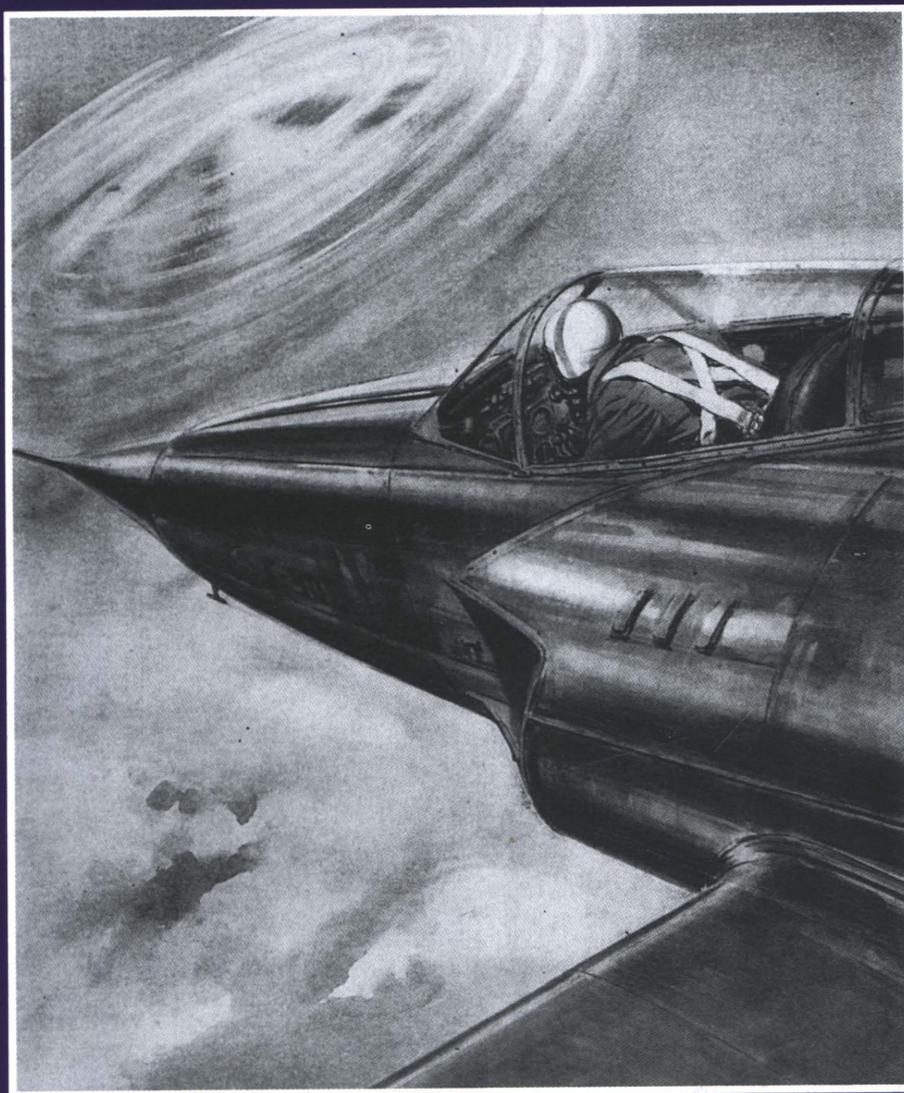


*The*

Volume 10 Number 2

# *Skeptic*



## *UFOs yesterday and today*

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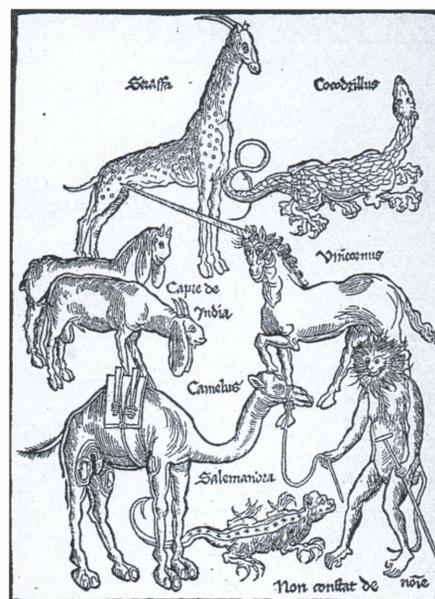


## The memory and myth of the Unicorn

**T**HE WIDESPREAD MYTH that the unicorn is a myth is a sad comment on the innate skepticism of humankind, always prone to disbelieve however forceful the evidence. If we had only a single testimony to the unicorn's existence, we might reasonably ascribe it to malobservation. But when we find travellers both to the East – Bernard de Breydenbach in 1487 – and to the West – the Conquistadores in Central America circa 1500 – recording sightings, the presumption is that the unicorn was at that time indigenous on at least two continents.

How then, did the unicorn acquire its mythical status? To answer that question we must go beyond simple skepticism to feelings of guilt. Having hunted this splendid creature to extinction, our ancestors sought to expunge their shame by pretending it never existed. But thanks to these contemporary illustrations, we know better.

Sources: Theodor De Bry, circa 1520 (top); Erhard Renwieh in Bernard de Breydenbach's *Voyage en Terre Sainte*, 1487 (bottom).



# Contents

## Editorial

As Dan Quayle might have said: 'there is one word and only one word that encapsulates all that is an anathema to the dedicated skeptic' and that word is 'irrational modes of thought'.

Whether it's the belief that the gravitational fields of planets, thousands of times weaker than that of the midwife, can influence the destiny of a new-born baby, or the idea that crystals sewn into the crotch of your Levis can increase your potency, we either laugh, groan or tear out our hair in despair when confronted with yet another example of irrational, paranormal idiocy.

Although *The Skeptic* tends mainly to cover matters paranormal, irrationality crops up in many other areas of human activity. Examples include hi-fi equipment, animal rights arguments (pro and con) and management consultancy - all of which have been discussed in the magazine at some time or another. But there are, undoubtedly, many other areas of irrational human behaviour that deserve to be exposed - we are just not aware of them.

If you have any knowledge of such beliefs or practices, perhaps in your own profession or leisure activity, please write to us about them and we'll try to look into them and cover your particular skeptical bugbears in a future issue.

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## The Skeptic



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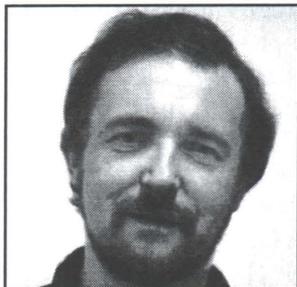
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 Please enclose a SAE.*



# Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

*Hits and Misses is coming to you from the suburbs of Chicago for the next couple of issues and, although clippings from UK newspapers are regularly winging their way across the Atlantic to me, it seems natural to include one or two American stories. As I sit in an apartment in Wheaton, Illinois with five churches within a radius of a mile, a large Bible College across the road next to the Billy Graham Center, the Theosophist Reading Room and Study Center next door, and nine psychic mediums listed in my local yellow pages, I'm not sure that the vibes will be totally conducive to writing Hits and Misses, but here goes anyway . . .*

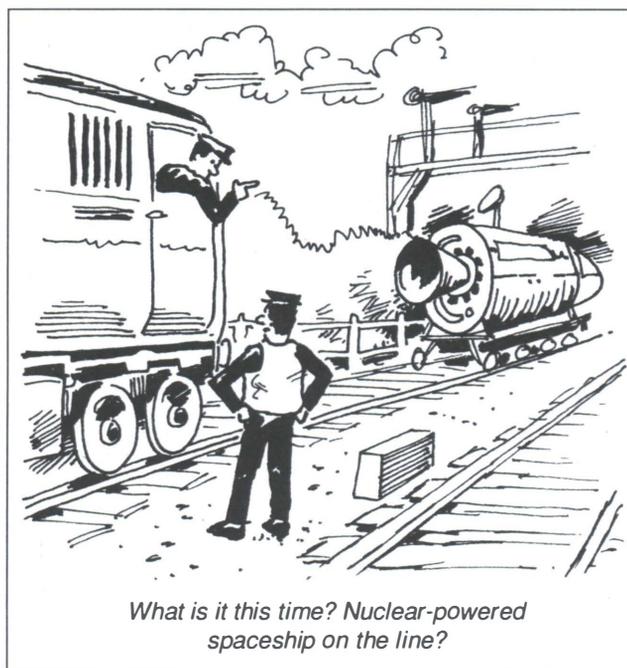
## Disarming fellow

Americans tend to sue a lot, as many very wealthy lawyers here could testify, but the case of a certain Thomas Passmore of Norfolk Virginia really takes the biscuit (cookie?) as far as chancing one's arm in going to litigation is concerned. According to WBBM News Radio Station, Chicago on 14 May, Mr Passmore – in a moment of religious fervour – took the unusual step of cutting off his right hand with a circular saw because he thought it was possessed by the devil. He could see the dreaded numbers '666' on it and decided to heed the biblical exhortation: 'If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off'. He was immediately rushed to hospital along with the severed hand which surgeons wanted to reattach to his arm. But Passmore categorically refused, as the bible says nothing about surgical reattachment of offending appendages. The hospital then sought to obtain an injunction from a judge that would allow them to reattach the hand in spite of Passmore's wishes to the contrary. The judge, however, held that the auto-amputee was within his rights not to have his hand reattached. (Perhaps something to do with the fact that the American constitution deals with the right of citizens to bear arms but says nothing about hands). Being law-abiding folk, the surgeons respected the judge's decision and Thomas Passmore and his hand were, alas, not reunited. Unbelievably, some months later, and a little too late for remedial medical action, Mr Passmore is now attempting to sue the hospital for 3.4 million dollars for their negligence in obeying his instructions and not reattaching his hand. You have to hand it to him . . .

## The train on (orbital) platform 5 . . .

If you think that British Rail's only attempt at high-speed passenger transport was the late, lamented Advanced Passenger Train, think again. A patent filed in 1972 by a British Rail employee and reported in *The Times* on 28 February indicates that the train with the tilting passenger compartment wasn't the most unlikely thing that the

company's engineers had in mind in the 1970s. In 1970, Charles Osmond Frederick who worked for BR in Derby, developed the 'lifting platform' which the subsequently-filed patent describes as a space vehicle powered by thermonuclear fusion. According to Davis Wardell of *Inventor's World* magazine who recently found the patent: 'It seems extraordinary that the British Railways Board should have patented a spaceship, but this patent was developed and amended over a number of years so they must have thought there was something in it'. A spokesman for the company, however, claims that the spacecraft was entirely the brainchild of Mr Frederick and that it was simply BR's policy to ensure that inventions of employees were patented in the company's name: 'BR never had any interest in space travel'. This is just as well really as there was, unfortunately, one rather serious flaw to the design. The propulsion system, which consisted of exploding small thermonuclear devices every 1/000th of a second, may have given the usual smooth BR ride but it would have exposed passengers on the Surbiton to Saturn run to lethal doses of radiation. If the egg and cress sandwich doesn't get you, the propulsion system will . . .



Tim Pearce

## Satanic Barbie

I have to confess that I have never owned one, but from what I know of them, the word 'satanic' does not immediately come to mind when confronted with a Barbie doll. However, who am I to question the wisdom of

Islamic hardliners in Iran who are using exactly this adjective in an attempt to dissuade people from buying the glamorous, American toy? According to the *Daily Telegraph* on 7 May, the argument goes that the 'unwholesome flexibility of these dolls, their destructive beauty and their semi-nudity have an effect on the minds and morality of young children'. Although all products that are 'Made in the USA' are in principle banned from sale in Iran as a result of the US economic embargo of that country, in reality, if anything, this has had the effect of increasing the value of the commodity – with dolls selling for prices varying from £50 to more than £150. As this latter figure is about three times the average Iranian monthly wage, Barbie obviously has some serious admirers in Iran.

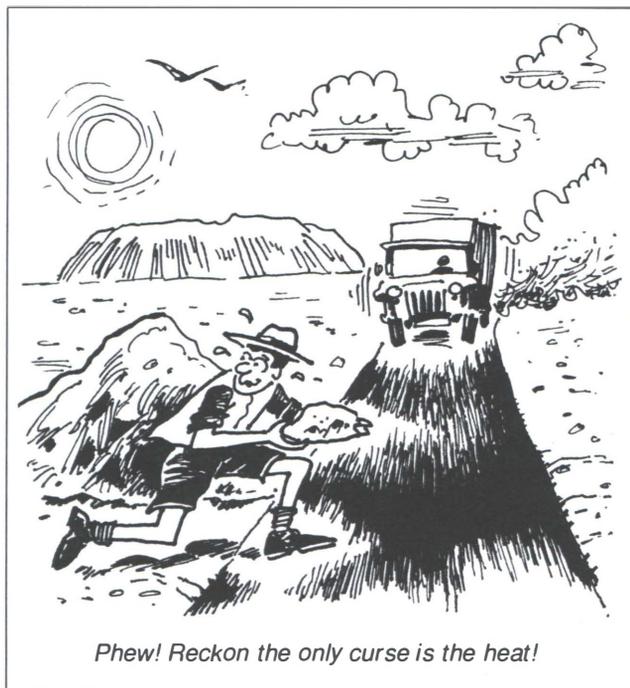
## The goat sucker of Puerto Rico

We are probably quite fortunate in Britain that our national monster (if Scots readers will forgive my treating Nessie like North Sea oil) is a rather benign and lovable entity who is presumably herbivorous. (Thinking about it for a moment, I don't remember ever having read anything about Nessie's diet so I'd be grateful for information on this topic from any knowledgeable reader). This is clearly not the case for 'El Chupacabras' (The Goatsucker) a resident of the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico who has a penchant for sucking the blood out of goats, chickens, and household pets. According to Scott Corrales in *STRANGE magazine* on the World Wide Web, the monster has been sighted throughout Puerto Rico by credible and respectable witnesses and can best be described as a cross between one of the 'Grey' aliens, a porcupine and a kangaroo, due to the presence of quill-like appendages running down its back and enormously powerful hind legs which enable it to leap over trees in a single bound. First reported in the municipality of Canóvanas, this menacing creature has been reported in all the communities which comprise metropolitan San Juan. El Chupacabras has reportedly landed on trees and bent them due to its apparently considerable weight, and causes other animals go crazy when it is in the vicinity. The authorities have thus far made no statement on the matter – an obvious and typical sign of a cover-up.

## Rocks go walkabout

Tourists who nicked pieces of Ayers Rock in Australia (now known by its aboriginal name, Uluru) are starting to send them back in an attempt to neutralise the curse that the illicit souvenirs have brought to their lives. Although the manager of Uluru National Park, Julian Barry, does not believe in the curse himself, he is encouraging belief in it, in the hope that it will reduce the number of people stealing souvenirs. As an example, according to the *Guardian* on 13 February, a New Zealand man wrote of his son's bad luck after stealing some fragments of the rock. The son had subsequently broken his back in a motorcycle accident and his father-in-law had died. I have had personal experience of a similar curse that, according to notices at the park, afflicts people who steal pieces of petrified wood at the Petrified Forest National Park in the US. A few years ago I visited the park in the company of a Dutch colleague who ignored the notices

and pocketed a few small souvenir fragments. A week later on his return to Holland the airline lost his suitcase (which was never recovered) and a few months later he had a heart attack (thankfully non-fatal). However, hardy skeptical physicist that he is, he did not mail the pieces of petrified tree back to Arizona.



Phew! Reckon the only curse is the heat!

Tim Pearce

## On the wings of a prayer



And whilst on the subject of Arizona, any reader who feels that prayer is an inefficient and uncertain means of communication need look no further than a company called Lindsay Scientific based in that fine state. For the very reasonable fee of only \$9.95 per page, this company will beam your prayers directly to God (and they can even be sent to him by email). According to their advertisement on

the Internet: 'Our equipment accepts your letters and drawings and launches them electronically at the speed of light on a powerful microwave radio beam into deep space. As soon as they are sent, they become available to be intercepted by God. We are not attempting to sell a mystical claim or smoke and mirrors. We are offering science fact, based on the same technology that NASA uses to communicate with deep-space probes such as Voyager . . .' The text goes on to explain that: 'Prayers, especially thankful ones, are often published as advertisements in newspapers, but we have to say (with no disrespect) that there is not much evidence that God subscribes to daily newspapers'. Of course not – he's too busy listening to the radio.

Steve Donnelly is a reader in the Department of Physics at the University of Salford.

# Testing a 'Psychic' Guru

Richard Wiseman and Erlendur Haraldsson

*Investigating the claims of Swami Premananda*

**S**WAMI PREMANANDA is a well known Indian religious leader with an international following. Born in Sri Lanka in 1951, Premananda claims that during his childhood he produced many miracles, including the materialisation of candy and fruit.

His mission as a Swami began in 1969 and was allegedly signalled by a saffron colour robe suddenly materialising on his body. This event was apparently witnessed by over 200 of his followers. In 1972 Premananda established his first religious retreat, or ashram, in Matale, Sri Lanka. This community was destroyed in 1983 during ethnic disturbances and was subsequently relocated to its present site in Southern India.

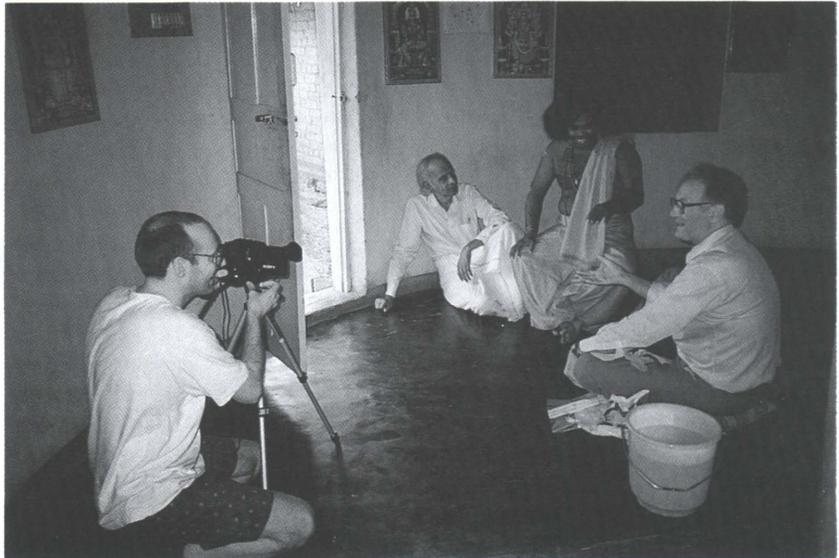
Like many Indian religious leaders, Premananda claims to possess several different types of psychic ability. His most frequent demonstrations involve the alleged regurgitation of small, egg shaped, stones, or 'lingams', and the production in his bare hands of small objects or 'vibuti', a fine grey powder used in Hinduism.

Although Premananda has frequently been filmed 'materialising' these objects, his abilities have never been properly investigated. The authors recently travelled to Premananda's ashram in the hope of carrying out such tests.

## At the ashram

Premananda's retreat is located approximately twenty kilometres from the town of Trichy. The ashram is a small, self-supporting community of about fifty adults and a hundred children, most of whom belong to an orphanage based at the ashram. In addition to the large orphanage building, the ashram contains a prayer hall, library, administrative centre, print room, and the living quarters for Premananda, his devotees and visitors.

After staying at the ashram for three days, we heard that Premananda would be prepared to meet with us the following morning. He was scheduled to hold one of the ashram's daily religious ceremonies the next day, and we attended the service in the hope of gaining his attention. Our plan worked. Towards the end of the service Premananda called us forward and asked us to explain why we had travelled to the ashram. We explained that we wished to carry out a scientific investigation of his



Richard Wiseman

psychic abilities. He was curious and wanted to know what sort of investigation that we had in mind. We explained that we would first inspect one of his hands to ensure that it didn't contain any concealed objects. Next, we would ensure that he couldn't secretly transfer an object into his hand after the examination, by placing a large transparent plastic bag over his hand and sealing it around his wrist. We would then video-tape him as he tried to materialise an object inside this sealed bag.

Premananda was extremely co-operative, invited us to place a bag onto his hand and tried to materialise an object. Unfortunately, the attempts ended in failure. He then claimed that the commotion surrounding the testing (the presence of the camera and some of his followers) were preventing him from concentrating.

To help overcome these problems he offered to go to his house and meditate for a short while and then continue with the tests. Premananda returned a few hours later and, after a few minutes of quiet meditation, declared that he was ready for one final test.

## Trick or treat

Premananda extended his left hand and one of us (Erlendur Haraldsson) carefully examined it. Erlendur then placed the transparent bag over Premananda's hand and sealed it around the wrist. Premananda spent a few moments attempting to materialise an object, but again failed. He explained that his ability wasn't working inside the bag. We removed the bag from Premananda's hand.

Premananda then placed his hand on top of Erlendur's, and slowly opened it to reveal a small metal statue. Premananda stated that in Erlendur's hand the power was 'working'. Next, Erlendur took Premananda's hand and placed it again inside the plastic bag. Premananda apparently materialised some vibuti inside the bag before indicating that the session was at an end.

The entire session was fast-moving, and we were uncertain whether we had seen a genuine paranormal phenomenon or a magic trick. Luckily we had filmed the entire test, and a close look at the video helped resolve the issue. Our film clearly shows that as soon as we removed the plastic bag, Premananda's hand moved to his lap (and out of sight of the camera) as soon as we removed the plastic bag. When his hand re-emerged from his lap, the second, third and fourth fingers were closed and the hand was not shown to be empty before the apparent materialisation of the small statue. Soon afterwards, Premananda's hand again moved to his lap and emerged with its back towards the camera, fingers closed. His hand was then placed into the bag for the second time, and he then produced a small amount of vibuti.

In short, Premananda's movements are consistent with him secretly taking various objects from his lap before they are magically 'produced'.

This investigation represents one of the very few times that the psychic ability of an Indian swami has been properly examined. Our simple test was designed to minimise the possibility of trickery and Premananda failed to produce any phenomena during this stage of the investigation. However, as soon as the test conditions were relaxed Premananda performed two ostensible materialisations for us, but a close analysis of these revealed that they were more likely to have been caused by simple sleight of hand than genuine psychic ability.

In summary, our investigation suggests that Premananda's abilities may be considerably more normal than paranormal.

**Richard Wiseman is a Senior Research Fellow in the Psychology Department at the University of Hertfordshire; Erlendur Haraldsson is a parapsychologist at the University of Iceland.**

# The Skeptic's Dictionary

Robert Todd Carroll

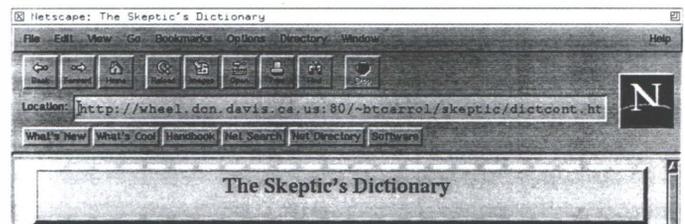
In a new regular feature, we present excerpts from *The Skeptic's Dictionary*, one of the first books written specifically for electronic publication on the World Wide Web.

## The Dogon and Sirius

**A**CCORDING TO ROBERT TEMPLE in his book *The Sirius Mystery*, the Dogon, a tribe of about 100,000 in western Africa, have had contact with extraterrestrials.

One of Temple's main pieces of evidence is the tribe's alleged knowledge of Sirius B, a companion to the star Sirius. The Dogon are supposed to know that Sirius B orbits Sirius, and that a complete orbit takes fifty years. One of the pieces of evidence Temple cites is a sand picture made by the Dogon to explain their beliefs. The diagram which Temple presents, however, is not the complete diagram which the Dogon showed to the French anthropologists who were the original sources for Temple's story. Temple has either misinterpreted the Dogon belief or distorted it to fit his fantastic story.

Yet, there are a number of other astronomical beliefs held by the Dogon which are curious. For example, traditional belief in a heliocentric system and elliptical orbits of astronomical phenomena; knowledge of satellites of Jupiter and rings of Saturn, among other things. Where did they get this knowledge, if not from extraterrestrial visitors? They don't have telescopes or other scientific equipment, so how could they get this knowledge? Carl Sagan concludes that the Dogon could not have acquired their knowledge without contact with an advanced technological civilization. He suggests, however, that the civilization was terrestrial rather than extraterrestrial.



Western Africa has had many visitors from technological societies located on planet earth. The Dogon have a traditional interest in the sky and astronomical phenomena. As Sagan notes, if a European had visited the Dogon in the 1920s and 1930s, conversation would likely have turned to astronomical matters, including Sirius, the brightest star in the sky and the centre of Dogon mythology. Furthermore, there had been a good amount of discussion of Sirius in the scientific press in the 1920s so that by the time the French anthropologist Griaule arrived, the Dogon may have had a grounding in 20th century technological matters beyond their understanding brought to them by visitors from other parts of earth and transmitted in conversation. (Sagan notes that some of the discussion of the day involved the nature of white dwarfs, for example. Sirius B is a white dwarf.)

### Further reading

Randi, James. *Flim-Flam!* (Prometheus Books, 1982).  
Sagan, Carl. *Broca's Brain* (Random House, 1979), ch. 6, 'White Dwarfs and Little Green Men'.

**Robert Carroll teaches Philosophy at Sacramento City College, California. © Robert Carroll 1994–1996. For the full text of the *Skeptic's Dictionary*, visit <http://wheel.dcn.davis.ca.us/~btcarroll/>.**

# Blazing Saucers

Martin S Kottmeyer

*Why have UFOs changed speed over the years?*

**I**T IS ONE OF THOSE LITTLE IRONIES of historical memory that we sometimes forget why we took an interest in some things. Take flying saucers. How many of us realize that the reason they made headlines in 1947 was not because Kenneth Arnold thought he saw spaceships from another world; but simply because he reported objects travelling at 'incredible speed'? Our local paper headlined it 'Officials Skeptical of Report of 1200 Mile-an-Hour Object'. The next day: '1200 MPH Flying Saucer Story Has Teller Up in Air'. The initial Associated Press dispatch specifically has Arnold saying that 'he could not hazard a guess as to what they were' and ends with him admitting 'It seems impossible, but there it is'.

The reason it seemed impossible was because back in June 1947 aeroplanes were not capable of even half that speed. They had not even broken the sound barrier quite yet, although they were edging up to it. Chuck Yeager would win that prize a mere four months after the Arnold report. In his report to the Air Force, Arnold mentions an Air Force pilot suggested he had seen 'some kind of jet or rocket-propelled ship that is in the process of being tested'. A subsequent communication to the Commanding General of Wright Field has him adding that he 'felt certain they belonged to our government'.

Curiously, Arnold's drawing of the objects he reportedly saw bears a significant resemblance to a plane of the period known as the Flying Flapjack. It was reportedly the fastest naval aircraft of its time, holding a 40 mph advantage over the F4U Corsair. However, it never got past the experimental stage to mass production, because of problems with propeller vibration. And the Flapjack was not exactly a secret. It had been featured on the cover of *Mechanix Illustrated* a month before Arnold's experience. A few people during and after the 1947 flap felt it was likely that Arnold's Flying Saucers were actually Flying Flapjacks.

## After the event

With the benefit of hindsight we can confidently say that Arnold's objects weren't Flying Flapjacks. And this is not just because there were denials by the relevant officials and because Flying Flapjacks did not travel at supersonic speeds. The behaviour of the objects was all wrong. Arnold said there were nine objects in a chain and they displayed erratic motions. Test flights are usually solitary affairs with at most a chase plane tagging along. Erratic motion would be unusual for a properly functioning high speed aircraft, and erratic motion by a chain



Mary Evans Picture Library

*Kenneth Arnold in 1947*

of nine of them rather bizarre. Arnold must have made a mistake somewhere.

Arnold's speed estimate for the objects was predicated on the assumption they were at least twenty-five miles distant. He based this on the fact that he had seen them swerve in and out of the high mountain peaks and specifically noted them disappearing 'just behind a jagged peak that juts out from the base of Mount Rainier proper'. Their altitude, he said, was 9200 feet plus or minus 1000 feet. When one looks at the geological survey maps of the Mount Rainier area, however, there is an interesting surprise: there are no such peaks in that altitude range. The nearest contender would be Pyramid Peak, and it stands at only 6937 feet, far outside his range of estimates.

This suggests that Arnold experienced an illusion of some sort. The best guess is that the objects temporarily disappeared when they rolled edgewise in front of the face of the mountain causing a loss of visual resolution. The angular size estimates put them near visual threshold and the optical clutter of the mountain, unlike the sky, probably contributed to the sense of a disappearance behind a feature of the mountain even though there

wasn't one to disappear behind. Arnold's objects were probably considerably closer and thus much slower. Given the erratic motions, the chain-like grouping, and the horizontal trajectory, the likeliest explanation would involve waterfowl. Swans would be the best choice at the altitude Arnold was travelling.

## Copycat sightings

Arnold's report excited great interest and generated a wave of copycat sightings. Ted Bloecher collected some 853 reports from this 1947 craze. The reports exhaust the thesaurus of speed superlatives. Phrases include: fast, very fast, extremely fast, high speed, tremendous speed, terrific speed, great, incredible, inconceivable, rapid, swift, amazing speed. They hurtled, streaked, and flew like blue blazes. 53% of the reports emphasize the speed of the objects seen. A few slow saucers made it into the papers, presumably because their shape seemed relevant. The reports mimic Arnold's report in other particulars. More than contemporary reports, there was an unusual number of sightings involving multiple objects. They favoured horizontal flight. Most of them took place in the daytime, a striking contrast to later years when UFOs favoured the night.

Despite a considerable variety in the reports, the form of the objects was always consistent with a type of aircraft. Propellers were often seen, one witness even claiming it was larger than the rest of the plane. Jet pipes, pilot's cockpits, glass domes, fins, legs, and antennae featured on some of the objects. Smoke, vapour trails, and rocket flames repeatedly marked their flights. A wide range of aerobatic stunts turn up among the reports: loop-the-loops, roll manoeuvres, banking, weaving, climbing, diving, tipping, circling, and swooping. Some 'UFOs' buzzed cars, but, unlike decades later, the car engines never died. It has been thought significant that animals sometimes reacted to the objects, yet a close reading suggests it wasn't because of their spooky alienness; the saucers were doing barnstorming manoeuvres.

Notable by its absence is any indication of extraterrestrial technology: no lasers, heat rays, paralysis rays or gases, mind control rays, power rings, levitation of people or objects, denaturalisation, matter interpenetration, space-suited entities, robots, remote eyes, or even simple observation ports. Nobody was looking for aliens and nothing was seen to suggest any were there.

Things have certainly changed since 1947, and the oddest, simplest proof of this is in the statistics about the speed of saucers. Where 53% of the cases of 1947 emphasize speed, statistics from 1971 showed only 41% of cases mention it. By 1986 it had fallen to 22%. Inversely, there has been a startling shift in the presence of hovering in UFO reports. Only 3% of Bloecher's 1947 population of reports involve hovering. That any are present at all may have something to do with either the fact that the Flying Flapjack was known to possess a vertical landing and take-off capability or with the fact that 1946 saw the first licensing of commercial helicopters. By 1971 hovering



UFO seen near Boise, Idaho, through surveying equipment, 1948

appeared in 39% of reports and by 1986 it swelled to 49%. Hovering has moved from practical insignificance to become the dominant mode of presentation, showing up over twice as often as high speed.

## Speed shift

A fuller appreciation of this shift can be gained by illustrating it by reference to the most popular cases. In the early years, speed estimates were a standard detail. Mantell's UFO purportedly travelled over 360 mph. When the UFO in the Chiles-Whitted case kicked in its blazing afterburner it went to speeds of 500–700 mph; Great Falls: 200–400 mph; Lubbock Lights: 1800–18,000 mph; Tremonton: 3780 mph; Nash-Fortenberry: 12,000 mph; Washington Nationals: 100–130 mph; Lakenheath: 12,000 mph; Levelland: 600–800 mph; Trindade: 600–700 mph.

Cases from the sixties, by contrast, rarely give speed estimates. In the Socorro case there is only talk of a slow decent and an easy climb. In the Exeter incident we encounter a 'falling leaf motion' and ufologists indicate this is a repetitive, one even says almost universal, feature of saucer motion. The Spaur UFO chase involves speeds of around 80 mph, and nobody comments on how slow this is compared to the fifties. Herb Schirmer was told by aliens that they can travel at 150,000 something, but he isn't sure if it is mph or something else.

We can find a couple of speed estimates in the seventies. In the Coyne helicopter incident, we are given the figure of 700 mph. In the Kaikoura classic we get the estimate of 10,800 mph. We also get a hint of great speed in the Joe & Carol abduction of 1976 with stars said to be shooting by as they travel in the craft. Allan Hendry dismissed this as obviously inspired by *Star Trek* visual conventions.

When we come to the eighties the most striking speed estimate comes from the Westminster flap where objects crawled across the sky at 25 mph. This is argued to be too slow to be terrestrial. Similarly, in the Gulf Breeze incidents, proponents focus on the ability of the objects to perfectly hover amid a 15 mph breeze as proof of non-terrestriality. In an analysis of the 1992 Williamsport, Pennsylvania UFO wave published in Timothy Good's

*Alien Update* the objects are all described as slow, very slow, or stationary. The statistics don't even list a category for high speed! The ufologist professes they are extremely slow – much slower than a Piper Cub can safely maintain its slowest speed. In 1947 the saucers were faster than any aircraft known and prompted speculations they were powered by atomic energy. Now they are miraculous because they are too slow. The shift in rhetoric is such a complete inversion it would be hilarious if it wasn't so astonishing.

## Hover-craft

Hovering wasn't absent in the fifties, but it had a curious habit of being associated with disreputable cases like the Maury Island hoax and Desvergers. All the contactee cases had ships which hovered inches or feet above the ground. In Truman Bethurum's account the saucer could move faster than one could bat an eye, but as it landed it abruptly decelerated so the aliens could demonstrate 'how slowly this monster could be brought down'. Interest rarely focused on this ability of hovering. In the Daniel Fry case the emphasis remained on speed. We are meant to be impressed when he tells us he went from White Sands, New Mexico to New York and back in half an hour. The given speed: 8000 mph. In the 1961 Eagle River case the flourish we are supposed to note is how a tree was bowed over in the wake of a saucer take-off. The Professor Johannis contact, revealed in 1964 (backdated to 1947), has the teller being rolled over and over in the dust because of the air-shock of his saucer's take-off. I would guess the Father Gill classic of Papua New Guinea was the first reputable case to display hovering, but it was too little known for a long time to consider it a factor in starting the trend to slower saucers noticeable in the sixties.

Why did this shift from fast to slow take place? The simplest answer has to be the fading of memory. Arnold's report lost its fascination as newer, better, shinier cases crowded it out for public attention. Cases like Socorro, Exeter, the Swamp Gas saucer of Dexter, Flynn, and *The Interrupted Journey* of Barney and Betty Hill captured people's imaginations and became the models to which later experiences would be compared. The search template of what should be considered wondrous filtered out what seemed irrelevant. In 1947 people looked for speedy things and things that looked like discs, and ignored the slow stuff and the lights floating around at night. There was a heavy bias to misinterpreting flocks of birds.

Later, people searched for bright lights and slow, hovering objects and, as Allan Hendry showed, people had a bias towards misinterpreting stars, planets, and aeroplane lights.

## UFOs in the movies

It is possibly relevant to also consider how the image of saucers changed in film over the years. Initially, movies followed the model set by Arnold's report. *Bruce Gentry: Daredevil of the Skies* (1949) and *The Flying Saucer* (1950) show brief glimpses of saucers flashing by at high speeds. The plots indicate they are not alien, but man-made. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) initially emphasizes speed

in radar tracking reports, but the landing involves the saucer settling to earth with a soft glow as befits a powerful, but peaceful visitor. The scene is aesthetically impressive and had to be a factor influencing contactee stories. *It Came from Outer Space* (1953) and *War of the Worlds* (1953) emphasize speed with crafts trailing sparks and plowing into the earth. The latter, however, also presents futuristic aerial tanks slowly rising and hovering over the landscape.

Hovering and slow movement are presented in *Invaders from Mars* (1953), *Devil-Girl from Mars* (1955), and *The Cosmic Man* (1958). *Earth vs the Flying Saucers* (1956) suggests speed in many key scenes, but hovering and gyrating in place is also present.

The aesthetics of anti-gravitational hovering reached iconic status with the arrival of *The Invaders* TV series in the mid-sixties. The image of a slow landing was repeated weekly at the beginning of each show. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) reprises some examples of speed from UFO lore, but hovering dominates the pivotal scenes of Neary's first encounter and the arrival of the Mothership. The ship in *E.T.* (1981) moves in a languid fashion even in its final rainbow-coloured acceleration. The TV series *The Greatest American Hero* (1981–83) presented a hovering Mothership with a glowing power ring that would serve as the model of the Gulf Breeze incidents. *Wavelength* (1983), *Starman* (1984), *Cocoon* (1985), *Uforia* (1987) and *Fire in the Sky* (1993) demonstrate a modern trend to slowness and hovering as a cinematic convention which parallels contemporary UFO trends. One could make a case that cinema showed an earlier trend to slowness than UFO lore and may have had a causal role in the shifting template of what makes UFOs mysterious, but it also can't be denied the films initially imitated life. Its role is not dominant in shaping perceptions.

## The cultural dimension

Saucers flying like blue blazes are no longer a dominant part of our definition of a UFO experience either in film or lore. In an age where supersonic transports routinely cross the oceans, multi-mach jets are a staple item in every country's military, and space shuttles regularly escape the bounds of earth, speed no longer seems so magical as it did at mid-century.

Levitation unassisted by helicopter rotors and rocket flames remains impressive and so defines alienness in a way high speed no longer can. 1200 mph is no longer incredible.

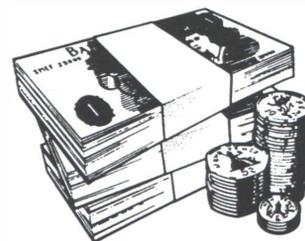
Does this prove UFOs are unreal phantoms that blend in with their times? No. Strictly, it only proves that there is a cultural dimension in our assumptions about what constitutes the behaviour of a flying saucer. People do not report everything that is present in the sky, but select only what is presumed to be interesting. What is interesting changes year to year, decade to decade, century to century. We've forgotten that Kenneth Arnold was interesting for reasons that no longer interest us. That, in itself, is interesting.

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# How Not to Get Rich Quick

Dene Bebbington

*A skeptical look at get-rich-quick schemes*



**J**UST RECENTLY, I have become acutely aware of a number of 'get rich quick' schemes being propagated in various forms, which make amazing claims about how lots of money can be made simply and easily, in some cases by only investing £5.

As a confirmed skeptic my first reaction to this is that if it sounds too good to be true then it probably is – and this is in fact usually the case. These claims tend to play on the gullibility (and stupidity) of some people, and only seem to add credence to P T Barnum's quip about suckers.

The most popular scheme for making large sums of money is the much-vaunted National Lottery, which in truth could net you millions of pounds for a stake of only one pound, although at rather slim odds of 1 in 14,000,000 or so.

The strange thing about the lottery is not that so many people do it, which is understandable, but the peculiar way in which they react to roll-over weeks. Bizarre behaviour manifests itself when there is an enhanced jackpot created by a roll-over: this apparently attracts more people to do the lottery, even though their chances of winning are the same as on any other week. It is quite puzzling how some people view an average jackpot of a few million not worth winning, but then consider double figure millions worth betting on. Perhaps this can be explained more by greed than anything else.

On my local TV news recently there was an amusing piece about a lottery 'expert' who provided advice on choosing numbers – for a fee of course. The immediate question that sprang to my mind was that if this guy knew something everyone else didn't, then why on earth wasn't he applying it himself rather than selling his knowledge?

## Chain letters

As children we were all familiar with chain letters which told us to send copies to ten friends, or breaking the chain would bring bad luck; or those that urged us to send a postcard to each person on a list with the promise of thousands of postcards arriving on our doorsteps.

This idea is now used by the make-money-fast brigade to promise us riches by investing a small amount, perhaps £5. The way these scams typically work is that you receive a list of five people to each of whom you

send £1. You then create a new list with the previous person at the top of the list removed, and your own name added to the bottom of the list. You then send this new list on to as many people as you can get names and addresses for, enclosing the same instructions. It is normally asserted that by following this method it's possible to make several thousands of pounds.

To a non-skeptical person (especially with a poor grasp of mathematics)

this might sound like an ideal opportunity of making some easy cash. Alas, if we examine the maths of such schemes it is obvious that they are little more than confidence tricks. With the chain letter method, there will only ever be  $5 \times N$  pounds in the system, where  $N$  is the number of participants. So, it is quite impossible for everyone to make thousands; the average return per person would be £5, which is a profit of nil.

As regular users of the Internet will have noticed, such con tricks appear with disconcerting regularity; all of them variations on the chain letter idea. The basic flaw is that they are all closed systems. In other words, the money only circulates between the participants, and hence everyone cannot make more than they put in. Game Theory calls this kind of thing a Zero Sum Game.



*Roman lottery, from L'illustration, 1867*

For someone to gain someone else must lose [1].

The spiel by the promoter of the scheme gives it away as being some sort of scam: it usually implores you not to ignore the opportunity, and says how the promoter initially had doubts, but then went on to make thousands by investing a paltry amount. The legality is always highlighted, to such an extent that it becomes obvious that *something* must be wrong with it.

### A step-by-step scam

An interesting scam concept is detailed in John Paulos' book *Innumeracy* [2]. This involves sending out predictions of stock market movements to a large group of, say, 16,000 people. To one half of the group you predict an upwards move; to the other half, a downward move. This will then leave one group of 8000 people who believe you've made an accurate prediction. You then divide this into two groups of 4000, one of which gets the upward move prediction, and the other the downward move prediction. After another couple of steps you then charge the remaining people for further predictions. This would probably be an illegal operation, but it highlights the reason to be skeptical when presented with seemingly 'can't lose' money making schemes.

On a slightly more honest and reasonable level there are the marketing schemes which involve both the selling of products and recruiting of new distributors. One such multi-billion dollar American company uses this method for selling their products, and suggests that people who become distributors for them can make enough money to give up their day job. Indeed some do, but not surprisingly only a very small fraction of them manage to – apparently less than 1% of all distributors.

The way to riches by being a distributor of this company's products is to recruit as many new distributors (known as 'downliners') as possible, since money is made by discounts on the amount of sales. This system has the flaw associated with any pyramid-based model, which is that not everyone can make riches since there is only a finite population. There must always be somebody at the bottom of the pile who has no downliners.

What is particularly insidious about these operations is the psychology used to entice people to become distributors. A common approach is to suggest some sort of inadequacy in the people who decide not to take up this 'amazing opportunity'. The implicit assumption is that any reservations about their system are not based on intellectual argument, but on a psychological weakness. These kinds of tactics seem akin to those used by cults to recruit members.

### A question of attitude

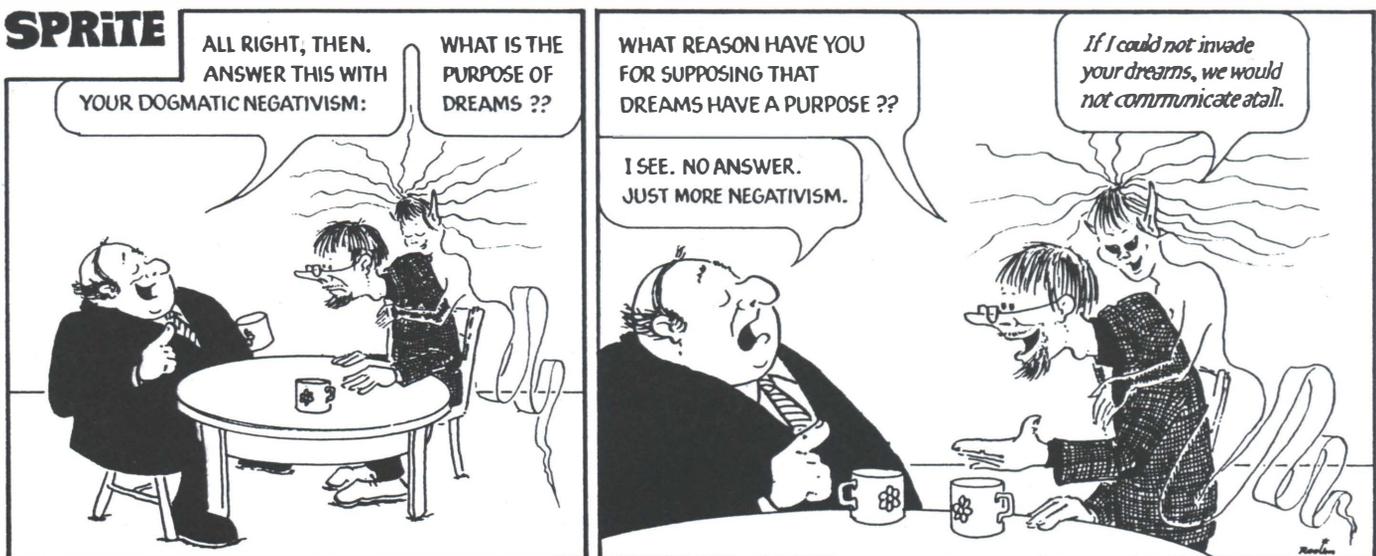
Once a person becomes a distributor there are the 'tools' that you are encouraged to buy. These are usually books and tapes advocating a positive mental attitude ('PMA'), and a Pollyanna-like mentality. The underlying message in these books and tapes is that you can achieve anything you want to if you try. But the fact that you are encouraged to buy these on a regular basis is somewhat suspicious. Just *how many* PMA books is it necessary to read before taking heed? The cynical amongst us might just think this is another way for the company to make more money. Of course the assumption here is that PMA will lead you to achieve whatever you want, and being a distributor for that company is the way in which you can earn lots of money to achieve it.

It's not unusual to find classified advertisements making spurious claims about how you can make large sums of money from small investments of your time and money in their system. But if you really want to become rich, don't expect it to come easy – unless of course you're one of the few lottery jackpot winners.

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Dene Bebbington is an impoverished computer programmer living in Reading.



# The Lure of Lucid Dreaming

Duncan Barford

*Is it possible to 'wake up' inside a dream?*

**L**UCID DREAMING is defined by enthusiasts as 'dreaming while knowing you are dreaming'. Through practice of a series of simple techniques, they argue, it is possible to 'wake-up' within your dreams.

Consequently, accounts of lucid dreams differ markedly from 'normal' dreams. First, the dreamer is fully aware of their situation, knows they are in bed and asleep, and that what they perceive is unreal. Second, mental faculties such as memory and reason, usually associated only with waking thought, are available to the dreamer.

Thirdly, the lucid dream has a unique 'quality': it appears to the dreamer to be exceptionally vivid and realistic, and often includes a sense of bodily awareness as full and complete as in waking life. Indeed, the line between a lucid dream and a so-called 'out of body experience' seems to be a fine one.

The most proficient lucid dreamers sometimes report the ability to alter the scenery and course of events within the dream, according to their conscious will. This, they claim, makes their dream-life a kind of personal 'virtual reality', affording them a vivid experience of any situation or fantasy they choose. Predictably, exotic sex and dangerous sports seem to be the most common lucid activities, but without any of the risk or responsibility these activities would exact from the dreamer in waking life.

I have experienced several lucid dreams, and can report that they are quite bizarre. However – in case you feel inclined to have your first lucid rampage tonight – I remain thoroughly unconvinced that lucidity is 'consciousness' during dreaming. I also find myself very suspicious of the way some researchers see lucid dreaming as having therapeutic applications. The Lucidity Institute is one organisation which provides courses on lucidity, which it claims 'can help people achieve goals in their waking lives . . . creative problem solving . . . overcoming sexual and social problems, coming to terms with the loss of loved ones, and physical healing' [1] – all

this without even getting out of bed! I am equally doubtful of the expensive goggles purportedly able to help induce lucidity by detecting eye-movements which accompany dreaming, and signalling through the closed eyelids of the sleeper with flashing lights.

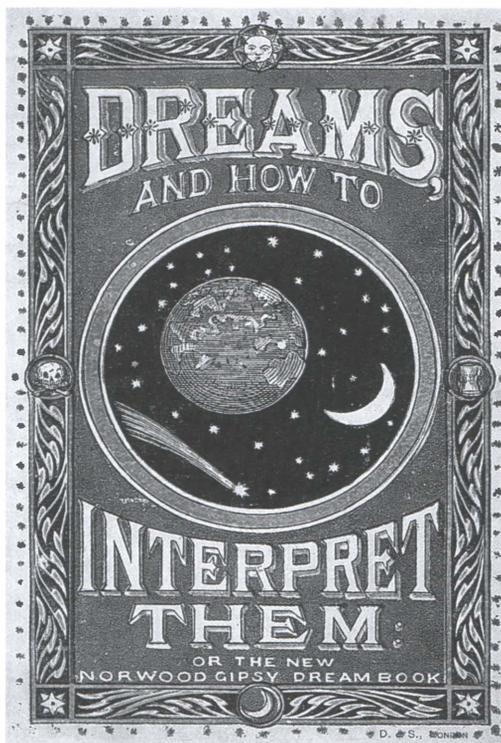
That lucidity is a 'lie' can partly be divined through careful reading of the literature. Lucid dreamers accept the fact that the quality of lucidity in dreams may 'vary'. They argue that this variability is not significant, however, because waking consciousness also fluctuates widely

between the extremes of acute concentration and dreamy mindlessness.

But the more one reads, the more the anomalies appear concerning this so-called 'dream consciousness'. A prime example is the problem of *written texts* encountered in lucid dreams. As in standard dreams, writing seems stubborn and slippery. No matter how lucid you are, you look at it one moment – then look again and find it has mysteriously changed; or else you read the words over and over, but the meaning remains elusive, or seems strangely divorced from the marks which appear on the page.

'I dreamt I was writing out *some kind of speech*', reported one lucid dreamer [2, page 84; italics mine]; another perused something that 'seemed quite reasonable, being *a kind of proclamation or set of instructions about arrangements for a sort of ceremony or pageant*' [3, page 72; italics mine]. Indeed, wherever the printed word appears in a lucid dream, the dreamer invariably reports what this writing 'said' in only a vague or generalized way.

This exposes the key misconception upon which the notion of lucid dreaming is built. Simply: to *read* a piece of writing, one needs first to *perceive* it, but this is not possible in a dream because the sleeper's eyes are shut. We *see* nothing in our dreams; dream images are simply not of the same order as perceptions; they don't originate from outside the dreamer, nor can they be regarded as existing independently of the dreamer's mind. You might



come across a whole library in a dream but (lucid or not), the books are undoubtedly all the work of a single author – the dreamer.

### False lucidity

Small wonder, then, that lucidity enthusiasts should find 'reading' so perplexing, because although it is quite reasonable for someone to say that they *dreamt* they were reading something, to claim instead they were reading something *in* the dream is totally absurd.

But what finally convinced me lucid dreaming was a total sham was – inevitably – a dream.

I was in my bedroom. There was something too silent and 'expectant' about the atmosphere, and this alerted me to the fact that I must be dreaming. Thus, I became lucid.

I seemed completely conscious of my situation. In fact, I even carried out a few of the experiments the experts suggest, such as looking in mirrors and testing electrical appliances to see if they work. After a while I decided to have some fun. I opened the window and jumped out, floating gently down to the lawn outside, feeling distinctly its prickliness under my bare feet. A fine summer day was just beginning, and a fat white cat seated on the garden fence eyed me warily as I took in big lung-fulls of flower-scented air. I was very pleased to be there, because I knew that when I woke it would be November.

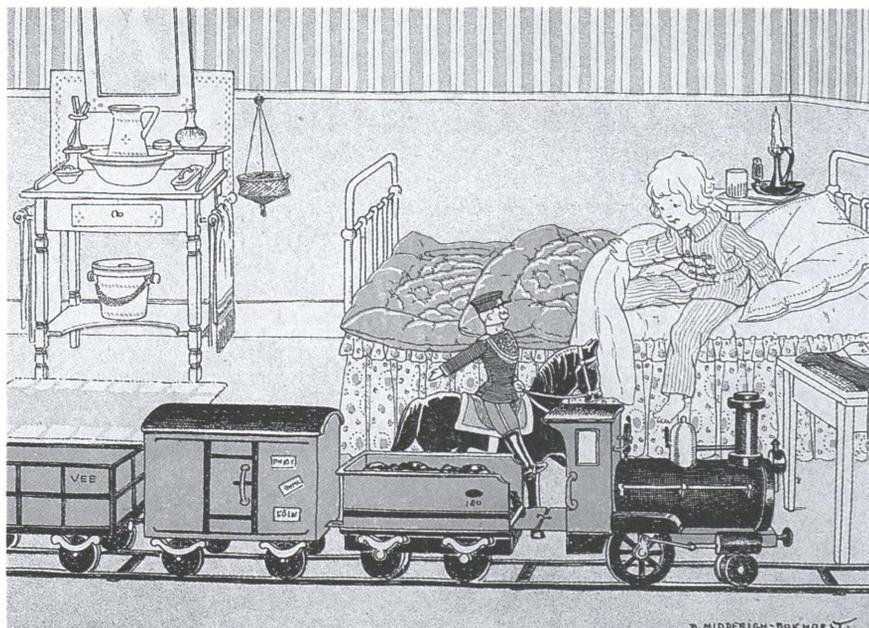
But once I was awake, I was disappointed – not merely because it was indisputably winter outside, but because I realized that the whole dream had been utterly *false*. It had only *seemed* I had been conscious within the dream; in effect, I had merely *dreamt* I had had a lucid dream.

The literature recognizes that this happens sometimes. It is called 'false lucidity', and is regarded as a failure to achieve full conscious awareness within the dream. For me, however, this spelt the end of my brief flirtation with dream consciousness.

I asked myself: how did I *know* the dream was false? How was it that I had a sense of having been conscious in the dream, yet an awareness on waking that this wasn't true?

The answer was that it simply *wasn't me* in the dream. The way I unhesitatingly leapt out of the bedroom window just isn't what I would have done in waking life. I realized also that my dream-room had been an odd amalgamation of my current home and a room at University. I had not noticed this in the dream; it had been the much less substantial fact of the 'atmosphere' in the room which seemed to alert me that I was dreaming. But if 'I' had really been 'me' in the dream, surely I would have noticed this?

So it occurred to me that if, instead, I had had a dream in which 'I' had behaved more like 'awake-I', then indeed



*A boy dreams that his toys are real* (Een Droom, circa 1912)

I would have woken and believed that I had been self-aware. But would that really be a true description of what had happened? It was starting to look as if a lucid dream had more to do with the *content* of a particular dream, than with any supposed 'state of mind' I might be said to have attained within it.

### Dreams of dreams

Perhaps someone less skeptical than myself might have had my dream, but woken up and reported it had been lucid. Consider this example:

'I'm going to fly,' I said, and started to break off the bars. They broke as if made of a cross between chocolate and sealing-wax, and I threw down the pieces onto the roof below . . . 'It is a dream,' I said firmly . . . I did *not* reflect that the way the bars broke proved it to be a dream [4].

I find it odd that someone could relate an episode so evidently redolent with the twisted logic of dreaming, yet assert that they were in some sense 'conscious' whilst it was dreamt. However, it seems the techniques for

We welcome clippings from newspapers, magazines, the Internet – anywhere! Please mark clippings with source and date, and send to the editorial address (see page 3).

Our thanks for this issue to: Andy Brice, Stuart Campbell, John Clarke, Jock Cramb, Marie Donnelly, Chester Faunce, Gerald Fleming, Dorothy L Forrester, Mavis Howard, Earnest Jackson, Yilmaz Magurtzey, David Martin, Stephen Moreton, Austen Moulden, Alan Remfry, Donald Rooum, Neil Rosen-Webb, Tom Ruffles, Mike Rutter, Gillian Sathanandan, Ian Saunders, H Sivyver, Brian Slade, J Thompson Jnr, Chris Torrero, J G Watson, Chris Willis.

inducing lucid dreams might predispose dreamers to exactly this type of confusion.

The most common method is to ask yourself at intervals during the day whether you are dreaming, and to look at mirrors and printed text to check that they are behaving normally. If you *are* awake and reality does appear to be in place, the experts suggest, then: 'say to yourself, "I may not be dreaming now, but if I were what would it be like?" Visualize as vividly as possible that you are dreaming' [1]. The reasoning behind this is that if you form the habit of asking yourself whether you are dreaming, this behaviour will carry over into your dream-life; you will *dream* that you ask yourself if you are dreaming and will then, hopefully, be able to answer 'yes'.

Leaving aside the question of what effect these exercises might have upon a person's sense of reality, it is obvious that by performing them the devotee is *rehearsing* the feelings they expect to have; they are, in an important sense, *already* having the experience they are aiming at!

Every dreamer will have noticed that their dreams are to an extent composed of impressions accumulated during the day preceding the dream. So if I have spent a proportion of my waking hours imagining becoming conscious in my dream, is it any wonder these thoughts might find their way into an actual dream? But although I might *dream* that I am awake in my dream, this is not equivalent to being conscious *in* the dream. Plainly, I can never have a true lucid dream: I can only *dream* about having lucid dreams! Lucidity is always 'fake', always only a dream *about* being aware one is dreaming.

This point of view destroys an enchanting illusion, but remains faithful to the nature of dreams – the fact

they are *not* composed of perceptions. It also has the advantage of explaining all those 'lapses' in lucidity which researchers have been compelled to admit – the inability of reason and memory to come up to scratch in the lucid 'state'. And it might also save people the time and expense of taking courses, buying goggles, and 'working on themselves' through lucid dreaming, because although it is true one can train oneself to have some impressively paradoxical and bizarre dreams, the world of dreams is still off-limits to waking consciousness.

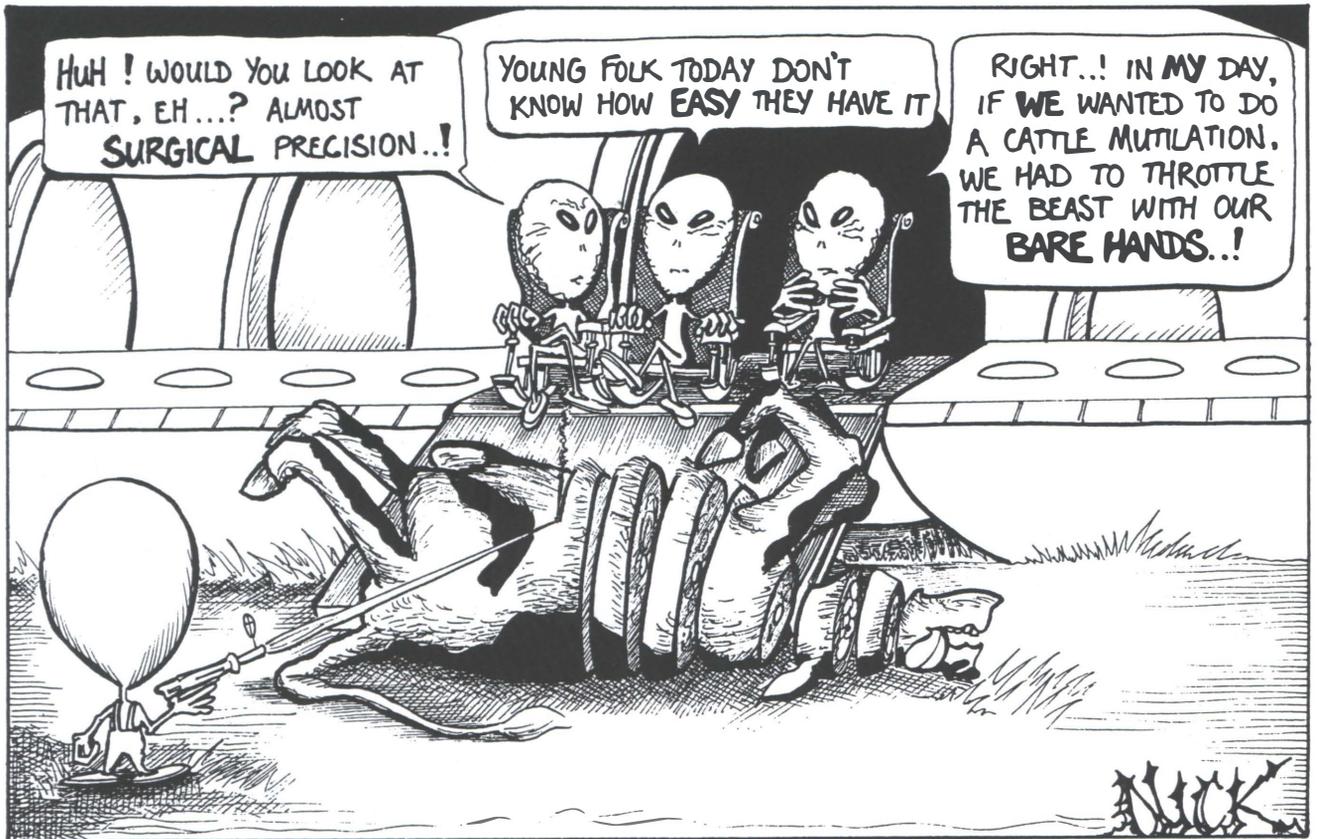
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ALIEN OLD-TIMERS

Nick Kim

# Un-Conventionally speaking

Chris Willis attends a decidedly Fortean gathering

**A** RECENT SURVEY revealed several million Americans may have been abducted by aliens', according to a display board at the Fortean Times 'UnConvention' held at the University of London's Institute of Education on 20-21 April.

Many *Skeptic* readers will no doubt be familiar with *Fortean Times*, a monthly magazine covering what it describes as 'news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents'. These subjects were certainly well covered in the conference agenda. Attractions included talks on False Memory Syndrome, Mayan prophecies, reincarnation, ghosts and 'the Apollo moon landing fake photographs'. Victorian-style séances were hosted by University of Hertfordshire Psychologist and regular *Skeptic* contributor Richard Wiseman, who demonstrated some of the ruses Victorian mediums used to fool gullible clients. There was also a chance to view the complete footage of the Roswell 'alien autopsy', a subject which I would have thought everyone would be heartily sick of by now.

Some 1500 connoisseurs of the weird and the wonderful paid their £25 to attend this celebration of the stranger side of life. Attendees were mainly middle-class, white thirty-somethings. I couldn't help wondering if I'd strayed into a convention of *X-Files* fans, a feeling which was reinforced by a talk by Nick Pope, billed as 'The real Fox Mulder'. Mr Pope investigated alleged UFO sightings for the Ministry of Defence between 1991 and 1994, and is convinced that some of them are genuine extraterrestrial visitors. His book on the subject is due out in June, and appears to have escaped the strictures of the Official Secrets Act.

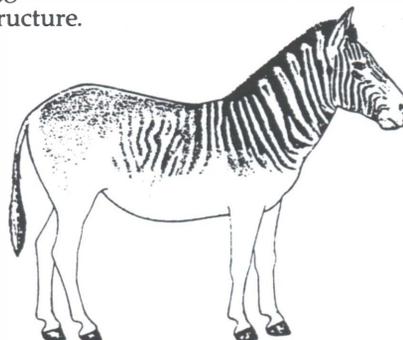
Despite such apparent openness on the part of the MoD, conspiracy theory was very much in the air. Robin Ramsay gave a talk on the increasing circulation of conspiracy theories in recent years. A later discussion considered whether the British government has a deliberate policy of withholding UFO information from the public. Having spent several months grappling with Civil Service bureaucracy as part of my own research, I can't help feeling that the government does not need such a policy – the amount of red tape involved makes it difficult to obtain government information about virtually *anything*.

An exhibition of Fortean Zoology featured sightings of strange animals such as the much-publicised 'Beast of Bodmin' and, of course, the Loch Ness Monster. Established in 1992, the Centre for Fortean Zoology investigates what it classifies as cryptids (animals unknown to science), quasi-cryptids (animals which are known to science but thought extinct or sighted in unlikely places) and zooform phenomena, which are intriguingly described as 'things which exist but may not even be alive'.



This last category includes a Gothic-sounding 'owlman' who has supposedly appeared to teenagers in a churchyard near Falmouth. Researcher Jonathan Downes claims that there were many sightings of this creature during the 1970s, but unfortunately – if not surprisingly – the exhibition did not include any photographic evidence.

On a more realistic note, the exhibition described attempts to re-introduce the Quagga, a zebra-like creature officially extinct since 1883. Scientists are trying to breed Quaggas from the Plains Zebra, which has a similar DNA structure.



A section on hoaxes included the sad story of a severely handicapped man passed off as a monster in China in 1984.

Talks included a fascinating session on vampires, during which I learned that vampires hate clean, tidy houses. Sadly, this was not enough to make me rush home to do the housework. Tina Rath of the Vampyre Society outlined vampire folklore through the ages. Apparently one type of vampire was thought to prey on unsuspecting railway travellers, but sitting in a particular position would keep the passenger safe. Next time you're travelling by train, look out for anyone sitting with their hands clasped and their left foot over their right – they're probably warding off vampires. I wonder what you are supposed to do if you're strap-hanging on the Underground.

Like *Fortean Times*, the UnConvention was great fun for anyone with an open mind, although some of the audience seemed so open-minded that a jumbo jet could have landed in the space between their ears.

Chris Willis is a writer living in London working on her PhD on Victorian detective fiction.

# The Ten-Percent Solution

Barry Beyerstein

*Do we really waste most of our brain-power?*

**A**S ANYONE WITH THE TEMERITY to question the existence of psychic powers will soon discover, a cherished rejoinder is the logical fallacy known as the 'argument from ignorance'. Therein, the debater assumes that in what we (admittedly) don't yet know lies the proof of what he or she believes to be true. Lacking solid evidence of their own, defenders of ESP and psychokinesis often argue that if it cannot be proved that something is not the case, this somehow counts as evidence that it is true.

In debates with advocates of the paranormal, I frequently encounter an extension of this ploy that rests on the widely quoted, but never supported, assertion that normal people only use 10% of their brains. So, the argument continues, if we don't know what the remainder of the brain is there for, it could be the repository for awesome mental powers that only a few adepts have mastered. This enlightened minority could be tapping their latent cerebral potential to accomplish levitation, spoon bending, clairvoyance, precognition, telepathy, psychic healing, and other fantastica scarcely conceivable to mere mortals condemned to subsist on the drudge-like 10%. Of course, the one-tenth figure is itself debatable, but even if it were accurate, it would in no way entail the existence of psychic powers, which must stand or fall on their own demonstrable merits. The 10% myth is so prevalent that I have become curious about its origins and why it persists despite its inherent improbability. Some earlier speculations of mine on the topic (*Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 12, No. 2) generated several thoughtful suggestions from readers. I would be pleased to hear from readers of the present article as well.

## Attack of the factoids

As someone who spends much of his professional life pondering how the brain works, I am quite willing to admit the extent of our ignorance about how this kilo and a half of gray matter manages to produce thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Nonetheless, I am at a loss to understand how my debating adversaries came to know with such pontifical certainty that we normally use only 10% of it. To the best of my knowledge, this alleged 'fact' appears nowhere in the literature of neurophysiology or physiological psychology. On the contrary, it is at variance with most of what we do know about the brain. The 'dormant brain' thesis seems to be another of those 'factoids' that accumulate a patina of believability through mere repetition. It has become firmly ensconced in the conventional wisdom, though no one who has cited it to

me has ever been able to state who first said it or what evidence there is in its favour.

Logic alone should give pause to the 10-percenters. When asked if the 10% figure is true, I often respond, 'How well do you think you would continue to function if 90% of your brain were suddenly incapacitated?'. The typically dismal responses implicitly concede the implausibility of the claim. We all know stroke victims who have lost considerably less brain tissue and are severely debilitated.

Furthermore, virtually all educated people now accept that the human brain is the product of millions of years of evolution. Given the conservatism of natural selection, it seems highly unlikely that scarce resources would be squandered to produce and maintain such an under-utilised organ. The brain is costly to run, consuming approximately a quarter of the metabolic resources of the resting body. How long would you endure huge power bills to heat all ten rooms of your home if you never strayed beyond the kitchen?

## Safety in numbers

The brain has evolved a fair bit of redundancy in its circuitry as a safety precaution, but little, if any, of it lies perpetually fallow. The armamentarium of modern neuroscience decisively repudiates this notion. EEGs, CAT, PET and MRI scans, magnetoencephalography, regional cerebral blood flow measures, and so on, all show that, even during sleep, there are no silent areas in the brain (see, for example, Per E Roland, *Brain Activation*, Wiley-Liss, 1993). Such tranquillity would be a sign of gross pathology. We also know from these technologies and from studying the effects of head trauma that the brain is not an undifferentiated mass. Rather, distinct functions are distributed to different regions of the brain. According to the 10% scenario, 90% of each of these distributed functional areas would have to be unused in order not to lose certain functions totally in a 90% dormant brain. This seems highly implausible in light of animal research where electrodes are inserted directly into the brain to map its microcircuitry and localization of function.

Henry Ford once said, 'Whatever you have, you must use it or lose it'. Muscles atrophy from disuse and so, apparently, do brain circuits. My own research and that of many others indicates that neural systems deprived of normal input either fail to develop, or deteriorate permanently. If 90% of our brains were really idle, we would expect massive areas of degeneration but no such signs

show up in normal people on the various scanners mentioned above. Of course, the 10% utilization figure could refer instead to storage capacity, processing speed, or some other index of brain activity (rather than simply to volume) but I know of no way to determine the theoretical limits of such processes in order to estimate the average person's efficiency. At any rate, research suggests that it is not lack of storage capacity that hinders performance most; the bottleneck is more likely to be difficulty in retrieving what we've safely stored.

### Ten percent nonsense

If the 10% figure makes no sense neurologically, I would suggest that this presumed neural tithing in ordinary people is, instead, a metaphor for widespread human longings. It is comforting to believe that we all have this latent potential and this may explain in part why so many people cling to this dictum of neuro-mythology. In addition, the remarkable ability of developing brains to reorganize and recover from neural damage may also have contributed to the plausibility of the belief. For instance, young children have been known to recover a surprisingly high level of functioning after loss of an entire cerebral hemisphere to injury or disease. This is far less than 90% of their brains, of course, but because dead nerve cells are not replaced after birth, these patients must be making do with what remains, suggesting there might have been some unused parts. In fact, it seems instead that the functions of the destroyed areas actually 'crowd in' alongside those the undamaged portions were already handling, rather than colonizing previously unused areas. Immediately following the trauma, such children experience devastating disruptions of behaviour and consciousness but, gradually, most abilities, including language, recover quite substantially. Unfortunately, this ability of the remaining neural tissue to assume the additional duties of destroyed parts wanes with age, as a visit to any neurological ward will quickly convince you. Even among those who suffer brain damage as young children and regain near-normal functioning, some deficits do remain, although it sometimes requires fairly sophisticated tests to reveal these shortcomings. The ability to achieve such a high degree of recovery seems to be largely lost by the time of puberty. Much recent research has been devoted to finding ways to suppress certain features of mature brains that largely prevent adult neural tissue from re-establishing functional neural connections after brain damage. Popularized accounts of the dramatic recoveries of some of these young brain damage victims probably fuelled the misconception that they never really needed the extra brain tissue in the first place.

This misapprehension was reinforced in an otherwise informative TV documentary that aired on the Public Broadcasting System and the Knowledge Network in North America. It featured the Sheffield University paediatric researcher John Lorber and an extraordinary group of his patients. Referred to Lorber because of fairly minor neurological complaints, these young adults were of normal or above-normal intelligence and were coping



Nick Kim

*"You'll have to forgive Sydney . . . The left and right hemispheres of his brain are currently engaged in a struggle for dominance . . ."*

well, educationally and socially. Astonishingly, CAT scans had revealed that their cerebral hemispheres had been compressed into a slab only a few millimetres thick. The compression had been caused by enlargement of the underlying fluid-filled ventricles. This had probably occurred insidiously as the normally-circulating cerebrospinal fluid dammed up behind constricted outflow channels over an extended period. The condition is known as hydrocephalus and if it is of very early onset and left untreated it will cause the entire head to balloon out in a grotesque fashion because the infant cranium has not yet calcified. Severe mental and behavioural retardation typically ensue. In Lorber's cases, the cranium had presumably already solidified by the time of onset of hydrocephalus – trapping the cerebral hemispheres literally 'between a rock and a hard place.' The absence of mental retardation in these young adults, despite their tremendous neural shrinkage, led Lorber and the producers of the show to ask the misleading question that, unfortunately, became the title of the episode: 'Is the Brain Really Necessary?'

What Lorber's remarkable cases demonstrate is not, as the documentary coyly suggests, the irrelevance of the brain to our mental lives, but rather the amazing ability of the brain to adjust to massive disruptions, providing they occur slowly enough and early enough in life. CAT scans cannot reveal how much of the thinning of the cerebral hemispheres in Lorber's patients was due to cellular loss and how much to compacting of brain cells into less than their normal volume. In addition, there is reason to believe that the greater share of cell loss in such cases may be among the supporting glial cells rather than in the neurons that actually mediate mental functions. The fact that these patients can get by with reduced brain volume does not imply that they wouldn't have put any additional tissue to good use had it been retained. I also suspect that their degree of normalcy may have been somewhat exaggerated for dramatic effect. Nonetheless, Lorber's cases are an eloquent testimonial to the resilience of the young brain and its ability to reorganize and carry on after major insults. Mature brains subjected to more rapid increases in intracranial pressure, due to growing tumours for instance, certainly show much more drastic impairments. Lorber's CAT scans also serve the useful purpose of reminding neu-

rologists and neuropsychologists that deeper structures in the brain (which are largely spared in these cases) contribute more to our mental abilities than our fascination with cortical structures sometimes leads us to think.

## Origins

Although the origins of the Great 10% Myth remain obscure, it has long been a staple of self-improvement courses like those of the Dale Carnegie organization. It remains a popular selling point for the hawkers of Transcendental Meditation courses and a variety of crackpot 'brain-tuner' devices so dear to New Age entrepreneurs. The myth has been around for a long time. For instance, Dwight Decker, in a 1994 Internet posting to the 'sci.skeptic' electronic bulletin board, noted that in the foreword to Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), the journalist Lowell Thomas cites the 10% myth and credits it to the pioneering psychologist William James (1842–1910). One of Decker's sources said he remembered James discussing it in his magnum opus, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) although Decker and I have both been unable to find such a reference. What gave rise to James' idea that we only use 10% of our brains, the source said, were anecdotal accounts of people who had suffered drastic losses of brain tissue due to accidents or disease, or who had been born with conditions (such as hydrocephalus) that left them with very little brain tissue at all. Yet they seemed to function more or less normally (obviously, cases such as those reported by John Lorber have been known to neurologists for a long time as well). Although he tried diligently, Decker was unable to locate such a passage in any of James' better-known writings. Perhaps James could have uttered it in one of his many public addresses and was merely quoted (or mis-quoted) elsewhere. Decker has also located references to versions of the 10% figure in the 1911 edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the 1929 edition of the *World Almanac*, all of which shows that the misapprehension was already widespread in the early part of this century. However it may have arisen, belief in 'the myth' obviously caught on: it was canonized at mid-century by no less a personage than Albert Einstein who once uttered it as a speculative reply to the constant barrage of questions about the source of his brilliance.

I believe this vision of the largely vegetative brain acquired at least some of its spurious scientific gloss from laypersons' misinterpretations of early neurological experiments with lower animals. Pioneering studies by Karl Lashley, for instance, showed that large portions of rat cortex could be removed with apparently little disruption in behaviour (later tests did find deficits that weren't obvious with the earlier research methods). In the same vein, confusion regarding certain terms used by early comparative neurologists may have compounded this misinterpretation. With evolutionary advancement, the cerebrum of mammals has enlarged greatly but a progressively smaller proportion of it is concerned with strictly sensory or motor duties. This was demonstrated in the 1930s by electrically stimulating the exposed cortical surface in a variety of species from different levels of the evolutionary tree. Because the current was unable to evoke overt responses from these increasingly large non-sensory and non-motor ar-

eas in the so-called 'higher' species with larger brains, those areas were referred to by some researchers as 'silent cortex'. Obviously, they did not mean that these regions were literally silent or unused. As we have seen, they are anything but silent – these so-called 'association areas' are responsible for our most uniquely human characteristics, including language and abstract thought. Areas of maximal activity shift in the brain as we change tasks and vary attention and arousal but there are normally no dormant regions awaiting new assignments.

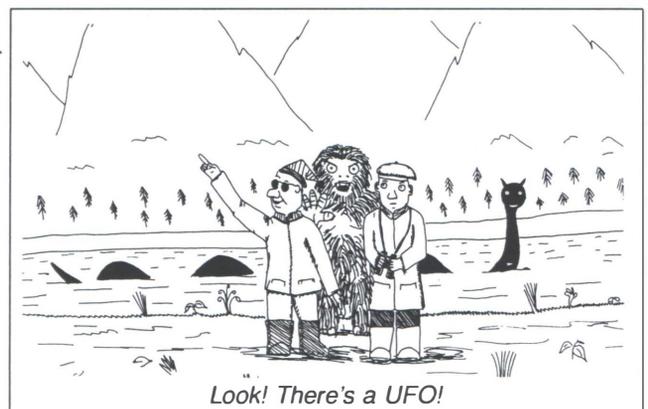
A final speculation about the origins of the 10% myth is that it might have been derived from misconstruals of rightfully modest admissions by neuroscientists concerning the limitations of our understanding. Despite the huge amount that we have learned about the brain, it is only honest to confess how much remains to be discovered. Such modesty would have been even more appropriate at the dawn of the 20th century when 'the myth' seems to have taken hold. Possibly, some early investigator's (probably optimistic) estimate that researchers only knew what ten per cent of the brain does may have been misread as an assertion that we normally only need or use ten percent of it.

## Cerebral spare tire

In the end, I think this persistent curiosity boils down, once again, to the comforting nature of most occult and New Age beliefs. It would be nice if they were true – death would have no sting and there would be no shortcomings in life, materially or mentally. The 10% myth suggests we could all be Einsteins, Rockefellers or Uri Gellers if we could just engage that ballast between our ears! This 'cerebral spare tire' concept continues to nourish the clientele of 'pop psychologists' and their many recycling self-improvement schemes. As a metaphor for the fact that few of us fully exploit our talents, who could deny it? As a spur to hope and a source of solace it's probably done more good than harm, but comfort afforded is not truth implied. As a refuge for occultists seeking the neural basis of the miraculous, the probability is considerably less than ten percent.

**Barry Beyerstein** is a Professor in the Department of Psychology and the Brain Behaviour Laboratory at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada.

*This is a revised and updated version of an article which first appeared in the Rational Enquirer, the magazine of the British Columbia Skeptics.*





# Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

## A matter of some gravity

**W**HO HAS NOT at some time fantasised about flying like a bird, soaring effortlessly over fields and mountains? Seeing the world in wide-angle! The clarity! The escape! The sense of power! The fantasy.

Thanks to the miracle of engineering, today we *can* fly, but the experience is far from transcendental. Unless, of course, your particular path to enlightenment is facilitated by being strapped into a metal tube at 30,000 feet, and forced to eat alien food – ‘What do you think it is?’ puzzled travelling companions ask each other.

*Those Catholic saints  
Did it  
Witches reticent and quaint  
Did it  
Let's do it, let's lev-i-tate*

There is a long tradition of people claiming to be able to fly, or levitate, using ‘secret powers’ of one sort or another. Many religious figures, fakirs, cult leaders, mediums, Catholic saints, dervishes, shamen and witches, have over the centuries claimed the power to levitate, and there is a worldwide folklore of miraculous flight. Unfortunately, however, levitation has proven rather difficult to demonstrate under controlled conditions. It is, you might say, a matter of some gravity.

*D D Home, they say,  
Did it  
Transcendentalists today  
Do it  
Let's do it, let's lev-i-tate*

Perhaps the best known ‘levitators’ of recent years are the practitioners of Transcendental Meditation. TMers claim to be able to meditate themselves into such a state that they can levitate from their mattresses and hover. The key word here, of course, is not ‘levitate’, but ‘mattresses’. I once attended a demonstration. The fellow was obviously in an extremely deep meditational state, his higher consciousness melding with the universe. What else could explain his apparent oblivion to the fact that his occasional two-inch ‘levitation’ was in perfect synchronisation with his energetic bouncing?

To physicists and engineers, however, levitation is perfectly feasible, although it does require equipment of somewhat more substance than ‘focused psychic energies’ and the like.

For example, the idea of magnetic levitation, or ‘maglev’, has been around for many years, and much research has been undertaken on the design of wheel-less trains that magnetically hover above their guidance



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<http://www.emdesign.com>

tracks. But such systems suffer from instability. (I have a vague recollection of seeing Eric Laithwaite demonstrate maglev during the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures, sometime in the seventies, where he caught an out-of-control levitated metal plate just in time to prevent it decapitating a member of the audience.)

*Some lady nuns  
Do it  
Eastern gurus on the run  
Do it  
Let's do it, let's lev-i-tate*

You can now buy a levitation system for your coffee table. Electro Magnetics Design, Inc., of Minneapolis, produces the ‘FreeSpace ESS900 Levitation System’ which will float objects weighing from 2 to 15 ounces in mid-air (see photo). The system uses a powerful electromagnet mounted in the head of the stand; the object to be levitated must be non-ferromagnetic, and fitted with a small rare-earth permanent magnet.

A larger-scale version of the ESS900 might one day provide for the demonstrable levitation of human beings, assuming that the delicate anatomical problem of how to insert the requisite magnet can be satisfactorily overcome. But until then, if we want to hover serenely, or fly with the birds, I suspect that we shall have no choice but to resort to the bouncy mattress, or climb into a metal tube in the sky.

**Toby Howard** is a lecturer at the University of Manchester, and a freelance writer.

# Skeptic at Large

Wendy Grossman



## Spring cleaning the mind

**I**T'S JUST BEEN Bank Holiday weekend, and I decided to become a new person. I did no work for four days (well, three and a half). I ate meals in the living room. I read a book in bed. And I decided to reorganize and paint the office.

I've been living in the same place now for five and a half years, which is some kind of record in my adult life, and I was bored, bored, bored with the same colour of magnolia everywhere and never having a different view. Now, my office faces in a different direction. I can look out the window. Portions of the floor are actually free of clutter. And the new soft jade colour (well, that's what they call it on the can) is appealingly different.

Unfortunately, as I found out after I logged onto the CIX electronic conferencing system 23 times on Tuesday, I am still the same.

This principle may be relevant to skeptics. At the very least, it explains why we spend so much time rehashing the same ground. Sherlock Holmes once told Watson that the human brain is like an empty attic. You must stock it very carefully, he argued, choosing only the furniture you really need. Furniture: ideas and information. Stuff the brain full of extraneous matter, and you won't have enough room for the bits that really count. This was his justification for not knowing that the earth went round the sun, by the way. He didn't, he argued, need to know this in order to conduct his detective work. We will all just have to be grateful that he never took on a case investigating a UFO claim.

The big problem for most people isn't that they've overstuffed their attics with information. After all, it's relatively easy to forget 90 percent of the things we learn in school, and most of us do this without conscious effort. The big problem is that once we've put the furniture in place we never move it again to vacuum underneath and throw out the accumulated stack of junk that's slid off the back. We (or at least I) certainly never get around to cleaning the cobwebs off the ceiling, a necessary prerequisite to repainting the place.

The mental equivalent might be rearranging all the preconceptions we have. There's a good reason for this: it's hard. Or, as a particularly confused and denial-prone friend of mine once summed up the workings of his own mind, 'It's a big place. And it's dark in there'. The reason it's so hard is that preconceptions creep into our minds, like termites, imperceptibly. We pick up all sorts of rubbish in school, from the various media we indulge in, from conversations with friends, and from our possibly flawed observations of the world around us. And, again

like termites, it all keeps nibbling away at the foundations. If we're lucky, the foundations crash exposing the truth, giving us the chance to rebuild. If we're unlucky, we proceed to our graves with a half-rotten structure that's so stuffed that it can't fall down.

A recent email message over the Internet from James Randi blamed most of this on the media – that catch-all term that suggests that all journalists and broadcasters are somehow the same – and seemed to imply that most media people knew but didn't care if they represented paranormal claims as genuine in the face of contrary evidence. My experience is that this is just not the case. I have personally met many people in television, radio, and print who personally believe all kinds of stuff. We see a number of them on CIX, and now that a friend and I have taken over the Fleet Street forum for UK journalists on CompuServe, another electronic conference service, we see many more. These are bright, cynical, educated people who buy into astrology, alien visitors, UFOs, and many other things that skeptics tend to question. Sometimes these folks just don't have the same information we have; other times they have it but don't recognize its significance.

So, sitting here in my (2/7) soft jade office with my desk pointing west instead of north and my new blank space on the floor where I can put a rug, I'm here to tell you that this is the first preconception we need to fight against: that media people are somehow special and know things the rest of the population do not. Media people went to the same schools a lot of us did. They studied or didn't study the same amount of science. They are subject to the same societal influences. The single difference is that they (or we, I suppose I should say) have some kind of talent for showing off in public. In my case, I showed off as a folksinger for a number of years before I figured out that showing off by writing things was a lot less stressful and a lot more lucrative.

It's a dismaying lesson, because we all want to believe that somewhere out there someone really knows something about how the world works that we can learn by absorbing their wisdom. There may be some of these people around. But if you were really smart, would you choose a profession where you spend all your time chasing other people to give you things (quotes, review copies, help)? I think not.

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

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# Reviews

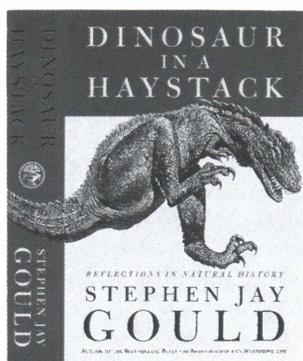
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## Good as Gould

Stephen Jay Gould, *Dinosaur in a Haystack: Reflections in Natural History* (Jonathan Cape, £18.99)



After more than twenty years of columns in *Natural History* magazine, Stephen Jay Gould is established as perhaps the best popular science essayist currently writing. Indeed, his introduction hints that Gould himself shares this opinion: 'I am not a modest man', he confesses, having plenty to be immodest about.

This seventh collection's 34 essays are good stuff. As usual, they return repeatedly to Gould's favourite subjects of evolutionary theory, scientists' personalities, and snails. But, again as usual, he casts his net wider to discuss literature, museums old-fashioned and modern, creole languages, astronomy, extinctions, the coming millennium, and much more. Always there's the sense that Gould has done more work than necessary: when debunking Hollywood's persistent travesties of *Frankenstein*, he clearly made the rare effort of reading Mary Shelley's novel right through, and his trashing of similar dumbing-down in the *Jurassic Park* movie is strengthened by knowledge of Michael Crichton's somewhat superior novel.

Gould's laudable concern to get at the actual truth overrides the supposed party-political divisions of, say, science versus religion. There's a pleasant piece of creationist-bashing which mercilessly parades the various recently-discovered 'impossible' evolutionary intermediates between hind-legged mammals and whales. But there's also a sharp attack on the notion that in the Dark Ages and mediaeval times, most scholars believed the Earth was flat – a tale which appears to have been whipped up during the 19th century as rationalist propaganda against blinkered religion.

Gould excels at dismantling anecdotes which are too good to be true, and potters enjoyably in search of whether and when J B S Haldane actually said that God 'has an inordinate fondness for beetles'. One writer recklessly had him saying it to Jowett, Master of Balliol, who died before Haldane was a year old. I liked this re-teller's unabashed excuse: 'Mundane constraints of time and space do not apply to stories about Oxford'.

Sometimes, perhaps when stuck for material, Gould constructs laboriously rococo parallels which seem just too contrived. For example, between the work of Linnaeus and an opera involving masks, because, er, Linnaeus

unmasked Nature.

It's a fine collection, though, with some genuinely moving passages – as when he visits New York during a partial solar eclipse and finds whole crowds of those famously uncaring city people being fascinated by improvised pinhole-camera projections: the shared joy of science. I wished I'd been there.

— David Langford

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## Randi strikes again

James Randi, *The Supernatural A-Z* (Headline, £6.99)

James ('The Amazing') Randi, magician, skeptic, and psychic investigator, will surely need no introduction to most *Skeptic* readers. In this, his tenth book – appropriately subtitled 'The Truth and the Lies' – he takes a hard look at 666 intriguing subjects from Abaris (the teacher of Pythagoras) and Abra-Xelin the Mage, through to Voodoo and Zombies, with stops on the way at Atlantis, the Great Pyramid, the Order of the Golden Dawn, Theosophy, and Transcendental Meditation, at all times ruthlessly exposing mistaken ideas, fraudulent claims, and downright hoaxes.

As well as genuinely 'supernatural' topics, Randi tackles fringe ideas in science (Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, UFOs), folklore (fairies, vampires), health (homeopathy, psychic surgery, radionics), and religion (faith healing, glossolalia, relics, Satanism, the Shroud of Turin, weeping statues, and Witchcraft). There are articles on groups such as the Aetherius Society, Christian Science, Gnostics, Rosicrucians, and Scientologists, plus devastating exposes of astrology, blindfold vision, Borley Rectory, channellers ('bad ventriloquism – they talk funny but their lips move'), cold reading, crop circles, crystal gazing, divination, dowsing (explained by the ideomotor effect), E-rays, N-rays, numerology, phrenology, police psychics, prophecy, qi, remote viewing, and talking plants.

Randi also gives brief but critical biographies of most of the noteworthy characters on the 'supernatural' scene, and in many cases he explains the sleight-of-hand, cold reading, and other stage magic tricks used by 'psychics' to fool investigators. We also have fascinating details of famous stage 'mentalists' such as Joseph Dunninger, Eric Jan Hanussen (Hitler's clairvoyant), Kreskin, and the Zancigs – all of whom sometimes seemed to believe their 'psychic powers' were the genuine article. Randi also describes the two trickster 'psychokinetes' who helped to expose the shoddy controls at a professional parapsychology laboratory in 'Project Alpha'.

My favourite story concerns Princess Amen-Ra, a defunct Egyptian lady whose exhumed remains brought tragedy first to her finders and then to staff at the British

Museum, which in desperation eventually (in 1912) managed to sell her to a brash, skeptical, and wealthy American, who decided to sail home with her – on the Titanic, naturally. Alas, this story is complete fiction. A more factual account concerns the legendary Curse of Tutankhamen, which seems to have actually *lengthened* (compared with actuarial tables) the life-spans of the people involved with opening the tomb.

The book culminates, naturally enough, with 49 prophecies predicting the End of the World on various dates, including (A.D.) 992, 1186, 1533, 1719, 1843, 1980, 1996, and of course Nostradamus' own choice, July 1999.

This is a wonderful book.

— Mike Rutter

## Thoughts for bed-time

Lyn Webster Wilde, *Working With Your Dreams* (Blandford, £7.99)

Lyn Webster Wilde writes clearly and with enthusiasm. She has developed a personal approach to utilising dreams to assist her activities and does not make extravagant claims for either the ease of working with dreams or the efficacy of dream solutions.

Wilde distinguishes six categories of dreams. These are: 'instinctive' dreams dealing with needs such as thirst or hunger; 'digestive' dreams which sort through and catalogue the day's experiences; 'integrative' dreams in which we dramatise and struggle with problems; 'creative' dreams which reveal solutions to various problems; 'true' dreaming which involves precognition, clairvoyance and prophecy and, finally, 'big' dreams which lead to life-enhancing experiences.

For the most part the author's treatment is reasonable and pragmatic. She stresses the need for organisation and structure in both individual and group dream-work. She is very forceful in her belief that the purpose of dream-work is to assist us in adopting creative and effective solutions to practical problems, and is not a substitute for action. She points out the need for self-discipline and willingness to subject the analysis of dreams to criticism. She is clear that 'dreams are not a short-cut to creativity for a lazy mind', but can be used to good advantage by an active and disciplined mind.

The book becomes less convincing when dealing with 'true' dreams. According to the author, such dreams allegedly have links with clairvoyance, telepathy and precognition. She seems uneasy in this area, however, stressing the unreliability of memory and the need for careful recording and testing of such claims. Similarly, the final chapter on 'big' dreams seems to have lost some of the earlier rigour and scepticism. 'Big' dreams lead to experiences after which the whole life of the person is changed; for example, when one is 'born again' in some way. The world is acknowledged to be the same place it was prior to the experience, but after the experience the meaning and significance of that place has completely changed. But once again, the author appears uneasy, preferring not to end the book by succumbing to the 'temptation to babble about cosmic truths'.

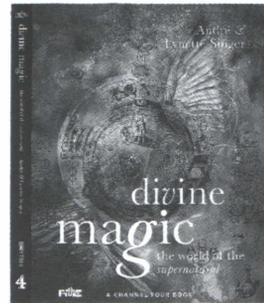
The value of this book is not significantly undermined by these latter chapters. It is an honest, thoughtful

and articulate attempt to systematically and, for the most part, critically consider the potential of dream work in order to make our waking life both more enjoyable and more effective.

— Dave Unsworth

## Divine anthropology

André and Lynette Singer, *Divine Magic: The World of the Supernatural* (Boxtree/Channel 4, £18.99)



In recent years we've seen a lot of wistful mysticism, almost a multi-generational form of nostalgia, associated with ancient Celtic customs. In popular mythos it seems that everybody would gather about on a moonlit night to the gentle drone of druidic chanting, cloves and other cosmically-meaningful herbs

would be scattered, and nice phrases would be intoned to the Universe. This book adds another detail: in the background, over a warm crackling open fire, a giant wicker figure crammed full of friends and relatives would be brightly blazing.

For the most part I like this book. It is authored by anthropologists, and as an eclectic anthropological survey of a wide range of beliefs held by people across cultures and through time, I think it works well. The text reads easily and is supported by a fine array of interesting pictures. And pleasingly – especially for lazy people like me – text and accompanying pictures usually appear on the same page.

You are warned about members of my profession in the introduction: Scientists. Or more precisely, 'Western' Scientists. ('Western' science? Ho there Tonto, hand me my spurs). We are the folk who unreasonably demand reasonable evidence. When evidence is poor or little is forthcoming, we are also the folk to blame for not producing any.

Where I think the textual fruit goes bad now and then, is where the authors launch into speculations about the reality or otherwise of various paranormal phenomena, because in reading these parts, I get the strong impression of a split personality at work. In some parts the narrative voice is one of balanced appraisal, whereas at others it switches to almost over-credulous belief; in these latter passages, science gets a bit of stick for being so dependent on mundane things like corroboration. Perhaps convinced of the worthless nature of verifiable evidence, the authors repeatedly shy away from presenting it, although I would argue that in some cases, quite intriguing data could be presented. In addition, an interesting question for validity which is implicitly raised by the inter-comparison of beliefs across cultures, but which is not specifically addressed in this book, is the fact that many beliefs are mutually incompatible when it comes to their finer detail.

As a introduction to the diversity of human belief, both across cultures and through time, this book works well; in its consideration of the possible validity of such

beliefs, it only teases. For no apparent reason beyond fashion, science (which is allergic to dogma) is presented as a dogmatic straw-man, prone to missing all the really important stuff. However, I don't expect the publishers will lose any sleep over this; scientists don't represent a major sector of the book-buying public, and people purchasing the book mainly to nourish their preconceptions shouldn't be overly concerned about evidence.

— Nick Kim

## Quotable jokes

Tom McHugh, *Flying Saucers are Everywhere* (Prometheus, £9.99)

This is a collection of UFO and ancient astronaut material loosely based on the classic UFO stories, ranging from the Wheelbarrows of the Gods to the sightings in Gulf Breeze – the jokes are easier to follow if you know your UFOs. Computer programmer Tom McHugh certainly knows his modern UFO mythos – his chapter on Betty and Barney Bumpkin and their abduction by aliens illustrates that.



Cricket Men



Teapot Aliens



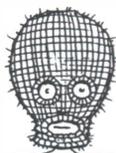
Arrowhead Aliens



The Bucket Heads



Paper Bag Men



Ski Mask Type

This would make an amusing series of newspaper or magazine columns if you came across them from time to time; as a 136-page book, however, the joke starts to wear thin relatively quickly. Some of this could be fun to quote to the wide-eyed, as I'm sure you could get away with declaiming the following:

If you shave your armpits with a razor that has been kept under the Great Pyramid, the hair will grow back even thicker.

Pretty impressive stuff, huh? The sad thing is that the wide-eyed would no doubt find this Cosmically Significant.

McHugh has, however, done a valuable service in discovering the equation  $Sk_{\text{UFO}} = BC$ , where  $S$  is the number of flying saucer sightings in an area over a fixed period;  $B$  is the number of Bermuda Triangle books sold in that area over the same period;  $C$  is the number of flying saucer books sold, and  $k$  is the variable 'kook factor'. The 'UFO' is added for special effect.

McHugh concludes that no matter what causes the Bermuda Triangle phenomenon, flying saucer book sales would be in serious trouble without a substantial kook factor. Now ain't that the truth?

— Vicki Hyde

## Mysticism at the nineteenth hole

Michael Murphey and Rhea A White, *In the Zone: Transcendent Experience in Sports* (Arkana, £7.99)

Sport and other activities that take us outside the realms of our day-to-day life certainly offer extraordinary experiences. The authors' thesis, briefly, is that sport can 'show us how to tap our metanormal capabilities' to 'evoke capacities that have generally been regarded as mystical, occult or religious'. These capacities include ghostly companions, ESP, telekinesis and out of body experiences. But athletes are shy of sharing these experiences and 'will seldom makes fools of themselves for the press'. The authors have no such compunction. They contend that 'To understand these uncanny moments you must approach them sympathetically' and 'Skepticism can distance you'.

Neither author mentions any interest in sport other than golf. The only experience of their own I could find mentioned was White having a 'luminous and uncanny round of golf'. Personally I have always thought of golf as the least interesting of human activities, but I realise this is personal prejudice. If you can become enlightened staring at a wall for years, perhaps you can have a mystical experience playing golf.

The book comprises seemingly endless anecdotes interspersed by commentary. These anecdotes provide extremely weak support for the authors' thesis, and make for dull reading. The authors make a show of trying to be objective, for example 'although some form of ESP may have occurred, it is more likely that the needed information was available through subtle sensory cues'. But they rarely manage to sustain this objectivity for long, and it is obvious their heart isn't really in it.

There are over a hundred pages of bibliography. This is rather remarkable considering that athletes are supposed to be loath to talk about their mystical experiences. However, the references dry up for some of the more contentious points. Of the approximately 40 referenced martial arts sources the authors quote most frequently from the two most fantastical. One of these, Gilbey's *Secret Fighting Arts of the World*, I found hard to swallow as a credulous 13 year old. To my amazement the authors quote directly from it, without the slightest hint of disbelief. For example: 'men who could lightly touch your body and bring a bright red blood line immediately to the surface; men who could support over a two-hundred-pound weight attached to their genitalia; men who could plunge their arms up to the elbow in unprepared, rather hard soil'.

They report Bruce Lee's 'one inch punch' under the heading 'Psychokinesis in the Martial Arts'. This is a demonstration that explosive force can be generated over a distance of as little as one inch. I can demonstrate this myself – albeit less impressively than Bruce Lee could – and I know that no special powers are involved. The authors even report 'means of generating internal power so enormous one can fell an opponent without actually touching him'.

There is open-minded, and then there is having your brain fall out.

— Andy Brice

## The sticks twitch

Sig Lonegren, *The Dowsing Rod Kit* (Virgin, £14.99)

*The Dowsing Rod Kit* comprises a 160-page booklet, a small notepad, two L-shaped copper-plated iron dowsing rods, and eight flat triangular wooden pegs. One should hold the L-shaped rods loosely in the hands with the long ends approximately horizontal. In this position small motions of a hand will result in large motions of the rod. If these motions don't occur if one merely thinks about them, one should train oneself by cheating at first, the book says. In other words, this book is a course in self-deceit.

The theory seems to be that dowsing taps the powers of the 'subconscious', relying on the ideomotor response. In other words, the small motions that make a pendulum or dowsing rod move are made without the dowser being conscious of them, analogous to whatever happens when one controls a familiar device: a pen, a car, a computer mouse or a musical instrument.

Behind this book is a popular but dangerous idea: anything that circumvents the control of the rational mind can't be a lie, hence is powerful and true. Dreams are reliable indicators of our deepest feelings, the future or our previous lives (take your pick), subliminally perceived suggestions are irresistible, and gut feeling (intuition) is better than brain thinking, and so on.

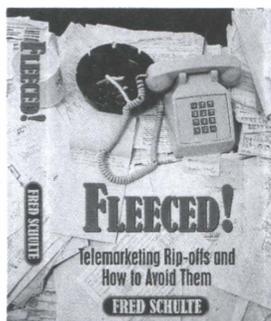
Dowsing is supposed to answer any question: where is water, and what is its depth (just dowsing a table with numbers), the flow of *ch'i*, the earth's magnetic field, chakras, auras – anything. Not mentioned of course are those nasty skeptical tests showing that dowers can't prove their grandiose claims.

Chapter 5 is remarkable. Blacksmith Hamish Miller found on his lawn 'earth energies' in a rectangular grid. Each day the grid lines moved closer to each other. He was elated. Mother Earth was communicating with him, he thought. Eventually the pattern disappeared was replaced by a spiral and spoke pattern: an Earth power centre, conveniently located right in his sitting room.

— Jan Willem Nienhuys

## Just say no

Fred Schulte, *Fleeced! Telemarketing Rip-offs and How to Avoid Them* (Prometheus, £21.00)



'Congratulations! You have already qualified for a major prize!' Although all of the scams, the anecdotes and the legal analyses in Schulte's book are North American, the rip-off schemes he describes will be all-too-familiar to readers around the world.

The bulk of the book is devoted to descriptions of a variety of telemarketing schemes, from relatively small, plainly illegal, scams which tend to change location frequently in order to stay ahead of the law, to larger scale operations which hire their own lawyers to enable them to survive in the 'grey borderlands' of legality.

The broad picture of human nature which the book offers is not an uplifting one – pitiless fraudsters preying on greedy or gullible victims. Particularly harrowing are the descriptions of schemes which deliberately target vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the lonely, the recently bereaved and the civic-minded and, in many cases, mount repeated attacks on the same victim ('re-loading') before selling on his/her details to other operators. Schulte even describes one scam, at the end of this line of exploitation, in which a multiple-victim is finally contacted by a group pretending to operate a semi-official loss recovery service for victims of telemarketing frauds.

Similar second-level frauds include the fake 'Better Business Bureau' to which the scamsters subscribe and whose phone number is then given to customers to call for an 'official' report on the health and reliability of the telemarketing firm. The principles on which these schemes rely are remarkably simple, as Schulte lists, with example 'come-on' lines:

1. Make the victim feel special: *You have been chosen; Not available to the general public.*
2. Arouse expectations: *A valuable prize; Freedom from financial worries.*
3. Create urgency: *Only available today; You must sign now to be eligible.*

Perhaps the most valuable information the book offers is contained in the Appendices which list 35 different types of scam, together with sample sales 'scripts' and techniques for countering standard 'customer objections'.

Anyone looking for a more in-depth analysis of the psychological principles behind telemarketing and other high-pressure sales techniques should opt for a treatment such as Robert Cialdini's *Influence: Science and Practice*, but for those interested in a more journalistic description of how such schemes operate on the ground, and of their perpetrators and victims, Schulte's entertaining book is certainly recommended.

— John Gillies

## African Magic?

Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (Arkana, £9.99)

Passing through a town, my companions informed me a man had recently risen from the dead here. This was not two thousand years ago in Palestine, but happened to this reviewer in 1990, in Muwo, Nigeria.

In the West we tend to give little credence to such stories. Somé will have us believe they are all true and commonplace in Africa. At the age of four he observed his grandfather return to his compound after death to say farewell, and he describes his great-grandfather's visit from the spirit world mounted on a horse.

Somé's story of growing up divides into two major periods. At a young age he is carried away by missionaries to be raised in a seminary boarding school, and expects to become a priest. He is taught entirely in French to be thoroughly westernized. He is steeped in the mystery of religion rather than in logic and rationalism. At age twenty he runs from the institution after getting into

a fight, and walks home.

After fifteen years' absence his own family recognizes him only with difficulty, and he has to relearn his native tongue. To reintegrate into the tribe, to become a member of his village, he undergoes the initiation ceremony he missed when he was fourteen. This experience is full of magic, mystery, and wonders: a tree becomes the green lady of nature and takes him into her arms; purple fires which do not burn; journeys through magic gateways and into caves to unknown and unseen worlds, full of spirit beings who teach and mentor the initiate. He learns to let go of 'debates, criticism, theories' and 'logic' in favour of learning which is 'living, breathing, flexible, and spontaneous'. The traditional initiation leads to 'destabilization of the body's habit of being bound to one plane of being, and the ability to voyage transdimensionally and return'.

It is a gripping tale, the well-written story we expect from someone who has earned a doctorate in literature. It is worth reading for Somé's descriptions of the white missionary world, and its contrast to the traditional village. As for magic, it always seems to work for others elsewhere. When the shaman calls his familiar for *me*, the spirit never shows.

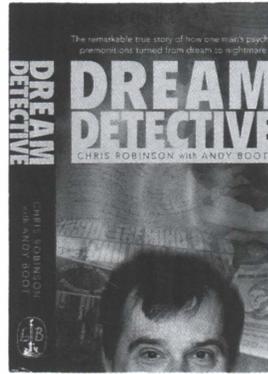
— Wolf Roder

## Perchance to dream

Chris Robinson with Andy Boot, *Dream Detective* (Little, Brown and Company, £16.99)

Chris Robinson claims that he is able to dream about future events and that he has frequently used this 'psychic' gift to help the police tackle terrorist activity. This book presents an account of his experiences and includes stories of him allegedly predicting the IRA bomb attack on RAF Stanmore, the IRA mortar attack on Downing Street and the murder of WPC Yvonne Fletcher. The book also claims that Chris has been carefully monitored by the police and that they have often acted on his 'psychic' tip-offs.

I had hoped that this book would present readers



with all of the evidence relating to Chris's dramatic claims and allow them to make up their own minds. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Chris has admitted that he has several dreams each night and dreams most nights of the year. As such, he must produce a huge amount of dream material. However, this book only contains descriptions of the small number of dreams

which have apparently come true, thus giving the impression that he has a much higher hit rate than is actually the case. Also, many of the dreams are clearly very ambiguous, and are being interpreted to fit events after the events have taken place. And, we often only have Chris's word that his dreams took place before the incident, and not vice versa. Unfortunately, these criticisms can be applied to nearly all of the anecdotal material contained in the book.

More interesting are the book's descriptions of the two experimental tests of Chris's claims. The first was carried out by myself [*Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 1996] and involved Chris trying to divine the nature of three crimes. We video-taped Chris as he outlined his description of each crime. The book states that Chris mentioned the murder of PC Blakelock in one description and 'some connection with milk' in another. These would have been impressive predictions. However, our video-tape reveals that Chris didn't mention these points until after we had told him the nature of each crime. A second test was carried out by Sue Blackmore [*Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 1995] and again Chris failed to exhibit any psychic ability.

In short, the book presents a rather one-sided, and in some places inaccurate, account of Chris Robinson's alleged ability and will be of little interest to people wanting a more objective assessment of his claims.

— Richard Wiseman

## Bookwatch

We mention some recent books of interest to skeptics. Selected titles will be reviewed in future issues.

### Fortean Studies Volume 2

Steve Moore

*John Brown*, £19.99

Another excellent round-up of Fortean essays.

### The Demon-Haunted World

Carl Sagan

*Headline*, £18.99

Sagan at his skeptical best.

### Medical Blunders

Robert Youngson and Ian Schott

*Robinson*, £6.99

Horror stories of quack and orthodox medicine, ancient and modern.

### The Cult at the End of the World

David Kaplan & Andrew Marshall

*Hutchinson*, £16.99

The astonishing story of the Aum cult, accused of the sarin attack on Tokyo's subway in March 1995.

### The Entrancing Flame

John E Heymer

*Little, Brown*, £16.99

A former Welsh CID officer investigates Spontaneous Human Combustion.

### Ablaze!

Larry E Arnold

*Evans/Gazelle*, £18.50

Another investigation of SHC, linking it to prana and kundalini.

### Science and Wonders

Russell Stannard

*Faber*, £8.99

Conversations with leading scientists on science and religion, from the recent BBC Radio 4 series.

### In Perfect Timing

Peter Caddy

*Finhorn Press*, £19.95

Memoirs, sometimes implausible, of the Findhorn founder.

### Climbing Mount Improbable

Richard Dawkins

*Viking*, £20

Another Dawkins *tour-de-force* on evolution and natural selection.

### Biological Anomalies:

#### Mammals — 1

William R Corliss

*Sourcebook Project*, \$21.95

The latest entry in Corliss' extraordinary part-work encyclopedia of anomalies.

# Letters



## Home alone

Mark Lawson, writing in *The Skeptic*, 9. 6, says he finds the conclusion that the human race may be alone in the cosmos depressing. He needn't. After all, we have been in a similar situation before. A few hundred years ago there was endless speculation as to whether the human race as then known was all there was. Were we depressingly alone on the face of the earth, or was there perhaps another race out there? The kingdom of Prester John, perhaps?

So explorers went out, risking life and limb, and sure enough other civilisations were found. And at first there was great excitement, but after a short while what did we find we had? Pygmies, American Indians, Tasmanians, Aborigines, and such like. Not that different from us, and certainly not enough to keep European man from feeling lonely.

On a bigger scale of space, and later in time, there is possibly a faint chance that we will find, or be visited by, beings from another planet. And after the euphoria wears off, and we get used to the bug-eyed monsters, what will we hear one another saying? 'Can we and the bug-eyed monsters really be the only people in the cosmos, or are we here all alone?'

The pattern is endlessly repeating, and the truth is, we are each of us always alone. Good, innit?

**Ean Wood**  
London W12

## Fairy tales

The case of the Cottingley Fairy photographs is not so simple as Chris Willis claims (*The Skeptic*, 10.1). One reason why Conan Doyle was 'so easily fooled' may have been that the original photographs were extensively retouched by the photographic expert H Snelling. In

ridiculing the corroborative evidence of psychic Geoffrey Hodson, Willis cites page 64 of Joe Cooper's book *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies* (1990), but ignores Cooper's conclusion on the next page that 'it is doubtful indeed if the rich and varied accounts of fairy life given by Hudson are entirely fictitious'.

The hoax of the photographs was a prank to get back at grown-ups who had scolded Frances for falling in the brook near the fairy glen, and scoffed when the girls said they played with fairies. Although in later life Elsie triumphantly exposed the hoax, her cousin Frances continued to maintain that although the photographs were fakes, she had indeed played with fairies.

For a comprehensive and fair-minded survey of this complex case, see the brilliant series of articles by Geoffrey Crawley in the *British Journal of Photography* (24 December 1982 – 8 April 1983).

**Leslie Shepard**  
Blackrock  
Co. Dublin  
Eire

## Infamous or famous?

Dene Bebbington ('Measuring the Mind', *The Skeptic*, 10.1) speaks without qualification of 'the infamous Cyril Burt'. Bebbington should, I think, have mentioned Robert Joynson's *The Burt Affair* (Routledge, 1989) and Ronald Fletcher's *Science, Ideology and the Media* (Transaction, 1989), two works which do much to clear Burt's name. There have also been relevant articles in earlier issues of *The Skeptic* (by Ray Ward in issue 7.2, and John McLachlan in 7.4).

Bebbington also quotes R C Lewontin's complaint against Arthur Jensen's 'famous article' 'How much can we boost IQ and scholastic achievement?'. It was that 'the only way we could answer

would be to try and boost IQ and scholastic achievement'. Fair enough. But anyone who actually reads that Jensen article, which was handily reprinted as the first chapter of his *Genetics and Education* (Methuen, 1972), will discover what Lewontin chose not to reveal, that it begins with an account of the massive and enthusiastic attempts which had actually been made in the USA, and had apparently failed.

**Antony Flew**  
Reading

## Calling all writers

I am starting up a *Journal of the Unexplained*, and am looking for contributors. Articles of all lengths concerning the Unexplained will gratefully be accepted. I am seeking articles from small groups on their latest theories and investigations.

**Edward Fleischmann**  
3 Parkmead Gardens, Mill Hill  
London NW7 2JW

## Full marks

Full marks to Toby Howard (*The Skeptic*, 10.1) for candidly admitting to performing his own (failed!) experiments in the 'paranormal'.

So many skeptics, especially those with a capital 'S', cultivate a high-handed 'know-it-all' attitude which only serves to alienate people whose minds are not yet made up.

We all need to think on our feet and make informed decisions.

**Phil Hancock**  
Plymouth

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