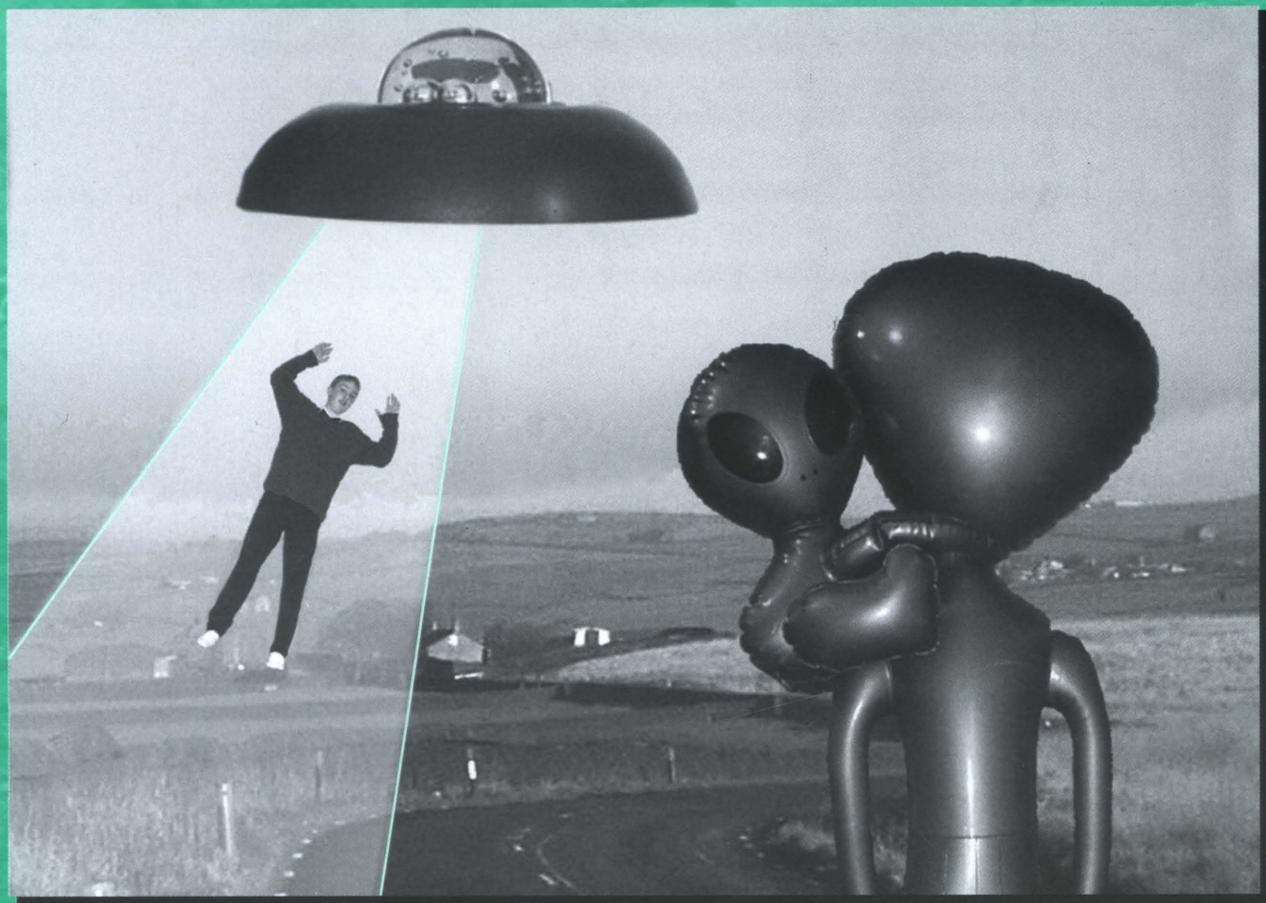


*The*

Volume 12 Number 1

# *Skeptic*



## ***ALIEN Non-Abductions?***

Also in this issue

***Are women more gullible than men?***

***Scotland's most famous psychic – The Brahan Seer***

***Feng Shui revisited***

***News • Book Reviews • Comment • Humour***

# Hilary Evans' *Paranormal Picture Gallery*



**W**ith hospital beds in such short supply, it is a scandal that so many should be occupied by people who, if the doctors only knew, will never leave them except to be borne to their everlasting resting-place. If only there were an infallible method of distinguishing between the survivors and the doomed... Well, there is – or at any rate there was, back in the 13th century. All you have to do is bring a Calandar – a kind of lark – into the sickroom, and hold it over the sickbed. If it turns its head towards the patient, he or she will recover. But if – as in our illustration from a French manuscript of the period – it averts its gaze, then nothing the doctor can do will avail.

*Source: 13th century French manuscript, reproduced in Les Arts Sumptuaires vol I.*

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Copy date for the next issue: two weeks after receiving this issue. Next editorial meeting: call (07020) 935370 10am to 9pm or email [edit@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:edit@skeptic.org.uk) for details.



# Skeptic in Chains

Wendy M Grossman

**I** HAVE BEEN THINKING a lot about aliens lately. For one thing, I've been called out to render opinions about UFOs on two TV shows recently, and although the "U" in UFO means "unidentified," most TV people seem to make the leap to equate UFO and alien spacecraft without any assistance from Whitley Strieber. For another, there's been a massive debate about the famous 1984 sighting of a UFO in Rendlesham Forest in the Fleet Street Forum, an area for British journalists I run on CompuServe. (Or, I should say, ran: by the time you read this, the Fleet Street Forum on CompuServe will be no more, though anyone who's curious can visit us in our new incarnation on the Web at <http://www.fleetstreet.org.uk>).

It had never occurred to me that Rendlesham would still be a matter for debate in 1999. I thought the explanation promulgated by astronomy writer Ian Ridpath back in 1986 and its 1987 enactment on the Channel 4 documentary *Is There Anybody There?* was quite persuasive. His notion was that the US airforce personnel at the nearby base saw the beam from a nearby lighthouse. Although this sounds weird – who sees a lighthouse in a forest? – in fact when you go to Rendlesham in person and survey the layout, you can see that it's perfectly logical. Apparently, though, this explanation isn't weird enough, even though earlier this year researcher James Easton unearthed evidence to the effect that even at the time the airforce personnel identified the UFO source as – the lighthouse.

The forum debater most ardently supporting the alien spacecraft hypothesis managed to annoy pretty much everyone by persistently mischaracterising Ridpath's explanation as "flying lighthouses." No matter how often we explained to her that this was incorrect, it kept popping up again in her comments. I don't know what normal people do about stuff like this, but I know what we did: we gave up. She went away. A month or two later, she came back, to have the last laugh on us: she's sold a book about Rendlesham. So look for flying lighthouses at your local bookstore one of these days.

The other reason I think a lot about aliens these days, though, is that sometime in the last year I decided to keep fish and set up an aquarium. Forget all those bug-eyed hominids in modern science fiction movies and alien abduction tales. If we ever do run across aliens, the real situation is probably going to be a lot more like living with fish. There they are, fully visible, waving their fins at me. We are completely unable to live in each other's environment: they can't breathe my air and I can't, as far as I know, breathe their water. That makes it impossible for us to communicate by means of sound. Equally, the difference in size (I was going to say scale, but you might have thought I was trying to be funny) means that there's

no elegant way to communicate anything fine-grained. I mean, if I try to make signs at them with even a small piece of myself – say, a finger – they can't easily see the whole thing because of the size and positioning of their eyes. And that's without factoring in the refracting qualities of the water and the glass sides of the tank: in some lighting conditions, I'm sure they can't see anything except themselves, reflected.

As for them, they can rely on only the crudest methods of communication. I am far too stupid to figure out that the leaves they chew off one of their plants every day are messages, they haven't got sufficient fin control to make signs, and there aren't enough of them to line up in formation to make words. Three goldfish doth not even a telegram make. So communication between us is limited to them doing this bizarre dance thing to tell me they're hungry. Well, I already know that: fish are always hungry.

Come to think of it, that may explain the messages behind crop circles, too. They're just hungry. Has anyone thought of leaving out some milk and cookies in the fields on summer nights to see if that keeps the designs from forming?

Closer to home, there are two pieces of good news. First, Scott Campbell, teaching at the School of Advanced Science, is starting up a series of monthly pub meetings for skeptics in the London area (see the announcement on page 9 of this issue).

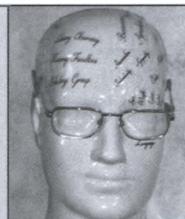
Second, many of you chose to support our initiative to get *The Skeptic* into British libraries: a whole 125 of you sent in sponsorships, and some people were generous enough to sponsor more than one library.

We are really thrilled that this initiative was so successful, and would like to thank all the following sponsors, in addition to those who requested anonymity:

*Cyril Howard, Dorothy L Forrester, Dr Thurstan Brewin, M Lachapelle, Simon Katz, Martin Ward, Dr Max Prola, Ray and Marjorie Mackintosh, P L Lancaster, Donald Room, Will McLewin, Jamie Anderson, B J Hazzard, A J Moulden, J G Wilson, Dr Brian Robinson, A Quinn, Ian Cargill, C L Torrero, Toby Howard, J H Ritson, Professor Antony Flew, Patrick Cherlet, John Dawes, L Lennard, Colin Johnson, John Blake, Dene Bebbington, K R Keeley, Dr Alma B Simmonds, Allan Muir, W Parker, J Newan, Tim Axon, Andrew Nutton, Roger D Morgan, S. Blackmore, Tim Regan, G F Culverwell, M G Burnett, A K Jones, T J Laundry, Ted Loughran, John D Bottomley, A J S McMillan, J Greening, Jacqui Farrants, Sidney Bertner, Giles Redgrave, Barbara Lee, E Hibling, J Woodhead, Dan J Bye, Bruce McIntosh, Nick Pope.*

Wendy M Grossman is editor of *The Skeptic* and a writer and folksinger.

# Hits and Misses



## Pill's grim progress

Boots is considering selling a herbal pill, Cellasene, which supposedly reduces cellulite (that pervasive fat so beloved of women's magazines), and which has already caused near-riots in Australia as chemist shops' supplies of the pill ran out. Boots has asked the Italian manufacturer, Medestea Interna, for more clinical trials of Cellasene before it will market it. But the comments of Medestea's spokesman Gianfranco Merizzi would have to make anyone wonder about their integrity. Merizzi said it had done wonders for his wife and that he used it to improve circulation in his legs. He was then quoted by *The Daily Telegraph* as saying, "Even if it was not true I would say it worked, but it is true and the clinical trials show that." Let's hope he's not just saying that.



*Yes, dear – a definite improvement.*

Tim Pearce

## Hoddle mania

England football team manager Glenn Hoddle managed to get himself into a media-fuelled explosion in late January, when he made some widely reported comments that suggested that disabled individuals had come by their troubles supernaturally; that is, that they had committed some kind of sin in a former life for which their current physical difficulties were cosmic pay-back. *Sky News* had fun going out and finding a suitably bespectacled young gymnast to say, in tones suggesting she had been exten-

sively coached, how hurt she was and how Hoddle now owed it to everyone to come down and talk to some disabled people personally and apologise.

It's been known for some time that Hoddle retains the services of his own personal faith healer, Eileen Drewery, on behalf of the team. In fact, when the team qualified for the 1998 World Cup, he publicly attributed some of that success to her, noting only in passing that the team also retains two masseuses, two doctors, and two physiotherapists.

The PC (as in politically correct) quality to all this overshadowed what for skeptics might be the main event: the England football team was being managed by a man who did not accept the physical element of causality. In other words, whatever the England team did in the way of practicing, working out, and sleeping and eating right presumably had little to do with the team's success or failure on the field. It's all about their previous lives (no wonder he tolerated Gascoigne's alcoholism for so long). Drewery is on record as saying that Hoddle's take on past lives was absolutely correct; she backed him loyally when the storm broke. Now: was the emphasis on people's past lives her way of ensuring that the team's losses didn't get blamed on any lack of ability on her part or Hoddle's? Or had she to regressed all the players back to their first-ever lives, to make sure they were successful? What about the previous lives of the people who made the ball? (Do the bookmakers know about this?)

## Mist opportunity

A very silly item indeed found its way onto the national early evening news and CEEFAX on 2 February, writes *Simon Brophy*. (Presumably the spectacle of the most powerful nation on earth about to publicly humiliate its elected leader; an ongoing conflict in Iraq; genocide in the Balkans; and a dodgy situation in Ireland were deemed not quite enough to keep the plebs interested.) The item was headed "A city council believes it may have proof that ghosts really do exist after something strange was caught on film at a Victorian museum."

Curator Stuart Warburton is reported to have said "The security cameras at the back of the hall triggered off one night at about 4:50am, and then suddenly . . . two figures appear on the film. The camera freezes for about five seconds and then the figures disappear. And then we have a mist that swirls along the top of the wall, which we cannot explain." Later, the bewildered Mr Warburton goes on to say "The hall is haunted, there is no question about that."

Hmmm. Must be something in the water. My first thought about curious images caught on low-definition video cameras in the middle of the night is "Soddin' camera's not working properly. Must get it fixed"; My second thought is "Well, I never! Mist in Leicester at 5am

in February. Stap me vitals!" My third thought is "Mr Warburton ought to get out more, possibly with the press officer of Leicester City Council." (Who I hear is very nice).

When contacted, Leicester City Council are reported to have said "Who's Mr Warburton?"



Tim Pearce

*You must see the image now!*

## Conservative faith

The head of the Peniel Pentecostal Church in Essex has incurred the wrath of the Advertising Standards Authority by claiming in the local press that he is able to perform faith-healing miracles. The ASA challenged the Church to provide evidence of this ability. The church's "Bishop" Michael Reid sent the ASA X-rays as proof. He said, "The evidence came from seven different doctors but the ASA said it was 'anecdotal'. This angered the doctors so much they threatened to sue. The ASA has no business speculating on spiritual matters."

One would have thought that faith healing was a medical matter as much as a spiritual one. And if not, why bother to send any X-rays? But the ASA backed down, leaving Bishop Reid free to continue to encourage church members to give him 10% of their salary. This is at least less than the Government takes. But, according to the *Daily Telegraph*, the church took over a branch of the Brentwood Conservatives last year, so perhaps they're working on that as well.

## Devil may care

Has the Catholic Church finally caught up with the twentieth century just as we are about to go into the twenty-first? Or are they still in the Dark Ages? The Vatican recently released revised guidelines to exorcism which

supposedly take into account modern advances in our understanding of mental disturbance. Bishop Corrado Balducci, an experienced exorcist, reported to the Vatican that the great majority of supposed cases of possession were really just cases of people suffering mental disturbances. This might seem modern enough, but the Bishop also claimed that five or six cases in a thousand were genuine cases of possession. "The whole world moves around the Devil," said the enlightened Bishop.

One thing that is changing is the way exorcism is presented. The Vatican is asking priests to tone down their language. Terms such as "the Prince of Darkness" or "the Satanic Power" are to be replaced by "the cause of evil." Did replacing the grand Latin phrases of the traditional mass and getting in a load of boring guitarists teach the church nothing? Toning down the theatricality will rob the Catholic Church of a lot of its appeal to many people. Mind you, the changes appear to be merely superficial. Cardinal Jorge Medina insisted at a recent press conference on behalf of the Vatican that the Church still believed in the existence of Satan and evil spirits, and that there were no 'radical changes' in teaching. "Catholic doctrine teaches us that demons are fallen angels as a result of their sin, and that they are spiritual beings with great intelligence and power", he reassured us.

The Vatican has at least decided that the devil is not a beast with a tail and pitchfork, following on from its decree in December of last year that God is not an old man with a white beard. So when can we expect them to announce that the Pope is not infallible after all?

## Kraft work

Evidence linking breast implants to cancer has proved elusive, but if you really want to increase your bust size without taking any risks then Dr Thomas Kraft of Harley Street is your man. He believes that merely thinking positively about your breasts can cause them to grow (well, that along with paying him £100 a session). One wonders if this applies to other parts of the anatomy. Could you add a few inches to your shoulders just by thinking positively about them? Could you develop your biceps this way? (Men, of course, know that one part of their anatomy can grow by mental effort alone, but the effects are temporary).

Dr Kraft isn't quite as positive as he sounds, though. Like Glenn Hoddle and J Z Knight, he thinks that the way things are with you are your fault. If you lack the endowment you want, that's because you weren't receptive enough to signals from boys. (This makes me think that Dr Kraft's vision of Utopia closely resembles that of the editor of *The Sun*.) We can surmise, then, that short people are short because they didn't want to be tall strongly enough, and short-sighted people are that way because they didn't think positively enough about wanting to have perfect vision.

Hits and Misses was compiled by **Wendy Grossman**, **Scott Campbell** and **Simon Brophy**. Thanks to clipping contributors Jock Cramb, Stuart Campbell and J Thompson.

# Are Women More Gullible Than Men?

*Mike Hardwidge tackles a thorny question*

**A**CCORDING TO A RECENT Mike Hardwidge survey of 47 women and 48 men, the genders' belief in the paranormal which, in this context, means everything from God to horoscopes, is about equal; and the reason people think it isn't is that men have been conditioned to deny such beliefs as they have no great wish to see their mates in the pub falling around laughing – it's the boys don't cry number.

This of course contradicts popular misconception, which has it that more women than men believe in the paranormal and that the cause is the way in which women are conditioned during upbringing and education – nothing to do with a couple of loose chromosomes here or there, you understand. This does rather beg the question as to how this indoctrination takes place – I mean, I'll buy the stuff about girls getting stuck with Domestic Science while the lads skive off to play cricket but how might this affect relative belief in God?

No matter. As a discussion on whether men and women are genetically identical would on its own occupy more than the two thousand words or so allocated for this article the subject will be mentioned only where specifically introduced by my surveyees.

Ninety-five people is not, I grant you, an extensive chunk of the population and there have been other surveys – a January 1998 *Femail* survey of just over a thousand claimed nearly twice as many women as men believe in the existence of fairies; well, OK, 7 percent of women and 4 percent of men. More men (23 percent) than women (17 percent) thought extraterrestrials were likely to be friendly, but then men always were trusting little souls. More women than men (71:55) believed in God and communication with the dead (47:25) and the accuracy of fortune tellers (43:24) left women well in the lead.

Curiously, though 26 percent of men and 29 percent of women believed Hell existed, belief in the Devil was level pegging at 24 percent, but I suppose that's another story.

I haven't been a great believer in the statistics produced by surveys since the day a friend's daughter, returning from a day's canvassing in Oxford Street, was startled to be told this was not what was required by the client and watched, bemused, as the answers on her forms were changed. I decided to conduct my own survey and started on newspaper horoscopes.

To these I give no personal credence, although I find it impossible to resist asking anybody I see reading one what it says about Taurus. All the blokes I asked said the same and most of the women said they read them because they were there but they wouldn't base a decision on them; this could account for the oft-touted statistic



Mary Evans Picture Library

that horoscopes are carried by women's magazines but not by men's.

Had I considered it, I suppose I'd have thought the more up-market the rag the less the likelihood of a stars column. I mean, you get horoscopes in the *Mirror*, the *Sun*, the *Star* – and the *Sport* (I'm told, as they say); they work their way through the *Express* and *Mail*, but then seem to fall at the barbed wire on the posh fence – diligent searches of the *Independent*, *Telegraph* and *Times* revealed not a star sign in sight and the *Guardian* said it certainly wouldn't have them not even in the women's section.

So: had this to do more with social than with gender barriers? I didn't know much about men's magazines and nor, for that matter, did I know much about women's except for having flicked through *Nova* and *She* in the days when it was fashionable to say they had jolly good cartoons and articles.

I repaired to the local newsagent and inspected the women's mags. *Cosmopolitan*, *More*, *Woman's Journal*, *Woman's Weekly*, *Woman*, *Chic* and *New Woman* had horoscopes. *Harpers and Queen*, *Hello!* and *The Lady* didn't. There you are then – it's social. *Vogue* did – oh well, perhaps it's not.

On to the men's mags – what actually is a men's magazine? Ask a man and he acquires that hunted ferret look they get just before they sidle up to ask if they can have a go on your Scalextric – “er...well, I suppose *Playboy* – some of the articles are really interesting.”

I was directed to an upper shelf on which rested a notice bearing the legend “no browsing, please.” I couldn't see *Playboy* and decided against public riffling through *Hustler* and *Readers' Wives*, which I suppose could be classed as a sort of joint mag anyway. I compromised by

looking through *Loot* and the *Radio Times*, neither of which had stars although *Loot*, whose Mori poll puts its readership at more male than female, did carry a couple of run-up-your-phone-bill ads for psychic services.

Asking questions was the obvious answer and I spoke to Ms D at a Well-Known Woman's Magazine, who said women were wired up differently from men, didn't I know that?, yes, they did horoscopes, she personally was very interested in the paranormal but I should speak to Ms S, who was directly responsible. Ms S said "I am busy, I have no interest in the paranormal whatsoever – I just edit the stars." Hmm.

Angela Giveon is editor of *Executive Woman*, which used to run horoscopic stocks and shares tips but stopped when the astrologer's excuse for getting it horribly wrong was that her husband had unexpectedly become ill. (I am reminded of journalist Christopher Hitchens, whose editor, firing his resident astrologer, commenced his dismissal letter, "As you no doubt will have foreseen ...")

The horoscope stuff, said Ms Giveon, was only a bit of fun anyway but she didn't want the magazine to appear foolish. Asked if she thought women were conditioned to believe she said "No – women are just different, which is why they're brilliant at multi-tasking while men are good at focusing." I asked her opinion of my theory that paranormal beliefs were an equal split and she said, "Absolutely – it's just that men are brought up to hide feelings and emotions."

*Esquire* and *Men Only* did, for a time, carry horoscopes, but stopped because "our readers weren't particularly interested."

*GQ*, *Mayfair*, *Gay Times*, *Knave* and *Penthouse* never have and all quoted reasons along the lines of "our readers don't like that sort of thing."

Morbid curiosity set in so I went for broke and tried the *Jewish Chronicle* who don't; the *Morning Star*, who haven't but might; and the *Sporting Life*, who said yes, but mainly for horses.

So far, so what? Well, generally speaking, it looked as though the stars were aimed more at women than men – the apparently defunct *Horoscope* magazine proclaimed its intended readership as "primarily B1, C1 and C2 females" – but should this be taken as an indication of belief in the paranormal at large?

Back to the survey, which I continued by confronting a collection of friends with the birth date of a mutual enemy. Result unanimous: dearie me, chorused the men, that fellow's younger than me, or something like that; not so the women – typical bloody Capricorn, they said. I pursued this and discovered that many more women than men know whose birthday coincides with which star sign but none of either gender would admit to taking general horoscopes seriously.

Personal horoscopes were different as I found when, having had one drawn up, I showed it around. "Junk," said the chaps. "Double Taurus, self indulgent, stubborn – you to a T," said the women. Much the same with Tarot card readers and fortune tellers – many women took it seriously, many knew at least one person with amazing experiences to recount, and few shared the overriding "If Mystic Meg's so clever how come she never wins the lottery?" male opinion.

The female of the species, it seemed, was less deadly than the male when it came to kicking over the paranormal traces and this, said nearly every woman I asked, is because they're more spiritually aware and caring than men, it's got nothing to do with education or upbringing, and anyway they just are, so there.

What then of belief in God, life after death, and religion in general? A female vicar of my acquaintance averred

that around 70 percent of regular churchgoers were women but was firmly against any suggestion of differences in spiritual sensitivity. This, she said, was nonsense – the main reason more men didn't go to church was that "they didn't want to be regarded as prats by their mates."

I tried this on a male vicar, who was in complete agreement – yes, it was at least 70 percent women and yes, it was primarily because the chaps had no intention of being thought soft.

Generalisation is a touchy subject – I've heard women put forth the opinion that the trouble with men is that most of them generalise too much. Nevertheless, it can be necessary and, in this case, there seemed to be three candidates for a conclusion.

The first was that women are daft, feather-brained little creatures offering easy prey to the serried charlatan ranks. Not so, I think – gullible women there may be but I suggest they're about as thick on the ground as blonde, leather-clad angels on black Triumph Bonneville. Women on the other hand were almost unanimous on men's gullibility and a frequent answer to "Are men more gullible than women?" was "Yes – big-time." I'd go for that and my certain conclusion is that, if women do show more interest in the paranormal than men, it has nothing whatever to do with relative gullibility.

By this time the survey was in overdrive and acquaintances, visitors, and passers-by were subjected to interrogation. Candidate conclusion number two was that more women than men believed in the paranormal and the reason for this was greater sensitivity and spiritual awareness. "Definitely," said the female believers, "Not quite, although of course we're more sensitive," said all but one of the lady skeptics, and "Could be," said most of the men.

I wondered what the table rappers thought and called the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain – were women

Newspapers and magazines which do or don't carry astrology columns

Do	Don't
<i>Mirror</i>	<i>Independent</i>
<i>Sun</i>	<i>Telegraph</i>
<i>Star</i>	<i>Times</i>
<i>Sport</i>	<i>Guardian</i>
<i>Express</i>	<i>Harpers and Queen,</i>
<i>Mail</i>	<i>Hello!</i>
<i>Cosmopolitan</i>	<i>The Lady</i>
<i>More</i>	<i>Loot</i>
<i>Woman's Journal,</i>	<i>Radio Times</i>
<i>Woman's Weekly,</i>	<i>GQ,</i>
<i>Woman,</i>	<i>Gay Times,</i>
<i>Chic</i>	<i>Knave</i>
<i>New Woman</i>	<i>Penthouse</i>
<i>Vogue</i>	<i>Mayfair</i>
<i>Sporting Life</i>	<i>Jewish Chronicle</i>
	<i>Morning Star</i>

in a majority amongst the mediums, the punters, or both, I wanted to know. The nice man at the SAGB said he hadn't got a clue and suggested I contact the College of Psychic Studies.

The College was interesting – more men, said administrator Logan Lewis Proudlock, seemed to be taking an interest in the paranormal and their current male-female split in the medium department was about fifty-fifty. The customers were a different story – seminars on healing attracted more women, but a recent talk by an American ex-Stargate employee pulled in a preponderance of men. I asked if, in her opinion, this was because women were more sensitive, caring, etcetera.

No way, she said, it's just because men tend to go for stuff that sounds techy. I repeated the vicar's remark and suggested this might be because there's less chance of the lads in the pub saying things like "so you're the twerp who believes in ghosts." Absolutely, she said – it's the boys don't cry number.

Which leaves us with conclusion three – belief is split pretty evenly between the genders but women are more open about it than men. I returned to my wearying surveyees but this time I was pushier and included questions like, "Do you think you've ever had a psychic experience?"

The women were unanimous – "Yes," said the believers, "No," said the skeptics. The male believers came up with a unanimous "Yes," but quite a few of the skeptics wavered.

"Sort of," they would say. "So why don't you believe in it?" "Well, I wasn't sure." "Why not?" "Well, all right, I'm sure but I don't believe any of that star-sign crap." "Have you told anyone else about this?" "No – and don't you, either."

Counting that and similar conversations as belief I came up with a fifty-fifty split; as you may have inferred I'm probably more skeptical about surveys than I am about the paranormal but, even so, it's my survey, I didn't change any of the answers and I reckon the fair conclusion is that male and female belief in the paranormal is numerically similar; but men have it instilled pretty much from birth that the last thing you should do is admit it.

I mention in passing – and very few people know this

– that there is a book called *Astrology for Dogs*. The only copy I ever encountered in captivity is owned by a woman – my wife, actually – but both book and foreword were written by men. All the canine horoscopes refer to he, him, his, etc, and examination of the small print reveals a disclaimer which commences, "The authors and publishers wish to apologise to bitches everywhere ..."

**Mike Hardwidge** is in PR; his clients are a select band of highly discerning technology companies.

The Association for Skeptical Enquiry (ASKE) and *The Skeptic* magazine present Britain's only regular skeptics' event:

### SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

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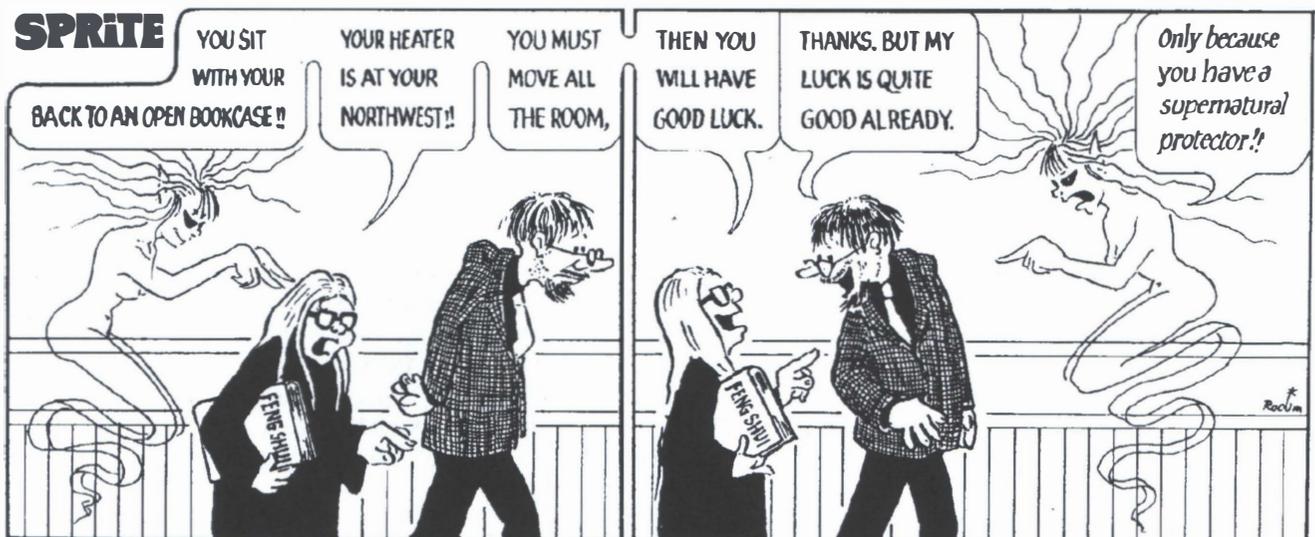
Upcoming talks:

**Thursday April 15:** Mike Hutchinson – 'Bizarre Beliefs'.

**Thursday May 20:** Dr Richard Wiseman (Dept. of Psychology, Univ. of Hertfordshire) – 'Investigating the Paranormal: A Skeptical Perspective'.

For further information contact Dr Scott Campbell on 0171 862 8686. E-mail: Scott.Campbell@sas.ac.uk.

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# Skeptical Stats

1. Amount awarded to trance channeler JZ Knight in her fight for custody of 30,000-year-old warrior Ramtha: **\$800**
2. Number of classmates who voted to ban Dihydrogen Monoxide after 14-year-old Nathan Zohner reported on its many dangers: **43 out of 50**. (Dihydrogen monoxide is a major component of acid rain, has been found in cancerous tumours, accelerates the corrosion of metals. In those who have developed a dependency on DHMO, its withdrawal causes certain death.)
3. Number of times a day the Red Sea parts and Lazarus rises at the new Biblical theme park outside Las Vegas: **24**.
  4. IQ attributed to Adam by creation scientists: **1500**.
  5. IQ attributed to Adam by Bernard Leikind, in analysing the above: **100**
6. Number of victims of kidney theft who have come forward in response to appeals for same: **0**
7. Amount Derbyshire couple owed to their house's vendor when they began claiming their house was haunted: **£3,000**
8. Amount the couple intended to charge for a Halloween party to prove the ghost's existence: **£5**
  9. Number of UFOs surveyed in Project Blue Book, 1947-1969: **12,618**
  10. Number of those reports which remained unidentified: **701**
  11. Number of individual dowsing tests carried out in Munich in 1986: **843**
    12. Number of tests showing positive results: **10**
13. Average of four approximations of the number one, using different methods: **1.99999999999**
14. World's record for longest firewalk, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, July 2, 1998: **165 feet**
15. Age at which "The Prophet" author Khalil Gibran died of alcoholism: **48**
16. Cost of attending UFOlogists' conference on the militarisation of space: **£220**
17. Number of extracts from Tibetan herbs contained in the herbal remedy Padma 28: **22**
18. Cost of the first Feng Shui-friendly computer printer, Lexmark's 5770 Photo Jetprinter: **£349**
19. Number of people psychiatrist Bennett Braun convinced late 1980s Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) patient Patricia Burgus she ate in a year: **2,000**
  20. Population of Burgus's home town, Glen Ellyn, Illinois, in 1990: **24,944**
21. Amount in dollars for which Burgus eventually settled when she sued Braun: **\$10.6 million**
  22. Cost of magnetic boots to heal arthritis in horses: **£65**
  23. Number of faith healers retained by the England football team: **1**
  24. Number of each of doctors, masseurs, and physios, retained by England football team: **2**
    25. Cost of your own rubber Roswell alien, 1995: **\$1695**
    26. Average cost of aliens in London, 1999: **£2**

**Sources:** 1 Tampa Bay Skeptics Rert; 3 *The Freethinker*; 4,5 *Newsletter of Oregonians for Rationality* (quoting Bernard Leikind in *Skeptic* (US)); 6 The National Kidney Foundation, via <http://www.urbanlegends.tqn.com/library/weekly/aa062997.htm>; 7 *Electronic Telegraph*; 8,9 *Britannica Online*; 10,11 *Skeptical Inquirer*; 12 *Annals of Improbable Research* (<http://www.improb.com>); 13 *Skeptical Inquirer*, January/February 1999; 14 *Guardian*; 15 *Daily Telegraph*; 16 *Daily Telegraph*; 17 *Daily Telegraph*; 18 Lexmark press release; 19 News of the Weird, UPI; 20 US Census; 21 News of the Weird, UPI; 22 *Daily Telegraph*; 23, 24 *Daily Telegraph*; 25 Sharper Image catalogue (quoted in *Skeptical Eye*); 26 Based on survey of prices of inflatable aliens and alien key rings from stalls before Christmas 1998 averaged with cost of Asda bubble bath (floating alien included for £1.99).

Skeptical Stats compiled by **Wendy Grossman, Rachel Carthy and Richard Hall**. Please send contributions (with source) to [stats@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:stats@skeptic.org.uk) or to *The Skeptic* (stats), PO Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH.

# Abductions that Never Leave the Ground

*Part one of a two-part investigation in which Hilary Evans takes a long, hard look at the reality – or otherwise – of the “alien abduction experience”*

**F**OR SOME OF US, the future is already here. The science fiction that was a dream for our grandfathers is a here-and-now reality for us. The alien invaders H G Wells warned us about are currently visiting our air-space; tonight and every night they will enter our bedrooms, carry us up to their spacecraft on beams of light, and perform sinister surgical operations on us before returning us to our beds. Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, whether we believe it or not.

Often, we don't believe it: but we are told we must learn to take a larger view. These alien abductions are the events which will carry us from one era of history – the era when humanity seemed alone in the cosmos – to another era, when our destiny will merge with that of otherworldly civilisations. For psychologist Leo Sprinkle they are part of a learning process involving the human race [1]; for information scientist Jacques Vallee they are part of the master-plan of a cosmic control system [2].

If this is so, it is the most important thing that has happened to our human race throughout its history. Clearly, it's worth taking seriously. If you and I are privileged to have a grandstand seat at this turning point in human evolution, the least we can do is take notice.

## Tens of thousands

Something is certainly happening. Twenty years ago, scarcely anyone was claiming to have made personal contact with extraterrestrials. Today, if we can believe those who have made a study of such things, abductees are numbered in tens of thousands. The leading investigator into abductions, Budd Hopkins, claims to have investigated 1,500 cases – and that claim was made four years ago [3]. He is far from being the only investigator with a substantial case-file, to say nothing of the countless cases that haven't surfaced because the witnesses chose not to report them, or were not even aware that they ever took place – for one of the characteristics of abductions is that often they do not come to light until long after the event, when some other circumstance reveals it by chance.

If we can believe the 1992 Roper Poll, the probable total for the United States alone is 3.7 million [4]. Unless the USA is being specifically targeted, this suggests anywhere between 16 and 200 million (depending on how you interpret the figures) abducted worldwide. Even the lower figure is a lot of people.

This awesome statistic is one reason the abductionists (that is, those who adopt the abductions-are-real position) feel justified in arguing that abductees can't all be

lying or deluded. And of course the abductees themselves don't think they are lying or deluded. With rare exceptions, they believe that what they had was a real, physical experience.

The primary texts are the first-person witness stories, of which a growing number are now in print [5]. The secondary texts are those of their investigators, notably Hopkins [6], Jacobs [7], and Mack [8]. There are catalogues, of which by far the most impressive is Bullard's [9]. And there are commentaries, the most outstanding being the proceedings of a 1992 conference held at (though not sponsored by) MIT [10]. A great number of UFOlogists, ranging from skeptics John Rimmer [11] and Philip Klass [12] to believer Edith Fiore [13] via fence-sitter Jenny Randles [14], have offered us their thoughts, some enlightening, others obfuscatory. Between them, they add up to an impressive body of testimony. Most of the authors, experiencers and investigators alike, give every evidence of honesty, and some of the abductionists – Bullard in particular – are highly intelligent people whose opinions are not lightly set aside.

Muddying the waters yet further are those who insist that it is wrong to consider abductions in isolation; rather, they must be seen in a wider context – which usually means some kind of “spiritual” context, which usually means some kind of New Age agenda. Apart from raising the phenomenon to a perceived “higher” level, this has the advantage that it transcends simplistic real/unreal evaluations: seen from this perspective, abductees become ‘experiencers’ to whom our attitude should be one of “caring,” not questioning [15].

## The abduction problem

The claimed experience, according to criteria adopted by Rodeghier et al [16], is made up of the following agenda:

1. the witness is taken against his/her will from normal terrestrial surroundings by non-human beings;
2. these beings take the witness to another enclosed place that is assumed or known to be a spacecraft;
3. in this place, the witness is subjected to examination and/or engages in communication with the beings.

Though this defines the abduction experience more narrowly than many would do, it is a fair summary of the stereotype consensus agenda. And it makes abundantly clear that the abduction experience is essentially a physical experience, where something real and tangible

happens. This becomes even more strongly the case if we add in a feature which was not much in evidence when this model was formulated, but has become increasingly more common of late: the enforced pregnancy and subsequent foetus-removal to which the female abductee is liable – a physical event if there ever was one!

Whether we choose to accept what the abductees tell us or not, there are awkward questions either way. On the one hand, why should we question stories told by seemingly honest, sincere people who show every sign of having lived through a genuinely traumatic experience? On the other, how can we not question stories so chock-a-block with contradictions, inconsistencies and implausibilities? Bullard and other abductionists set great store by the remarkable similarity among accounts, which they claim could not arise unless the stories were factually true. And indeed, the consistency of the accounts is impressive; but then so are similarities in other types of experiences such as tunnel-of-light near-death experiences, visions of the Virgin Mary, and first-hand accounts of witchcraft sabbats, none of which are generally taken to directly reflect a physically real experience. Remarkable the similarities may be, but they are hardly a sufficient reason to accept the stories at face value [17].

The difficulty of reconciling these approaches has encouraged a third school of thought, mainly among Americans, which ingeniously dodges the question by questioning the level of reality on which these experiences are happening. Various formulations of virtual reality have been proposed, notably by Grosso [18]. But however attractive “imaginal” reality and the like are as academic games, their proposers are a bit fuzzy about how they

relate to old-fashioned consensus reality. The virtual reality theorists are no more satisfactory than the higher consciousness crowd when their concepts are applied to actual cases.

Take Travis Walton of *Fire in the Sky* fame [19]. If they were neither hallucinating nor lying, then either he and his friends were all caught up in some alternative reality or he was bodily spacenapped. If so, he must have been taken somewhere. Unless we are prepared to embrace fantasies of suspended animation and the like, we must accept that his flesh-and-blood body continued to exist, and somehow life – and all the complex bodily processes which constitute physical living – was sustained. Similarly, Linda Napolitano, the heroine of the “Manhattan Transfer” case, must have been physically flown out of her apartment window and carried through the air by some process capable of carrying and manoeuvring an unsupported heavy body in free space [20]. Again, no alternative-reality scenario can account for a female abductee’s being impregnated or other physical events. For Debbie Jordan to have had the impregnatory experiences she claims, she had to be taken onto a nuts-and-bolts spacecraft where a flesh-and-blood penis, or an artificial substitute, injected live, active sperm into her [21].

The abductionists, needless to say, are unwilling to accept any hypothesis that transcends consensus reality. For such as David Jacobs, abductions are factual here-and-now experiences, and any problems must be on the here-and-now level [22]. To do him justice, he does not duck the challenge. Here he is explaining one detail in Napolitano’s interesting story: “In spite of hundreds of



Mary Evans Picture Library

Perhaps the best-known of all UFO “abductees” — Betty and Barney Hill. The photograph was taken in 1966, five years after their claimed abduction.

accounts of people flying through closed windows, it is exceedingly rare to find an outside witness who has observed it. Therefore, although it sounds impossible, the physical mechanism that allows people to pass through solid objects probably renders them invisible, at least for this part of the abduction experience" [23]. Ingenious; but a mystery isn't explained by hypothesising another mystery.

It's to Jacobs' credit that he faces up to such difficulties, but of course the abductionists cannot dismiss such problems, because they are part and parcel of the testimony. To admit they might be mistaken about one item of the reported experience would open up the question as to how much else they could be mistaken about? And even, whether they could be mistaken about the experience as a whole?

Apart from those playing games with theories of virtual reality, there are others who say it doesn't really matter whether the stories are true or not, because the victim is a victim in either case, and needs help. Yes, but what kind of help? Consider an analogy: If a girl says she has been raped, it is important to establish whether she was really, physically raped or if she imagined it. True, either way, she needs help. But not the same kind of help. If she has really been raped, she may need to be treated for shock, and counselled to help her come to terms with her experience. On the other hand, if she is fantasising, it is important we find out what led her to fantasise in this way.

So with abductees. Granted that they need help, they need a different kind of help according to whether or not their claim is rooted in fact. So it is important to establish whether abductions are real or not.

## Proving abductions are real

If abductions are really taking place, it ought not to be difficult to prove: if just one abductee were to take his camera with him and shoot a roll of film; or if just one witness happened to see an abduction taking place, and took photos; or if an abductee brought back an artifact; or made drawings containing convincing details; or provided information of a convincing nature; or could show surgical or other marks which were unquestionably non-human. Unfortunately, not one of these things has happened. Not a single item of convincing primary evidence is available. Instead, all we have is witness testimony.

Nor is the secondary, indirect evidence, any more satisfactory. We have no supporting eye-witness testimony, seeing an abductee being taken or returned; we don't even have a UFO hovering over the abductee's house at the crucial time. True, there are rare cases where evidence is offered, but if anything they weaken the case rather than strengthen it because the evidence is so flimsy. Victims point to "scoopmarks" on their bodies which they claim are due to alien implants; but there isn't a scrap of evidence to confirm that is what they are.

## Evaluating testimony

So we are left with testimony. And we have to ask: what is testimony worth? To start with a simple instance, take the case discussed by veteran American investigator Don Worley: Two witnesses report seeing a crowd standing

like zombies near a fish-shaped UFO in the centre of a small town. They report an hour and a half of missing time, a presumed abduction: the next thing they recall – both of them – is seeing the same crowd of people dispersing back to their homes on a near-by street. Worley admits: "In my subsequent investigation of the case and of the area, I was totally unable to find a single soul in that area who remembered that anything had happened there that night" [24].

Perhaps because it reads like a scene from *Invasion of the Body-snatchers*, the story is attractively plausible. And it is certainly an odd story, especially since his two witnesses gave identical accounts. Yet is hardly less odd for the investigator to accept at face value the affirmation of his two witnesses against the negation of everyone else living in the area! Are we to suppose that all the others had their memories erased? So subjective an evaluation warns us that no witness can be properly evaluated unless those who report their testimony are also scrutinised.

Ironically enough, one of the most revealing books about abductions is the one authored by that same Betty Hill who was the heroine of the classic 1961 abduction which set the pattern for all the stories that have followed. Her common-sense approach to UFOs includes several cautionary tales:

In the mid-1970s, a woman phoned to say she did not know if she was crazy or had been abducted by a UFO. Her problems began when she enrolled in a New Age psychic development class. They would lie on the floor and were put into a light trance. They were "connected" to different kinds of UFOs. Some were hooked up to the medical ones. Others were hooked up to scientific ones. Still others were told how they lived on their own home planet... Over a period of time she began to think her fantasies were real. After these sessions ended she sought out hypnotists. Every hypnotist gave her a different abduction. She became fearful as she believed the "aliens" were watching her through her windows, unlocking her doors, coming in and giving her injections. She became suicidal. She was under the care of psychiatrists for fifteen years. She had all kinds of delusions. She knew she was an alien who was forced to move to this planet. Under hypnosis, it emerged that as a child she had been mistreated by her family: her grandmother continually hit her, and her mother followed the example. The resulting trauma was transferred to the aliens. She preferred to believe her anxieties were the result of UFO contacts, rather than the cruel treatment by her grandmother and mother at an early age [25].

We do not know by what process that subject came to transfer the blame to the aliens, but often it is the result of simple suggestion. At a party at Betty's house, a hypnotist offered to uncover his guests' UFO abductions. They all laughed, for they all knew they were never abducted. He requested a volunteer so he could demonstrate how this was done. A middle-aged woman volunteered. He put her into a light trance and began to question her. To our amazement, she told how she had been taken on board a UFO, made pregnant, came home and later gave birth to a "big, fat baby girl." She gave it a name. Six months later the UFO came back and took the baby with them. None of this was true. She lived in the same neighbourhood all her life: no pregnancy, no birth, no police

looking for the body of a missing baby. So why had she told this tale? The hypnotist went back home. The woman underwent a tremendous personality change. She had been a normal average person. Now she began drinking excessively – manifested all kinds of weird behavior. Finally she went to the police and accused the hypnotist of raping her while she was in a trance. She developed health problems which persisted about ten years. One day, we were looking through her old family albums. Suddenly we saw a picture of her about the age of five, sitting on the front steps. What was she holding? A big, fat baby doll. Name? The same as the one she had used in her hypnosis. Where was this doll? She did not know, for it disappeared one day and she was never able to find it. Finally, the solution to the tales she told under hypnosis was found. She took a real experience and turned it into a UFO abduction, while in a trance. She had no more problems [26].

Though her own abduction experience came to light only through hypnosis, Betty learned to be on her guard: "Recently a hypnotist visited my home. I heard him tell a friend he wanted to put her into hypnosis to uncover her abductions. She said 'Abductions? I have never seen a UFO!' He said, 'That is proof of your abduction. The aliens did such an excellent job of removing all of your memory, to the point that you cannot remember seeing the craft.'" [27]

Hypnosis is often fingered as the cause of fantasy and fabrication; but other and more down-to-earth factors can induce an altered state of consciousness which leaves the individual open to suggestion: "A woman was referred to me by a medical doctor when she told him she thought she had been abducted by aliens. I recognised her as bi-polar, or manic-depressive. I suggested she should be tested to find out her lithium level. Tests confirmed this diagnosis: she was given lithium treatment and became normal again. Then she said she didn't need lithium any more. She ran naked round the garden, claiming the aliens were everywhere. When she took the lithium, she knew they didn't exist. At one point she told me demons were in the basement of her house, while the UFO people were in the back yard trying to get into the house to save her. The demons prevented them from doing this. She started destroying the house, finally setting fire to it. She was sent off to a mental home while her husband faced a huge bill for the damage she had done. [In the end Betty convinced her to face facts] I said: 'UFOs are real, but the aliens stay on board their craft - remem-

ber that you see them only when your lithium level is down.'" [28]

In that case, the cause lay in the individual's physiological make-up, acting in concert with her beliefs. But the experience can be triggered by a purely external cause, acting on a suitably predisposed individual: Brazilian student Alvario was not quite your average young man: he was also a UFO-buff. In March 1978, a few nights after giving a lecture drawing largely on von Däniken, he was wandering round the town when he happened to see a mysterious object in the sky. It was no illusion: others also saw it. But what happened to Alvario, happened to him alone: his next conscious memory was waking in a field the following morning with no recollection of how he had got there. Under hypnosis he recalled a classic

abduction experience, during which he had sex with a female alien [29].

Subsequently, however, UFO-skeptic James Oberg was able to establish that the "mysterious object" seen by Alvario and others was the re-entry of a Soviet satellite. Clearly, we can't prove that no abduction took place, but it is a reasonable guess that what happened to Alvario was that he experienced a hallucination triggered by seeing the satellite – favoured, of course, by his obsession with UFOs [30].

In this case we know enough about Alvario to trace his experience to what we know about

him personally. Often, that kind of information is not available; we can only conjecture that a similar process is taking place in such a case as the following:

"A doctor told me [Betty Hill] about a terrible problem he was having. Between patients' visits, the 'aliens' were in his consulting room, harassing him. Whenever a patient came in, the aliens disappeared. Had he ever taken any pictures of them? These would be of great value. I offered to sit quietly in his office to do this, but he refused, as he knew they would disappear as soon as I entered. My next suggestion: throw them out as he would with any troublesome patient. If they refused to leave, call the police and have them arrested. Make sure the police take pictures. End of case" [31].

Another person who confided in Betty Hill was a teenage girl who told her she was suffering from nightmares: she was having repeated dreams of being abducted aboard a UFO. When Betty questioned her more closely, the girl blurted out that her parents had just separated after 20 years of marriage. One doesn't have to be a trained psychoanalyst to conclude that she was projecting her personal problem into her dreams, substitut-



ing “the aliens” for the faceless “enemy” that had broken up her parents’ marriage [32].

## A state of mind

Such cases suggest that abductions, whether or not they are real, have become a state of mind to many Americans. Consider this extraordinary statement from author Michael Craft: “I purchased fourteen or fifteen copies of Strieber’s *Communion* as gifts for friends in various walks of life, telling them nothing. Some months later, I asked them what they thought of the book. Every single one confessed to strange, disturbing feelings of familiarity regarding Strieber’s experiences. Ten of the readers admitted that they were so unnerved by the feelings [that] ‘it had happened to them’ that they never finished reading it” [33]. Does this tell us something about Michael Craft’s friends; or about the American population; or about the human race as a whole? Would two out of three of you and I respond in the same way?

While there is virtually no independent, external evidence for abductions taking place, there is evidence that some alleged abductions did not take place. The classic case is that of 37-year old Australian housewife Maureen Puddy: One day in 1972 she had a UFO sighting while driving home from visiting her son in hospital – that is to say, at a time when she was probably undergoing personal stress. A few weeks later, she heard a voice calling her name all night. The next day, at the same location as her earlier sighting, her car stopped of its own accord, and she heard the same voice making bizarre statements. Some months later, her aliens told her to return yet again to the spot. She alerted two prominent UFOlogists, Paul Norman and Judith Magee, to meet her there. She told them that while on her way to the rendezvous she was briefly accompanied by a figure in the car, with blond hair and wearing a white ski suit; but it vanished before she got there. At the location, Magee and Norman joined her inside her car. She saw the same figure, outside, beckoning, though her companions saw nothing. She then described where she now was, giving a fairly characteristic account of being aboard a spacecraft – full of

interesting detail; with her on the spacecraft was the alien entity, who encouraged her to continue her narration. Yet she was sitting beside them all the time, in some kind of altered state [34].

Such an event can be variously interpreted, as an out-of-body experience, astral travel, projection and so on. We don’t know whether the scene she described corresponded with any scene in reality, or was pure imagination. But one thing we are sure of: Puddy did not go there in her physical body.

Something similar occurred in an English case investigated by Jenny Randles. The witness was Gaynor Sunderland, who at the outset of her experiences was nine years old. She and her brother had encounters over a

prolonged period. On one occasion Gaynor was actually witnessed mid-contact by her mother. She was in a trance-like deep sleep. Later, like Puddy, she described an abduction. Randles concluded, reasonably enough: “There is every reason to assume that these experiences were not objectively real, but were psychic in nature” [35].

A particularly puzzling case is that of an American wife, Beryl Hendricks: in 1978 Beryl was at home when she joined her husband on a couch, and appeared to pass out. She found herself on some kind of operating table, with a number of figures around her. They removed a tumour from her breast. She was watched by her husband the whole time: she did not move from the couch. In other words, the operation did not take place in physical reality. Yet – if we can believe her subsequent claim – the operation really took place, and the tumour was really and truly gone when she woke [36].

Psychologist Kenneth Ring, who investigated the case, was baffled: “What on earth – or in heaven – do we have here? Is this an NDE or some kind of UFO encounter?”

## Imaginary abductees

In each of these cases, the accounts given by the “non-abductees” seem to have been no less convincing than those offered by “true” abductees. It was this paradox



which inspired the experiments conducted by Alvin Lawson and Dr McCall in 1977.

Essentially, their procedure was to hypnotise a number of volunteers with no significant knowledge about UFOs, and to induce them to narrate their abduction experiences. The general lines of the experience were determined by leading questions: the details were created by the subjects. What happened was that they came up with a set of stories impressively similar to those told by "true" abductees.

Overall, the responses showed no substantive differences. Many supposedly obscure "patterns" emerged in the imaginary narratives, such as retracting light beams; entities without facial features; UFOs which grow larger and smaller; levitation aboard the spacecraft via a tunnel of light; shape-changing entities which take whatever form the witness wishes – features we wouldn't expect to be known by naive subjects.

Lawson did not doubt that those who claimed to be "true" abductees had a real psychological experience; but his experiment showed that we cannot take the content of the narrative as evidence that the incidents took place as physical reality [37].

Lawson's experiments have been largely set aside by the abductionists, who find fault with the way the experiment was set up, and claim that his protocols were flawed and that there has been no replication. In fact, a small-scale replication was carried out by Jenny Randles which confirmed the ability of imaginary abductees to create imaginary scenarios, but interestingly produced sharply different results. Her English subjects recalled the transfer to the spaceship, which most abductees don't; on the other hand, none of them reported a physical examination, which is a key element in the American scenario [38].

Does this invalidate Lawson et al? By no means. The difference between the Randles and the Lawson findings can be traced to a cultural difference between the American public, which has been more heavily exposed to abduction stories, and the British public, which – at that time – was largely unaware of this dimension of the phenomenon. If so, then what appears to be an argument against the imaginary nature of the abduction experience becomes an argument for the view that all these experiences – true and imaginary alike – are culturally conditioned. The very fact that the fantasy varies from one culture to another suggests that the abduction experiences are not externally objective events involving alien visitors, but internally subjective events involving a blend of psychologically-generated and socially-derived material.

*The second, and concluding, part of this article will appear in our next issue.*

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**Hilary Evans** writes and lectures widely on UFOs, the paranormal, and all aspects of anomaly research. He is also a director of the Mary Evans Picture Library.

# The Brahan Seer

*David Hambling investigates Scotland's champion psychic*

**M**OSSES WAS NOT THE FIRST prophet to have a popular following, and Mystic Meg will not be the last. Reading the future in stars and palms, tea leaves and goat entrails, they have all had their followers. Skeptics can usually see through these soothsayers, but there are a few whose powers genuinely seem to challenge our ideas about time. One of these is the Scottish prophet known as the Brahan Seer.

He foresaw the Highland Clearances, the Caledonian Canal, and the bloody Scottish defeat at Culloden. He predicted the end of the Seaforth family in uncanny detail, and foretold other strange occurrences a century or more before they happened. According to tradition, every prediction he made except one has now come true. It is a formidable reputation, and one that deserves closer scrutiny.

Otherwise known as Coinneach Odhar ("Dour Kevin") and also as Kevin Mackenzie, the Brahan Seer is a shadowy figure in an otherwise well-documented era. The only historical record of him is in a witchcraft trial of 1577, where his name is given as Keanoch Ower and Kennoch Owir. A legend seems to have grown around him, attracting prophecies made by others [1].

For example, there is a prediction attributed to him that the jaw of the sheep would replace the plough, said to foretell the Highland Clearances. Centuries earlier however, the same prediction was attributed to one Thomas the Rhymer. The first written record of the Brahan Seer's own predictions was not made until 1832. This was well after most of them had been fulfilled, though there were some that came true afterwards.

The Brahan Seer is most famous for the events surrounding his death. Isabella, the third Lady Seaforth, asked him how her husband fared in France. The seer

replied that at that moment her husband was putting his arms around another woman and kissing her. Outraged, Lady Seaforth ordered the seer to be put to death as a witch. His revenge was "the Doom of The Seaforths": he predicted that the line of the Seaforths would end tragically, with the last Seaforth burying four sons before dying himself. He even described the appearance of the four neighbouring lairds when this was to happen (one had a hare lip, one had buck teeth and so on). Naturally, everything came true exactly as he said. There is even a monument on Black Isle marking the site of the fatal prediction.

Research shows no evidence that Lady Seaforth ever in fact had anyone executed for witchcraft. The event does not appear in any official records, nor the diaries of the local minister or other contemporaries [2]. The details of the story have been, at the very least, enhanced over time. The end of a male line is not very unusual; scholars have calculated that on average, noble lines in feudal England found themselves without a male heir every three generations. Scotland in this period would have been similar, so the Seaforths' survival for a hundred and fifty years was fairly typical. It is the details that make the story amazing, and these change in different versions of the story.

One detail is that the event must have happened around 1665–1675, making Kevin over a hundred years old at the time. This is hardly plausible if he was a labourer on the Seaforth estate as the story claims.

It also seems that there are more than a few predictions awaiting fulfilment. He predicted that the loch above Beaully would overflow and destroy a nearby village, and also that one day Loch Ussie would flood the Stathpeffer valley so that ships would tie their cables to a standing stone called Clach an Tiompain. Neither has yet occurred. On the other hand, the natural arch at Clach Toll did collapse as he said – though we might ask whether predicting the collapse of such an arch at an unspecified future date represents clairvoyance, or common sense.

Different versions of his prophecies crop up in different places. A standing stone near the Muir of Ord is supposed to be the site of a future massacre of the Mackenzies; the same legend is applied to a stone near Beaully, only this time the MacRaes are the expected victims [3]. Spreading your bets is a good policy in the prediction business, and in the days of the clan wars it was fairly likely that someone would be slaughtered somewhere. But we have to count these as misses.

He scored a famous hit with his prediction that ships would sail around the back of Tomnahurich Hill at Inverness. This came true when the Caledonian Canal was constructed in the mid-19th century.



He also said that one day the hill would be under lock and key so that the fairies who inhabit the hill would be trapped inside it, which takes more explaining. It is also possible that the same prophecy was applied to other hills (the name, which means Yew Tree Hill, is not unique); the scattershot effect may be at work here.

Another celebrated prediction was that the best blood in Scotland would be spilled at Drumossie Moor, where the battle of Culloden was fought. "Red coats are stained black with blood; red blood chokes the flower of the clans. The roar of the great guns has woken the dead in hell while the living weep for the glens." Bonnie Prince Charlie drew up his forces on the moor where they waited for three days for the English to arrive. There were several thousand Scots present, including the Mackenzies, so if anyone knew the story it should have spread through the army like wildfire.

A debate about the best place to meet the English was recorded, but this turned entirely on whether the open terrain of the moor would give the superior English cavalry and artillery an advantage [4]. Contemporary accounts of the battle do not mention any concern about the prophecy, either before the battle or as a reason for the defeat afterwards. It is hard not to conclude the prophecy was a later addition.

Culloden also provides an example of the mobile nature of myths. The Nine of Diamonds playing card is called the Curse of Scotland, supposedly because it was used as a death warrant. One version of story has the event happening in the aftermath of Culloden, another puts it before the Glencoe massacre fifty years earlier [5]. Even with comparatively recent historical events, folklore is clearly unreliable.

One prediction which definitely was recorded before it came true was that: "The great castle of Fairburn will stand uninhabited and forgotten and a cow will give birth to a calf in the top chamber of the main tower." In 1851, after the prophecy had been published and was well known, a pregnant cow apparently followed a trail of straw up a winding stair in the abandoned castle and gave birth in the top chamber. A special train was laid on from Inverness for curious sightseers to see the fulfilment of the prediction for themselves [6].

I may be accused of cynicism, but it seems to me that the farmer probably knew of the prophecy himself. The commercial possibilities of a miraculous calf would not have been lost on a shrewd farmer. I am not suggesting that the farmer in question deliberately lured the cow up the tower, but like modern-day farmers who know that crop circles can be profitable, he may have turned a blind eye to exactly how it happened.

The Brahan Seer is credited with many other, vaguer prophecies. "Rome was, London is, Edinburgh will be," for example, and "fire and water will run in the streets of Inverness." With a bit of creative interpretation you could claim that these were true, but the hit rate is less than astounding. If the Isle of Lewis is destroyed in a battle, or the Highlands depopulated by Black Rain, as he foretold, I will be forced to change my view. However, neither of these seems likely and so far the Brahan Seer has not yet proven himself a true prophet.

The Seer's predictions look impressive when seen massed in the distance; but examined close up they are

insubstantial, an army of ghosts that dissolve in the light of day. This does not diminish them as folklore; after all, we do not criticise stories about Robin Hood or King Arthur because they are not historically accurate. Myths are stories which tell you something about the dreams of the people who tell them.

The Brahan Seer spoke of massacres, dispossession, the end of noble families, and destruction on a grand scale. He did not predict that Scotland would be made rich by black gold, that the clan feuds would cease and there would be a lasting peace with England. He represents the gloomy side of the Scottish psyche, and his warning that everything will pass away is true enough. But for specifics, the Brahan Seer is no more helpful than any other Scottish character who constantly advises us that "We're doomed." Time, it seems, does keep its secrets after all.

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### CSICOP Research Scholarship

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and The University of Hertfordshire are pleased to announce the creation of the "CSICOP Research Scholarship."

This three year scholarship will fund a Ph.D. student to carry out research related to psychology and skepticism. Possible topics could, for example, include: the critical evaluation of evidence for the paranormal; the psychology of deception, lying and fraud; eyewitness testimony and the paranormal; the psychology of belief in the paranormal; the media and the paranormal; communicating science to the public.

This research will be conducted under the supervision of Dr Richard Wiseman at the Psychology Department of the University of Hertfordshire (UK). Dr Wiseman currently heads a research unit specializing in the scientific examination of alleged paranormal phenomena and related topics. The Unit has a well established record of research and postgraduate training programme. The University is located just North of London, is well equipped to support research students and has an excellent record of Ph.D. completion.

Applicants should have a good first degree in Psychology or relevant discipline, and be able to demonstrate an interest in skepticism.

Further details can be obtained from Dr Richard Wiseman, University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, Herts., AL10 9AB. Direct tel: 01707 284628; Direct fax: 01707 285073; Email: psyqrw@herts.ac.uk.

# Feng Shui Revisited

*A J McKerracher on the ancient beliefs behind the current fad*



"The Signora had no business to do it," said Miss Bartlett, "no business at all. She promised us south rooms with a view close together, instead of which here are north rooms, here are north rooms, looking into a courtyard and a long way apart. Oh, Lucy!" [1]

**B**ut just as Lucy Honeychurch eventually got her longed-for view, so too did workers in the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank on Hong Kong Island. The Feng Shui advisor reputedly called in by the management insisted that the bank face out to sea, with the hill to the rear, thus exploiting natural conditions and creating a more harmonious and ultimately more profitable environment. Moreover, for a mere £14.99 readers of the small ads in the Sunday papers can "harmonise their homes with a beautiful, multifaceted, hanging Feng Shui crystal" [2]. The cost includes postage and packing, hanging cord, and full instructions. It is unlikely, though, that these instructions, however full, will embrace the thousands of years of Taoist philosophy and experiment that lie behind the spiritual system of Feng Shui. But this has never stopped any self-respecting New Age entrepreneur from making a healthy and deeply meaningful profit.

Feng Shui practitioners claim to exploit healing energies that lie within the earth by positioning buildings and furniture in beneficial alignments. Energy levels can be increased and positive forces tapped by the careful positioning of furniture and a thoughtful use of colour. Feng Shui experts say that where we live and work, and how we arrange our rooms and furniture can affect our well-being and prosperity. For example, planting dense bushes near the front or back of a house will block the flow of useful energy in the home, while sloping ceilings and heavy beams are said to exert unhealthy downward pressures if a bed or desk is placed beneath them. Feng Shui or "Wind-Water" seeks to attract beneficial forces by divining natural energies and working in harmony with the environment. The concept began in China under the Shang Dynasty (from the 16th to 11th centuries BC) and influenced the design of buildings and cities for many thousands of years.

To write about Feng Shui without a lifetime's study of Taoist observations can seem crude and patronising. Moreover, perhaps an over-critical approach is simply the result of paying too much attention to the corrupt, commercialised branches of Feng Shui or to the watered-down versions designed for shallow, Western intellectuals. It is impossible not to respect the interest in and concern for the environment that lie at the heart of Feng Shui. Nor is it easy to find fault with beliefs that encourage human beings to accept the importance of respecting and working with, rather than against, their natural settings. There is, of course, much that is simple common sense in this ancient art of placement. People like views and tend not

to be too keen on traffic; the tourist industry has known about this for years. Sleeping under a sloping ceiling or beam can make people feel shut in and, indeed, can threaten the taller among us with injury, regardless of any "geopathic" stress lines. However, it is difficult not to be sceptical in the face of some of the examples put forward by enthusiasts. The patient whose Irritable Bowel Syndrome was cured by moving her bed and the students whose exam results improved when their desks were re-positioned invite questions.

But why has Feng Shui become so popular? What is its attraction? It is misleading to think of Feng Shui as a beleaguered creed mocked by clear-thinking Westerners. Contrary to some accepted beliefs, most Westerners are not sceptical; the survival of horoscopes in every popular newspaper and even in the weightier tomes of the *Telegraph* (well, at least in its Saturday magazine), bear witness to this. Try to find a Westerner who doesn't know his or her star sign. Incidentally, Feng Shui enthusiasts who dismiss Western religion as simplistic and write off Western attitudes to infinity need to have a quick look at the opening verses of St John's Gospel [3]. No, we are ready to seize upon any kind of protective magic as our ancestors were and are even more enthusiastic if the magic comes from the East.

Although it has been said that "we embrace the science behind Stonehenge but passionately deny the science behind Feng Shui" [4], for many Europeans, it is the other way round. There is a tendency to dismiss Western culture and civilisation (no doubt, for very good reasons) and to grasp at any straws of "enlightenment" offered by the "East". While our ideologies, religious and political, have proved wanting, it is very comforting to think that some human beings have got it right. We have searched for utopias for centuries, and the fascist, socialist and communist experiments and, indeed, the religious experiences of the West have all disappointed us. So perhaps the truth lies in the East. With distance lending its usual enchantment and with a veil drawn over the nastiness of various warlords and one or two antisocial customs, the Chinese appear to offer some hope for flawed humanity. A popular view of Chinese civilisation adopts the kind of perspective you would gain of Medieval Europe if you studied the works of Peter Abelard, Francis of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen, and ignored the likes of William the Conqueror and other less sensitive souls. We take what we want from the complex histories of millions of human beings and deal with our material completely out of context.

Moreover, in addition to our reverence for all things Eastern, there is much in Feng Shui that arouses older, instinctive feelings in us. Here are ideas that awaken traditions that are as deeply seated in the West as in the

East. Customs and stories that attribute special powers to the land are common in Western history. Belief in the beneficence of the land has survived the centuries. In England there are many stories of the "Green Wood" making all things well. Various legends tell of Robin Hood figures, with the forest offering safety and justice, while in *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, confused city-dwellers find that their troubles are resolved when they disappear into the forest and await developments. Tom and Barbara Good's attempt to get back to nature in Surbiton has a long and distinguished history.

The idea of using Feng Shui in the workplace is very appealing to Western workers, many of whom have been misplaced persons since the industrial revolution. Only in the last 250 years has the majority of the population taken the unusual step of working away from home and it hasn't been universally popular. Rural life may not have reflected an Arcadian dream, but there seemed to be something fundamentally unnatural about life and work in the factory towns. It is hardly surprising that schemes for reform came thick and fast in the 19th century. Among them was the idea of the Chartist Land Society to give every family a couple of acres and a cow and send them back to the land. When Feng Shui practitioners want workers to be aware of the land and be able to see the passing of the seasons as they work, they join a well-established tradition.

The claim that the application of Feng Shui in an office or workshop has increased productivity is confidently put forward. We could ask whether the benefits come from the attitude of the employers rather than from the positioning of the desks. It is a reasonable assumption that any employer who goes to the trouble of employing a Feng Shui expert in designing the office, will not continually gaze at employees as if they had just crawled out from under a badly positioned stone and might also run to a coat of paint. It might be more profitable to ask why so many members of the workforce are unhappy at work and whether prevalent management techniques do actually make people work more effectively.

However, what is the harm in Feng Shui? A desire to feel comfortable in one's surroundings is hardly suspect. Nor is there anything odd in wanting to feel protected in a world that is, and always was, a frightening place. Our ancestors, in whatever part of the planet they lived, knew this and made no bones about clinging to relics and saints, both official and locally invented, in an attempt to conjure up some protective magic. The myriad of local saints and cults that made up the medieval Catholic Church and troubled 16th century reformers is evidence of a desire to find comfort in hostile surroundings. Now we have no local gods, saints or relics to ward off

dangers; so why not try hanging crystals? The energies of the earth will protect us as surely as patron saints or holy relics protected our ancestors.

But to rely on forces within the land, good or evil, is to rob humankind of its responsibility. Feng Shui practitioners exorcise dangerous sites for us. Arto, founder of the non-profit making Feng Shui Association in Britain is quoted as saying, on visiting a building site near Norwich, "They had all sorts of problems – and no wonder. The field was also the site of a 2,000-year-old battlefield. It needed a thorough exorcism". On a practical level, can anyone find a corner of Europe that has not witnessed some suffering in the past few thousand years and so is not in need of a thorough exorcism? The outbreak of bubonic plague in the 1340s left few villages untouched, and every harsh winter pushed the death rate up by the early spring. But perhaps we are in a numbers game? Do

people have to suffer and die in their hundreds and thousands to provide evidence of unfavourable energies in the earth? Do quantitative judgements apply here? Then again, take any group of children to the site of

the Battle of Hastings and decide whether the earth is really exerting negative energies. The gentle slope that proved so handy for the Anglo-Saxons in the early part of the battle will be put to extremely good use within about five minutes. Scenes of grisly murders make very good tourist attractions, as has been discovered to great profit as parts of the world slowly turn into giant theme parks.

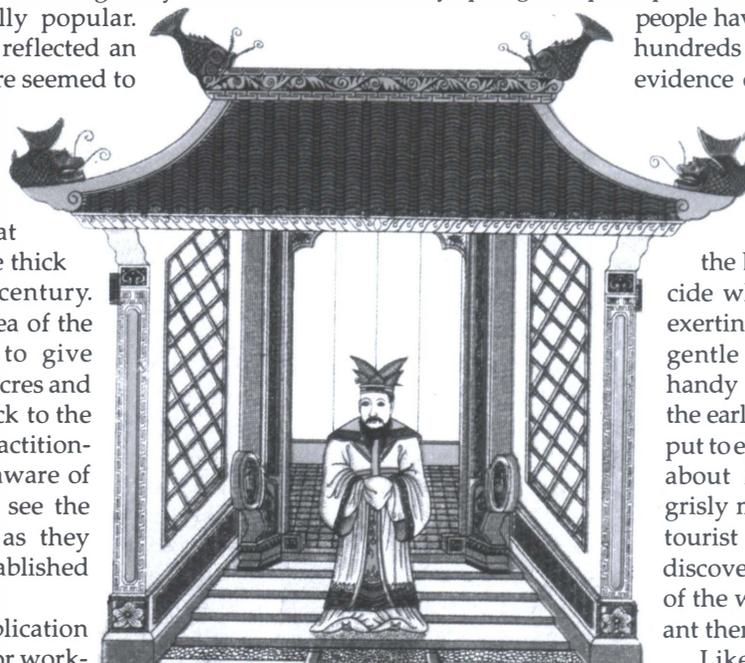
Like it or not, human beings and not forces within the earth are responsible for the battles and the torments. Not to accept this is a dangerous abnegation of responsibility. To attribute responsibility to forces within the land is to deny the workers on that land and the survivors of the battles and torments some credit just for working and surviving against the odds. We are responsible for the earth and we are responsible for each other; hanging crystals and wind-chimes, carefully placed tables and nicely painted walls, pleasant views and thorn-free gardens are very pleasant but cannot shift that ultimate burden of responsibility.

"A stone is soft as wax: tribunes more hard than stones. A stone is silent and offendeth not, And tribunes with their tongues doom men to death" [5].

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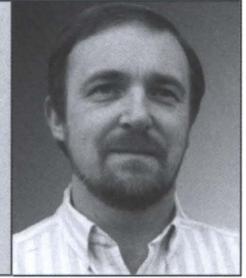
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A J McKerracher is a teacher.



# Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly



## Good vibrations

**A**STROLOGER: Your wristwatch keeps time using a quartz crystal that contains both energy and frequency, right?

YOURS TRULY: Er, yes, I suppose you could put it that way.

ASTROLOGER: Then why can't you acknowledge that quartz crystals can be used to improve people's energy levels and frequencies and keep them in tune with the cosmic frequency?

YOUR TRULY: *A rather long pause . . .*

This is, as near as I can remember, a verbatim transcript of part of a conversation with a well-known astrologer which took place (thankfully) off-air on the set of one or other daytime TV discussion programme. Now it's not that I am incapable of answering the final question – give me a fortnight, a calculator and some graph paper and I can possibly write you a minor dissertation on the topic – but to answer the question succinctly, in a 20 second sound-bite, avoiding scientific jargon and in a way that doesn't confuse or patronise the average TV listener I suspect is beyond my capabilities.

In many ways, the problem is as much semantic as scientific or logical, and is associated with the very specific meanings that terms such as "frequency" and "energy" have to physicists compared with the rather woolly meanings that they may have for the person in the street in general or the New Age believer, in particular. "Frequency" is a fairly straightforward term; it is simply a measure of the rate at which something swings back and forth, or oscillates, and is measured in cycles per second – or nowadays in hertz (Hz) after Heinrich Hertz, the German scientist who first broadcast and received radio waves.

As far as personal frequencies are concerned, I guess I have several. Firstly, there is my pulse rate which at 60 beats per minute would correspond to about 1 Hz and then there is the frequency with which I go to the loo – a few times per day or some millionths of a hertz (microhertz). Finally and, at the other extreme, I mustn't forget the frequency of vibration of the individual molecules of which I am made which occurs at a frequency of thousands of billions of hertz (terahertz).

The only cosmic frequency that immediately comes to mind is that associated with the so-called cosmic microwave background – the energy "left over" from the Big Bang. This frequency is in the region of hundreds of billions of hertz (100 gigahertz or so). Temperature is just a measure of the frequency at which the molecules or atoms of a body are vibrating, so that I could tune one of

my personal frequencies to this cosmic frequency simply by cooling my body down to a temperature of about minus 270° Celsius (3 K). But this would be a fairly drastic and permanent "improvement" to my psychic condition and one for which I don't feel I'm ready yet.

On the other hand, if meditation or another mystic discipline can help me "improve" one of my personal frequencies, my preference would be to go for the one measured in microhertz, because if I can reduce this frequency a bit then I will be able to make it through the night without having to get up and take a leak.

"Energy" is a somewhat more complicated term both scientifically and in its everyday usage. Energy comes in different forms, and much of physics is concerned with its transformation from one form to another. All other things being equal, a fast-moving object possesses more (kinetic) energy than a slow-moving one and a hot object is more energetic than a cold one. A large mass on a shelf has more (potential) energy than a smaller mass at the same height or the same mass at a lower height. We use food to provide energy to our bodies and are accustomed to seeing the energy content of food listed on packaging in kilocalories (or nowadays in kilojoules – after James Prescott Joule, the Salford physicist who established the equivalence of different forms of energy).

When it's used by proponents of various aspects of the paranormal, the term "energy" becomes even more diverse and complicated. As well as those energies listed above, the universe is supposedly home to various types of energy unknown to science. For instance, the flow of Chinese energy "Qi" or "Chi" through invisible channels in the body affects our well-being and can be modified by the use of acupuncture; the flow of similar energy around our surroundings can also affect the way we feel and can be engineered using principles of "Feng-Shui". But whether this energy is the same as the streams of "Earth Energy" (positive and negative) popular in Germany or the energies tapped into by various types of dowser both inside and outside of crop circles has not yet been established. But keep watching this space, as I intend to expand on the theme of "energy" in a future issue.

For the moment, I'd like to give you piece of advice that could have great importance to your personal development – if you want to increase your personal energy levels and those of your quartz crystal, let me suggest that you drop the latter off a high cliff while eating a king-size Mars bar.

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



# Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

## What happens when "language goes on holiday"

**I**N CASE YOU MISSED IT, allow me to fill you in on "the astrological event of the year". This unmissable occasion did not involve a rare conjunction of Cancer and Pluto (much to the relief of Disney lovers everywhere). Rather, it was the publication of a special supplement by a major national newspaper which promised – wait for it – to tell you "exactly what might happen in 1999."

The prospect of such a precise account of what could possibly happen enthralled me. I definitely remember that I may even have bought the paper. And I'm quite certain that it could have been a really good read. All these things are undeniably true. Perhaps.

Such perversions of the language are particularly interesting to philosophers, who spend a great deal of their time trying to distil from the messy concoction of everyday speech a purer, more rational brew. What bothers us is that, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said, bad reasoning inevitably follows when language "goes on holiday". What precisely he meant by this is disputable, but at root he was objecting to the way in which people – including (perhaps especially) philosophers – forget the rules which govern the use of words in our "language game" and end up with statements that have all the outward appearance of sense (they are grammatical English sentences) but have all the substance of nonsense. "Exactly what might happen" is just a particularly extreme example, which even readers of the shameless tabloid that coined the phrase would surely spot a mile off. The real challenge is to pick out the better disguised species.

A favourite example of mine concerns the prophecies of Nostradamus. Let's forget for a minute the fact that modern interpretations of Nostradamus's ramblings about moons, rivers, forests and the like display a freedom of interpretation on a par with claiming that Thomas Hardy was a comedian. Let us also put to one side the fact that according to "predictions" that appeared in 1970s editions of his works, but which mysteriously can't be found in more recent editions, the East Coast of America would have disappeared by now and the Third World War would be history. Ignore also that his fabled prediction about Hitler was in fact unambiguously about the river Hiller bursting its banks. Forget all that, and let's accept that what Nostradamus said did, sometimes, come true. Why are so many people impressed that Nostradamus apparently predicted things which came true?

Among the many reasons, a disregard for the proper use of words seems to be crucial. It hinges on the difference in meaning between "prediction" and "foreknow-



ledge" or "seeing the future." Anyone can make a prediction. Some will be correct, many others wrong. We don't generally think that people who make correct predictions can see the future. Weathermen, although much more accurate in their predictions than astrologers, are much less likely to be credited with the ability to see the future. Genuine foreknowledge requires something extra that Michael Fish all too clearly doesn't have. It requires special access to the future through a kind of perception or intuition. (There are, of course, plenty of times when we have foreknowledge for non-mysterious reasons. The *Radio Times* is one source of foreknowledge which is pretty reliable, though not fool-proof.)

So obviously, making correct predictions is not in itself proof that one can see the future. To establish that there was genuine foreknowledge, we would have to be shown that the predictions made were more accurate than either chance or skilful forecasting. I don't think it's news that Nostradamus failed this test.

There's something wrong with using a word like "foreknowledge" when there is no evidence that there is any. If I point to a cat and say "dog", I am in a real sense misusing the word, whether I actually know what "dog" means or not. Likewise if I credit William Hague with great charisma. To claim someone can see the future when all they have done is made a few decent predictions is a similar crime against language.

We are used to arguing that those duped by the uncanny match between Nostradamus's words about diseased sheep and the scrapie crisis have made a logical error, in that they have failed to recognise how successful prediction does not entail foresight. We're also used to pointing out their factual mistakes. Nostradamus just didn't say half of the things legend claims. But looked at another way, their errors can be seen as a misuse of language. Of that, you can be fairly certain.

**Julian Baggini** is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine* ([www.philosophers.co.uk](http://www.philosophers.co.uk)). A four-issue subscription to *The Philosophers' Magazine* costs £11.80 (UK) and can be ordered on (0171) 538 8288.

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# Reviews



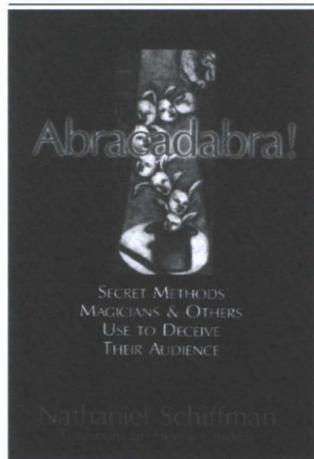

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## TELLING SECRETS

### **Abracadabra!: Secret Methods Magicians and Others Use to Deceive Their Audience**

by Nathaniel Schiffman

Prometheus, £24, ISBN 1-57392-163-7



As magician Henry Gordon points out in his foreword:

The secrets of conjuring will always be revealed. This serves two useful purposes. They promote an interest that recruits newcomers to this wonderful hobby, and they challenge performers to devise new and improved methods of deception – And this challenge has always been accepted and acted upon.

Schiffman is a devotee who caught the magic bug early in life, and who has become intrigued by the principles of deception. He has clearly become impatient with those magicians who seem unaware that the principal victims of their deceptions are often themselves.

There are already hundreds of books available which reveal magic to the layperson . . . There are plenty of untalented magicians out there, and plenty of talented magicians who have gotten lazy because they've been able to rely on the same old bag of tricks for so long. . . Magicians have used the same principles of deception for literally thousands of years to trick their audience into accepting impossibilities as reality. Can you imagine a governmental office of espionage which relied on the same technologies year after year without change? It wouldn't be long before all that country's secrets were known, and that country would be far behind other countries that made use of new methods of deception.

Schiffman doesn't tell you much that you probably don't know already about stage illusions. And he doesn't get all of it quite right anyway, but then he makes no pretensions to having special knowledge. Much of his research seems to have consisted of just reading some magic texts and plain asking around.

His more interesting thesis is an examination of how magicians' methods are used against us in the real world, though here I think he has it the wrong way round: the principles of deception have been around for much longer

than conjuring, and it is the magician who is the Johnny-come-lately.

I had high hopes of the potentially interesting marrying-up of conjuring and real-world deceptions, but Schiffman has little to add to the fairly obvious.

A mildly interesting read, but in the end, not the eye-opener it should have been.

Lewis Jones

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## WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

### **Weird Water and Fuzzy Logic: More Notes of a Fringe Watcher**

by Martin Gardner

Prometheus, £22, ISBN 1-57392-096-7

Martin Gardner's America is a strange place. Accusations of Satanism abound, an evangelist claims to be able to see through his glass eye and a book supposedly dictated to a modern writer by Jesus becomes a best seller. Gardner feels that:

We live at a time when science education in English-speaking countries is sinking, and interest in New Age, pseudoscience, and occultism is rapidly rising.

Gardner takes a skeptical look at cranks of all kinds, as well as considering more complex and serious issues such as mathematical theory, anthropology and false memory syndrome.

Gardner has written for *Skeptical Inquirer* for many years. This book reprints some of his most popular columns, together with a selection of his book reviews. The format prevents Gardner from covering his subjects in any great depth, but he has an enviable ability to sum up complex issues in a short article. Not many writers could give a lucid explanation of probability theory in three pages, but Gardner manages it.

Some offbeat pseudo-scientific theories are given suitably skeptical treatment. In 'Fuzzy Logic', Gardner looks at arguments for and against this much-hyped new way of thinking. 'Weird Water' is a round-up of bizarre theories involving water's supposed 'memory', its curative properties and its potential as a replacement for petrol. Sadly, the world may never know what it is that turns water into a wonder-fuel for engines: the inventor demanded a quarter of a million dollars down-payment before he would release the secret and, strangely enough, no-one wanted to pay him.

Some of Gardner's conclusions are a little strange. He argues that computers have had little effect on films. How does he imagine the special effects are generated?

He also underestimates the effects of computer technology on modern music. However, these are quibbles.

On the whole, this book is eminently browsable and highly entertaining. One chapter is titled 'Is Western Culture Vanishing?' If the pseudo-scientific New Age nonsense Gardner exposes is typical of Western culture, one can only hope so.

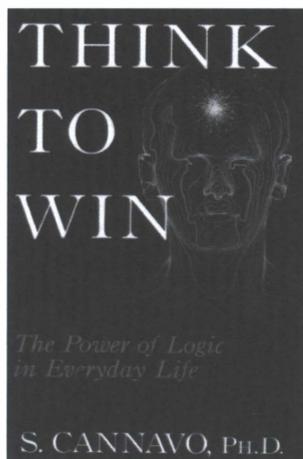
Chris Willis

## LOGIC PROBLEMS

### Think to Win: The Power of Logic in Everyday Life

by S Cannavo

Prometheus Books, £10.50, ISBN 1-57392-211-0



In the twentieth century, logic has developed into a mathematical subject. Modern logic has few if any connections with the systematic treatment of sound and unsound patterns of reasoning that was the original subject-matter of logic. However, as a reaction to this development, studies in non-mathematical logical reasoning has been revived several times, at least since the 1960s. It has reappeared in various curricula under names such

as "informal logic", "argumentation", and "practical reasoning". Professor Cannavo's book is part of this revival of that old-time logic. Hence, in spite of being a book about logic, it differs from most other logic books in being formula-free. Its aim is to teach the reader how to think and argue rationally.

The book has four parts. The first of these delineates the subject. It treats issues such as what reasoning is, why we need arguments, when hidden assumptions need or need not be made explicit, whether facts and values can be separated, and so on. The need for charity in interpreting statements by others is one of the main topics in this part of the book.

The second part is devoted to the logical fallacies. This is pleasant reading, not least due to the many new examples of the fallacies that the author has collected. He certainly shows that the traditional fallacies, such as ambiguity, circular reasoning, and *ad hominem*, are still alive and well. In addition he introduces a few new categories, notably "mystification" that he rightly treats as a variant of the more classic "appeal to authority".

Part three of the book introduces the distinction between inductive and deductive thinking. The final fourth part discusses concept analysis – a subject that is sadly missing in most other books on informal logic.

Although there are many books on informal logic, this one is unique in its combination of popular form and scholarly reliability. It is *the* book on logical and rational thinking that I want to recommend to the philosophically uninitiated.

But of course the question cannot be avoided: Does it help? Does anyone think more logically, or avoid fallacies better, in practical situations after reading Cannavo's book? That we cannot know, and it would be extremely difficult to find out. But as always, the educator has no other choice than to believe in the educability of mankind.

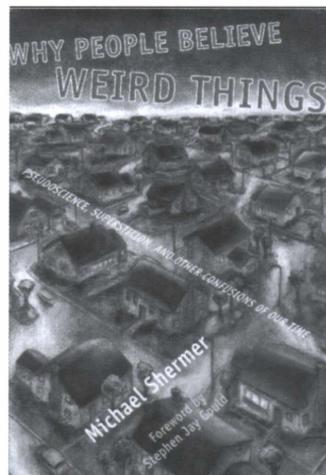
Sven Ove Hansson

## ASKING WHY

### Why People Believe Weird Things

by Michael Shermer

W H Freeman, \$22.95, ISBN 0-7167-3090-1



How do you define weird things? After all, what may appear weird to one person is another's cherished belief. To Michael Shermer, weird things are beliefs which are not supported by the evidence. In this book he examines a number of pseudo-scientific and pseudo-historical beliefs.

In the pseudoscience section, the author looks briefly at near-death experiences and alien abductions, and recounts his own abduction experience. This he attributes to an hallucination brought on by sleep deprivation, but are skeptics too swayed by pre-existing beliefs? Shermer then uses witch hunts and their modern counterpart, recovered memories of alleged sexual or satanic abuse, to illustrate how mass beliefs can spread through communities by means of feedback loops. In earlier times these information loops were fed by gossip, and in the present day by media coverage.

A number of chapters are devoted to a more in-depth examination of two belief systems: creationism and Holocaust denial. Both are characterised by the ease with which believers are able to ignore or to dismiss so much existing evidence and knowledge.

In each case any errors by Holocaust historians or evolutionists are used to invalidate the whole of their arguments, while any debate between scholars is taken as a sign that they too doubt what they are saying. Once again Shermer uses a feedback loop fed by information, intentions and actions, to model the growth of the Holocaust.

So why *do* people believe weird things? Briefly, because they want to. Weird beliefs can offer intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (there can be large profits for writers of controversial books), or they may offer hope, or give meaning to life. For these reasons, while it may be possible to encourage those in the middle to think critically about their beliefs, committed believers, in the words of James Randi, are like unsinkable rubber ducks.

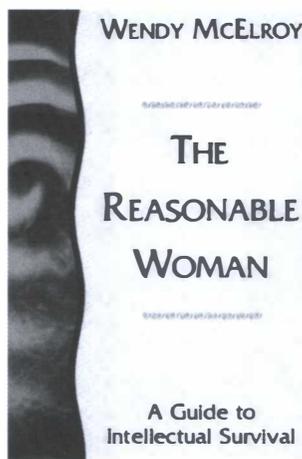
Susan Crawley

## MAKE YOUR MIND UP

### The Reasonable Woman: A Guide to Intellectual Survival

by Wendy McElroy

Prometheus Books, £10.50, ISBN 1-57392-208-0



Plenty of books will tell you how to improve your relationships, sex life, emotional well-being or thighs, but there are few that deal with making the most of your mind. Wendy McElroy's book fills this niche pretty well, if you can put up with words like 'counterhostility' and 'psychologise'. McElroy gives practical and aesthetic reasons why one should care about being reasonable. She argues that this amounts to cultivating good habits such

as reading books, concentrating, asking questions and arguing without excessive emotion. The reader is urged to overcome her fear of error, express her opinions and take herself seriously (and drop her voice by half an octave and cut her hair, although the book stops short of suggesting a false moustache).

Like most self-help literature, it is reassuring and repetitive: 'Tolerate your own eccentricities', 'Everyone has the right to her own opinion', 'You don't need to impress anyone but yourself,' and so on. This is dull but inoffensive.

However, the section on Intellectual Therapy is more sinister. You are told to set up a therapy group, invite your friends, charge a fee for attendance, perform a series of intrusive group exercises and exclude any member who refuses to do her homework – all of which seems a little inconsistent with the goal of encouraging reasonable behaviour. Despite this, the book has its good points. Much of the second half deals with the psychology and tactics of arguing, and should help anyone to hold her own in a discussion. An extensive list of recommended reading includes Richard Feynman and Darrell Huff, and there are very approachable chapters about statistics and logic.

*The Reasonable Woman* might make a good present for a shy friend, if she promises not to invite you to her therapy group.

Louise Johnson

## BRAIN WAVES

### Confirmation: the Hard Evidence

by Whitley Strieber

Simon and Schuster, \$6.99, ISBN 0-684-81994-5

Not content with having been visited, abducted, poked, prodded, and featured on trash TV talk shows, horror novelist Whitley Strieber can now reveal that he's had IMPLANTS. In 1988, he discovered there were "some unknown bright objects in my brain." At the time, he

says, he was increasingly concerned that people were labelling him an "alien abductee" when all he was trying to do was call for a public inquiry. This was his own fault: as he so achingly writes in this book, "the descriptive material was so vivid." One must feel for him: his skill as a writer obscured what he intended to say. Disturbed, he went back to writing horror novels and went through a bad financial patch, losing the cabin in which many of the alien encounters had taken place.

But another strange and vivid encounter in 1995 – as usual, his wife, sleeping next to him, was undisturbed and the burglar alarm on his house was not tripped – landed him with a strange swelling on his ear. Surgery failed to extract the object from his ear, but a small sample nicked from it showed a crystalline structure that Strieber figures has to be either gout (which he didn't have) or – well, something strange. It reacts, apparently, to meetings with his new literary agent and victims of alien encounters, causing his ear to swell and turn bright red.

Of course, one implant can't make a whole book. Most of *Confirmation* is a series of stories about a variety of implantees, as I suppose we must call them, and the surgeries carried out to remove their foreign objects by Dr Roger Leir. Of course, one extenuating factor is that technology companies and others are working on various types of implants even now, so Strieber suggests it's possible that "the secret government" may not have abandoned mind control experiments on innocent citizens.

No one, especially not the mainstream press, will investigate properly because UFOs "represent rejected knowledge." In fact, Strieber says, he advises anyone with a story of alien encounters not to talk about it publicly, as all of them have suffered great personal losses for it. However, he winds up, we must overcome fear, and grasp the challenge the visitors pose, and learn to embrace and capitalise on this knowledge we're rejecting. We can go into space – and become immortal.

Anyway: if you want to get ready for the implants craze before it hits Britain in a couple of years, it's all in here.

Wendy M Grossman

## FORTEAN FILES

### Borderlands

by Mike Dash

Arrow Books, £6.99, ISBN 0-74932-396-5

Dash works for *Fortean Times*. He therefore might be thought to have a vested interest in the paranormal, but in fact he maintains a pleasantly sceptical attitude to the various anomalous phenomena he considers. These include apparitions of the Virgin Mary, parapsychology, out-of-the-body and near-death experiences, past life memories, UFOs and alien abductions, bigfoot and other zoological curiosities including lake monsters, ley lines, ghosts, fairies and poltergeists among others. He therefore casts his net pretty wide.

I apply two tests when deciding whether to read a book of this kind: are there any phenomena described here I haven't heard about before, and does the author have anything interesting to say in terms of explanation? As regards novelty, most of the cases that Dash recounts

are ones I was already familiar with, but even so it is useful to have a handy source of references and these are provided in excellent notes at the end of the book. Some of the items were however new to me; I hadn't realized that most of the bogus social workers who allegedly tried to abduct children throughout Britain in the 1990s apparently never existed.

As for explanations, Dash favours hoax and psychological reasons for most of the mysteries he considers. He points out, however, that there are however a few categories for which these explanations don't work well. There are well-authenticated reports of frogs and other unlikely things falling out of the sky, and rationalist dismissals of poltergeists as nothing but fraud don't really stand up. I agree with these comments.

The book is well written and entertaining; I thoroughly recommend it.

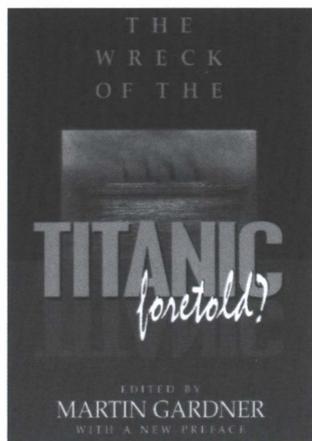
Anthony Campbell

## SEA MYSTERIES

### The Wreck of The Titanic Foretold?

by Martin Gardner (Editor)

Prometheus, £10.50, ISBN 1-57392-201-3



Connoisseurs of trashy fiction will love Martin Gardner's splendid anthology. He reprints three fictional accounts of ships wrecked by icebergs in the Atlantic, all of which were published *before* the Titanic sank. Prophecy? Clairvoyance? Probably not. As Gardner explains, fears of ships colliding with icebergs were common at the turn of the century – rather like fears of air crashes today.

Morgan Roberts' *The Wreck of the Titan* is reprinted in full, and is well worth reading. The *Titan* is one of the biggest liners ever built (sound familiar?) which collides with an iceberg in mid-Atlantic, leaving few survivors. I would have more faith in Roberts' supposed clairvoyant powers if people who hail this as a prophecy had not conveniently ignored the rest of the novel, which includes such improbable events as a sailor single-handedly killing a polar bear with a penknife. Roberts' account of the workings of Lloyds is also more romantic than accurate. However, he does describe the sudden financial ruin of some Lloyds' underwriters . . .

WT Stead's *From the Old World to the New* is a regrettable blot on the career of one of Britain's greatest crusading journalists. Gardner reprints two chapters which served as propaganda for Stead's supernatural beliefs. Dreadful though the novel is, its unintentional hilarity makes it well worth reading. One of the many 'psychic' characters practises automatic writing, and tells a friend "I have many friends in all parts of the world who also have this gift, and we use it constantly, to the almost entire disuse of the telegraph" (p103). He tries to send such a message to a friend who is shipwrecked on an iceberg, "fearing greatly that he would not be able to

receive it owing to the difficulty, if not impossibility, of practising automatic handwriting on the shifting ice" (p 108). Well, yes, I suppose it *would* be a little tricky.

After this, Mayn Clew Garnett's 'The White Ghost of Disaster' and the poems Gardner reprints are rather an anticlimax. Yet more liners hit icebergs due to greed and negligence. It's just as well that 'psychic' predictions have no legal status, or White Star Line could have made a fortune in libel damages after the *Titanic* sank!

Chris Willis

## NO CAN DO

### Impossibility: The Limits of Science and the Science of Limits

John D Barrow,

Oxford University Press, £18.99, ISBN 0-19851-890-0

With the end of a century and a millennium looming it comes as no surprise that a book assessing some aspects of science should be published. This is a good contribution since it discusses what inherent limits there might be on scientific knowledge, and also explains the scientific and mathematical principles underlying various limits. There are some pertinent comparisons of modern and pre-twentieth century views about the future of science.

Barrow appears to have in mind a general but intelligent readership, and so the writing is not dumbed down but neither does it get too technical and need a strong knowledge of mathematics. The first chapter is an introduction to the ideas of impossibility and covers such areas as paradox, omniscience, religion, limits on certainty, and the speed of light. Many readers will probably be familiar with much of the subject matter covered in this first chapter. The rest of the book covers a wide range of subject matter including technological limits, issues of progress, cosmological limits, the nature of minds, deep limits and impossibility. The scope of these ranges from the microscopic to the cosmological; and as a person who finds astronomy fascinating some of the cosmological ideas discussed, such as inflationary universes, were particularly illuminating.

This quote from the final chapter sums up the book well: "If this book has taught the reader anything, I hope it is that the notion of impossibility is far subtler than naïve assumptions about the endless horizons of science, or pious hopes that boffins will be baffled, would leave you to believe. Limits are ubiquitous. Science exists only because there are limits to what Nature permits."

The niggle I have about the presentation of the book is that it goes into quotation overkill: not only does each chapter start with an apposite quote, but so does each section. Even the preface starts with a quote, and the subject of this quote is prefaces. Also, each chapter ends with a summary section, whilst this can be useful I found it somewhat reminiscent of textbooks.

This is a fine book which definitely belongs on the shelves of anyone who is both interested in science and wants a good overview of what limits there may be to such knowledge. It also has that great quality of being both readable cover to cover, and accessible as a reference due to being well organised and having an index.

Dene Bebbington

# Letters

## Hot stuff

Re Chris Willis's article "Trial By Fire" (*The Skeptic*, 11.4). Quite recently I read somewhere an article stating that there had been a few examples of combusted human bodies being found in more or less sealed rooms containing a fireplace, under conditions similar to those narrated by Dickens, i.e., in which the body (including the bones) was almost entirely reduced to ashes, though perhaps the feet and shoes remained, and there were dark greasy stains on the wall and ceiling, but no obvious burning of the room furniture away from the body.

The dead were usually elderly people living in isolation, and death was attributed to their bulky clothing getting close enough to the fireplace to ignite. One theory was that the burning clothing would soon release enough fat from the body to sustain the flames by wick action, but the temperature required to calcine bones seemed impossibly high.

In that article an experiment was described in which a pig's body was wrapped in a blanket sprinkled with paraffin, laid on the ground, and set alight. The flames burnt brightly for some minutes, then settled down to a much lower level, after which they continued to burn for many hours. A very high temperature was registered inside the body, and calcination of the bones occurred. It seems that these high temperatures can be generated because the ash layer on the outside acts as a very good thermal insulator, a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has stirred the ashes of a garden fire left overnight.

It is a pity that *The Skeptic* should be dismissing events as fanciful "spontaneous combustion" when there do seem to be a few examples of "triggered slow combustion," a hazard not to the sinful but to the elderly living in isolation and trying to keep warm.

C F Coleman, Grove, Oxon

In her article Chris Willis failed to point out that a recent British TV programme (QED?) demonstrated, not only that the phenomenon really exists, but that it is not spontaneous. The programme showed the combustion of a pig's carcass covered in no more than some fabric doused in an inflammable spirit. Once lit, the 'wick effect' of the fabric allowed the fire to burn into the body fat and was then supplied with this fuel until very little of the pig remained.

The conclusion must be that the victim has to indulge in that already lethal combination of drinking and smoking. But more important, they have to be unconscious. Either dead from some other cause, or in a stupor, a dropped light falls onto clothing already soaked with alcohol. This allows the 'wick effect' to start. If they are not disturbed or do not awake, their whole body will be consumed. I think in some cases, people have fallen into fires, where a similar process could start.

I had understood that Dickens based his story on a report at the time of the combustion of a carter in Scotland. I think Willis's last reference should be '14', not '4'.

Stuart Campbell  
Edinburgh

**Chris Willis replies:** The article was written and submitted to *The Skeptic* before the QED programme was broadcast. The QED programme did not claim that SHC exists. On the contrary, it offered the "wick effect" as a possible explanation for some of the many deaths wrongly attributed to SHC. This "wick effect" is a modern theory which had not been put forward at the time Dickens was writing. I'd also like to point out that the choice of illustration was *The Skeptic's*, not mine, and that I did not see it or know it was being used until I saw the published article.



## No Instant Replay

To quote from Lewis Jones' review of Stephen Jay Gould's *Life's Grandeur* (*The Skeptic*, 11.4):

"Gould also addresses another main question: is there a drive towards more and more complexity as life evolves? His answer is no. He sees the bell curve of complexity as blocked by a wall at the left end: the irreducible simplicity of the bacterium. Any random change in complexity can move no further in that direction: it has no choice but to stay as it is, or encroach on the space to the right."

But then, if the "bell curve of complexity" spreads towards greater complexity for whatever reason, then surely that is a drive (or at least a tendency) towards greater complexity as life evolves – even if it is "only" the statistical result of random processes. (After all, so is the rest of evolution.)

Obviously, Gould is trying to convince people who see the development of life as an "upwards" march with human beings as its culmination – but surely that can't include many of the people for whom his book is intended?

Also, one has to ask what is meant by "replaying the game of life again and again". In what way can this be meaningful, even as a thought experiment?

One of the things that soon becomes clear about the "game of life" is the lack of second chances....

Charles Goodwin  
London

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