

The

Volume 11 Number 2

# Skeptic



## *Organ Snatchers: Myth or Reality?*

Also in this issue

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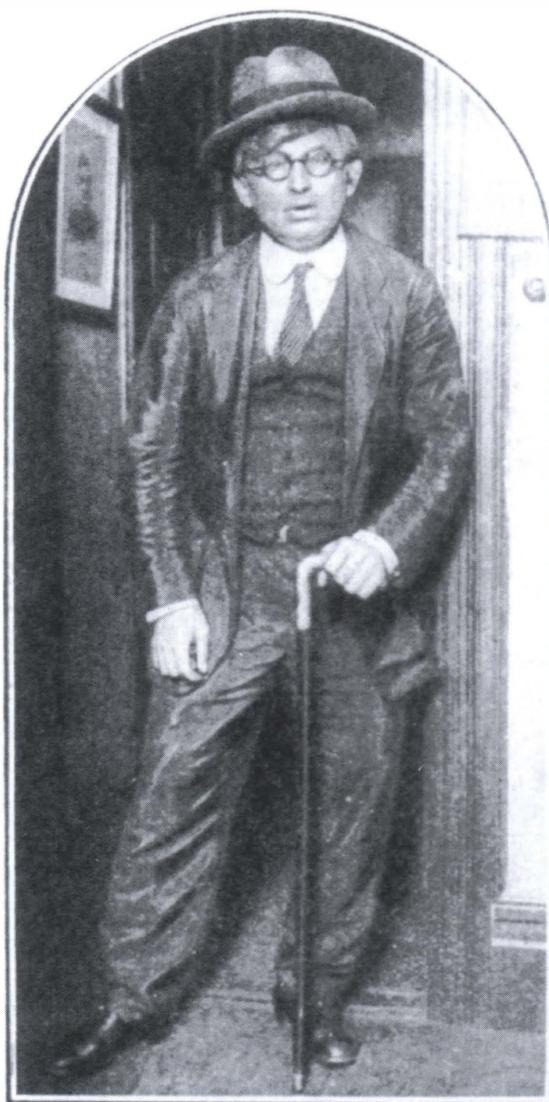
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# Hilary Evans' *Paranormal Picture Gallery*



## Houdunit?

**C**ONAN DOYLE INSISTED HE WAS A PSYCHIC without realising it. Skeptics claim him, True Believers counterclaim that his skepticism concealed a passionate wish-to-believe. Ehrich Weiss himself was as much a trickster as his stage persona 'Houdini', and the circumstantial evidence can be interpreted either way. What were his motives, we may speculate, in visiting spirit mediums incognito and in disguise? Here we see him dressed for a date with the dear departed in 1925: is he concerned only to debunk, or does he perhaps hope to be convinced?

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

# Contents

## Editorial

For this issue of *The Skeptic* we have changed the way we print the magazine. For the first time, the magazine has been printed directly from computer disk. Instead of printing out master pages on a high-resolution laser printer and either physically pasting all artwork onto the pages, or getting the printer to scan an image and assemble the page, we have electronically scanned all artwork ourselves and incorporated it into the computer file. This gives us a much greater degree of control throughout the publication. We hope that this will result in a consistently high printing quality, something that has not always been entirely the case in the past. The higher technology, alas, also has a slightly higher cost. To avoid having to increase the subscription price, we have decided to introduce a small amount of paid advertising into *The Skeptic* and, in the first instance, are only offering this facility to our readers.

So by placing a small ad in *The Skeptic* you can show your support for the magazine and help us to keep our costs down.

We do, of course, reserve the right to refuse an advertisement if we feel it to be inappropriate.

## Volume 11 Number 2

<b>Hits and Misses</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Steve Donnelly	
<b>Organ Snatchers</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Peter Burger	
<b>The Adaptable Medicine</b> .....	<b>12</b>
Simon Brophy	
<b>The Alternative to Religion</b> .....	<b>14</b>
Mike Walsh	
<b>The Skeptic's Dictionary</b> .....	<b>17</b>
Robert Todd Carroll	
<b>Many Happy Returns</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Melissa Krausey	
<b>Psychic Diary</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Toby Howard	
<b>Skeptic at Large</b> .....	<b>21</b>
Wendy Grossman	
<b>Reviews</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>Letters</b> .....	<b>27</b>

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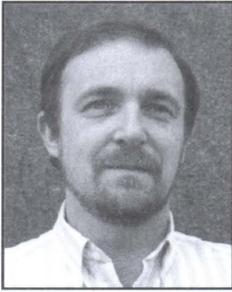
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*We welcome contributions. Please enclose a SAE.*

**Cover Artwork** Mary Evans

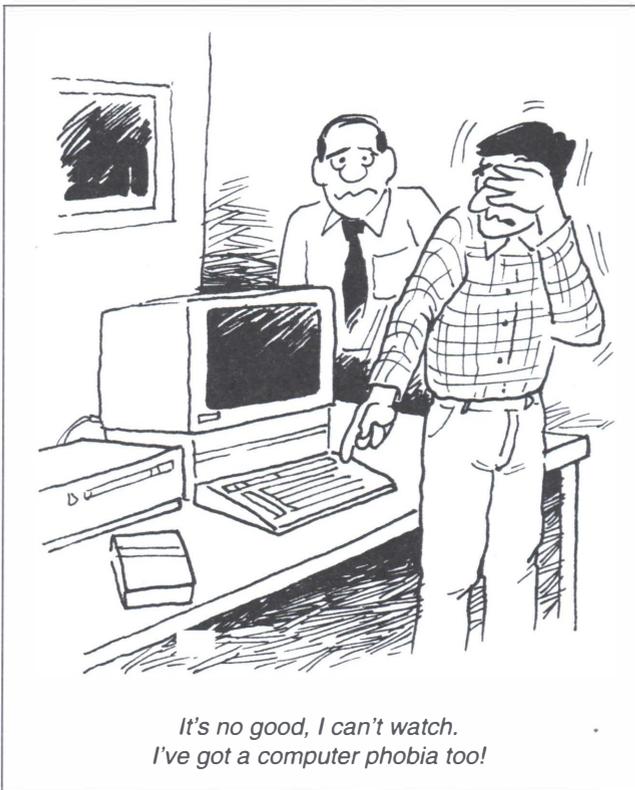


# Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

## Computer therapy

If computer software can win chess games against grand masters such as Gary Kasparov, it should come of no surprise to learn that computers are also doing a great job of replacing psychotherapists. According to the *Sunday Telegraph* on 23 February, a programme called 'Fear Fighter' costing only £29.99 is doing as good a job as a psychotherapist in helping patients fight problems such as claustrophobia and agoraphobia. Trial projects at the Institute of Psychiatry in South London have literally shown that, in dealing with irrational fears, a computer produces results equivalent to those obtained by human therapists. Which leads me to a suggestion that I'd like to make to the Catholic Church in Australia whose bishops have revealed that, due to fears of paedophile priests, they are considering banning contact behind closed doors (such as the confessional box) between priests and children. Surely, in such cases, the priest could be replaced by a computer equipped with rudimentary speech recognition software and a computer voice. With the exposure that the best known user of a computerised voice, Stephen Hawking, is getting for his views on the universe, the voice would even have an appropriate cosmic, God-like quality.



Tim Pearce

## Repaying old debts

Whilst on the subject of people in authority abusing young people in their care, I couldn't help but be impressed by a defense used by a teacher in California who was found in the back of his van with a naked schoolgirl. According to the *Daily Express* on 12 May, Roger Katz, a 50 year old teacher in Santa Fe, claimed in court that the 14 year old child had been a mature woman in 640 AD in Tibet where (and when) he had been a teenage monk. She had saved his life by taking an arrow in the chest that had been fired by a horseman from a rival religion and, in the back of his van, he was merely repaying a 'debt of love and devotion'. Psychological reports indicated that Katz was not suffering from any delusions. Californian district judge (and one has to ask who he might have been in previous lives) was distinctly unimpressed and awarded Katz an 18 month jail sentence.

## Homeopathic detergent

Readers who are concerned about the degradation of the global environment caused by their use of laundry detergents may be interested in a new product available in the US and, no doubt, soon to reach these shores. The Earthsmart Laundry CD™ is a totally environmentally safe replacement for washing powder, fabric softener and anti-static sheets. You will never, EVER, need to buy any of these again once you have invested a mere \$89.95 and purchased this remarkable device as it is good for for 50 years of washing at one load per week. 'But how does this remarkable device work?' I hear you asking. Well, it's quite simple really. To quote Earthsmart themselves: 'The Earthsmart Laundry CD™ accomplishes the same thing as conventional detergent by emitting a charge into the water, which breaks the bonds between molecules, enabling the individual water molecules to penetrate the fabric. The water is also highly charged with negative ions. The dirt, which is highly positive in charge, is attracted to the individual water molecules and is flushed out with the water during the rinse cycle. The rinse cycle actually acts like a second wash cycle, since there is NO SOAP to rinse out . . . It works on the principles of quantum physics, not chemistry, with a method called Structured Water. This 21st technology activates your laundry water naturally through this proprietary ionization process which structures water to mimic the cleaning effect of detergent. The disc itself resembles a fat CD, with the Structured Water on the inside.'

This 21st Century technology is, in fact, nothing other than our old friend homeopathy, in which water retains a memory of foreign molecules even when not a single one

is contained within it. Presumably the instructions to the water in the washing machine from the structured water within the Earthsmart CD™ are communicated electromagnetically through the walls of the disc (see next item). If homeopathy works to cure complex diseases, why should it not work on the much simpler task of cleaning your underwear?

## Digital water memory

The research of leading water-memory researcher Jacques Benveniste has yielded even more amazing results than those published a few years ago in *Nature* and subsequently debunked by a team that included James Randi and the then editor of *Nature*, John Maddox. In a paper submitted to a scientific conference this year, Benveniste and co-workers at the Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago claim that they have sent homeopathic influences by email (only needs one bit in 10 GigaTerabytes of noise perhaps?). Having demonstrated that homeopathic influences can be transferred to water electromagnetically in previous work, this time they went a step further by sending (from France to the USA) sound files (1 sec, 16 bits, 22 kHz) containing the homeopathic influences as attached files to email messages. These files were then replayed to water in the USA which took on the homeopathic properties as demonstrated by tests on guinea-pig hearts. Personally, I would have thought that water memory would work better when transmitted by N-rays to and from polywater.

## Woolly thinking

Think of a sheep, and an image of a creative thinker does not immediately come to mind. On the contrary, the poor sheep has had a bad press for a long time — from those that went astray in the bible to those that Bo Peep lost in the nursery rhyme. But stereotypes are often inaccurate, and, in Hampshire, sheep have been showing their true imaginative intellects. A cattle grid usually suffices as a barrier to keep sheep (and other animals) from straying into pastures where they are not wanted; however, according to the *Sunday Telegraph* on 23 March, a cattle grid in the village of Bramshaw is not sufficient to prevent the sheep from gaining access to a field where the grass is greener. A 'volunteer' sheep simply lies down on the grid and the entire flock walks over it and then pulls it across the grid to join them for lunch.

Any readers observing sheep behaving in this SAS manner, in their own far-flung corners of the Empire, please communicate directly with Rupert Sheldrake of Morphic Resonance fame.

## Mancunian UFOs

I'm not sure whether it is typical of the rest of the country, but a *Manchester Evening News* survey (published on 22 May) revealed that 79% of Mancunians believe that flying saucers exist this despite having a reputation for being down to earth kind of folk. There is probably no connection between this and the fact that the *Guardian* (originally the *Manchester Guardian*) carried an advertisement by Canon (on 1 April) in which they guarantee that if you buy one of their cameras and keep it with you at all times you will NOT be abducted by aliens. This is based

on the well known observation that people who are abducted by aliens never have a camera with them.

## Drink and be slim

The British beer belly may soon be eliminated if pills currently undergoing trials reach the shelves of the purveyors of alternative medicines. According to the *Sunday Telegraph* on 23 March, pills by the name of Beer Blok have been developed by Natural Health Supplements of Chichester in Sussex and are being tested in bars all over England. All the drinker has to do is take one pill for each pint he/she consumes and 'hey presto', the tablets prevent the calories in the beer from being converted into fat deposits around the midriff and instead they pass clean out of the system.

The British male's gastronomically perfect night out may soon consist of 10 pints of best bitter, 10 Beer Blok tablets and a few packets of potato crisps made with Olestra — an oil substitute available in the UK which is not absorbed by the body (but may cause anal leakage).



Tim Pearce

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### A big thank-you, to all our clippings contributors, who for this issue include:

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 J B Thompson Jnr, Chris Torrero, J G Watson, Chris Willis.

# Organ Snatchers

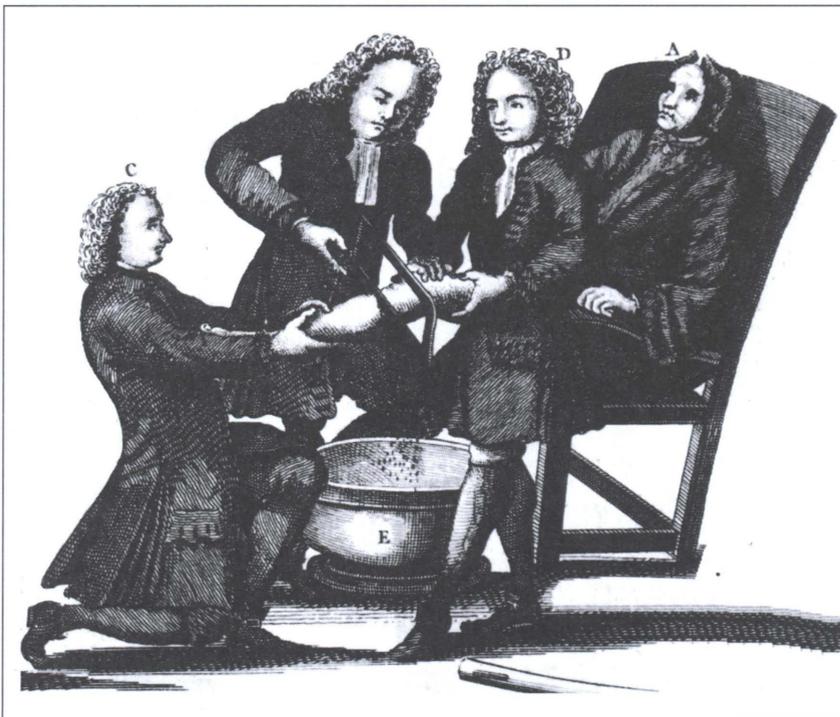
Peter Burger

*Is the trade in human organs myth or reality?*

**F**OR ALMOST TEN YEARS, a horrible story has haunted the world's media: in Latin America children are robbed of their kidneys and corneas for the benefit of wealthy Americans. On closer examination, these horror stories turn out to be based on rumours and legends. Organ-napping: the contemporary version of an age-old and universally known legend.

A man with a wispy beard rocks his head back and forth as if he is in a trance. The camera zooms in on his face, showing us that his eyes lack irises and pupils. The next shot is an indoor scene. A younger relative asks in Spanish: 'What did they remove?' The blind man answers: 'My corneas.' The boy pulls the eyelids of the right eye apart. Superimposed on the cloudy white tissue, the title of the documentary floats into view: *Organ Snatchers*. The name of the blind man is Pedro Reggi, the voice-over tells us. He is 26 years old and he lives in a small village 60 miles from Buenos Aires. His corneas were stolen during the period he spent in the mental institution Montes de Oca. *Organ Snatchers* is directed by French journalist Marie-Monique Robin, one of the most influential disseminators of a shocking message: in Latin America, the organs of the poor are stolen for the benefit of the rich. The recipients may be wealthy Americans, but stolen corneas are also procured by transplant surgeons in France. Robin's message does not fall on deaf ears. Her documentary was aired in a number of countries and shown three times in United Nations meetings. A re-run on French television, in January 1995, was watched by

more than three million viewers. Robin also sold her story to foreign magazines. In *Life* (October 1993), she describes Reggi as having 'the emaciated face of Jesus Christ'. In a Dutch weekly [1], Reggi features as 'the angel-faced boy' who 'once had a pair of beautiful brown eyes, where now only two gaping holes remain.' This last statement is an exaggeration: Reggi's eyes may look horrible, but anyone can see that they are not gaping holes. What's more: his corneas are still there too, as someone with expert knowledge of eye surgery might tell you. I watched *Organ Snatchers* with Dutch ophthalmologist Mrs. H. Vilker-Dieben, board member of the Dutch Cornea Foundation. 'The corneas are clouded', she said. 'This looks like scar tissue caused by old infections, as far I can judge from the video images. To be completely sure, I would have to examine the eyes myself using the right kind of lamp.' So Reggi's corneas have not been stolen? No, they haven't. The alleged theft would indeed have left his eye sockets empty. Normally, to remove the cornea from a deceased donor, a transplant surgeon will extract the eyeball in its entirety, replace it with a plastic ball of the same size, and eventually glue the eyelids together. The Dutch ophthalmologist's observation tallies with medical records that became public after Reggi's appearance in a previous British-Canadian documentary about organ traffic, *The Body Parts Business*: Reggi was born with bilateral glaucoma. He lost his eyesight due to eye diseases. [2]



Mary Evans

## Jeison's Eyes

The story of Pedro Reggi is not the only controversial episode of *Organ Snatchers*. On closer inspection the documentary's emotional climax, the story of 10-year old Jeison Cruz Vargas, the photogenic little blind boy with the flute, turns out to be equally doubtful. In the documentary, Robin meets Jeison in the institute for the blind in Bogota, Colombia. His mother Luz recalls taking Jeison to a hospital in the slums when he needed treatment for diarrhea; when she saw him again the next day, his eyes had been removed. Her son's medical file has been destroyed, she says. 'It is a hospital for the poor, that's why things like this are happening here. It is the worst hospital in the world.' Ever since Robin went public with Jeison's story, this version of events has been vehemently contested by both the hospital involved — Salazar de Villeta — and the Colombian government. According to a statement (February 4, 1994) by

the Columbian ombudsman for Health and Social Security, Jeison never underwent an eye operation. Barely four months old, he was hospitalized, suffering from severe malnourishment, dehydration and a number of serious ailments, including infection of the eyeball with pseudomonas and infection of the cornea. Probably because his parents were very poor, they stopped the treatment and took the infant to a herb doctor. The infection destroyed his eyesight. The row over Jeison's eyes reached a climax after Robin's documentary was awarded the Prix Albert Londres in May 1995, the most prestigious distinction for French journalists. Conscious of the fact that statements by Colombian doctors and officials do not carry much weight in France, the Colombian embassy had Jeison (now a 12-year old) flown to Paris in August 1995 in order to have his eyes examined by two renowned French specialists in ophthalmology and infectious diseases.

A pediatrician assessed the boy's medical records. [3] In their report, the French doctors note that the eyeballs, although atrophied, are still there, as are parts of the cornea. The infection that irreparably damaged his eyesight is quite common for malnourished infants in the Third World. Moreover, the doctors argue, it is impossible to remove the corneas from a live donor without causing a severe haemorrhage. Besides, no surgeon in his right mind would use Jeison's infected corneas for transplantation, as they would likely kill the recipient. It might be added that with its 28,000 violent deaths per year, Colombia has no shortage of donors anyway. For according to Colombian law, everyone is a potential donor, unless the family objects. [4] Embarrassed by the outcome of the medical examination, the Albert Londres jury suspended Robin's award and promised to take a second, more thorough look at her documentary. [5] In the end, the jury decided to reconfirm the award, praising Robin's good intentions but still expressing reservations about the veracity of her claims. [6] To maintain that Jeison's eyes have been stolen, Robin has resorted to increasingly unlikely conspiracy theories and *ad hominem* arguments. The files could be forged — after all, why did it take the Colombian hospital two years to produce them? 'What is worth more?' she asked, when confronted with the doctors' report. 'A mother's oral testimony? Or the word of a group of experts who intervene twelve years after the fact and in whose objective interest it is to make people doubt the existence of organ traffic (for reasons of professional solidarity, a

proven taste for secrecy, international friendships established during the course of their careers)?' [7] Nor does she think the medical establishment is the only culprit. When I spoke to her in February 1995, Robin claimed that Jeison's mother and other witnesses and authorities have all withdrawn their accusations under pressure from the United States Information Agency. [8] In fact, the USIA, a government institution that fights anti-American propaganda, has waged a campaign against Robin. Since 1988, it has published a number of reports, systematically repudiating allegations of organ theft. This started out as a reaction to cold-war KGB propaganda, in which the United States were held responsible for the murder of South American children. Robin blames the responsible USIA staff officer,

Todd Leventhal, for much of her setbacks and even suggested that he was implicated in the theft of her car. She has received death threats by phone and on the Internet. As she repeatedly said to me: 'It's like a thriller.'

### The Blood Carriage Moral

Panics caused by tales about strangers who kidnap and kill children have been around at least since the blood libel legend accused Jews of mixing their Easter matzo dough with the blood of christian children. Among those numerous historical rumour panics there is one that is the spitting image of today's organ theft scare. [20] Paris, May 1750: the city is in uproar, because under the eyes of the populace police are arresting children in the street, taking them away in shuttered carriages, destination unknown. The people resist. Riots ensue. Police officer Labbé is caught redhanded as he grabs an 11-year-old boy. The boy is liberated by the mob and Labbé has to run for his life. He enters a house and tries to hide under a bed, but his pursuers drag him out into the street. Guards come running, prise him from the hands of his captors and take him to a police commissioner's residence. The people lay siege to his refuge and demand those inside to surrender the kidnapper. In the end, they kick in the door. There is an exchange of gunfire. The furious crowd wrestles Labbé away from his guards and puts him to death with sticks and stones. In a way the Parisians are not mistaken: to keep vagabonds off the street, policemen do randomly arrest boys and put them in jail without granting them a proper trial. As the police receive a reward for every child, they are not particular about the ones they arrest: even those whose age, behaviour or social status does not fit the description run the risk of being apprehended. Ambiguous situations like these are ideal breeding grounds for rumour, and indeed, in no time rumours do emerge.

### Hansel and Gretel

Marie-Monique Robin was not the first to call attention to the organ mafia. Stories about organ-napping first appeared in the world press in 1987. [9] On January 2 of that year, a Honduran paper reported that disabled children

were sold to the US as a source of 'spare parts'. Thirteen child victims had been discovered in four *casas de engordes* ('fattening houses'—shades of Hansel and Gretel). The source of these reports was Leonardo Villeda Bermudez, secretary general of the Honduran committee for social welfare. On January 3, however, this official retracted his allegations, explaining that he had merely repeated the unconfirmed assumptions of social workers. Later cases, in Guatemala and Peru, followed the same pattern: alarming but unsubstantiated reports, which were withdrawn as soon as they were published. As bad news is more newsworthy than good news however, the initial disclosures were often reported by the press, whereas the subsequent denials were ignored. This is a professional vice of journalists, which may have been even stronger in those who had an ideological axe to grind. Unsurprisingly, in the late eighties the horror-stories about organ theft were eagerly picked up and published by Soviet media, which in the same period gave weight to the rumour that the HIV virus had been artificially created in an American biological warfare laboratory. [10] The European Parliament too has twice spoken out against organ theft. In 1993 it passed a resolution condemning organ traffic.

The resolution was based on a report by socialist Europarliamentarian Leon Schwartzberg. In this report, the former French minister of public health describes the medical, ethical and social consequences of the lack of donor organs and stresses the existence of a homicidal organ mafia. The very idea that cynical traffickers literally sell the flesh of third world children evokes strong feelings of dismay and compassion. This does not make a detached, clinical look at the facts any easier. Schwartzberg even disqualified sceptics by classing them with Holocaust deniers: 'To deny such traffic is comparable to denying the existence of the gas chambers in the last war.' Nobody denies that in some countries (for instance Brazil, India and Egypt) poor people offer their organs for sale. In this respect, organ traffic is a reality. Transplantation experts, however, are not prepared to assume the existence of a large scale mafia-controlled organ trade. Individual cases, like Pedro Reggi's and Jeison's, do not stand up to scrutiny. In general, organ theft is implausible because clandestine transplantations require numbers of highly skilled medical personnel and sophisticated equipment that are not to be found in the countries where the organ thieves are said to operate. As Eurotransplant's medical director Guido G Persijn told me:

'Of course it is possible to kidnap people, anaesthetize them and steal one of their kidneys, but to do that you

also need a recipient. The recipient needs to have a matching bloodgroup and tissue-group. You need an HLA-typing... And how can you be sure that this Mr. X you've snatched off the street makes a suitable kidney donor in the first place? Isn't he suffering from a renal disease, nephritis, HIV? You would need an immense organisation. It's just not worth it.'

Even the strongest evidence for organ theft, such as the reports of kidney-napping in India that emerged in February 1995 [11], is ambiguous at best. Poor inhabitants of a Bangalore village applied for jobs in the city and were robbed of their kidneys under the guise of a routine medical check-up. A specialist, a GP and two middlemen were arrested. The German magazine *Der Stern* broke the news with an article headlined: 'Organ theft in India proven for the first time.' Actually, *Der Stern's* pictures of Indian men and women sporting huge scars merely prove that India has a markedly higher percentage of inhabitants with only one kidney than richer countries. By March 1995 more than eighty alleged victims had registered

with the Bangalore police. Yet, according to the town's police commissioner, only a small part of those have really been robbed; the others supposedly sold one of their kidneys and are hoping to receive a higher remuneration by lodging a complaint. [12] But why wait for conclusive evidence to be found? When I called him in February 1995, Stan Meuwesse, director of the Dutch branch of Defence for Children International (an organisation that fights child labour, child slavery, child prostitution and other forms of child abuse) asserted that organ theft is a reality. 'The accepted facts and figures about child abuse are so overwhelming, that this has to be true too', he argued, repeating an argument voiced by other representatives of non-governmental organisations in the human rights field.

All there is to go on are the stories that are being repeated over and over: stories, Meuwesse said, that convince everyone in the children's rights community.

### Legendary Criminals in Organ Snatchers

One of those recurring stories is told by Mexican parliamentarian Hector Ramirez, a member of a parliamentary committee charged with the investigation of illegal organ traffic. Ramirez recounts the case of a little boy who was kidnapped on the market in the Extapalapa quarter

and turned up two months later on the same spot, a scar on his back marking the place where one of his kidneys had been extracted. Ramirez: 'His mother had him examined by a doctor. This confirmed her suspicion. When the little boy returned to his family, he brought \$2000 with him. I contacted his mother, but she wouldn't tell anything at all. She was very scared. With the money she could take care of him.' For lack of names, pictures or documents, it is impossible to check this story. The official report by Ramirez does not mention it. Robin's team could not locate a single victim or witness in Mexico. The story sounds improbable: why didn't these supposedly ruthless criminals simply kill the eye-witness, instead of delivering him on the scene of the crime with \$2,000 for pocket money? Random acts of kindness like this one have never been reported from other branches of crime. If this story is convincing at all, the appeal lies not in its realism but in the moral point it makes. The story graphically expresses a message that speaks to the hearts of both poor Mexicans and human rights activists world-

### The Blood Carriage Moral (continued)

The children are cut open, it is said, and bled to death in a tub because an ailing prince—or a princess, or even the king himself—has to bathe in children's blood. This story did not originate in Paris in 1750. It was already told about the emperor Constantine, who refused to be cured in this unchristian way and saw his health restored by God as a reward for his righteousness. In Paris, the then king Louis XV was one of the targets of the rumour. For his atrocities he was compared with Herod, the murderer of the innocent children. According to the French historians Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, the fact that the people pointed to king Louis as the perpetrator, reveals their hatred of a ruler who had turned from a benefactor into a Herod. The rumour was known in eighteenth century Antwerp too. [21] Parents used to warn their children against staying out late by telling them about the 'Blood Carriage', a beautiful horse-drawn carriage. Inside is a rich lady who offers sweets to children playing in the street and asks them to accompany her to her castle and play with her daughter. If this approach does not succeed, she'll just drag them inside. In her castle, their big toes are chopped off and they bleed to death in a tub for a king who suffers from a severe illness and can only be cured by the blood of children under seven. Parisian children forced to donate their blood for an ailing member of the Royal Family find their exact counterpart in Third World children who are robbed of their organs for the benefit of rich Westerners—in fact, the rumour has not really changed in two and a half centuries. One version of the rumour, that stirred trouble in 1768 Lyon, even involved transplantation: to provide a mutilated prince with a fresh arm, a new child was said to be kidnapped each day. Day after day, surgeons tried to graft a new arm, but each time the operation failed. [22]

wide: Americans think that they can use the inhabitants of Latin America any way they like in return for a little pocket money. Everything points to the conclusion that Ramirez' story is a contemporary legend: a tale that surfaces time and again in different forms, but always appears to have happened recently just round the corner from where the storyteller lives. Unreal stories like this one can have real consequences, though. In Colombia, Argentine, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands and other parts of the world, organ donations have dropped as a result of these rumours, transplant organisations charge. And 'it has had a devastating effect' on international adoptions, says Susan Cox, president of Holt Adoption Services in Oregon, one of the agencies that annually help place about 8,000 children with U.S. parents. In Turkey, officials outlawed foreign adoptions after the organ-thieves myth took hold. [13] As sociologists say: whenever people experience a situation as real, it will become real in its consequences. The truth of this dictum is brought out even more dramatically by the Guatemala organ theft scare of 1994.

### Lynch Justice for Child Snatchers

Guatemala, March 8, 1994. [14] American tourist Melissa Larson (37) is sipping a glass of pineapple juice on the market of the village Santa Lucja Cotzumalguapa. Suddenly, she finds herself surrounded by angry villagers and accused of being a child snatcher. To protect her from the mob, Larson is arrested and smuggled out of the village by the authorities. When the inhabitants find out that she is gone, they turn on her protectors, burning down the police station and setting fire to ten cars. It takes five hundred riot police, army reinforcements and armoured cars to restore the peace. Larson, after 19 days in prison, has a lucky escape. Less fortunate is 51-year old June Weinstock, who came to San Cristobal to watch the Easter celebrations. On March 29 villagers spot her photographing children on the market and caressing a little boy. A woman who has lost sight of her 8-year old son in the bustle eyes Weinstock with suspicion. 'Maybe the gringa keeps the boy in her suitcase,' the icecream vendor jokes. Weinstock becomes the centre of an increasing crowd: there is an American child stealer in town! She too needs police protection, as one thousand inhabitants lay siege to the police station. Five hours later, she is dragged outside and brutally beaten. Weinstock lapses into a coma and has to be hospitalized. She suffered eight stab wounds, a fracture of the base of the skull and two broken arms. By then, the lost boy has been back with his mother for some time already. These incidents would never have happened without the rumours that preceded them. Long-haired foreigners were said to prey on children. A street urchin had been robbed of his corneas; his pockets were stuffed with US dollars. Eight babies were found with their hearts cut out. One had a hundred dollar bill stuck in the gaping wound with a note saying: 'Thanks for your co-operation.' Graffiti warned Americans that they were not welcome: 'Gringo child stealers go home.' Hysteria was fueled by an article in *Prensa Libre* (March 13, 1994), Guatemala's largest circulation daily, depicting the organ trade in the form of an advertising pamphlet. Ten useful organs are displayed like meat in a supermarket, with the prices they would fetch in the United States. The price tag on the heart reads '\$100,000', a kidney is worth \$65,000 and a cornea would fetch a mere \$2,500 on the black market.



### A Children's Exodus

So, where do these stories come from? How did Jeison's and Pedro Reggi's family come to believe that their relative's blindness was caused by thieves? Apparently, these stories have not been inspired by actual crimes. So, could

they be leftist propaganda, spread by deceitful journalists, as the US Information Agency has repeatedly suggested? In its most recent report on *The Child Organ Trafficking Rumor* (December 1994), the USIA does not come down as hard on 'Soviet front groups' as it used to; it provides much useful information but still does not explain the phenomenon. Both parties—humanitarian believers and US government skeptics, but most of all the believers—underestimate the power of the people themselves to develop and circulate unofficial explanations as a reaction to actual circumstances and tensions. In other words: they underestimate their ability to create rumours. These stories originated in Latin American cities, not in a communist era Russian ministry. The most detailed study of these rumours has been undertaken by Parisian folklorist Véronique Champion-Vincent. Champion-Vincent, who has been monitoring the organ theft rumour for years, maintains that it is much more than cynical propaganda. Rather, the rumour is the unreal synthesis of two real consequences of the poverty that afflicts Latin America: adoption and organ traffic. [15] Children from Latin American countries are much in demand on the adoption market. At the time of the attacks on American tourists in Guatemala, on average 20 children per week were adopted from that country, half of them by Americans. Not all requests by American and European couples for the adoption of a Latin American child are met by legal means. Documents are forged, mothers sell their babies and even kidnappings occur. Clandestine foster homes do exist and are frequently discovered by the authorities. The people themselves regard this children's exodus with mixed feelings: what will the future of these children be like? Do they not rather belong in their own country? As we have seen, the selling of bodyparts belongs to the reality of third world countries too. Rumours about organ theft, says Champion-Vincent, posit an imaginary connection between the two phenomena: according to the rumour, the adoptions serve the organ trade as well. A third fact of life in Latin America that feeds the rumour is the high level of everyday violence, vividly described by anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes in a chilling chapter of her book *Death without Weeping*. [16] Scheper-Hughes shared the life of the poor in a community in Northeast Brazil, a region where 'disappearing' is a frightful and by no means imaginary way of departing this world. The anonymous bodies of the victims may turn up on the side of the road, their genitals cut off and their eyes plucked out. Violence is such a routine feature of the world these people inhabit that they cannot even take ownership of their own body for granted. And so, starting in the mid 1980's, the anxieties of the poor produced rumours of organ traffic.

It was said that the teaching hospitals of Recife and the large medical centers throughout Brazil were engaged in an active traffic in body parts, a traffic with international dimensions. Shantytown residents reported multiple sightings of large blue or yellow vans, driven by foreign agents (usually North American or Japanese), who were said to patrol poor neighborhoods looking for small stray children whom the drivers mistakenly believed no one in the overpopulated slums and shantytowns would ever miss. [17]

According to Scheper-Hughes, inhabitants of the First and Third World hold incompatible views of organ donation:

While Western Europeans and Northern Americans persist in thinking of organ transplants as 'gifts' donated freely by loving and altruistic people, to the people of the Alto, whose bodies are so routinely preyed on by the wealthy and the powerful (in economic and symbolic exchanges that have international dimensions), the organ transplant implies less a gift than a commodity. [...] The Brazilian rumors express poor people's perceptions, grounded in an economic and biotechnomedical reality, that their bodies and the bodies of their children may be worth more dead than alive to the rich and the powerful. [18]

These feelings of powerlessness in the face of ruthless exploitation predate the introduction of transplant surgery. In fact, stories of white killers stalking poor South Americans for their bodyparts fit a native tradition which already existed long before adoption and transplantation became important issues. One of the white ogres that abound in these traditional legends is the 'pishtaco' of the Andean Indians, a night prowler who collects human fat. [19] He sells his booty to factories (as a lubricant) or to pharmaceutical companies (as a basis for medication). Indian fat was also said to be used to start up jet engines. The monsters have kept up with the times and are presently hunting for corneas and kidneys.

### The EuroKidney Gang

The fear of cutthroat physicians that thrives under the corrugated iron roofs of South America exists as well in American and Western European luxury apartments. Although emotions do not run as high in the First World, the Dutch, for instance, have their own rumours about stolen bodyparts. In 1990, a contemporary legend that is the mirror image of the Latin American version circulated in the Netherlands. A widely known and believed story told how a businessman or tourist visits Brazil (or Tunisia, or Turkey), is anaesthetized by kidnappers and on recovery finds out that one of his kidneys is missing. [23] Since 1992, a new version is doing the rounds, this time starring a child rather than an adult victim. On a daytrip to the Disneyland amusement park near Paris parents lose sight of one of their children. After a while, the little boy is found on a bench, pale and dazed, with a big scar marking the spot where his kidney has been extracted. Identical stories surfaced as soon as two weeks after EuroDisney opened its gates in 1992. They do not only scare Dutch parents: German, Swiss, Austrian and Swedish parents too fear for their toddler's safety. In spite of this, not one single victim—or its parents—has ever come forward. The story is a textbook example of a contemporary legend. [24] Typically legend-like too, is the way it adapts itself to its surroundings. The Disneyland kidnap scare does reflect a certain amount of xenophobia, but it is not the expression of a people that feels exploited. Consequently, like their Mexican counterparts, the Parisian kidney thieves kindly return their victims to the scene of the crime, but in contrast to their Latin American colleagues they never give them thousands of dollars for pocket money.

## Notes

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6. *Le Monde*, 22 March 1996.
7. Bantman, op.cit.
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# The Adaptable Medicine

Simon Brophy

*Ginseng: tastes like a vegetable, looks like a man . . .*

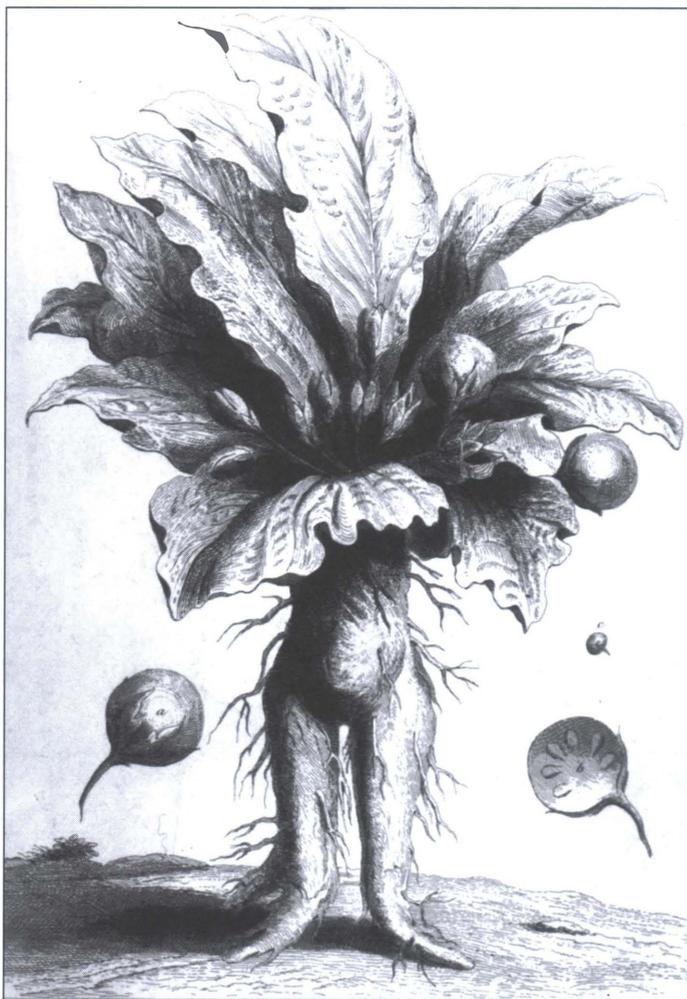
**I**F THERE WAS A DRUG that, it was claimed, had the effects of improving stamina and performance; calming the nerves and alleviating stress; treating illnesses of the mind, the blood, the pancreas, the liver, the circulatory system and the kidney, and had the interesting side effect of improving libido, would you go ahead and gobble it up? Or would you just be a teeny, tiny mite bit suspicious? Readers of *The Skeptic* will probably recognise the spurious claims of the snake-oil salesman.

One medicine to which this list of miracles has been applied is ginseng. Ginseng is a collective name for a number of different plants which have one major feature in common: the roots have a tendency to bifurcate, or divide, in such a way as to cause them to resemble the human form. 'Jenshen' is said to be an approximate translation from one or other Chinese language for 'man-root'. We Europeans even have our own version of a plant with a similar name and appearance: known as the mandrake, a plant that is a relative of the potato, and which is entertainingly poisonous, being loaded, as it is, with a series of alkaloids, the primary one being atropine. Mandrake is derived from Old English and means 'man-serpent' pre-sumably a reference to the plant's slippery nature. A deal of witchy folklore grew up about it during the middle ages, one of the most famous stories being that the plant shrieked when uprooted. The bellow that the plant emitted was said to drive men mad, and so dogs were trained to do the deadly deed. (5).

Plants that resemble the human form, or bits of it, have long had a role as medicines in human society. Their use originates in one of the earliest forms of shamanism in human societies and is referred to by Fraser somewhat confusingly for our purposes — as homoeopathic magic.

Briefly, early human medicine-men would administer plants, or extracts of plants, to their victims because the plant bore a vague resemblance to the part of the body that was afflicted. In most societies this custom survives only in the curious and colourful names given to some plants. For example, the lungwort, which has leaves that are reminiscent of the shape and appearance of the lungs, and which was ineffectually used, amongst other things,

as the basis for cough remedies. Custom, usage, and a bit of luck identified those plants which possessed some observable, beneficial pharmacological action, or at least had no short-term ill-effect, and weeded out the plants (and hopefully the medicine men) that were actually dangerous. Ginseng belongs firmly in the category of plants which don't actually do much harm but a thriving industry survives today selling extracts of ginseng to a gullible public. The reasons are probably that the plant is exotic — it is hard to grow in our climate. It comes from far away, from lands long associated with mystery and exoticism. It is not recommended for anything really serious, so its apparent success/failure ratio will be high. It has to undergo some mysterious processing before it is fit to use. There is some shaky research,



often quoted by supporters, that appears to show the beneficial effects of the plant on the performances of Olympic athletes. Lastly, the preparation, like a certain popular continental lager, is reassuringly expensive.

There is a cluster of plants known as ginseng, and a diverse group they are. Two major reviews in the *Pharmaceutical Journal* [2,3] gave a detailed description of the plants called ginseng and the varied compounds found within them. There are two main plant species that are both sold under the name ginseng. They both belong to

the same biological family - Araliacea (that also includes the ivies) - but they are distinct species. Of the two main species, Panax ginseng is the official plant, grown mainly in the far East. Russian or Siberian ginseng - *Eleutherococcus senticosus* - is a different species that looks only vaguely similar above ground, but that has that all-important rooty resemblance to the human form. Presumably aficionados of ginseng admire specimens of ginseng in the same way that viewers of *That's Life* used to esteem the licentious potatoes and scatological turnips grown by Englishmen from Cleethorpes.

Preparations of these plants - the ginsengs, that is, not the bawdy vegetables - are sold to an unknowing public as ginseng - that is, as the same stuff - yet the two main species are no more closely related than (say) zebras and donkeys. One may be tempted to say well, what does it matter, if they both work the same way? But there is no

evidence that they do. Each subspecies contains different chemicals in different proportions, yet all are sold to the public for the same indications. Panax species mainly contain compounds known as ginsenosides. These chemicals belong to a class known as saponins. Trease and Evans (4) describe saponins thus: 'Saponins [are glycosides] which are characterised by their property of producing a frothing aqueous solution. They also have haemolytic properties and when injected into the blood stream are highly toxic. [...] When taken by mouth saponins are comparatively harmless.' The comparatively harmless bit is rather disappointing, if not wholly unexpected.

*Eleutherococcus* species contain eleutherosides which belong to a class of substances known as glucosides. When you lop off the glucose bit, you are left with a handful of chemicals that may have a weak analgesic effect and/or a weak caffeine-like effect (because the leftovers have a weak resemblance to salicin and caffeine). Of course, whether they actually do have these effects depends entirely on the patient being given a satisfactory dose of eleutherosides. This depends, in turn, on how and where the plant was grown, and the subsequent standardisation of the chemicals in the preparation.

When they harvest the man-root it is subjected to some harsh treatments including baking, sun-drying, hanging, steaming, scraping, banging - and probably shot-blasting - before being deemed fit for use. There is no official standard of pharmacological activity. This is scarcely surprising, given the plethora of chemicals present, in varying proportions, in every batch of plant,

and the astonishing mistreatment of the raw roots.

Herbalists have a special name for the ginsengs: they are known as 'adaptogens'. (6) The suggestion is that the combination of small amounts of weakly pharmacologically active molecules, has a restorative function on certain physiological and psychological functions. Now, one or more of the dozens of molecules found in these plants may, in fact, have nearly undetectable steroid-like activities in mammals. (Even quite small doses of steroids can give patients a feeling of well-being. This fact has not gone unobserved by unscrupulous manufacturers of patent herbal medicines in the developing world. There have been several cases in the medical literature of pots of ethnic 'erbs being juicily laced with hydrocortisone.) Consequently, ginseng is used for many minor medical conditions that are difficult to confirm diagnostically, and so are almost impossible to treat rationally. These include

acting as a tonic, alleviating stress and calming the nerves, treating amnesia, insomnia, illness' of the liver, heart, kidney, nervous and circulatory systems and, according to popular fiction, impotence. A more recent review in the *PJ* by Raman and Houghton (1) referred yet again to all of these. In relation to the last claim, their statement that: "Any alleviation of fatigue or an improved sense of health and physical vigour could, however, contribute to a greater desire for sexual activity." is presumably an ironic afterthought. The same effect could probably be attributed to winning the lottery, as in:



Any sudden and unexpected increase in the size of one's bank balance could, however, contribute to a greater desire for sexual activity. More than likely, and no shot-blasting involved.

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# The Alternative to Religion?

Mike Walsh

## *A brief brush with humanism*

**I** AM AN ATHEIST. I don't believe there's a god. I believe Man to be no more than a mammal with an unusually well-developed brain (viewers of 'Blind Date' excepted).

The only thing I don't understand is, if the brain is so well-developed, how come that, for so many people, it continues to accept religion so unquestioningly? Why do apparently sane and logical people swallow the words of what can only be described as a totally unscientific myth? I mean it's not as if the evidence isn't there. For years science has been demonstrating that all manifestations of life are simply chemical reactions, and that there is simply no evidence for the presence of a 'soul'.

The trouble is that we humans are the one species burdened with the knowledge of the inevitability of our own deaths. Because of this, we seek a meaning to it all, search for the presence of some kind of guiding principles. A set of rules, if you like, by which to lead our lives.

Speaking personally, I have long since ceased to feel such a need. I am comfortable with the futility of my existence and the inevitability of my ultimate non-existence. Yes, all right, it would be wonderful to think that this life could go on forever, but logic tells us that it can't. Like all mammals, once the reproductive cycle is over, the human body breaks down (my wife will tell you that mine broke down some years ago). Eventually the chemical reactions stop, resulting in death. This may be hard to accept for some. I mean, can you imagine a time in which you genuinely aren't interested in the next episode of 'The Archers'? (Please insert your own soap preference if my example is meaningless to you).

### **The power of Christianity**

Religions tend to come with the state of which you are citizen, and Britain is no better than any other country in its obsession with institutionalised religion. Wherever you go in this country, the Anglican church is all around you. Bishops sit in the House of Lords, schools are obliged to hold religious ceremonies on a daily basis and our monarch, over whose succession we have no power whatsoever, is head of the church. Whether we like it or not, religion controls or guides a large part of our lives. (Happily we haven't quite reached the extreme of some zealots, such as the Muslim fundamentalists during the recent takeover of Kabul. They decreed that all women were to stop working and the men were to grow beards. The day that the Church of England orders all men to take up train spotting and the women to spend their spare time making jam has not yet arrived.)



The trouble with all this, though is that it makes God, a difficult man (or woman?) to shake off. It's all ingrained too early. Even one's everyday language is full of sayings that invoke the Almighty. Somehow the expressions 'Oh God', 'Christ Almighty', 'Jesus wept' and so on, still spring to one's lips long after embracing atheism. It seems that the desire to invoke, or blame god for those unexpected and unwelcome experiences in life is a difficult one to shake off. Some believers would maintain that this is natural, since they hold that the whole of morality and ethics is based in the teachings of the church. In fact, to many people, the word 'Christian' is a synonym for 'moral'. The real fanatics even go so far as to proclaim that following the Bible's teachings will lead to a blameless existence (which would seem to indicate that most of them haven't read the book).

I think Karl Marx was spot-on when he described religion as the 'opium of the people'. One of the biggest mistakes of the movement named after him, however, was in not recognising the importance of allowing the people their opium. Many people need some kind of guiding principles to be followed in everyday existence.

However, that's all very well for those who have 'found' religion. But what about us atheists? If not Christianity (or any other of the world's religions) then what? Where to go for 'spiritual' guidance? I decided to explore whether or not there really was a secular belief system for me. I decided to explore whether or not there really was a secular belief system for me. A set of rules by which I should live my life.

## A Humanist Declaration

The most obvious organisation to turn to seemed to me to be the Humanists. Here was surely a secular movement designed to allow free-thinking people to decide how their lives should be run. For many years I had heard the movement referred to by people I held in some esteem. Perhaps this was where I would find my meaning of life.

To find out more, I consulted the Net. ([www.infidels.org/org/aha](http://www.infidels.org/org/aha)) There was some encouraging stuff here. I discovered that the likes of Isaac Asimov and Carl Sagan have called themselves Humanists, men whose opinions I respect. The American Humanist Association proclaims that 'Reason and science are the soundest means for investigating claims of truth' and that 'Humanism is an approach to life emphasising ethics, rationality, and intelligent compassion'. 'Humanism... derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny'. This certainly looked like the sort of organisation I could comfortably be a part of.

Then I read on, and almost at once my heart began to sink.

Firstly, I came across 'A Humanist Declaration of Peace'. I guessed before I started reading that this would be more idealist than practical, and I was right. There isn't room in this article to give complete chapter and verse, but there were at least three areas that caught my eye.

The Declaration stated 'We give our full support to those persons of conscience who choose for deeply held ethical reasons not to participate in war'. Now that kind of simple acceptance just won't do. There are times, like when a Nazi nutcase is determined to wipe out an entire race simply because of their ethnicity, that participating in a war, conscience or not, may be the only way to stop them. At such times, 'conscientious objection' rather smacks of the Monty Python character who joined the army for the water skiing and travel, but not the killing.

The next paragraph also fuelled my concerns, in that it '...call(ed) upon our Humanist leaders to provide peace counseling (sic) to persons concerned about peace issues'. Peace counselling? What sort of qualifications would be required to be a peace counsellor? And why does my mind conjure up an image of yet another gravy train pulling out of the station to follow the Alien Abductors and Repressed Memories towards fame, fortune and the best-seller list?

When the declaration called for the formation of 'registries where people of conscience may formally register their statements of conscientious objection' I finally decided it wasn't for me. After all, Senator McCarthy was quite keen on registers, wasn't he?

## New humanism

I resolved to dig deeper, and discovered that there was a movement within Humanism called New Humanism, that seems to have started in Sweden (Among other places, this can be found on [humanism.org/Movement/English/declar.html](http://humanism.org/Movement/English/declar.html)).

Why is it that whenever I see the word 'new' (as in New Age, New Labour, New Improved Surf) I immediately suspect that all is not as it seems? Reading New

Humanism's Copenhagen Declaration of March 1995 confirmed my worst fears.

The Declaration supposedly sets out the movement's ideals. Here is a group of people who think they have the solution to the world's ills. Or do they? Call me an old cynic if you will, but I had real problems with some of the ideas I read.

The basic ideals sound fine enough. '...health care and education are clearly the two highest values...' is something I can readily agree with, as long as we can find the wherewithal to pay for it. But most of the document reads like something from the worst excesses of the Socialist Workers' Party

Unemployment, we are told, is sharply rising. Where? In Europe possibly, but has the author been to South-East Asia recently? Or the USA? Capitalism, apparently, is wrong. Wanna live in Albania? Or North Korea? Banking must be transformed so that 'its services are made available without charging usurious interest'. I might go along with the 'usurious' bit, but let's face it, banks wouldn't last long if they didn't pay out interest to investors. And to do that, you need to charge interest to borrowers.

Now I'm not about to enter arguments about capitalism versus socialism here, or to say that the world banking system is a wholly altruistic organisation, but surely any thinking person can recognise that there are arguments pro and con both?

Another worrying factor in this document was the New Humanists' call for a Revolution. How many revolutions have ever solved more problems than they've created?

Reading further into New Humanism I could find little to reassure me. Naturally they are against all forms of violence and are in favour of tolerance, liberty and social justice (whatever that is). They wish to support the struggle of minorities and ethnic groups (even minorities like the Branch Davidians, and ethnic groups such as those zealots in Kabul?) However they put forward no concrete plan for this. We've simply got to start loving and tolerating one another.

My final suspicions about New Humanism were confirmed on reading that I could join a 'Personal Development Work Meeting' where I can 'Strengthen the most positive aspects of (myself)' using such tools as visualisation (Betty Shine and Uri Geller would have a field day here). The ultimate aim, currently is to achieve a week without war in May 2000 (sorry, I've lost the Web site reference for this one). A bit like National No Smoking Day I suppose, and about as likely to happen.

## Free thinking

So, having dismissed the New Humanists as a bunch of wide-eyed idealists with all the practicality of a chocolate frying-pan, I decided to search closer to home and see what the more traditional (?) Humanists were saying. In order to do this, I turned to *The Freethinker*. A Humanist periodical, founded in 1881 by G W Foote, this purports to be the voice of secular Humanism in Britain.

I got off to a bad start in the first issue I read (Volume 115 number 8) in which the editor describes his recent visit to Cuba through a pair of spectacles that are decidedly rose tinted. The people have food rationing, but they don't mind, blacks and whites have total equality, and

everyone loves Fidel. Even the Catholic Nuns come in for some praise for carrying Communist Party membership cards. The prostitutes encountered about the author's hotels are merely 'working girls'. Beggars, so poor as to see the gift of a Bic biro as a magnanimous gesture, are 'school truants' and much less miserable than those found in London. Good old Fidel!

I read this with a mixture of incredulity and amusement, then sat back and waited for the next issue's mailbag to point out the inaccuracies. I waited in vain. Not a thing. Clearly when the editor of *The Freethinker* speaks, the readers listen without criticising. The rest of the letters told me a great deal about the average Secular humanist, however. One correspondent, a doctor, advocates the execution of all petty criminals. Some readers insist that all Humanists must be Socialists, others that they must be Conservatives. There are long and incomprehensible exchanges on what precisely is meant by free will and (possibly silliest of all) arguing whether atheism is a faith.

Many of the articles and editorials go to great length to ridicule church-goers and their beliefs. Without recognising that it is not the believers who are at fault, but the men who lead and control the world's great religions. There is also rather too much sneering and unnecessarily offensive remarks. Describing Christ as a 'namby-pamby no-dick wimp' (Vol 115 No 7) is by no means an isolated example. This kind of thing is simply gratuitously offensive and adds nothing to the arguments about the personality of the man (assuming he existed) or how he came to be thought of as the son of god.

Another cause endlessly espoused is the 'Gay and Lesbian' movement. Now this is a concept that has always puzzled me. I have no hesitation in supporting the rights of both gays and lesbians for equality with heterosexuals, but what on earth have gay men and lesbians in common that allows a 'Gay and Lesbian' movement to exist? You might as well have a gay and paedophile movement, or a Lesbian and bestiality movement. As Dr Aric Sigman points out in his excellent book *New Improved* (that damned word 'new' again) '... each group has been able to gravitate toward the characteristics of their own sex with little consideration of the opposite sex, which is, to all intents and purposes, out of their

frame of reference.' The concept of a 'Gay and Lesbian' movement is, therefore, ridiculous, but is constantly espoused by *The Freethinker*.

The magazine also insists that being 'pro abortion' is mandatory to the confirmed Humanist. Once again, I had difficulty. Abortion is a right that all women should have, but it's just to complex a subject to receive blind acceptance. There's a world of difference between the termination of a pregnancy caused by the rape of a teenager and one performed for the convenience of keeping a job. Some genuine moral arguments must be considered, and each case considered separately.

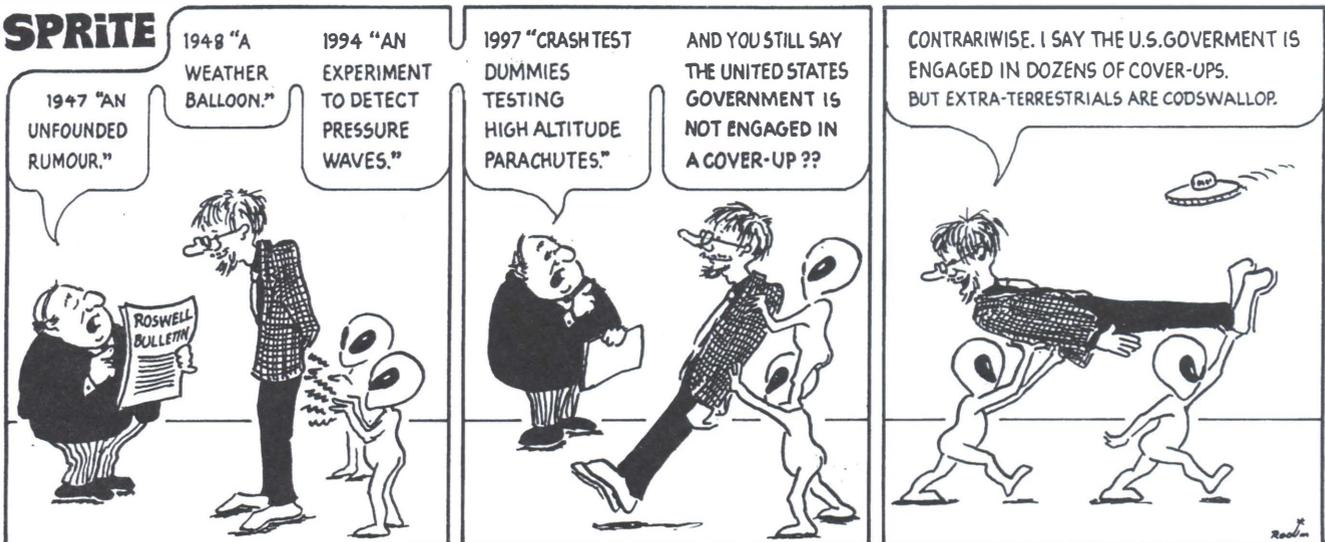
The magazine isn't entirely without merit. There were some timely attacks on religious education in schools, and the rise of fundamentalism and intolerance, but these were often almost buried in the streams of vitriol and invective against those simply trying to keep the faith in which they had been brought up. Let's face it, it doesn't take much intellectual power to find anomalies in the Bible and in the teaching of some religious leaders, yet the *Freethinker* is full of articles doing just that.

**Rites**

One thing, above all, stood out during my (albeit rudimentary) attempts to understand Humanism (I have been taking *The Freethinker* for only just over a year). The more I read about Humanism, the more it seemed to me that it was trying to form itself into a religion, with rules, dogma and, strangest of all, rites. This took a number of forms. There were calls for regular 'meetings', the adoption of certain political and social agendas and so on. But the one thing that stood out was the preoccupation with rituals.

Now no matter what society, people or religion you examine, you'll find one thing common to all. They all have a series of rites of passage that define the landmarks in life. There's birth, puberty, marriage and death, with often a few others in between. And all these episodes have, in one way or another, been translated into the rituals of the prevailing religious group. The problem is, what do you do about celebrating these milestones if you're an atheist?

In many ways, the answer to the question is simple and is supplied by the law. Births, marriages and deaths must be registered in order to comply with the legal



system in almost every country in the world. This makes perfect sense. The legal registration of a new-born baby is an essential way of proving nationality and ensuring the child's rights as defined by the laws of the land. In the case of marriage, legal registration assists in ensuring that legal inheritance rights are met. Death must be registered for the same reason, as well as to be sure that the cause of death is established.

Surely all other ceremonial is no more than a desire to have a party? An opportunity for friends and, especially, family, to get together and eat and drink too much? (And why not?) So those of us who recognise no need to invoke a deity in marking these rites of passage can simply ensure that the legal requirements are met and happily get on with their lives.

However, Humanism has taken upon itself to supply those rites. Whether it be a birth, marriage or death, they offer appropriate ceremonies to see them through. Amongst the offerings I discovered were:

A Humanist Child Dedication Ceremony

A Humanist Memorial Service

A Sample Graveside Internment Ceremony

A Formal Humanist Wedding with full orchestra

A Mixed-faith Humanist Wedding Ceremony

And, what seemed daftest of all:

A Non-theistic Religious Meditation Ritual

This, to me, is the height of arrogance. How can the Humanists possibly claim that their catechism of mumbo-jumbo can be in any way more meaningful or binding than those offered by established religions? At least those have the credibility of tradition behind them, whether we like them or not. Surely, if a Humanist objects to the traditional ceremonies, all he or she needs is the licence, followed by a good party?

Then there's the question of who will perform these ceremonies. Can anybody do it, or does one need qualifications? Perhaps we need a kind of Humanist priesthood? May the Editor be with you.

I appreciate that this article is rather negative, and that I may well have offended a number of people. I'm sure Humanism does a great deal of good, and provides a *raison d'être* for many of my fellow atheists, some of whom (if they've stayed with me this far) will, by now, be fuming. To them I say, convince me. Show me the merits of Humanism, or find me another alternative. Just don't ask me to accept Humanism as the answer simply because it's the only show in town.

So where do I go from here? Religion offers me nothing. Humanism offers me political dogma, tired ideas, arrogance, squabbling and intolerance. Well, it's simple, really. I shall go on living my life under the auspices of 'Walshism'. This involves a healthy scepticism, a vain desire to avoid being judgmental and a tolerance, as far as I am able, of those whose ideas I disagree with. Unfortunately it also involves being occasionally unreasonable, intolerant and biased.

But then again. I'm only human.

**Mike Walsh** is an Educational Consultant in a City-based software company and the author of more than a dozen erotic novels.

# The Skeptic's Dictionary

Robert Todd Carroll

*Angels are back in fashion*

**B**odiless, immortal spirits, limited in knowledge and power, accepted in the traditional belief of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The three choirs of angels appear early in the Christian era; the classes are, from the highest: seraphim, cherubim, thrones; dominations, virtues, powers; principalities, archangels, angels. Angels appear in the Bible, often in critical roles, e.g., visiting Abraham and Lot (Gen. 18; 19) and announcing the Incarnation to Mary (Luke 1). The cult of guardian angels who protect individuals or nations is especially strong in the West. The angels of hell, or devils, led by Satan, are viewed as initiators of evil temptations.



Belief in angels is comforting, even though there is no proof for their existence. Angels can also serve as monitors of behaviour. A parent can try to control a child's behaviour by convincing the child that someone is always watching him or her. The angel is presented as being a kind of bodyguard, but the child will hopefully realize that the angel is also keeping track of all deeds, good and bad, even those done when mommy and daddy aren't around.

As a child, I was introduced to the world of angels and devils. The evil ones were everywhere, but the only angel I remember was my guardian angel. That one angel was enough comfort to ward off any despair from being in the company of too many devils. The guardian angel is a wonderful concept and has been adopted in many myths and movies, though in the movies the guardian angel is usually transformed into a superhuman master of occult powers. Somehow, a bodiless, translucent, winged spirit in a gossamer gown wielding a laser sword isn't convincing. The angel is still popular, though, as evidenced by the recent publication of several books by 'experts-by-experience' on the subject and the popularity of the television program 'Touched by an Angel.'

Why are these bodiless beings always depicted as humans with wings? Because depiction enhances belief and a bodiless being cannot be depicted. We can imagine a non-bodily being only by suspending our belief in reality as we know it. How does a bodiless being think or feel? To talk of spirits as non-bodily beings is to utter words without any more meaning than the expression 'a round square.'

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

# Many Happy Returns

Melissa Krausey

*An attempt to regress to a past life*

**L**ET ME LAY MY CARDS ON THE TABLE. I have long been convinced that I was a Victorian governess in a previous life. I toyed with the idea that I was a recycled edition of Charlotte Bronte, but in the end I was deterred by the thought of her walrus-whiskered husband, Arthur Bell Nicholls. I knew I was a governess, though, because - like most of the breed - I've always been hopeless with children. And it had to be the Victorian era, because there was a glut of governesses in circulation at the time, all tragic and consumptive, which somehow appealed to my sense of the dramatic.

So what do you do when you know you had a previous life, and you want to find out more about it? In my case, I perused the classified ads in the back of a magazine and discovered that, for a small fortune, I could be hypnotically regressed and re-experience my former incarnation.

Cecil (not-his-real-name) had a string of impressive-sounding qualifications in hypnosis and regression therapy, and sounded only slightly strange over the phone. Moreover, he sent me a bundle of literature on the subject of his accomplishments, referring to himself in the third person throughout. I thought he seemed a little in awe of himself, and I must confess that this impression rubbed off on me.

Without further ado, I booked an appointment with him, and spent the next few days in a frenzy of anticipation. I pictured myself stopping the conversation at future dinner parties with the comment, 'Of course, when I underwent past life regression, I discovered the reason for my aversion to whelks,' or, 'I can't kiss your children goodnight, because my previous incarnation ended with scarlet fever contracted through little Georgiana'.

The big day came. I caught a train to Godalming, and followed Cecil's surrealistic map from the station to his house. It took me several attempts, and I did feel that the town might benefit from the introduction of street lamps and road signs. (Also, I realised that as a governess, I had never been expected to teach Navigation, a shortcoming which I had sadly failed to rectify in my next life.)

Cecil was a small, precise man with a slightly prissy manner. His interior decoration was distinctly New Age, and he had a black cat, which studiously ignored my friendly overtures. The session started off like a medical consultation, as he sat me down and proceeded to establish my (present incarnation) history. What was my interest in regression? Was I in search of healing? Self-growth? Did I have subliminal memories of another existence? I was suddenly too embarrassed to trot out the Victorian governess theory, and instead told him lamely that I had always felt a strong affinity for the past. This seemed to satisfy him, as he conducted me to a sofa, and instructed me to lie down and close my eyes. I wondered briefly whether his previous incarnation had been as Sigmund Freud. (Or perhaps he had been a Nice Jung Man?)



Cecil started off with a prayer, in which he invoked an oriental-sounding deity and placed it in sole charge of the proceedings. This didn't bother me particularly. I mean, I figure that if you want something, it's always a good idea to go to the top. So I lay back and closed my eyes, while Cecil (or the deity?) bathed me in a warm, golden light. I concentrated on total relaxation, and waited to be precipitated into the past.

Cecil took me down a long flight of stairs, which I had to count as I descended. When I got to the bottom, he advised me that I was in a garden full of mist. He instructed me to locate a door. At this point, I became rather puzzled. Did he expect me to see an actual door, or was I supposed to visualise one in my mind's eye? As no door presented itself to me, I hastily invented one.

'And what colour is the door?' he enquired encouragingly. 'Er, red,' I replied, trying very hard to picture it. 'A red door,' repeated Cecil, in hushed, reverential tones. 'And what does it look like?' 'Round,' I replied firmly, thinking of Bilbo Baggin's door. 'A round red door,' breathed Cecil earnestly.

He conducted me through my door and into a tunnel. He conducted me through the tunnel, and out the other side. 'And when you come out of the tunnel,' he pronounced triumphantly, 'what do you see?'

I thought hard about this one, I really did. I mean, I felt as if I were a student who was about to fail an exam. Still, in the end, I had to concede defeat. 'Nothing,' I confessed.

If Cecil was disappointed, he managed not to show it. Instead, he conveyed me to the top of an even longer

staircase, down which he led me with ponderous gravity, counting every step. This brought me to another garden full of mist, another door. ('A brown door,' murmured Cecil wonderingly.)

This time, it was a square door, and it, too, concealed a tunnel. Through the tunnel I had to go.

'And as you emerge,' Cecil concluded hopefully, 'what do you see?'

But it was no use. No amounts of stairs and doors and tunnels would transport me into the past. Indeed, it became clear to me that I had no past. In short, I was a first-timer on the planet, my past abruptly contracted from a millenium to a few decades.

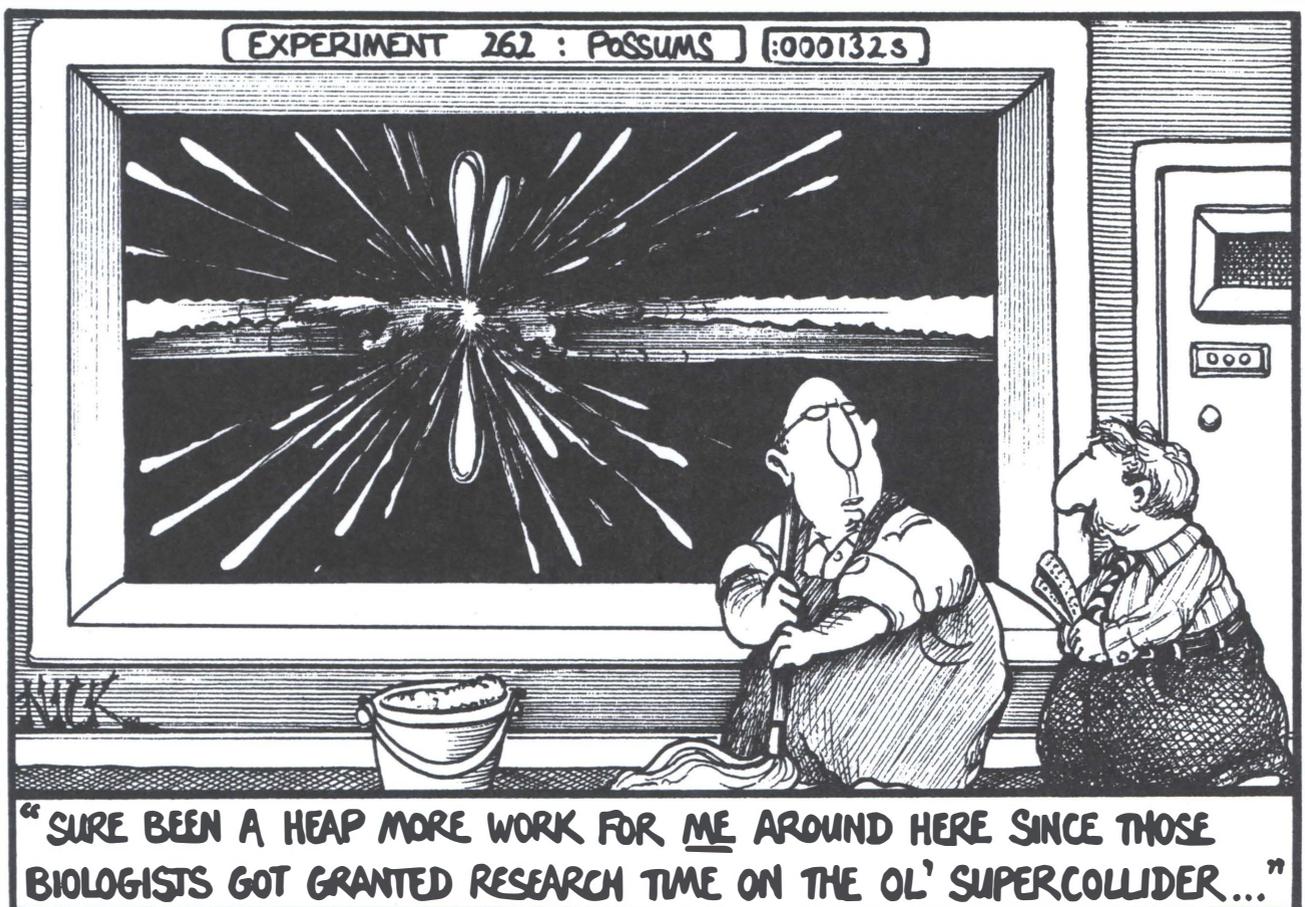
A post mortem ensued, where Cecil explained rather evasively that different people had different responses to hypnotic regression, and that, yes, some of them might conceivably pretend to regress when they were really in the here and now all the time. I was beginning to wish I'd never attempted to stray from the here and now.

There remained the small matter of Cecil's payment. With much furtive fluttering and muttering, he negotiated a half-price deal, which was really the only good thing to have come out of the evening.

And I never did discover the reason for my aversion to whelks.

**Melissa Krausey** is a freelance writer working in London.

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# Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

## Monkey business

**R**ather like those underground rivers which lurk under the streets of London and attract the attention of enthusiasts of the Underworld clad in gumboots and Gore-Tex, Conspiracy Theories continue to bubble just below the surface of the conventional world of the 'accepted explanation'.

You've probably heard of some of the biggies: Watergate was down to Howard Hughes and his obsession with political manipulation; JFK was simultaneously assassinated by at least three warring factions within his own government; AIDS was deliberately genetically engineered by biological warfare scientists; the economies of all the nations on Earth are puppeteered by a secret group of bankers – Jewish, Catholic, Protestant or Inexplicably Mystical, take your pick – who meet in secret caves deep in the Swiss mountains; Elvis faked his own death; scientists have invented a car that runs on water/have discovered perpetual motion/have perfected the infinite-life lightbulb, but the power industry has gagged them on all counts; and of course, the US government knows all about UFOs and have whole armies of captured aliens in whose advanced technology lies the secret of Microsoft's success.

While that last example might have left you smirking with Skeptic Subscriber disbelief, the fact remains that for many people, a good Conspiracy Theory can be a comfort, and can help to impose some welcome shape on the world. Suddenly there's a Master Plan to explain all; a Secret Committee to choreograph all politics, wars and economics; and best of all: those infuriating loose ends which dangle around assassinations, mysterious suicides, disappearances, coups d'état, plane crashes and riots, all suddenly get tied up in a blinding flash of (admittedly mysterious) interconnectedness that would make Charles Fort's hair stand on end.

Traditionally, what anyone has known about Conspiracy Theories has been directly proportional to the effort they were willing to spend in searching them out, chasing the connections, and tracking down all the relevant books and pamphlets. But now, the Conspiracy Theory world suddenly has a roadmap, courtesy of the renowned maverick prankster Robert Anton Wilson. Co-author of the *Illuminatus* series of books, and perhaps the world's leading anarcho-Fortean, Wilson is attempting the almost impossible. He's compiling a list of all known Conspiracy Theories. Together with his co-compiler Miriam Joan Hill, Wilson is assembling a page on the Web ([www.cruzio.com/~blackops/](http://www.cruzio.com/~blackops/)) with a link to pages set up by other people to celebrate their own favourite

conspiracies. Even in its embryonic stage it makes fascinating reading, with hundreds of ideas in an A-Z compendium of obsession.

Conspiracy theories come and go like Nessie's humps, but there's a new one which appeals to me immensely. The world, it seems, is controlled by monkeys.

That might not sound so absurd, but for the fact that these monkeys are purple. And they live as a tribe deep in the Amazon rainforest, from where they exercise their subversive manipulation of mankind.

The Purple Monkey story begins in ancient Egypt, with a reference in an appendix to the *Papyrus of Ani*, the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, which dates from 247 BC:

Hail, ye Four Apes who sit in the bows of the Boat of Ra, who convey truth to Nebertcher, who sit in judgment on the oppressed man and on oppressor, who make the gods to be contented by means of the flame of your mouths.

After Egypt, the monkeys disappeared. Their next appearance was in Knossos in Crete, home of the Minotaur. By now they had turned blue.

They disappeared again until the Middle Ages. They surveyed humanity, and decided that it needed guidance. They retreated to the Amazon, where the canopy would provide the shelter and solitude necessary for the nurturing of their powers.

They became telepathic, and purple, and discovered a way to fly around invisibly at supersonic speeds. In fact, what are commonly referred to as UFO sightings are in fact young Purple Monkeys practising their flying – they haven't yet mastered the art of invisibility.

The Tribe of the Purple Monkeys control the world in an insidious manner (as if there might be some other way) by telepathically creating holograms of famous people who are mistaken for the real McCoys by us gullible humans. Of course, the operational costs are immense, and the Monkeys make ends meet by operating bogus 'Save the Rainforest' charities. As the money pours in, the Monkeys become increasingly powerful by purchasing stock in the major companies of the world.

I rather like the idea of all of humanity being controlled by hyper-intelligent Amazonian purple telepathic monkeys. Without involving that annoying 'God' thing, we can finally see that the reasons for all our human problems lie entirely elsewhere. At last, we're off the hook! Or am I missing something?

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

# Skeptic at Large

Wendy Grossman



## *Getting things in perspective.*

SOMETIME AROUND 1980, I remember driving somewhere in the western half of the US late at night and turning on the radio to find the science fiction writer Harlan Ellison complaining about Americans' priorities. As I remember it, his complaint had to do with the general lack of interest in the then latest photographs from JPL, which gave astronomers the first close-up look at the rings around Saturn. 'But all anyone was talking about that week,' I remember him (perhaps incorrectly) saying, 'was, Who shot JR?' I wouldn't know; I never watched Dallas (or was it Dynasty?).

The same kind of thing could be said about the week in the summer, when the 50th anniversary of Roswell was vying for attention with the Mars landing and the photographs of the dusty barren Marscape being sent back by Pathfinder. The two seemed to be running neck and neck in the race for coverage. Mars scored bigger on the news, probably, but Roswell got all the talk shows. Match the July 4 UFO special on ITV to the BBC documentary on the history of American unmanned space exploration, and the coverage of the Roswell Festival to the picture display on the daily news and you come out about even. Do I hear you say that this 50-50 ratio is kind of depressing? I'd have to agree — though not as depressing as if Mars lost out completely, which was of course always possible.

It was notable in the *Sky News* coverage of the Roswell Festival that the organizers of the festival were completely clued-up about how to sell their wares, namely the idea that bug-eyed crash dummies landed on the planet 50 years ago.

'You wouldn't cover a UFO conference,' the head honcho told *Sky* shrewdly. 'There's hundreds of UFO conferences every year that don't get covered. But you'll cover a festival.' Including the man in the alien suit doing the Macarena, yes, *Sky* certainly did. I'm sure the UFO buffs were annoyed, too: these are, I can imagine them thinking, not the serious investigations into alien landings and government cover-ups that the world needs. No, this is the tacky American theme park version of UFology.

Come to think of it, it's astonishing that astronomers haven't hit on this method of selling the product before now. Why shouldn't there be a Mars theme park, where tourists can go to drive around the Marscape in golf carts. I'm sure some portion of the Arizona desert could be painted reddish brown and denuded of vegetation for the purpose without much loss. The one bit that might be hard is setting up a bubble dome where people could

experience the thin, cold Martian atmosphere. Well, perhaps not. Someone without a sense of humor might sue when their coffee exploded.

Somewhere in all these festivities I got called out to show up to do the skeptical routine on *Sky News*. I was trioped up with two guys who believe there is a government cover-up, even though the most solid evidence either could produce for such a thing was a threatening phone call back in 1976. But the show was kind of fun. We had a call from a woman who knew the aliens were watching over us because several had healed her from a life-threatening illness, and another from a woman who knew the story of aliens landing was nonsense. A perfectly balanced sample.

By contrast, the news coverage of the Mars landing wasn't balanced at all. Mysteriously, none of the news shows felt obliged to find a Flat-Earth Society spokesman to question whether the landings were in fact taking place and allege that the photographs and the mission control room in California were all faked.

I kind of got stuck at that point in writing this column. Was the story really going to be yet again that paranormal claims attract more interest than hard science? No. It turns out that the story is that media coverage was, for once, out of tune with the interests of the general public.

The real story turned out to be on the Internet, where the Mars Pathfinder site was getting 100 million hits a day. Now, OK, granted that hits is a very crude measure of popularity — a hit is a single file download, and a Web page downloaded once by a single visitor to the site may contain many files. But still . . . a JPL scientist giddy with excitement reported on ABC's *Nightline* program on Monday, July 7, that the site had just been bombarded all day by, he imagined, everyone who had gone back to work after the holiday weekend, turned on their computers, and kept the Pathfinder site running in a corner of their screens.

The upshot is that many more people from all over the world were interested in seeing real pictures of the dusty, barren Marscape than were interested in seeing a load of bug-eyed crash-test dummies. Score one for the much-maligned general public. Mars and Pathfinder will be the making of the Internet as a news medium the way the Gulf War made CNN.

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

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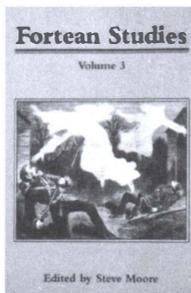
# Reviews

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## Scholarly Forteana

Steve Moore (Editor), *Fortean Studies Volume 3*  
(John Brown, £19.99)



This volume presents another set of scholarly articles about a wide variety of Fortean phenomena. The initial chapters review the folklore surrounding 'unexplained mysteries', such as Spring-Heeled Jack (a Victorian 'ghost' who spat fire and evaded pursuers with supernatural leaps) and the 'Screaming Skull' legends of Britain (skulls which, if removed from their resting

places, caused the onset of various paranormal phenomena). Other chapters discuss the evidence for and against the existence of unusual creatures including: giant birds, sea serpents and (my favourite) 'The Singing Mouse of Devonport'.

A third set of chapters examines UFO-related topics including analyses of the relationship between UFO studies and the media, UFO sightings in 1908 and alien abductions. The closing sections of the book contain updates on some of the topics covered in *Fortean Studies* 1 and 2, and end with comprehensive topic, author and date indexes to the 1995 volume of *Fortean Times*.

All of the chapters present material which is extremely well-researched and documented. For example, the chapter on Spring-Heeled Jack contains over 200 footnotes and its appendix contains complete transcripts of the 85 source documents referred to in the text. As such, the volume represents the type of scholarly research that should typify a skeptical approach to Fortean phenomena – a far cry from the superficial coverage that these topics so often receive.

I just hope that the market for the book is large enough to encourage the publishers to continue producing this excellent series. Highly recommended.

— Richard Wiseman

## Spectral variations

R C Finacune, *Ghosts: Appearances of the Dead and Cultural Transformation* (Prometheus, £12.50)

If there really is an afterlife, it would appear to be a reasonable assumption that the nature of this post-mortem existence would not vary over the centuries. After all, although deists may well believe that this world is imperfect and corruptible, surely heaven, hell and even purgatory would not change in ways that reflected the preoccupations of the living? Such spiritual realms might be

expected to be immune to changes in organizational structure and policy that afflict earthly institutions.

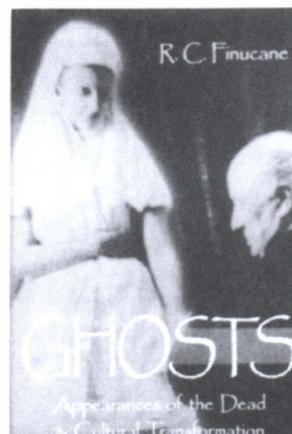
Therefore, if ghosts really do exist, we might reasonably expect the nature of their manifestations to be fairly constant down the centuries. The problem, as this book shows so well, is that the appearance and behaviour of ghosts has varied considerably throughout history. Finacune is a historian and his book is both scholarly and highly readable. The book addresses three main problems: 'how the dead have been perceived in Western European traditions; what changes have occurred in these perceptions through the centuries; and why these perceptions have altered'. Finacune is less concerned with the issue of whether or not ghosts really exist, than with the fact that the idea of ghosts is a social and historical reality.

His survey concentrates on ghost reports from England from the sixteenth century onwards, but begins with a description of ghosts from ancient Greece which 'flitted and squeaked like crazed bats all the way down to Hades, where they spent eternity meekly standing about murmuring to each other in hollow tones'.

But the appearance of ghosts has changed to reflect their social function. For example, medieval apparitions often reinforced Catholic teachings regarding rewards and punishments after death. The spirits of departed loved ones, it was believed, could be helped to escape purgatorial punishments by prayers from the living (and donations to the church) and the message was brought home using lurid accounts of spirits appearing to the living in states of horrendous torment.

Nowadays ghosts serve mainly to reinforce the basic idea of life after death and generally do not have much direct involvement with the social affairs of the living. Finacune ably guides the reader through the centuries with clarity and good humour.

— Christopher C French



## Old trons, new trons

A K Dewdney, *Yes, We Have No Neutrons: An Eye-Opening Tour through the Twists and Turns of Bad Science* (Wiley, £17.99)

Dewdney's lively book deals not with fraudulent science – intended to deceive others – but bad science, whose

practitioners have managed to deceive themselves. His paradigm case is cold fusion – hence the title. Following a relentlessly jolly introduction, this and seven other examples are allotted a chapter apiece.

The first three are thuddingly familiar from skeptical texts. French physicist Prosper Blondlot's delusions about invisible N-rays have been frequently written up, although Dewdney has done his research and adds some novel (to me) bits from the debunker Robert W Wood's damning report to *Nature*.

Next comes a vigorous bash at IQ testing, as extensively covered in Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* (duly credited). Again, new material appears. One test inflicted on US inner-city kids requested the missing word in the following sentence: 'When a dove begins to associate with crows, its feathers remain —, but its heart grows black'. Think about that, but not too hard.

Chapter 3 attacks Freud's notorious lack of scientific rigour. Chapter 4 puts the boot into the admittedly rather silly Drake equation which is supposed to estimate the number of radio-emitting civilizations in our galaxy. By way of non-sequitur, Dewdney goes on to sneer at SETI in general . . . a gamble which might still offer a more interesting payoff than the National Lottery.

The next topic is closer to our author's heart (he being a Maths and Computer Science man): the overselling of neural-net systems as a universal solvent for computational problems. Pausing only for a sideswipe at perceptrons, Dewdney gives an excellent condensed explanation of the issues and gleefully points out how far actual systems' performance falls short of the hype.

That well-worn cold fusion saga occupies Chapter 6: been there, done that, got several book-length accounts. Chapter 7 refreshingly exposes the scientific illiteracy of Biosphere 2 and its hopelessly inadequate provision for multiple ecologies (15–30% of included species died out, but cockroaches were doing fine). Chapter 8 – stop me if you've heard this one before – debunks J Philippe Rushton's dodgy theories about inherent racial IQ differences, as rehashed in the notorious *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994).

Yes, *We Have No Neutrons* reads well and would make a fine entry-level book for anyone interested in pathological science. Skeptics familiar with existing literature should wait for the paperback.

— David Langford

## A very strange year

*Fortean Times Weird Year 1996* (John Brown, £7.99)



Like many other women, I've stopped buying *Fortean Times* because of the sexist advertisements it carries, so *Fortean Times Weird Year 1996* provided a welcome opportunity to enjoy the best of this formerly excellent magazine without the smut.

This vastly entertaining, tongue-in-cheek compilation of weird and wonderful news stories and articles from 1996

includes the usual crop of alien abduction stories and strange religious phenomena. One of the more bizarre of these is the Python-esque 'Holy Handkerchief of Genoa' which we're told on page 4 has never been photographed. So how did they get the detailed reproduction of it that appears on page 51? Of course – it must be a miracle!

Freak accidents and other unlikely events feature heavily. Pity poor Ulrich Schild, impaled through the chest on a branch in a motorcycle accident in the Dominican Republic. Having miraculously survived and got himself to hospital with 5ft of branch protruding from his chest, he then had to wait three hours while doctors wrangled over who would pay for of the operation to remove it. Other unfortunates include the driver who decided a pair of pliers were an adequate substitute for a steering wheel, and the vicar with a stray ferret up his cassock.

Of course, there's the inevitable article on Roswell. This one begins, 'Is anyone left on Planet Earth unaware of the Roswell Incident?' Is anyone left on Planet Earth still interested? Isn't it time journalists declared a moratorium on the whole wretched subject? The book's back cover is a hilarious spoof advertisement for an 'Alien Abduction Pregnancy Test'. Perhaps this would sell well in the Roswell area.

Being largely a 'best of' compilation, the book may seem a waste of money to anyone who's bought *Fortean Times* throughout the year, but it does offer a good read for those of us who haven't. I'm almost tempted to start buying *Fortean Times* again – but not quite. Oh well, I could always hope that their most offensive advertisers will be abducted by aliens in 1997. That's a story that would definitely increase their readership.

— Chris Willis

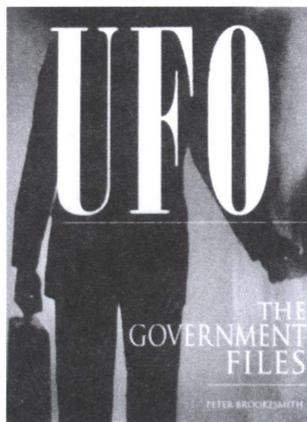
## Unexpectedly skeptical

Peter Brookesmith, *UFO: The Government Files* (Blandford £14.99)

If you were only aware of Peter Brookesmith as the editor of the partwork *The Unexplained*, which originally appeared in 156 weekly issues between 1980 and 1983, and as anthologies in spin-off books for years thereafter, you would be forgiven for thinking that this book wasn't going to be very rational. But how wrong you would be.

*The Unexplained* was just like the curate's egg; good in parts. There were occasional gems in it but it wasn't consistently good enough for me to get past the first twenty or so issues. This book is the opposite, but even more so. As I write this review I haven't had the time to read it thoroughly from cover to cover but I have dived into it a number of times and have found it very informative, absorbing, well written, and – unlike *The Unexplained* – extremely skeptical. It has much information which I haven't seen anywhere else and I was especially pleased to see an analysis of the Belgian UFO flap which occurred in 1989 and 1990, and is a case which UFOlogists cite as being unexplained but which Brookesmith shows is far from convincing. There is also a seventeen-page chapter on the Roswell crash in which Brookesmith summarises a very complicated case (including the infamous alien autopsy) extremely well.

Brookesmith's story of so-called government cover-ups starts with the Los Angeles Air Raid of 1942 and



proceeds to the 1993 case of 'The Flying Catamaran?' by way of Canada, Puerto Rico, Bolivia, Australia, Iran, France, Belgium and the United Kingdom. Thirty-three individual cases are described in boxes of between half a page and one and a third pages long. For some, these are the only mention they get. Others are also included in the chapter text, most of which is taken up with the history of UFOs,

background on leading players, and projects, like Blue Book, the Condon Report, and the MJ12 documents.

*UFO: The Government File* is a large format book which, for me, creates problems with storage. But with the inclusion of many photographs and documents, no other format would do the subject justice. Anyone vaguely interested in UFOs and wanting just one book devoted to the subject could do no better than to buy it. UFO enthusiasts, too, should also find this book a more than useful addition to their collections.

— Mike Hutchinson

## Slack-jawed awe

Peter Hough and Moyshe Kalman, *The truth about Alien Abductions* (Blandford, £9.99)

Reviewing books for *The Skeptic* can be a rewarding experience. Even the most unscientific tomes often contain a few useful or interesting snippets that can be filed away for future use. Sometimes, however, one finds a book that seems to have no saving graces. This is such a book

It starts with a number of accounts written by 'abductees'. All names given are false, so none of the accounts can be checked. The first is by a university lecturer who, during a night spent in a cabin in the Iranian mountains, was abducted and literally taken on a magic carpet ride by unidentified beings. The experienced was shared by an Iranian, who later denied that the event occurred and has since died. Despite this, the authors still take the story at face value.

The second 'incident' happened to a couple with a young child. The pair were seriously fatigued, travelling late at night in bad weather through a part of France with which neither was familiar. The account is given in colourful language ('Rain smacked the tarmacked surface of the car park like tracer fire'). The pair see strange lights in the sky and discover that they have taken three and a half hours to travel forty miles. The woman later suffers a nosebleed and the child anal bleeding. This, along with some subsequent bad dreams and sleep paralysis is the sum of the evidence of abduction, yet the authors devote an entire chapter to the incident.

The case which receives the most attention, however, involves a family living in a Lincolnshire village, who witnessed a UFO in 1979. Hough and Kalman investigated the women (three young girls and their mother) in 1994, some fifteen years after it took place. Fifteen years is a very long time, and as anyone who has studied the

workings of the human mind knows, memories over such a period are notoriously unreliable, but the authors make no allowance for this, relying on that most dubious art, hypnotic regression, to glean their facts.

From here the story degenerates into a mish-mash of reported dreams, ghostly sightings and even a visit from a poltergeist. Some of the most mundane occurrences (a sinking feeling whilst close to sleep, dreams about strange ghoulish creatures, sleep paralysis, dreams of being able to fly) are treated by the investigators with slack-jawed awe, and little or no attempt is made to corroborate except with immediate family or close friends.

But evidence is not Hough and Kalman's strong point. An example of the quality of supporting evidence should give a flavour of what I mean: 'One of [an abductee's] uncles dreamed he was on a beach and when he awoke he had a pebble in his hand' Well, it must be true then!

And Hough and Kalman's paranoia doesn't end here. We are treated to a whole chapter on 'Men In Black' – mysterious government agents who visit abductees using the most inept attempts at subterfuge. Even the cases reported in the British press in the last few years of bogus social workers out to snatch children from their mothers are cited as part of the alien abduction phenomenon, though it is never quite made clear whether these are aliens themselves or more government agents.

I could go on, but I won't. Suffice to say you'll learn more about abductions by watching the test card on TV than you will from reading this rubbish. As for me, I had a bad dream last night, so I'm off to write a bestseller about it.

— Mike Walsh

## Absurd pseudoscience

Julie Milton and Richard Wiseman, *Guidelines for Extrasensory Perception Research* (University of Hertfordshire Press, £12.45)

Dr Julie Milton is a Research Consultant in psychology at the University of Edinburgh, and Dr Richard Wiseman is a Senior Research Fellow in psychology at the University of Hertfordshire. This is the second title in what is claimed to be 'an important new series on parapsychology.' For the back cover blurb, the publishers have managed to find two approving comments on the first book (*Guidelines for Testing Psychic Claimants* by Richard Wiseman and Robert Morris): these are from *The Skeptic* and *Fortean Times*.

This is a slim volume of less than 60 pages of text, followed by 12 pages of references, and a 20-page checklist that does little more than summarise the previous text. By and large, rather like parapsychology itself, the book's remit tends to be negatively defined. It is 'not intended to be a set of rules'. But 'Neither are the guidelines intended as a primer'. The booklet's main purpose in fact is no more than to 'provide convenient information sources' for those who are interested in ESP studies.

I don't know who the target readership would be. Those who are not familiar with research will find themselves continually referred to other sources for a proper explanation. Those already familiar with research will find the advice numbingly simplistic. (Don't let a receiver know about the target beforehand. Don't allow

signals between sender and receiver . . . )

A great deal of attention is paid to statistics and the testing of random number generators – long a diversionary tactic in this area – in spite of the fact that ‘psychics’ who manage to achieve above-chance results have no idea which of their own responses were ‘successful’.

The most depressing information to be gleaned from this book is the light it casts on the current state of the art. Most research now, it seems, merely aims to ‘examine relationships between ESP and some other variable or variables,’ whereas studies aiming to establish the existence of ESP are ‘now rare’.

This survey omits procedures for ruling out experimenter fraud. Why? Because some commentators consider such controls ‘unnecessary and paranoia-inducing’. The authors recommend consulting magicians when developing tests, but observe ‘we have privately encountered resistance to the idea on the part of some researchers who do not trust magicians or do not consider them competent in a scientific setting’. And a ‘non-ESP control condition . . . is neither generally called for nor apparently conceptually possible’.

This well-meant guide to this truly absurd pseudoscience is a timely if unwitting reminder that the phlogiston of psychology is still awaiting its Lavoisier.

— Lewis Jones

## Self-help and hyperbole

Dean Tong, *Ashes to Ashes . . . Families to Dust: False Accusations of Child Abuse: A Roadmap for Survivors* (FamRights Press, \$15.95)

Insofar as this is a ‘roadmap’, it’s a roadmap of a minefield. Given that the author is himself an accused parent, the book is, understandably, written with passion and occasional hyperbole, but objectivity in this area, as in the closely related and equally tangled debate about ‘False Memory Syndrome’, is always at a premium. Anyone seeking a balanced academic assessment of the issues will not find it here. For those familiar with the field, it will be enough to note that a key item of advice offered is the suggestion that accused persons should call on the help of the highly controversial Dr. Ralph Underwager.

To be fair, however, academic assessment is not the author’s aim. The book is intended as a ‘self-help manual’ for (falsely) accused individuals. It is nonetheless ironic that, in defining ‘False Memory’ or ‘Sexual Allegations in Divorce’ as ‘syndromes’ and providing ‘checklists’ for their identification, writers on Tong’s side of the dispute come close to falling into the same forms of reification and mechanistic categorisation as the ‘abuse witch-hunters’ whom they castigate.

The book is also very much a North American ‘roadmap’. Victims of so-called SAID syndrome from other parts of the world will find it of limited practical assistance. All of the resources and legal precedents described are restricted to the US context.

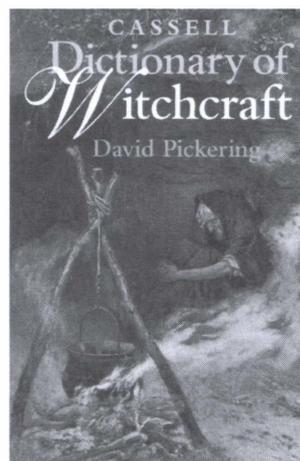
The first five chapters consist of four case histories (including the author’s own) of the ‘syndrome’ which, he alleges, is causing the ‘disintegration, death and future extinction of the American family’. Four general chapters on ‘The Accused’, ‘The Accuser’, ‘The Syndrome’ and ‘The Victim’ are probably the parts of the book with the

greatest general interest and applicability. The remaining sections – roughly half the book – contain practical advice on dealing with (US) child protection agencies (about whom Tong is particularly scathing), courts, attorneys, and self-help groups. There is also a fairly heterogeneous list of Internet resources.

— John Gillies

## Which witch?

David Pickering, *Dictionary of Witchcraft* (Cassell, £18.99)



Although witchcraft is part of the broader concept of sorcery, the author concentrates on European history and on Christian belief. The idea itself is a reflection of moral theology, in that the witch is thought to have renounced baptism and to have entered into a pact with the devil, thereby of necessity denying God. The witch thus placed herself beyond the bounds of society, and was a traitor to the community.

Combatting such heresy was the chief purpose of witchfinders and the Inquisition. The Middle Ages found their authority for killing witches in the Bible, but modern observers think such interpretation is largely a matter of mistranslation.

Persecution of witches was an aspect of the waning Middle Ages in the fourteenth century. The coming of the Renaissance and the Black Death initiated social and economic turmoil which created a need for scapegoats. Persecution fell on Jews, heretical sects, and friends of the Devil in separate measure. In 1484 the Pope sanctioned the use of the most severe methods, including torture, against the suspected and accused. Two years later the notorious *Hammer of Witches* was published, initiating the period of most intense persecution. Since the witchfinders, the Church and the secular power shared among them the spoils of the accused’s land and property, there was every incentive to seek out victims, including among them the well-to-do.

The tyranny died out gradually in the eighteenth century, as secular, scientific, and enlightenment thought rose. As society became more stable, laws against witchcraft were repealed. The last trials in England and Scotland were staged in 1712 and 1722 respectively, in France in 1745, and the last German case was heard in 1775. The very last trials in 1782 and 1793 took place in Switzerland and Poland respectively.

The focus of the dictionary is on the historical truth and reality of events in Europe. There are lengthy generic articles on such topics as demons, familiars, spells, and torture; and on such institutions as the Inquisition, the Knights Templar, and the Hell-Fire club. The book is strong on names of important personages and the trials they were involved in. It has entries on individual countries and is well cross-referenced among persons and topics. The dictionary is deliberately limited

on modern witchcraft, Wicca, and Satanism, as these have only faint links with medieval heresies.

—Wolf Roder

## Knowledge and power

Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (The University of Chicago Press, \$19.95)

What we now know as scientific method emerged over a period of little more than a 100 years from the late 16th through the 17th century. In this period, Galileo, Newton, Bacon, Rousseau, Hooke, Boyle, and a host of lesser stars threw out the old animistic-teleological view of nature, based on deductive *a priori* reasoning and a religious reverence for the writings of the ancients, in particular Aristotle and the Bible. They replaced it with a thoroughly modern experimental science of observation and inductive reasoning. From this revolution grew the world as we know it.

Or so the accepted story goes. Stephen Shapin's excellent monograph suggests that this view, while essentially true, is a great over-simplification. In three densely argued chapters (backed by a comprehensive bibliographic essay) he reveals the complex links between the growth of modern natural philosophy and the changes taking place in religion, the nature of State power, and, to a lesser degree, everyday commerce and technology.

The core of Stephen Shapin's argument comes in the third chapter – 'What was the knowledge for?' – in which he shows how the rise of new thinking was part of a general shift in the relationship between Church and State, as the power of Rome declined in the face of the Protestant Reformation, and in particular in England, religious and scholastic thought lost its dominance over the State. When Francis Bacon, for example, declared that knowledge is power, he was not making some abstract pronouncement – he was after all a senior adviser to both Elizabeth I and James I, and at one stage Lord Chancellor. Science was to be put to the service of the State, where knowledge is power only if it is true and verifiable. Usefulness was to be the test of truth

None of this is to say that the victory over religion and mysticism was complete, or even attempted. God was still pre-eminent in explanations of how nature worked. Newton's universe, for instance, needed a deity to start it moving and to keep it going, while Robert Hooke foresaw great things for the new science, including flying, and the transformation of base metals into gold.

Nor is the argument yet won. The current resurgence of mysticism and religious fundamentalism, not to mention downright messy thinking, is a clear warning that rational humanism still needs defending. Read this book.

— Ted Slade

## Hidden in the mind

Robert A Baker, *Hidden Memories* (Prometheus Books, 1997 (orig 1992), £14.99)

Robert A Baker is a retired University lecturer on psychology and has spent many years studying the ways in which the mind can fool us into experiencing things that

aren't there. In his previous book *They Call It Hypnosis* he examined the phenomenon of hypnotism.

In this book he goes further, taking on a whole range of subjects including past (and future) lives, channelling, alien abductions, interplanetary voyages and life after death. His vast experience of psychology and, in particular, the psychology of hypnotism, make him extremely well qualified to tackle these subjects.

To Baker these things are, quite simply, all in the mind. His main hypothesis is that many of the phenomena can be explained by cryptomnesia. This is the means by which the mind can store information and not consciously be aware of doing so. This is not to be confused with repressed memory, where the amnesia is (supposedly) a deliberate suppression of some unpleasant experience. Cryptomnesia is what allows those hypnotically 'regressed' to 'remember' precise details of past lives, details that were, according to Baker, gained from reading books, watching films etc.

Many of Baker's arguments are extremely compelling. In the chapter on hypnotic progression, for example, he shows how culture and previous experience can colour the way the future lives are perceived. Thus a science fiction fan 'seeing' a future life would tell of spaceships and friendly alien beings, whilst an environmentalist is more likely to foresee a future of pollution and decay. Baker also shows how scientific knowledge has changed the things reported. He tells how, a century ago, a channeler might have been in contact with a being from Venus, Jupiter or Saturn, worlds about which little was then known. A modern practitioner, however, made aware by modern science of the hostile environments on these planets, is more likely to receive messages from further afield in order to retain credibility. Baker is extremely dismissive of psychiatrists and their art. Like many modern thinkers, he disparages most of Freud's theories. He goes further, however, seeing the work of psychiatrists as often more harmful than helpful and even questioning whether psychiatrists have ever accomplished a cure of a mentally ill patient who could not have been equally well treated by a physician or neurologist.

Baker is definitely a 'hard line' sceptic. Those favouring a more conciliatory approach may take umbrage with the certainty of some of his pronouncements in this book. There seems little doubt, however that his research is sound and his credentials unimpeachable. This is a long book, often quite difficult to follow. I felt, at times, that a more anecdotal style might have helped when the going got very heavy. That having been said, Baker has an important message to convey, and for anyone studying supernatural phenomena, this book is an important and thoughtful document, and its message should be studied carefully.

— Mike Walsh

## Seeking Book Reviewers

If you are interested in joining the book reviewing team at *The Skeptic*, and have access to the Internet, please drop us a line on [skeptic@cs.man.ac.uk](mailto:skeptic@cs.man.ac.uk), stating your interests and any relevant experience.

# Letters



## Independent thinkers

In *The Skeptic* 11.1, Toby Howard discusses the 'tangled web of Independent Thinkers' who have detailed theories on life, the universe and everything. With names like Archimedes Plutonium it would not be difficult for a sceptic — even one with little scientific training — to come rapidly to the conclusion that such people do not really have any answers to important problems. However, particularly in the US, there is another category of independent thinker that poses a much greater problem for the lay (i.e. non-scientist) sceptic and that is the 'maverick scientist'. For almost every topic covered in *The Skeptic* it is possible to find a proponent who is a scientist with genuine, respectable scientific qualifications. For instance, Percy Seymour (astrology), Stanton Friedman (UFOs) and Jacques Benveniste (homeopathy) come to mind immediately.

How should we regard the writings of such people and, superficially, why should we have less respect for their views than for those of the sceptical scientists?

John Allen — London

## Ethical ads

Your advertisement for an advertising manager in the last edition of *The Skeptic*, as you suggest, raises ethical issues. It is one thing to publish a fairly negative review of an uncritical book on paranormal topics, but would you, for instance, accept advertisements from the publishers of such books? Or for that matter for dowsing kits, packs of Tarot cards or alternative health remedies

How could you decide where to draw the line given that you may not know the contents of a book or the efficacy of a health remedy before accepting the advertising?

Surely it is safer not to take on board such ethical issues and

simply continue to be an 'advert-free zone'.

Chris Rycroft — by email

*We have thought long and hard about the ethical and practical issues associated with carrying paid advertising but feel that, despite the problems advertising may pose, The Skeptic would benefit from (and indeed needs) the extra revenue that it would generate.*

*Of course, if we are inundated with more advertisements for clearly skeptical books, events and so on then we would have to turn down the ethically challenging advertising — so send us your ads!*

— The Editors.

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## 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.*

### Life After Death: The Evidence

Ian Wilson

*Sidgwick & Jackson, £16.99*

If you want an impartial look at the possibility of an afterlife, look elsewhere. Having made up his mind that some part of us survives death, Wilson writes to justify his conclusion.

### Music: The New Age Elixir

Lisa and Joseph Summer

*Prometheus, £18.99*

A coruscating attack on New Age healers who use music and sound as the basis of their dubious practices. A qualified music therapist

herself, Summer embraces the power and beauty of music, but blasts New Age absurdities out of the water.

### Scams From the Great Beyond

Peter Huston

*Paladin Press, \$18*

In a parody of the 'make money in your own home' book, a New York skeptic explains how to be a successful paranormalist.

### The Mammoth Book of Dracula

Stephen Jones (Editor)

*Robinson, £6.99*

Blood-curdling collection of short stories with a vampire theme.

### What's Really in the Stars

J V Stewart

*Prometheus Books, £16.99*

A skeptical look at the absurdities of astrology, unfortunately marred by a clumsy writing style. Worthwhile, but hard going.

## MIB

Jenny Randles

*Piatkus, £8.99*

Prolific paranormal writer Jenny Randles investigates the Men In Black urban legend.

### Plants of Mystery and Magic

Michael Jordan

*Blandford, £18.99*

Terrible title, good book. Beautifully illustrated guide to plants with interesting links to magic and mysticism.

### Psychic Discoveries: The Iron Curtain Lifted

Sheila Ostrander and

Lynn Schroeder

*Souvenir Press, £18.99*

Revised and updated edition of the uncritical 1971 book that introduced the world to the wonders of the Russian psychic scene. Foreword by psychic expert Uri Geller.

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