideal as protectors (by lending them to a friend ranching sheep in northern California, where they immediately took charge of the flocks) they sold them to a circus and set off to the Pacific in search of the 'mermaid' or manatee.

But you have no business, and above all Les Francis has no business, making mock of one of the few completely documentable rectifications of a 'myth' that we have seen this century.

**John Brunner**  
South Petherton, Somerset

*Shortly after we received this letter, we were saddened to hear of John Brunner's death. John was a frequent and welcome correspondent to The Skeptic since our earliest days, and we shall miss his support and always lively criticism. An obituary appears on page 11 of this issue. – The Editors*

## In praise of sea-bands

Andy Brice's article ('Gadgets gone crazy', *The Skeptic* 9.3) contains a reference to acupuncture bands that combat sea-sickness, with the apparent implication that they are useless.

I more or less accidentally acquired some 'sea-bands' on going on a cruise in May. When I opened the case and saw a reference to acupuncture I was very sceptical, but as I had them I decided to give them a trial. Much to my surprise I, who have always been a bad sailor, survived force 5/6 winds with complete comfort when many were badly affected. *The things worked for me.*

But when I told my brother-in-law, who sails in yachts, he said that having tried them out with complete faith, he has never been so sick in his life.

However, almost as soon as I got home I was afflicted with a painful malady. I began to wonder whether something that could in some mysterious way produce a beneficial effect, like stopping sea-sickness, could also produce bad effects. And it occurred to me that there may also be among your readers some who have used sea-bands, and that we might get a survey of them to show (1) how many found them successful, and (2) whether any had untoward effects that might be attributed to them.

I deliberately do not specify my malady: what would be most exciting would be if others had suffered in the same or related ways.

**Mrs P M Huty**  
Tunbridge Wells

## Millenia fever

Regarding events at the end of the tenth century, according to *The Vatican Billions* (Avro Mannatton, Chick Publications), the church encouraged people to believe that the

end of the world was imminent, and many rushed to divest themselves of all their worldly goods. The church eagerly welcomed these gifts, and registered the transfers in legal documents, so that the donors could not retrieve their possessions when the end of the world failed to happen.

And this time? Perhaps fewer will rush to donate their goods, but the church will find some excuse – you'll see. Jubilee years, and Holy years, have been proclaimed at ever closer intervals – any excuse to gather in more wealth from the faithful.

For myself, my seventy-plus years have taught me that there is no limit to human folly – or human greed!

**Margaret Moulton**  
Ringwood, Hants

## Creating nonsense

Creationists everywhere ('A Miniature Armageddon', *The Skeptic*, 9.3) would agree that their God is not only all-powerful, but possesses thinking processes that are beyond all human logic.

Given those two premises, it is perfectly possible that their God did indeed create the world exactly as described in Genesis (both versions) and then, for His own inscrutable reasons, arranged fossils, geological strata and so on to make it appear that the Earth was billions of years old.

I am surprised that the Creationists haven't already come up with this idea. With it, they could leave off their squabblings with the scientists and be smugly happy in the knowledge that, whatever the scientific evidence in favour of evolution, it is all a God-produced illusion and that they alone know The Truth.

Or am I being simple-minded?

**Val Dobson**  
Preston

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