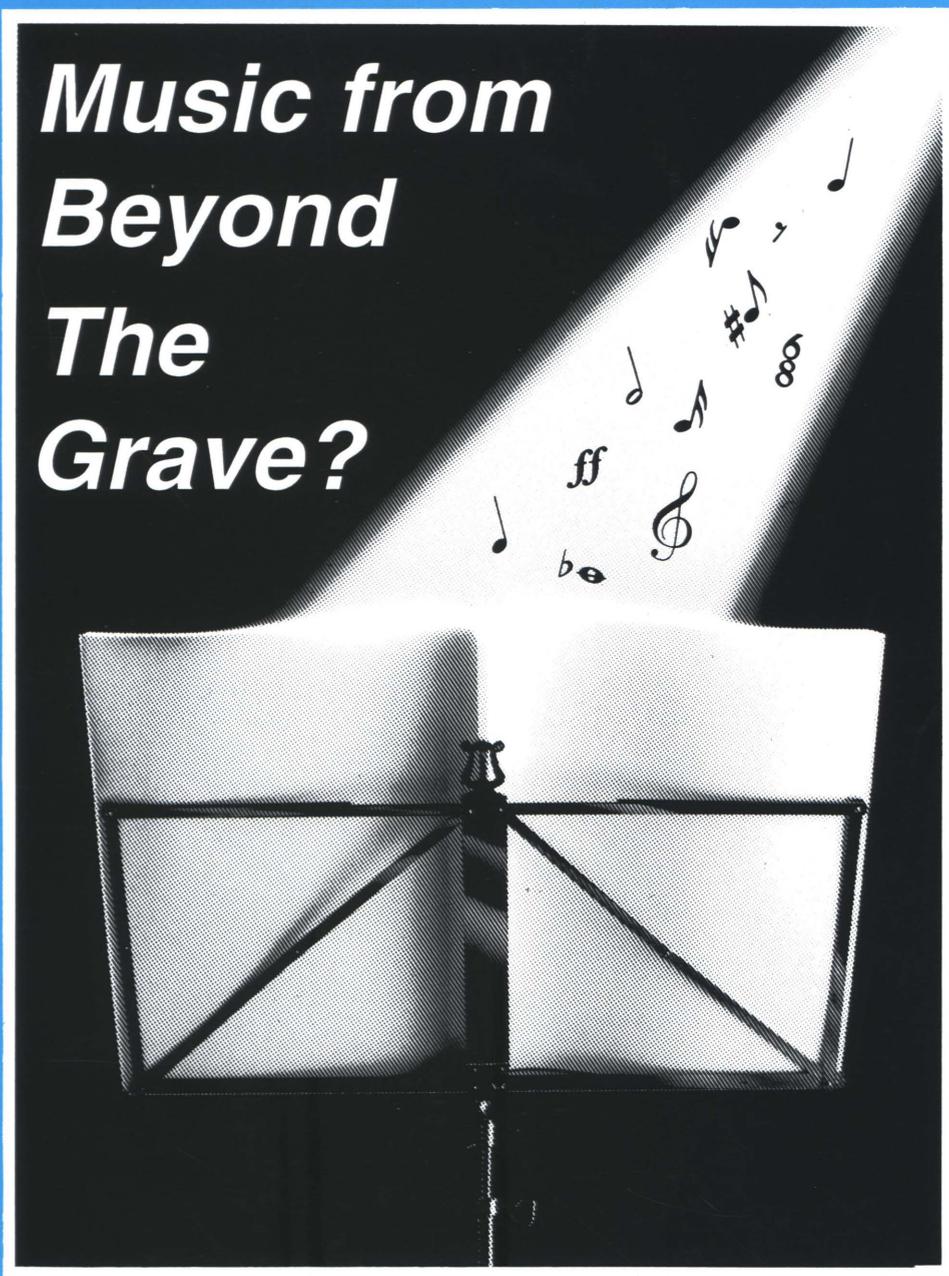


The

Volume 10 Numbers 5 & 6

Skeptic

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Beyond
The
Grave?*



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Hilary Evans' *Paranormal Picture Gallery*

Christmas is a traditional time for telling ghost stories, so here are two: one indoor and one outdoor, one seemingly pointless and one very much to the point. But both took place in everyday circumstances, no clanking chains or eerie surroundings. And both were unexplained . . .



ONE DAY IN 1884, Kathleen Leigh-Hunt was following a housemaid up the staircase of the house in Hyde Park Place, London, where she was staying; but when the girl reached the landing, she abruptly vanished.

Her hosts could not identify the servant and had no explanation: the recently-founded Society for Psychical Research was informed, but they too could offer no reason why the apparition should manifest to a complete stranger in this way. The episode seemed entirely pointless.

For the second ghost story, turn to the inside back cover.

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

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Editorial

'A double blessing is a double grace' says Laertes, clear evidence that Shakespeare was blessed with precognitive powers.

Never mind the endless arguments about Shakespeare being the historical man from Stratford, or a *nom-de-plume* of Edward de Vere, Francis Bacon or Commander Zarg from the Fifth Quadrant. We can exclusively reveal for the first time that the Bard, in this one line from *Hamlet*, has seen across four centuries, and foretold the first ever double issue of *The Skeptic*. And please note that this is a genuine *double* issue – count the pages and you will find exactly twice our usual number.

Christmas is a good time to catch up on your reading, so we hope you will be doubly delighted to settle down in your favourite armchair with your favourite magazine and enjoy the special features from contributors old and new.

This issue, by the way, marks the end of *The Skeptic's* tenth year of production – we intend to celebrate our tenth birthday with the next issue and have plans to generate some media coverage which we hope will swell our circulation and get us more widely read.

Our continuing ability to produce *The Skeptic* for the next decade will depend (as it has depended up to now) on *your* support – we rely not only on your subscriptions to the magazine but also on your contributions of clippings, letters and articles (and even, sometimes, money). We'd like to take this opportunity to thank you, once again, for your invaluable support over the last ten years. And as the Bard wrote: *At Christmas I no more desire a rose, than a Skeptic-free zone*. Or something like that. Happy Xmas to you all.

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We welcome contributions. Please enclose a SAE.



Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

Dropped from the skies

As any UFOlogist will tell you, there are more things in our heavens than are dreamt of by air-traffic controllers, but unfortunately (and with the exception of the debris and alien bodies left in Roswell, New Mexico) little tangible evidence of all these alien craft is generally left behind. *Skeptic* readers will be pleased to learn that this has now changed. According to a report in the *Evening Standard* on 26 September a 25 lb object fell out of the skies and crashed into a car park in Selsdon near Croydon just missing electrician David Cooney and leaving a small crater in the tarmac. The object was a sheet of metal. Sources close to the Department of Transport – who have launched an investigation into the incident – reveal that the police would like to interview the pilot of any (now roofless) potting shed that was flying in the area at the time.



Tim Pearce

Make a fast buck

Would you like to make a (relatively) easy £100,000? All you need to do is take out an insurance policy costing £100 annually and get yourself abducted by aliens. Unlike most other types of insurance policy, which will not pay out if you conspire in the event against which you are insured, apparently even volunteer abductees will be able to claim the money. According to articles in the *Daily Mail* and the *Independent* on 24 August, Goodfellow

Rebecca Ingrams Pearson devised the policy following recent revelations about the possibility of life on Mars (although I must say that abduction by microscopic worms boggles the mind even more than the usual alien abduction story). You can also double your money as the company will pay £200,000 to anyone 'deemed by independent assessment to have been impregnated by an alien'.

Sex, drugs and . . . religion

Sometimes interesting clippings, for reasons of space, don't get the mention they deserve in *Hits & Misses*. One such item comes from the *Daily Telegraph* on 12 February and is particularly apposite now as Christians' approach their big religious holiday. Apparently (unless your name is Salman Rushdie), religion is good for your health – and I'm not just referring to spiritual health. A study of 4000 people in North Carolina suggests that older people who attend church services are less depressed and physically healthier than people who worship at home (although no comparison was made with atheists, satanists or sun worshippers). Although this could be due to God looking after those who worship him in the correct manner, a spokesman for the National Institute on Ageing claimed that this could be due in part to active religious participation reducing those health problems that result from 'substance abuse, smoking, self-destructive behaviours or unsafe sexual practices because these activities are discouraged by most religious groups'. He didn't say anything about rock-and-roll.

Mail your maker

And whilst on the subject of prayer, readers may remember an item in *Hits & Misses* earlier in the year in which I reported on a company in Arizona that offers to radio your prayers to God (for a small fee). An Israeli internet company has come up with another, non-traditional, method of communicating with the Almighty (although I have no information on which method gets through faster). The company, Virtual Jerusalem, will place email messages to God in Jerusalem's Wailing Wall, where Jewish tradition says God picks up His mail. 'We are getting between 15 and 20 messages a day from all over the world,' says Avi Moskowitz, president of the company. According to Moskowitz, company employees do not read the email; the messages are simply printed out and stuffed into the Wall's crevices along with other handwritten messages that are traditionally left there. In fairness, I should point out that unlike Lindsay Scientific in Arizona, the service from Virtual Jerusalem is entirely free on their homepage at <http://www.virtual.co.il>.

Tears of glass

In a departure from the usual paranormal phenomenon of weeping statues – in which an inorganic, ceramic statue weeps organic blood or tears – a young girl in the Lebanon is weeping tears made of glass. According to the *Daily Mail* on October 10, the girl, Hasna Muslmani, has wept hundreds of glass tears the size of small beans over the last six months without suffering any injury. The tears appear to be covered in a viscous liquid that protects the eyeball and tear ducts. The girl has her own explanation of the tinkling tears, believing that she has been singled out by the prophet Mohammed for a special miracle. An ophthalmologist who has witnessed the phenomenon, Fadi Maalouf, described it as extraordinary: 'I do not believe that glass could form inside the eye, and it is impossible that a foreign body artificially introduced could emerge in such a way. If pressed, I would probably opt for a glandular deformity.' This is a paranormal malady that I would be personally happy to suffer if only the Good Lord would substitute diamond for glass.

Evolution of belief

Responding very rapidly, compared with their reaction to Galileo, the Vatican has finally decided that the theory of evolution, as propounded by Charles Darwin in his *Origin of Species* one hundred and thirty eight years ago, is 'more than just a hypothesis'. In a letter from Pope John Paul II to a group of scientific experts which was published in October, he said: 'the convergence of results of work done independently one from the other constitutes a significant argument in favour of this [Darwin's] theory'. However, although the Pope acknowledges that the human body may be the result of Darwinian evolution he, of course, maintains that man's spiritual soul is directly created by God and that: 'Consequently, the theories of evolution, which consider the spirit as emerging from forces of living matter or a simple epiphenomenon of matter, are incompatible with the truth about man.' To be fair to the Catholic Church (and as reported in the *Independent* on 25 October), in 1950, Pope Pius XII allowed Catholics to believe in evolution but insisted that it was not proven and that full weight should be given to arguments against it. The full acceptance may be a little overdue but it is better late than never. Christian creationists please take note.

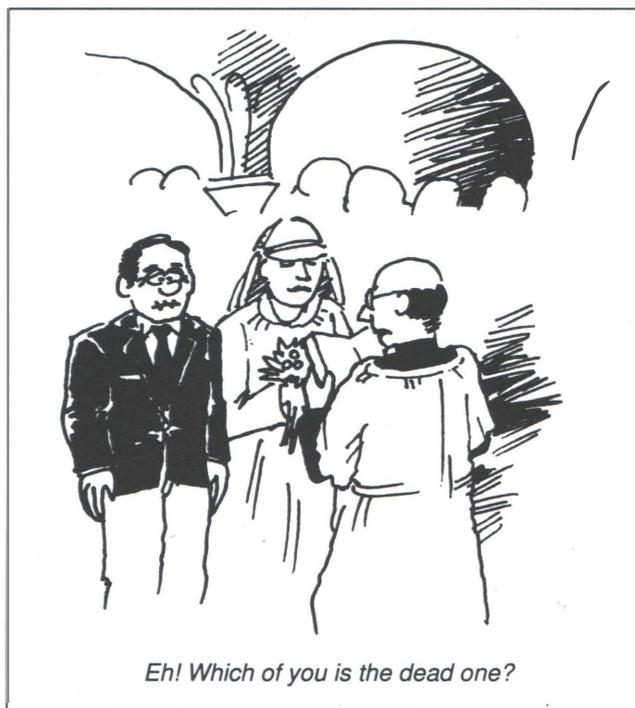
Chinese furniture arrangement

Sometimes, it is hard to believe that articles published in 'respectable' broadsheet newspapers on paranormal topics are not some kind of spoof. For instance do the pin-stripe suited *Telegraph* readers really follow the advice given in a recent series of articles on the ancient Chinese tradition of Feng-Shui? If I am to believe the article on applying Feng-Shui principles in the office, then I am some kind of walking disaster: not only do I have inauspicious vertical blinds, but I also have a desk with right-angled corners (which means I shall never be wealthy), don't have any plants to absorb electrical pollution and depression and have a window behind me which also brings some unspeakable misfortune. Still, if I'm lucky,

maybe someone will buy me a goldfish or a crystal paperweight for Christmas.

Wedding spirit

As far as I'm aware, even in California, both partners in a marriage ceremony must be alive. It, thus, came as some considerable surprise to read in an article in *The Mail on Sunday* on 1 September that, in France recently, a woman married her dead fiancé who was murdered two years ago. Thirty-seven-year-old Patricia Montenez was determined that the wedding – planned before her policeman fiancé, Claude Darcy, was gunned down in an armed raid – should be allowed to go through, for the sake of their son, Axel, who is now aged six. Postwoman Patricia, had fought hard for the right to call herself Madame Darcy in an acrimonious legal battle with her mother-in-law and had also had to obtain special permission from President Chirac before the wedding was allowed to take place. The President eventually authorized the posthumous marriage under a law passed in 1915 to help the fiancées of soldiers killed in the First World War. Normally it is not possible to marry dead people in France.



Tim Pearce

Steve Donnelly is Professor of Experimental Physics at the University of Salford.

A big thank-you, and a Merry Christmas, to all our clippings contributors, who for this issue include: Paul Blackwell, Simon Brody, Steuart Campbell, Brian Carter, Jock Cramb, Charles Dietz, Edzard Ernst, Dorothy L Forrester, Earnest Jackson, Ken Johnson, Yilmaz Magurtzey, David Martin, Patrick Marwham, Stephen Moreton, Austen Moulden, V S Petheram, Alan Remfry, Donald Rooum, Neil Rosen-Webb, Tom Ruffles, Mike Rutter, Gillian Sathanandan, Ian Saunders, Alma Simmonds, H Sivyver, Brian Slade, J Thompson Jnr, Chris Torrero, J G Watson, Chris Willis.

Koestler's Legacy

Robert L Morris

Parapsychology at the University of Edinburgh

Introduction

The noted writer and critic Arthur Koestler and his wife Cynthia provided in their wills for the establishment of an endowed Chair of Parapsychology at a British university. The declared intention was to further objective scientific research into "the capacity attributed to some individuals to interact with their environment by means other than the recognised sensory and motor channels". Following the Koestlers' deaths in 1982, their trustees advertised the post and in 1984 awarded the Chair to the University of Edinburgh. In 1985 I was fortunate enough to be invited to serve as the first occupant of the Chair, taking up the post in December of the same year. My remit was to develop a systematic and responsible research programme that would integrate this controversial area into the ongoing research and teaching activities of the university community. The editors of *The Skeptic* have invited me to describe how we have gone about our task over the last eleven years.

We have fairly limited resources. Our basic funding, from the Koestler Endowment earnings and from the Literary Estate, provides for a full-time secretary (Mrs Helen Sims) and two postdoctoral fellows, one fulltime (Dr. Deborah Delaney) and one part-time (Dr. Caroline Watt). We are located within the Department of Psychology, where I do some teaching and supervise research students at both Honours and postgraduate levels. Eight students have now completed Ph.D's under my supervision (a ninth has recently submitted his thesis), on theses related to parapsychology. We receive some additional research funding from outside institutions, for student support and for necessary equipment.

Integrative Parapsychology

In setting up a research plan, one of our main problems was to clarify just what serious parapsychology involves. Anyone can call themselves a parapsychologist, and media representations tend to put entertainment first with accuracy at best an afterthought. Thus we have developed what we call an Integrative Parapsychology, with six features:

We regard parapsychology as the study of apparent new means of communication, or interaction, between organisms and their environment (commonly referred to

as psi, or psychic ability), beyond those presently understood by the scientific community.

2. Parapsychology is an interdisciplinary problem area, not a separate discipline and not just a subset of psychology.

3. Parapsychology questions rather than presumes; our remit is to investigate a capacity attributed to some individuals and we are under no obligation to presume that capacity's existence.

4. Parapsychology incorporates the investigation of two sets of working hypotheses: the 'pseudopsi hypothesis', which states that most if not all of the evidence for psi is spurious, the result of our being misled or misinterpreting observations; and the 'psi hypothesis', which states that we do appear under certain conditions to have access to some genuinely new means of communication.

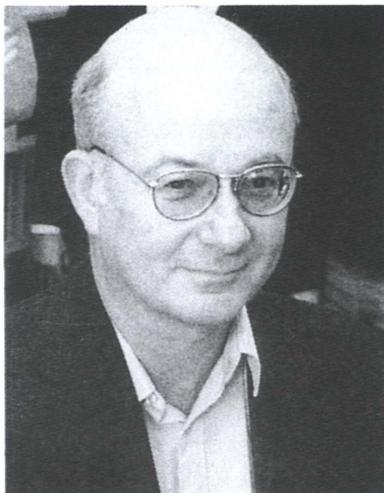
5. Parapsychology involves the study of observers drawing inferences, and can profit from the use of models of how we make observations about ostensibly psychic events, including how we can be misled by ourselves and others.

6. Parapsychology uses the tools of science, including detailed descriptions of natural occurrences, surveys, hypothesis formulation and testing, correlational studies, controlled experimental studies with systematic variation of condition, and construction of theoretical models.

What's not psychic but looks like it...

Our research has largely proceeded along two main lines. One involves the study of "what's not psychic but looks like it". Psychology has long been involved in the study of self-deception and error in human perception, memory, thinking and decision making. Within our group, Carl Williams is looking at some of the factors that lead us to attribute meaning to ambiguous information, with an eye toward eventual clinical application. Tony Lawrence is developing and testing a model of the factors involved in the formation of beliefs about psychic phenomena, as we are growing up and as adults as well. Both now have full time lectureships, at Liverpool Hope University College and Coventry University, respectively. Simon Sherwood is studying the effects of anomalous sleep experiences upon the formation and maintenance of belief





Professor Robert Morris

as strategies for presenting information to observers. Richard Wiseman (currently at the University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield Campus) has studied the effects of observers' attitudes toward psi upon their ability to reconstruct the details of fraudulent psychic demonstrations shown to them on videotape, finding that those with positive attitudes were less likely to notice details related to how the trick was done. It's important as well to understand the psychological strategies of the confidence artist and the techniques by which psychic claimants attempt to negotiate the rules by which their claims will be accepted or rejected. Our work in these areas is currently best represented in a little book recently co-authored by Dr Wiseman and myself, *Guidelines for Testing Psychic Claimants*. It includes a description of the strategies pseudopsychics can use to produce even complex patterns of results in their data fraudulently. Of additional interest are the strategies by which fake psychic researchers persuade clients that they know all about the clients through psychic means. Chris Roe has specialised in this area, particularly in the verbal strategies often used. Together we are gradually working toward the development of a general model of deception, including the social context of such deceptive acts. We hope this line of research will be beneficial directly to parapsychological research as well as cognitive and clinical psychology and other disciplines where deception may be involved.

Assessing new means of communication

Our second main line of research involves assessment of the evidence for genuine new means of communication, including the development of better descriptive tools for exploring daily life experiences as well as experimental tools for producing psychic effects with sufficient strength and consistency that they can contribute to systematic research programmes to develop and test models of how psychic functioning, if it exists, actually works.

Some of this work involves a mix of questionnaire and interviews. Shari Cohn has used both to explore 'second sight' experiences within family units, analysing the material both quantitatively and qualitatively to look for patterns in the nature of the experiences themselves, family relationships and other salient factors. Carlos Alvarado is also using both techniques to look for pat-

systems, extending Lawrence's work.' Additionally we have become quite involved in the psychology of conjuring and deliberate deception, drawing both on an integration of the relatively obscure writings of professional magicians and fraudsters and on experimental studies. This research involves surveys of the techniques for both physical and mental effects, as well

terms in a specific kind of transpersonal experience known as an out-of-body experience, closely related to near-death experiences. Such research has been an under-represented component of formal parapsychology and can contribute a great deal to understanding the richness of the experiences involved, as well as in the development and testing of models about their nature. Frans Snel is studying the interactions among alternative health practitioners and their clients. Miriam Moss is studying the styles people use in describing the experiences that have happened to them.'

Naturalistic settings

Other research may involve bringing systematic investigation tools into naturalistic settings, to overcome the problems of ecological validity frequently associated with controlled, laboratory-based research with living organisms. We have done very little in this area, other than to explore ways of sealing off target materials that can then be turned over to individuals for exploratory work in non-laboratory settings. One study by Dr. Wiseman and Dr. John Beloff with an individual claimant produced chance results; another by Drs. Delanoy, Watt, Wiseman and myself with several individuals previously successful in the lab produced positive results. We will be pursuing this area, always in consultation with magicians, as part of our effort to conduct at least some of our research in more natural settings.

Laboratory studies – extrasensory perception

Most of our effort in this area has gone towards experimental studies of deliberate attempts to produce psychic effects in our own research facilities within the Psychology Department, emphasising procedures that have had a good track record with several other researchers. One line of research follows a noise reduction model for ESP studies and uses a mild sensory reduction technique known as the ganzfeld procedure, plus progressive relaxation, asking relaxed participants in a shielded room to produce mental impressions about the content of short film clips being displayed several rooms away. The procedure is automated and includes security features to guard against fraud by researchers as well as participants. Our results with this procedure are very encouraging, with effect sizes similar to those obtained elsewhere by researchers with less well safeguarded facilities, and our research with this technique continues. Several researchers have been involved with this work, including Kathy Dalton, Deborah Delanoy, Caroline Watt and final year undergraduate students in addition to myself.

Another line of research by Caroline Watt involves looking at individual differences in perceptual defensiveness and vigilance, following up on research done in several other countries indicating that people who score as defensive on a defense mechanism test do more poorly on controlled ESP tests. She has found similar results using a more objective procedure to assess perceptual defensiveness and vigilance, with vigilant people scoring better. This is consistent with the notion that for some people the information may be more distorted in the course of processing, although the finding may have other interpretations as well.

A third line of research has explored techniques purported to train or enhance psychic ability. This line of

research, largely conducted by Dr. Delanoy, Dr. Watt, Dr. Loftur Gissurarson and myself has presently produced only mixed results at best, and has in part contributed to the falsification of certain claims for psychic development techniques.

Psychokinesis

A fourth line of research involves attempts to influence through mental activity, e.g. intentions, the behaviour of electronic equipment such as random number generators based on a source of noise. Such research may seem inherently extremely implausible, as surely we would know it by now if we had any such ability. Nevertheless, low level but consistent effects have been produced in a variety of other laboratories. Our own results have produced at best extremely weak results, although there has been a tendency for the results to be stronger with those having more positive attitudes toward the possibility and those who feel they have had spontaneous experiences suggesting such effects. This research has been conducted largely by Dr Konrad Morgan, Dr Gissurarson and Paul Stevens, in addition to final year undergraduate students. We regard the work as contributing to the falsification of some hypotheses regarding the linkage between operator attitude and equipment failure. This work is being conducted in part as a joint project with researchers at the Institut für Grenzgebiet der Psychologie und Psychohygiene, exploring models of volitional strategies and their application to parapsychological research.

Interaction with living systems

A fifth line of research involves attempts by an active agent to influence the body physiology of a receiver several rooms away. One version of this involves exploring the idea of remote staring effects, through the use of closed circuit video. Although we are encouraged by some exploratory studies, this line of research is still in its preliminary stages. It is being conducted largely by Dr. Delanoy and Zachary McDermott.

History of parapsychology

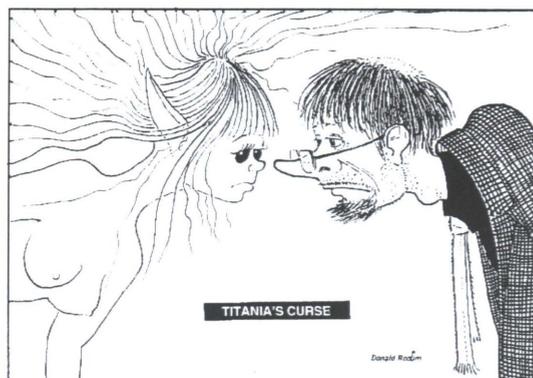
A final area of research involves the history and social context of criticism in parapsychology, conducted by Nancy Zingrone, and a set of surveys of methodological problems and issues by Dr. Julie Milton.

Concluding remarks

In short, our research programme is still in early stages, with more progress in some areas than others. We are clearly contributing to a better understanding of how we can be misled, both by ourselves and others, and we appear as well to be identifying certain areas where genuine psychic effects may be more readily manifest under conditions that will allow us to explore them more systematically. We are attempting to apply the tools of science to an extremely complex set of human experiences and their interpretation and we are acutely aware that we must avoid both the false positive error of claiming something is there when in fact it is not, as well as the false negative error of declaring something is not there when in fact it is. Both errors are bad science.

Professor Robert L Morris occupies the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology at Edinburgh University.

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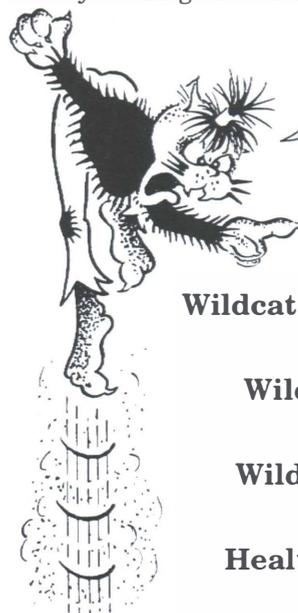
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Thanks a bundle, Erich . . .

David Longhorn

The making of a skeptic

Why am I a skeptic? Why do I subscribe to *The Skeptic* and its American auntie, *Skeptical Inquirer*? Well, let me tell you a story.

Long, long ago, so long ago that people actually thought flared trousers were a really neat idea, a twelve year old who was into science fiction came across a book. It was a very popular book, with a nice cover and a riveting title. It was – as the title of this article has probably told you – *Chariots of the Gods*, by the well known Swiss hotelier and convicted embezzler, Erich von Daniken.

Well, I was just a kid. I thought that books fell into two categories. There were stories, like those of C S Lewis, H G Wells and the like. And then there were 'hard' books, the sort that were purely factual. *Chariots of the Gods* was obviously not a story – not with all those rather boring photographs, not with that big bibliography at the end – so it was clearly a *proper* book. (Like I say, I was just a kid.) I devoured *Chariots* and about half a dozen others of its kind, most of them by von Daniken, but with a smattering of W Raymond Drake and Charles Berlitz. I was hooked.

Or was I? Because at the same time that I was eagerly absorbing the news that just about every ancient monument had been built by aliens, who also created poor old *homo sapiens*, I was also reading other books. I read Patrick Moore and Arthur C Clarke 'science popularisations for young persons', for instance. And these were creating interference patterns in my head, as it was obvious that the ancient astronaut brigade were going wrong. They couldn't tell the difference between galaxies and solar systems, they seemed rather vague on what a light year was, and so on.

I began to wonder what was going on. If Erich and company didn't know the rudiments of astronomy, things even a spotty kid from Sunderland could understand, how could they talk with such confidence about ancient astronauts? Surely (I half-reasoned) people aren't allowed to public factual books that are full of mistakes? I even had vague images of Erich, his emulators, and all their publishers in the dock of the Old Bailey. Alright, I was a *really* naive kid. I believed that you weren't allowed to publish lies and claim they were true.

Eventually, of course, my great dilemma – who to believe – was solved. I hit puberty, became cynical, read

Ronald Storey's *The Space Gods Revealed* and other debunking books, and realised that Erich von Daniken's writings were tissues of tosh. I went on to read and enjoy such little masterpieces as Lawrence Kusche's *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery: Solved* and Ronald Binns' similarly-titled work on Nessie. Uri Geller I found simply laughable; Doris Stokes and her kind psychics likewise. Today, if someone tells me about crystal healing or psychic channelling, I am unimpressed (but always – I hope – polite).

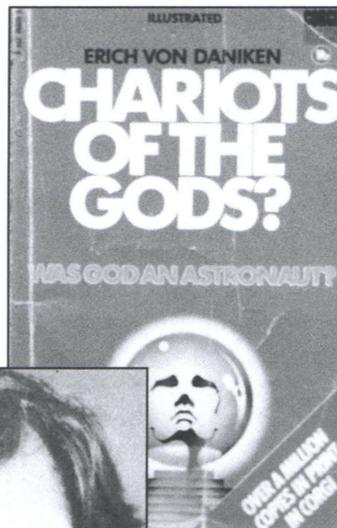
And it's all thanks to Erich von Daniken, whose ideas

might be seen to have acted as a kind of inoculation – I suffered a brief infection, a fever of the intellect, but was rendered immune to much worse diseases. Or was it so simple? After all, lots of people bought von Daniken's stuff, and of them a fair proportion must have realised they were being had. So why are comparatively few folk moved to become paid-up skeptics?

In my case it can probably be attributed to emotion. I was roundly cheated at a very impressionable age, and when I realised I felt understandably hurt and humiliated. So without really making a conscious decision I threw in my lot with 'the other side' i.e. intelligent people who hadn't written screeds of crud just to get their grubby hands on my pocket money. I suspect that others could tell a similar story.

Is there a serious point in all this? Well, maybe. We skeptics portray ourselves as rational, level-headed folk who are weary of being bombarded with erroneous data, and concerned with the harm to society that might result if charlatany is allowed to spread unchecked. To which I reply, 'Well, yes, but...' Surely there's an element of good old, unreconstructed anger in skepticism? Aren't all people emotional creatures first, and reasoning creatures second? So come on, you emotional skeptics – come out of the closet. I've shown you my youthful trauma – now show me yours!

David Longhorn is a local government officer from the North East of England.



Psychic Con-men

Richard Wiseman and Emma Greening

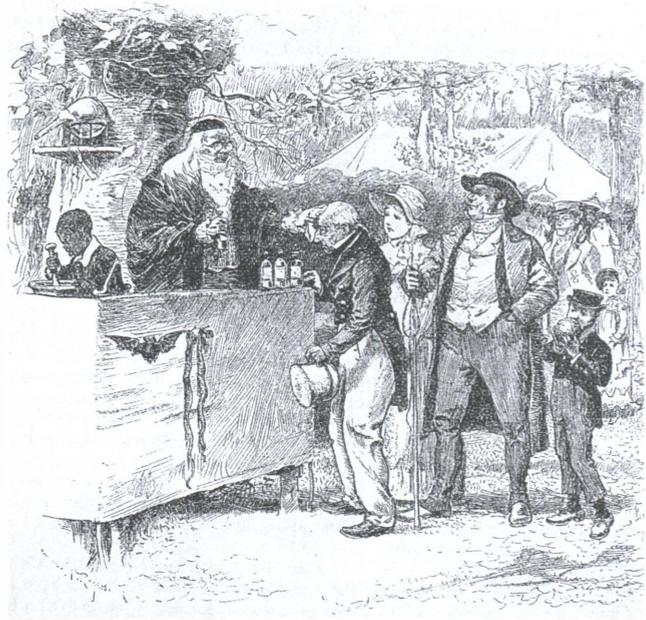
*Making a fortune from telling fortunes:
investigating exploitative 'psychics' in London*

A few months ago we were approached by Carlton Television's *The Investigators* programme, and asked whether we could help make an investigative documentary about exploitative 'psychics'. The project sounded interesting and we agreed to be involved. After several meetings with the programme makers we decided to help set-up an undercover 'sting' operation. Basically we would send two actresses to several alleged psychics. Each actress would say that she had recently experienced a great deal of bad luck in her life (including, for example, family bereavements, problems at work and with boyfriends) and were eager for some 'psychic' help. The psychics would be unaware that these problems were completely fictitious and, perhaps more importantly, that the actresses were fitted with hidden cameras which filmed each of the consultations.

We chose five London based psychics from adverts in various newspapers (e.g., *Eastern Eye*, *Ms London*), focusing on those that claimed to be able to remove curses. We thought that one or two might try to exploit their seemingly vulnerable clients – however nothing had prepared us for what we were about to encounter.

First up was Psychic A, who operates from a cosmetics and hair products shop in Hackney. The actress claimed that she had just split up with her boyfriend. Psychic A assured her that he could help and went on to recommend that the actress buy some white underwear and return in a couple of days for a herbal bath. This would 'loosen her up' and bring her boyfriend back to her. The cost of this 'treatment' would be £450. After the consultation, the actress remarked that she had felt very unsettled by the implicitly sexual nature of certain comments made by Psychic A.

The same actress then visited Psychic B in Camberwell. This time the actress claimed that she had always had a difficult relationship with her sister, and that matters had recently been made worse by the death of their mother. Psychic B informed the actress that her sister was jealous of her, was trying to drive her boyfriend away, and 'doesn't care how far she goes to destroy your future'. Psychic B had a solution to this problem. If her client burnt five candles, at £150 each, then her sister 'will in the end give you the things that belong to you and let you lead your own life . . .'. Psychic B also stressed that her client must not tell anybody about the consultation, noting 'Because if you do say something about it then the work that we will have to do is just going to be for no reason, it's just going to collapse in front of us, and you will not have anyone else to help you through this'.



Mary Evans Picture Library

Our actress next consulted with Psychic C in Ilford. He told his client that her bad luck was due to her planets being misaligned, that only he could realign them. However, when he had finished his work her spell of misfortune would end and that ' . . . your purpose of coming here will be fulfilled. You will have future children, and be able to meet your mother, your health is not good, that will be okay. Your future will be okay'. Psychic C then informed his client that this service would cost her £630.

Our second actress was first sent to Psychic D, and asked to say that she had been experiencing a great many problems with both her boyfriend and sister. Psychic D said that she should be able to get her boyfriend back because 'he is destined in your life lines, which means he was supposed to be with you all the time'. She then went on to talk about the problem of the sister, noting 'she wants your life to be empty and desolate. She wants your life to be worth nothing. Your hopes and dreams must be shattered, for you to be like a beggar on the street . . .'. Psychic D then told her client the bad news - her sister had been to a 'spiritual worker' (i.e., another psychic) and had a curse put on her. Next came the good news - Psychic D thought that she might be able to lift this curse by lighting various candles, and that this would cost around £900.

Finally, we sent our second actress to see Psychic E, and asked her to tell him the story of her errant boyfriend. Psychic E said that the boyfriend could be brought back by using a number of different creams and lotions. These were available for £450.

Although the psychics operated from different locations, there were a number of common themes running through their consultations. First, none of them offered any form of mainstream counselling, or even suggested that their obviously distressed client (during three of the consultations the actresses feigned tears) seek out professional help. Second, several of the psychics were eager to convince their client that her run of bad luck was due to a curse had been put on her by a seemingly close friend or family member. Third, many of them tried to distance the client from any possible social support, often asking her not to mention the consultation to friends or family. Fourth, and perhaps most worrying of all, each and every psychic suggested that they alone could solve the client's problem, and asked between four hundred and fifty and nine hundred pounds for their services.

For many people, the adverts in newspapers and magazines appear to offer quick and easy solutions to their personal problems. However, the psychics that we investigated only exploited the vulnerable and offered services that were more likely to confound, than to assist, clients' difficulties. We were appalled at the way in which all five 'psychics' were prepared to act in such an unethical way, and appeared to be more concerned with emptying wallets than giving comfort to apparently distressed people. One could perhaps argue that such behaviour might be excusable if these people really are psychic. However, our project inadvertently resulted in some data strongly suggesting that this is not the case. Not one of the five 'psychics' was able to use their 'supernatural' powers to detect that their clients were actresses, or that they were being secretly filmed for a television programme that intended to expose their shoddy behaviour!

Dr Richard Wiseman heads the Perrott-Warrick Research Unit at the University of Hertfordshire. Emma Greening has recently joined the unit and is involved in various research projects.

The Skeptic's Dictionary

Robert Todd Carroll

The Cardiff Giant

Alleged to be the fossilized remains of an antediluvian giant of some ten feet high with 21 inch feet, but actually a carved slab of gypsum sculpted a year or two before its "discovery" in 1869. The fake fossil was the idea of George Hull, a cigar manufacturer and atheist, and a distant relation Stubb Newell, who owned the farm in Cardiff, New York, where the hoax was perpetrated. Experts almost immediately suspected the "fossil" was not a fossil, but rather than deter visitors to the farm (who shelled out 50 cents each to see the "Goliath") they came in the hundreds per day to remote upstate New York for a view of Biblical history. Some were soon saying the giant lived in Biblical days and was proof of the Bible's accuracy about giants such as Goliath.

Newell had built a tent over the site and was charging admission. Furthermore, within a week of its discovery, he sold three-fourths of his interest in the Giant to a syndicate in Syracuse, New York, for \$30,000. Business was so good that P.T. Barnum wanted to get in on the action. He offered to rent the giant for just three months to take on the road with his circus, but Newell and the syndicate wouldn't deal. So Barnum had a duplicate made and charged people to see a fake of the fake. It is said that when both were displayed in New York City at the same time, Barnum's fake of the fake outdrew the real fake! [Feder, p. 36]

Kenneth Feder, in his book on myths and frauds in archaeology, sees the Giant episode as a familiar one:

Trained observers such as professional scientists had viewed the Giant and pronounced it be an impossibility, a statue, a clumsy fraud, and just plain silly. Such objective, rational, logical, and scientific conclusions, however, had little impact. A chord had been struck in the hearts and minds of many otherwise levelheaded people, and little could dissuade them from believing in the truth of the Giant. Their acceptance of the validity of the giant was based on their desire...to believe it. [Feder, p. 37]

Amen. We have seen the same pattern in case after case. And while we should admire the skepticism toward experts of believers in occult, supernatural or paranormal phenomena, we must note that this skepticism is often not rooted in a desire to believe only what the evidence supports, but in a desire to believe what one wants to believe regardless of the evidence.

Further Reading

Feder, Kenneth L. *Frauds, Mysteries and Myths*, ch. 3, (Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1990).

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/>.

The Santa Conspiracy

Steve Donnelly

Beware of fat, bearded men bearing gifts . . .

Consider the following facts: in countries all over the world, a character known variously as Santa Claus, Father Christmas, Saint Nicholas or translations of these terms into other languages is a part of national culture and comes to particular prominence at this time of the year. The Nicholas figure can be traced as far back as the 4th century where a bishop of that name in Asia Minor was associated with bizarre, inexplicable occurrences. The precise form of the Santa myth varies from culture to culture but running through all the modern versions is the notion of a portly, red-clad figure whose role is to reward, with material goods, those children who have been well-behaved during the preceding twelve months. In the British and North American tradition, the Santa character visits children's homes on the evening and night of the 24th December by means of a mysterious flying vehicle, landing and taking off from roofs and flying through the air silently, using no known means of levitation or propulsion. In the weeks preceding Christmas, it is common all over Europe and North America to see figures in Santa Claus or Saint Nicholas garb in town centres, in department stores and, on occasion, calling door-to-door in suburban areas. In most cases, the Santas wear white beards (presumably false) that hide their true features. They are generally seen in the close company of small children.

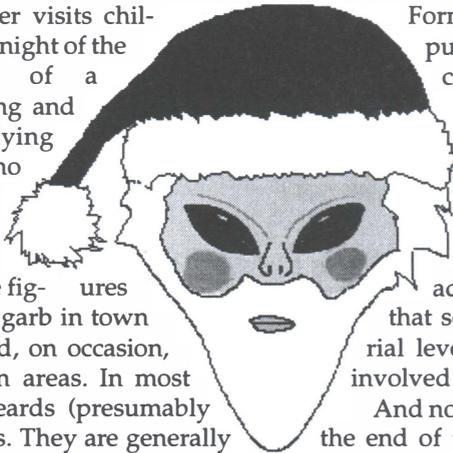
Thus far, the facts are indisputable but let us now consider some of the implications. Firstly, it is inconceivable that a myth that runs so strongly through so many cultures should not have some basis in fact. For example, anecdotal reports of little-understood phenomena such as ghosts, angel-like figures and (with some relevance to the Santa mystery) unidentified flying objects (UFOs), to name but three, are similarly common to many cultures. Although there is not yet an all-encompassing explanation of any of these, there is, nonetheless, a wide public acceptance that they represent some underlying reality. Despite the protestations of sceptics, scientists and others, surveys clearly demonstrate that the majority of thinking people believe in the reality of one or more of these phenomena. Similarly with the vast amount of anecdotal information behind Santa story, there must be some truth behind the mythology. *There is no smoke without fire.*

Of particular interest is Santa's flying vehicle—generally described as a sleigh pulled by reindeer. There have

been numerous reports of mysterious objects in the skies over Europe and North America in winter-time. Many of these reports of UFOs—from judges, policemen and reputable members of society—are entirely compatible with the idea of a noiseless, silent craft that uses no known means of propulsion, and *no such report has ruled out the possible association of antlered livestock with the craft.* It is well known by the UFO community that national governments are aware of these reports but have decided to keep their populations in the dark as to both the evidence and any plausible explanations. Indeed, revelations of a giant government cover-up over the subject of UFOs has been vociferously demonstrated in recent years by a number of dedicated enthusiasts in the United States.

Formerly secret documents have revealed that public figures, up to and including an American president, were involved in keeping the facts concerning a crashed alien craft from the US population. Although, as yet, no similar equivocal documentation has come to light concerning sightings of flying sleighs it is a reasonable assumption that these are included in the UFO cover-up. In addition to this, however, it is my contention that senior establishment figures up to ministerial level, in this and many other countries, are involved in a cover-up of the Santa affair in general.

And now to the most disturbing component. Since the end of the second world war, there has been an increase every year in the number of burly figures in Santa costumes who spend several weeks interviewing children in department stores all over the country. With my own eyes, I have witnessed the disturbing spectacle of an elderly, disguised male with little boys and girls on his lap *without a single social worker intervening.* The implications of this are breathtaking, as the conspiracy clearly extends from cabinet ministers down through society to encompass even the lowly social-worker. And of course, there is a constant barrage of propaganda to persuade us that these mysterious, white-bearded figures are innocuous entities whose only purpose is to entertain the children. This is a level of disinformation greater even than the planting by the government, a few summers ago, of a pair of sexagenarian intelligent agents in the fields of Wiltshire in order to convince the British public that most of the best-known crop formations were hoaxes. Those involved in crop-circle research were not taken in by this, of course—they had ample evidence from dowsing and other sources that the crop-formations were the products



of alien intelligence.

But what is the secret that is being so effectively kept from most of the world's population? Before presenting my astonishing conclusions, one more piece of the jigsaw puzzle needs to be examined and then slotted into place. Even the most cursory analysis of social trends over the last hundred years or so reveals that until approximately the end of World War II, children in most of the western world were respectful to their parents, unrebelling, generally well behaved and never used four-letter words in front of their elders. Paralleling the trend towards increasing numbers of Santas on our streets and in our stores is the change to the character of the modern child. The worthy character traits of the 50s have given way to impertinence, poor table manners, inability to discriminate good from bad and attention spans measured in milliseconds. A child of the 1950s would scarcely recognise a modern child as a member of the same species. *And this is the crux of the matter.*

I believe that the evidence allows only one possible conclusion: a large percentage of children in the western world have been abducted by burly aliens dressed in Santa Claus attire who have replaced our human offspring with alien substitutes. The network of Santas in department stores serves to gather intelligence, every winter, on the addresses of the children who will constitute that year's wave of Yuletide substitutions the abductions and replacements being carried out by means of a fleet of silent, fast flying machines. Conservative estimates indicate that by Christmas morning, the Earth's alien population may have increased by up to 1 million.

The fact that governments are aware of these terrify-

ing happenings and are actively engaged in a cover-up of mammoth proportions is a clear indication that the earliest alien substitutes have by now manoeuvred themselves into positions of power and influence so that *many of our government ministers are aliens substituted by the Santa network during the post-war years.* It is thus scarcely surprising that members of government are frequently reported in the media as being 'out of touch with the common man' and behaving as though they are 'living on another planet'.

Unhappily, I can propose no instant solution to this horrifying situation except to suggest that readers, fortunate enough to have MPs born before the 1940s, should immediately attempt to raise this matter with their elected representatives (perhaps after a cursory inspection of their little fingers). Also, in future, parents visiting Santa's grotto with their offspring could at least unsettle the aliens, without frightening the children, by sitting on Santa's lap and whispering 'We're on to you, mate' into his ear. And of course we must keep a careful watch over our children during the dangerous hours from Christmas Eve through to Christmas morning.

Finally, if you remain unconvinced by my conspiracy theory, can you explain why neither version of the film *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* can be found in your local video shop or why the book *The Midwich Cuckoos* is mysteriously absent from your town library?

And can it really be just a coincidence that 'Santa' is an anagram of 'Satan'?

Steve Donnelly is Professor of Experimental Physics at Salford University and co-editor of *The Skeptic*.

Tim Pearce



You can't abduct me now. I'm needed here!

Smart Bombs or Dumb People?

David Hambling

Are hi-tech weapons as reliable and accurate as we are told

Some subjects invite scepticism. At the first mention of spoon-bending, mind-reading or fortune-telling, our critical defences are raised at once. Equally, there are few people who would take a car salesman or a politician at face value. But sometimes otherwise intelligent people will swallow absurd claims without looking at the facts. The weakness, as usual, lies in our tendency to believe what we would like to be true. We laugh at people who want to believe they are psychic, but nobody questions our belief in modern military technology and the amazing powers of the smart bomb.

We heard a lot about smart bombs, or 'Precision Guided Munitions' (PGMs), during the Gulf War. In February 1991 there were nightly pictures of bombs and missiles hitting targets in Iraq with astounding precision. The pictures were impressive, but they were backed by little in the way of hard information. Some idea of the historical background is necessary.

A handful of guided weapons were developed in World War Two, but these needed to an operator to steer them to the target. The true Smart Bomb made its first appearance in April 1972 during the Vietnam war. The Thanh Hoa bridge had survived hundreds of American attempts to bomb it. It was finally destroyed by a force of just two F-111 bombers using Paveway laser-guided bombs. The military began to take smart bombs seriously.

Paveway and similar weapons rely on a laser designator, which projects a spot of light on to the target. A sensor in the bomb's nose detects the laser and directs the bomb in a controlled glide straight on to the illuminated spot. Early systems relied on a ground operator or another aircraft to provide the laser; modern versions have the laser mounted on a swivelling mount on the bombing aircraft itself.

The second generation were television-guided weapons such as the Walleye bomb and Maverick missile. These have a small television camera which relays a picture back to the cockpit; when the target is in the centre of the screen, the operator locks on and the bomb guides itself to the target. Advanced versions can be released from several miles away and then locked on as the bomb comes within sight of the target.

In the 80s and 90s, a third wave of intelligent weapons appeared. These have 'imaging infrared' (IIR) seekers, similar to television guidance but seeing the heat emissions of the target. IIR sees through darkness, rain or fog, and can easily pick out a tank hidden in trees by heat signature. Sometimes called 'brilliant' weapons, they are completely autonomous: when fired, they can identify

and home in on a target from several miles away without human assistance.

There are, however, a few problems.

Laser-guided weapons work well when they stay locked on, but if the weapon loses sight of the laser, which happens about half the time, they miss spectacularly. The average distance for these misses is about five miles. In conditions of rain or dust or smoke, not uncommon on the battlefield, laser designators are useless.

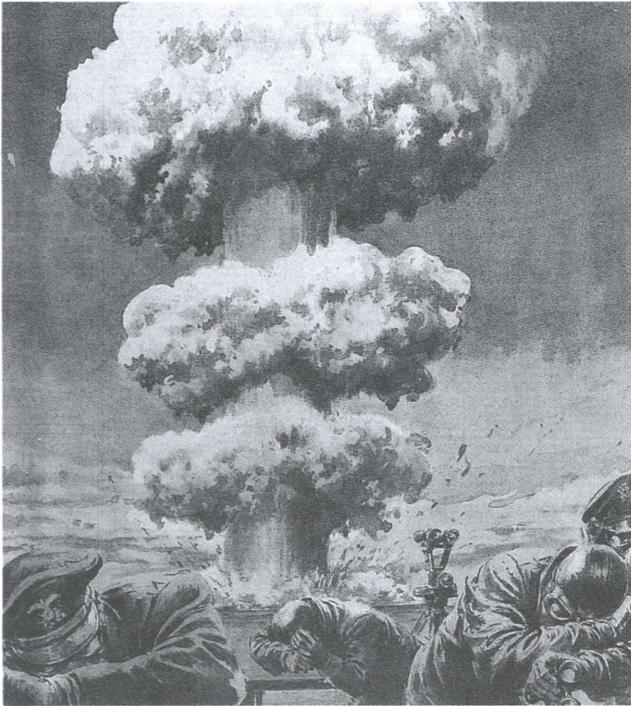
The television-guided systems have a narrow field of view – about 2.5° in the case of the Maverick. One pilot described it as 'like looking at the world through a drinking straw', making it difficult to find and identify targets. Think of a pilot in combat, flying at three hundred miles an hour at low level, watching out for anti-aircraft fire and other planes: not the ideal situation in which to be peering at a small screen trying to spot a camouflaged enemy.

Maverick was tested in the desert against tanks parked out in the open, and scored well in the tests. The conditions in Vietnam were very different, and pilots found it was hard to lock on to anything sheltered by trees, and impossible with a moving target.

Infra-red imaging devices were intended to solve these problems, but introduced a few new ones of their own. They have trouble telling the difference between the heat from a tank engine and that of a truck engine or a burning wreck. They have been known to lock on to the reflection of the sun in water. Russian tanks have decoy flare dischargers, so an incoming missile will have to choose between several heat sources. They usually pick the hottest one, which is likely to be a decoy. Worst of all, these weapons cannot tell enemy vehicles from friendly ones, which is serious problem on the fast-moving modern battlefield.



Mary Evans Picture Library



During the Gulf War, journalists were treated to daily videos of bombs hitting pinpoint targets, going down chimneys and through air ducts. It was a good show, but these pictures were not very representative. During the first two weeks of the air war, 790 sorties were flown against 33 bridges. After another five weeks, and many more sorties, a quarter of the bridges were still usable. That's not bad, but in military terms it was not good enough, since it allowed two-thirds of the Iraqi Republican Guard to escape.

Over five thousand laser-guided Maverick missiles were fired, but only a thousand or so tank kills were claimed. Later analysis reduced the claims by about 60%; if history is anything to go by they are still inflated. However, many sources still quote the kill rate of 80% mentioned at the time.

Then there is the cost. The TV-guided Maverick started at a fairly reasonable \$20k. The laser-guided version came it at somewhere over \$100k. The infra-red imaging version costs over \$400k per missile, a very expensive way of blowing up flares. The Russians sell their older tanks on the international market for about \$100k each. It might be more cost effective just to buy all their tanks off them.

The biggest and best smart weapon of all is the cruise missile. Costing about \$1.2m each, they carry a thousand pounds of high explosive or cluster bombs to a range of over a thousand miles. The guidance systems have been getting steadily more sophisticated and now use a combination of 'TERCOM' radar (TERrain COMparing), inertial navigation and satellite data from the Global Positioning System.

'The old ground-launched cruise-missile had an accuracy that would get it into the football stadium' reported one project manager. 'The conventional Tomahawk can get you into the goalposts.'

On September 3rd 1996, a wave of twenty-seven cruise missiles was launched at Iraq, directed at fifteen air de-

fence installations. Six hours later the Pentagon claimed that all targets had been hit, a claim which the press passed on. However, the next day a further seventeen cruise missiles were fired at targets which had not been destroyed by the first wave.

A damage assessment released three days later said that six of the targets were 'severely damaged or destroyed' and five others 'damaged, vacated or degraded.' The remaining four received 'little or no damage.' If we charitably assume the second category count as a hits, it works out that firing three missiles at each target gives a score of 11/15 or 73%. This represents about a 34% chance of a hit for each missile. This figure is probably an overestimate. The Pentagon would not select targets which it was unlikely to hit, and when assessing damage they tend to be generous. (During the Gulf war they claimed to have destroyed four times as many Scud launchers as the Iraqis possessed). They are in the enviable position of a student sitting an exam who can choose which questions they want to answer and then mark their own exam paper afterwards. To score only 34% under these ideal conditions suggests that the real chance of hitting any given target is low. There are, of course, projects under way to improve cruise missile accuracy. The evolution of smart bombs follows a pattern. Each new generation is greeted as a major technological breakthrough. Years later the manufacturers admit that the weapons are not quite so wonderful . . . but they have a new technology which is much better. The next generation are guided by millimetre-wave radar; designers say they will be accurate, reliable and cost-effective. They will make profits for the manufacturers, but whether they perform better than their predecessors remains to be seen.

There is an underlying problem though. War is fundamentally a messy, bloody business, one that can't be solved by technology alone. The 'surgical strikes' of the Gulf war caused thousands of civilian casualties, though this was played down. In the post-Cold War world, we should not succumb to the notion that pressing a launch button is a solution to foreign policy problems.

The Pentagon has billions of dollars of smart weapons on order. This is in spite of a report from the General Accounting Office saying that claims about their smart bombs ' . . . were overstated, misleading, inconsistent with the best available data, or unverifiable.'

Britain has spent less on smart bombs, but a new Air Staff Target has called for adding guidance systems to our stocks of 'dumb' bombs. Senior RAF officers say that unguided weapons are virtually useless in the modern era, apparently ignorant most of the damage in the Gulf was caused by unguided weapons. It seems that they too are falling for the siren song of shiny new technology, regardless of the evidence against it.

Smart bombs hit less targets and kill more civilians than are claimed. They cost a great deal of (your) money. And if we ever have a serious war, we may end up wishing we had invested in cheap, reliable low-tech weapons instead.

David Hambling works in IT and is a freelance writer and researcher.

Millennium

Kevin McClure

The end of the world is getting nigher

Should you want a job for life – or longer, if you can face the concept – you could commit yourself to reporting on apocalyptic, end of the world, beliefs. Of all the varieties of conviction of the occurrence of irrational, extraordinary events, caused by non-human agencies able to intervene irrevocably in the affairs of our race, this is the Magic Porridge Pot. Or maybe the Enormous Turnip. Something immense and indefatigable, anyway.

I've been fascinated by this material for years, and first started collecting the literature in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, when I published a couple of speculative issues of the *End Times Bulletin*. It won only a limited audience, but brought together the early strands of the Survivalist movement, which has developed into the Militias, early New Age material, including UFO landings in England to carry off the chosen, and more traditional Biblical interpretations. It didn't matter much that few people bought it: I ceased publishing because, as the crisis passed, so too did the sense of panic and divine mission that was helping fill the pages.

Asked, last year, to write *The Fortean Times Book of the Millennium*, I returned eagerly to the fray. I'm a more sceptical writer and researcher than I was fifteen years ago, but hopefully a more compassionate one, too, so long as people aren't exploiting and damaging each other. I'd anticipated that the nature and motivations in the millennial field hadn't changed much since 1981-82, but I was wrong. The prospect of a year that has three noughts on the end has brought some strange and greedy people out of the woodwork. And some dilemmas for the concerned sceptic, too.

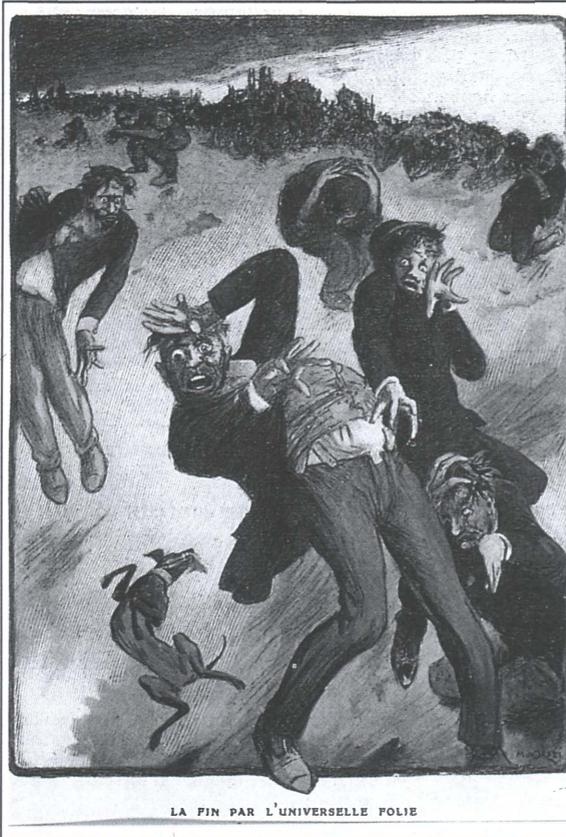
Of course, I found some easy targets. Foremost among these is Nostradamus, whose history has already been dealt with fairly and capably by James Randi. I couldn't avoid concluding that however good or bad a prophet he

may have been, Nostradamus had a remarkable mind, and a high level of commitment as a plague doctor, and I think that Randi has little argument with that viewpoint. What Randi wasn't, perhaps, aware of, is the extent of the money-grubbing dishonesty of those who feign interpretation of the obscure French quatrains to produce snappy references to current events.

Even best-selling authors Peter Lorie and V J Hewitt have knowingly produced gems like, 'Diana Spencer . . . will become a queen who joins her pensive king in reviving a fleeting monarchy' . . . 'Beginning in 1992 and

ending in 1993, the coronation of King Charles and the Olympic Games will be followed by a great earthquake, triggered off by a shifting in the San Andreas fault . . . A mass evacuation begins from cities and towns before the earthquake. The State Governor organises the exodus to the border where it stays outside the ring, the shadow, the zone . . . San Diego disappears beneath the sea . . . Hollywood film studios collapse . . . America burns 1993-1996.' The important point to remember is that it is abundantly clear that Nostradamus neither wrote those words, nor intended his to be understood in that way. Such prophecies – and their ignominious failure – are the responsibility of Lorie and Hewitt alone. Many others have done the same, or worse, and continue to do so. We shouldn't aim for a long-dead target.

I'm conscious that most sceptics don't mess with mainstream religions, but the Book of Revelation dominates apocalyptic belief, and I couldn't avoid taking a position. Simply, I look at the shadowy, and maybe substantially unreal, St John of Patmos like any other person who claims to have experienced visions. I've never supported the view that scepticism should ring-fence 'respectable' religions, and this most influential of books of the Bible adopts so much earlier material, is put together so awk-





wardly, contains such vivid, graceless and cruel imagery, so many threats and so little love, that it seems scarcely Christian. And scarcely credible, too.

Yet it has close parallels with the output of so many other individuals who have their own visionary experience, and then amalgamate its content with that of other and earlier visions, thus validating and supporting their own, making themselves part of what is probably an entirely subjective tradition. It was little more than luck and the support of a few powerful individuals at the right moment that took Revelation into the main Biblical canon. I find it quite daunting to realise what that chance inclusion has led to, what potential it has provided for more charismatic believers to control and terrify others. What would Jim Jones, David Koresh, Hal Lindsey and a thousand others have done without it?

Some individuals came out quite well. I rather like Mother Shipton, who never spoke or wrote a single word of the prophecies attributed to her, but seems to have been a general good egg, a woman of wisdom in a time when it was difficult to be respected for that, something of a herbalist, and a caring mother in difficult circumstances. William Miller, of the Millerite movement, worried terribly about publicising his interpretation of the Book of Daniel. Maybe he realised how easy it is to gain followers, and how seldom they retain the power of independent thought. Whoever thought up the Prophecies of St Malachy may have known an uncanny thing or two, as did the Virgin Mary who appeared to two young children at La Salette and gave surprisingly well-vindicated messages about forthcoming crop blights and an epidemic that afflicted young children in the surrounding area. Sceptical I may be, but there are occasional prophecies, recorded before the events they foretell, that seem to have worked. I can't pretend that they didn't.

We live now, as I'm sure you'll have noticed, in an age of unprecedented drivel. Time was when well-documented claims of paranormal events and experiences warranted serious investigation, when sceptics had something to work on, and the scientific approach prevailed on both sides of the argument. If you've ever tried discussing Pleiadean technology with a channeller, the joys of visiting a nursery full of hybrid babies with an alien abductee or – dare I mention it – life after death with Michael Roll or Ronald Pearson, you'll know just how pointless and frustrating it can be.

I have no faith in any of the current crop of prophecies. Dannion Brinkley with his pseudo-NDEs, James Redfield and the appalling, fictional 'Celestine Prophecies' which have to date produced three books and – would you believe – residential courses to develop and explore the quite imaginary powers contained in the list of 'insights'. A wide range of pseudo-scientific predictions, from paranormal polymaths like Gordon-Michael Scallion and Stan Deyo insist on the coming Pole Shifts, and sell advice on where best to live for safety in the grim, but somehow exciting future.

There is, however, a moral to all this. Trying to apply established sceptical explanations and arguments to people who receive, record, create and spread apocalyptic beliefs is as useless and irrelevant as arguing with them. It's a little like watching Richard Wiseman trying to explain a complex abduction claim on the basis of a hypothetical helicopter, a Scottish sceptic constantly re-inventing the science of mirage or various other token sceptics repeatedly opening the 'temporal lobe epilepsy or other EM effects' box in response to claims of the most exotic experiences.

What becomes apparent is that if you sit fifty people down with a Bible and an audience, one or two of them will believe they've been chosen to be there, and will start preaching – quite possibly about the End Times and the Last Judgement. Sit another fifty with some books about near-death experiences, and one or two will report the tunnel and the light and an angel or two. Similarly, and another fifty, with out-of-body experiences. Set someone to convince those groups of the reality of that experience, and those figures will certainly rise. Mind you, you'll only need half-a-dozen New Age Australians to find a channeller who'll predict the landing of thousands of flying saucers, tell you you're Starseed, and sell you a magazine telling you when the poleshift's on its way.

I know it's frustrating for those who want a stimulus/response explanation for all reports of extraordinary experience, but we've hit a level of irrationality for which there is no rational explanation. We can, however, take some comfort from the fact that, quantity and the level of media interest aside, that irrationality has always been in evidence if you know where to look for its history. And, generally, the place to look for it is in the historical record of religious experience because that is where, traditionally, it has been stored.

There are people who are prone to report experience of encounters – visual or mental, or even in the 'inspired' interpretation of 'sacred' literature – with non-human intelligences. These reports require no specific stimulus, no external event or internal mis- or mal-function. Making such reports – and holding a conviction that the events are real – runs back as far as does recorded history. The end of the world may well be the most common and most striking message, but it's just one of many – the content of the reported experiences just changes and adapts with time and context. I suspect that the effort to understand a phenomenon that is a core characteristic of human behaviour has hardly begun.

Kevin McClure is a civil servant and writer. His latest book is *The Fortean Times Book of the Millennium*.

Where Fish Once Walked

Ian Rowland

Stimulating sixth-form skepticism

There are two good reasons to hammer a nail into your head. First, it's a marvellous way to win the attention of any audience, being cheap, reliable and almost invariably non-fatal. Plus, it's an excellent way to demonstrate notions dear to the sceptical heart.

For example, the other day I was at Eastbourne College where I'd been booked to give a talk on 'Analytical Thinking'. Call me perceptive, but I guess that to the average student the term 'Analytical Thinking' sounds about as zippy as 'A technical history of drainpipes'. For this reason, I generally start my talk with tales of Indian god-men and the ways they 'prove' their divinity, such as (you guessed) by hammering a nail into their head without harm. I then take out my hammer and my solid, five inch, shiny steel nail, and I proceed to perform the self-same miracle before their very eyes. For my money, there's no neater way to kick start a chat about 'proof' and 'evidence'.

Although I'm pleased to have found such a splendid ice-breaker, there *is* a downside, in that I'm rather dismayed that it's one of the things I know how to do. What I mean is that there are many practical, useful things that I feel I ought to know, like how my car engine works and how to cook a risotto. On such matters I am clueless. But nail-in-head, this I know about, and if you really, truly, madly need a list of 21 ways (no exaggeration) to do spoon-bending, I'm your man. This does not suggest a

good choice of ambitions in younger life.

Just before I go on – and there – a point to all this – I must add that when I stick a nail in my head, I do of course tell the students that they must not even *dream* of trying it themselves. I emphasise that it is both painful and dangerous if you don't know how to do it. Furthermore – and this seems to clinch it for them – it is of course an extremely *stupid* thing to do. Unless, of course, like me you get paid to do it. Well, it beats a desk job.

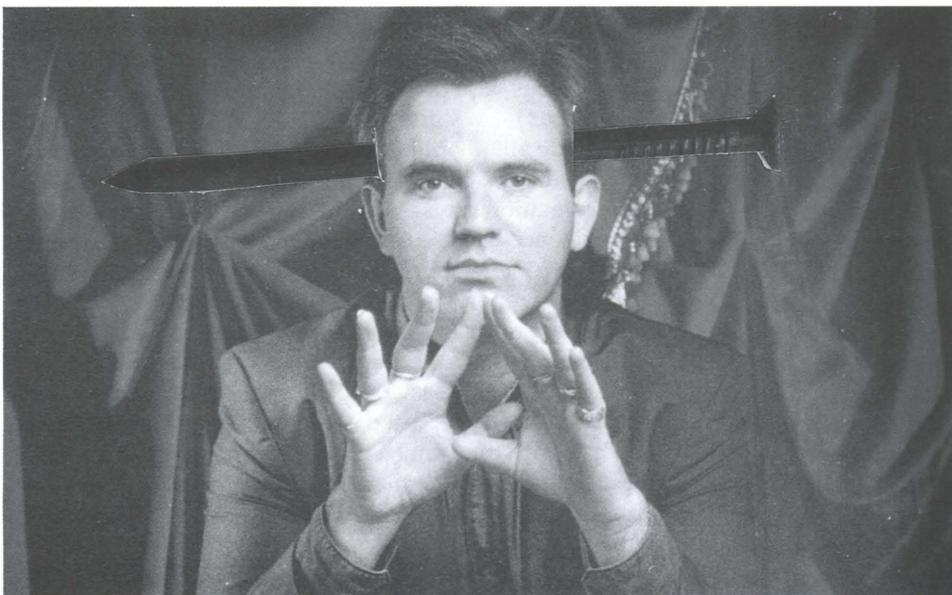
Despite these caveats, you may feel that, safety issues aside, this sort of demonstration is rather sordid for sensitive, impressionable sixth-form minds. Ditto that other kiddie's party favourite of mine, psychic surgery. Well, I had exactly the same reservations. In fact I discussed them with my host at Eastbourne, the Head of General Studies, John Thornley. After a minute or two of hearty laughter, John wiped the tears from his eyes and assured me his sixth-form were about as sensitive and impressionable as Mike Tyson in a tank.

And that's just the girls! (snare drum).

Not only did John encourage me to include the nail-in-head *and* the psychic surgery in my talk, he wanted the psychic surgery as gory as possible and even volunteered for the role of patient. Hence the entire sixth-form were treated to the sight of me removing bloodied tumours from his stomach, via my miraculous psycho-surgical gifts. And it's the same at all the other schools. Ian offers to leave out the 'indelicate' stuff. Ian has his pussy-footing

caution derided as the naive ramblings of someone stuck in a Billy Bunter time-warp.

I've extracted bloodied tumours and rammed steel into my head at numerous colleges, but Eastbourne remains one of my favourites. They have a superb lecture theatre, and serve nice cakes. It's also a place steeped in history (established 1867) and, proud boast, alumni include Michael Fish: weatherman, national institution, and the Man Whom Hurricanes Mock. In fact, they erected a statue to Michael Fish just by the school gates, but sadly it got blown over in



the Great Hurricane. Okay, I made that up, but he is an old boy, so I call the college the place where Fish once walked. Just in case you were wondering.

Giving shows and talks to sixth-form colleges and the like has given me some insight into how this age group views the paranormal, and I have to say I think the news is good. For one thing, the vast majority of them seem to be natural-born sceptics. They've seen plenty of pro-paranormal stuff in the media, sure enough, but it seems they just don't buy it. I'm speculating, but I'd suggest there are three reasons for this.

One, they have an instinctive teenage desire not to look foolish, which includes not believing in anything that may turn out to be garbage, e.g. astrology. Two, they have a healthy street-wise awareness that some apparently sincere people are just out to make a fast buck, e.g. astrologers, estate agents. Thirdly, I believe their resistance to paranormal flummery may stem from their daily regime of learning, thinking and figuring things out. There is a world of right and wrong answers, and of awareness that comprehension may involve sustained mental effort. Typical telly drivel such as 'Strange But Made Up?', with its join-the-dots conclusions and hey-wow sensationalism, just doesn't make the cut.

So how come the paranormal enjoys such widespread belief among the adult population? I would suggest the rot sets in when people leave their school days behind. The daily mental grind is left behind. The notion of having to invest some mental effort before you get to the right answer becomes discarded. If a magazine says psychics can help with murder cases . . . well, so be it. There are other things to worry about. Bills to pay. Steaming

car engines to gaze at uncomprehendingly. Burnt instant risottos to scrape from blackened pans.

So what lessons can we learn? Without wishing to sound defeatist, it seems plain as a pikestaff that we have, at least for the time being, lost the media battle. Ratings are the what matter, and 'Amazing psychic power!' yarns will always do brisker trade than a factual exposition of the cold reading industry. But the sixth form students of today are the producers, journalists and commissioning editors of tomorrow. Are we doing all we can to reach them at this early stage?

I've found sixth-form students more than receptive to the concepts of critical thinking, thoughtful analysis, and, basically, not being taken for a ride by some halfwit with a bad magic act passing himself off as psychic. I don't think this is because I'm such a gosh-so-wonderful speaker. Nor is it just that one hour from me is one hour's relief from French subjunctives, the life-cycle of the frog and other National Curriculum gems. From what I've seen, they genuinely enjoy getting to the truth below the surface, and seeing glib non-explanations ('it's a psychic phenomenon not yet fully understood') exposed as so much waffle.

The more we can work with schools, the better the long-term prospects for a little sane reasoning to enter everyday life. Even if it takes a few nail-induced headaches, it will be worth it.

Ian Rowland is a psychic illusionist who gives talks about psychic fakery and mind stuff. He is available for schools, colleges and crowd dispersal.



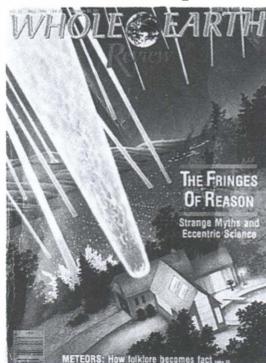
Skeptical Books for Christmas

This is the time of the year when many of us like to curl up in front of the fire with a good book. But put away your P D James or John le Carré – buy yourself a good skeptical book instead. We asked a number of contributors to The Skeptic either to tell us about their favourite books or to let us know which books would be on their list this Christmas. If you are really lucky maybe you'll find one of these in your stocking on Christmas morning.

Jim Lippard, philosopher.

David Marks and Richard Kamman's *The Psychology of the Psychic* (1980) should qualify as a classic skeptical examination of psychic claims. The chapters on Kreskin and Uri Geller first put forth the phenomena observed, then unravel the mysteries through some clever detective work. The later chapters look at social and psychological causes of unfounded belief.

One of the most entertaining skeptical books I've read is Ted Schultz's *The Fringes of Reason: A Whole Earth Catalog* (1989, Harmony Books), which grew out of a special issue of *Whole Earth Review* magazine (Fall 1986). The book is full of wonderfully witty reviews of all manner of strange stuff, including references to the skeptical literature in all the right places. It's humorous, fun, and a good non-threatening introduction to skepticism that would be of interest to paranormal advocates.



Wendy Grossman, freelance writer and founder of *The Skeptic*.

Martin Gardner, *Science: Good, Bad, and Bogus*. This was the first really skeptical book I ever read; it was sent to my friend Bill Steele as background material for an article he was doing about James Randi. I had gone with him to see Randi live as a way of doing something new on my birthday in 1981, and had been blown away to see someone with the tools to examine claims I seemed to have heard all my life. But finding out that Gardner was a Founding Fellow of CSICOP really was the thing that established the organization's credentials in my mind, as I had grown up knowing about his mathematical games column — we used to play Nim on restaurant place mats when we were waiting to be served. My 8th grade math teacher, Nancy Rosenberg, was a huge admirer of his and had us all making flexagons and polyhedra in class.

John Allen Paulos, *Innumeracy*. Paulos puts a lot of things in perspective that don't normally get thought

a skeptical look at extraordinary claims...

SCIENCE
GOOD, BAD
AND BOGUS



MARTIN GARDNER

about, and really makes the case for better math education. This book is right up there for me with Darrell Huff's older *How to Lie With Statistics*.

Carol Tavris, *The Mismeasure of Woman*. The title is a nod to Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*, another of my favorites, but the topic is broader. Tavris really questions a lot of the garbage science that purports to prove that women are our stereotypes and comes up with strong research to support her arguments.

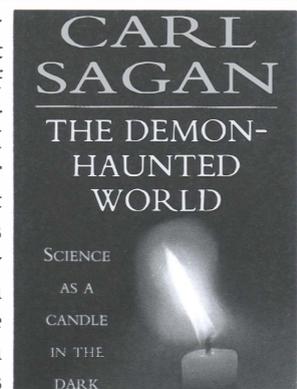
Cecil Adams, *The Straight Dope*. The first of the many question-and-answer books and columns in the current array of them. Adams is mean, funny, and downright abusive in answering questions sent to him at the *Chicago Reader*, the alternative weekly newspaper where the column originated. There are now two follow-up books, and the column appears on the AOL Internet service. 'If you had been listening in high school chemistry class like you should've, Bobo...'

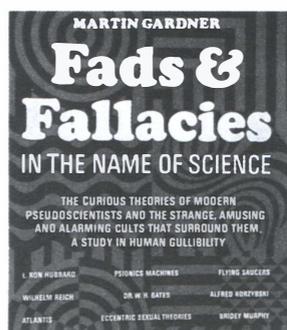
The Experts Speak, Cerf & Navasky . . . and they got it all wrong!

James Randi, magician and author.

The Demon-Haunted World – by Carl Sagan. I think that the back-jacket blurb of this book – taken from chapter two – expresses beautifully the present situation and the status of skepticism. Many months before publication of this book, I was sent a manuscript copy for review, with the warning that there were to be major changes and additions. Much to my satisfaction, Sagan used much stronger and bolder language in the finished version. As an academic, he has always leaned toward understatement; in this book, he calls nonsense by its correct name, rather than characterizing it as 'perhaps doubtful.' I celebrate this approach.

The New Apocrypha – by John Sladek. This was written in 1972, before it was 'proper' to offer objection to nonsense. Conspiracy theories, phrenology, Atlantis, Velikovsky, and other popular mythologies of the day were bravely dissected by Sladek, who provided extensive bibliographical references as well. That, and the proper index, makes this a valuable reference work for the skeptic. An updating – much has happened in the ensuing 25 years – would be welcome.





Fads & Fallacies in the Name of Science – by Martin Gardner. This was originally *In the Name of Science* (1952) and has been upgraded and added to several times. It can be regarded as the first seriously critical treatment of spurious psychic, pseudoscientific, and occult subjects. Martin is generally regarded as the father of skepticism in the USA, and continues his tireless battle against fakery and quackery to this day.

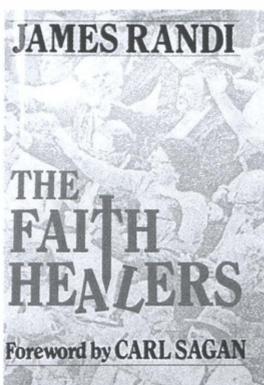
Chris Willis, freelance writer and researcher. James Randi's *The Faith Healers* (Prometheus Books, 1989) exposes the sick world of the all too

many con-artists who masquerade as evangelists and faith healers. Randi exposes various mind-boggling financial scams and shows how so-called 'healings' are faked for the TV cameras. It's a fascinating book, but ultimately saddening, as Randi recounts the sufferings of these charlatans' victims.

'Psychic' con-artists were around in the 17th century too. Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (OK, I'm cheating – it's a play, not a book) features a fake magician and his sidekicks who play on people's belief in the supernatural in order to cheat them out of their money. One man gives the tricksters many of his possessions, which he is assured will be magically turned to gold. Another is introduced to the 'Queen of the Fairies' summoned up for him by magic. It all goes horribly wrong, and he ends up locked in a lavatory, still convinced his vision was genuine. Meanwhile, a shopkeeper continually consults the magician for (very expensive) advice as to 'Which way I should make my door, by necromancy; and where my shelves' – perhaps Feng Shui was around even then!

Steuart Campbell, author. As someone who espouses sceptical causes I am naturally attracted to others who do likewise: Any of the books on evolution by Elaine Morgan. The first was *The Descent of Woman* (1972), followed by *The Aquatic Ape* (1982), *The Scars of Evolution* (1991) and *The Descent of the Child* (1996). They are all based on the theme that mankind has not evolved on the plains of Africa – what she sceptically calls 'The Tarzan Hypothesis'. She claims that we have evolved in water – 'The Aquatic Ape Theory' – and has collected a lot of evidence in support of the hypothesis. I think she's right!

Bonar Meninger's *Mortal Error* (1992) which describes ballistic expert Howard Donahue's demonstration that, although Oswald did fire at JFK, his shots didn't kill him. According to Donahue, the fatal shot was fired accidentally by bodyguard George Hickey mishandling an AR-15 machine gun. Fascinating account of one man's refusal to accept official accounts which didn't make sense.



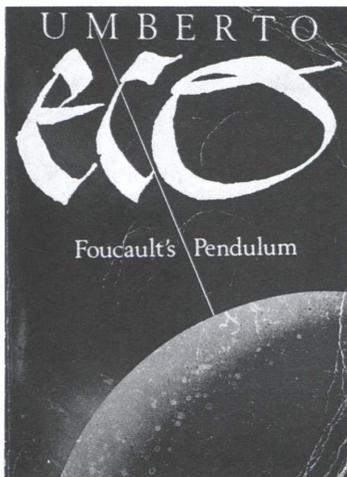
Dene Bebbington, computer programmer. My current sceptical outlook has been especially influenced by the books of the renowned philosopher Bertrand Russell. What particularly appeals to me about his writings is his rather impish sense of humour. In the book *Unpopular Essays* he talks of some nuns who apparently take a bath wearing a bathrobe and who, when asked why, respond: 'Oh, but you forget the good God'. In a rather congenially flippant turn of mind he remarks that 'Apparently they conceive of the Deity as a peeping Tom whose omnipotence enables him to see through bathroom walls, but who is foiled by bathrobes'!

Wolf Roder, geographer and author. We must not overlook *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* by Martin Gardner, I sharpened my baby teeth on it, and like to think many of my contemporaries did as well. My Dover reprint copy is tattered from frequent reading, because every time a new pseudo-science quacks up, I reach for this volume. It is almost like an encyclopedia, so much did Gardner cover in such a short space. The pseudo-sciences have hardly changed at all, and the same old chestnuts are peddled by the befuddled.

Lucy Fisher, writer. *The New Apocrypha* by John Sladek. I found this book when I was searching for an answer to the meaning of life. It covers everything from Nazis to werewolves, it's intelligent and witty, and he insists that those who believe in absurdities will commit atrocities. *Flim-Flam!* by James Randi. I moved quickly onto this title and was cheered by his critique of the Cottingley Fairies' suspiciously fashionable hairstyles. However, I was disturbed by his exposé of some inefficient Italian table turners as at that time I still believed in spiritualism.

Mike Walsh, writer. Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*. Actually, this is a novel, but has a brilliant plot in which a pair of sceptics concoct – just as a bit of fun – a wonderful story, à la 'Holy Blood and Holy Grail'. The Knights Templar, the Rosicrucians, 'Et In Arcadia Ego', they're all there as the pair make the most tenuous connections in an attempt to invent an extraordinary conspiracy. The only trouble is, it turns out to be true, and the hapless pair, knowing too much, get bumped off.

James Randi's *Flim Flam*. A bit obvious, I know, but still the finest and most readable sceptics' primer imaginable. If I meet anyone who expresses even the remotest interest in the sceptical viewpoint I lend my copy and watch them learn. It should be required reading in all schools.



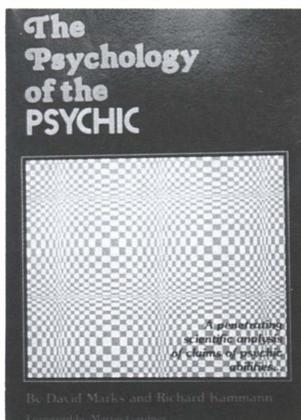
Simon Birstingl, consultant on environmental legislation and standards.

What constitutes a skeptical book? One could include anything that rationally explains phenomena in a scientific manner where previously there was only religion and superstition. I think that therefore, for me, Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* is a seminal skeptical text, but I cannot say it is one of my favourites as I have not read it. I will have to make up for this by nominating as my first book Sir Julian Huxley's beautiful book on Evolution (I cannot remember any other details of date, publisher or title) which was given to me when I was 10 years old. This is a lovely book, full of diagrams and illustrations that enthralled me. In fact I did not do much more than look at the pictures and diagrams until I was about 13, but when I did read the text I was hooked. I suppose that from then on I learned to look at the way plants and animals did things in a different light, and a career in the biological sciences beckoned.

There can be no debate about whether my second choice is a skeptical book. I nominate, as my all time favorite, James Randi's *The Truth About Uri Geller*. I learned about it while researching Sai Baba on the Internet. When I got hold of my copy I read it in a day and was enthralled. I remembered Geller from when I was a child, and my feeling that he was using trickery but not being able to see exactly how. This book filled in a lot of the gaps, though I would love to know some of the trade secrets that Randi is so cagey about. It should be in every library and every TV, radio and newspaper's reference section.

Richard Wiseman, psychologist.

The Psychology of the Psychic by Marks and Kammann. (Prometheus). This was probably the first book that I read about parapsychology and so I have always had a soft spot for it. Adrian Furnham (a social psychology professor at London University) lent me his copy when I told him I was interested in the paranormal and I think it is responsible for me getting involved in the field. I think the authors' investigation



into Geller and the Targ-Puthoff remote viewing experiments are superb. Perhaps more importantly, it is written in a really accessible way.

Net of Magic by Siegel (Univ of Chicago Press). This is the book that I wish I had written! It outlines Siegel's work into the psychology, sociology and history of Indian street magic. But it's so much more than that. It really manages to analyse the complex relationship between myth, magic and mystery in India. It was this book that convinced me that I should carry out field research in India.

Guidelines for Testing Psychic Claimants by Wiseman and Morris (Univ of Hertfordshire Press, Price; £7.95). Another book which I wish I had written. It brilliantly analyses some of the many pitfalls which can occur when

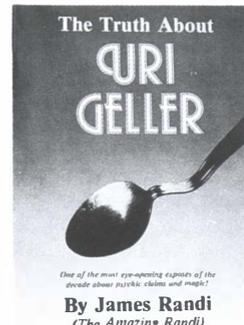
people test psychics, and what can be done to help avoid them. More to the point, we need the sales.

Everything written by Eric Dingwall. This man is my skeptical 'hero'. I think his work was way ahead of its time and I still get a kick out of reading it.

More to the point, he was intensely interested in erotica, had a large collection of chastity belts and used to spread gossip about the personal lives of everyone in the field.

Ian Rowland, psychic illusionist.

The Truth About Uri Geller by James Randi. This is the book that changed my life. I read it when I was 14, and it was my key to the skeptical treasure house. If I hadn't read this book, I wouldn't be doing what I do

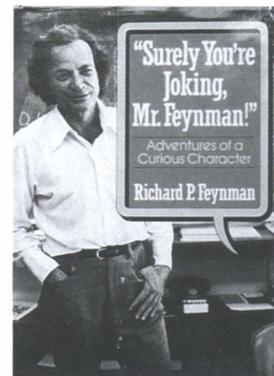


today, and my life would be much less fun and far less fulfilling. I have lots of other great sceptical books, but this is the one where I actually felt my life shifting gears and changing direction. *Stolen Lightning – the Social History of Magic* by Daniel Lawrence O'Keefe. I spend ridiculous amounts of time traipsing round old second-hand book stalls, hunting for gems that can't be found any other way. This is one example. It is the best-researched, best-written, most beautifully comprehensive work I've ever seen on the history of people claiming they've got special powers. 570 pages, hardback, and mine for less than a tenner. And I still haven't come across anyone else who's even heard of it, let alone got a copy.

Neville W Goodman, consultant anaesthetist.

'Everything was written by somebody who didn't know what the hell he was talking about, so it was a little bit wrong, always!' This is Richard Feynman – the late, great, wonderful Richard Feynman – recounting his experience of being on a commission to choose science books for schools. *Surely You're Joking, Mr Feynman* (London: Unwin, 1986) is the skeptics' primer. You can be a skeptic without reading it, but you'll be a better skeptic if you do. You'll also be armed with anecdotes, such as that when Feynman was engaged on the Manhattan project to develop the Bomb, he made a hobby of breaking other people's passwords. So did the authorities tighten up on security? No: they put out a warning that Feynman was dangerous.

Petr Skrabenek retold this story when he reviewed Feynman's book for the *Lancet*. Skrabenek, sadly, is also late, but equally great. Do you know the disease 'septicaemia'? It is an uncommon generalised disorder of low infectivity against which medical school education is likely to confer life-long immunity. That is Skrabenek's (and his co-author James



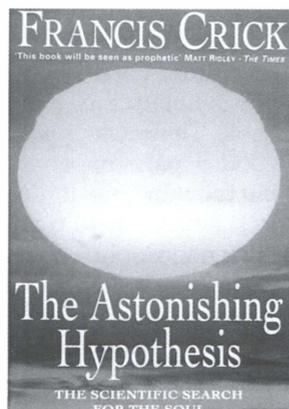
McCormick's) definition, and he illustrates it magnificently in *Follies and Fallacies in Medicine* (Glasgow: Tarragon Press, 1989). Alternative medicine gets an even rougher ride: did you know that the dilution claimed as effective in homoeopathy is equivalent to 'one grain of salt dissolved in a volume of diluent which would fill ten thousand billion spheres, each large enough to enclose the whole solar system'?

But enough of this; I'm off to get my stars read for 1997...

Steve Donnelly, physicist and *Skeptic* co-editor. The book on my shelves which has become more dog-eared than most through frequent consultation is Terence Hines' *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*. This book is effectively a concise encyclopaedia of the paranormal and covers a vast range of topics. For a readily accessible reminder of the ins and outs of hair-loss cures and hollow earth theories or for a quick introduction to Carlos Castaneda, Immanuel Velikovsky or Ted Serios, this is the book that I consult time and time again.

If you want to marvel at the real capabilities of the human brain rather than the imagined paranormal ones, then Francis Crick's *The Astonishing Hypothesis* is the book to read. Crick, a British biophysicist, together with James Watson and Maurice Wilkins, won the Nobel Prize for medicine in 1962 for determining the structure of DNA. Since that time, he has had a particular interest in human consciousness and his book details some of his views and findings on this fascinating topic. There are many other interesting books on consciousness, of course – for instance, Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (in which it isn't) but, as an experimental scientist, I particularly like Crick's detailing of what is known experimentally about relevant aspects of brain function rather than mere philosophical speculation.

Finally, in my view, many irrational ideas (particularly religious beliefs) stem from an exaggeration in our minds of the importance of human beings in the grand scheme of things. For instance, is it likely that the omnipotent creator of the universe really cares whether a little insignificant speck of organic molecules, such as yours truly, eats bacon for breakfast or attends church on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday? And is He/She really insecure enough to demand to be worshipped by His/Her creations? If you would like to have your place in the universe restored to a more realistic level, nothing works better than Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*. Of course he has written a number of other books – and *The Blind Watchmaker* is another favourite (particularly when countering those tiring creationist arguments against evolution) but for reasons that I can't explain, I found the idea that we human beings may simply be a vehicle used by genes to propagate themselves a humbling but exhilarating one.



Mike Hutchinson, author and bookseller. As the UK representative for Prometheus Books you would expect me to include titles from our range in any list of 'wants' for Christmas. And you'd be right. But in order to be fair I thought I should cast my eye around and choose some books from other publishers. I've chosen one book which I already have but would otherwise go out of my way to get – and recommend you to do the same – two which I will soon have, and one which I'm trying hard to get.

I usually find that single subject books are often something of an overkill. At face value my first book would seem to be just that, but it would be easy to be misled. *Water Witching U.S.A.* by Evon Z Vogt and Ray Hyman was first published in 1959 by Chicago University Press. (Ray Hyman is well known by skeptics as one of the foremost critics of parapsychology). The second edition was published in 1979 and I am very pleased to see from an Internet search that it is still available (Paper \$13.50, 0-226-86297-6).

Water witching is an American term for dowsing. This isn't just a book about dowsing though; it is an education in skepticism. One or two chapters cover other subjects like Clever Hans, table tipping, N-Rays, psychic readings, and even Bridey Murphy and are used to demonstrate false thinking. If you have a limited budget or only have room for a small number of books, this is one of those you should have.

Two books which I will be getting for Christmas, post permitting, are *Skills of the Vagabonds* and *Skills of the Vagabonds II*. They are winging their way from Hong Kong as I write. (Well, sailing their way, actually.) I first heard of these books when they were the subject of an article in CSICOP's quarterly publication *Skeptical Briefs*.

The first book deals with Chinese arts and beliefs, including secrets of achieving spectacular effects using trickery, secret communication, self defence, and escape from hostile pursuers. In the second book there is information about Chinese belief in a 'life force', claims that a practitioner can develop superhuman abilities and how such claims can be produced fraudulently. Finally there is information on traditional Chinese medical compounds and a favourable report on the CSICOP expedition to China.

After the article appeared in December 1995, *Skeptical Briefs* received so many requests for information about where these books could be obtained that I'd better let you know now. The books are not easily available in the UK as far as I know. You will need to get them from Leung's Publications, 440/442 Nathan Road, SA/fl., Hong Kong. Telephone (854) 2780-0468. Fax 2780-8181. The first costs \$15.40 and the second, \$19.95. These are discounted prices for overseas customers. Surface mail is \$6.80 for one book and \$4.20 each for two. Credit cards are not accepted.

My final choice is a biography of Houdini. Until recently the definitive biography was the twenty-seven year old *Houdini: The Untold Story* by Milbourne Christopher. Some weeks ago, reading a magic newsgroup on the Internet I heard of a new book about Houdini which promises to take the 'definitive' mantle from Christopher's book. It is *Houdini: The Career of Erich Weiss*,

by Kenneth Silverman published in the United States by Harper Collins at an enormous \$35.00 although at the current rate of exchange that's only about £21.00. I don't know if there will be a UK edition. On the Internet I have seen nothing but praise for the book which is said to include around 100 photographs, many never before or rarely seen. Houdini has been the subject of numerous books, films, and television programmes, many of which have done him a great injustice. I can never understand why Hollywood and even some authors have seen fit to introduce fictitious episodes into the life of such an extraordinary man. Because the Christopher book has been out of print it has been many years since I have been able to recommend a currently available book on Houdini. It is satisfying to know that, for the foreseeable future, this will not be a problem. And if I can get this book in time I know what I'll be doing at Christmas.

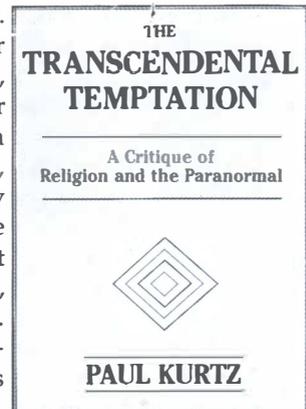
Dave Langford, writer.

Mr Belloc Objects To "The Outline of History" by H G Wells (1927). This now-rare book is H G Wells's best polemical volume. Hilaire Belloc, though now remembered almost solely for his fine comic verse, was a pugnacious Catholic apologist. Naturally he objected to Wells's *The Outline of History* for its anti-Catholic and pro-Darwin stance, and published a series of sneering articles which tried to characterize Wells as an ignorant cockney, dismissing his considerable knowledge of science by reference to various outdated and obscure (but safely Catholic) authorities. In *Mr Belloc Objects*, Wells gleefully struck back, pilloried the scientific illiteracy of the attack, and rightly made Belloc look an utter fool. It's a splendid debunking performance, with many nifty shafts of satire, and still reads well. Wells 'copied' his materials from the 'wrong books', said Belloc loftily. The reply: 'That "copied" is good! One can see that base malignant Wells fellow, in his stuffy room all hung with Union Jacks, with the "wrong", the *Protestant* book flattened out before him, copying, copying; his tongue following his laborious pen.' A tiny sting in the tail, though, is that one of the many pieces of scientific evidence which Wells triumphantly paraded was... Piltdown Man. Oops! *The New Apocrypha: A Guide to Strange Sciences and Occult Beliefs* by John T. Sladek (1973). A personal favourite, this, since it was the first compendium of eccentric beliefs which I came across – and even bought in hardback, because I'd admired Sladek's hilarious and satirical sf novels. (Despite a persistent media belief to the contrary, sf writers tend to be a hard-headed and skeptical lot. In this context, please note that Whitley Strieber has complained bitterly about being called an sf author and listed in the 1993 *Encyclopedia of SF*... since, for example, *Majestic* is not sf but historical fiction.) Here Sladek runs riot through a wide field of credulity, delivering groin kicks and rabbit punches as he goes – with due homage to Martin Gardner's similarly arranged but slightly less funny *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*. The paperback edition of *The New Apocrypha* is imperceptibly shorter, a couple of paragraphs having been removed thanks to litigation by a certain cult... which is how I first heard, from Sladek himself, of the unswerving commitment to free speech and freedom of information held by our good old friends the Scientologists. Both editions have a hefty

bibliography which led me to all sorts of other interesting stuff. Nice one, John.

Robert E McGrath, software engineer, author. Single best book (actually everything by Dr B, but that wasn't allowed): Susan Blackmore, *The Adventures of a Parapsychologist*, Prometheus, 1986. (I think there is now a new edition). *The Adventures* is the most autobiographical of Blackmore's works, although most of her writing is deeply self-centered – for good reason. She has spent her life attacking the questions she thinks are important. She asks, 'Who am "I"?', 'What does it mean to be "me"?', 'Is there something more than physical reality?', 'How can we really know?' She has repeatedly said, 'I don't know', and 'I may be wrong', but she has never stopped asking good questions with the utmost intellectual integrity and rigor. Despite the immense difficulty of these questions, she has neither abandoned the work, nor has she ever compromised her high standards of inquiry. We could all do worse than to follow her example.

Free bonus extra – worst book: Paul Kurtz, *Transcendental Temptation*, Prometheus. I have considerable respect for Prof Kurtz for many reasons, but I hated this particular book. There was probably a good 5 page paper in here, but I couldn't find it. I'm sorry to say this, but 10 centimetre thick philosophy books don't change the world these days, 10 second sound bytes rule. Talk radio, si, serious philosophy, no. So let's get serious and lighten up.



Toby Howard, university lecturer, freelance writer and co-editor of *The Skeptic*.

My all time favourite skeptical book is Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*. I bought it by accident at the start of a trip by sea to Holland, and stuck in a tiny cabin as the sea raged outside, my jaw dropped lower with each page I read. Eco has the chutzpah to ask questions as big as 'Why do people believe in things?' and the intellectual and imaginative firepower to get away with it. Although the characters are mostly unbelievable, the plot is absurd, and the book is seriously over-written it is a work of genius and I read it once a year without fail.

Cults of Unreason by Christopher Evans (who tragically died in 1979 at a early age) has long been out of print, but is a classic. The book was written in the early seventies and Evans surveys the nutty ideas then current, concentrating on the UK. There's a big section on L Ron Hubbard and his Scientologists, less menacing in those days, a superb tongue-in-cheek analysis of the Aetherius Society, quack 'black box' electrical medical cures, and a pot-pourri of bogus 'holy men'.

Evans' style is clear and informed, always witty, and a joy to read. It took me three years' searching to find this book, and I wouldn't swap my dog-eared hardback for anything. ☺

Ho, Ho, Ho! It's Techno-Santa!

Never one to be behind the times, Santa Claus is embracing modern technology, says **Nick Kim**, in a special report emailed from the North Pole



Key

- a. Satellite receiver for Global Positioning System
- b. Infrared night-vision glasses.
- c. Ceramic nose-cone and ceramic tiles, required to withstand the incredible temperatures associated with the immense speeds Santa must travel at nowadays in order to deliver presents to the ever-expanding population of children on earth.
- j. Asbestos-fibre beard and hair, to withstand high temperatures (as noted above) and yet also maintain that ring of Santa-authenticity. (All fabrics also soaked in fire-retardant phosphine compounds).
- d. Filtration unit and rebreathing apparatus, required due to Occupational Safety and Health considerations associated with the chronic inhalation of asbestos fibres.
- e. Recoilless Rifle (Bazooka). Santa hasn't got time any more to mess around trying to find your chimney-if that is you have one. He hasn't even got time to stand around while you answer your doorbell. This year, he intends to make a clean surgical hole through your living-room wall.
- f. Depleted Uranium shells ensure that the hole gets made, even if your living-room wall happens to be surrounded by 3-inch thick steel armour.
- g. Heads-up display.
- h. and i. Hand-held Laser Target Designation-Gun and Laser-Guided Smart Presents. Once the hole is made, Santa will aim the laser into your living room, and deliver Smart Presents with pin-point accuracy by the 'Fire-and-Forget' method. (This Christmas morning, you should awake to find a smoking hole in your wall, a charred Christmas tree and a few Smart presents dotted about, each in their own little crater.)
- k. (we did j. before...) Boot-mounted precision Gyroscope for backup navigation by dead-reckoning should the Global Positioning System fail.
- l. Boot-mounted Magnetic Anomaly Detector for no apparent reason.
- m. Belt-mounted Sextant, for navigation by starlight during 80% of the time when all the high-tech navigation gear is on the fritz.
- n. High-Speed-Anti-Radiation-Missile (HARM) to deal with national defence networks or any further encounters with the notorious Santa-hating scientist known only as 'Biggins.'
- o. MacDonnell-Douglas S-33 Relaxed-Stability Sleigh with the very latest in Fly-by-Wire avionics and externally mounted Quadraphonic-Surround Sound Audio system set permanently to 'Jingle-Bells' and featuring four 30 million watt speakers, audible from the moon, should that become an issue.
- p. Compact shoulder-mounted Supercomputer to filter Population Data, the latest Census Statistics, Consumer Research Polls, and Council Building Permits to determine who is living where. Links through to ground-based spy network to ascertain which children are being good, and which children are being bad, and just how good or bad these children are being.
- q. (Not shown). The XJ-970. A new type of Reindeer-based propulsion system designed specifically for the modern Santa featuring superconductor-based Gravity-Repulsion-Units and a unique Fly-by-Reigns control system. Details of this highly-innovative system remain shrouded in secrecy even to this day.

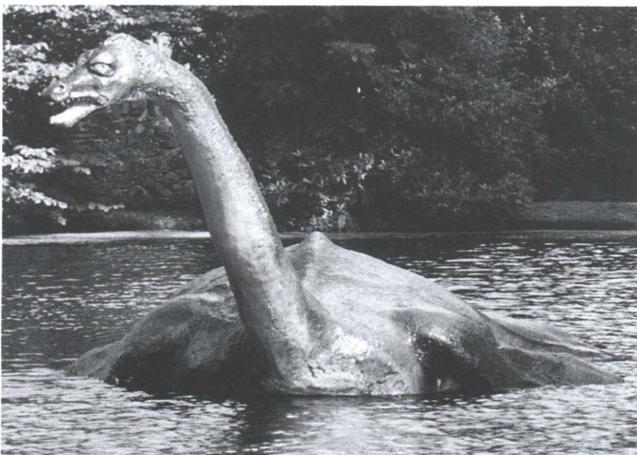
Nick Kim is a scientist in Hamilton, New Zealand.

Festive Fifty Prize Quiz

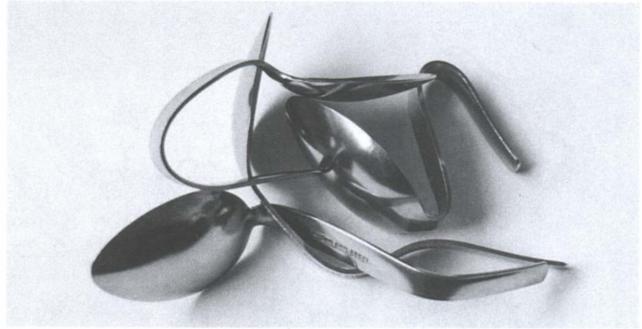
Tired of crossword puzzles, Cluedo and Trivial Pursuit? Why not exercise your faculties, paranormal or otherwise, with our prize quiz: 50 questions to puzzle, titillate, amuse and baffle

YOUR MISSION, should you decide to accept it, is to answer as many questions as you can. (We'd be surprised if anyone knew *all* these, and if they did, we'd suggest psychiatric help). Post, fax or email your answers to the editorial address (see page 3) by 10 January 1997. First prize is a bottle of champagne and a life (and after-life) subscription to *The Skeptic*. Second prize is a £20 book token.

1. Which planet did President Jimmy Carter mistake for a UFO?
2. Which milk drinkers made worldwide headlines in 1995?
3. What literary achievement do Sarah Ferguson and Uri Geller have in common?
4. Which Harvard professor was attacked for publishing a book of supposedly true alien abduction stories?
5. What did the US Air Force see flashing in Rendlesham Forest in December, 1980?
 - a. An alien spacecraft
 - b. A lighthouse
 - c. The Star of Bethlehem
 - d. The lights on a police car
6. At which Scottish Visitors' Centre would you find the creature in the picture below?



7. In which US state is Area 51, the site of a supposed government cover-up of alien landings?
8. What is Occam's Razor?
9. Which planet was claimed by Michel Gauquelin to influence sports figures?
10. Who occupies the Arthur Koestler Chair, and where?
11. What were IQ tests originally invented to do?
12. For what activity are Dave Chorley and Doug Bower famous?
13. What scientist has compared thoughts and fashions



These mysterious bent spoons recently materialised in The Skeptic's offices. What could possibly have caused them to bend? See question 50.

14. What is James Randi's original (that is, birth) name?
15. Who is the only researcher to have served on committees for both the Society for Psychical Research and CSICOP?
16. Which of the following commonly held beliefs are true:
 - a. Hair and nails grow after death
 - b. The Internet is chockful of pornography
 - c. Sun signs determine personality
 - d. Warm water freezes faster than cold water
 - e. Cutting hair makes it grow faster
17. What do Sarah Ferguson and Nancy Reagan have in common?
18. Name the 13th sign of the Zodiac.
19. What is the age of the universe according to the Big Bang theory?
 - a. 7 days
 - b. 6,000 years
 - c. 10 million years
 - d. 10 billion years
20. What is the age of the universe according to Creationists?
 - a. 7 days
 - b. 6,000 years
 - c. 10 million years
 - d. 10 billion years
21. How do you account for the difference of the answers to the previous two questions, if any?
 - a. The speed of light is slowing down
 - b. God designed the world to fool us into thinking it's older than it really is
 - c. Mass hypnotism
 - d. Quantum mechanics: the world changes when we try to observe it
 - e. It's a government conspiracy
 - f. Hey, it's only a theory

22. When skeptical author Melvin Harris investigated the Bloxham tapes, to what source did he attribute some of the more obscure details of the past lives recollected by Jane Evans?
23. What is the chance (as a percentage) that you just inhaled a molecule that was exhaled by Julius Caesar in his dying breath?
24. If you wanted to be immortal, which would you join?
 - a. The Mormons
 - b. The Jehovah's Witnesses
 - c. Together Forever
 - d. Alcor

25. Name the lead agents in *The X-Files*.

26. Which UK town, immortalised in a series of books by Arthur Shuttlewood, was the centre of a 'UFO flap' in the late sixties/early seventies?

27. Who started the ley line industry, with his 1925 book *The Old Straight Track*?

28. Is this structure (right) an alien artifact? If not, what is it?

29. Who was inspired to form the Aetherius Society when, doing the washing-up one day, he heard a disembodied voice say to him: 'Prepare yourself. You are to become the voice of Interplanetary Parliament'?

30. Which prominent skeptical author is the alter ego of Dr Matrix?

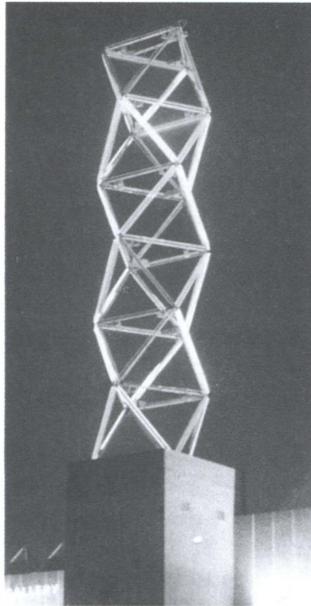
31. Who is Nessie's little sister?

32. Cyril Henry Hoskins, a former plumber from Plympton, was better known as which best-selling mystical author?

33. Which New Hampshire couple claimed to have been abducted by a UFO in September 1961, and produced a 'star map' showing the location of the aliens' home?

34. Which crank ex-psychoanalyst alerted the world to 'orgone energy'?

35. On which Scottish island is this standing stone complex (below) located?



36. George Adamski, pioneering American UFO contactee, and author of *Inside the Spaceships*, had his 'flying saucer' (right) identified as . . . what?

37. What geographical area, whose mysteries were championed by Berlitz and debunked by Kusche, featured in a piece of music and who was the composer?

38. Which West African tribe has been claimed to have an inexplicable knowledge of the star Sirius?

39. If you had severe back problems, which type of therapist would you choose?

- a. A chiropractor
- b. An osteopath
- c. An acupuncturist
- d. An Alexander Technique practitioner
- e. A Procrustean practitioner

40. What so-called fruit is really a vegetable, and what so-called vegetable is really a fruit?

41. Which world-famous author once described Spiritualism as 'the greatest nonsense upon earth' and a 'vulgar delusion of the uneducated', yet later became such a firm believer that he travelled the world promoting Spiritualism?

42. What prolific US sci-fi author wrote classic texts on general science and human anatomy, as well as guides to Shakespeare and the Bible?

43. Which dwelling gained notoriety as Britain's most haunted house before it burned down in 1939?

44. Which famous, brilliant, fictional criminal believed in phrenology? (*Clue: see question 41*)

45. Which Yorkshire stately home reportedly contains the skull of one of its 17th century inhabitants, which was exhumed shortly after burial and bricked up in a wall off the staircase to end a spell of mysterious poltergeist activity?

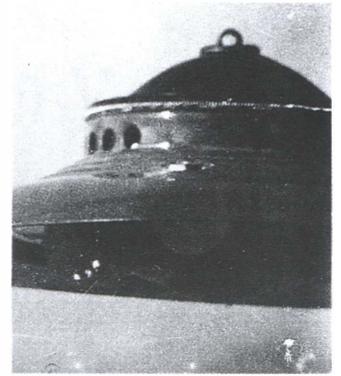
46. At which First World War battle were retreating British troops supposedly saved by angels?

47. What was going to happen to US televangelist Oral Roberts in 1987 if he didn't raise enough money?

48. Which well-known Theosophist claimed to be the real-life model for the heroine of Rider Haggard's novel *She*?

49. Which archaeologist excavated the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey after the spirit of a dead monk had supposedly told him where to dig?

50. **Tie-breaker.** What is *your* explanation, in 50 words or less, of the mysterious bent spoons that materialised in *The Skeptic's* offices? The best ideas will be printed in the next issue.



Quiz compiled by **Wendy Grossman** with contributions from **Chris Willis, Ian Ridpath and Toby Howard**.

The small print. Entries are welcome from all readers, with the obvious exception of the compilers, their families, friends, acquaintances, pets or friends of friends – alive or dead. The editors' decision is final, and fairly arbitrary. Winners, and the answers, will be announced in issue 11.1.

The Wandering Womb

An extraterrestrial report by alien scientist Botulin Saxx, intercepted and translated by our intergalactic correspondent **Nick Kim**, finally explains many of the mysteries of alien abduction tales

*The Largely Unremarkable
Hairless Apes of Sol 3
Really are Largely Unremarkable:
The Myth of the Wandering Womb*

Botulin Saxx
Institute for Exobiology
Proxima Centauri 4

ON HIS PRELIMINARY mapping visit to the third planet in the Sol system, Anthrax H Thrift [1] noted the predominance of an abundant array of common life-forms, largely unremarkable in all respects except one. The female of a species of hairless-ape [2] was said in the local scientific literature of the time to be in possession of a 'wandering womb', an anatomical curiosity unparalleled in space-time.

Authority for this assertion was traceable to a pre-eminent and highly-respected hairless ape scientist-philosopher, by the local name of Plato. This locally famous philosopher of Sol 3 maintained that, unused for a long time, the female's womb became 'indignant' and made its way around the body, inhibiting the body's 'spirits' and causing disease. Thus the hairless-ape word *hysteria*, denoting a psychological state of instability, derived from their word *ustera*, meaning uterus. Males of a prominent tribal group at the time of Thrift's expedition, known as Greeks, were of the opinion that females were inevitably unstable because of this anatomic peculiarity specific to their sex.

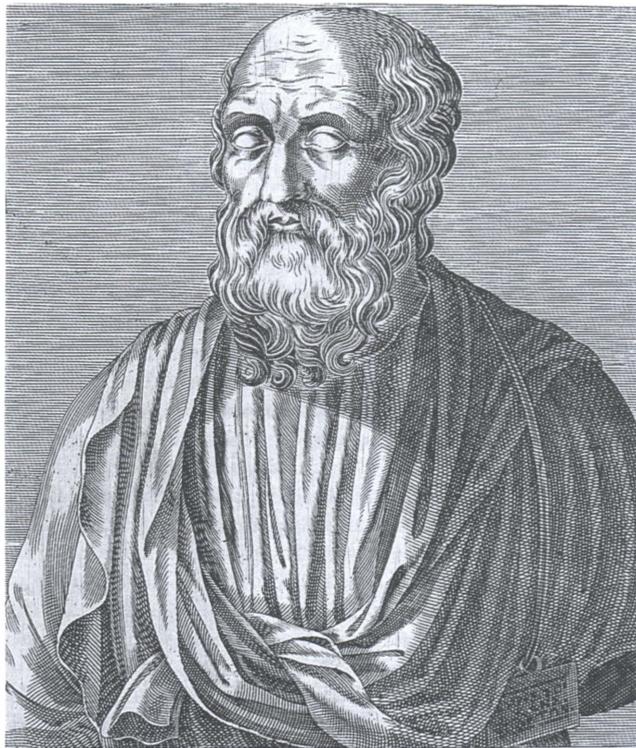
Unfortunately, due to funding constraints, Thrift was unable to conduct a series of controlled experiments on female hairless apes in order to determine the veracity of Plato's account. Crediting Sol's scientist-philosophers with a modicum of competence, he made the assumption that such a locally well-respected figure as Plato was unlikely to have been wrong about so basic a biological fact. Thrift also felt that Plato's use of a word which transliterated 'spirits' was likely to be local shorthand for 'complex biochemical processes'. Thrift's account of the expedition was published in what was at the time a relatively obscure exobiological journal, in a small paper simply entitled: *The Largely Unremarkable Hairless Apes of Sol 3 are in fact Remarkable in One Respect*.

Thrift's now seminal report sparked a revolution in exobiology, and a wave of fascination across the wider

galaxy, both of which continue unabated to this day.

Over the intervening centuries and at latest count, speculation about the wandering wombs on Sol 3 has resulted in the preparation of some 25,396 scientific manuscripts, 954 books, and 78 plays. In addition, wandering wombs have been the subject of an estimated 1,230 conferences, 2.8×10^{13} talk-shows, 8.3×10^{35} popular magazine articles, and an astonishing 5.4×10^{56} personal conversations. In the scientific realm, there are currently no less than eight serious (yet mutually incompatible) theories which attempt to explain (a) how a species of ape could ever evolve a wandering womb in the first instance, and (b) why that species would want to keep a wandering womb once they had it.

In the meantime, and as far as the author is aware, it appears that no one has yet had the opportunity (or inclination) to experimentally validate the original report, by direct medical examination of the hairless apes of Sol 3. This is indeed surprising, given the now foundational importance of Wandering Womb Dynamics (WWD) to current thinking in exobiology. The aims



The hairless ape known locally as 'Plato', whose 'wandering womb' theory inspired Dr Saxx's research

of this work were therefore to address this oversight by direct examination of a large cohort of female specimens of the hairless ape of Sol 3.

Materials and methods

Over a period of 17 local years, a total of 50,000 females of the hairless ape were collected from the complete range of geographical areas on Sol 3 over which hairless apes are endemic. Care was taken to ensure that the composition of the cohort accurately represented the larger population from which the sample was drawn, both in terms of age distribution and tribal affiliations. In addition, some 2500 male specimens were collected as control samples.

Some initial difficulty was encountered in sample collection, since during daylight hours, the hairless apes have a tendency to unexpectedly change their location, meaning that the precise coordinates of an individual as established in the upper stratosphere were frequently incorrect by the time we arrived at ground level. After some experimentation, the most satisfactory solution to this problem was found to be to collect specimens at night, directly from their sleeping quarters, where they were generally to be found in a more quiescent state [3]. Samples were usually collected from suburban regions of major and minor cities.

After being located, specimens were immobilised using a Tru-Shot 5000 Immobilizer Ray (Betellax, Inc. Betelgeuse 19) and transported to the waiting laboratory aboard ship using a standard Tractor Beam (Beams-R-U's, Rigel 7). Use of the Immobilizer Ray, though not conventional, was considered to be important in this work, because we wanted to ensure that the womb would remain as it was at the precise time of collection, and would not have the opportunity to further wander. For instance, it was considered possible that onset of biochemical crisis associated with capture might cause the womb to always migrate to a specific position within the body cavity. The Immobilizer Ray was also used on the male specimens, because it was found that otherwise, they had a tendency to babble.

In the laboratory, each specimen was surgically examined in order to determine the precise location of its womb at the time of first capture, and then tagged with a miniature implant ('Locate-that-Alien', Exogene Implants Inc, Sirius 3) placed within the epidermal skin at the base of the skull. Womb location was recorded against tag serial number. A small proportion of the female specimens were found to have had their wombs removed prior to capture, presumably as a result of primitive medical intervention; these subjects were released untagged, after being shown the DWIP (see below). Males were used as control specimens: despite extensive and detailed examination, none were found to have wombs. Once tagged, individuals were released back into their environment in such a way as to ensure minimal disturbance to other members of the species who were not



FIG 1. A CALIFORNIAN WOMAN WHO ACTUALLY APPEARED PLEASED TO SEE US. SHE WAS QUICKLY IMMOBILISED.

Nick Kim

participating in the trial, and who were in any case trying to get some sleep.

After a random interval, in all cases of between 30 and 3,653 days (0.08 to 10.0 years) local time (determined using a random number generator) female specimens were recaptured. They were then re-examined in order to determine whether in fact their wombs had wandered from their original location in the intervening period. About 300 of the male specimens were also recaptured: those examined were still found to be entirely unwombed [4]. In 2,336 cases the original specimens either could not be located, or had died in the intervening period; this brought the total number of our cohort to 47,774 female specimens and 2,390 male controls.

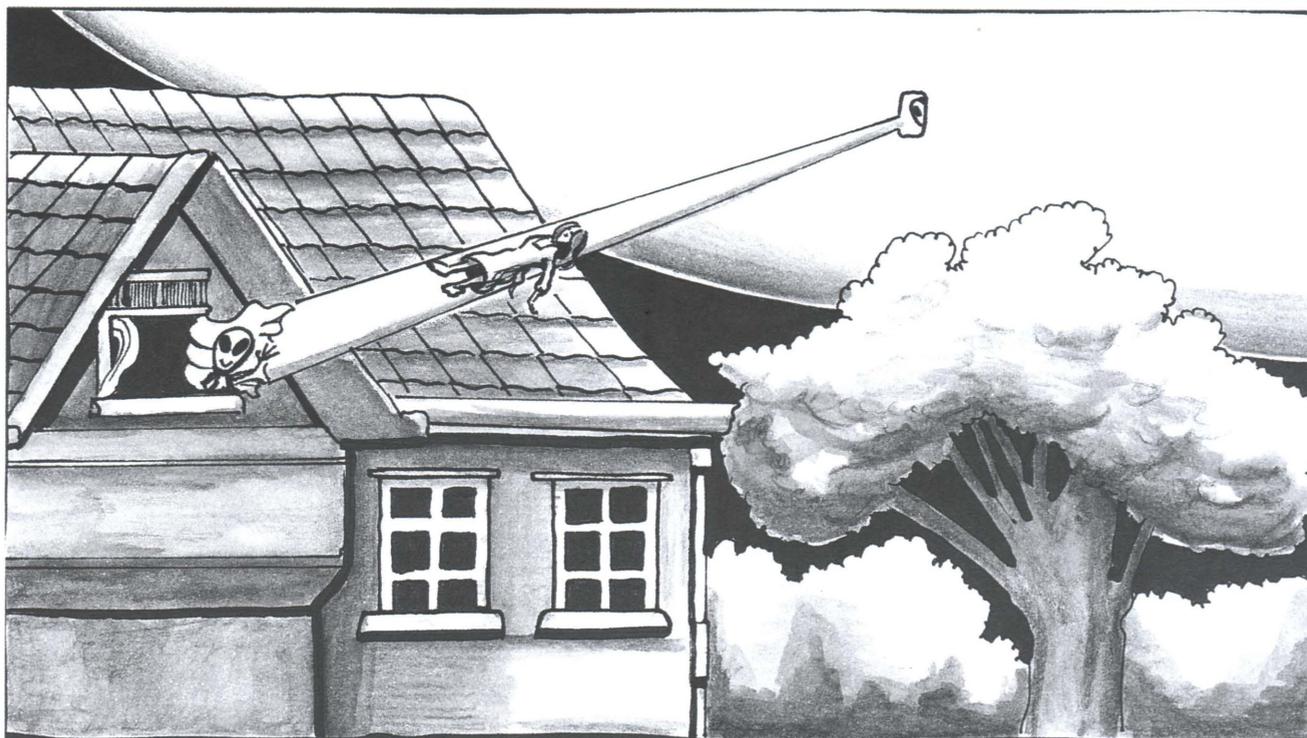
After the second capture, but prior to release, specimens were shown the standard Developing World Information Presentation (DWIP) entitled *Caring for your Home Planet*. This is in keeping with the normal ethical guidelines governing Interactions with Sentient Fauna (ISF) during expeditions to developing planets.

Results and discussion

Overall summary results are presented in Table 1 (below).

	Female	Male
Number of subjects	47,774	2,390
Estimated age range	14-93	15-78
Greeks	932	32
Wombs accounted for	46,889	0
Wombs found to wander	0	n/a
Proportion of wandering wombs	0	n/a

Table 1: Summary of results of womb dynamics for the cohort of 50,164 hairless apes from Sol 3.



**FIG 2. COLLECTING A SPECIMEN USING THE TRACTOR BEAM.
A YOUNG RESEARCH ASSISTANT WAVES FOR THE CAMERA.**

Nick Kim

Disturbingly, no wombs were found to have wandered [5].

It would be difficult to overemphasise the significance of this finding. The results call into question the entire theoretical field of WWD, which itself is now a foundational cornerstone of modern thinking in exobiological evolution. All 47,774 identified wombs in our cohort were decidedly immobile. Moreover, medical opinion was that the wombs were in all cases securely anchored to various other pieces of the internal anatomy, and were highly unlikely to ever have been able to wander in the first place.

The remote possibility that the wandering womb phenomenon was something restricted to Plato's own tribal group (Greeks) was examined; sifting of the data revealed that 932 of the female specimens were of this tribal affiliation, yet it is clear that none of these wombs showed a detectable tendency to wander (see Table 1). After some consideration, an alternative suggestion that wandering womb phenomenon could be something which only occurs on the sub-micron scale was discounted as being overtly silly. The reworking of current exobiologic theory in the absence of WWD will undoubtedly take some time.

It is hoped that the results of this study will in no way detract from the other notable accomplishments of Anthrax H Thrift, or diminish his status as one of the giants of modern science. In retrospect we see that the degree of authority he afforded the hairless ape Plato was perhaps unwarranted, but this oversight is understandable given the external constraints imposed on the earlier work.

However, it should be noted that the findings of this research also throw doubt on another branch of modern science, which remarkably enough, has also been pro-

foundly influenced by an assertion traceable to the same troublesome ape.

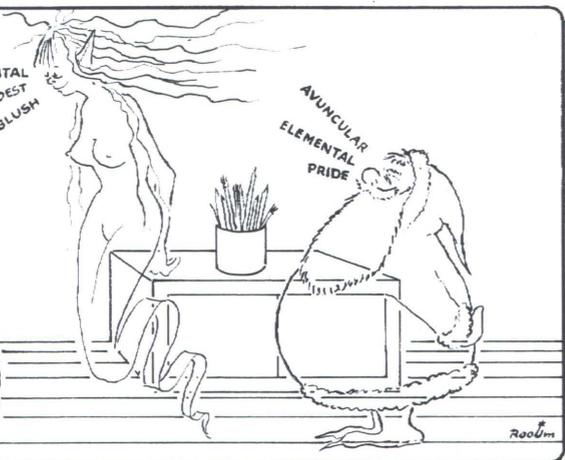
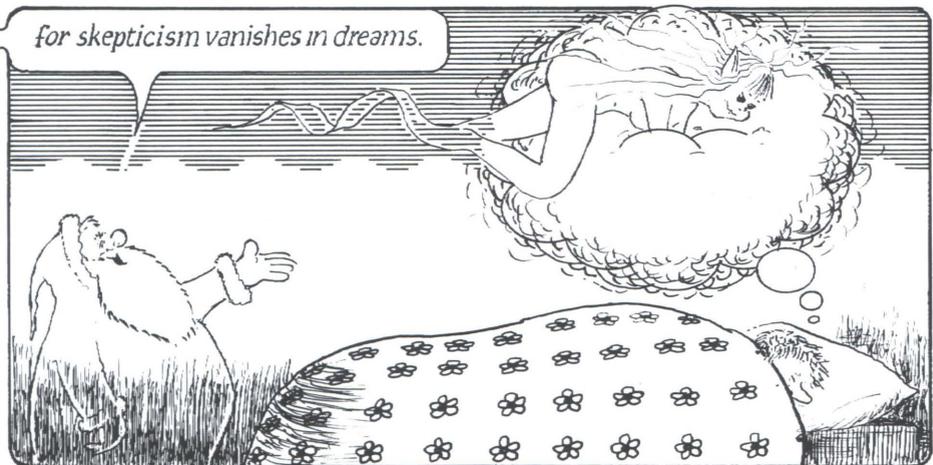
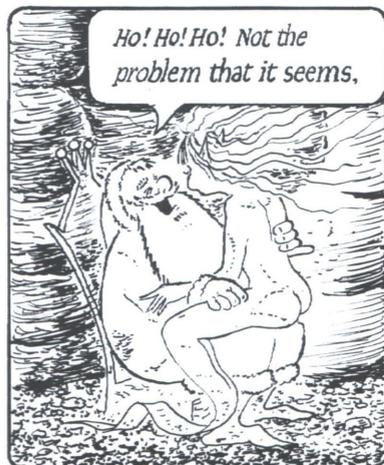
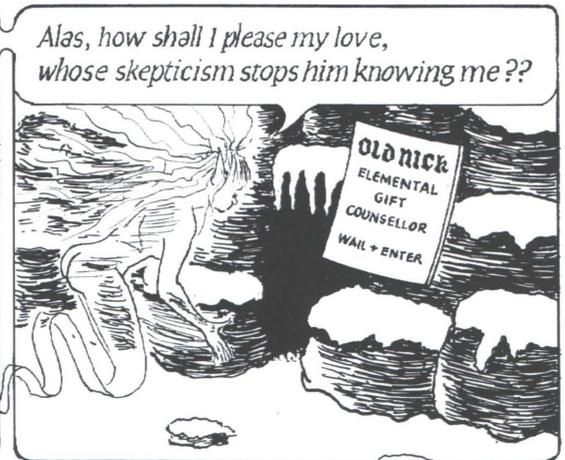
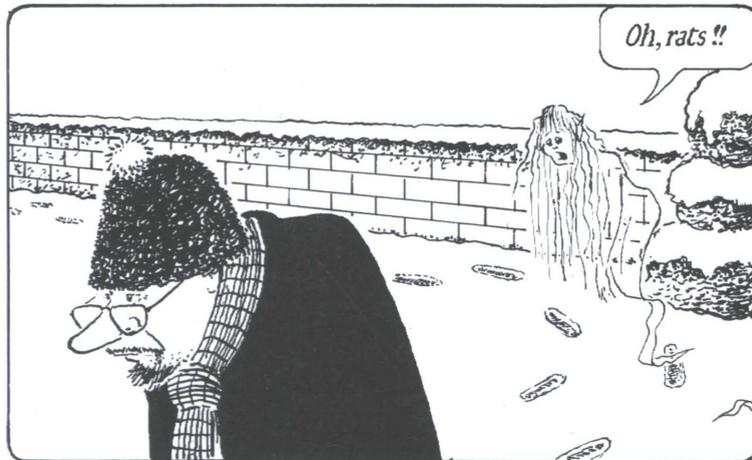
This is Plato's recorded account that Sol 3 once had another continent called Atlantis, which at some point in geologic history sunk beneath the planet's oceans. Perhaps it is also time to examine this report in more detail as well; particularly as it appears to have become inadvertently incorporated at the foundational level into our current understanding of Planetary Geology.

Notes

1. It is a pity that this great scientist is celebrated on Sol 3 only for his brief second visit, on account of the unfortunate prejudicial effect that his intestinal flora (anthrax bacillus) had on the life-expectancy of the hairless apes, who unaccountably favour the use of *E.coli* for organic digestion.
2. The so-called hairless apes of Sol 3 do in fact have a small amounts of hair, localised about the head, under-arm and pelvic regions; however, in order to avoid confusion, the authors will adhere to the conventional nomenclature introduced by Thrift.
3. Except when found as pairs in seedy motels.
4. Curiously, some males appeared to have enjoyed this procedure the second time around.
5. This sentence gets a paragraph to itself for dramatic effect.

Botulin Saxx is an interplanetary scientist and cartoonist from a highly advanced civilisation who bears not the slightest resemblance to the New Zealand scientist and cartoonist, and frequent *Skeptic* contributor, Nick Kim.

SPRITE



From Penny Dreadfuls to Video Nasties, and back again

In the wake of recent controversy over David Cronenberg's film of J G Ballard's 'Crash', Chris Willis is skeptical of glib answers to social problems, and laments a resurgence of Victorian values

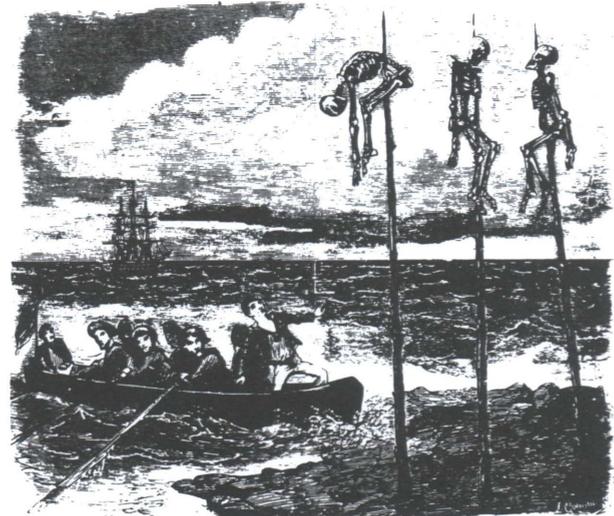
THERE ARE STRIKING SIMILARITIES between the modern moral panic [1] over 'video nasties' and Victorian concern over readership of 'penny dreadfuls'. Press coverage of both issues uses similarly emotive language to portray a similar situation: a middle-class panic over working-class juvenile crime, focused strongly on working-class adolescent boys, whose favoured forms of entertainment are seen as an incitement to criminal activities. Both moral panics reveal middle-class social assumptions regarding childhood, class and gender

In our increasingly secular society, videos seem to have taken over from the devil as a convenient scapegoat for crime. 'The devil made me do it' is no longer a believable excuse, but 'Video violence made me do it' is an acceptable alternative. Young viewers are presumed to be infinitely impressionable. The child's mind is regarded as a *tabula rasa*, despite the tendency of modern child psychology 'to think about children as active processors and seekers of information which try to fulfil their current needs rather than passive subjects' [2]. In a bizarre reversal of the true situation, the child is seen as a passive recipient, while the inanimate (and therefore passive) book or video is seen as an active object capable of exerting a malign influence. This oversimplifies the act of viewing.

After completing a year-long study of video violence and young offenders, Ann Hagell of the Policy Studies Institute expressed concern that 'attention is being misdirected to what children can get hold of. I think the important question is not what they watch but how they interpret what they see' [3], a point which is all too often ignored.

Videos on trial

Perhaps the most notorious 'video nasty' of recent years is *Child's Play 3*, the film alleged to have inspired the horrific murder of toddler James Bulger by two young boys. In his summing up at the end of their trial the judge, Mr Justice Morland, commented 'I suspect that [the killers'] exposure to violent video films may in part be an explanation' [4]. The tabloid press largely ignored the 'in part' and went on to create a fine moral panic about the evil influence of video nasties. The *Sun* declared that 'An x-rated video may have sown the seeds of murder in the mind of one of James Bulger's killers' [5] and the *Daily Mirror* carried the banner headline 'Judge



SKELETON ISLAND:
In *THE PIRATES BURIED TREASURE*.
By J. J. BURNETT, author of 'Through a Thousand Perils,' etc.

CHAPTER I.

HAZY WEATHER.

THE Manabique Channel is not the pleasantest or the safest cruising ground in all seasons of the year, but then necessity has

no choice, and Captain Ralph Douglas had to take his little gun-boat, "The Hornet," wherever a slave was most likely to be found, and that was sometimes in very queer places indeed—they did not seek him, the reader may be sure, and when Mahomet found that the mountain did not come to him, it will be remembered that he had to go to the mountain.

"The Hornet" was a neat little craft, and carried twelve guns and a hundred able-bodied seamen, besides her marines and officers. The "Hornet" had proved that she could sting too, for she had made

some important captures, and was the terror of the whole African slave coast. She had captured and destroyed fifteen slaves in less than nine months.

But on the night on which our tale opens the slapper little gun-boat had enough to do, in combing wind and sea without looking after anything else, for the ocean had risen to its wrath, and was hurling its crested billows through the narrow strait with a velocity and force that were truly appalling.

But it takes a good deal to appeal a British sea-

Blames Violent Videos' [6]. *Child's Play 3*, a film about a doll which comes to life and commits a series of murders, had been rented on video by the parents of one of the boys shortly before the murder. There were striking similarities between incidents in the film and the murder. However, the police had not introduced the video as evidence in court because there was no evidence that children had actually watched it [7].

Whether or not it had played a part in inciting the boys to murder, the video provided an easy scapegoat. The tabloid press simplified the moral issues by concentrating on the video to the exclusion of virtually all other possible influences on the killers. On the day after the judge's summing up, the *Mirror* devoted its first pages to sensational coverage of the 'evil' video, but it was not until page 21 of same issue that the paper mentioned the

killers' 'pitifully deprived background' which could also have been a contributory factor [8]. Later *Mirror* coverage included interviews with video's director, David Kirschner, quoted as saying that *Child's Play 3* was 'never intended for kids' and that he would not let his own children watch it, even though they had walk-on parts in it [9].

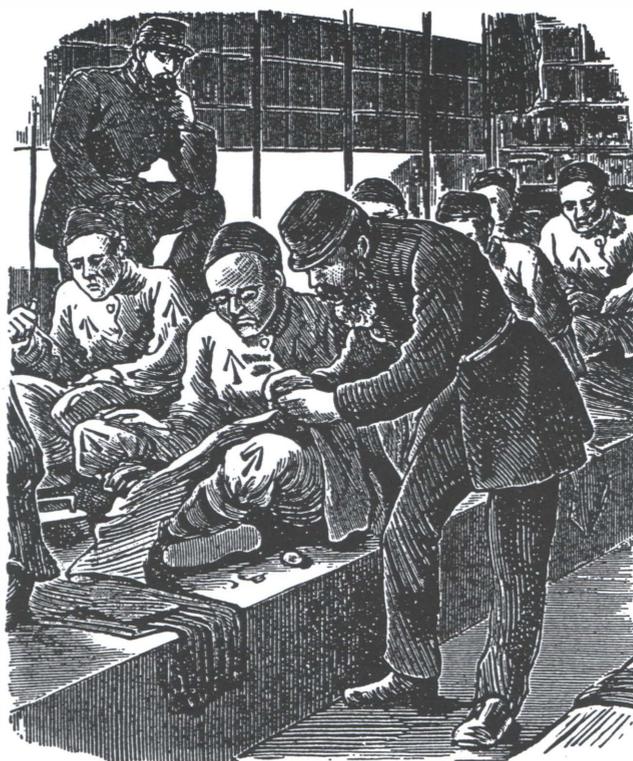
The *Sun's* coverage was even more graphic than that of the *Mirror*. The front page of the 26 November issue carried the banner headline 'For the sake of ALL our kids ... BURN YOUR VIDEO NASTY', launching a campaign to destroy all copies of *Child's Play 3* by asking readers and video shops to burn their copies [10]. This is an odd reflection of the *Sun's* perception of their readership – the appeal seems to implicitly assume that *Sun* readers already had this film in their possession. Page 11 of the same issue carries a graph showing the heart rate of a *Sun* journalist who watched it while wired to a heart monitor. Her heart rate increased at most violent points [11]. Quite how this is meant to prove the video to be an incitement to murder is not stated: the *Sun* seems to think it is self-evident.

The same issue carried a story headed 'Sick movie made my son a demon', which began 'A boy of six turned into a demon after being 'possessed' by the video doll Chucky, a mum said yesterday' [12]. Tabloid journalists wrote about the film almost as if it were a sentient being with malignant intent, thus reflecting the plot of the video itself which features an inanimate object (a doll) which comes alive and has evilly destructive urges. However the *Mirror* did admit that '[violent videos] alone cannot create evil but they inevitably must affect young minds' [13]. Ironically, tabloid coverage increased sales and rental of the video. The *Mirror* of the 27 November carried the headline 'Ghouls queue to hire Chucky horror video' [14].

The moral panic was not confined to the tabloids, or even to newspapers in general. The *Guardian* recorded that 'Within minutes of the jury reaching guilty verdicts at Preston crown court, a Commons motion was tabled calling for a Home Office investigation into the role that TV and video violence played in creating the psychological impulses for this murder' [15]. It seemed unbelievable that two young children could have committed so brutal a crime, and blame began to be displaced from the murderers onto the films' adult makers, distributors and viewers. David Alton MP, never slow to comment on 'moral' issues, was quoted in the *Sun* as saying, 'Our homes have been penetrated by garbage. If you dress murder and rape as entertainment, how can a child know right from wrong?' [16]. On 12 April 1994 Home Secretary Michael Howard 'announced tougher censorship laws to protect children from "video nasties"' [17].

The Victorian connection

Similar concern over violence presented as entertainment was felt a century earlier. Rising juvenile crime rates from the mid to late nineteenth century coincided with an increase in working-class literacy and the growing availability of 'penny dreadfuls', which were widely read by adolescent boys. Usually sold in penny instalments (hence the title) these publications gave the juve-

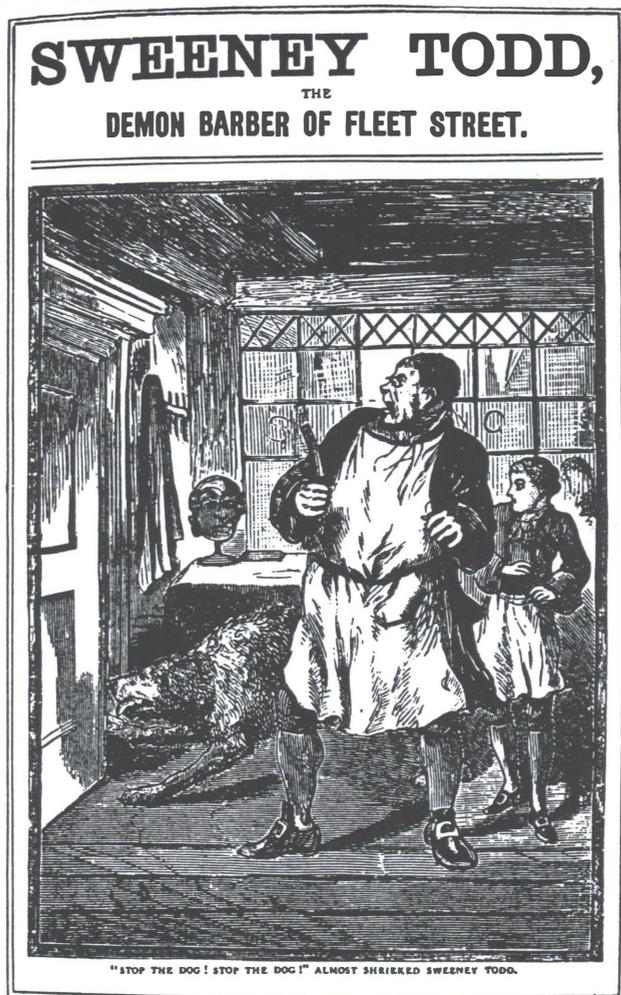


nile reader a weekly diet of murder, mystery and mayhem with a smattering of piracy and highway robbery thrown in for good measure. They were one of the earliest forms of literature to target children directly instead of via their parents, catering for adolescent boys' tastes at a price they could easily afford. Parents could not be sure their children did not read penny dreadfuls any more than modern parents can be sure their children do not watch violent videos.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards penny dreadfuls provided an easy scapegoat for virtually all male juvenile crime. Much of the concern came from clergymen, journalists and magistrates [18], who seem to have assumed that the penny dreadful readership was almost entirely young, working-class and male, exactly the audience that twentieth-century commentators consider most at risk from the 'bad influence' of video nasties.

The main stock-in-trade of the penny dreadful consisted of glamorised accounts of real-life, male criminals, notably pirates and highwaymen. Contemporary commentator Francis Hitchman objected to their 'glorification of vice and crime' [19] which gave the impression that 'no life is so delightful as a life of roguery tempered with violence' [20]. As a further incitement to lawbreaking, penny dreadfuls portrayed a world where 'all officers of the law are "tyrants" and oppressors, whom it is the duty of "spirited lads" to resist to the uttermost' [21]. He described penny dreadfuls as 'The literature of rascaldom – a literature which has done much to people our prisons, our reformatories, and our Colonies, with scapegraces and ne-er-do-wells' [22].

Harriet Martineau, one of the few female commentators on the subject, considered penny dreadfuls to be a literature 'of animal passion and defiant lawlessness' which 'prepar[ed] the young for convict life' by 'exciting the imagination, and giving a glow of romance to a hard



and sordid mode of life' [23]. However, she felt that the root causes of crime were poverty and deprivation, which presented much less clear-cut issues.

Another type of penny dreadful hero was the young boy of the same age and background as the targeted readership, who ran away from work, school or home to become a pirate or highwayman. Middle-class commentators feared that this could lead to what would nowadays be called 'copycat' activities among young boys who were insufficiently able to distinguish such stories from reality. In articles aimed at an adult, middle-class readership, Edward Salmon complained that 'boys may be driven to sea or to break into houses by the stories they read' [24] and cited cases including that of 'a youth [who] was so maddened by reading one of the tales provided for his entertainment that he shot dead his father and brother' [25].

Writing for a similar readership, Francis Hitchman quoted the anonymous author of *Five Years of Penal Servitude, by One Who Has Endured It*, who said of the young criminals he had met in Newgate: 'Their heads had been stuffed with the rubbish they had read of gentlemen pirates, highwaymen and bandit captains' [26]. This style of social comment was echoed over a hundred years later by the tabloids' use of anecdotal 'evidence' [27] and quotations from anonymous 'experts' [28] to 'prove' that video nasties incite children to crime.

In court, boys accused of crimes often claimed to have been led astray by penny dreadfuls. In 1885, Sir

Thomas Chambers, the Recorder of the City of London, complained that 'there is not a boy or a young lad tried at our Courts of Justice whose position there is not more or less due to the effect of unwholesome literature upon his mind' [29]. However, these boys may well have been exploiting middle-class fears in the hope of getting lighter sentences. In 1881, Thomas Wright, a writer on working-class life, said that:

'It often happens, we are aware, that some juvenile till-robber is found to be a reader of penny dreadfuls. Nevertheless, we cannot agree with the conclusion usually taken in these cases that the reading and robbery stand in the relation of cause and effect. Young gentlemen "in trouble" are ready enough to avail themselves of this plea when it is put into their mouths.' [30]

Mainstream publishers for the juvenile market may have had a vested interest in whipping up hysteria against penny dreadfuls. In 1893 newspaper magnate Alfred Harmsworth, who certainly understood the power of the popular press, claimed that:

'It is almost a daily occurrence with magistrates to have before them boys who, having read a number of "dreadfuls" followed the examples set forth in such publications, robbed their employers, bought revolvers with the proceeds, and finished by running away from home and installing themselves in the back streets as "highwaymen". This and many other evils the "penny dreadful" is responsible for. It makes thieves of the coming generation and so helps fill our gaols'. [31]

This was undoubtedly a popular view, but it is worth bearing in mind that Harmsworth was saying this in first issue of a new 'wholesome' boys' weekly which competed with the penny dreadfuls for an audience.

It was not just the existence of penny dreadfuls that was the problem: it was their large circulation. According to J J Tobias,

'The sale of tales of this sort in penny parts was said to have been proceeding in the large towns since 1844; 100 such series were circulating in London in 1850, we are told, and they were taken round this provinces by hawkers' [32].

Some claimed a readership in 100,000s [33]. The 1870 Education Act increased the potential market [34], and in 1890, the *Quarterly Review* complained of

'this foul and filthy trash, circulating by thousands and tens of thousands week by week amongst lads who are at the most impressionable period of their lives' [35].

There is constant emphasis on the 'impressionable' nature of young boys: the implication being that adults could read such publications without harmful effects. The problem lay in the readers as much as in the reading-matter, a point missed by one indignant penny dreadful author who commented

'Personally, I should like to know if any members of the juries who attribute youthful crime to the so-called 'penny dreadfuls' which the tender-aged

criminal is supposed to have devoured, have ever read one of the books on which they pass such wholesale condemnation?' [36].

The majority of studies into the effects of present or past media violence are inconclusive [37]. Speaking on behalf of 23 researchers in the fields of media studies and the psychology and sociology of the mass media, Martin Barker told the *Guardian*:

'Although research into the "effects of media violence" has been obsessively going on for some 70 years now, the outcomes of that research are neither clear nor unidirectional' [38].

However, this has not prevented journalists and politicians from drawing their own conclusions.

Scapegoats then and now

Like penny dreadfuls, video nasties provide a convenient scapegoat for rising juvenile crime rates. In a letter to the *Guardian*, Dr Julian Petley, Head of Communication and Information Studies at Brunel University, pointed out that, 'ever since the "video nasty" panic of the early eighties, horror videos have presented an easy target for those seeking facile explanations of and solutions to the allegedly rising tide of violence in our society' [39]. Lavinia Carey, director-general of the British Videogram Association, felt that in the wake of the Bulger murder, 'People are maybe overreacting and understandably trying to find a reason for this ghastly crime' [40]. Violent reading-matter or visual images are an easy target for moral outrage: they can easily be made subject to stronger censorship in the hope that this will reduce levels of real-life violence. Complex issues involving urban deprivation, poverty, poor education and the so-called 'break-down of society' are more difficult to tackle and cannot be swept aside by a single piece of legislation.

Boys and girls

In the 1990s, as in the 1890s, concern over rising violent crime has focused largely on working-class boys. In tabloid coverage of the video nasty panic, the main fear expressed is that children would become violent after viewing violence. From the context of most pieces, however, it is clear that the word 'children' is almost invariably used to refer to boys. The underlying assumption is that girls rarely watch violent videos or read violent fiction. In discussions of video nasties and penny dreadfuls, girls are seen as potential victims rather than potential criminals, although occasionally fears are expressed that girls may be led into prostitution.

Throughout the past century, unemployed working-class boys have been seen as potential delinquents, who are likely to join gangs of 'mods', 'rockers', triads or whichever other group is the current bogey of urban



roughs, motor-bandits and smash-and-grab thieves' [41]

In the 1990s the threat is seen as even more immediate: thanks to the video recorder, violent visual entertainment has moved out of the cinema and into the home.

Late Victorian middle-class social commentators' fear of the working classes was perhaps inevitable in view of the revolutions which took place throughout Europe in the earlier part of the century. By increasing working-class literacy, the nineteenth century Education Acts increased working-class power. It was not only penny dreadfuls which could be a 'bad influence': in a society with deep social divisions, working-class literacy itself could be a threat to the status quo. Although increasing literacy was generally regarded as a positive move, there was an underlying fear that, as they became more educated, the working classes might no longer be content with their place at the bottom of the social order.

Nanny knows best

In today's so-called 'nanny state', there is a fine line between censorship and social control. By restricting what people are allowed to view or read, the State attempts to exert control over their thought processes, the most extreme illustration of this being Orwell's *1984*, in which the State manipulates the minds of its citizens by controlling all book and music production and TV output. If we accept that censorship is a form of social control, perceptions of the child's mind as a *tabula rasa* must extend to the populace as a whole; a somewhat dubious concept. As Martin Barker puts it, the paternalist state seems to have adopted the principle that 'To see is to want to do - unless you are protected powerfully enough' [42]. Similarly, some nineteenth century commentators argued that literature should be carefully screened so that masses would only see 'wholesome', edifying material [43], an argument which would no doubt find favour with many of Mary Whitehouse's supporters today.

As we go to press, controversy rages over David Cronenberg's film *Crash*. At least one UK local council has already banned it, apparently acting on the assumption that it will turn its audiences into joy-riding, road-raging psychotics who will rush out to crash cars in search of the ultimate sexual thrill. There will no doubt be strong objections to its release on video. Even widely

folklore. This recurrent fear is now linked with a specifically twentieth-century fear of the power of the moving visual image. Writing in the 1950s, Hugh Redwood commented that:

'The boys of the slums are wonderful training material for good or evil. They are children in their love of pictures and music. Hollywood's worst in the movie line has recruited hundreds of them for the gangs of race-course

respected authors and directors such as Ballard and Cronenberg cannot escape being bracketed with the makers of 'penny dreadfuls' and 'video nasties' and subjected to censorship by the 'nanny state'.

There is arguably a case for censorship – but whose values determine what others may read or watch?

Notes

1. The term 'moral panic' was coined by Stanley Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (MacGibbon and Kee, 1972).
2. Lucia Sell-Trujillo: *Questioning the Representation of Childhood: The Case of James Bulger* (unpublished London University MSc thesis).
3. *Guardian*, 2 April 1994, p3.
4. *Daily Mirror*, 25 November 1993, p4, *Guardian* 25 November 1993, p4.
5. *Sun*, 25 November 1993, p2.
6. *Daily Mirror*, 25 November 1993, pp4–5.
7. *Daily Mirror*, 26 November 1993, p4; *Sun*, 25 November 1993, p2, *Guardian*, 25 November 1993, p4.
8. *Daily Mirror*, 25 November 1993, p21.
9. *Daily Mirror*, 29 November 1993, p13.
10. *Sun*, 26 November 1993, p1.
11. *Sun*, 26 November 1993, p11.
12. *Sun*, 27 November 1993, p5.
13. *Daily Mirror*, 25 November 1993, p6.
14. *Daily Mirror*, 27 November 1993, p9.
15. *Guardian* 25 November 1993, p4.
16. *Sun*, 25 November 1993, p2.
17. *Independent*, 13 April 1994 (CD-ROM archive – no page number given).
18. Patrick A Dunae: *Penny Dreadfuls: Late Nineteenth Century Boys' Literature and Crime* (Victorian Studies, Vol 22, Winter 1979), pp133–150.
19. Hitchman, p153.
20. [Francis Hitchman]: 'Penny Fiction', *Quarterly Review*, Vol 171 (July-October 1890), pp 150–171, p155.
21. Hitchman, p152.
22. Hitchman, p152.
23. Harriet Martineau: 'Life in the Criminal Class' *Edinburgh Review* 117 (October 1865), pp 337–371, p347.
24. Edward Salmon: 'What Girls Read', *Nineteenth Century*, 20 (1886) pp 108–17, p523.
25. Edward Salmon: 'What Boys Read' *Fortnightly Review* 45 (1 Feb 1886), pp 255–256. Cited Dunae, pp137–138.
26. Hitchman, p152, quoted Dunae, p140.
27. E.g. 'Sick movie made my son a demon', *Sun*, 27 November 1993, p5.
28. E.g. *Sun*, 25 November 1993, p2.
29. *Boy's Own Paper* (5 September 1885), p783. Quoted Dunae, p141.
30. Thomas Wright: 'On a Possible Popular Culture', *Contemporary Review*, 40 (July 1881), 35, quoted Dunae, pp 140–141.
31. Quoted John Springhall: 'Pernicious Reading? The Penny Dreadful as Scapegoat for Late-Victorian juvenile crime' (*Victorian Periodicals Review* 27:4, Winter 1994, pp 326–349.). Also cited Dunae, p148, and Turner p111.
32. J J Tobias: *Crime and Industrial Society in the 19th Century* (Batsford, 1967), p89.
33. Peter Haining (ed): Introduction to *The Penny Dreadful Or Strange, Horrid and Sensational Tales* (Gollancz, 1975), p15. These figures are not necessarily reliable, there being no Audit Bureau of Circulation at the time.
34. Dunae, p136.
35. Hitchman, p154.
36. quoted Springhall, p347.
37. See e.g. Hilde T Himmelweit, A N Oppenheim and Pamela Vince: *Television and the Child: An empirical study of the effect of television on the young* (OUP, 1958) and H J Eysenck and D K B Nias: *Sex, Violence and the Media* (Paladin, 1980), pp 110–111, which outlines the results of studies carried out since 1958. Brian Brown: 'Exactly what we wanted' in Martin Barker: *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (Pluto Press, 1984), pp 56–87 gives an interesting account of the alleged manipulation of such a study for political ends.
38. quoted *Guardian* 28 April 1994 p7 of G2 section.
39. Letter in the *Guardian*, 27 December 1994, p19.
40. *Guardian*, 26 November 1993, p2.
41. Hugh Redwood: *God in the Slums*, quoted Geoffrey Pearson: 'Falling standards: a short, sharp history of moral decline' in Martin Barker: *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (Pluto, 1984), pp88–103, p93.
42. Martin Barker: 'Nasty politics or video nasties?' in Martin Barker: *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (Pluto Press, 1984), pp 7–38, p37.
43. Dunae, p137.

Chris Willis is a freelance journalist and researcher.

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Music from Beyond the Veil – or Within Ourselves?

Melvyn Willin investigates the musical mediums who claim to receive their inspiration from the ‘spirit world’

MUSIC PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE in many aspects of life, and in most religions, and spiritualism is no exception. The singing of popular songs and hymns has long been thought conducive to binding people together and, in the example of spiritualism, to encourage the communication of spirits. Sceptics, of course, might argue that in the dark conditions, the singing might be used to obliterate the sounds of the mediums’ confederates entering a room, or trap doors opening.

In séances, musical instruments have been used to allegedly prove the presence of spirits when they have been played without physical contact, and outstanding musical feats have been achieved using instruments that mediums have claimed little technical ability upon.

Other mediums have spoken of direct contact with the spirits of departed composers and performers. They have played their music or even written it down under dictation from these discarnates.

Musical instruments and mediums

In the mid-nineteenth century the Davenport brothers became widely known in spiritual circles for their staging of feats involving musical instruments. From the inside of a cabinet they would escape from their bindings and play a variety of instruments including a guitar, trumpet and tambourine. However, they never claimed a spiritual origin for their displays, and referred to them as ‘entertainments’. They may have purchased their props from Ralph E Sylvestre’s of Chicago, suppliers of trick instruments, and their methods involved prowess in escapology [1].

Daniel D Home produced music from accordions at various times under ‘experimental conditions’ instigated by Sir William Crookes, and one such instrument can be found in the London office of the Society for Psychical

Research. James Randi has suggested [2] that Home probably concealed a tiny harmonica in his lips to achieve unknown musical effects. Having acquired an instrument with the correct range of notes I found that a suitable source of breath could not be applied to the instrument from inside the mouth. I wrote to Mr Randi to enquire about this and other information of a musical nature, but did not receive a reply.

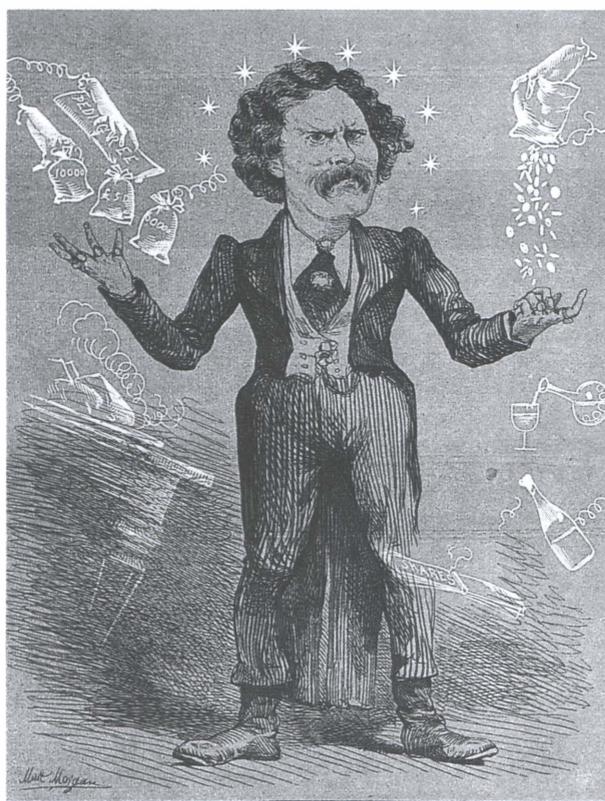
There were many other mediums allegedly producing spirit music from instruments during the nineteenth century. These included the Eddy brothers, who produced musical feats similar to the Davenports, and a prosperous farmer Jonathan Koons who produced spirit music from the violin [3]. And according to *The History of Modern American Spiritualism*, ‘At Tippie’s room, however, the music is all produced by spirits . . . the music is started, as well as continued, by the invisibles’ [4]. During investigations of the well-known medium Margery Crandon, musical manifestations included the

playing of an invisible mouth organ, a ‘psychic’ piano, bugle, bell and other instruments [5].

Inspired performers

The French medium George Aubert claimed to have only a very basic ability on the piano, yet when in trance he was ‘possessed’ by the spirit of ‘Mehul’ and able to play difficult works by many composers. Similarly, Jesse Shepard (1849–1927) was visited by a spirit who told him to develop his singing and he commenced to amaze his audiences with a ‘basso of colossal register’ and ‘in the highest notes it becomes a decided soprano’ [6]. Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899) wrote a cantata ‘The Song of the Stars’ in an inspired state and she quotes many examples of spirit involvement with her music [7].

Mediums often received musical inspiration from



D D Home, 1868

dead composers and performers. For instance, Mrs Leonore Piper claimed J S Bach to have been one of her guides and William Stainton Moses received spirit messages from Mendelssohn.

The violinist Florizel von Reuter wrote two books about the advice he received from Paganini via a type of ouija board used by his mother [8,9] and the English eccentric Charles Tweedale wrote at length about his contact with Stradivarius using the planchette to discover the secret of the Italian violin-maker's varnish. Infuriatingly, the spirits mainly passed on philosophical statements and abstract comments about the afterlife, which could not be verified. Even when von Reuter used his mother's planchette himself, the messages were usually obscure. However, on a few occasions more substantial contact was provided by Paganini. It is alleged that he gave von Reuter advice on how to finger his composition 'La Campanella' [9]:

'Suddenly, without any premeditation, while playing a difficult passage my fingers seemed to be impelled to abandon suddenly the fingering I had used for years, the substitution of a perfectly different fingering taking place as naturally as if it had been a simple passage instead of a very complicated one . . . in the course of the ensuing hour I received at least a dozen new ideas in nuancing, fingering, and bowing, the effect being as though the suggestions were given me through telepathy, or that my bow and fingers were being controlled by another Intelligence than my own.'

Jelly d'Aranyi (1895–1966), a friend of Sir Edward Elgar and a brilliant concert violinist, discovered the whereabouts of Schumann's 'lost' violin concerto through séance activity [10], but she received a great deal of help in her searches from her contacts in the music profession.

Although not necessarily claiming spiritual contact directly as the source of their inspiration, many well-known and respected composers have undergone psychic experiences which have brought them into contact with a 'divine' external source.

Contemporary musical mediums

During the 1970s several musical mediums published their works with varying degrees of success. One such was Clifford Enticknap who believed that he was a channel for Handel's music. He believed that their relationship developed on Atlantis where Handel was known as a great teacher called Arkos, and that prior to that he was on the planet Jupiter with some other great composers. (Prior to this Enticknap was a female contemporary pupil of Handel). Enticknap has written an oratorio – 'Beyond the Veil' – which is four and a half hours in duration and contains such memorable lines as this [11]:

He showed his genius at the keyboard,
when not much more than a little child,



Margery Crandon

and later he amazed the world
by the very incredible speed
with which he wrote his music

For reasons which escape me, Mr Enticknap would not appear to have performed the piece too often.

The musical mediumship of Rosemary Brown has caused controversy since the 1960s when she started to publicise her music from spirit composers. It would seem from the available literature, which is substantial, that most people either believe that she was truly in contact with dead composers, or that she had hidden depths within her subconscious which allowed her to produce the hundreds of works that streamed from her pen during the 1960s and 1970s.

Ongoing research has included interviews with the concert pianist John Lill who believes in the authenticity of her claims, as well as having her music analysed by present day experts on Beethoven (Barry Cooper, University of Manchester) and Chopin (John Rink, University of London) who believe that her music is pastiche. Although some of the music has the hallmarks of the composers who allegedly dictated it ('Grubelei' by Liszt is one such example) most of the music lacks the 'vision' of the original composers when subjected to professional musical scrutiny.

Unfortunately, Mrs Brown has not been willing to discuss or provide access to her music since soon after the publication of her third book *Look Beyond Today* [12] where she spoke of a greater interest in poetry. In a final section of the book she provides details of the fairies that she has seen at the bottom of the garden, and twenty-foot tall angels. For further reading see [13, 14 and 15].

Case studies of musical mediums

I recently conducted some research into modern-day musical mediums. I placed a number of advertisements in newspapers and magazines such as *Psychic News* and *Fortean Times* asking for people who believed that they were receiving music from discarnate sources, to contact me, in confidence.

Similarly, I approached establishments with access to mediums and knowledge of such matters. Some of these, such as the Spiritual National Union and the Institute of Spiritualistic Mediums proved to be most helpful, but I received a frosty response from the Spiritual Association of Great Britain. However, the Society for Psychical Research and the College for Psychic Studies were extremely helpful in providing further contacts.

I devised a questionnaire according to the guidelines set out in the book by Richard Wiseman and Robert Morris [16], but suitably modified to incorporate musical aspects of any alleged mediumship, and sent it to the people who either claimed a spiritual source for their music, or were undecided about its origins. An audio cassette was included with the questionnaire to make any desired recordings accessible and full return postage and packing was enclosed.

The aim of the questionnaire was to try to ascertain

whether there were any trends and similarities to be discovered with the people who claimed to be receiving music from the spirit world.

During the period 1994 to 1996, sixteen questionnaires were posted to appropriate people, of whom two did not respond at all and did not return the cassette or postage. One of these was a 'professional' medium who partly earns her living from claims of receiving discarnate musical inspiration. Another telephoned, declining to fill in the form because of ill-health. Thirteen people returned their questionnaires, having replied with varying amounts of detail.

Ages of participants

A high proportion of the participants were born in the 1930s. It can be speculated that retirement seems to be a common factor since eight of the thirteen were in that situation.

The lack of daytime paid work may have allowed previously stifled attributes to become more highly developed. A greater sense of urgency to explain or exploit talents might be felt as life, in its generally accepted physical plane, approached its conclusion. One only has to attend any of the hundreds of spiritual churches scattered across the whole country to notice the preponderance of people in their sixties and above, and although there are younger mediums beginning to appear on the spiritual 'circuit' this does not seem to be common with musical mediums. The exception to this hypothesis are the alleged communicators with John Lennon, one of whom declined to complete a questionnaire, but who was nevertheless interviewed and provided music purporting to originate from Lennon.

Occupations and education

Several of the participants described themselves as music teachers or performers, but non-musical careers such as a librarianship, the civil service and chartered accountancy were also declared.

The majority of the participants had attended secondary or grammar schools and had achieved O levels and A-levels in a variety of subjects. Some had also attended professional courses after school or in connection with their professions, but nobody claimed to possess a degree in any subject.

However, the most noticeable differences could be seen in the musical education received, which ranged

from none at all to diplomas from various London colleges of music. Most participants claimed at least an interest in music at an amateur level and perhaps a few piano lessons as a child.

Psychic abilities and theories

Clairvoyance, clairaudience or similarly suggestive words were claimed by all the participants, but they varied concerning the actual source of their abilities. For instance respondent #1 referred to her power as 'seership', but she did not provide any definition as to what exactly she meant by 'seership'. Respondent #6 explained, at length, his belief in 'worlds within worlds'. Some individuals felt a binding directly with spirits such as respondent #4 with Novello, and #7 with Caruso.

The most favourable conditions for spirit contact were peace, quiet and safety. Respondents #5 and #8 needed to be alone. Only #2 mentioned the problem of communication when sceptics were present. Respondents #11 and #3 (both singers) spoke of a 'buzz' of nervous energy indicating the presence of spirit.

There was general agreement among the respondents that an external force – most used the word 'spirit' – was guiding them and providing proof of the continuation of the spirit or soul after physical death. They believed that music was providing tangible evidence of this.

Several of the musical mediums were interviewed and recorded on audio and video and others provided manuscripts of their music. Every case was researched in depth to provide details of the medium's life as well as the authenticity of their music.

Appraisal

The majority of the musical mediums seemed to be absolutely genuine in their belief that dead composers/performers were attempting to bring new music into the world through their mediumship. Most did not seek financial gain from their efforts, although several sought public recognition for their gifts.

Some of the mediums went to great lengths to minimize the extent of their musical training, but there were examples of childhood piano lessons and large amounts of practice time in adulthood – often several hours each day after retirement from full-time employment. It could be argued that at this time of life a gap in their emotional and physical lives was being alleviated by such activity. A sense of ur-



J S Bach (1685–1750)

gency may have been experienced as life's expectancy neared its conclusion.

A feeling of personal importance may provide a clue to the claims of spirit dictation since an amateur musician writing a pleasant piece of music does not have the impact on the public, or his/her friends as the claim of divine intervention. Humility may have denied the mediums from naming God as their direct source, and spiritualism provided a convenient alternative. Furthermore, criticism of the music could be redirected towards the spirit composer or the transmission problems encountered.



Modern-day musical medium Rosemary Brown

The music is mainly of a good amateur quality but it does not compare favourably with the music of the composers who are alleged to have dictated it. In their defence, the mediums stated that the transmission from the spirit world to the material world, as well as their own brain hampering the process, has a detrimental effect on the music. However, on some occasions the music or performance was felt to be exactly in accordance with the spirits' wishes and yet the results were still professionally below standard.

Whatever the genuineness of the musical mediums' beliefs, they have nevertheless achieved results which they could not have normally been expected to. They have been inspired by their beliefs to devote considerable amounts of time and energy into producing music and have received little in return for their efforts other than ridicule.

Conclusion

It would seem from past and present sources (for example, various editions of the *Groves Dictionary of Music*) that musical mediums, despite the claims of the spiritual establishment, have not achieved a high enough standard of composition or performance to be acclaimed by professional musicians. The exception is Rosemary Brown who has received some support for her music.

To a large extent they bring about this comparison themselves by entering the 'domain' of the professional musician. Although there may be aspects of professional jealousy (or snobbery) at any amateur's attempts to compete with a professional, one hopes that genuine ability would be acclaimed accordingly. If the mediums claimed to be 'inspired by' the composers concerned instead of being 'dictated to', then the musical establishment would probably accept their music more willingly.

To accept the claims of the musical mediums one has to suspend belief in the reality that one has been taught throughout one's life. It is possible at times to enter a trance-like state, for instance, when being totally involved emotionally with a piece of music, but in a fully alert analytical state of mind, a transcendental feeling is not

achieved. This may be the clue to an understanding of the creative force at work in a medium.

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Get a life – forever!

An extraordinary group of people are claiming the future as their own, reports Toby Howard. But will they share it with the rest of us?

AGENTLEMAN by the name of 'Max More', along with his colleagues 'Tom Morrow' and a fellow with the unlikely – but perfectly legal – name of 'FM-2030', are founding members of an extraordinary society. They want to live forever, and they don't believe in taxes. They call themselves 'Extropians', and they are straight out of the pages of a sci-fi novel.

Punning on 'entropy' (a measure of the disorder of a system), 'extropy' is defined by Extropians as 'a measure of intelligence, information, energy, vitality, experience, diversity, opportunity and growth'. Sounds familiar? Maybe, but your average Extropian is far removed from your average New Ager.

Extropians reject all claims of the paranormal and pseudoscience, and deny any supernatural being, force or destiny. Their 'religion', if we may call it that, has two strands: organised optimism, and complete devotion to the power of science. Extropians believe that science, technology and the scientific method offer the only possible hope for our future. Or, rather, *their* future.

Extropians are unrepentant techno-freaks. Stimulated by the Internet, Virtual Reality, designer drugs, Artificial Intelligence and fuzzy logic, they look forward to a time when we have control over the ageing process; when we can directly stimulate intelligence using 'smart' drugs; when nanotechnology will create tiny machines the size of cells, which will travel through our body and repair it; and ultimately a time when our minds can be 'uploaded' into computer networks, freed from the fragile neurochemical substrate of the brain. The final step is to take humanity into space, to start civilisation again, and this time, to get it right.

The Bible of the Extropians is the *Extropian Principles*, a dynamic document which changes in parallel with developments in Extropian thought. Rather like a piece of computer software, the *Extropian Principles* has a 'version number', currently 2.6. There are five principles: Boundless Expansion, Self-Transformation, Dynamic Optimism, Intelligent Technology and Spontaneous Order. 'BEST DO IT SO' say the Extropians, acronymically.

'Extropianism is a transhumanist philosophy', Max More states, claiming that we become 'transhuman' when 'technology allows us to reconstitute ourselves physiologically, genetically and neurologically'. But the transhuman is merely a transition phase. The ultimate goal is to become 'posthuman': to progress beyond our unreliable fickle biology; to abandon our ancient biochemistry, and to become an ex-person.

What Extropians visualize is nothing short of a complete transformation of the human race: they envisage a new, self-organising society, comprising 'posthuman'

humans with dramatically enhanced physical and mental abilities.

The idea isn't particularly novel. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote about this over a hundred years ago: 'I teach you the Superman. Man is something that should be overcome' (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part 1, 1883). Nietzsche, tragically, spent his final years insane and paralysed. The Extropians intend never to die, and to remain saner and healthier than the rest of us unenlightened slobs for all of eternity.

Extropians are bright. They realise that technology isn't yet *quite* up to the job of backing up our personalities onto computer disks. So, many Extropians are opting for the 'freeze your head to save your ass' solution, a sort of buy-now-pay-later philosophy where they surrender their heads to a cryogenic flask, to be frozen in liquid nitrogen, until such time as technology is advanced enough to either revive their brains or scan the frozen neurological structure to extract the encoded 'self'. It's quite a gamble, and it's expensive.

Along with their posthumanist manifesto, Extropians have a heavy political agenda. They don't want an imposed government of any kind. They favour a free market in which cooperative corporations trade ethically and establish holistic price structures (remember, most Americans still haven't heard of Robert Maxwell). At an Extropian party Romana Machado, one of the more colourful Extropians, turned up in leather dominatrix gear, with her boyfriend on a leash. She was 'the State', her boyfriend 'the Taxpayer'. Those wacky Extropians!

Between you and me, I worry about these VEPs, these Very Extropian Persons, as they refer to themselves. Although their optimism makes a welcome change from much current fatalistic pre-millennium thinking, I can't help but detect a whiff of self-satisfaction and – dare I say it – selfishness. Their optimism appears to be focused squarely on themselves. The idea of a 'me' generation which might last forever is rather scary. Somehow I can't picture these Extropians manning soup kitchens or distributing clean needles in an inner-city ghetto.

But I mustn't be too skeptical. Maybe after I'm long gone, they'll still be around to prove me wrong.

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The Extropians, are, naturally, electronically contactable. Email extinfo@extropy.org, or visit their Web pages at www.c2.org/~arkuat/extr/. Or snail mail 13428 Maxella Avenue #273, Marina Del Ray, CA 90292, USA.

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Ask Apollo

Marjorie Mackintosh

*A look at the life and times of the Delphic Oracle,
Greek hot-line to the wisdom of the Gods*

THE ORACLE OF APOLLO at Delphi in Greece is the best known of the many oracles that dotted the ancient world. It was famous in ancient times and its name has endured while Dodoña, Didyma and Klaros have been forgotten by all but a handful of experts. But what actually happened at an oracular shrine and what sort of things did Apollo tell those who came to seek his advice? The main sources of our knowledge are ancient writers like Herodotus writing in the fifth century BC and Plutarch much later in the first century AD. Ancient writers and archaeology allow us to piece together much of the story.

The sanctuary sits on the side of Mount Parnassus looking down over the deep valley of the Pleistos River and beyond to the Gulf of Itea. It is a very beautiful site and it is not at all surprising that this was chosen as a sacred place. Indeed, it was believed that Delphi was the centre of the world and the omphalos, the stone that was the navel of the earth, was kept here.

Origins

The origins of the oracle are lost in history. There was a settlement at Delphi from the late second millennium BC; but the earliest indisputable evidence for a sanctuary comes from the 8th century BC in the form of offerings of figurines and tripods – the three legged stools associated with Apollo [1]. If there was an oracular shrine there from the Bronze Age, material evidence for it has disappeared. But myths suggest that Apollo was not the first deity to take up residence at Delphi. Using mythology as history is, like using the Bible as history, pretty suspect. However, in all variants of the story of Apollo's arrival at Delphi, he fights and kills a serpent already in residence. In one version, the snake guarded the shrine of Ge or Gaia, the earth goddess, who had an oracle there [2], possibly the memory, preserved in myth, of a real Bronze Age shrine. Moreover, it seems that in the 6th century BC, Ge did indeed have a shrine beneath the terrace of Apollo's temple [3]. So it is possible that the myth harks back to a real event, the ousting of the followers of one deity by those of another. The serpent that Apollo fought and killed was called Python. He is remembered in the title of the woman who delivered the oracles, Pythia [4].

Whatever the truth, from the eighth century BC onward, Delphi was inhabited by Apollo. The sanctuary came to have special significance among the ever-quarrelling Greeks because of its status as a national shrine. It was above the petty rivalries of the little city-states and



tribal groups that made up ancient Hellas and was considered, therefore, to give unbiased advice [5]. The sanctuary consisted mainly of a processional road, the Sacred Way, that wound its way up to a large temple. Above the temple was a theatre and higher up the slope, a stadium for the Pythian games held in the god's honour. Along the Sacred Way, suppliants would have seen small columned buildings, the treasuries. They were exactly what their name implied: homes for the treasures that cities and individuals gave to Apollo [6].

It is hard to imagine today what the site would have looked like in its heyday. Buildings were white and roofed in red. Reliefs decorating the buildings and statues lining the Sacred Way were painted in bright colours. The treasuries housed gold objects, trophies, statues and anything of value that had been donated to the god. The sumptuousness of the offerings is suggested by a few of the gifts known to have been given by King Croesus of Lydia: a solid gold lion weighing about 250 kg set on a pyramid constructed of 117 bricks made of a mixture of

gold and silver, and two large bowls, one of gold, the other silver [7].

Questions and answers

We know a reasonable amount about the public face of the oracle and how it worked. This was not a secret cult but unfortunately there was no ancient anthropologist to sit on the sidelines taking notes on the behind-the-scenes preparations. If the signs were right, after preliminary rites culminating in the sacrifice of a goat, the lucky pilgrim was able to ask his (only his, women were not allowed to question the oracle) question. The Pythia, sitting on a tripod in a trance inspired by the god, made a response which was then interpreted for the questioner by a priest. Representatives of governments and dignitaries asked first, private citizens later. Questions would be answered only once a month for nine months of the year. After that Apollo took off on holiday and his half-brother Dionysus stayed behind to temple-sit [8].

During the high period of the oracle, the Pythia's inspiration by the god was taken for granted. She was his mouthpiece, a peasant woman aged at least 50, not necessarily a virgin. There is a tradition that young virgins were chosen as the earliest Pythias and that the practice was abandoned after one was seduced by an enquirer. There is nothing, however, to corroborate this story [9]. In fact, it looks rather like a tale made up to explain the surprising fact that the god's spokeswoman was a middle-aged peasant rather than a beautiful young girl, Apollo being rather partial to beautiful young girls.

In the later centuries BC and the first centuries AD when the oracle was failing and the religious world of the ancients was changing, the question of how the Pythia came to be inspired was a subject of some interest. Quasi-rationalistic explanations were produced which still have a hold today. The most common one is that she inhaled gases from a cleft in the rock inside the temple which put her into a trance state and led to her pronouncements. This story was well known to Plutarch and rather popular among the Romans. It was even retailed some years ago in the *Skeptical Inquirer* [10]. The guide at Delphi will also repeat it, unless challenged [11]. But it is untenable because no matter how hard they have looked, the French, excavating there since the beginning of this century, have never found evidence of gassy crevices or chasms in the region of the temple nor, indeed, would the limestone of the area be capable of emitting such intoxicating gases [12]. But tourists seem to like the story and so it continues to be told.

There is also the theory that the Pythia chewed laurel leaves and this induced her trance. However, the laurel in question was probably the sweet bay, *laurus nobilis*, which we still use as seasoning and very few of us manage any decent prophecies. Laurel chewing has been tried experimentally but to no avail [13]. It is likely that laurel was burned for ritual purification, being Apollo's plant, but there is no reason to think that this had any particular drug-like effect.

The most reasonable suggestion and one most generally accepted by modern researchers is that the Pythia was a highly suggestible peasant woman, perhaps even chosen for her suggestibility, whose trance state needed no chemical or artificial aids. The fact that there were

only nine readings a year and these were accompanied by considerable preparation and ceremonial was probably enough to trigger her response. Whether it worked every time or whether there was some faking is obviously hard to say. The final prophecy delivered to the hands of the applicant, was written in verse by priests who interpreted the Pythia's words. There must have been plenty of room for manipulation.

Hits and misses

It is not surprising to learn that history records both hits and misses. As with our own 20th century seers, the misses tended to be quietly glossed over while the hits were trumpeted to all who would listen. The most famous miss was the failure of the oracle to predict the victory of the Greeks in the Persian war early in the fifth century BC. Indeed, the oracle appeared to recommend surrender [14]. Apollo generally kept a low profile on political matters after this.

However, there are some very famous hits that show the clever ambiguity of the answers that the oracle could give. As just one example, when King Croesus asked Apollo whether he should attack the Persians, the answer came back that if he attacked the Persians, he would destroy a mighty empire. He did – his own. When Croesus complained, Apollo's response was that before he made war on the Persians, he should have asked the god which empire he meant [15]. Obvious, really. The oracle continued rather weakly into the first centuries AD, its treasures finding their way to Rome and later Constantinople.

With the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, Apollo finally packed his bags and left his sanctuary to be rediscovered 1500 years later by tourists. But then he knew that would happen, of course.

Notes

1. Robin Osborne, *Greece in the Making 1200–479BC*, London 1996, 202.
2. Joseph Fontenrose, *Python*, Berkeley, Ca., 1980, 13–21.
3. H W Parke and D E W Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle*, I, Oxford, 1956, 8.
4. Fontenrose, 14.
5. Osborne, 205.
6. Today's visitors can see the Treasury of the Athenians which has been partially restored.
7. Manolis Andronicos, *Delphi*, Athens 1976, reprinted 1994, 8.
8. Parke and Wormell, 17–41.
9. *Ibid.*, 35.
10. Thomas Easton, 'Psychics, Computers and Psychic Computers', *Skeptical Inquirer*, XI, 4, 1987, 384–5.
11. At least the one I talked to did.
12. Parke and Wormell, 22–3.
13. E R Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley, 1964, 73.
14. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Oxford, 1985, 116.
15. Herodotus I, 90

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Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

A big question and a media nightmare

NOT HAVING BEEN BLESSED with any skills as a philosopher, I rarely contemplate my navel in public.

However (you could see that 'however' coming, couldn't you?) in recent months I have been asked a very simple question that I have been unable to properly answer.

Twice this year, I have been approached by groups of students at Manchester University, where I teach. The students, undergraduates taking Film, Drama and Media Studies courses, were making video documentaries on aspects of 'the paranormal', and had found my name through the University grapevine.

Could they interview me on video, they asked? In both cases I agreed. And in both cases everything went fine, as I happily answered their questions: 'Do you believe in extraterrestrials? What do you think about faith healing? Does it matter that a large percentage of the general public believes in ghosts, ESP, astrology and telepathy?'. And then, in both cases, came the clincher, at which point I froze: 'Why do you produce *The Skeptic* magazine?'. I squirmed in my seat, and could only grimace and prevaricate.

The question, and my inability to provide a succinct answer, has a long pedigree. Generally, in the same way that I avoid performing brain surgery or running the country, I avoid appearing on video, TV or radio. It's not that I have three heads, an unusual nervous twitch, or even a particularly terrible hairstyle (although I have heard it rumoured that my own students say I resemble Mr Tony Blair), but when faced with a camera or microphone I quickly assume the demeanour of a gibbering idiot. Whereas for proponents of the paranormal this might prove a positive boon, for a skeptic it's a definite liability. Instead, I leave media appearances to friends such as Steve Donnelly and Wendy Grossman, who have the curious ability to not only remain coherent, but to be articulate and witty with it. The swines.

I realise I am revealing to you a huge psychological weakness, but I crave your indulgence. Because it wasn't always this way. In fact, I was quite happily doing radio spots until one fateful morning, when I agreed to do a live interview on local BBC radio with UFO researcher Jenny Randles.

I still have a tape of the encounter, moderated by DJ Alan Beswick, widely regarded as the 'mad dog' of early-morning local BBC radio. He hated me from the word go, probably with good reason, and relentlessly pummelled me on air: 'So you skeptics are a self-appointed group of

judges who go around deciding what's paranormal and what's not?' he barked. 'Not at all. You see . . .' I tried to say, only to be immediately cut short by his next salvo: 'How many members are there in your Skeptical Society? What investigations have you done? What qualifications do you have? You're self-appointed experts, aren't you?'. I tried to respond but could only splutter, continuously interrupted by Mr Beswick. It was not yet 8 a.m., I wasn't getting paid, and I had a headache. I gave up.

Throughout all this, Ms Randles sat impassive, winning almost by default as Mr Beswick vented his spleen on this know-it-all, upstart young academic skeptic. I left the BBC's Oxford Road studios in a daze, hating myself, bashing my car against a BBC bollard. The final score: Randles 1, Howard 0.

All the way home, in between bouts of creative swearing, I asked myself the question: 'Why do I do this?'. Hard to believe, but that was nine years ago.

Most readers will be aware that *The Skeptic* is a non-profit-making enterprise, produced on an entirely volunteer basis. We barely cover our production costs. When you consider that many of our contributors are writers and researchers who actually make their living by selling their work, their donations to this magazine, and their respect for our unrealistic deadlines, are all the more extraordinary. Why do *they* do it? I suspect each has their own answer.

We've been accused of preaching to the converted, as if that were something negative. But isn't this true of any magazine that you pay money for? Does the Queen read *Anarchy Today*? Does Mary Whitehouse read *Playboy*?

Like all editors should, we constantly ask ourselves: Why do our readers read our magazine? What articles might they find interesting? Which books should we review for them? Of course, you do more than just read *The Skeptic*: you pay for its existence. Your bank balance or credit card account is at least £14 a year worse off, or you have bought the magazine from a bookshop for £2. Some magazines rely on adverts. We rely on readers.

There's a short story by Christopher Cherniak in which a person's mind goes into an infinite loop when pondering a certain self-referential question, like 'This sentence contains three errors'. I feel a bit like that sometimes, when I get asked the 'Why do you do it' question.

I realise I haven't offered any answers. Perhaps you have some. Like I said, I'm no philosopher.

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

Skeptic at Large

Wendy Grossman



On technology and compassion

I'VE HAD A sneaking conviction for a long time that today's trash TV talk shows are the modern equivalent of Lourdes: they're places where desperate people go in a last-ditch hope for a miracle cure. In the Middle Ages, people believed in relics and artifacts that might have been in contact with God. Today, we believe in television. That may be why so many who style themselves intellectuals despise it so much; they believe in the Word (written).

As I write I'm watching an edition of *Geraldo* on Sky called 'Divorce Busting.' The idea here is that a bunch of couples come out on stage with lotsa problems, which they recount to the audience. There's the Obligatory Therapist (on the Net, they'd probably call her the ObShrink), who is an 'expert' at salvaging miracles and has 'written a book'. (Aha! you're going to say. TV producers worship the Word (written). They do indeed.)

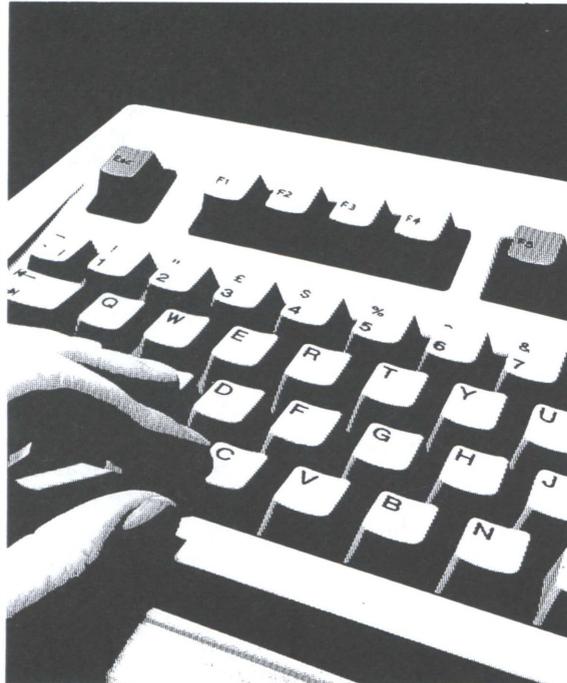
Can these marriages be saved? *Geraldo* is going to find out. He's going to give every single one of those four couples a private (except for the video recorder) session with that there ObShrink and then we're gonna find out that she's right when she says most marriages can make it after all. (Anyone who's seen the Mary Tyler Moore show, that's your cue to throw your knitted beret in the air and try to catch it.)

I remember sometime in the mid 1980s, before I started *The Skeptic*, seeing a big cover story in *Time* magazine about the rise of trash TV, particularly focusing on *Geraldo* – a fist fight had broken out on one of his shows, and worshippers of the Word (written) were asking What America Was Coming To when such things could happen.

That was then, this is now. Now, there are much trashier shows than *Geraldo*, and on the trashiest of these trashy shows, *Jenny Jones*, not long ago a guest killed another guest. Unfortunately, not actually on the show. That would have been *Real Television*, right up there with the live execution *Phil Donahue* would have broad-

cast if they'd let him. Not only would she have gotten ratings, but the show would have been excerpted on every news show in the world. Talk about your great publicity.

The show was one of these things they (meaning Jones, Ricki Lake, and Sally Jessy Raphael) do from time to time: 'My Secret Crush'.



People come on and reveal that they have what Americans currently call a 'jones' for the people they have crushes on, who promptly arrive to hear the news in person, while the audience yells encouragement in the background. Wahoo!

So the thing is, this show had a twist: the secret crushes were same-sex. Now, is that revolutionary, or what? And what happened, apparently, was that the male object of one of these crushes felt so humiliated and ashamed that he went out and shot the guy who had the crush on him three days after the show taped.

You may be surprised to hear the show never aired except in the Michigan court where this guest was tried for murder.

OK, so that's weird. But you might say the guy with the crush was cured. Probably not the way he wanted to be, but cured. Beats waiting for Dr Kevorkian, the Michigan euthanasia specialist.

Around the same time as this case was wending into court, the body of a Maryland housewife was found near the North Carolina caravan of a man who had responded to an ad she sent out over the Internet for someone to torture her to death. The Internet being home to the broad spectrum of humanity that it is, she actually managed to find someone to do this for her, although his lawyer argued that the death was accidental – one of those sex with strangulation things, though without the orange that made that MP's death so picturesque a few years back. What are the odds on that?

My guess is that the lawyer's explanation is more likely than the alternative: that this guy deliberately killed a stranger he met on the Net. People are in general much more likely to murder someone they know. But it's a

balance of probabilities based on little information. It's certainly true, as the *Independent* pointed out a couple of weeks later, after tracing her old postings across the Net, that the parts of the Net she frequented – newsgroups like alt.sex.necrophilia – operate in those twilight areas where you can't tell whether people are serious or indulging in role-playing fantasies.

Her daytime Web sites, which offered tips on low-cost interior decorating, are a David Lynch-style contrast to the email spoor left on her hard disk, which made it clear she had found the method of suicide she wanted: Could she have been saved by a talk show?

The American columnist Barbara Ehrenreich (read her wonderful *The Snarling Citizen* collection) has speculated that the talk shows give their guests their first taste of holding their lives up to community standards, thereby giving them a new perspective. This seems a reasonable interpretation of many of these shows, although without interviewing some of the guests it's hard to be sure.

It's certainly true that the community 'wisdom' they're exposed to is the kind of mainstream lifestyle that the woman from Maryland seems to have run away from, and that each version of this wisdom follows patterns that are partly dictated by the host's personality. Oprah might look gently on alternative therapies, but she also does serious programs on safety and personal finance, while Sally Jessy Raphael drips compassion from behind her large, red-framed eyeglasses and talks to people as if she were their kindergarten teacher (it's astounding no one's ever belted her one for that).

You may be wondering what happened to the four couples on *Geraldo*. The show let a week go by. Couple One (fight all the time; wife feels husband's priorities exclude her and he belittles her) said: every chance we'll stay together; we're learning to talk things out and find solutions to the small things we do that make us fight all the time. Couple Two (guy a womanizer but insists he loves his wife, who stays 'for the kids'): husband says now going to be straight; kids say they want family to stay together and parents are fighting less; wife trying to start fresh as if a new relationship. (*Geraldo* talks on about investing 17 years and not throwing it away – 'Half my life,' nods the woman, who looks 50 – while part of you wants to shout, 'Run! Now!')

And on *Jenny Jones* the audience would leap up and yell exactly that. It's hard not to feel that the *Jenny Jones* show got what it deserved. Of all these shows, it is the one that most ritually humiliates its guests in a mud-wrestling atmosphere where people stand up and cheer when two women pummel the boyfriend they've just jointly busted for what Jones quaintly calls 'cheating'. She means the man kept what appeared to be primary relationships going with both women, who worked together, at the same time, and they found out after seven months when a pager message from one woman was forwarded to him at the other woman's house.

Jones, more than any of the other hosts, seems unable to grasp that her guests might be real humans with real passions; she behaves as though everyone is really a TV simulacrum that can be turned off when the cameras go off and everyone leaves the studio. Perhaps she herself is that way, an extreme version of the problem some performers have of only feeling alive when they're on stage.

The converse side of this mystical perception that technology somehow invents people's lives is nowhere seen more clearly than in coverage of the Net. The Net reflects all of human life, its obsessions, perversions, distortions, and horrors as well as its much higher percentage of humour, bizarre tendencies, cooperative spirit, and general decency.

What it doesn't have is those centralized community standards; the only subjects people on the Net really agree on are messages advertising get-rich-quick schemes on Usenet (dubbed 'spam' and bad), the Net itself (good), and junk email (very, very bad).

People who don't read alt.sex.necrophilia might be surprised to know it exists and might disapprove of the contents if they read them, but in general they don't care; they just don't go there.

Such a cyberspace is almost the exact opposite of the mainstream standards-driven TV talk show: it's a place where the fact that those standards don't apply frees you to experiment with any fantasies you like and find companions to share them.

In this kind of climate, where do evidence and scientific examination fit in? As *The Skeptic* goes into its second decade, we continue to grapple with the problem that we have neither miracle cures to offer nor Neverlands where people can lose themselves and their identities while looking for Mr Goodbar.

The vision we offer seems to be cold and hard-edged, with little comfort or warm fuzzies, and it is universally seen as negative. We need to counter that perception. We are not here to dismiss everything out of hand, any more than we are here to 'believe in' things – miracle cures, telepathy, even technology. We are here to support the long, slow process of the building up of the body of human knowledge by careful, methodical, scientific research.

But we must also remember to have compassion: we work and live with humans.

Wendy M Grossman is a writer and folksinger who founded *The Skeptic* in January, 1987. She can be reached at wendyg@cix.compulink.co.uk.

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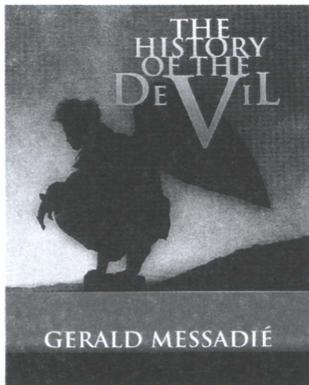
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Reviews



The devil we know

Gerald Messadié, *The History of the Devil* (Newleaf, £20)



The dustjacket gives Gerald Messadié a great build-up.

He is the author of 15 books in French, and has edited the scientific magazine *Science et Vie* (Science and Life). He also has a wide following for his 'methodical, passionate and sometimes scathing debunking of myths'. In this book, Messadié is hunt-

ing for the devil, across all human history and cultures.

Messadié makes his own view clear at the start. He believes the devil does not exist, and that the belief is pernicious. For, he argues, once we accept that there is a personification of evil:

'We find ourselves waging an incessant and fanatical shadow war against Evil . . . [and this] predisposes us to ill will and mistrust, then to intolerance and finally to murder. The foreign is always the enemy, and in this state of mind everything is ultimately foreign' (p7)

For about two-thirds of the book, Messadié surveys human cultures throughout the world and throughout history, arguing that virtually none of them have anything like the devil. There are fractious gods and demons, magic and witchcraft, but no devil, nothing like a prince of pure evil.

The devil was first constructed by Zoroastrian priests, seeking to demonise political opponents about 600 BC. Indeed, Messadié argues, that is precisely the function of the devil: to stigmatise others as evil and to impose one's views upon them.

Coming closer to home, analysis of Satan in the Old Testament shows that his role is essentially that of God's loyal, if cantankerous, lieutenant. It is not until the New Testament that Satan emerges in his familiar colours as the Evil One. As the Christian era progressed, the devil was used in the witch-hunts and the Inquisition's persecutions. Whenever someone wishes to establish a theocracy, the devil is used to attack opponents.

The sheer erudition in this book, and the massive scope of the argument, make it hard to evaluate. I did some checks upon its factual accuracy, and found it passed easily. In addition, Messadié's argument was borne out

by the recent Creation Science dispute: people opposing this fundamentalist nonsense were indeed stigmatised as being agents of the devil!

I found this book provocative, informative and intriguing. If your interests run this way, perhaps you will too.

— Martin Bridgstock

Anecdotal evidence

Robin P Foy, *In Pursuit of Physical Mediumship* (Janus Publishing, £16.99)

This book presents an autobiographical account of the author's search for the type of psychic phenomena traditionally associated with 'dark room' séances (that is, movements of objects, manifestations, apports, and so on).

The initial part of the book details the strange events which apparently occurred when the author sat with the well-known medium Leslie Flint and his first 'home circle' (a group of individuals who regularly meet and attempt to produce psychic phenomena). Later parts of the book outline his setting up of other home circles, the 'Noah's Ark Society' (a society dedicated to physical phenomena) and its most recent off-shoot, The New Spiritual Science Foundation.

This book is jammed full with descriptions of strange phenomena. In séance after séance, objects levitate, fly around the room and several well known historical figures (for example, Winston Churchill and the physicist William Crookes) make guest appearances.

For a skeptic, the problem is one of disbelief. I would be impressed if the book contained strong evidence that such phenomena actually occurred and were not the product of fraud or self-deception. However, this book isn't about such evidence and instead simply presents one anecdote of an uncontrolled séance after another. For this reason I found it all rather repetitive and uninteresting.

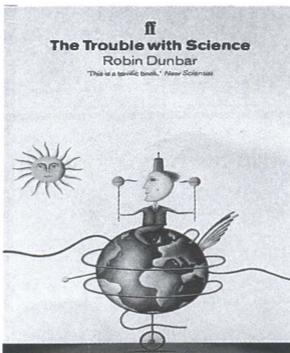
Towards the end of the book the author notes that this type of physical phenomena can, at the moment, only be produced in rather special circumstances (such as sitters groups in which there is a warm and trusting atmosphere). This, for the most part, rules out the possibility of proper testing.

As such, I guess the only way forward is to let the groups develop until they feel confident enough to allow outsiders to properly investigate their claims – until then, I suspect that their anecdotal experiences, and books which report such stories, will not be of much interest to skeptics.

— Richard Wiseman

Science in trouble

Robin Dunbar, *The Trouble with Science* (Faber & Faber, £7.99)



This is a defence of science against various critics, and in particular against those relativists or postmodernists who claim that no certain knowledge can ever be obtained.

The first half of the book is devoted to showing that science, far from being unnatural, is one of the 'genuine universals characteristic of all higher forms of life'. Dunbar provides several inter-

esting cases of proto-scientific reasoning and even systematic experimentation among 'primitive' peoples. Examples such as the use of medical plants by chimpanzees are taken to indicate that science-like reasoning is not even restricted to humans.

In the second half of the book an important complication is brought in: science is not just the use of common sense. It differs from everyday reasoning in important ways, not least in its demands of intellectual precision and its use of theories. Dunbar discusses how it is that our brains are capable of this type of reasoning. He sympathises with the theory that primates have their large brains in order to cope with each other – in other words that our brains are constructed to deal with complex social relationships. In order to substantiate this claim he gives a highly interesting account of complex behaviours among higher non-human primates, such as coalition-formation, tactical deceptions, and kinship relations that may extend back for several generations. Possibly, these observations indicate what our large brains originally developed to achieve. If this is so, then we may be better equipped to deal with social matters than with the natural world.

The final chapters deal with popular science and with the need for an improved science education. Dunbar has rather drastic proposals for change, including a (compulsory?) 'science national service' to be spent for example as a research assistant or as a participant in a conservation programme.

This is a highly enjoyable book, not always uncontroversial but always well-argued. It is a perfect gift to someone who knows very little about science but wants to know more.

— Sven Ove Hansson

Believing Hitler

Gerald Suster, *Hitler: Black Magician* (Skoob Books, £7.95)

With shelves of books on the Third Reich including a dozen biographies of Hitler, Suster informs us that much is yet not known or understood about this man.

He thinks Hitler used black magic to accomplish his ends. Suster has published two books on Aleister Crowley and his circle and considers himself an authority. Suster's mind-set is that black magic exists, and that it is

the science and art of causing changes in consciousness to occur in conformity with will, and that the properly trained human will is, quite literally, capable of anything; and the aim is concentrating the will of the magician into a blazing stream of pure energy. Further, black magic consists of using this energy for material gain, or, above all, for the pursuit of power (page 100). Aside from the fact this is not the energy measured in joules or kilowatt, where did Hitler acquire his training?

Two learning periods are claimed. When Hitler was between 20 and 24 and lived in Vienna, Suster accepts he embarked upon a furious course of reading. He credits him with studying among others Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, H S Chamberlain and Blavatsky. He also credits Hitler with the diligent practice of esoteric disciplines to bring about a greater control of his mind.

The second period was after the War in Munich. There Hitler studied the control of subtle forces under the tutelage of Dietrich Eckart and the Thule Society. Suster sees the former as an important adept, and the latter as a powerful magical order.

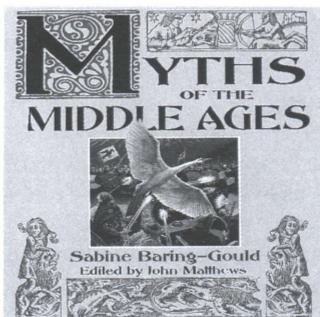
Through intense and systematic study Hitler learned magical techniques which aroused his potential. His Ajna Chakra or Cyclops Eye was opened. Are we really to believe this high-school dropout, the Vienna vagabond, this unemployed would-be artist, who could never settle down to a regular job or regular hours, devoted himself at any time to a consistent course of study of anything? Can we imagine the man who wrote the semi-literate *Mein Kampf* had read, much less understood Schopenhauer or Nietzsche?

Hitler claimed to have read widely, and to have fashioned a world view from his studies. There is very little evidence of what he read, or that he read anything more than the racist tracts of the time. There is, however, evidence he was capable of lying.

— Wolf Roder

Skeptical lessons

Sabine Baring-Gould (Edited by John Matthews), *Myths of the Middle Ages*, (Blandford, £16.99)



ful and illuminating introduction.

This highly readable volume comprises 12 scholarly investigations into the origins of myths such as the 'Sangreal' and the Antichrist. Editor John Matthews has selected these 12 from Baring-Gould's original set of 24, first published in 1869, adding in each case a help-

I confess to never having previously heard of The Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould. As Matthews' entertaining introduction makes clear, he was by any standards a prolific man, producing numerous volumes of poetry, traditional folk songs and fiction, not to mention 16 children and the words to 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. At one time the British Museum library credited him with having more published works than anyone else.

Each of Baring-Gould's essays is well-researched and

easy to read. Some deal with myths which are far from extinct. For example, he explains the derivation of an archetypal 'Fortunate Isles' myth, of which 'Atlantis' is just one manifestation. Similarly, the chapter on the Sangreal suggests that the fable of the 'Holy Grail' is an ancient Druidic tale hijacked by the Christian relics industry for its own purposes.

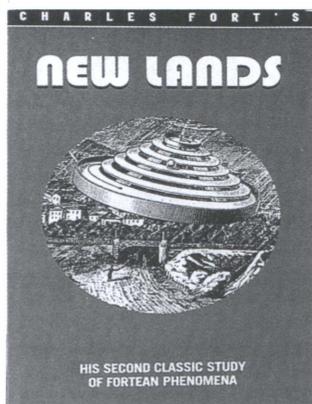
The essays are all fascinating, and contain many good skeptical lessons. For instance, it soon becomes clear that a lack of corroborative evidence, far from hindering a myth's propagation, actually helps it adapt to different cultures and preoccupations. It is also abundantly clear that anything and everything has at one time or another been 'proved' via mystical signs 'interpreted' by the wise, reported eye-witness testimony and other equally insubstantial evidence.

That which has been used to prove *everything* cannot prove *anything*. Baring-Gould was well aware of this, and he was writing before the turn of the century. A shame, then, that so many modern media mandarins haven't quite learned this simple lesson.

— Ian Rowland

Incomprehensible iconoclast

Charles Fort, *New Lands* (John Brown Publishing, £9.99)



I used to have a sneaking admiration for Charles Fort. The sheer doggedness of the man – or rather of his followers as represented in *Fortean Times* – appealed to my sense of the iconoclastic. Alas, my girlish notions have been shattered by a close encounter with the master in the form of *New Lands*, subtitled 'His Second Classic Study of Fortean Phenomena'. This

is a re-issue of the 1923 edition, edited by Fortean scholar Mr X (his legal name).

One of the enthusiasts quoted on the back cover refers to Fort's 'hallucinatory torrent of images and ideas' – not a bad description, though I wouldn't consider it a flattering one.

However, it does sum up nicely the well-nigh incomprehensible writing, the pseudo-profundity of alleged insights and the impression that the author is privy to all manner of Cosmic Secrets of Great Significance that we lesser mortals somehow fail to recognise. Take, for example, the beginning of Chapter Two:

'And our own underground investigations – and whether there is something in the sky or not. We are in a hole in time. Cavern of Conventional Science – walls that are dogmas, from which drips ancient wisdom in a patter of slimy opinions – but we have heard a storm of data outside –'

There's lots more of this, interspersed with mouth-foaming rants against astronomers and scientists in general, equivocal arch asides in the midst of some truly ridicu-

lous ideas (ones which would have been totally off the planet even in Fort's time), as well as the more 'conventional' Fortean accounts of lights on the Moon, phantom soldiers in the sky, falls of organic matter from clear skies and the like.

It's just not worth wading through, even if it is a classic in its field. I would have done better to keep my illusions, so to speak, and surfed the appropriate Web site (www.forteanimes.com) – that, at least, is readable and topical.

— Vicki Hyde

Preposterous arguments

Alan Hayward, *Does God Exist? Science Says Yes!* (Printland Publishers, Hyderabad)

The dogmatic title is probably not the author's own. It contrasts with the courteous, tentative style of the book, and the first edition, in 1978, had a different title.

It is a principle of good debate that in criticising the position of opponents, one should pay attention to their best arguments rather than their worst. So anyone who fancies a good debate with creationism should take note of Alan Hayward.

Other authors have won notoriety with lists of data 'which Darwin's theory cannot explain', some of which are easily explained, while others are not true. Hayward selects only the best examples.

Among Darwinists themselves, the most frequently mentioned is the origin of sex. I once asked in these pages (*The Skeptic*, 5.5) why creationists ignored it, and am now embarrassed to learn that Hayward had written about it in 1978.

Among creationists, a favourite story is that of the bombardier beetle storing two chemicals which, it is falsely claimed, explode spontaneously when they come into contact. Hayward's version gives the beetle not only the two chemicals but also two detonating enzymes, making the story not only more startling, but also true.

The book has errors. It counts biologists like W R Thompson, who believe Darwin's theory does not explain evolution, as disbelievers in evolution itself. And in an aside from the creation/evolution debate, it cites a feat by Uri Geller as evidence of clairvoyance.

But unlike most creationist writers, Hayward knows and understands the data of geology and molecular biology. He accepts the age of the earth, the succession of fossils, the ubiquity of the genetic code. And he recognises that biology 'needs the concept of evolution to make it hang together'.

The theory he advances is that there are (or were until the advent of humans) millions of separate creative acts, occurring in a sequence which may pardonably be mistaken for evolution.

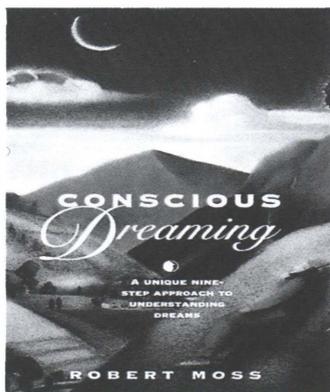
This accords with the data and is logically unassailable, but offends the principle of parsimony. It is unlikely to convince anybody who is not a creationist already.

The book is valuable, however, as an exemplary lesson in how to argue the preposterous without appearing ridiculous.

— Donald Room

Dream theory

Robert Moss, *Conscious Dreaming: A Unique Nine-Step Approach to Understanding Dreams* (Rider Books, £9.99)



Robert Moss is active in the Association for the Study of Dreams, described as an international organisation 'whose members range from psychiatrists and anthropologists to artists and shamans' – and this description encapsulates much that is frustrating about his book.

Every time the reader comes upon an item of interesting psychological or

anthropological information, he/she is immediately drenched in New verbiAge. To be fair, the aims of the book are never presented as academic. Moss, who runs his own 'Active Dreaming workshops' is setting out to extol the 'shamanic power of dreams' and to present – almost entirely anecdotal – examples of their supposed revelatory and therapeutic possibilities.

The 'nine steps' referred to in the title can really be summed up in Moss's own words as 'Be open to possibility!' – or, as a more skeptical reader might express it – 'Be totally uncritical!'. The organisation of the chapters has little obvious coherence, but the book's overall thrust is reminiscent of a wide range of North American 'self-help' books. The final chapter on 'The Creative Power of Dreams' has sections on how dream analysis can aid in education, preparing for major life-changes such as a new job, general problem-solving and, of course, artistic creativity.

The most intriguing section of the book, from a psychological viewpoint, is the autobiographical introductory chapter in which the author describes a lonely childhood in Australia, beset by serious illness and extreme allergic reactions, in the course of which he turned increasingly to his own imagination and to his dreams for comfort.

Almost inevitably, he came under the influence of Aboriginal culture, and its attitudes towards dreaming clearly had a profound influence on his view of the world. As an account of how personal circumstances and culture shape one's perception of reality, this chapter could hardly be bettered. The rest of the book is a disappointment.

— John Gillies

Witch watching

Stewart Farrar, *What Witches Do* (Robert Hale, £7.99)

It must be difficult to write sensibly about witches. Everyone from Shakespeare to the *Sunday Sport* seems to have conspired to give them a bad press. After all, even favourite tabloid targets such as Fergie or Paula Yates never get described as 'secret, black and midnight hags'

or accused of conducting strange rituals involving animal sacrifice.

Stewart Farrar has tried to redress the balance. *What Witches Do* is a factual, unhysterical (if distinctly partisan) outline of the practices and beliefs of modern followers of Wicca. Farrar himself was initiated as a witch in the early 1970s, and his book gives a frank account of his own experiences. First published in 1971, *What Witches Do* is probably one of the best works on the subject, and is now reissued in a new edition.

After describing his own initiation, Farrar outlines witchcraft's basic beliefs. He goes on to describe various rites, including 'handfasting', the witches' equivalent of a wedding. Although the book was written over 25 years ago, the chapters on Tarot reading, clairvoyance and healing have a distinctly New Age flavour, as does the witches' strong belief in respect for nature.

Farrar emphasises that witchcraft is an ancient religion whose beliefs include tolerance of other religions. Unfortunately this tolerance is not mutual. Witches have probably been on the receiving end of more prejudice than any other religion.

Sadly, no matter how many books of this sort appear, people will still prefer the sensational, violent view of witchcraft celebrated in tabloid newspapers and horror films.

— Chris Willis

Ritual denunciation

Anthony North, *The Paranormal: A Guide to the Unexplained* (Blandford, £16.99)

A waste of time. North's book is not even good as a sampler of typical paranormal beliefs, since he selects from occult claims to fit a half-baked theory about racial memories. He starts the book by declaring himself neither a skeptic nor a believer (in other words, a believer), performs the usual ritual denunciation of the closed-mindedness of science, and is singing the praises of a universal 'creative, higher mind' at the end.

North's 'evidence' is typical: reams of anecdotes, mysteries fashioned out of thin air, far-fetched hypotheses listed as if they were on a par with any other scientific ideas. Even when he shows some awareness of skeptical explanations of his alleged phenomena, North comes up with ways to save the day for the occult. If cryptnesia is behind certain memories rather than reincarnation, this still is supposedly 'to answer a mystery by a mystery'. The next step, naturally, is to bring on quasi-Jungian ideas about 'inherited memory'. Readers of Susan Blackmore will discover that her discarded hypothesis of a common psychic memory-bank still appeals to some.

A skeptic going through *The Paranormal* will find numerous errors, not to mention an insistently wrongheaded approach to even the real mysteries touched on by North. However, criticizing popular paranormalist literature this way is somewhat futile.

North is looking to read humanly significant meaning off of the universe; the fact that he tries to do this by talking nonsense about things like quantum fields is incidental. Books like these are the inspirational literature of occult religion, not just fringe-science.

— Taner Edis

Anything goes

Michael Colmer, *Business I Ching: An Oracle for Executive Decision Making* (Blandford, £9.99)

It is difficult to take this book seriously. Its main part consists of 77 numbered predictions, each containing advice such as 'Buy: autos, airlines, tourism' or 'Release: food, catering, hotels'. The choice of which prediction to consult can be made in any of a number of ways, including the use of dice or random toying with a desk calculator. The only important instruction is that 'attempts to "abuse" the system (by repeated entries, for example) are bound to produce nonsensical results'.

The short introductory section (about 20 pages) expresses the same 'anything goes' attitude. A variety of methods are all said to be conducive to business success, including graphology (in hiring), dowsing (to assess buildings), astrology, and biorhythms. The author professes a strong belief in horoscopes cast not only for individuals but also for companies, and he also sees biorhythm charts for companies as a new interesting development.



The horoscope for Barings Bank, based on its creation on Christmas Day 1762, appears to the author to be so well-engineered that he takes it for granted that the bank's founders had consulted an astrologer. (No historical evidence whatsoever is offered to substantiate this historical claim.) In contrast, their employee Nick Leeson had a troublesome horoscope and should for this reason never have been hired. It is all very obvious *post factum*.

Personally, I am even more impressed by successful predictions if they are made and publicised before the predicted event. Unfortunately, Michael Colmer does not offer his readers any predictions with this additional quality. Presumably, since he is reportedly earning his living as a 'management psychic advisor', you will have to pay much more than £9.99 (the price of this book) for more timely predictions.

— Sven Ove Hansson

Nowhere near the answer

David Barclay, *Aliens: The Final Answer?* (Blandford, £9.99)

This book offers a solution to the UFO enigma skeptical readers will find difficult to accept. Barclay's thesis is simple: Modern palaeontology is wrong about how humans evolved and about the fossil timeline in general.

Humans are not mammals, but a special breed of living dinosaurs. In fact, humans were bred (just as dogs

were later bred from wolves by humans) from some unknown dinosaur by intelligent dinosaurs at least 70 million years ago.

Barclay also explains where these smart dinos went. They were wiped out, along with all the other dinosaurs, in a nuclear holocaust somehow caused by humans 65 million years ago. Well, most of them were wiped out. Some of them survived and continue to meddle in human biology to this day. For the 'aliens' abducting people today – the short, wide-eyed Greys aren't from Zeta Reticuli or any other star system, for that matter. The Greys are the surviving members of the species of intelligent dinosaurs which created us. And they are still tinkering with the breeds.

That's Barclay's story in a nutshell. He offers scant evidence for proof. How do we know humans and dinosaurs coexisted? Barclay trots out long-discredited examples of human footprints found in rock dated to dinosaur times. What about the nuclear holocaust? Where's the evidence? Barclay offers none, except the creation stories of Genesis. His reference to palaeontologists blaming radiation for the mass extinctions of dinosaurs 65 million years ago suggests he has somehow muddled the discovery of the iridium layer and the nuclear winter hypothesis together (Iridium is a rare element which is found in meteorites. Its discovery in rock layers dated to the time of the mass extinctions has led to the theory that the mass extinction was caused by a massive meteor hitting the Earth. The great mass of dust and dirt thrown into the atmosphere would have blocked the sun and cause global temperature to drop significantly. This and other world-wide effect would have wiped out the majority of existing species – the dinosaurs. This theory then led Carl Sagan and others to speculate that similar catastrophes would be caused by a global nuclear war; hence 'nuclear winter' and Barclay's confusion).

Aliens: The Final Answer? No, we can say, not even close.

— Anson Kennedy

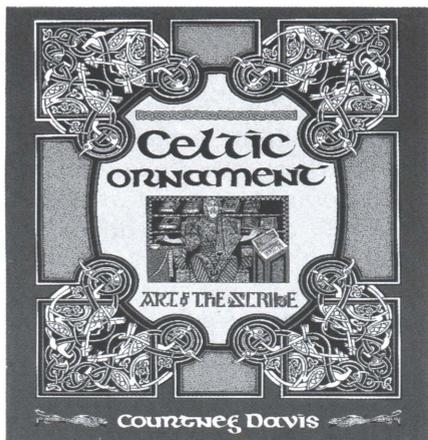
On the Celtic bandwagon

R J Stewart, *Celtic Myth, Celtic Legend* (Cassell, £9.99); Courtney Davis, *Celtic Ornament: Art and the Scribe* (Blandford, £16.99); Courtney Davis and David James, *The Celtic Image* (Blandford, £16.99); Courtney Davis and Elaine Gill, *The Book of Celtic Saints* (Blandford, £18.99)

Does the world really need yet another set of books retelling Celtic myths? To judge from the popularity of this type of work, the answer would appear to be a definite 'yes'.

There seems to be no end to the growth industry in lavishly illustrated books on Celtic art and folklore for the general reader. These are avidly devoured by New Agers who have rediscovered Celtic history and reinterpreted it to suit their own beliefs in vague concepts such as 'nature-orientated spirituality' (*The Celtic Image*, p 15).

The Celtic legends collected by R J Stewart cover largely familiar ground. Tam Lin, Cuchulainn and Merlin are all here, retold in a style which sometimes smacks of heavy-handed political correctness. When reading the story of Merlin and Nimue, do we really need to be told



that 'Many variants of this tale are sexist and patriarchal'? I think not. Striking illustrations by Courtney Davis combine Celtic and New Age influences. Oddly, some of the illustrations refer to stories in the companion volume, not this one

— a sly marketing ploy?

The Book of Celtic Saints is a lively retelling of legends surrounding the early Celtic Christians. I particularly liked the story of Saint Bridget, who was 'accidentally ordained as a priest by a rather short-sighted bishop' (*The Book of Celtic Saints*, p 34). *Celtic Ornament* is beautifully laid out, with Celtic-style calligraphy and borders framing painstakingly detailed drawings of ancient Celtic artwork from sources such as the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels. *The Celtic Image* is a lavish colour production which describes a selection of Celtic traditions and artefacts, with the aim of introducing the reader to the present-day 'Celtic Renaissance'.

All four books have a distinct New Age bias and will doubtless sell well in Tintagel and Glastonbury, along with many others of their kind. But how far has Celtic mythology been distorted to serve New Age beliefs? At times, it's difficult to see the Celtic wood for New Age trees.

— Chris Willis

Getting it wrong

Peter LeMesurier, *Nostradamus: The Final Reckoning* (Piatkus, £8.99)

Peter Lemesurier has written several previous books on matters of keen interest to the psychic fringe: he has explained the chronology represented by the Great Pyramid (*The Great Pyramid Decoded*, Element, 1977) and revealed how we should interpret Nostradamus (*Nostradamus – The Next 50 Years*, Piatkus, 1993). If these books contain as little content and as much unfounded conjecture as in the book under review, then I am happy to have never had to read them.

Nostradamus: The Final Reckoning consists of Lemesurier's interpretations of Nostradamus's prophecies and, as such, is a calendar listing future events. It doesn't start well, predicting that in 1995 the Pope will be confirmed in office for five more years and then explaining in the commentary that this confirmation may or may not be made public . . .

In order to provide confirmation of his interpretations of the prophecies, Lemesurier uses many sources: the future chronology present (apparently) in the Great Pyramid of Giza, religious scriptures and several modern prophets or psychics including Edgar Cayce, Jean Dixon and Arthur C Clarke.

Clarke may be rather surprised to find himself in this

illustrious company but, as Lemesurier explains, although Clarke's forecasts are just extrapolations of present technological development, they possess many of the qualities of prophecies. It is interesting that in the early, most detailed, part of Lemesurier's future calendar of events, Clarke's forecasts usually contradict the more apocalyptic visions of the other seers.

The predictions in Lemesurier's calendar may be summarised as follows: over the next forty years the central Islamic nations will invade and conquer most of continental Europe, there will then be a counter-invasion which will result in the freeing of Europe and the defeat of the Islamic invaders, finally, for the next four hundred and fifty years, there is peace as humanity prepares for a higher state of consciousness. It all seems rather unsatisfactory and bears many resemblances to the Moorish invasion of Spain which was still recent history during Nostradamus's life.

Although the book claims to be about Nostradamus's prophecies, it is really about Lemesurier: he has developed his own method of interpreting Nostradamus (explained in *Nostradamus – The Next 50 Years*) and uses it exclusively. No explanation is given in this book as to how his method works: you must read *Nostradamus – The Next 50 Years* to find out.

If anyone is considering buying this work of fantasy then I strongly recommend that they read Randi's book first (*The Mask of Nostradamus: The Prophecies of the World's Most Famous Seer*, Prometheus, 1993).

—Toby O'Neil

Tall stories

Michael Hesemann, *The Cosmic Connection: Worldwide Crop Formations and ET Contacts* (Gateway Books, £12.95)

There are times when I almost wish I couldn't read. For a start the many sharply-focused colour pictures of crop circles tell their own stories. You don't have to be an art expert to be able to reconstruct from the pictures how the crop circles were made. But what does the text say?

'Major problems arise in identifying the nature of the corn-flattening stimulus involved because, to my knowledge no such stimulus exists.'

Come again? And what about Doug and Dave? Only a conspiracy to bring cerealists into disrepute. What role do psychics and dowzers play in identifying the 'genuine' circles? Writes Hesemann:

'I have become sceptical of psychics and 'channels'; their statements are often too contradictory, too unspecific and sometimes incorrect.'

Sometimes? Perhaps Hesemann has invented a new kind of philosophy: selective skepticism.

While the shots of UFOs are not nearly as good as those of the circles, they do reveal interesting parallels between the architecture of cosmic vehicles and terrestrial automobile design which may not quite be due to chance.

This book seems to be an exercise for sacrificing facts to an obscurantist theory. If the facts are otherwise, too bad for them.

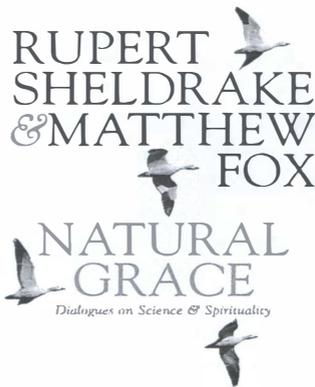
As an ethnology student Hesemann contributed a

couple of UFO tales to *The Spider in the Yucca Palm* by skeptic Rolf Wilhelm Brednich, the German counterpart to US urban folklore expert Jan Brunvand. It is curious, to say the least, that a person supposedly trained to recognise tall stories for what they are should instead be taking them in hook, line and sinker.

— Lee Traynor

Unnatural boredom

Rupert Sheldrake and Matthew Fox, *Natural Grace: Dialogues on Science and Spirituality* (Bloomsbury, £13.99)



Rupert Sheldrake's name will be familiar to most readers of *The Skeptic*. In his first book, *A New Science of Life* (1981), he proposed the controversial theory of morphic resonance.

The basic idea of this theory is that nature operates in accordance with a kind of cumulative memory. For example, Sheldrake argued that it may be difficult to crystallise a chemical compound which has just been created because there will initially be no 'memory' in existence of how that type of crystal forms.

However, once it takes place for the first time, such a memory is created. It will then be easier to achieve crystallisation the second time it is attempted even if the second attempt takes place thousands of miles away and the chemists involved have no knowledge whatsoever of each other's work. As more and more crystallisations take place, the morphic resonance hypothesis assumes that it will get easier and easier until an asymptote is reached.

Sheldrake claims that behaviour is similarly influenced. According to the theory, if laboratory rats in Britain solve a particular maze, rats in Australia will solve it more quickly than if the British rats had already done so. Sheldrake has developed his ideas in subsequent books and, understandably, has been the centre of a considerable amount of controversy.

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Matthew Fox's name is likely to be less familiar to *Skeptic* readers. Fox describes himself as 'post-denominational priest in a post-denominational era'. His previous works include *On Becoming a Musical Mystical Bear* (1972) and *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (1988). The current volume consists of dialogues between Sheldrake and Fox upon 'Living Nature and Creation Spirituality', 'Grace and Praise', 'The Soul', 'Prayer', 'Darkness', 'Morphic Resonance and Ritual', and 'Revitalising Education'. Had I known this before I agree to review the book, I probably would not have bothered.

I am afraid that I found most of this book either boring or irritating. This was disappointing given that I usually find Sheldrake's ideas interesting even if I disagree with them. I am sure the authors would expect nothing less of me, as they would see me as a prime example of a spiritual pygmy, all left brain and no right

brain (this particular piece of neuromythology crops up throughout the book, along with many other vague New Age notions).

If a missing cerebral hemisphere is the reason I avoid having discussions like these, it's a price worth paying.

— Christopher C French

Amazing, but true?

Geoff and Hope Price, *Miracles: True Stories of How God Acts Today* (Macmillan, £6.99)

If ever you were skeptical about the idea of amazing miracles supposedly performed by God, then this book will certainly give you much food for thought. At just over 300 pages it presents quite a barrage of accounts regarding apparent miracles that have happened, to which the authors attribute divine intervention as the cause.

The book begins with a quote from William Cowper which includes the line: 'God moves in a mysterious way', and after finishing the book, I can say for sure that this sums up what the Prices would have us believe. The book is divided up into chapters which look at miracles in different contexts; such as miracles in history, in their family, in relationships, in the Bible, in the local church, in business, and so on. Most chapters recount a series of miraculous happenings, interspersed with some commentary, typically along the lines of how God is good. At first the book is quite an easy read, it is fairly well written and the style is easy-going, however, the continual recounting of one miraculous story after the next soon starts to become tedious.

There is no doubt that the apparently miraculous happenings the authors talk about make one wonder very seriously if there is something in what they are saying, that is, whether there is in fact a God who does intervene in the world via miracles. It is well nigh impossible though to easily validate much of what they say, since most of it appears to be based on reports they have received from friends and others.

There is something very disconcerting about the way the authors view the world. They mention many miraculous events (such as recovery from serious and incurable illness), usually after the subject or his friends and/or family prayed for him. Some of the miracles they speak of are very dramatic. Consider the following regarding a man suffering from a curvature of the spine:

'His friend, standing beside him, said he had seen the bones in David's back moving into their correct position under his shirt.'

In contrast to this, some of the miracles discussed are quite trivial, as in one case where time was apparently interfered with to enable somebody to get to an event at a church in time!

Even though the authors devote a chapter to a discussion of when miracles *don't* happen, one is left with an overwhelming view of a fickle and capricious God. The best the Prices can do to explain away suffering unhelped by God is to talk about God's mysterious and unfathomable plans, and in some cases of some good things that may come from experiences of suffering. But when one looks at all the needless suffering and cruelty inflicted on people in the world, it becomes very difficult to under-

stand, let alone believe in their peculiar view of a God. One sentence from the book sums up their outlook particularly well:

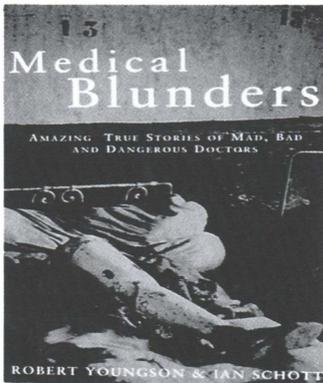
'The conditions which allow miracles to flourish are, first, trust in God's promises to mankind as found in the Bible and second, a *childlike certainty* that God is acting on our behalf.' [My emphasis]

This is indeed what it comes down to for these people, but the sheer capriciousness of these actions are hard to reconcile if one cannot just accept facile explanations.

— Dene Bebbington

Surgical slip-ups

Robert Youngson and Ian Schott, *Medical Blunders* (Robinson, £6.99)



Although all of us, at some time or another, make mistakes, there are certain people we would prefer never erred in even the most insignificant way; people like air traffic controllers, designers of fairground rides, predictors of Earth-asteroid collisions, the mechanics fixing your brakes at the garage and – of course – doctors.

Medical Blunders is a superb book, taking a long hard look at what 'healers', professional and amateur, have been getting up to over the centuries, and it makes for truly alarming reading.

Witness quack cures like 'Film-O-Sonics', a black box

capable of 'curing' cataracts, cancer and ulcers, in which lurks a tape-loop of Frank Sinatra singing 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes'; the 'Oscilloclast' which can diagnose a patient's ailment from their signature; and the 'Electro-Metabiograph Diagnostic Machine and Quantimeter' which, at \$250, can cure heart diseases, high blood pressure and prostate gland problems.

Although there are some serious laughs here, the mood is mostly dark. We read of the influential Greek physician Galen (c.130–210 AD), with his bizarre ideas of anatomy: how he believed that blood originates in the liver and is consumed by the other organs, and that phlegm oozes from the brain; and his misguided insistence on blood-letting, draining huge quantities of blood from his patients, and killing most of them in the process.

Medical Blunders is packed with stories to make your hair stand on end. After an eye-popping chapter on sexual matters, the authors present fascinating reviews of the mistakes of early plague doctors, of nineteenth century physicians who were apparently clinically insane, and of the tragic errors involving modern drugs such as thalidomide.

There is much more, ranging from the ham-fisted attempts to cure psychiatric problems with electricity and – can you believe this? – *hammers*, to the brutal experiments that qualified doctors have happily carried out on living human subjects.

This could easily have been a silly book aimed squarely at the prurient, but it isn't. It is excellently written and researched, and its two authors – one a doctor, one a journalist – have a genuine love and respect for the medical profession.

Nevertheless, the message is clear. Next time someone says to you: 'Trust me, I'm a doctor', *don't*.

— Toby Howard

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 Loch Ness Monster:

The Evidence

Stuart Campbell
Birlinn, £6.99

A revised and updated edition of Campbell's in-depth analysis of Nessie. Essential reading for cryptozoologists.

The Near-Death Experience Reader

Lee W Bailey and
Jenny Yates (Editors)
Routledge, £45.00 (hbk), £14.99 (pbk)
Twenty-four articles on NDEs and related topics. A wide-ranging analysis, taking in science, mysticism and philosophy.

Twilight of the Celtic Gods

David Clarke with Andy Roberts
Blandford, £16.99

An intriguing account of modern people who claim to maintain ancient Celtic beliefs and world-views. Hard to judge, since most of the neo-Celts remain anonymous.

Gods and Goddesses

Elizabeth Hallam (Editor)
Blandford, £16.99

A beautifully illustrated book describing over 130 deities from around the world. Great reference – and coffee-table – material.

Psychic Warrior

David Morehouse
Michael Joseph, £16.99
The 'true story' of the CIA's 'paranormal espionage program'. Hard to swallow, but who knows what the intelligence community gets up to behind closed doors?

Life's Grandeur

Stephen Jay Gould
Johnathan Cape, £16.99

The latest collection from the master essayist. Far-ranging, opinionated but meticulously argued, and stimulating.

Fortean Times Weird Year 1996

Joe McNally and
James Wallis (Editors)
John Brown, £7.99
The strangest things to have happened this year, collected and reported as only *Fortean Times* can. Shocking and wonderful.

Fire on Earth

John and Mary Gribbin
Simon & Schuster, £16.99
The Gribbins go in search of the 'doomsday asteroid' which might one day strike Earth, with terrible consequences. Well-written and illustrated.

Hilary Evans' *Paranormal
Picture Gallery*



IN HIS 1735 BOOK *Secrets of the Invisible World*, Daniel Defoe tells the story of a young lady who had foolishly made an assignation to meet a young man in a remote spot. On her way to her rendezvous she met the parish minister who, to her surprise, knew her intentions, and persuaded her not to prostitute her honour to the youth's vicious appetites.

Guiltily, she confessed he was right, and returned home. Yet, though her maid had seen the Minister as clearly as she did, it turned out that he had been nowhere near the place and certainly had not met her. Defoe concluded that, since it cannot have been the Devil, it must have been her Guardian Angel who saved her from a fate worse than death.

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