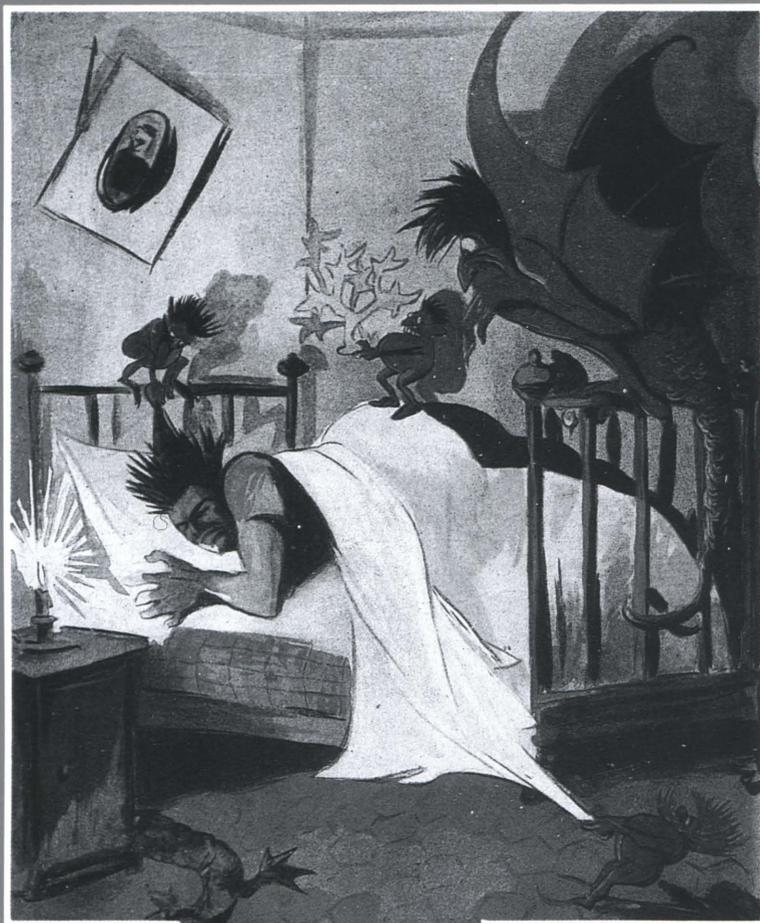


The

Volume 10 Number 4

Skeptic



The psychology of alien abductions

Also in this issue

Multiple personality disorder

Sleuths and psychics

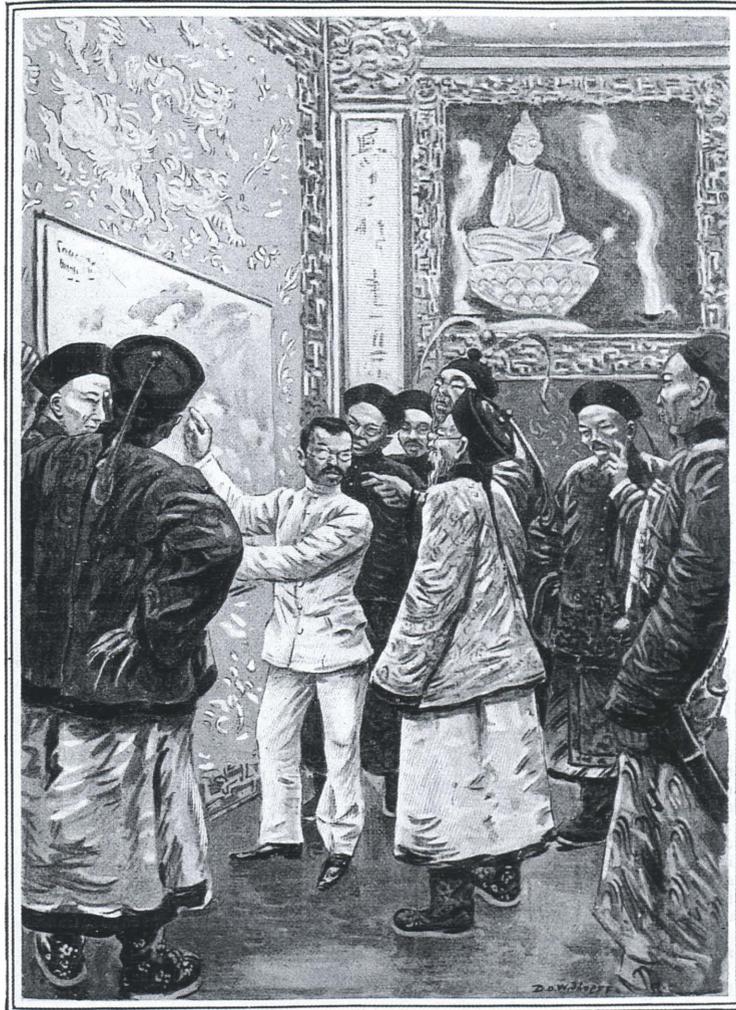
Should we believe what we see?

What are our children reading about the paranormal?

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Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery



A secret plot

TRAVEL WHERE YOU WILL in China, and you will be met with shaken heads if you inquire for the nearest English restaurant. Yet here in western Europe Chinese restaurants are virtually ubiquitous. Why?

This 1905 illustration provides the answer. It shows a clandestine meeting of a Chinese secret society, who are plainly studying a map of western Europe. You do not have to be a conspiracy theorist to realise what these cunning orientals are planning. Under the cover of Chinese restaurants they will infiltrate our social system and one day, when the time is ripe, rise and strike . . .

Source: D O Widhoeff in *Je Sais Tout*, 1905.

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

Contents

Editorial

On April 1, 1996, the James Randi Educational Foundation was inaugurated as a non-profit educational foundation with its headquarters in Florida. The Foundation was launched through private funding, and already houses extensive library facilities, a sophisticated computer setup with a World Wide Web server and 24-hour Internet access for researchers, students, and the media. If only such a foundation could be created in the UK, skeptics here might also feel that they were making some progress against the forces of antiscience and superstition that seem to be gaining momentum by the week. Unfortunately, we do not have an equivalent (or even a near equivalent) of the Amazing Randi on these shores. Logically perhaps, the presentation of the rationalist point of view on paranormal matters should not require a skeptical superstar – but given the power of the media and the number of ‘prestigious’ and ‘famous’ media performers who promote paranormal beliefs it wouldn’t half help. So, dear *Skeptic* reader, keep practising those guitar riffs, hone your interviewing skills and perfect those complicated conjuring tricks. When you knock Oasis from number one, outprestidigitate David Copperfield or get knighted for your services to British broadcasting, perhaps your skeptical views (and touch wood that you will not have lost them by then) will be taken seriously by the media – and maybe then we will be able to create the UK equivalent of the James Randi Educational Foundation.

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 PO Box 475
 Manchester M60 2TH
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 Web www.cs.man.ac.uk/skeptic
 Tel 0161 275 6274
 Fax 0161 275 6236

Editors
 Dr Steve Donnelly
 Toby Howard

Finance Manager
 Dave Martin

Cartoons
 Donald Room
 Tim Pearce
 Nick Kim

Editorial Support
 Jane Bousfield
 Angela Cernoculski
 Daf and Mike Tregear

Special Consultant
 Cyril Howard

Special Projects
 Chris Willis

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Hits and Misses

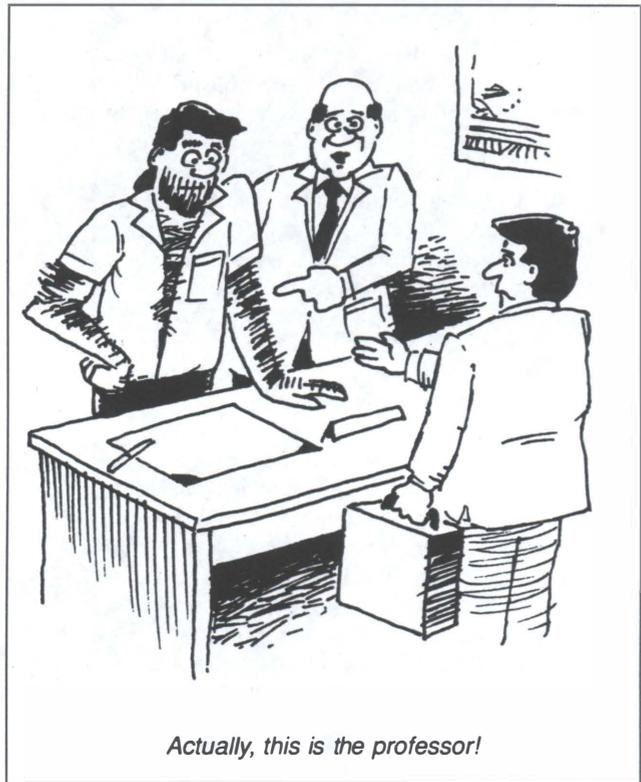
Steve Donnelly

Marketing pseudoscience

Many people make a great deal of money out of the paranormal and pseudoscience but, alas, I am not one of them. I need to start taking my throwaway ideas seriously if I am to rectify this situation. As an example, a few years ago on one of those interminable daytime TV chat shows, when asked to comment on alternative therapies such as reflexology, iridology and the laying on of hands, I asked the audience whether they would patronise a garage which advertised the diagnosis and rectification of car engine problems by manipulation of little lumps in the tyres, inspection of blemishes in the headlight reflectors or correction of the car's energy field. The following summer my brother brought me a brochure he had obtained at the Glastonbury Festival in which some New Age mechanics were offering exactly this type of car repair service. Did they steal my intellectual property rights or just coincidentally have the same idea at the same time — or were they unwittingly in telepathic contact with me? And did they attract many customers? I'll never know. The latest example relates to the Donnelly Weight Loss Scheme, described in *Hits and Misses* in the last issue. The principle of the diet was that by attaching small portions of the food you crave to the back of your head with sticking plaster you will satisfy the craving with only, at worst, a homeopathic intake of calories. Unfortunately, I have been beaten to the market place with this breakthrough in human nutrition. The *Manchester Evening News* on 18 October reports that top dieticians and trading standards officers have joined forces to condemn a new weight loss product. And what was the product? You have guessed correctly. It was a revolutionary new weight-loss system by the name of Sveltepatches consisting of stick-on patches that cause fat to 'melt-away'. The spoilsport skeptical dieticians, however, are claiming that the only way to lose weight is by eating less and exercising more.

Hirsute genius

Men whose receding hairline gives them a high forehead are known to be thinkers, those with thin patches on top are reputedly good lovers and those afflicted by both types of male pattern baldness *think* that they are good lovers. This is well-known, but what is not common knowledge is the correlation between *body* hair and intelligence in men. Dr Aikarakudy Alias of the Chester (Chest-hair) mental health centre in Illinois has carried out studies that reveal that members of Mensa are likely to be more hairy than labourers. For instance, in one of his studies, 45% of male medical students were 'very hairy' compared with 10% of the general male population. The



Tim Pearce

Guardian on 12 July reports that Dr Alias told a European psychiatry conference in London that 'When academic ranking among students was examined, the hairier males got better grades'. Hair on the back as well as on the chest, by the way, is the definitive sign of high IQ. As other studies seem to reveal that high fertility and other desirable genetic qualities tend to be associated with people who have very symmetrical bodies, a woman seeking a good mate should presumably look for a male whose left and right knuckles both trail on the ground to an equal degree when he walks.

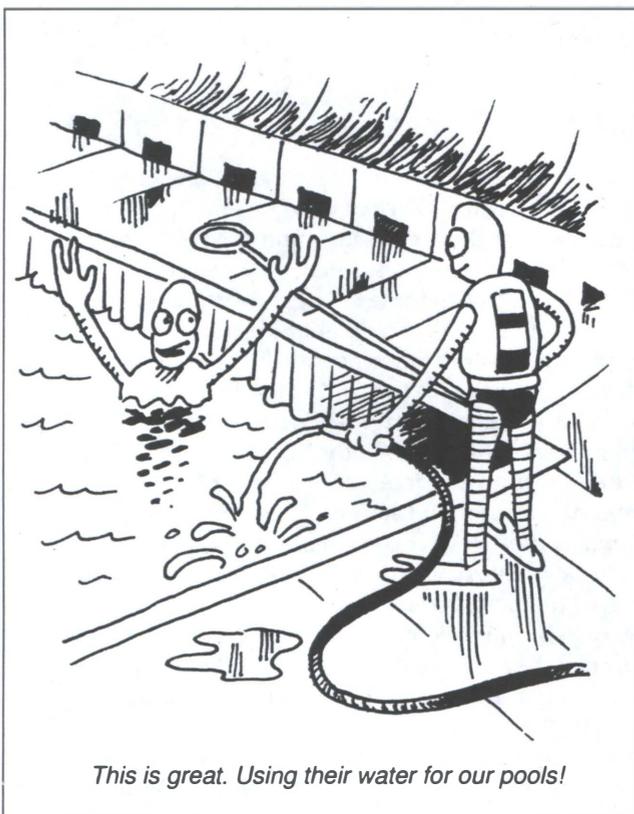
Levity indeed

An article published on 1 September in the *Sunday Telegraph* makes me wonder whether the newspaper's calendar is five months out of sync with everybody else's. The article, entitled "'Antigravity' device gives science a lift" reports on the supposed recent discovery of an anti-gravity device by scientists at the Tampere University of Technology in Finland. The device consists of a rapidly rotating superconducting ceramic annulus suspended in the magnetic field from three coils, all maintained at liquid nitrogen temperature — a description that comes remarkably close to the aptly-named Levity Disk that eccentric amateur inventor John Searle has been claiming

for years is able to repel the earth's gravitational field and fly off into space. The new device reduces the weight of articles placed above it by a few percent but by stacking machines the effect can be increased. The discovery arose out of routine research on superconductivity and may, according to the article, give rise to a new type of lift, space vehicle and electricity generator. According to the *Telegraph* article, Dr Eugene Podkletnov, the scientist in charge of the project, claimed that 'One of my friends came in and was smoking his pipe. He put some smoke over the cryostat and we saw that the smoke was going to the ceiling all the time. It was amazing — we couldn't explain it'. Another inexplicable aspect of the story is that anyone should be allowed into a scientific laboratory smoking a pipe — especially one whose smoke normally went downwards. I await with interest the publication of the paper describing the new invention in the *British Journal of Physics D: Applied Physics*.

Tanker in the sky

Readers living in Yorkshire who have suffered two years of water shortages may find it hard to believe that two summers of hosepipe bans and other inconveniences could possibly have resulted from a slightly lower than average rainfall or even mismanagement of the water resources. However, in a clipping from the *Manchester Evening News* from last January which has only just come to my notice, Rochdale postman Mike Jones provides what may be the definitive answer to the mystery of the missing water. According to Mr Jones who heads up Rochdale's UFO research group, the summer of '95 showed a considerable increase in UFO activity in the Greater Manchester and Yorkshire areas coinciding exactly with the period of low water levels: 'The sightings



Tim Pearce

are near water and suddenly we have a water shortage. The situation needs looking at carefully.' Indeed, one witness actually reported seeing a spout rising from the river Mersey to an unidentified flying object. I think we must accept this evidence at face value: not only are aliens abducting Americans and mutilating our cattle but they are nicking our water as well.

Lottery course

If one of the functions of further education is to entertain the population then Barnfield college in Luton deserves a prize. On the other hand, if the purpose of further education is education, then the college deserves to be reprimanded. The college is running an eight-week evening course in how to win the lottery taught by psychic Philip Griggs (who himself has never won more than £10, by the way). Mr Griggs will show people how to operate his 'lottery board' which uses a crystal to choose numbers working on a clairvoyant wavelength. He will also teach them all they need to know about Pythagorean and Hebrew numerology. Readers unable to take the course may be interested to know that according to Mr Griggs, twos, fives and sevens are lucky whereas four is a number to avoid. The *Sunday Express* on 4 August reports that Mr Griggs, a former able seaman, became interested in palm-reading at sea when working on nuclear submarines and then studied for a further education teaching certificate. As well as his lottery class, he also teaches clairvoyancy, tarot and palm-reading to adults in Bedfordshire. I would not be surprised to hear that some enterprising University had started degree courses in these topics at some time in the near future.

Face the facts

It seems incredible that there should, yet again, be academic debate over the authenticity of the Turin Shroud but there is. An article published in July in the Italian Roman Catholic daily paper *Avvenire* and picked up by the *Sunday Telegraph* on 7 July, reports that a study of the shroud by two Italian Professors has led to the discovery of the faint imprint of a Roman coin bearing a date corresponding to AD29 near the left eye of the face on the cloth. Despite the carbon dating experiments a few years ago which showed unequivocally that the material of the shroud dated from somewhere between the years 1260 and 1390, the two professors argue that their discovery lends credence to the theory that the shroud is the burial cloth of Christ. Given that a fairly obvious interpretation of the discovery is that a mediaeval forger included the image of the coin to enhance the impression of authenticity, it should come as no surprise to learn that the professors are experts in computer science and forensic medicine — but not logic.

Finally, as promised in the last issue, honourable mention for Mike Walsh who spotted not one but *two* typographical errors in the *Psychic Detectives* section of the book *Bizarre Beliefs* which I reviewed in the last issue.

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

Is There Anybody In There?

Dr John Gillies examines the evidence for and against the existence of 'multiple personality disorder', and finds a classic case of 'skeptics versus believers'

MULTIPLE PERSONALITY DISORDER, or MPD, is one of the most dramatic and controversial of psychiatric diagnoses. It is an extreme 'dissociative disorder' in which the sufferer is said to possess several distinct 'personalities' which alternate in controlling his/her actions and which, in some instances, are totally unaware of the other personalities' existences. Consequently, one personality will have no memory for periods of time in which one of the others (or 'alters') has been in control. Celebrated cases such as Eve White ('The Three Faces of Eve') and Kenneth Bianchi (the 'Hillside Strangler') were the forerunners of an explosion of media interest in the topic in the early 1990s. Yet many psychiatrists and psychologists continue to question whether the condition really exists.

Colin Ross, one of the leading authorities on the treatment of MPD, has said: 'To diagnose MPD is a bit like admitting that you believe in UFOs. It calls your professional reputation into question'. Similarly, Hicks says that he knows of:

no other illness that stimulates such strong denials of the possibility of its existence, and an absence of interest in many very capable clinicians who have very intense spontaneous curiosity about other clinical phenomena [1].

Ross [2] claims that skeptics normally make two 'major cognitive errors': First, that a diagnosis of MPD is made to give patients a 'licence for irresponsibility' ('I'm not responsible because one of my other personalities did it!'); and second, that MPD is iatrogenically manufactured by therapists – rather as 'recovered memories' have been alleged to be. Both of these claims Ross regards as so patently unsupported by evidence as to make the skeptics' attachment to them clearly irrational: 'I can't help but suspect that they are defences covering a deeper resistance'. If Ross is right, why does the idea of MPD provoke such resistance? What, according to the 'believers', are the 'skeptics' so afraid of? Two answers are commonly offered.

The threat to 'personal identity'

The first answer is that MPD may pose problems for the concept of personal identity at the philosophical level. Stephen Braude [3] has written an important examination of the philosophical implications of MPD, beginning with a discussion of the history of hypnosis – an area in which a fierce debate between 'believers' and 'skeptics' has raged, in close parallel to the debate on MPD. Braude considers the technical difficulties which the possibility of several distinct personalities co-existing within the



Many Evans Picture Library

same body poses for our everyday notions of 'personality' and 'identity'. Perhaps the recent decision of the American Psychiatric Association to change the name 'Multiple Personality Disorder' to 'Dissociative Identity Disorder' reflects unease at these difficulties, which are also reflected in the debate about the upper limit to the number of distinct 'alter personalities' that can exist in MPD. Early writers, such as Morton Prince [4], had trouble with the possibility that *ten* separate personalities might exist within one body (or perhaps one brain?) – but there are now several cases on record of patients *hundreds* of 'distinct and named' personalities. So far, the *Guinness Book of Records* has not become involved.

Ross's view, however, is that skeptics' doubts are motivated by more than a purely philosophical distaste for the idea of multiple personalities. ('I can't help but suspect that they are defences covering a deeper resistance'.) What might the motive for these more 'irrational' objections be?

One common answer is that the view of personal identity implied by the concept of MPD is so radical that it touches off some of our most primitive fears concerning

the integrity of the self – the bedrock upon which all our beliefs about the world rest. Thus, according to this theory, while the skeptics' refusal to accept the reality of MPD may stem partly, perhaps, from a philosophical objection, it is at bottom a primitive emotional response to the horror of abrupt and total identity loss. We may view the *gradual* disintegration of a personality (as in Alzheimer's disease) with deep dismay – but what is unique about MPD, it is said, is its implication that identity may be totally vulnerable *on a moment-to-moment basis*. If the identity of other seemingly normal and fully functioning individuals may vanish abruptly and without warning, then so may my own.

'Identity games' are, of course, a key feature of successful 'horror' entertainment – and the greatest emotional impact is perhaps made with 'unmarked' and unanticipated transitions – where a known and trusted individual is *discovered* to be not the person they seemed but 'one of them'. In this connection, Putnam's [5] discussion of MPD makes an interesting link to Capgras Syndrome, an exotic disorder in which the patient believes that someone close to them has been replaced by an exact double.

Of course, the 'believers' say, this fear, though potent, is, for the vast majority of us, groundless: 'full-blown' MPD affects only a small proportion of people – and all of them have a very special type of personal history. This 'special history' forms the basis of the second theory of what motivates skeptics.

The threat of child abuse

The second thing which, according to the believers, the skeptics are afraid of, is the threat of child abuse. The personal history of virtually all MPD sufferers almost always reveals, it is said, traumatic physical, and emotional and/or sexual abuse in childhood. In Ross's view, people (professionals and lay public) simply do not wish to accept the implication that, if MPD is real and widespread, then child abuse must also be real and widespread. For Ross, 'debunking' MPD is simply 'a second line of defense against dealing with the reality of childhood abuse in North America'. The other side of this coin is represented by Paul McHugh [6] who attributes the rise of the MPD diagnosis (from less than 200 cases throughout the 19th century to over 20,000 in the last decade) to a partisan desire:

to confirm that a vast number of adults were sexually abused by guardians during their childhood . . . Just as the divines of Massachusetts were convinced that they were fighting Satan by recognizing bewitchment, so the contemporary divines – these are the therapists – are confident that they are fighting perpetrators of . . . child abuse, by recognizing MPD.

Thus, the argument about the reality of MPD becomes entangled with the, actually quite separate, issue of the prevalence of child abuse.

While current theory makes it difficult to accept the reality of MPD without accepting the association between MPD and child abuse, it is, of course, perfectly possible to accept that child abuse may be widespread without

accepting the absolute reality of MPD.

My own position is that I am skeptical about MPD but believe that some forms of child abuse are probably much commoner than hitherto realised. And is the issue even as simple as this? Are there not several intermediate positions which one might plausibly hold? For instance, 'Child abuse may be widespread and, in a few very rare cases, may lead to extreme dissociative conditions like MPD – but the vast majority of cases in the current MPD "explosion" are not genuine'.

Compared with the majority of the issues with which skeptics traditionally deal, such as telepathy, UFOs, and spiritualism, the MPD controversy is unusual in that it is the skeptics, rather than the believers, who stand accused of 'wishful thinking' – of being unwilling to face unpalatable truths about the fragility of personal identity or about the prevalence of child abuse.

But is Ross actually correct in claiming that the 'two major cognitive errors' made by skeptics are totally unsupported by evidence – and must, therefore, be irrational beliefs which serve a defensive function? Let's reconsider them:

- (1) A diagnosis of MPD gives a 'licence for irresponsibility'.

It has to be acknowledged that, in the forensic context, the diagnosis of MPD has served precisely this function in some celebrated cases: for example those of Billy Milligan [7] or Kenneth Bianchi [8] in which the defence case rested precisely on the premise that the individual charged could not be held responsible because he was unaware of the crimes committed by an alter personality. Apart from the criminal context, the role of certain alters in licensing socially unacceptable forms of behaviour has been a central feature of all of the most celebrated cases from 'Sally' in Prince's 'Miss Beauchamp' case through 'Eve Black' in Thigpen & Cleckley's 'Three Faces of Eve'.

Other dissociative states, such as fugue, share this feature. One clinician (Symonds) says that his standard approach to all cases of dissociative 'fugue' is to say to the patient: 'I know from experience that your pretended loss of memory is the result of some intolerable emotional situation. If you tell me the whole story, I promise I will absolutely respect your confidence, will give you all the help I can and will say to your doctors and relatives that I have cured you by hypnotism.' According to Symonds, this approach has never failed to elicit from the patient an admission that the fugue was deliberately staged.



(2) MPD is iatrogenically manufactured by therapists.

Rycroft [9] has pointed to three strands of evidence in favour of the iatrogenesis or 'suggestion' hypothesis: the fact that therapists interested in MPD encounter vastly greater numbers of such cases than other therapists; the fact that most cases of MPD have turned up in the USA where public and professional interest in the phenomenon is highest; and the fact that many therapists have used hypnosis – a context where suggestion is of the essence – to contact 'alternate personalities' or to facilitate 'switching'. A fourth strand points to the similarities between the historical pattern of growth of the MPD diagnosis and those of other 'suggestion-based' crazes [10]. In this connection, the crucial influence of highly publicised cases such as 'The Three Faces of Eve' is usually noted.

Against such criticisms, 'believers' such as Ross and Braude claim that, while MPD may nowadays be widely publicised, historically early cases cannot be attributed to patients playing known roles or seeking to fulfil therapists' expectations. However, Merskey has convincingly demonstrated that close scrutiny of even the earliest reported cases does not exclude the possibility of artificial (including iatrogenic) production. There is certainly evidence that the therapist may at least play an important part in the 'identification' of the various personalities by, for example, encouraging the client to name them – and even pro-MPD therapists accept this. The role of the therapist's suggestions in encouraging the transformation of 'severe but less exotic emotional problems into more interesting 'multiple personalities' ' has been commented on by Bootzin & Acocella [11].

In this way, the believers' standard argument that one reason for the explosion in the numbers of MPD cases in recent years is that, hitherto, most such cases were misdiagnosed as schizophrenia (for example [2, 12]) is now turned on its head. The reason more and more cases of MPD are emerging, say the skeptics, is that more and more therapists are 'suggesting' to disturbed (schizophrenic?) individuals that, for example, one interpretation of the 'voices' they hear in their heads is that different 'personalities' exist.

However one regards this controversy, it is hard to see the role of the therapist as anything but crucial. Consider, for example, the following prescription for the investigation of the patient who hears 'voices', offered by a leading champion of the view that much 'schizophrenia' is, in reality, MPD:

It is important for the examiner to think about the voices *as if* they were actual people and try to find out what they are like, what they are doing and what their motivation seems to be. In other words, one should examine *all* auditory hallucinations as if they came from alter personalities, in order to positively rule dissociation in or out. This applies no matter what the clinical diagnosis. [2, p162]

Contrast this with the recommendations of a leading skeptic:

The helpful clinical approach to the patient with putative MPD, as with any instance of hysterical

display, is to direct attention away from the behavior – one simply never talks to an 'alter'. Within a few days of a consistent therapeutic emphasis away from the MPD behavior, it fades and generally useful psychotherapy on the presenting true problems begins.' [6, p508]

Is it any wonder, then, that, while some therapists may have as many as 15–20 MPD cases in therapy *at the same time*, others never encounter a single case *throughout their entire career*?

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John Gillies is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Glasgow.

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Sleuths and Spirits

Chris Willis

A look at the prominent role of the supernatural in detective fiction

THERE WOULD SEEM TO BE no place for the supernatural in a detective story. After all, it would spoil the plot if the murder victim could return from the grave to name the murderer. But superstition and detection are not as far apart as they would seem. Detectives investigating the Jack the Ripper murders apparently opened the eyelids of at least one victim in the belief that the victim's eyes might have somehow retained the image of last thing she saw. Even today, there are several 'psychic detectives' who claim to assist the police in their investigations.

An ability to communicate with the dead would no doubt be a great advantage for a detective. In Peter Lovesey's novel *A Case of Spirits*, an ardent female Spiritualist tries to convince the detective that he would make a good medium. She tells him: 'It doesn't prevent you from being a detective as well, you know. I should think it would be a positive advantage' [1]. At the end of the book, the detective needs no supernatural powers whatsoever to reconstruct a séance and reproduce and explain the tricks used by the fraudulent medium.

Exposing fake mediums has provided a basic plot for detective stories since the turn of the century. In Tom Gallon's 1903 short story 'The Spirit of Sarah Keech' [2] spirit messages miraculously appear on a typewriter whose keys move even though no one is touching them. In fact the typewriter is connected to another machine in the next room, so that messages typed on one machine appear on the other. Unfortunately for the medium, the typist employed to do this is an undercover detective.

The boom in Spiritualism after the first world war made the medium a well-known figure in fact and fiction. In 1928 Lilian Wyles, the CID's first woman officer, became involved in a *cause célèbre* when she investigated complaints against a well-known medium. Wyles arranged a private séance, where she was surprised to be told that she had a husband (she was unmarried) and a sister (she was an only daughter). The medium also predicted the imminent death of Wyles' mother (who lived for another 12 years). Not surprisingly, Wyles said that this 'did nothing to impress me as to her powers of clairvoyance' [3] and a

summons was issued against the medium, who was fined after a much-publicised trial. At that time it was illegal to predict the future, and the genuineness or otherwise of the medium was not an issue in the trial, but the case caught the public imagination, and the fraudulent or misguided medium was to be a popular figure in fiction during the years that followed.

F Tennyson Jesse's 1931 detective *Solange Fontaine* attends a séance where:

No less a person than St Elizabeth of Hungary appeared to us and wrote us messages in English on a little tear-off pad. Unfortunately, when grappled with by two men, friends of my own, who were present, St Elizabeth turned out to be a man – the medium in fact, dressed in white muslin [4].

Such events were apparently not uncommon in real life, much to the embarrassment of genuine Spiritualists. In 1873, a Mr Volckman had disrupted a séance by grabbing hold of a 'spirit' calling herself Katie King, only to find himself clutching the very substantial form of the medium Florence Cook, who was supposedly bound in a locked cabinet [5]. At another séance a sitter took hold of a 'spirit' who proved to be the medium Miss Woods on her knees, partly undressed and draped in muslin [6].

Solange Fontaine is later aided in her investigations by a self-confessed fraudulent medium who, to her own amazement, solves a murder case when she channels a perfectly genuine message from the supposed victim. A much more sinister Spiritualist appears in Gilbert Frankau's 'Misogyny at Moulins' published in the same year. This malevolent medium uses private séances to hypnotise women into committing suicide [7].

Agatha Christie's *The Sittaford Mystery* [8] begins at a séance where the spirit of a Captain Trevelyan informs the sitters that he has just been murdered. It turns out that Captain Trevelyan has indeed been murdered at or near the very time the spirit message came through. Throughout the book two mysteries run in parallel – who committed the murder and what is the explanation of the spirit message? Various explanations are suggested, ranging from clairvoyance and auto-



Lilian Wyles, first woman CID officer

suggestion to telepathy. In fact the murderer created the spirit message by purely natural means in order to establish an alibi. A perfectly logical solution to the 'supernatural' mystery has been obscured by a shoal of red herrings.

Probably the most detailed portrayal of a fake medium occurs in Dorothy L Sayers' *Strong Poison*. Lord Peter Wimsey's sidekick, the redoubtable Miss Climpson, masquerades as a medium in order to search a house for a missing will [9]. In a series of expertly faked séances, she produces 'spirit rappings' by means of a small metal soap box attached rather painfully to her leg with a strip of elastic. She also manages an impressive performance of table-turning, making a small bamboo table levitate by supposedly supernatural means. This is done by means of wires attached to her wrists while her hands remain firmly in view on top of the table. Having found out a little about her client's background, she is also able to produce convincing 'spirit messages' from a variety of people including her client's dead fiancé. Miss Climpson learned these tricks from:

... a quaint little man from the Psychical Research Society [who] . . . was skilled in the investigating of haunted houses and the detection of poltergeists . . . she had passed several interesting evenings hearing about the tricks of mediums . . . she had learned to turn tables and produce explosive cracking noises; she knew how to examine a pair of sealed slates for the marks of the wedges which let the chalk go in on a long black wire to write spirit messages.

She had seen the ingenious rubber gloves which leave the impression of spirit hands in a bucket of paraffin-wax, and which, when deflated, can be drawn delicately from the hardened wax through a hole narrower than a child's wrist. She even knew theoretically, though she had never tried it, how to hold her hands to be tied behind her back so as to force that first deceptive knot which makes all subsequent knots useless, and how to flit about the room banging tambourines in the twilight in spite of having been tied up in a black cabinet with both fists filled with flour.

Miss Climpson had wondered greatly at the folly and wickedness of mankind [10].

The 'man from the Psychical Research Society' is probably based on Frederick Bligh Bond, an archaeologist and psychic researcher whom Sayers had met in 1917. Bligh Bond excavated the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey after the spirit of a dead monk had supposedly told him where to

dig. However, his firm belief in Spiritualism had not prevented him from exposing several fraudulent mediums in his capacity as an investigator for the Society for Psychical Research. Bligh Bond's account of his spirit guidance in excavating the Glastonbury ruins was published in 1918, following which he was promptly dismissed from his job and barred from the Glastonbury site by the Church of England, who did not want to be associated with spiritualism.

A modern counterpart of Bligh Bond appears in Paul Gallico's 1964 novel *The Hand of Mary Constable*. The detective (who, appropriately, is named Alexander Hero) is the:

chief investigator of the British Society for Psychical Research . . . [and] an independent private detective of the occult . . . an occupation which called for a thorough grounding in normal and abnormal psychology, physics, chemistry, biology, photography, magic, sleight-of-hand [and] laboratory procedure [11].

Even Sherlock Holmes could not boast such a catalogue of accomplishments! Hero exposes a fraudulent medium who has produced the impression of the supposed 'spirit hand' of a dead child in wax, complete with correct fingerprints. The medium's methods are similar to those described by Dorothy L Sayers, in *Strong Poison*, but with modern technological advantages, such as the use of infra-red light to help her move around in the dark.

Gallico makes great play on the fact that men of scientific training and intelligence are fooled by the medium because her simple sleight-of-hand tricks are outside their experience. As James Randi has often pointed out, an obsession with looking for a scientific explanation for paranormal phenomena can blind scientists to the use of simple conjuring tricks to produce supposedly supernatural effects. J N Maskelyne, a Victorian magician and investigator of psychic phenomena commented that:

no class of men can be so readily deceived by simple trickery as scientists. Try as they may, they cannot bring their minds down to the level of the subject [12].

Entertaining though it may be, mixing Spiritualism and detective fiction is not always a recipe for success. Dickens' unfinished novel *Edwin Drood*, arguably one of the earliest detective stories, was completed after his death by an American medium who claimed that his spirit had dictated it to her. Dickens' son commented: 'I never saw this preposterous book, but I was told that it was a sad proof of how rapidly the faculties . . . deteriorate after death!' [13].

DOROTHY L. SAYERS



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10. *Strong Poison*, p162.
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12. *Daily Chronicle*, 29 October 1895, quoted Brandon, p256.
13. Quoted in Brandon [5], p 56.

Chris Willis is freelance writer and researcher.

Clipping contributors for this issue

We welcome clippings from newspapers, magazines, the Internet - anywhere! Please mark clippings with source, date and your name, and send to the editorial address (see page 3). Our thanks for this issue go to: Paul Blackwell, Simon Brophy, Steuart Campbell, Jock Cramb, Charles Dietz, Edzard Ernst, Ken Johnson, Yilmaz Magurtzey, Patrick Marnham, Stephen Moreton, V S Petheram, Tom Ruffles, Mike Rutter, Gillian Sathanandan, Ian Saunders, Alma Simmonds, H Sivy, Chris Willis.

Advertising Standards Authority upholds complaint



THE AUGUST 1996 NEWSLETTER of the Advertising Standards Authority reported that the ASA had upheld a complaint against an advertisement for *Uri Geller's Mind Power Kit*. This is the full text of the ASA's report.

Advertiser: Virgin Publishing Ltd trading as Uri Geller's Mind-Power Kit, 332 Ladbroke Grove London W10 5AH

Medium: Magazine

Complaint from: Essex

Complaint: Objection to a specialist press advertisement, for *Uri Geller's Mind-Power Kit*, that claimed:

'At last, Uri Geller shares the secrets of his extraordinary powers... reveals his own mind-enhancing techniques, designed to improve mind-power and fulfil your inner potential. This kit contains a book which demonstrates how to activate your untapped potential, a 60-minute cassette which helps focus the inner mind, and a crystal and meditation card both imbued with Uri's unique powers.'

The complainant questioned the basis of the claims (3.1, 7.1)

Adjudication: Complaint upheld.

The advertisers provided testimonials from scientists who accepted that Uri Geller had unusual powers. He had 'imbued' the crystals by placing his hands among them and had put his hands in the paint that made an orange dot on the meditation card. The Authority was concerned that the advertisers gave no specific evidence to show the crystal and meditation card were instilled with Uri Geller's claimed powers and that the kit had not been given trials. The Authority asked the advertisers not to use the claims again.

(Reproduced from the ASA Newsletter No. 63, August 1996, available from The Advertising Standards Authority, Brook House, 2-16 Torrington Place, London WC1E 7HN, Tel 0171 580 5555)

Mike Walsh reviews *Uri Geller's Mind Power Kit* in this issue on page 24.

Abduction theory

Nick Rose

Are sleep-related psychological experiences the answer to the mystery of alien abductions?

IN OCTOBER I was asked to take part in a radio interview commenting on a report in the tabloid press that a man from Dagenham had paid £100 to insure himself against being abducted by aliens.

Whether or not the original story was true, which is highly doubtful given its source, it does represent something of a continuing trend in UFO mania. If the story were true then it would raise some interesting questions. How would an insurance company define an alien abduction? How would the company evaluate the risk of Dagenham 'Dave' being abducted? What proof could satisfy a skeptical claims assessor that an abduction had taken place?

In 1992, Budd Hopkins, David Michael Jacobs and Ron Westrum commissioned a Roper Poll survey of unusual experiences which they believed were associated with UFO abductions [1]. Over the period of three months, and at considerable cost, this carefully sampled survey was carried out on nearly 6,000 adult Americans. Might they have the answers to any of these questions? From Hopkins' and his co-authors' interpretation of the poll it appears that we can define an abductee as anyone who has had, at any time in their lives, four out of five 'symptoms' of an alien abduction. At the risk of being accused of attacking a 'straw man', I'd like to examine these 'symptoms' a little closer. Just what do they tell us, if anything, about the apparent phenomenon of alien abduction?

It is interesting to note that the item which yielded the highest number of 'yes' responses is the experience of waking up paralysed with a sense of a strange person or presence or something else in the room. Something like 18% of their poll had experienced this at least once, which they equated with about 33.3 million Americans. This item in the poll is actually a combination of two separate experiences; an experience of waking up paralysed, and sensing a strange presence.

Sleep paralysis is the phenomenon of feeling that your body is paralysed, and usually manifests when you in a half-awake/half-asleep state. From our own research this appears to be a common experience. About 34% of chil-

dren and 46% of adults reported an experience of sleep paralysis. This compares well with a Japanese survey which found an incidence of around 40% [3].

The paralysis itself may be due to the body being locked up from having been in, or entering, dreaming (it is known that the body is paralysed so that you don't act out your dreams). Sometimes sleep paralysis occurs with hypnagogic or hypnopompic hallucinations, often accompanied with the feeling of a presence in the room. Hypnagogic hallucinations are the period of hallucination that everyone gets once in a while when falling asleep; hypnopompic hallucinations occur just as you start to wake up. Hallucinations of this sort can include hearing strange humming noises or voices, feeling apparent changes in size, shape or position of one's body, seeing faces (sometimes malformed or horrific), seeing lights and patterns, and an array of quite bizarre, but perfectly normal, effects. A combination of hallucination and sleep paralysis can be understandably terrifying.

Sleep paralysis is not a recent discovery, and nor are sleep paralysis myths. Hufford [2] examined the folklore surrounding the legends and traditions of the 'old hag' among the people of Newfoundland in Canada back in 1982. The Vietnamese have long had stories of a 'grey ghost' that enters their rooms at night. In medieval times demonic incubi and succubi came to their victims at night to seduce them. Is alien abduction

our modern equivalent of a sleep paralysis myth? It seems that many people interpret sleep paralysis as some external force or agent, restraining their movements or crushing the breath from their chest. If the paralysis feels like an external force then many people, in their search for an explanation for the experience, will assume that it is. What form that external force takes will depend much upon that person's cultural information. In this country, for the moment at least, the interpretation of the force as an extra-terrestrial one is still relatively rare. Ghosts and spirits still enjoy a relatively strong position in popular belief compared with ETs.



Of the Roper poll's other symptoms, two were experiences that could be associated with sleep states: A 'feeling that you were actually flying through the air although you didn't know why or how', and having 'seen unusual lights or balls of light in a room without knowing what was causing them, or where they came from'. The first of these 'symptoms' is basically a description of an out-of-body experience (OBE).

Many people who regularly have OBEs describe a period of paralysis shortly before the experience begins, traditionally known as 'astral catalepsy'. A number of OBEers might believe that this experience stems from something actually leaving the body and flying around, although a more convincing explanation has been offered by Susan Blackmore in her books *Beyond the Body* [4] and *Dying to Live* [5]. Within our research, however, none of the OBEers have interpreted their experiences as extraterrestrial in origin, usually preferring a psychic or spiritual interpretation. As for the 'balls of light' we too found a number of respondents who claimed to have had such an experience. The Roper poll found 8% of Americans reported lights. In our surveys the figure was higher; 17% of adults and 28% of children. Strange lights and patterns of lights are common forms of hypnagogic or hypnopompic hallucination, so it is unsurprising that the incidences are so high. What is surprising is the suggestion that such natural, common experiences are indicative of alien abduction.

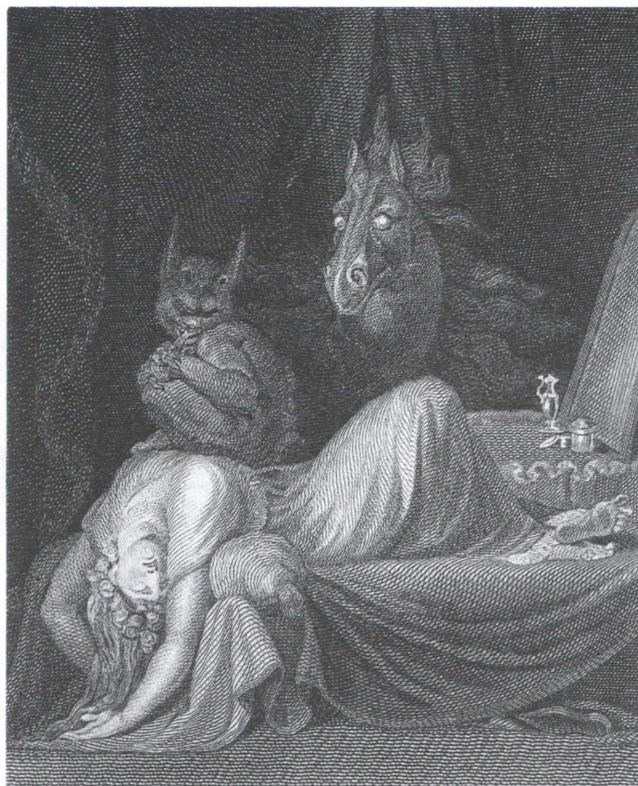
I have little to say about the final two 'symptoms'. They were; losing track of time for an hour or so (more ominously called 'time-loss'), and the finding of 'puzzling scars' the origin of which the respondent could not recall. Suffice it to say that human memory is not a video tape recorder and absences and inaccuracies in our memories are neither uncommon or evidence of extraterrestrial activity.

None of these individual 'symptoms' is exclusively 'caused' by alien abduction, and to be fair Hopkins *et al* do not suggest that they are. To come under their definition of an abductee, you have to have experienced at least 4 of the five symptoms. This roughly comes out as 3.7 million Americans (about 2%). On that basis I'm surprised that the insurance premium was not higher, as the chances of getting snatched (if we can assume that abduction rates are the same across the Atlantic) seem pretty high!

Even Hopkins, Jacobs and Westrum accept that individually any of the symptoms can arise naturally, independently and without the intervention of ETs, so why should we accept that any combination of the experiences be evidence of abduction? If a person suffered four out of the five symptoms within a single episode that might be more impressive (but hardly inexplicable), but the poll gives no indication of whether these symptoms occurred together or separately over a space of many years.

From having delivered similar types of questionnaires myself, I suspect that the latter is more likely and that the respondents to the Roper poll were remembering; that time in 1988 when they had an attack of sleep paralysis, an occasion when they were little when they thought they saw a light in their room, an occasion last week when they discovered a small cut on their hand but didn't remember how they did it, and so on.

For the past year Dr Susan Blackmore and I have been



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collecting reports and conducting surveys of sleep paralysis and other unusual experiences for a research project funded by the Perrot-Warwick fellowship. From our research it appears that rather than 'symptoms' like sleep paralysis and hypnagogic hallucinations being caused by alien abduction, it is rather the other way around.

Alien abduction, in many cases, is an interpretation of sleep paralysis and hypnagogic hallucination. Experiences of abduction that follow this form will be entirely subjective experiences, so there will be no physical proof that the person has been 'snatched'.

Any skeptical claims assessor would require more than reports of non-specific 'symptoms akin to post-traumatic stress', or accounts elicited whilst a person is under hypnosis, before handing over the check. I doubt very much that the story of Dagenham Dave has any basis in fact, but if it were true the insurance clerk who sold the policy would be laughing up his or her sleeve.

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Nick Rose is a Research Assistant at the University of the West of England

Kid's stuff

Dr Richard Wiseman and Clive Jeffreys investigate some popular 'non-fiction' books about the paranormal written for children

CHILDREN ARE FASCINATED with the paranormal. They enjoy being frightened by ghost stories, are intrigued with the notion of magical powers and delight in fantastic tales of mythical worlds inhabited by elves, fairies and goblins. With their curiosity fired, they are eager to know if ghosts really exist, if people really are psychic or whether science really is unable to explain 'supernatural' happenings.

No child would be disappointed by a visit to their local bookshop or library in search of material on the paranormal. A trip to our local bookstore yielded five of the most popular childrens' titles: *The Supernatural*, *The Unsolved Mysteries Project Book*, *The Haunted World*, *The Guide To The Supernatural World* and *Ghosts*.

All of these books claim to be factual and were shelved in the non-fiction section of the bookshop. The books cover a huge range of material including psychic powers, hauntings, UFOs, the Bermuda Triangle and Bigfoot. But do they present a child with anything approaching a balanced view of the paranormal? To find an answer, we analysed two topics which were common to all the books: psychic abilities and ghosts.

As with most children's books, the text was neatly broken into easily digested 'passages' and each passage could be placed into one of three groups.

First, some passages presented a pro-paranormal viewpoint by suggesting that genuine paranormal phenomena actually existed. Support was either explicit – for example, *The Haunted World* notes 'Ghosts often have a good reason to haunt people. Some have an urgent message or warning to deliver' – or implicit, with passages failing to mention possible normal explanations or mentioning such explanations but dismissing them as implausible (for example, relating a poltergeist case without men-

The books reviewed	
<i>The Usborne Guide To The Supernatural World</i> by Eric Maple, Eliot Humberstone & Lynn Myring, published by Usborne Books, 1990, 192pp, £4.99.	
<i>Unsolved Mysteries Project Book</i> by Steve Barlow & Steve Skidmore, published by Headway Books, Hodder & Stoughton, 1993, 32pp, £3.99.	
<i>Puffin Factfinders: The Supernatural</i> by John Day, published by Puffin Books, 1995, 32pp, £3.99.	
<i>The Usborne Book of the Haunted World</i> by Caroline Young, published by Usborne Books, 1995, 48pp, £4.99.	
<i>Usborne World of the Unknown: 'Ghosts'</i> by Christopher Maynard, published by Usborne Books, 1990, 32pp, £3.99.	

tioning the possibility of hoaxing).

Second, there were passages that presented a more 'balanced' view by outlining potentially normal explanations for 'paranormal' phenomena but not stating whether these explanations were actually proven. Mentioning that a certain psychic might be fraudulent but without stating whether he/she had actually been caught cheating was an example of this in *The Haunted World*.

Finally, a third type of passage presented an 'anti-paranormal' view by explicitly noting that a supposedly paranormal phenomenon had a normal explanation. The example of ghostly noises in a 'haunted' house that turned

Book	No. of passages selected	pro-paranormal passages	balanced passages	anti-paranormal passages
1. <i>Unsolved Mysteries Project Book</i>	30	25 (83.3%)	4 (13.3%)	1 (3.4%)
2. <i>The Supernatural</i>	60	55 (91.6%)	3 (5%)	2 (3.4%)
3. <i>Guide To The Supernatural World</i>	177	158 (89.2%)	10 (5.6%)	9 (5.2%)
4. <i>Ghosts</i>	75	48 (64%)	11 (14.6%)	16 (21.4%)
5. <i>The Haunted World</i>	99	90 (90.9%)	7 (7%)	2 (2.1%)
Total:	441	376 (85.2%)	35 (7.9%)	30 (6.8%)

Table 1: Numbers (and %) of pro-paranormal, balanced, and anti-paranormal passages in each of the books examined.

out to be caused by scurrying mice is a case in question.

Table 1 presents the number and percentage of the three types of passage in each book. It clearly illustrates that the books present a pro-paranormal viewpoint. Overall, 82.5% of the books' passages either explicitly confirmed certain events as paranormal, failed to present alternative explanations for such phenomena or mentioned such explanations but dismissed them as implausible. *Ghosts*, the book that displayed the smallest amount of bias, still contained 64% of pro-paranormal passages, although it did at least outline how scientific methods could be used to investigate hauntings and clearly detailed three cases where normal explanations were shown to account for paranormal phenomena.

An even more worrying aspect of the analysis was the discovery of some appalling errors in some of the 'pro-paranormal' passages.

For example, both *The Supernatural World* and *The Unsolved Mysteries Project Book* describe the ghostly phenomena associated with Borley Rectory (labelled 'the most haunted house in Britain') and in particular the 'poltergeist' activity reported by 1930's investigator Harry Price. No mention is made of the fact that it is widely believed that Price faked much of his investigation and report [1].

The Supernatural World describes how one scientist, Cleve Backster, wired plants to a lie detector and discovered that the act of him thinking about burning the leaves of the plant caused the detector to show a large response. The book concludes that 'Plants seem to recognise a killer'. The section doesn't mention that other scientists failed to replicate Backster's findings and suggested that he was using inappropriate techniques to record levels of the electrical activity in leaves [2,3].

On a worse note, some of the books endorsed 'paranormal' events which are known to have normal explanations. *The Haunted World* contains a photograph of an Indian fakir appearing to float above the ground. The caption reads 'Apparently, Subbayar Pullavar levitated for four minutes in 1936'. In fact, the fakir is clearly performing a simple, and well documented, magic trick in which the performer is connected to a harness under his clothing, and supported by one end of a cloth covered pole (see, for example, [4]). A few pages later the book presents a photograph of the medium Carlos Mirabelli apparently levitating. The caption reads 'This photograph claims to prove that Mirabelli could levitate'. The photograph is a known fake. Research has shown that the photograph has been extensively retouched to remove the object (probably a ladder) that Mirabelli was standing on at the time of the 'levitation' [5]!

Likewise, *The Supernatural World* reproduces various 'Kirlian' photographs, stating that 'Kirlian pictures seem to show that all living things and some inanimate objects have a twinkling aura that constantly surrounds them'.

In fact, several scientists have demonstrated that such photographs are simply recording the discharge produced when a high frequency voltage is applied to a grounded object (see, for example, [6]). These photographs have a perfectly natural explanation and *The Supernatural World*, is wrong to conclude that they may 'help us understand psychokinesis and psychic healing'.

Childrens' enthusiasm for the paranormal presents educators with an excellent opportunity to teach them about many different aspects of science. Children's critical thinking skills could be enhanced by having to consider alternative explanations for supposedly paranormal events and they could be encouraged to think about the types of investigations needed to evaluate these explanations. Some of the principles involved in evaluating evidence could be illustrated,

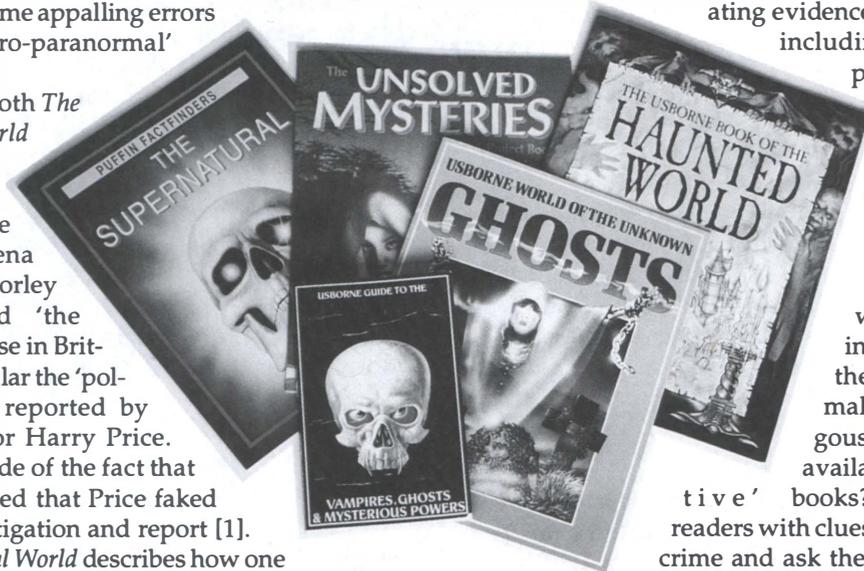
including, for example, the problems of assessing eyewitness testimony and the way in which books/media sometimes distort information.

Could not a really well-designed book invite children to play the part of a 'paranormal investigator', analogous to some currently available childrens' 'detective' books? If books can present readers with clues relating to a fictional crime and ask them to play the role of detective then children could surely be presented with evidence relating to 'paranormal' events and be asked to try to solve the mystery.

It is a great pity that none of the books examined fulfilled this potential. Indeed, rather than informing/exciting their readers about science, the books more or less promoted the notion that 'supernatural' events demonstrated the limitations of a scientific approach. Often this argument was supported by incorrectly describing instances where scientists/investigators had apparently been unable to explain 'paranormal' phenomena. Both *The Guide to the Supernatural World* and *The Supernatural* refer to the paranormal powers of Ted Serios, a 'psychic' who claimed to project mental images onto photographic film. The first book states that 'Neither Ted Serios, nor the scientists who have tested him, have any explanation of how the power of thought is able to affect photographic film' while the second book notes that 'Experts are unable to explain the strange pictures created by psychic photography'. Neither book notes that skeptics have suggested various ways in which Serios might have faked his demonstrations (see, for example, [7, 8]).

The Haunted World contains a brief account of Harry Houdini's investigation of the medium, Mina Crandon ('Margery'). The book notes that Houdini locked Crandon in a box to prevent her cheating during test séances. Apparently:

As the séance began the box burst open. Margery



said 'Walter' [her 'spirit control'] was very angry. When she was shut into it again, something inside shook and banged so much that the experiment had to be abandoned. Houdini was left frustrated.

No mention is made of the fact that Crandon failed to produce any convincing phenomena during Houdini's test seances or that later evidence strongly suggested that she was a fraud (see, for example, [9]).

All of the books examined present themselves as being factual and may be the first source of information on the subject encountered by young, inquisitive and impressionable minds. Our analysis suggests that, at best, they badly misinform their readers.

Publishers would surely shy away from producing a children's history or science text which was obviously biased and full of errors. It is unfortunate that they feel that it is acceptable to do so when publishing books on the paranormal.

Right to reply

In February 1996 we sent all of the publishers a copy of this article and asked for their comments. None of them wrote back. In August, we sent them another copy, mentioned that it would soon be published and again asked for their comments. Headway Books again didn't reply. Puffin Books thanked us for pointing out the errors in their book and said that they would be corrected if the book was reprinted. Usborne Books wrote back stating that their *Guide to the Supernatural World* had gone out of print and that:

Our only other point is that publishers have no say where booksellers (or anybody else) display children's books. Therefore along with all other publishers of both children's fiction and non-fiction, Usborne titles are displayed in a variety of different

sections of a children's book department.

We wrote back stating that our comments weren't meant to be a criticism of where booksellers had placed these books, but rather of the fact that the books claimed to be non-fiction but contained appalling factual errors. We also asked whether they were now saying that their books were meant to be seen as fiction and, if so, why the books claimed to contain scientific evidence suggesting supernatural phenomena actually exist. To date, they haven't replied.

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Richard Wiseman is a Senior Research Fellow in the Psychology Department at the University of Hertfordshire; Clive Jeffreys is a freelance writer.



Closing the Door on Evidence

Tom Napier

Should we always believe what we see?

SINCE WE, AS SKEPTICS, expect claimants to provide evidence, we should give some thought as to what evidence we would find acceptable. In some cases, even if a phenomenon existed it might be difficult to provide proof. However, in the case of physical phenomena, providing evidence should not be too difficult. UFOs, Noah's Ark, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster: if they exist, produce the hardware. Failing that, would a good photograph suffice? Should we be convinced, for example, by the much ballyhooed, and much derided, 'alien autopsy'?

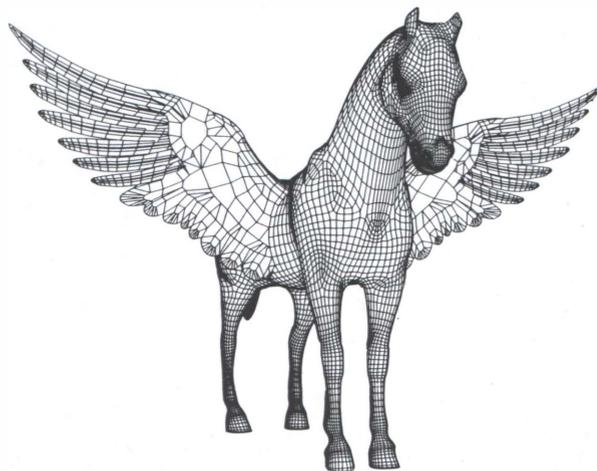
About a year ago I spent a few hours in the company of an engineer who happens to be an evangelical UFO believer. He kept on asking me what it would take to make me believe in alien spacecraft. It was as if he had all the evidence on tap, he only had to dig out the right anecdote and I would suddenly be converted. Unfortunately I don't find anecdotes too convincing these days. On the spur of the moment I couldn't think of a really telling criterion but the next time someone asks me I am likely to answer, 'Reading an analysis of alien technology in a peer-reviewed scientific journal'.

You see, being once bitten, I am twice shy. In my early teens I was convinced of the reality of flying saucers. It was photographic evidence which convinced me. Not one photograph, which I realized could be a fake, but two. They clearly showed the same object and they had ostensibly been taken by unrelated people in different countries. I was quite pleased with myself to have realized that these photos constituted proof since the author didn't raise the issue himself.

However, the only place I had seen those photos was in a book written by George Adamski. The only evidence that they had been taken by different people was the author's word. Later in life I attained a higher level of skeptical sophistication. I realized that I had no independent evidence that the entire book was not a hoax - which it was.

However, my head was in the right place. If two unrelated people had photographed an object clearly enough for it to be identified as the same thing, and it could not be shown to be some unusual but mundane object, then this would still constitute pretty hard evidence.

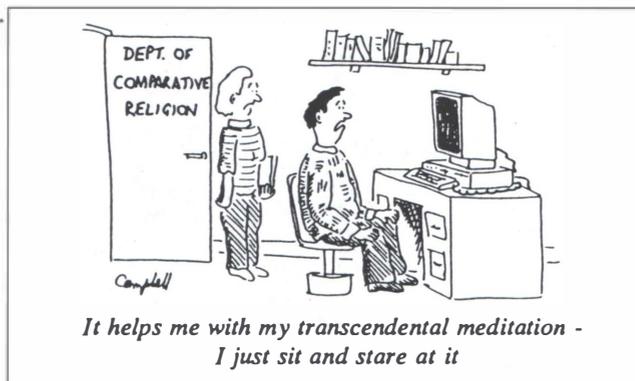
Unfortunately, this is no longer true of any single photograph and, to some extent, never was. The possibility of faking photographic evidence has always existed, witness the Cottingley fairies. Only under rather unusual circumstances can a photograph, even an undeveloped negative, be taken at face value. It would require the move-



ment of the roll of film to be tracked by an independent witness from the store all the way to the processing lab. Just as having too perfect an alibi makes one the most likely suspect, anyone with the foresight to set up such an evidential trail risks condemning themselves as a would-be hoaxer. However, these days it is all too easy to fake photographs. Check the tabloids at your neighbourhood supermarket if you don't believe me. (Or, more surprisingly, see the cover of the February 1994, *Scientific American*. This shows a photograph of Marilyn Monroe, arm-in-arm with Abraham Lincoln.)

The last hold-out for spacecraft used to be movie film or video tape. Traditionally it has been much harder to fake moving objects convincingly, as dozens of bad science fiction movies demonstrate. Now that door too is closing. For some time it has been possible, even for patient amateurs, to use a computer to generate convincing images on video-tape, either by modifying an existing recording or by creating complete images from scratch. Suitable hardware and software can be bought for a few thousand pounds.

Because of its higher resolution, it is more difficult to



manipulate movie film with amateur equipment, though to some extent processing time can be traded for cost. With professional equipment the result can be indistinguishable from reality. Movie makers routinely insert computer-generated images into their productions where it would be too expensive or impossible to film the real thing. Rather than rent three MIG-29s for a fly-over scene in *Goldeneye*, the producers created the shot, complete with motion blur, on a souped-up Amiga. They used a 3D computer model of a MIG-29. If they had used a UFO model the results would have been just as convincing. In *Forrest Gump*, Gary Sinise played a legless veteran so well via computer trickery that his agent now worries that he won't be offered any more walking roles. And remember *Jurassic Park* next time someone wants to show you a film of Bigfoot.

However, even as advancing technology closes the door on visual evidence, it makes physical evidence more compelling. It flying saucers really are made of alloys unknown on earth, samples can now be analysed non-destructively in ways which would convincingly eliminate a terrestrial origin. Wood from Noah's Ark could be accurately dated by carbon-14 or neutron activation analysis. If Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster are captured, or if the Roswell bodies ever emerge from cold storage, DNA testing will show their relationship, or lack of it, to other earthly organisms.

Technology has upped the ante but, should you hold the right cards, the jackpot is easier to win than ever.

Further reading

- 'When is Seeing Believing?' William J Mitchell, *Scientific American*, February 1994
- 'The Digital Backlot', Robert Braham, *Spectrum*, July 1995
- 'Premium Bond', Ben Vost, *Amiga Computing*, Issue 7.

Tom Napier edits *Phactum*, the newsletter of the Philadelphia Association for Critical Thinking.

This article originally appeared in Phactum, and is reprinted with kind permission.



Notice

In many countries there are associations of scientists, academics, magicians and laypersons dedicated to the critical, naturalistic examination of claims of the paranormal. We wish to see one brought into being in the UK.

If anyone else would be interested in joining a national association of sceptical enquirers, we should very much like to hear from them. Please write to: **Wayne Spencer and Tony Youens, 15 Ramsden Wood Road, Walsden, Todmorden, Lancashire OL14 7UD.**



Paul Johnson

Donald Rorum

The Skeptic's Dictionary

Robert Todd Carroll

Auras: now you see them, now you don't

AN AURA IS A COLOURED OUTLINE or outlines emanating from the surfaces of humans, animals and even inanimate objects. Under ordinary circumstances, these coloured films are only visible to certain people with a special psychic power. However, you may purchase a special set of goggles, some with 'pinacyanole bromide' filters, or you may use Kirlian photography to capture auras on film.

Auras are believed to be indicative of a person's physical and emotional state of being. Thus, auras can be read by people with special powers like members of the Berkeley Psychic Institute.

Every year at the University of California at Davis there is a festival reminiscent of the sixties with tie-dyed shirts, psychedelic music, incense burning, children with flowers in their hair, marijuana smoking, gurus, massages with scented oils, handcrafts, and so on. The show is called the Whole Earth Festival, and I've been to several. One booth is run by the Berkeley Psychic Institute (BPI). It's the Aura Reading booth.

For a few dollars, you sit in a chair in the great outdoors with the music playing and people swaying while someone from BPI reads your aura. Not only does the reader read your aura, he or she draws it for you on a piece of paper which is pre-printed with the vague outline of a person. Actually, the reader doesn't draw so much as colour your aura. There he or she sits with a can of crayons, picking out very carefully just the right hue to capture the essence of his or her vision of your aura. Then the reader tells you what your aura reveals.

There is a way to test the claim that a person can read auras, and it was done on US national television on a program hosted by Bill Bixby. The Berkeley Psychic Institute sent their top aura reader for a chance to win a \$10,000 prize for anyone who could demonstrate psychic powers. The psychic was presented with about twenty people on stage and was asked if she could see their auras.

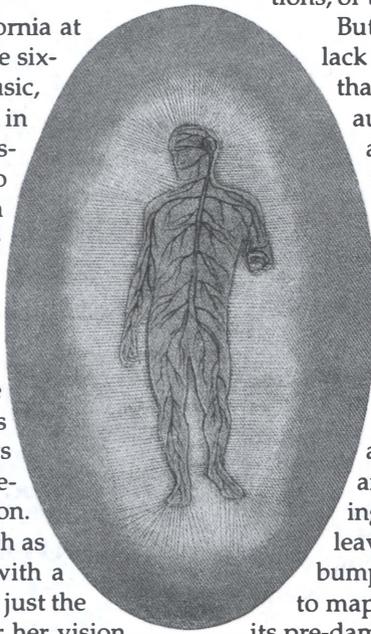
She said that she could see the auras and that they all had one and they emanated at least a foot or two above each person's head. The twenty aura-wearing people then went offstage. A curtain was lifted, revealing a number of partitions behind which only some of the twenty people were standing. Thus Bixby and the psychic were looking at twenty partitions but only several of them had a person behind it. The psychic was asked if she could see any auras creeping up above the partitions. She said she

could. To get her ten grand all she had to do was correctly identify each partition which had a person behind it. She was to do this by seeing each person's aura above the partition. The audience was given an aerial camera view of the proceedings. Well, the psychic claimed that there was a person behind each partition. She claimed she saw an aura above all the partitions. The partitions were removed, revealing about 6 people behind partitions. The psychic didn't even seem surprised. And I suppose she could go back home and tell her followers that she did get right all the ones who were behind the partitions, or that 6 out of 20 is not bad in a hostile arena.

But of course the test only demonstrates the lack of aura reading power of one person, not that there is no such thing as an aura, or that auras are not indicative of mental, emotional and physical health or sickness. A more interesting area of investigation here is photography, beginning with Kirlian photography which is taken by the true believer as proof auras exist. The Centre of Expertise in Paranormal Phenomena, an Australian outfit, claims to have taken Kirlian photography to new limits. They claim that they have applied for a patent on a process of restoring a scratched and damaged CD to its exact original state by examining the aura of the damaged item using Kirlian photography. They claim the aura leaves an exact impression of all the pits and bumps of the original CD and they know how to map the aura and restore the compact disc to its pre-damaged state. I imagine they will be seeking investors in this exciting new development.

The notion that auras reflect health is a common one among true believers. The problem is what colour reflects what condition? My sister claims that when she worked in a hospital she could always tell which patient would die by their aura. The dying ones had purple auras the night before they died. Aura expert Robert Bruce, however, sees something different with dying patients: 'First the aura fades and weakens, and then, a week or so before death it starts to expand, changing into a beautiful pale sky-blue aura shot through with silver sparks'.

In other words, reading auras is something like reading roschach tests, and probably just as accurate.



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/~btcarrol/>.



Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

Saying what you mean, and meaning what you say

A FEW YEARS AGO I wrote in *Psychic Diary* about *Mirror Talk*, a tape machine that could record speech, and replay it backwards. The promoters of the machine claimed that by listening to speech backwards, you could make out what people were secretly thinking. Hidden within the gibberish of normal reversed speech, they said, were crystal-clear phrases exposing the speaker's true feelings, often quite the opposite of what they were saying. I laughed at this absurdity, made several bad jokes, and forgot all about it.

And then, a few weeks ago, I received an email message from David John Oates, founder of Reverse Speech Technologies in California. Mr Oates had come across my *Mirror Talk* article via *The Skeptic's* World Wide Web pages. He was furious at the way the *Mirror Talk* people had ripped off and misrepresented his ideas, and he implored me to look at the 'legitimate research' at his Web site. So I did.

I quickly discovered that the central claim made by Mr Oates is this:

Reverse Speech is another form of human communication that is automatically generated by the human brain. It occurs every time we speak and is embedded backwards into the sounds of our speech. This previously undiscovered function of the mind is the mind's own independent voice speaking from the deepest regions of consciousness.

Mr Oates offers many examples of Reverse Speech in action, downloadable from the Internet for anyone with a suitably equipped computer. The first clip I listened to was of Neil Armstrong's first words from the moon: 'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind'. Despite the fact that Armstrong's words are meaningless (he was meant to say 'That's one small step for a man') they've become part of our culture. If you listen to Armstrong's words backwards, according to Mr Oates:

'That's one small step for man' reverses to say 'Man will space walk'. This is a reflection of his logical thoughts at the time. Man will continue to walk in space.

I plugged a microphone into my PC, and, hoping nobody was listening, mimicked Armstrong's words, recording them onto my computer's hard disk. Playing the recording backwards, I heard: 'Schhhwaaaaan yyweel mmpaaaache waaaahh'. 'Man will space walk'? Maybe.

The next sound clip I examined was from O J Simpson. When O J says 'Just turn a tape recorder on the next time' this apparently reverses to: 'I skinned them all'. Another Simpson soundbite, according to Mr Oates, reverses to

'The law will forgive crime'.

Several of Mr Oates' Web pages are given over to analyses of the recent Presidential debates between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole. Talking about how he avoids being influenced by people who wish to contribute or offer him services, Clinton says: 'I try to articulate my position as clearly as possible'. Backwards, we are told, he reveals his unconscious thoughts: 'she's a fun girl to kiss!'. Dole, about to crack a joke, stutters slightly. Backwards, his pre-joke stutter says: 'I'll get the laugh in'.

Many of the reversals are obscure, with strange sentence structure. For example, from the Dole/Clinton debates: 'Remove the censor markets'; 'My fake. Must see that I can sue his soul'; 'We pour on a devil. I will say he heard'; 'Shake his heaven. Rob his ass';

Mr Oates answers critics of the unusual structure and content of his reversals by arguing that the brain uses metaphoric imagery in creating the hidden speech. He identifies metaphors which occur frequently, such as 'whirlwind', 'satan', 'lancelot', 'goddess', and states that these refer to common cultural archetypes.

What fascinates me about these claims for Reverse Speech is that Mr Oates has devoted the last 13 years of his life to them. He replied promptly and courteously to my questions about his ideas. He is adamant that he is not a New Ager, is not a nutter, and genuinely believes in Reverse Speech as a discovery of major importance to humanity. Having had the chance to talk with him, I do not believe that Reverse Speech, unlike *Mirror Talk*, is a cheap rip-off. It's a genuinely held belief, with an extraordinary amount of work and energy invested in it.

Mr Oates uses Reverse Speech in his hypnotherapy practice, which he says is booked up until January 1997. He runs courses on the therapeutic use of Reverse Speech, publishes books and tapes, and sells a speech-reversing tape recorder. His Web pages are crammed with endorsements from clients and professionals.

I believe that Mr Oates is mistaken about the reality of Reverse Speech, and I told him so. I was surprised by his reaction: 'I am pleased to see skepticism', he replied.

There may be countless unprincipled scoundrels in today's ruthless New Age free market, but – in all fairness – I am convinced that Mr Oates, despite his very strange and utterly implausible ideas, is not one of them.

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

For more details of Reverse Speech, see <http://www.reversespeech.com>, email backwards@4dcomm.com, or contact Reverse Speech Enterprises at PO Box 1037, Bonsall CA 92003, USA, Tel 619-732-3097.

Skeptic at Large

Wendy Grossman



Talking about free speech

IVE BEEN FORCED to think a lot about free speech this last month. You'll have lost track of this by now, but for those who follow such things, I'm writing this in early October, and the period since August 25 was the high-octane period for censorship of the Internet in Britain. There are, or rather were, four articles to be written about this, but the upshot is that the attempt is being made to remove digitally transmitted child pornography from the nation's news servers. (I have a friend who describes geographical attempts to regulate the content transmitted across the Internet as 'making a rule that you can only piss in the shallow end of the pool.')

Is child pornography dangerous? The police are sure that it is. Others are less sure, particularly because by making this material illegal even to possess, our society makes discussion of the issues involved difficult. And then you get into the whole question of bomb recipes online, and that's a whole other kettle of fuel mixed with fertilizer.

There is, however, a large body of scientific evidence to counter the notion that AIDS either doesn't exist or is not caused by HIV (pedants please note: I have *not* redundantly called it 'the HIV virus,' a phrase that drives me bonkers). Nonetheless, the leading proponent of this theory, Peter Duisberg, has relatively newly brought out a nice, large, fat book promoting this unhelpful notion, which a few years ago was the center of a campaign by no less a newspaper than the *Sunday Times*.

It seems to me that this really *is* dangerous. Isn't it at least somewhat likely that people will have read the newspaper, seen the Channel 4 documentary, or read the book and concluded that all sorts of activities are safe after all? Isn't it possible that real people will die from reading this text and believing Duisberg has hit on something? Won't some of them be children? And yet, no one proposed banning the *Sunday Times* or Duisberg's book, or closing printing plants. Chances are they won't even be sued by people who altered their lives after listening to them.

And so on to this morning's *USA Today*, which carries the news that American Health Maintenance Organizations (these are membership clinics staffed by a roster of doctors where members pay an annual subscription in return for all the health care they need - sort of small, private NHSs) are considering adding 'alternative therapies' such as acupuncture, herbalist remedies, and homeopathy to the roster of services they provide. The reason given is consumer pressure. *USA Today* is widely underrated: its reporter, Steve Sakson, took the trouble

to nail the point that alternative therapies are often cheaper than orthodox medicine, although unproven. He also quoted William Jarvis, head of the National Council Against Health Fraud, who noted the case of an HMO which sent patients to a clinic specializing in dietary supplements because it was cheaper than AZT treatment and, even more cynically, that the patients wouldn't be around as long. Meanwhile, I've seen several American drug stores selling the homeopathic remedy for a condition next to the medical, over-the-counter remedy. The homeopathic one costs half as much, and the packaging material makes the same promises; if you weren't too clear on what homeopathy was, which would you choose?

These things all raise similar difficult issues: how do you balance free speech, consumer demands, and the issues of life and death? Do you want your NHS contributions spent in part on supplying homeopathic treatments to others just because they demand them and it's cheap? The answer to bad speech is more speech, as civil libertarians love to say, but what if the bad speech is from a doctor to a patient, or a scientist to a lay public anxious to believe that an epidemic won't affect them? And if you say that these things are all right, but it is *not* all right for an Internet user to keep copies of pictures or text fantasies of child rape on a hard drive how do we as a society reach an accurate understanding of what horrors live in our midst?

I've come to understand something about censorship that wasn't obvious to me before this last month (if it was obvious to you, I'm sorry for being slow): it is based on the notion of an us, the incorruptible, who must make decisions on behalf of a them, a corruptible public who may be led by words and pictures into activities they would never otherwise have considered. I hope you feel appropriately insulted by this assumption.

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

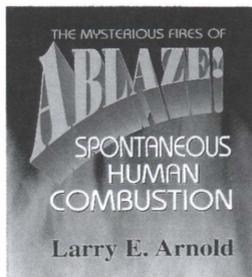


Reviews



Burning questions

Larry E Arnold, *Ablaze: The Mysterious Fires of Spontaneous Human Combustion* (Evans/Gazelle, £18.50); John E Heymer, *The Entrancing Flame* (Little, Brown, £16.99).

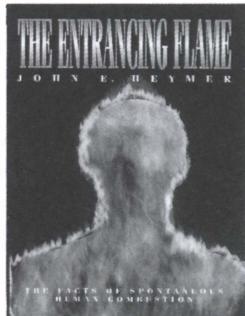


Larry Arnold's *Ablaze* seems to have been written for the sole purpose of including in one book every known event, whether anecdotal, mythical or fictional, that could possibly be included under the heading 'Spontaneous Human Combustion (SHC)'. The style is disjointed and incoherent and the book might as well be

read in a series of randomly selected chunks – during which the reader will learn that those who are hot-tempered, depressed, morose or psychologically moribund are predisposed to spontaneously combust and that SHC may be self-induced in those attempting to master their internal fire and achieve a state of hyperthermia through the power of Kundalini.

Other remarkable insights include the theory that the army of Sennacherib were, overnight, victims of mass collective self-combustion in 701 BC and that Britain is the site of many 'leynes of telluric energies' such as the one which caused 'a chicken coop and fifty hens to spontaneously combust' in Market Rasen in 1905. The tone is one of breathless credulity throughout and the theories offered to explain SHC could only have come from someone with no scientific understanding. *Ablaze* is strictly for amusement only.

John Heymer, author of *The Entrancing Flame*, was an officer with the Gwent police for 25 years. In 1981 he was the scene of crime officer in a case in which the badly burned body of a 73 year old man was found in his home. Rejecting the coroner's verdict of accidental death and convinced he had witnessed a case of Spontaneous Human Combustion, Heymer went



on to collect details of ten similar cases. These form the larger part of this book. They are certainly intriguing and, if correctly reported, it is difficult to think of logical and familiar explanations for most of them. However, with no witnesses to several of the deaths it is questionable how similar the cases really are, and it may not be reasonable to look for a single explanation.

The author does not consider SHC to be a paranormal phenomenon but the 'scientific' theory he offers that

defective mitochondria in a cell may liberate hydrogen and oxygen causing an explosive reaction which then spreads rapidly through out the body poses more questions than it answers.

— Mike Hutton

Houses of myth

Robyn M Dawes, *House of Cards: Psychology and Psychotherapy Built on Myth* (The Free Press, \$22.95)

Psychological researcher Robyn M Dawes is Professor in the Department of Social and Decision Sciences at Carnegie-Mellon University, and his book *House of Cards* challenges some of the most cherished clinical assumptions and therapies now in use.

He writes, 'I feel a sense of obligation because society has supported my research and has personally supported me sufficiently well that I do not . . . have to take a vow of semi-poverty to pursue my interests. Thus, I feel an obligation to tell people my view of what is going on'. He pulls no punches: 'a mental health expert who expresses a confident opinion about the probable future behaviour of a single individual (for example, to engage in violent acts) is by definition incompetent'.

One of the key points in his thesis is that 'the effectiveness of therapy is unrelated to the training or credentials of the therapist' (a conclusion based on well over five hundred studies of psychotherapy outcome). Also, 'the *type* of therapy given was unrelated to its effectiveness, with the possible exception of behavioural techniques, which seemed superior for well-circumscribed behavioural problems'.

In experimental assessments, professionally trained and credentialed psychologists did no better than university professors who had no background in psychology. Nor was there any relationship between length of treatment and outcome. ('In fact, nothing worked better for alcoholics than a minimal treatment involving detoxification and one hour of counseling'.)

The most pernicious of our culture's beliefs is that 'adult behaviour is determined mainly by childhood experiences'. In particular, 'Self-esteem . . . is believed to be an important causal variable in behaviour, even though the California Task Force on the Importance of Self-Esteem could find no evidence of such a causal effect'.

Dawes reviews Paul Meehl's twenty studies comparing statistical prediction with clinical prediction in such areas as academic success, electroshock therapy, and criminal recidivism). Clinical predictions never came out best. In Jack Sawyer's later review of forty-five studies, the results were the same.

Actuarial methods were superior even in assessing intellectual deficit due to brain damage, and professional psychologists 'could not even detect young adolescents

who were faking brain damage' after merely being told 'to be convincing'.

Dawes is especially disturbed by the implications for expert testimony in courtrooms, 'where a statement about years of experience is accepted as evidence of expertise'. He reproduces a list of 48 ludicrous 'symptoms' that licensed experts have provided as evidence of sexual abuse, and he is scathing about the unscientific use of 'anatomically detailed dolls'.

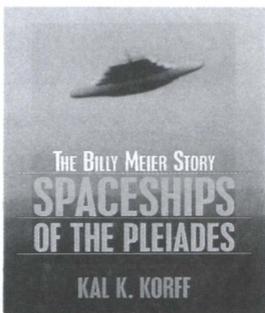
His advice to the reader is explicit: 'If a professional psychologist is "evaluating" you in a situation in which you are at risk, and asks you for responses to ink blots or to incomplete sentences, or for a drawing of anything, walk out of that psychologist's office . . . If your contact with the psychologist involves a legal matter, your civil liberties themselves may be at stake'.

The book is thoroughly referenced, makes its case clearly and often wittily, and is an excellent read. Highly recommended.

— Lewis Jones

Pleiadian playtime

Kal K Korff, *Spaceships of the Pleiades: The Billy Meier Story* (Prometheus, £22).



When this book arrived, I must say that I was a little daunted by its sheer size. I confess that I knew very little about Eduard 'Billy' Meier prior to reading this vast tome. A book of this size devoted to the debunking, as I saw it, of a single case struck me as a possible case of overkill. And there was also the possibility that I might discover by

page 15 that the author had a dry-as-dust style that would leave me wishing I had never offered to review the damn thing. Fortunately, I need not have worried on either count. I found Korff's style very engaging and, when I got to the last page, I would happily have read another couple of hundred.

Although in a sense the book is devoted to a single case, when the case in question is that of Billy Meier a very large book is required for a comprehensive treatment. The reason is that Meier claims to have had more than seven hundred contacts with aliens, mainly with a female cosmonaut from the Pleiadian star cluster who goes by the name of Semjase (pronounced 'sem-YA-see').

Meier has taken over a thousand photographs of alien spacecraft and several 8mm films of other worlds. The latter were allegedly obtained during a five day trip aboard a Pleiadian flying saucer. He also claims to have travelled through time with the help of the Pleiadians, even meeting Jesus Christ. He has brought back samples of physical evidence to support his accounts. His supporters argue that dozens of independent witnesses can verify his claims.

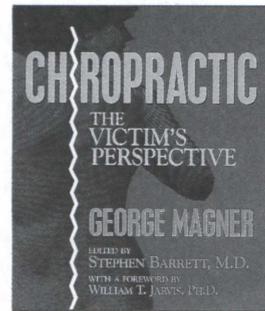
It goes without saying that a brief review cannot even begin to summarize the convincing case that Korff presents against Meier's claims. Suffice it to say that the book is a model of careful investigation and would, in my opinion, convince any reasonable reader that the

Meier case is in fact the most elaborate hoax in the history of UFOlogy.

—Christopher C French

A victim's tale

George Magner, *Chiropractic: The Victim's Perspective* (Prometheus, £21)



George Magner was a patient of chiropractors (who claim that spinal misalignments are the basis for most ailments) and realised that they had permanently injured him. He subsequently founded the Victims of Chiropractic group and started gathering his rich collection of data and testimonies.

His book begins with a brief history of the origins of chiropractic, its founders, the internal quarrels and quarrelling factions. He analyses the training available to chiropractors, and the very doubtful quality of most chiropractic schools. The basic concept of the subluxation, or misalignment, of the spinal vertebrae, is thoroughly discussed, and debunked.

The chapters on how chiropractic managed to gain official licensing in the USA are very interesting, considering the political lobbying attempts by other alternative systems in the USA and Europe to bypass scientific evaluation, by making use of laws that were meant to regulate trade and economy.

The hypocrisy of the whole organisation behind chiropractic is well demonstrated by their unwillingness to remedy their total lack of scientific foundation and ethics. Chiropractic is shown to be, as many other alternative treatment systems, more a religion than a science. Criticism is taken to equal blasphemy to be dealt with by personal attacks on the messenger rather than on the arguments.

Magner praises some chiropractors who tried to improve the big business system from within. They were harshly treated by their fellows, even with attempts on their lives. In the USA, chiropractors are working to become the equivalent of family doctors, and claims to be able to treat all kinds of diseases, such as infections, diabetes and even cancer, by setting the spine straight. They give weird dietary advice and vitamin supplements and use lots of other quack methods. Chiropractors claim to provide life-long preventive treatment, but encourage the refusal of childhood vaccinations. The chapters on raising income by aggressive marketing techniques, patient binding, and misrepresentation of facts to the public may leave you breathless.

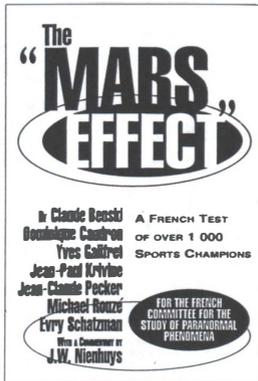
The considerable dangers of chiropractic manipulation are well-documented and are alarming, taking in to consideration the total uselessness of most of their treatments. The testimonies in this book alone represent probably more cases than are known in medical literature. Tips for the patients how to protect themselves against unnecessary and dangerous treatments are included.

This book is warmly recommended.

— Wim Betz

Mars wars

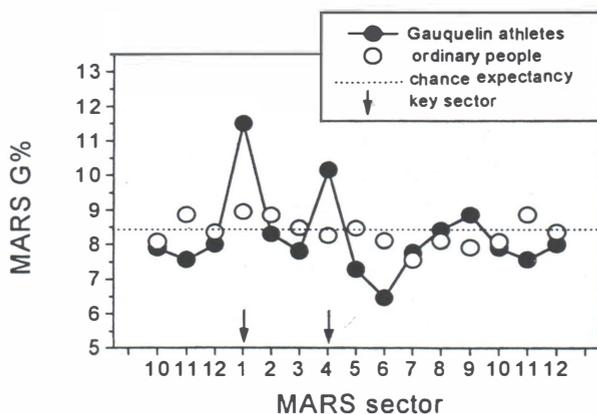
Suitbert Ertel and Kenneth Irving, *The Tenacious Mars Effect* (Urania, £9.95); Claude Benski *et al*, with a commentary by J W Nienhuys, *The 'Mars Effect': A French Test of Over 1000 Sports Champions* (Prometheus, £16.99)



It has been more than 40 years since Gauquelin presented evidence for a 'Mars Effect' in the birth times of sports champions. These two new books inadvertently show that the controversy will continue indefinitely.

Supporters of the Mars Effect claim that it is an objectively replicable (and replicated) effect, and that it is past time it should be scientifically

recognized. They have an impressive array of evidence and statistical argumentation to back this up. Skeptics counter that their test shows no sign of an effect, and that bias and mistakes explain previous positive results. They have an impressive array of evidence and statistical argumentation to back this up.



The difficulty with previous Mars Effect tests was selecting a sample of champions who were properly eminent in their sport. That is the big issue with the latest French data as well. Suitbert Ertel claims that the Mars Effect is present here, though he also charges the French Skeptics with various kinds of scientific incompetence in assembling their data. J W Nienhuys argues that Ertel's 'Eminence Effect' – a stronger Mars Effect signal with increasing eminence of the champions – is an artifact with no real evidence in support. Charges of bias in selecting the samples and deciding on 'eminence' fly freely. Something is wrong with at least one interpretation here, but without definite and obviously objective 'eminence' criteria, it will be hard to find out exactly what. Neither book, for all their dense tables of data and statistical arcana, are satisfying on such matters. There is too much room for skeptics and proponents to inadvertently screw up.

The Mars Effect, then, currently resides in limbo. It is an unexpected result if true, but also a marginal effect and not one with clear occult implications. So we get a purely statistical research program taking on a complex

world with no theoretical guidance. One expects confusion. Furthermore, incompetence seems to have plagued teams of skeptics throughout the affair, and Gauquelin evidently had his own biases affect his data set.

As things stand now, the Mars Effect is more interesting for the sociology of science than science *per se*. There is perhaps no comfort for astrologers in these books, but they also reveal skeptics to be all too human.

— Taner Edis

Orange dottiness

Uri Geller's Mind-Power Kit (Virgin Publishing, £19.99)

This kit contains a book co-written by Jane Struthers, an audiotape, a crystal 'energized especially for you' and an orange dot. Yes, that's right, an orange dot.

The book is a rather meagre 110 pages. There is a brief biography, followed by a series of chapters on subjects which Geller claims all of us can master. These include Visualisation (picture nice things in your mind and they'll come true), Willpower, Colour Therapy, Crystals, Dowsing, ESP and Psychokinesis. The chapter for which I searched in vain, however, was one on conjuring.

Most of it is pretty standard stuff. We are told we can improve our ESP simply by practising. Want to give up smoking? Get slim? Cure yourself of cancer? It's all down to willpower. Similarly psychokinesis, which, the book suggests, was used to form the pyramids and Stonehenge.

Geller warns us not to abuse our powers. He tells a story of how he was punished for using his mind to win £17,000 at roulette, and was forced to throw the money away. He instructs us never to prostitute our powers. Perish the thought!

As to the rest of the kit, the audiotape contains standard positive thinking type messages, complete with shapeless New Age music. The orange dot is, well, an orange dot printed on a piece of cardboard (good for mending watches apparently) and the crystal is made of quartz. We are informed that such crystals have healing powers and are good talismans. I think mine must have been faulty as, since receiving it, I have dropped and broken my laptop computer, the company with which I booked my summer holiday has gone bust and I am currently recovering from one of the most virulent bugs I can remember.

The book starts out promisingly enough, though. In the first paragraph, Geller writes 'I've even got used to reading stories about myself in newspapers and magazines that owe more to fiction than accurate reporting'.

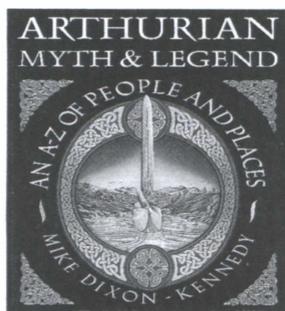
So have we, Uri. So have we.

— Mike Walsh

The Arthur Industry

John Matthews, *The Unknown Arthur* (Blandford, £17.99), *King Arthur and the Grail Quest* (Blandford, £9.99); R J Stewart and John Matthews (Editors), *Merlin Through the Ages* (Blandford, £9.99); Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Arthurian Myth and Legend* (Blandford, £16.99)

There seems no end to the stream of books about King Arthur currently churning off the presses. Blandford's four latest offerings are aimed at the New Age gift



market – perhaps for a New Age alternative to birthdays?

Mike Dixon-Kennedy's *Arthurian Myth and Legend* is an impressively scholarly dictionary of Arthurian lore, which will be a useful reference book for anyone interested in this field.

R J Stewart's and John Matthews' *Merlin Through the*

Ages is a browsable compilation of extracts from works about Merlin from 1134 to the present day. While admiring the extent of the editors' research, I can't help wondering firstly why anyone would want to read this book, and secondly why almost all the contributors are male.

John Matthews seems to have turned himself into a one-man Arthur industry. His *The Unknown Arthur* is a beautifully presented and illustrated gift book which recounts several obscure and almost forgotten Arthurian legends. Unfortunately these stories suffer from what a literary friend of mine describes as 'forgotten classic syndrome', which can be summed up as, 'The reason that many so-called "neglected classics" have been forgotten for years by readers and critics is that they're not actually very good'.

The pick of the bunch is Matthews' *Arthur and the Grail Quest*, which brings together a wide range of material and illustrations relating to the Grail legend from Celtic times to the present. As well as looking at mainstream texts, it includes various obscure and fascinating items of information. Did you know that apparently the Nazis searched for the Holy Grail along with other occult artefacts? Maybe *Raiders of the Lost Ark* wasn't so far from the truth after all.

— Chris Willis

No credit

Frank Joseph, *Atlantis in Wisconsin* (Galde Press/Gazelle, £11.50)

Uncertainty and guesswork pervade archaeology: it comes with the turf. The remains of ancient civilisations rarely have labels and signposts, and the scientist perforce becomes a sleuth. An obsession with the minutiae of the daily grind in ancient times can be a great motivating force, which when combined with scientific objectivity can lead to fascinating and illuminating insights. Or throw out the objectivity and it can lead to this type of book.

The author of this book is a man obsessed with one archaeological site; a lake in Wisconsin, complete with nearby copper mine, assorted stone temples, an island, enigmatic rock carvings, and some provocative (to him) underwater rock piles. The first few chapters are remarkably restrained, limited to a fairly standard form of archaeological musing, such as 'who could have produced such advanced mining technology?' etcetera, etcetera. But alas, from this point on, the whole thing totally degenerates.

According to Frank Joseph, Atlantis is the likely source of all ancient European metallurgy. He believes that the canny Atlanteans staked a claim on the American sub-

continent, thereby cornering the European copper market right throughout the bronze age (despite the book title, he makes no claim that Wisconsin itself is Atlantis). Not yet content, Frank then attempts to prove his theory by enlisting the aid of some compelling scientific evidence from such cornerstones of science as pyramids, stone circles, the Loch Ness monster, astrological signs, satanists, spirit guides, channelled ancients, telepathy, resonant energies, no less than three mediums, and oh, so much more. It's a triumph of belief over reason.

I like to give credit where credit is due; none is.

— Nick Kim

Anything but impartial

Andrew Boyd (Foreword by David Alton MP), *Dangerous Obsessions: Teenagers and the Occult* (Marshall Pickering, £7.99)

According to this book's foreword:

It is high time our government and society faced up to the dangers which the occult poses to the spiritual and moral health of this country.

Dangerous Obsessions warns that dabbling in activities such as astrology, ouija, the New Age and rock music is not just religiously wrong, but leads to crime and anti-social behaviour. 'Roger', for example, practised the occult via Gothic music and horror films, leading to drug abuse and joining 'The Black Alchemists' who 'would cut their bodies and drink their blood as an integral part of their magic rituals' (p214).

Ultimately, occult practitioners can defend themselves and I shall not enter into any such discourse here. However, as the case of 'Roger' shows, absolutely no verifiable details – not even 'Roger's' correct name – are presented. The book's main flaw is not its lack of corroboration but a discreditable massaging of contradictory evidence. Chapter 9 is devoted to the old chestnut of ritual abuse and says: 'a UK Health Department inquiry found evidence of "three substantial cases of ritual abuse."' (p147). The report actually says: 'Three substantiated cases of ritual, not satanic, abuse, were found' (my emphasis) and emphasises that the rituals were secondary to the abuse, that is, not for any religious objective (J S La Fontaine, *The Extent and Nature of Organised and Ritual Abuse. Research Findings*, HMSO, 1994, p30). Thus the abuse caused the occult-like ritual and not the other way round, which is the book's central contention.

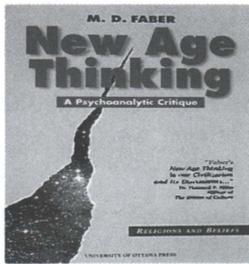
Dangerous Obsessions closes with a survey of children's attitudes towards the supernatural. For example, 'over a third play Dungeons and Dragons, one in eight listen to heavy metal music daily, 88% have watched 'occult movies' and 87% said they watched 'video nasties' (p238). Nowhere are we told what an occult movie or video nasty actually is, but even if there was a causal connection to crime then the same children would be disproportionately offending more. Evidently Mr Boyd decided not to check this out.

Sadly, I fear many will read *Dangerous Obsessions* and believe its self-presentation as an impartial investigation, when it is anything but.

— Peter Ward

Regression lesson

M D Faber, *New Age Thinking: A Psychoanalytic Critique*
University of Ottawa Press, \$29)



'*The Kettle: A Critique by the Pot*', you may be thinking – but you would be wrong. Faber writes with insight and humour about a wide range of New Age fads and fancies: crystal healing, shamanism, channelling, Goddess worship, Wiccanism, and so on. And in doing so, offers an intriguing analysis of the motiva-

tional roots of the beliefs which underpin such activities.

His use of psychoanalysis and its terminology is deft and clear-headed, drawing mainly on the work of Mahler, Stern and Bollas. His agenda is clearly set out in the introduction, in which he offers a definition of New Age thinking as (in psychoanalytic terms) essentially 'regressive' or 'infantile' in character, having three key features: *infantile omnipotence* (belief in one's unlimited powers), *regressive fusion* with the environment (denying the reality of separation) and *narcissistic inflation* (belief that one is magical, unique and radiates special energies or qualities).

The remainder of the book is a highly entertaining application of these key ideas to the gamut of New Age obsessions. Faber's aim is to show that New Age thinking is not simply 'an outgrowth or spin-off of the post-modern world'. He contends that, while social conditions clearly play a role in the rise of new religions and social movements, New Age-ism represents a response to essentially *timeless* human preoccupations and fears (vulnerability, separation, mortality) and that the post-modern world has not *produced* the New Age, but merely

given it a particular flavour or accent.

This case is made with wit and style. The cover's claim that the book is 'our *Civilization and its Discontents*' may be something of an exaggeration – a better comparison might be with *The Future of an Illusion* – but Freud himself would certainly have approved Faber's conclusion:

Once we *see and know* the emotional purpose which illusion serves, we can no longer come to it disingenuously, as believers. The game is up. We either go forward to face the unknown stripped of illusion and armed only with our clear perception, or we go backwards into the realm of magical behaviour and belief.

— John Gillies

Hollywood babbles on

Laurie Jacobson and Marc Wanamaker, *Hollywood Haunted: A Ghostly Tour of Filmland* (Angel City Press/Gazelle, £14.99)

Lon Chaney's ghost was regularly seen sitting at a bus stop at Hollywood and Vine; Montgomery Clift haunts Room 928 of the Roosevelt Hotel, patting guests on their shoulders; the spectre of Howard Hughes visits his old office at the Pantages Theatre; the shadow of Clifton Webb remains at his Rexford Drive house . . .

You get the idea. If anywhere would make a perfect venue for hauntings, apparitions, chilly rooms and things that go bump in the night, it would be Tinseltown.

Jacobson and Wanamaker, in the company of a parapsychologist called Taff, have sought out the ghostly myths and legends of Hollywood, and they spin a fine yarn. The only flaw in this highly entertaining book is, alas, that the authors appear to believe every word of it.

— Les Francis

Bookwatch

Some recent books of interest to skeptics; some titles are skeptical, some pro-paranormal, some in-between. Watch for full reviews in future issues.

The Encyclopedia of the Paranormal

Gordon Stein (Editor)
Prometheus, £120

A mammoth volume offering comprehensive, skeptical, coverage of the subject. Over 50 expert contributors.

The Fortean Times Book of the Millennium

Kevin McClure
John Brown, £9.99

An insightful and witty study of the cults, fanatics, prophets and folklore that the impending millennium continues to inspire.

The Prehistory of the Mind

Steven Mithen
Thames and Hudson, £16.95

An ambitious attempt to fathom the evolutionary origins of art, religion and science.

Behind the Crystal Ball

Anthony Aveni
Newleaf, £20

A learned, but readable, historical investigation of the nature of magic and science, and how our beliefs affect our perceptions of reality, and vice versa.

Ghosts

R C Fincane
Prometheus, £12.50

A skeptical historian explores reports of ghosts and hauntings throughout the ages, and concludes that rather than being 'out there', the reality of the ghost experience is very much within ourselves.

In Search of the Light

Susan Blackmore
Prometheus, £14.50

In an updated second edition of her 1986 *Adventures of a Parapsychologist*, Susan Blackmore describes her journey from ardent believer to skeptic.

The Extraordinary Story of Life on Earth

Piero and Alberto Angela
Prometheus, £24.50

Four billion years of the Earth's history are condensed into one year as the authors chart the evolution of life.

Complementary Medicine: An Objective Appraisal

Edzard Ernst (Editor)
Butterworth-Heinemann, £16.99

Aimed at professionals, ten papers critiquing aspects of complementary medicine.

Letters



Devil dealers

A local second-hand Car Dealer has the Ceefax page number 666.

Are they trying to tell us something?

**Wayne Parker
Pontypool**

Swans and mirages

Stueart Campbell (Letters, *The Skeptic*, 10.3) denies that Kenneth Arnold reported objects travelling at 'incredible speeds'. That is a direct quote from the initial AP news story and the fact that it was based on erroneous calculations and assumptions does not erase the fact that it was so reported.

Campbell implies I claimed that Arnold's drawing (he made one with two views) 'exactly' resembled the Flying Flapjack when I correctly only claimed a significant resemblance.

He says swans 'do not fly so high' as Arnold's objects. I refer him to Gordon C Aymar's *Bird Flight* (Dodd, Mead, 1936, p51) for an authority who states that swans do climb 'exceptionally to as much as 10,000 feet, the turbulence there being much less than at lower altitudes'. Other bird texts indicate such exceptional altitudes occur in mountainous regions.

It is ironic that Campbell would say it is ludicrous that an experienced pilot could not identify swans, yet his analysis has Arnold not only unable to identify mirages, but has him mistake Mount Rainier and Mount Adams for peaks only half as large. Swans tend to have nocturnal flying habits and even experienced birders rarely see them on the wing. There is no reason to think pilots would have so frequent encounters with them that they recognized them under all circumstances. Their differences from geese, their unexpectedness at such an altitude, and the shallow viewing angle would all contribute

to an honest puzzlement on Arnold's part.

My review of Campbell's book he briefly mentions appeared in the July 1995 *MUFON UFO Journal*. Readers can judge for themselves whether Campbell's claim of surprise at my rejection of his ideas is credible. The last line of his letter is simply precious.

**Martin S Kottmeyer
Carlyle, Illinois, USA**

What's the target?

I've been reading and subscribing to both *Skeptical Inquirer* and *The Skeptic* for many many years. But now I'm kind of tired.

I mean how many debunkings of UFOs or the Shroud of Turin can you stand? Over the years, reading *Skeptical Inquirer* et al, I've a growing suspicion that I'm seeing a new religion coming to life: THE SKEPTICS.

They worship 'common sense', and are devoted to fighting superstitions. But, mind you, they don't attack the other churches like the Catholics, Islam, and the rest. No, they let people have their big delusions, but prefer to attack the small ones.

If people in Ethiopia practice clitoridectomy, the 'skeptics' don't mention it. They write about crop circles instead.

**Jim Josefsson
Sweden**

Mr Josefsson raises an important issue: just what fields of human activity should 'skeptics' concern themselves with? We'd welcome readers' thoughts on this question - The Editors.

Job seekers beware

Have you ever considered investigating the extensive and growing use of Psychometric Tests in job selection?

I remain extremely sceptical about these tests - both the tests

themselves and the oft-time amateur status of the people using them. Am I being paranoid or is there a real cause for concern?

**Gilian Sathanandan
Shrewsbury**

Pathological science

As a footnote to the article about the supposed health risks of exposure to electromagnetic fields ('The Media and the Pylon Scare', *The Skeptic*, 10.3), on 31 October *Time Magazine Online* reported that a two-year evaluation of around 500 studies conducted since 1979 found no evidence whatever of any cancer, reproductive or developmental abnormalities that could be linked to power lines.

However, it also notes that Congress has ordered a five-year, \$65 million study of the health effects of EMF by four government laboratories. According to Christina Hoff Sommers ('Pathological Social Science', in *The Flight from Science and Reason*, NY Academy of Sciences, 1996), Professor of Philosophy at Clark University, people did not start to take this 'threat' seriously until a three-part article by Paul Brodeur appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1989.

Dealing with the 'threat' now costs the US more than \$1 billion a year. This is pathological science: the costly and fruitless search for non-existent phenomena. Usually the flaws are quickly exposed and interest wanes, but in cases like this, when public fears are constantly being fed, scotching the myth is a lot more difficult.

**Michael Allaby
Wadebridge, Cornwall**

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