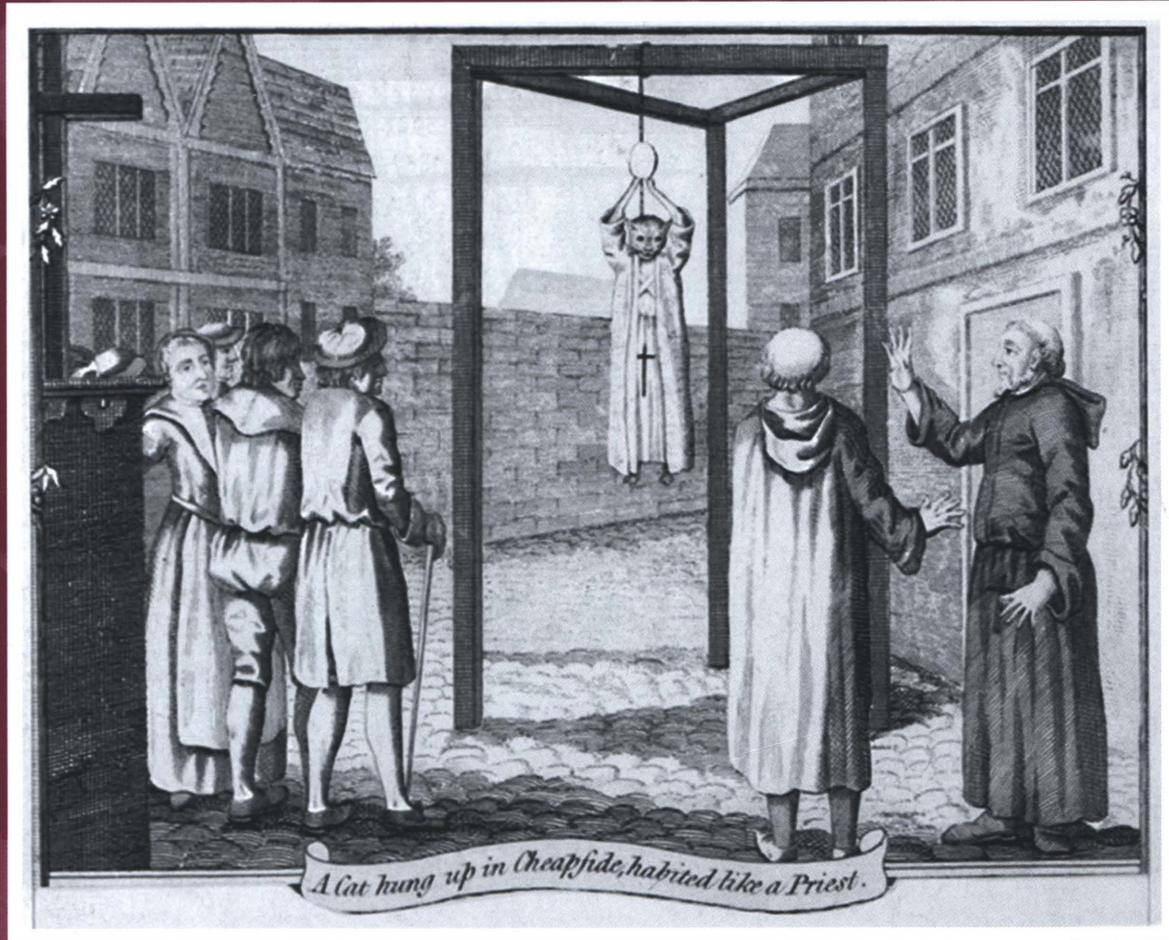


**The**

Volume 13 Number 1

# ***Skeptic***



## ***Satanic Cat Abuse?***

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***Asking awkward questions***

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# *Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery*



**T**HE AFFAIR of “the Devils of Loudun” was only the most notorious of the outbreaks of Convent Hysteria which punctuated the history of monastic life from the fifteenth through to the nineteenth centuries.

Superfluous daughters who failed to win a suitable earthly husband were apt to be offered as brides of Christ – packed away into nunneries whether they had a vocation for the spiritual life or not.

Not surprisingly, the combination of confinement, fasting, penance and the suppression of natural instincts periodically led to outbreaks in which, claiming to be possessed by demons, the women would tear off their habits, swarm up trees or onto rooftops, writhe in orgasmic convulsions, and scream blasphemies and obscenities.

# Contents

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## Volume 13 Number 1

<b>Skeptic in Chains</b> .....	4
Wendy Grossman	
<b>Hits and Misses</b> .....	5
<b>The Last Witchcraft Trial?</b> .....	7
Adam Buick	
<b>Awkward Questions</b> .....	10
Harold Hillman	
<b>Skeptical Stats</b> .....	12
<b>The London Cat Flap</b> .....	13
Paul Chambers	
<b>Dissociative Identity Disorder</b> .....	14
Anna Stone	
<b>Have You Considered a Career in Pseudoscience?</b> .....	17
David Fisher	
<b>Statistical Folly and Prayer</b> .....	19
Dene Bebbington	
<b>Rhyme and Reason</b> .....	21
Steve Donnelly	
<b>Philosopher's Corner</b> .....	22
Julian Baggini	
<b>Reviews</b> .....	23
<b>Letters</b> .....	27

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email [edit@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:edit@skeptic.org.uk) for details.



# Skeptic in Chains

Wendy M Grossman

## Psychic Experts

**W**ELL, WE MADE IT! Into the new millennium... sometime between January 1, 2000 and January 1, 2001. I refuse to have the argument about whether or not this year or next year or four years from now is the right date. On this occasion, consensus wins, and the consensus was this was the year to have the party. Anyway, in a thousand years, what's a few years one way or the other? I figure this whole year is the millennium dawn.

Still, whatever century this might or might not be, it's clearly not the 1990s any more. So CSICOP was perfectly justified in doing a survey of psychics' predictions for the 1990s to assess their reliability. The survey is an annual project of Gene Emery's, who has been tracking this sort of stuff for some 20 years.

Psychics, by the way, shouldn't feel I'm picking on them unfairly. I'm a Net person. I love it when *any* supposed expert is wrong, from the stock market analysts who have been predicting the collapse of the stock market boom, oh, any time in the last five years (actually, we all know it has to collapse, we just don't know when) and losing money by shorting Internet stocks to IBM founder Thomas J Watson, who in 1950 figured there was a world market for "about five computers." Anyone else who has this kind of malicious streak and wants to enjoy it should find themselves a used copy of the now out-of-print book *The Experts Speak*, by Christopher Cerf and Victor Kavasky: it's full of gems like that.

Aaaaanyway, *Skeptic* readers will be unsurprised to hear that the psychics didn't do any better in 1999 than they did in the rest of the decade. They missed: John F Kennedy Jr and the Bessette sisters' plane crash (Carolyn Bessette was instead supposed to give birth to healthy twins); Monica Lewinsky's loss of weight and emergence as a spokesmodel for dieting firm Jenny Craig (she was supposed to become a millionaire by opening a boutique for full-figured women); and OJ Simpson's more or less complete obscurity (he was supposed to confess he was guilty of his ex-wife's murder on shock-jock Howard Stern's radio show).

Emery goes on to talk about the seriousness of the situation, saying that the people who are persuaded by the few visible successes that psychics do have – as a friend of mine likes to say, even a blind pig with no sense of smell finds a truffle once in a while – to spend money they can't afford calling psychic hotlines, and paying for private readings. Maybe so.

For some people. I would bet, though, that most people, if asked, would say they're quite aware that what they're reading is entertainment. It's no surprise psychics

pick the most outlandish predictions they can: that's what sells papers. Do you buy a tabloid to read that someone has predicted that the world is going to keep turning and the sun will come up tomorrow? Not unless you're looking for a review of the musical *Annie*.

But you might buy a paper – just to laugh at how ridiculous it all is, of course – to find out more about someone's prediction that the Millennium Dome was going to collapse on New Year's Eve, killing the Queen and all the dignitaries. Or, since we know you're a die-hard skeptic, you might buy the paper to carefully chart the predictions so next year you can show who was wrong.

What these surveys generally fail to point out, though, is that sensationalist predictions are the media fodder for every field. Take the stuff I write about all the time, the Internet. For the last five years I've been hearing how the Net is going to turn everyone in the world into libertarians; how, because the Net is essentially ungovernable by any nation, we are in the twilight of national sovereignty; how soon everyone's going to be able to telecommute to work from a Greek island; how, despite the fact that three-quarters of the world's population has never made a telephone call, there are going to be 1 billion people wired to the Net by... actually, last year. Whatever: the point is that wild predictions are currently the stuff of even the serious news.

What's wacky is that in some areas people seem to feel compelled to make the predictions come true – you get some Wall Street analyst saying in the morning that Globalsoft stock will reach a target of \$115 by 2001, and by that afternoon lunatics have rushed in and made it true the same day.

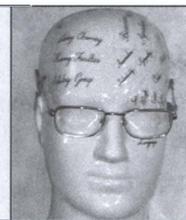
The fact is that these days just about anyone can make a pretty good living by making predictions that are far enough in the future – say, one to ten years – that people will forget about it before they get around to testing the person's credibility by checking whether any of the predictions came true. At the same time, the predictions have to be near enough to matter – it's no good predicting in, say, 1500 that a blonde princess is going to be killed in the 1990s. Just like in movies or books, you need to know and care about the characters.

So, let's see. To kick off the year 2000 with a bang, what can I predict? Ah yes: I predict the Internet stock bubble will burst\*. When? In the 13th moon of the 2nd house, when the Sun is in the 14th sign. (Let them figure that one out.)

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

\* Note added in proof: Wendy Grossman made this prediction well before the Wall Street sell-off of technology stocks in mid April.

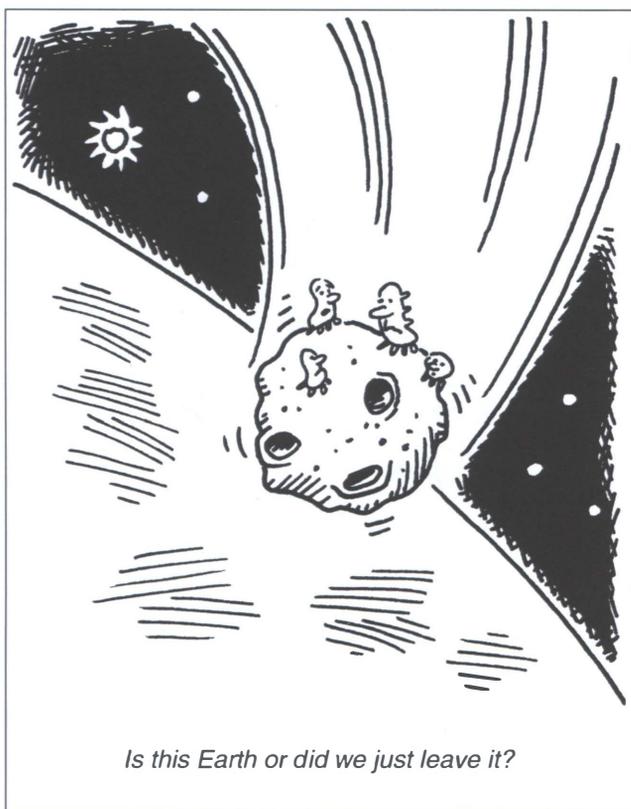
# Hits and Misses



## The Mars effect

It's not enough for Barry Fell to claim that American Indians are really Celts; now, according to CNN, a Finnish researcher claims we might really be Martians.

Martian rocks bearing microbes could have landed on Earth trillions of years ago, infecting the Earth (so to speak) with Life Itself. Or perhaps the traffic went the other way: they're not too sure. But they have pretty much ruled out the idea that we are the descendants of microbes from outside the Solar System. Means we're not Vogons, anyway.



*Is this Earth or did we just leave it?*

Tim Pearce

## Freedom of speech

One of the odder legal cases to come along is the one currently proceeding in London regarding British writer David Irving, who is suing American writer Deborah Lipstadt over comments she made about him and his work in her book on Holocaust denial\*.

Taking advantage of Britain's rather hostile libel laws, which place the burden of proof on the accused and stick the loser with the bills), Irving is claiming that Lipstadt's comments are costing him respect and future book deals. Judging from the comments made about his books at online booksellers' sites, we'd say Irvin may have less reputation to lose than he thinks – either that, or a lot

more people to sue. He could also throw in government officials from a number of countries around the world that have banned him from entering because of his views.

Skeptics should be interested in this trial, because it touches on several issues important to all of us. One is, of course, freedom of speech; part of that is people's right to say things that other people disagree with or call provably untrue, but part is also the right to comment, even unfavourably, on other people's work.

Someone who claims to be psychic and sells his or her services or performs in public should by doing so relinquish the right to sue over skeptical examinations of those performances, and someone who writes and publishes history books should accept that scholars will pick over them. If the work is good, it will stand up to the process.

In the meantime, if you want to support Lipstadt, her book *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* is available from any of the online booksellers, as are Irving's many books.

On a more technical note, if you want to support freedom of speech in Britain, pen a note of protest to your MP about the Regulation of Investigatory Powers bill (there's a good analysis at <http://www.fipr.org>).

## They shoulda seen it comin'

Everyone knows New York is a weird place. Even if it isn't, as one Seinfeld episode had it, a place where millionaire comedians mug old ladies for loaves of marble rye, it's the kind of place where Quentin Crisp felt at home and where on any given day any damn thing can happen, including the Disneyfication of Times Square.

Even New Yorkers, however, were surprised to learn that under Mayor Giuliani's welfare-to-work program welfare recipients were being recruited to work for Psychic Network at a starting salary of \$10 an hour after being trained to read Tarot cards. Psychic Network was only one of 160 businesses in the program, known as Business Link. On January 29, 2000, the day after the *New York Times* broke the story, the city announced it had ended the arrangement.

## Strieber snaps

Dave Langford writes in issue 151 of his SF newsletter *Ansible*:

DEPT OF UROLOGY ... this being what John Grant's spellchecker keeps suggesting for 'UFology'. David Hines reports: "Long-time Langford fan Whitley Strieber was roundly humiliated on the January 18th "Kirk, Mark, and Lopez Morning Show" on 97.9 FM in Baltimore, MD. Strieber called in to promote his new book, *The Coming Global Superstorm* (co-authored with

\*Note added in proof: David Irving lost his libel case on 11 April.

conspiracy maven Art Bell), the thesis of which is that "Earth's climate works like a rubber band being stretched and suddenly released" (yes, really), and that said rubber band is getting ready to snap back with enough force to blow off a finger or two.

A highlight: when one disk jockey read off a list of Strieber's wildly alarmist and (need this be said?) unsubstantiated claims, Strieber snapped back, accusing the DJs of being deliberately inflammatory, and trying to make him look foolish by taking him out of context. On the contrary, they replied – they were reading directly from Strieber's own press kit.

## Alternative 2000

Too late to garner comments from skeptics through this issue of the magazine, we discovered that the Science and Technology Committee of the House of Lords is preparing a report on Complementary and Alternative Medicine, "addressing in particular the issues of education, training and regulation, and of provision within the NHS in addition to the private sector."

The Committee will produce a report to the House, with recommendations to the UK Government, in autumn 2000. The relevant clerk, Miss Mawson (to whom all inquiries should be addressed, at +44 (207) 219 5358), notes that so many people wanted to comment on this issue that they had to extend the deadline although, only until the end of February.

## Gross error

What's neon green or metallic grey and four inches long, with huge ears, three fingers, and legs stuck together, and covered in slime? You're right: the answer is definitely *not* a foetus.

These gross-out "Alien" toys were on sale all over the UK before Christmas, including at our local shop, which had them curled up in egg-shaped pods in the candy section up near the cash register, leading us to believe the toys were gross-out candy – distorted versions of Cadbury's Creme Eggs, perhaps (in which case they'd be greatly preferable to the original).

Apparently, however, when paramedics were called in to Buckhurst Hill station in Essex by a distressed cleaner who had found one of these things on a platform, they took it to the local hospital thinking it might be a discarded incipient human baby. In a way, this has to be a welcome change from the other more typical occurrence, in which a mundane Earth/human artifact is taken to be an exotic proof of alien existence or paranormal powers. And the worst you can say about the paramedics is: perhaps they worry too much.

The toys did look very weird the first time you saw them, especially if you thought they were candy. We hasten to assure concerned readers that neither H Grossman, the Glasgow company that makes the toys, nor its managing director, Martin Grossman, is any relation to *The Skeptic's* editor. Pity: they'd make great skeptical gifts.

## Health fraud

"All women sympathise with her," said a woman at the tennis club recently. She was speaking of Caroline Richmond, who had just lost her (last) case against the surgeon who removed her uterus and ovaries when she thought she was going in for a minor operation.

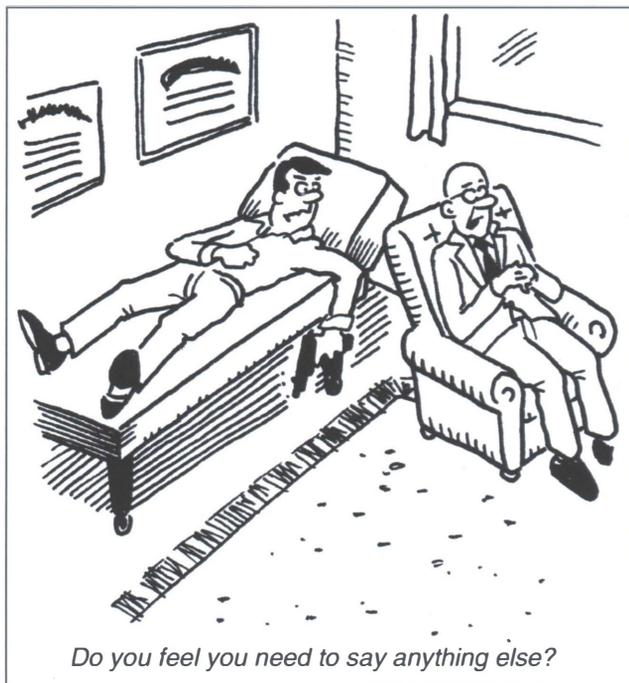
Richmond, a medical journalist, was a founder of the Campaign Against Health Fraud, which started up around the time *The Skeptic* did. The one good thing that seems likely to come out of the whole outrageous mess is that procedures will change to ensure that patients going under the knife will have more and clearer information. But with stories like this filling the news, is it any wonder that people switch to alternative medicine?

## Failed foresight

Somehow we managed to miss the 1998 story of Wendell Williamson, who shot two people dead in North Carolina during a gun rampage, and took his psychiatrist to court, on the grounds that the psychiatrist failed to foresee his transformation into a killer and therefore failed to block the shootings.

Williamson's legal team managed to convince the jury, and Williamson was awarded \$500,000. This is the kind of judgement you'd think would be reversed on appeal; however, the superior court judge upheld the decision. It sounds hilarious at first – one of those stories about the ridiculously litigious American legal system.

In fact, that case turns out on inspection to have a serious point: what should be a psychiatrist's standard of care when his relationship with a patient ends?



Tim Pearce

Hits and Misses was compiled by **Wendy Grossman**. Thank you to our clipping contributors for this issue: Stuart Campbell, Thomas Ruffles, Ken Johnson, and Jock Cramb, and please keep sending news items of interest.

# The Last Witchcraft Trial?

*Adam Buick on the 1944 prosecution of Helen Duncan, purveyor of ectoplasm to the gullible*

**O**N THE CENTENARY of her birth in 1997 a group of spiritualists launched a campaign to obtain a posthumous pardon for the medium Helen Duncan, who achieved a certain notoriety in 1944 when she was prosecuted and convicted under the Witchcraft Act of 1735. The campaign has been spearheaded by James MacQuarrie and Michael Colmer, co-founders of the British Society of Paranormal Studies [1]. The Helen Duncan trial was also featured in ITV's *Secret History* series in July 1998.

A trial as late as 1944 under a law called the Witchcraft Act does indeed make an intriguing story.

During and after wars commercially minded spiritualists can make a killing. Many people desperately want to know what has happened to their loved ones, especially those reported missing, and they are prepared to pay money to mediums to try to find this out. Helen Duncan (from Scotland) and Frances Brown (from Sunderland) decided that a good place to ply their trade would be Portsmouth, the Royal Navy's home port. Here there would be many parents, wives, and girlfriends anxious to know the fate of their relatives and friends. In 1943, therefore, Duncan and Brown were holding séances in a room above a chemist's shop (run by a spiritualist couple and which also served as a spiritualist church), charging 12s 6d for participation. One young naval lieutenant was so disgusted when he learned of this that he decided to do something about it. He complained to the police, who attended some of the séances to gather evidence.

In his article Colmer alleges that "her case was a transparent conspiracy to frame her 'in the interests of national security.'" Apparently, the "establishment" were "terrified that she might accurately discern the date of the D-Day Normandy Landings" and that the information might leak out to German spies; so she had to be taken out of circulation. The actual reasons for prosecuting her and her three accomplices would have been more prosaic: that the Naval authorities in Portsmouth were genuinely disgusted at the exploitation for money of the worry and grief of the relatives of the sailors they were responsible for and decided to make an example of her.

Helen Duncan and her three co-defendants were indeed the last people to be charged and convicted under the Witchcraft Act of 1735. However, they were not accused of witchcraft or of practising spiritualism as such, but of fraud in that they pretended to be able to produce, in return for money, physical manifestations of the dead, or "conjuraton" as the Act put it. The 1735 Act was in fact



Mary Evans Picture Library

*Helen Duncan*

the Act that repealed the more savage legislation under which many people had been put to death for witchcraft in the previous century. The 1735 Act was in this sense a liberalising measure, and was retained mainly for use against fairground charlatans and others who tricked gullible people out of their money with promises to put them in contact with the dead. In 1951 it was repealed and replaced by the more appropriately named Fraudulent Mediums Act, which is what the 1735 Act had essentially become by 1944. So, a less tendentious description of Helen Duncan's case would be to say that she was the last person to be convicted of fraud under the 1735 Witchcraft Act before it was repealed and replaced by the 1951 Fraudulent Mediums Act.

The prosecution case, as reported in *The Times*, was clear enough:

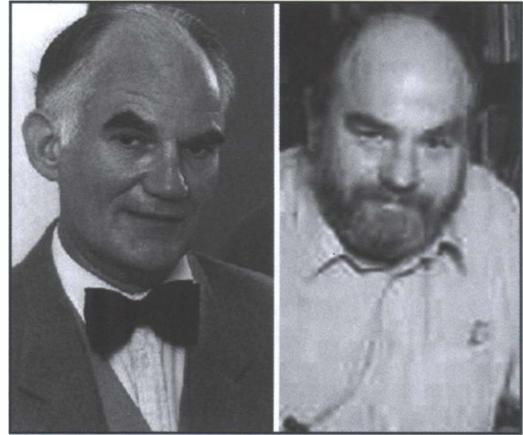
Mr John Maude, K. C., prosecuting with Mr Henry Elam, said the Witchcraft Act was mentioned in the indictment, but the case was in no way connected with witchcraft, and in no way aimed at honest

beliefs, whatever they might be. It was aimed at just ordinary fraud... The séances with which the prosecution was concerned took place in a smallish house at Copnor Road, Portsmouth, where, over a drug store belonging to Mr Homer, was a room known as the 'Master Temple Psychic Centre,' which was registered as a church. Towards the end of 1943 two naval officers became interested in the activities of the psychic centre, as a result of which this prosecution was launched. Elizabeth Jones, who was known as Mrs. Homer, under which name she would be referred to during the trial, told one of the officers, Lieutenant Worth, that Mrs. Duncan could produce spirits, and that her spirit guide used ectoplasm from her eyes, ears, nose and mouth to form a spirit. The charge for admission to the séance was 12s. 6d. It would appear, counsel continued, that the so-called ectoplasm was something like a strip of cheese-cloth or butter-muslin, or possibly some sort of towel. Lieutenant Worth asked if he could bring a surgeon naval officer who was sceptical, and it was alleged that Mrs. Homer said: "Yes, I will give him a seat in the front row and scare him stiff." She said that if the doctor attempted to touch the ectoplasm it would rush back into Mrs. Duncan's body with such force that it might cause her serious harm, or even kill her. "In fact," said Mr Maude, "it went the other way, into the audience, and the suggestion of the prosecution is that the towel, or whatever it was, was snatched by a confederate and disappeared." (24 March 1944)

Surgeon Lieutenant E. Fowler said that Mrs. Brown showed him photographs on which she said were spirit photographs of people who had died. When a form appeared, which they were told was a parrot, someone said, "Dear old Bronco," Detective-Sergeant Taylor, of the Portsmouth Police photograph department, was shown a number of "spirit" photographs which Mrs Brown had given to the police, and he said: "In my opinion all the effects produced could be obtained by faking." He added that "ghost" effects could be made by two exposures on the same negative, but a dark background was required. War Reserve Constable Cross, who attended a séance where the alleged exposure leading to the court proceedings was made, said he pushed forward and seized a white shrouded form which appeared between the curtains. It was Mrs. Duncan. He told her he was a police officer and would arrest her, and she sat down on a chair. As he took hold of her he alleged that she was pushing a white cloth to the ground in front of her. (25 March 1944)

It was significant that the defence chose not to put Helen Duncan herself on the stand, no doubt to avoid an embarrassing cross-examination and perhaps also because she was not prepared to swear under oath that she and her assistants had not used sheets and other props in her act. It is true that the defence offered to put on the act for the Court but they must have known that this would be refused (in fact they must have been banking on this, since she would not have been able to produce the effects without her props).

The defence wanted to turn the case into a defence of the doctrine of spiritualism and produced a long list of



*Michael Colmer and James MacQuarrie who spearheaded the campaign to obtain a posthumous pardon for Helen Duncan*

satisfied customers and believers to try to make a case that the power to materialise the dead did exist and that Helen Duncan possessed this power. But this was never going to work as a defence since the case was bound to be judged on the particular events that gave rise to the charge. Both the prosecution and the judge made it clear that it was not spiritualism that was on trial but four people whose alleged fraud happened to involve spiritualism. The issue was fraud, not freedom of religion.

The prosecution case and the evidence produced at the trial were sufficient to convince a jury that deliberate trickery, and therefore fraud, were involved and they convicted Duncan and the three others. It's a matter of debate whether a nine-month prison sentence (and a four-month sentence for one of her accomplices — the other two were simply bound over) was too harsh, since the simple fact that she had been exposed in public as a fraud might have sufficed. But there was no miscarriage of justice. Fraud was proved.

There will be mediums who sincerely believe they possess the powers they claim but this can't apply to those who claim, as Duncan did, to possess "that rare psychic gift of being a vehicle for physical phenomena whilst in a trance state" as Colmer puts it; in other words, to be "able to make walking, talking figures materialise from the ectoplasm that flowed through her" [2]. All such "materialisation mediums" cannot but be aware that they are employing magicians' stage techniques to produce these effects. They are in essence putting on a show, and some are very good at it. There is nothing wrong with that — so long as it is clearly understood that it is a show, entertainment.

Such materialisation mediums cross the line when they claim that they really are materialising the dead (as opposed to contacting them on a purely spiritual level). They are not, and they know perfectly well that they are not. Things are made worse when they take money, not from people who want to be entertained, but from vulnerable people who want to be put in contact with the spirits of dead relatives and friends and who really believe that this is what their money is buying them. It might be buying solace or therapy but this is not what they believe they are paying for nor what the medium is ostensibly selling them. Fraud is therefore involved.



From the middle of the 19th century onward, ever since claims to be able to make the spirits of the dead manifest themselves in some physical way (knocking, slate writing, spirit photographs, "ectoplasm", and so on) became popular, its practitioners have been exposed over and over again. Often such exposures were carried out by professional magicians and stage performers (such as Houdini), who were well aware of the techniques used to produce the effects since they employed them themselves in their own acts. Some materialisation mediums ended up being prosecuted; others were simply discredited. Helen Duncan herself, in fact, already had a previous conviction for a similar offence before the 1944 case. Melvin Harris's book *Sorry, You've Been Duped!* contains a photograph of Helen Duncan and one of her materialisations. It is quite clearly a stage prop [3].

The Fraudulent Mediums Act 1951 is still on the statute book. Section (1), subsections (1), (2) and (5) reads:

(1) Subject to the provisions of this section, any person who(a) with intent to deceive purports to act as a spiritualistic medium or to exercise any powers of telepathy, clairvoyance or other similar powers, or (b) in purporting to act as a spiritualistic medium or to exercise such powers as aforesaid, uses any fraudulent device, shall be guilty of an offence.

(2) A person shall not be convicted of an offence under the foregoing subsection unless it is proved that he acted for reward; and for the purposes of this section a person shall be deemed to act for reward if any money is paid, or other valuable thing given, in respect of what he does, whether to him or to any other person.

(...)

(5) Nothing in subsection (1) of this section shall apply to anything done solely for purposes of entertainment.

It is clear that a prosecution of Duncan under this Act, had it then been in force, would probably have been successful (so, if the literal terms of the Act were enforced, would that of not a few present-day psychics). But, then, a conviction as a fraudulent medium would have carried less street cred than conviction as a witch.

## References

1. Their case can be found in an article "Helen Duncan, Medium Martyr" by Colmer at <http://members.tripod.com/~helenduncan/Duncan.htm>.
2. *Western Daily Press*, 27 December 1997.
3. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1986. Reprinted by Prometheus Books in the US.

**Adam Buick** works in Brussels and is a member of the Comité Belge pour l'Investigation Scientifique des Phénomènes réputés Paranormaux.

## Skeptics in the Pub

Skeptics in the Pub meet on the 3rd Thursday of every month (except May/June, when it will be 3rd Wednesday), at the Florence Nightingale Pub, Westminster Bridge Road.

Guests for May/June TBA – but note that meetings will be on the third **Wednesday** for those two months only.

Skeptics in the Pub meetings begin at 7:30pm. The venue is upstairs in the Florence Nightingale pub, 99 Westminster Bridge Road, London, SE1 (junction with York Road, on the roundabout, near Waterloo station). The talk will be followed by informal discussion in a relaxed and friendly pub atmosphere. Guest ales and food available. Non-skeptics are welcome and you can turn up at any time during the night. Further information and mailing list announcements available from [pub@skeptics.org.uk](mailto:pub@skeptics.org.uk) or Robert Newman at 0(208) 686 6800.

## Help us produce *The Skeptic*

The Skeptic is seeking help from someone with experience in using desktop publishing software, Adobe PageMaker or Quark Express to help with the production of the magazine. We cannot offer any payment for this assistance (i.e. you would receive the same salary as the editors!) but you would have the privilege(?) of being involved in the production of Britain's only skeptical magazine.

Please call (07020) 935370 10am to 9pm or email [edit@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:edit@skeptic.org.uk) if you think you can help.

# Awkward Questions

*Harold Hillman argues that we should be asking more questions and getting better answers*

**P**OLITICIANS, CLERICS AND ACADEMICS all claim to search for the truth, however they define it. Questions are the engines of truth. An awkward question may be defined as one which would reveal information that the person questioned regards as private, or that shows up contradictions or hypocrisy in the views or practices of the person questioned, or his or her allies. Since knowledge accords power, the questioner is trying to wrest some power from the person questioned, and, will perhaps use it to the detriment of the latter.

In Parliament, ministers and shadow ministers use the following tactics to avoid answering awkward questions honestly. They may absent themselves. They may ignore the questions, or answer different ones. They may denigrate the questioner, for example by accusing her or him of being hypocritical. They may give a misleading or partial answer, or they may simply lie. The same tactics are used in radio, television and press interviews by powerful people such as industrialists, speculators, advertisers, lobbyists and others.

In the past, clerics and theologians often used barbaric methods to discourage awkward questions, because questioning itself was considered to be sinful. Nowadays, they are much more tolerant. They assert sometimes that part of the belief in a religion is the acceptance by lay people that they are knowledgeable enough to understand the mysteries or apparent paradoxes of the religion. They may feel and state that the personal revelations to them of faith are much more powerful than any arguments about it. They often discourage awkward questions by pointing out the many past and present millions of co-religionists, who have never expressed doubts. They sometimes say that it is impossible to answer difficult questions before one has accepted the basic tenets of the religion. They sometimes deny the validity of parts of the scriptures or fundamental beliefs, which the hierarchies of their religions regard as crucial.

Academics also know how to deal with awkward questions. Sometimes they answer direct questions equivocally, in the knowledge that students are often too intimidated to press for comprehensible answers. They may refer students to textbooks or references, some of which have not addressed the questions. They may ridicule the questioners. They may quote references incorrectly, occasionally intentionally. They often do not answer letters. They avoid examining 'controversial' questions in reviews. They prevent questioning speakers from presenting their views at national and international meetings of learned societies. They discourage alternative views, or awkward questions from being put in the media. They recommend anonymously that grant-



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giving bodies not support, and editors not publish, the work of those who question the current consensus. They even make personal remarks about such people in confidential conversations and private correspondence.

Of course, in most democratic countries there are mechanisms in place to encourage people in authority to answer questions fully, frankly and honestly. Editorials of newspapers draw attention to the questions which ministers have not answered in Parliament. A small proportion of zealous citizens write optimistically to their Members of Parliament asking them to table awkward questions. A thinking believer occasionally accosts the vicar outside church. An academic who has a challenging manuscript rejected for publication can sometimes persuade the editor that the referee was unjust and the manuscript should be reconsidered. In democratic countries authorities sometimes answer awkward questions, because the systems of power and information are not monolithic nor do they constitute conspiracies. The proposed Freedom of Information Act in this country, like its counterpart in the U.S.A., is a step in the right direction.

However, it is rare that an answer to even the most awkward question induces an establishment to change its policies or views. This is because most systems have in-built mechanisms to discourage people from exposing

them to the public. For example, a Member of Parliament who presses a minister of his own government to answer an awkward question is likely to be noted by the whips to the detriment of his or her future advancement up the ladder. A theologian who publicly expresses doubts about the Virgin Birth is unlikely to be offered a bishopric. A zoologist who criticises the concept of evolution is unlikely to be appointed to a biological research committee. A cytologist who says that the endoplasmic reticulum is an artefact is unlikely to be offered a chair.

Although it cannot be proved, it seems to me that casuistry is increasing in politics, religion and academia. The public is becoming increasingly cynical about the power of government and of the media. It seems to accept that the evasion of awkward questions is a time-honoured and acceptable way of keeping power, and that it can do little about this. Yet leaders talk of a society which wants to be open, which is transparently accountable, which deplores corruption, and which prizes intellectual honesty. I would like to propose a number of practical measures which might encourage more answers to awkward questions, despite the evident problems with them.

Parliamentary procedures should be changed so that one of the important functions of the Speaker would be to ensure that ministers and shadow ministers should always answer questions fully, or give substantial reasons – as judged by the Speaker – for not doing so. This would imply that whips would not be able to forbid members to ask questions. Ministers and their shadows would have to be present when the work of their departments was being discussed; they would not be allowed to side-step questions, or make personal or derogatory remarks about the questioners. Most Members of Parliament would attend most sessions, and listen to the debates. These measures would require substantial changes in the culture of the House of Commons.

It is difficult to know what can be done about awkward questions in religion, where there are two very difficult considerations. Firstly, the authority of most religions is derived from their scriptures, which are by their nature immutable. The second problem is shared with virtually all walks of public life: the value of a belief is based not merely on evidence, but also on the individual authority of its proponents. In most cases, the questioner has less status than the person being questioned. It is also difficult to see how questioning may be encouraged in those fundamentalist political systems and religions in which questioning itself is seen as a sign of heresy. One can only welcome recent trends in more progressive religions to indulge in dialogue with each other and with the secular world. This should improve the atmosphere, in which they become more ready to address awkward questions.

Many academics would also have to change their attitudes. They would have consciously to generate an atmosphere of intellectual honesty. This would require, first, that they would accept a duty to answer all questions on subjects in which they have published papers, upon which they have given advice to public bodies, which they have quoted in support of their published views, and about which they teach students or broadcast; second, they would have to be prepared to admit and to try to resolve all apparent anomalies and contradictions in the views they espouse; third, they



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should be prepared to justify in detail and sign all references for applications for grants and submissions of manuscripts for publications, fourth, they should actively encourage research whose results may not support their own hypotheses; fifth, they should not react in a personal or emotive way to scientific or academic differences of opinion.

I would suggest that applicants for grants be allowed to appear before research committees to answer and ask questions; the committees should be required to give precise reasons for turning down applications.

Internet, Usenet and other databases should be used to put awkward questions to experts in a field of research, and there is no reason why those questioned should not be named. It is neither improper nor defamatory to tell one's colleagues the names of those who refuse to answer proper questions. Recently, I had the experience of putting on to a database 60 questions in cytobiology and neurobiology which had not been asked or answered in the literature. Unfortunately, several of the answers were rude or personal, or their authors thought that I had not read the literature. Nearly all those who contacted me were very junior; none of the senior scientists whose views might have been thrown into doubt by my questions responded. Subsequently, I answered systematically all the points they made, many of which I had already dealt with in my publications over the years.

Regrettably, nowadays, there is such a plethora of information available on databases that it is quite likely that the questions never reach the persons who should answer them. So one uses the old-fashioned letter or the modern email, but neither will induce a person to reply, if they do not wish to do so.

In my view, the public – including academics – have been far too tolerant of those in power failing to answer important but proper questions. Among the factors encouraging this trend are competition for jobs, working in research groups, the expense of research, and the availability of so much data.

I believe that the public should not regard any proper question as awkward because discouraging it slows down progress. This article deals mainly with politics, religion and academia, but it is likely that the same phenomena also occur in law, economics, industry, advertising and other loci of power.

**Harold Hillman** is the Director of the Unity Laboratory of Applied Neurobiology, and Chairman of 'Freedom to Care.'

# Skeptical Stats

1. Estimated percentage of the effectiveness of standard antidepressants that may in fact be caused by the placebo effect: **up to 75**.
2. Chance that the newly discovered asteroid will hit the Earth in 2022: **1 in 1 million**.
3. Conclusion of CNBC newscaster, based on the above: **We'll all be safe**.
4. Estimated number of bugs in Windows 2000 at launch: **60,000**.
5. Estimated ratio of bugs to lines of code: **1 to 500**.
6. Estimated number of people in Britain who have tried St. Johns Wort: **2 million**.
7. Amount paid to Psychic Services Network worker Mark Sanders by ABC News after he claimed that a secretly made videotape shown on *Prime Time Live* ruined his reputation: **\$933,992**.
8. Number of attacks in October 1999 in Greyfriars Kirkyard for which ghost experts believe the spirit of 17th century nobleman Lord Advocate Sir George Mackenzie was responsible: **6**.
9. Percentage of home buyers who will pay for a full structural survey: **5**.
10. Percentage of home buyers who will pay for *any* survey: **20**.
11. Cost of a Feng Shui survey of your prospective new home: **£400**.
12. Size of the new New York Hayden Planetarium: **36000 sq ft**.
13. Number of guns possessed by average American gun-owner: **3**.
14. Amount CBS is paying Rome's Atlantic Star hotel to use its rooftop view of St Peter's when the Pope dies: **\$180,000**.
15. Number of wild plant species harboured by Buckingham Palace gardens: **325**.
16. Size of the gardens: **40 acres**.
17. Amount the Duke of York (aka Prince Andrew) pays for sessions with bioenergy practitioner Seka Nikolic: **£60**.
18. Number of members of the Gnostic Church's Stella Maris cult reported missing in the run-up to 1/1/2000 (the cult believed an alien spacecraft was to save them from the end of the world on 12/31/99): **about 200**.
19. Percentage of Americans who have experienced one or more divorces: **25**.
20. Percentage of born-again Christian Americans who have: **27**.
21. Frequency of going to the bathroom to which 63-year-old Wiley Brooks, who claims to have been a Breatharian for over 30 years, will admit: **once every few months**.
22. Cost of book on how drinking your own urine will cure all ills: **\$7**.
23. Number of small, Hubble-like telescopes astronomers want to link together in space to search for Earthlike planets in other solar systems: **6**.
24. Length of time some circumcised American men believe it will take to regrow their foreskins by "tugging": **a few years**.
25. Number of "tuggers" thought to exist in the US: **18,000**.

**Sources:** 1 *Science* 1999, 284:238–240; 2, 3 *CNBC*, 2/4/00; 4, 5 *PC Magazine* (US); 6 *The Independent* (2/15/00); 7 *Associated Press* (2/16/00); 8 *Edinburgh Evening News* (11/6/99); 9, 10, 11 *The Times* (1/22/00); 12 *CNBC*; 13 *Discover* (5/96); 14 *Harper's* (9/98); 15, 16 *Independent* (12/9/99); 17 *Sunday Telegraph* (7/11/99); 18 *Sunday Telegraph* (7/11/99); 19, 20 *Barna Research Group* (quoted in *Skeptic* (US)); 21, 22 <http://www.breatharian.com>; 23 [http://ast.star.rl.ac.uk/darwin/brief\\_summary.html](http://ast.star.rl.ac.uk/darwin/brief_summary.html); 24, 25 <http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/1999/12/17/tuggers/index.html>.

Skeptical Stats compiled by **Wendy Grossman** and **Rachel Carthy**. 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.

# The London Cat Flap

## *Paul Chambers on the trail of the phantom cat-rippers*

**T**HE SATANIC RITUAL ABUSE SCARES that rippled through America, Europe and Australia during the 1980s and 1990s have been a favourite topic for debunking by skeptics. It is, however, not just humans that have been deemed to be the victims of the Satanists that are imagined to hide within our suburban communities – they are also after our pets.

Like human Satanic Ritual Abuse scares, the fear that there are devil-worshippers who are kidnapping and murdering domestic pets surfaces every few years, mostly in suburban settings. After several years of inactivity in Britain, a series of these animal mutilations recently gripped the capital city.

During September 1998 London branches of the RSPCA became aware of a sudden and alarming increase in reports of decapitated and mutilated family pets, most notably cats. By November it had nearly forty murdered cats, plus several other types of small pet, from over thirty-five London boroughs. It looked as though the capital had gained itself a serial cat-ripper. Despite attempts to suppress the story, the press got wind of it and by the end of November the tabloid headlines were linking the deaths to Satanic rituals, teenage gangs or a human serial killer in training. Aside from the screaming headlines, local MPs also became involved, a firm offered a £1,000 reward and the regional BBC television news even covered the story.

Faced with this publicity, the RSPCA initiated Operation Obelisk whose sole purpose was to examine the circumstances of these suspicious deaths. This was no small task, for by Christmas the number of mutilated cats alone had reached over one hundred. Operation Obelisk began to look at the evidence that they had before them.

Most of the dead cats (and occasionally rabbits) had been decapitated with the bodies left in or near their owners' property. Often, limbs or vital organs had been severed or removed. One cat was even found skinned and staked out in the owner's garden next to a wooden arrow which pointed toward the house. There seemed to be strong evidence in favour of a cat-ripper stalking the capital's suburbs. However, Operation Obelisk disagreed.

In late February 1999 the RSPCA wound up its investigation and released a statement stating that nearly all the cats it had examined had died of natural causes. Instead of precision cutting with surgical instruments, detailed forensic examination of the cats' bodies revealed tell tail signs of teeth marks on the wounds. Operation Obelisk concluded that the cats had been killed by cars or foxes and then mutilated by scavenging animals. In only a minority of unconnected cases was human involvement suspected. This conclusion did not go down well.

By the time Operation Obelisk had been terminated there was already a considerable band of people who

were conducting their own investigations into the cat-rippings. Christian groups were convinced that there was a Satanic dimension to the deaths and that church-goers were being targeted. Amateur pet-detectives saw the hand of a serial killer at work while, inevitably, a local UFOlogist suspected extraterrestrial involvement. Pet owners, too, were skeptical, and in some cases angry, with the RSPCA and continued to follow the RSPCA's initial advice, offered in November 1998, of keeping their pets indoors. By the summer, progress had reached a stalemate with few new incidents being reported and the authorities refusing to re-open the investigation.

The London cat mutilations follow closely behind a similar series of incidents in the USA. Here too the authorities have been split on the cause of death, sometimes favouring a cat-ripper (for example, in Allen, Texas, last year) and sometimes more natural causes such as cars and wild animals.

Although Satanists and aliens are popular culprits, cat killing is seen by many criminologists as the surface symptom of a far deeper mental psychosis with more than one serial killer having started their career by torturing family pets. There could, however, be an even more bizarre explanation. The *Daily Telegraph* recently reported that stray animals could be used to provide transplant organs for sick domestic pets. This could add a twist to the ever popular organ-snatching myth in which people are drugged and have their organs stolen so that they can be sold to wealthy foreigners.

Could there be a maniac, in the pay of wealthy pet owners, stalking the streets of London in search of cats from which to harvest healthy organs?

### Sources

RSPCA personal communication plus press release, 26/11/98; *Daily Mirror*, 24/11/98; *The Daily Telegraph*, 19/4/99; *The Sunday Telegraph*, 13/12/98; *The Independent on Sunday*, 1/8/99; *The Allen American* (Texas), 8/8/98; *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 25/7/98.

**Paul Chambers** is author of the book *Life on Mars*, and has written about the Face on Mars for *The Skeptic* (issue 12.3/4).



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# Dissociative Identity Disorder

*Can people really have multiple personalities? Goldsmith College student Anna Stone investigates in this prize-winning essay*

**P**ATIENTS WITH Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) behave as if they possess two or more distinct identities, each with its own name, personality, and unique set of memories and experiences (Spanos, 1996).

Many but not all of the identities may display amnesia for each other's experiences and unawareness of each other's existence. The number of patients diagnosed with DID has grown rapidly since 1980, when the disorder was first included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), and now numbers many thousands, most of these in the USA (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Kirsch, Chaves, Sarbin, Ganaway & Powell 1999).

The question of whether DID is a legitimate psychiatric disorder could be considered to depend on the degree to which sufferers fulfil the seven major criteria required for the diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder. If it could be concluded that DID sufferers do not meet these criteria to a sufficient extent then it would be difficult to argue that DID is a legitimate psychiatric disorder, and it would be easier to define DID as a social construct. Therefore the seven criteria will be considered in the light of arguments and evidence from proponents of the two major models of DID: the sociocognitive model (SCM) and the post-traumatic model (PTM). A further argument against DID as a legitimate psychiatric disorder stems from the rapid increase in the number of diagnoses in recent years coinciding with widespread public attention to the disorder. The explanations for this phenomenon offered by the two models will be evaluated.

Three of the diagnostic criteria for a psychiatric disorder are *observer discomfort*, the *violation of moral or ideal standards*, and *vividness and unconventionality*. While DID may cause observer discomfort and violate moral or ideal standards for some, this would appear to be a personal reaction of the observer and not universally shared. As Spanos (1994) points out in some detail, many cultures have recognised forms of multiple identity enactment including demonic and shamanistic possession and individuals experiencing these phenomena have been highly respected.

An analogy could be drawn with transvestism, in which individuals also display distinct identities, each with its own name, behaviour, and style of dress. However transvestism is not in itself a psychiatric disorder but is normally considered to be a life-style choice. While it is clear that DID, like transvestism, involves vivid and unconventional behaviour, it is less clear that the vividness and unconventionality is a serious liability for the sufferer or for society.

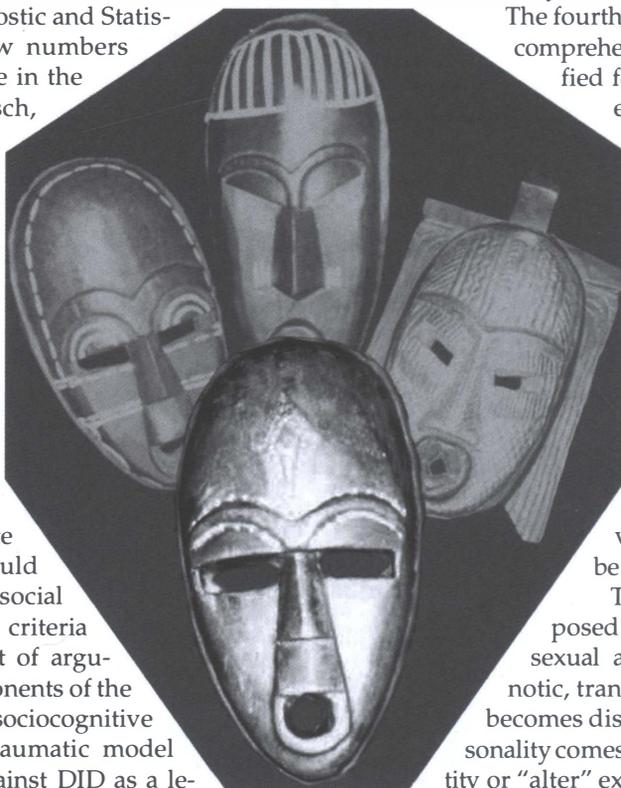
The fourth criterion, irrationality and incomprehensibility, appears to be satisfied for those patients who experience amnesia for substantial time periods and who later discover that they have performed compromising actions during these times.

The fifth criterion is unpredictability and loss of control and this begs the question of whether the enactment of multiple identities is indeed beyond the control of the individual with DID. The SCM and the PTM take very different views on this issue, which will be explored in some detail.

The PTM holds that in predisposed children, trauma including sexual abuse produces a quasi-hypnotic, trance-like state in which identity becomes dissociated and an alternate personality comes into being. The alternate identity or "alter" experiences and remembers the

trauma but the memories of the alter are separated from normal consciousness and from the main personality by hypnotic-like amnesia. If this technique is successful in protecting the main personality from the effects of trauma and abuse then the child will be more inclined to use it again and therefore develop further alters. Seen in this light DID is an unconscious survival strategy – as Ross so eloquently phrased it, "DID is a little girl imagining the abuse is happening to someone else" (1997, quoted in Mair, 1999). In summary, the PTM posits that the development of DID and hence the enactment of multiple identities is beyond the control of the individual: it is something that happens to them rather than an intentional strategy.

The SCM takes a highly contrasting view of the etiology of DID. Supporters of this model hold that DID



is socially constructed and is a "context-bounded, goal-directed, social behaviour geared to the expectations of significant others..." (Spanos, 1994, abstract). Spanos (1994) cites evidence from many cultures that multiple identity enactment, which according to DSM-IV is the key feature of DID, takes on many different forms according to the expectations of a particular culture. The SCM proposes that individuals use information from the media, support groups, clinicians and from significant others to (a) view themselves as possessing multiple personalities, (b) present themselves in this light, and (c) interpret and enhance their personal history to fit their understanding of the symptoms and origins of DID. This latter point could well contribute to the recent increase in reports of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse given the widespread cultural belief that this is a primary factor in the etiology of DID.

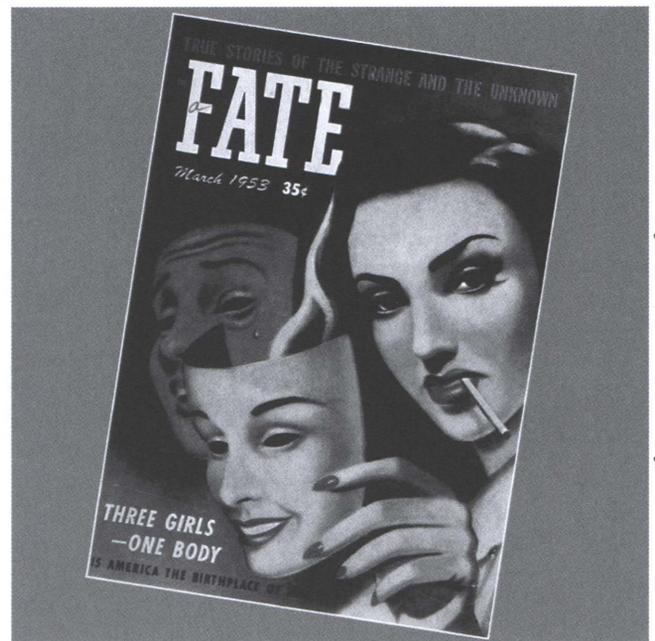
It is clear that according to the SCM the development of DID and the enactment of multiple personalities, as goal-directed social behaviour, must be regarded as being under the control of the patient. However it is not supposed that the patient is always acting with full conscious awareness and so it could be said that the criterion of loss of control is satisfied.

The last two criteria required for diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder are the degree of patient suffering and the maladaptiveness of their behaviours, and here also proponents of the PTM and the SCM are in disagreement.

It is interesting to consider the ways in which a seemingly maladaptive behaviour can in fact be adaptive for the individual if it fulfils some social need. Spanos (1994) noted that DID is the subject of much media publicity, more so in his opinion than most other psychiatric disorders, and proposed that DID patients are motivated by a desire to receive social attention. In addition there are self-help groups in the USA that provide a sense of identity and social acceptance for their members. This could be a rewarding experience for an individual with a weak social network and a tendency to depend on others for approval and acceptance. It should be noted that Spanos did not accuse patients of deliberately faking symptoms: rather, he suggested that they are generally unaware of their motives and sincerely believe themselves to have multiple identities.

Gleaves (1996) countered this argument by citing research findings showing that the incidence of Histrionic Personality Disorder is not higher among DID patients than other clinical or community samples, and that DID is associated more strongly with Avoidant Personality Disorder. In his view this makes it unlikely that a DID patient is seeking attention. However, as Lilienfeld et al (1999) point out, Gleaves' argument equates attention seeking with Histrionic Personality Disorder whereas in fact it comprises only one facet. Avoidant Personality Disorder is characterised by the desire for acceptance and the dependency on others for approval and so is perfectly consistent with the SCM explanation of the motivation of DID patients. In this sense multiple identity enactment can paradoxically be seen as adaptive behaviour.

Regarding patient suffering, proponents of both models are in agreement that DID patients are generally disturbed and unhappy with their condition. Gleaves (1996) claims this as evidence that DID is an unwelcome psychiatric disorder and therefore unlikely to be self-generated.



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However, as Lilienfeld et al (1999) point out, a subjectively distressing condition might be reinforcing to a patient with a weak social support system who is overly dependent on a therapist for acceptance and approval, and that many therapists treat suspected DID patients with sympathy and respect.

To summarise so far, it appears that DID meets the criteria of irrationality and incomprehensibility and loss of control and may meet the criterion of patient suffering and so may be deemed to qualify as a legitimate psychiatric disorder.

Turning to the issue of the huge increase in the number of DID cases diagnosed in the last two decades, the two models propose alternative explanations for this phenomenon. Proponents of the PTM (Gleaves, 1996) point out that DID was first included in the DSM-III in 1980 (as Multiple Personality Disorder, MPD) and that the resulting increase in clinician awareness of the disorder explains the increase in diagnoses. Supporters of the SCM on the other hand (Spanos 1994; Lilienfeld et al 1999) suggest that clinicians and therapists are implicated in the etiology of many cases of DID. They claim that clinicians encourage patients to view themselves as possessing multiple personalities, provide information and cues to enable patients to present themselves appropriately, and recognise and legitimate the resulting alters by speaking to them directly. This process is facilitated by the trust and confidence placed in the therapist by the patient. In this view iatrogenesis accounts for the increase in DID diagnoses. Gleaves (1996) disagrees that therapists are implicated in the development of DID and argues instead that therapists are encouraged to treat alters as self-generated and not as real personalities. He argues that the recommendation of therapy is to speak to alters in order to understand all aspects of the patient, not as if they are separate identities, and to aim for integration of the whole personality. However, as Lilienfeld et al (1999) point out, the treatment literature does encourage therapists to treat alters as independent entities via use of such techniques as the "boardroom meeting" and the "bulletin board".

Further, according to the SCM, the signs of multiple identity enactment are very distinctive (a patient who

calls themselves by a different name and displays a contrasting personality on different visits) and so are hardly likely to have escaped the attention of clinicians before 1980. Gleaves (1996) counters this argument by noting that sufferers are accustomed to meeting hostility and so are skilled in hiding their alters. (One wonders how this can be the case if the main personality is amnesic for the existence of the alters.)

The issue of whether the rise in the number of DID cases is due to iatrogenesis or to improved diagnostic skills can only be resolved by empirical data on the actual prevalence of DID in the population and as yet there are no convincing data.

To support the argument for iatrogenesis Lilienfeld et al (1999) note that the number of alters per case has increased dramatically over the last two decades, although the number of alters present at diagnosis has remained constant, and that the number of alters tends to increase over the course of therapy. Supporters of the PTM argue that the similarity in the number of alters on first presentation undermines the SCM, which predicts that individuals will use available cultural information to conform to the public image of DID and therefore should be presenting with more alters. Supporters of the PTM also argue that the increase in the number of alters during treatment is due to the skill of a therapist in uncovering the alters. In addition, Gleaves (1996) notes that alters can be latent and only brought into the open during treatment – which makes the PTM non-falsifiable. This is a dangerous argument as it justifies the therapist in acting in such leading and suggestive ways as to run the risk of encouraging the patient to unconsciously but actively cooperate in the creation, as well as the identification, of alters. In the absence of empirical data on the actual number of alters pre-therapy in DID sufferers, this argument cannot be easily resolved.

Spanos (1994) and Lilienfeld et al (1999) note that the majority of DID diagnoses stem from a minority of therapists and hold this to be further evidence for iatrogenesis of DID. However, this argument is not entirely convincing, since it is not known to what extent selective referral operates – if suspected DID cases are more likely to be referred to the minority of therapists specialising in diagnosis and treatment of this condition then this is an equally plausible explanation. Data on the practice of selective referrals could shed light on this issue.

Supporters of the SCM express concern about the use of hypnosis and leading questions to uncover alters. Spanos (1996) notes that patients with DID often have high hypnotisability scores and that this renders them both more perceptive of, and likely to comply with, the perceived interpersonal demands of the situation. Thus leading questions from a therapist are likely to invoke an attempt by the patient to comply with the perceived demand characteristics and supply the therapist with the required response. The patient may be quite unaware of their active role in complying with the demand characteristics and believe that the alters discovered as a result of this process are genuine. To counter this argument, Gleaves (1996) notes that the high hypnotisability scores of DID patients are the factor that enables these people to first dissociate in childhood. In addition, he notes that hypnosis is used in less than half of all DID cases, and cites a study by Ross & Norton (1989)

showing that there was no difference between those patients who received hypnosis and those who did not in symptoms, number of alters, and past history. In return Lilienfeld et al (1999) maintain that hypnosis is not essential to produce compliance from a suggestible client.

Further, the Ross & Norton (1989) study included only patients diagnosed with DID and therefore may have been subject to ceiling effects. Direct data on the emergence of alters and other symptoms of DID from therapists who do and do not use hypnosis, and who use more or less suggestive and leading questioning techniques, could resolve this issue.

The debate between the supporters of the two models is partly fuelled by the existence of a number of features that render the issues particularly difficult to resolve. Direct experimentation is impossible for ethical reasons, and prospective evidence of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) followed by clear development of DID would be the ideal but is inevitably expensive and time-consuming to collect. In addition, CSA is often impossible to corroborate in retrospect, and both CSA and sociocognitive cues are difficult to define operationally.

In summary, it appears that there are strong arguments on both sides which cannot be fully resolved without empirical data on the childhood onset and the pre-treatment prevalence and characteristics of DID in the population. There are good grounds for concern that therapy may lead to the genesis of DID in some patients and to the creation of alters and so there is an immediate need to apply stringent standards to the practices employed by DID therapists. For the moment it appears that the case for DID as a social construct has not been established beyond reasonable doubt and so it should remain as a psychiatric disorder to facilitate treatment for individuals who are clearly suffering, as long as it is recognised that the root of their problems may not be genuine DID.

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# Have You Considered a Career in Pseudoscience?

*David Fisher considers alternative careers for underfunded scientists*

**T**HE THOUGHT of a pseudoscience career was prompted by an impressive envelope I received in early 1999 [1].

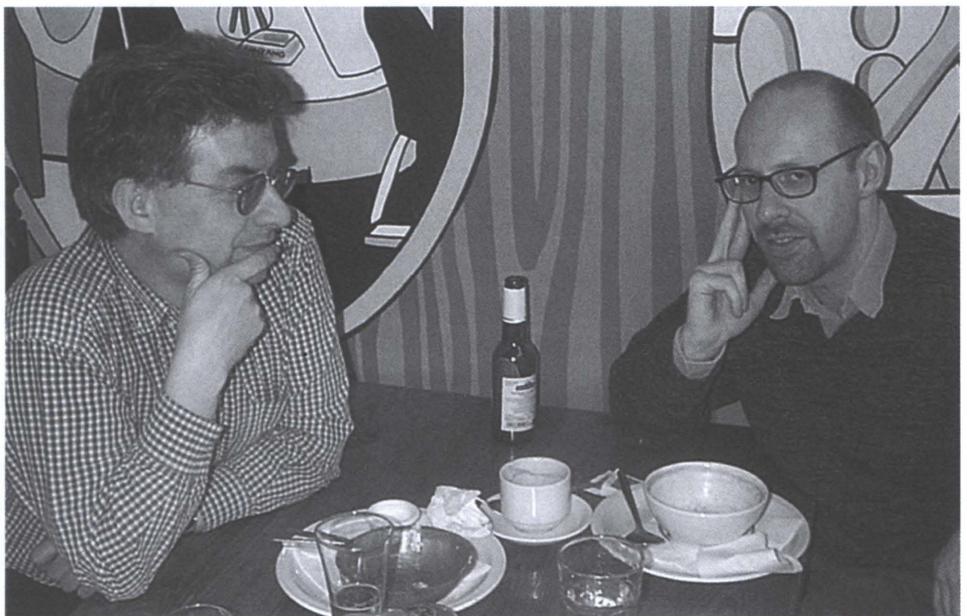
It bore the cachet of the US Department of State (fine for improper use: \$300), and had been posted to me by an American embassy. It contained details of a forthcoming "First International Conference on Free Energy," to be hosted by the said State Department. But this was not free energy of the Gibbs or Helmholtz variety, it was instead that-which-dare-not-speak-its-(real)-name: perpetual motion. Moreover, the covering letter was signed by the inventor of a putative mechanical "reactionless drive" – or anti-gravity machine, as many would term it.

Anyway, it occurred to me that if such ideas were now receiving governmental support (even the CIA's "psychic spies" did not get their own public conference), perhaps younger physics students at least should be guided in that direction. After all, everyone says that things are looking bad for physics, and even after trying immensely hard to satisfy the exacting standards of examiners, students can still look forward only to poor pay and prospects. But suppose one took to the Dark Side, would it be so bad? After all, the popular hands-on science exhibitions are busy softening up a world of "open-minded" consumers, what with the Exploratory shop in Bristol selling dowsing rods and "channelling crystals," and Technquest in Cardiff explaining why ships sink in the Bermuda Triangle and using its planetarium to point out astrological features.

For the moment at least, the community one joined would be relatively small and one would immediately benefit from being a "big fish in a small pool". One would no longer have to impress peers, but only laymen and journalists. Simply attract the attention of a typically unscrupulous "science journalist" and one is soon into "silly money". I understand that some "gravity-shielding" experiments, which were once termed "risible" even by *Fortean Times*, are now being backed by NASA to the tune of \$500,000.

At last one can have one's say: rather than one's only likely contact with the media being a garbled and misrepresented sound-bite during a college open-day, one can now look forward (depending upon what one claims) to a TV documentary profile, one's own episode of *Equinox*, and a lengthy interview in the Sunday broadsheets. Then there is the patent (because, contrary to popular belief, patent offices regularly accept physically impossible machines), the over-hyped book, and perhaps the film contract. After all, when the producers were looking for a scientific "McGuffin" upon which to hang *The Saint* movie, they did not approach Joint European Torus workers. Oh no, they called upon the services of cold-fusion mavericks. Free energy wins again!

Apart from greater media interest and better personal career prospects, little else will change. Those with tenure need not even give up their day job. Provided that you lard your papers with the usual "code-phrases" which signal wild speculation, you can continue to publish in the leading physics journals. Of course, the claims which you now make for these papers in the wider world will not be acceptable among decent scientists. But even if you just cannot hide your views on ESP, dowsing, alchemy, faces-on-Mars, and so on under a bushel of speculative double-talk, there is an increasing market for journals which take the concept of "peer review" to its logical limits.



*Skeptics Chris French and Richard Wiseman discussing career moves from academic psychology into astrology and homeopathy respectively.*

There is the now almost venerable *Speculations in Science and Technology*, the up-and-coming *Journal of the Society for Scientific Exploration*, and the glossy trade-journal for free-energy folk, *Infinite Energy*, to name but three where a rejection slip is hard to come by. One can also still go to conferences, and even meet film stars. The attendees at a 1994 US free-energy conference posed for photographs with Jim Carrey while he was filming nearby. The film was in fact *Dumb and Dumber*, but there was no hint of irony. Indeed, remember the actor Dennis Weaver, who played the "horse-sense" detective, Sam McCloud? He presented a paper at the conference himself.

One does not even have to restrict oneself to the "fringe". The Intersociety Energy Conversion Engineering Conferences are organised by the seven leading US engineering societies but have no qualms about inviting perpetual motionists and alchemists into their fold. But it is rather strange to see, for instance, a paper about a periodic table, full of imaginary elements and concocted by a mystic, published (in all seriousness) by the Society of Automobile Engineers.

There is every likelihood that one will walk the corridors of power. Stanley Meyer and his "car that runs on water" were featured by BBC TV during a "science week" some years ago. That is always an accolade for the pseudoscience careerist and, sure enough (following further exposure on Channel 4's *Equinox*), Stanley was soon invited to speak to a "special-interest" group at the House of Lords. Unfortunately, he was indicted for fraud before that occurred (the downside of your new profession).

During the very bitter miners' strike of 1984, Sir Ian MacGregor was closing pits but was also a director of a shadowy private "research institute" whose typical activities have included backing cars that run on water (again), and anti-gravity drives. And speaking of crackpot gyroscopic devices, they certainly propelled Eric Laithwaite into the limelight of the BBC *Heretics* series.

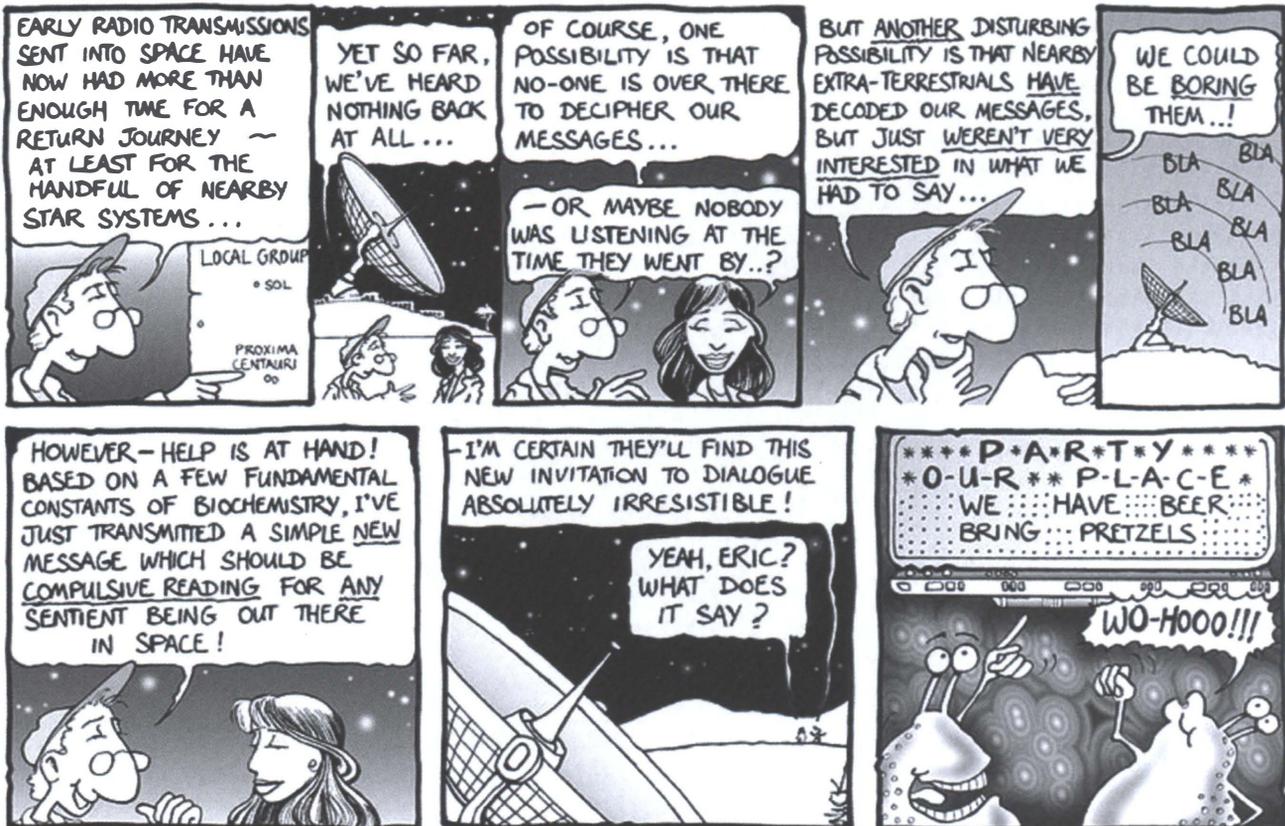
But what of posterity? One may attract media attention in the short term, but surely one will be passed over with disdain by scientific biographers. Not necessarily. Pons and Fleischman, of cold-fusion infamy, have both found places in the *Biographical Encyclopedia of Scientists* while Professor Sir Michael Berry, one of the most innovative mathematical physicists of recent times has not, even though his workplace almost looms over the publisher's offices; a constant reproach. And who is that publisher? Why, it is the Institute of Physics [2]. Which is why I am sure that it will applaud the present thought.

Notes

1. This piece was originally submitted to *Physics World's* Lateral Thoughts column. It was rejected on the grounds that it was "not relevant". The fiasco shortly became "public" knowledge when *Science* pointed out these same US DOS activities.
2. *Physics World* is published by the IOP!

Dr David Fisher is an editor of *Defect and Diffusion Forum*, and one-time Hon. Sec. of the UK Skeptics, in which latter capacity he became fed up with being accused of 'Rottweiler skepticism'.

LAB INITIO BY NICK D. KIM



# Statistical Folly and Prayer

*Dene Bebbington reports on a study which purports to show that the effects of praying have a statistical significance*

**T**HERE IS AN OLD SCEPTICAL SAYING that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence. In 1982/83 a study was carried out which purportedly demonstrates that the Judaeo-Christian God intercedes in human welfare in response to prayer. Eventually, the study was published in a medical journal [1] and news of this study got around so that it has been cited as evidence for prayer's being efficacious.

I will take a look at this study and show that its conclusion doesn't stand scrutiny since the study has flaws which render it worthless except as an example of how problematic it is to attempt measurement of such things as the effect of prayer. The statistical techniques are not examined: besides the fact that this writer does not have the appropriate knowledge, the relevant issue is the study's design.

## The Study

The aim of the study was to determine whether prayer to the Judaeo-Christian God had an effect on the medical condition of patients admitted to a hospital coronary care unit. The sample population was a total of 393 patients, with the prayed-for group being comprised of 192 of these, and the remaining 201 being the control group. Patients were randomly allocated to these groups, and a double-blind protocol was followed.

A list of 30 diagnoses was created and used in a table showing the status of both groups on entry to the study. Other variables in the entry status list are:

	<i>Prayed-for Group</i>	<i>Control Group</i>
Age (mean)	58.2	60.1
No. of females	65	63
No. of males	127	138

A list of 26 new problems, diagnoses, and therapeutic effects after entry was created and used in a table showing the status of both groups after entry to the study. Other variables in the outcome list are:

	<i>Prayed-for Group</i>	<i>Control Group</i>
Days in CCU after entry	2.0	2.4
Days in hospital after entry	7.6	7.6
No. of discharge medications	3.7	4.0

A scoring system was developed to measure patient outcomes which were graded into good, intermediate and bad. The resulting scores were:

	<i>Prayed-for Group</i>	<i>Control Group</i>
Good	163	147
Intermediate	2	10
Bad	27	44

The intercessors were "born again" Christians from both Protestant and Catholic churches. Each patient in the prayer group was allocated a group of between three and seven of these intercessors to pray for them.

## Methodological Flaws

A salient flaw in this study, which the author (Randolph Byrd) acknowledges, is that it was not possible to account for patients in the control group who were prayed for by people not involved with the study – for example, friends and relatives. The purpose of a control group is to provide a comparison population not influenced by the intervention (prayer, in this case) in order to determine if the intervention can be reasonably associated with the measured outcomes. Having a control group whose independence from the intervention is unknown is itself enough to make it unreasonable to draw any conclusions from the study. This doesn't seem to bother Byrd, though; he states:

This [the control group's not being "pure"] may have resulted in smaller differences observed between the two groups. How God acted in this situation is unknown; i.e., were the group treated by God as a whole or were individual prayers alone answered?

I suppose this means that a serious methodological flaw is not going to get in the way of his beliefs and conclusions of God acting in response to prayers.

The people doing the praying were given the first names of the patients they were to pray for. Does this mean God is all-knowing enough about human affairs that he can intervene on the basis of knowing their first name? That seems to be assumed by Byrd, but making such assumptions then leads to other questions about God: Under what conditions does God respond to prayer? Why was it assumed that more than one person praying per patient was required? Does God intervene in human welfare without being solicited to do so? How substantive is God's intervention?

The purpose of listing these questions is to indicate that if one tries to measure something like God's actions then there are possibly several confounding factors which will muddy the waters even further. These factors cannot be controlled for, and it cannot even be known if they are factors or not.

The choice of entry status and outcome variables was not explained, and it is not clear if the qualitative relationships between these could have skewed the results. There is a slight bias on entry status for the control group being more "unhealthy"; also the control group has a higher average age and percentage of males. Of 26 outcome variables listed, only six show a statistically significant difference in favour of the prayed-for group. No analysis is presented to discuss whether this may be due to the nature of the conditions of the patients. Relying on a randomised allocation of patients to the two study groups is not necessarily enough to rule this out.

It would be useful to know on what basis the scoring system was derived, even though the prayed for group come out noticeably better (see above) it could be that the nature of the entry variables influenced this. It is not stated whether the scoring system was developed before the study commenced, if not, could it be that more than one scoring system was tried? Apparently the outcome criteria were decided by Byrd after the data had been collected, and when he was no longer subject to the double-blind protocol [2]. Such criteria should have been decided before the study commenced, not after.

A minor point about the statistics is that there are some inconsistencies in the rounding of percentages, and in one case different percentages are reported for the same absolute number. A transcription error could be the explanation, but such sloppiness doesn't enhance one's confidence.

### Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics

The people doing the praying were instructed to pray for "a rapid recovery and for prevention of complications and death, in addition to other areas of prayer they believed to be beneficial to the patient." However, the average number of days in hospital was the same for both groups and there was no statistical significance in the death rate. Does this mean God intervenes in some aspects but not others. How would we know?

In a statistical study intended to try to measure the effect of an intervention, it is of little relevance whether the statistical techniques used are appropriate if the methodology of the study is not sound. The most reasonable conclusion to draw from this study is the futility of

trying to use statistical techniques to measure the effects of a being whose very existence is far from established – to say the least!

### References

1. Byrd, R.C: "Positive Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population". *Southern Medical Journal* (1988) Vol 81, No. 7. Reprinted at <http://www.geocities.com/CapeCanaveral/Lab/6562/apologetics/smj1.html>.
2. Tessman, I & Tessman J: "Efficacy of Prayer". *Skeptical Inquirer* (March/April 2000) Vol 24, No. 2.

**Dene Bebbington** is a freelance software engineer. He wrote about Holocaust revisionism for issue 12.2.

### Competition results

All the *Skeptic* readers who responded to our Millennial competition were smart enough to notice that the photograph included, at the bottom, a person who could have thrown whatever object the UFO actually was.

In fact, this was a cropping error – the picture was meant to run with the person removed\*, and without the person the UFO effect is quite remarkable. Nonetheless, although everyone surmised, accurately, that the person threw the object, few guessed correctly what the object itself actually was. Neither a hat nor a frisbee, this particular UFO was in fact an aluminum foil pie plate. L J Clarke, of Uxbridge, came closest with "a tin plate". Close enough to win. Congratulations to L J Clarke.

\* It would have been helpful if someone had informed the picture editor of this!!  
 – Picture Editor



# Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly



## Worts and all . . .

**I**T STRUCK ME THE OTHER DAY what a damn tough job it is to be intelligently skeptical in the face of the vast amounts of information that we have to cope with in our daily lives — and particularly when it relates to our health, it may be very important to know which source of information to believe. As a physicist, there are some areas of pseudoscience and the paranormal on which I feel reasonably competent to pronounce judgement — astrology, homeopathy, perpetual motion machines and cold fusion are all examples of subjects where I feel that my profession probably stands me in good stead. In other areas, whilst having no special professional qualifications, in common with many readers of *The Skeptic*, I have been interested in this whole area of human folly for nearly 30 years, and have accumulated some knowledge along the way. But there are some topics — particularly anything touching on medical matters — where it is hard to see how even an intelligent, reasonably well-informed layman can separate the wheat from the chaff. Will St John's Wort really help cure the blues? Will vitamin E protect you against Alzheimer's disease (as a woman informed me on the train the other day) and will cranberry juice definitely reduce my chances of getting prostate cancer? My own procedure for attempting to shed light on such matters is, as so often the case nowadays, to turn to the Internet and conduct a search for the remedy of interest. The problem is then to ignore the dozens or even hundreds of sites belonging to commercial organizations or which otherwise have vested interests and to try and find the occasional impartial academic, medical or government web site that may report on clinical trials that testify to the efficacy (or otherwise) of the remedy in question.

For instance, when I applied this approach to St John's Wort (which my partner takes regularly) the contrast between the information on a commercial page ([www.WeightLossguide.com](http://www.WeightLossguide.com)) and that on the web site of the (US) National Institute of Mental Health ([www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)) was extreme. The former informed me that St John's Wort works as well as Prozac, that it will help me lose weight, that it will increase energy and alertness, thus providing treatment for irritability and mood swings — thereby giving benefit to sufferers of PMS, tension, fear and fatigue. It will apparently also help me get things done by reducing or eliminating the desire to procrastinate and it will reduce or eliminate depression by enhancing my sense of well-being. Finally "for many generations, St John's Wort has shown to be effective in the treatment of the following ailments without any side effects: fatigue, varicose [sic] veins, depression, irritability, dysentery, tension, neuralgia, sciatica,

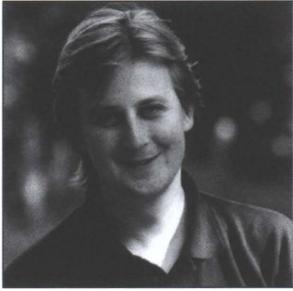
fibrosis, wounds and bruises, headache, SAD, hysteria, anxiety disorder, PMS, fibromyalgia, insomnia, tuberculosis, syphilis, worms, fear, alcoholism, whooping cough, colds, rheumatoid arthritis, hypercondria [sic], mania [and] mood swings" — presumably it works pretty well in the treatment of incredulity also.

The NIMH page, on the other hand, was much less enthusiastic, writing that: "An overview of 23 clinical studies in Europe, published in the *British Medical Journal* (Vol. 313, August 3, 1996), found that the herb might be useful in cases of mild to moderate depression. The studies, which included 1,757 outpatients, reported that St. John's wort was superior to placebo and appeared to produce fewer side effects than standard antidepressants." The page also contained a warning, dangerously absent from the WeightLossguide page: ". . . the combined use of St. John's wort and other drugs [. . .] could result in harmful effects. These may include oral contraceptives; medications to treat heart disease, depression, seizures, and certain cancers; and those to prevent organ transplant rejection".

I think that the specific topic of St John's wort serves as a very typical example of the vital importance of carefully filtering the information, on any topic, that is available on the web, in newspapers, in women's magazines or elsewhere. Of course, given that extremely dubious treatments such as homeopathy are available on the NHS, the mere association of qualified medical practitioners with a medical treatment does not itself testify to its efficacy. It is worth bearing in mind that medical practitioners are primarily clinicians rather than scientists — if a treatment works for a patient, even via the placebo effect, then this may be sufficient reason for a doctor to prescribe it and even to recommend it. The practitioner's job is to heal, not to establish universal scientific truths. I would suggest that anyone seeking medical or pharmaceutical information on the web should firstly try to find the sites that do not have too much vested interest in the treatment under investigation, as discussed above, and then look for indications that peer-reviewed clinical trials have been conducted and published in journals such as the *British Medical Journal*, *The Lancet* or the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

This just seems like common sense to me but I wonder to what extent the man and woman in the street (without the critical habits of readers of *The Skeptic*) take this skeptical approach to medical and other information available on the Internet and elsewhere.

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



# Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

## *Fudge fairies – fact or fiction?*

**H**ERE'S SOME elementary logic. If the devil is in the detail and my columns contain no details whatsoever, then surely it follows this page should be devoid of all characteristics of a satanic or unholy nature.

I'll leave it to you to see what's horrendously wrong with this inference, but one reader has already come up with a kind of refutation by pointing out the diabolical failings (surely not!) in an argument I advanced last time. Briefly, I suggested that the belief that "what goes around comes around" is refuted by experience, as nasty people frequently do not get their come-uppance and the good often go unrewarded. "This point constitutes no sort of refutation at all," wrote the attentive reader. "In most systems of thought which incorporate karma the idea is that a person experiences reincarnation. Therefore it is not at all surprising that the return swing of the pendulum is not seen in the same life."

In a similar vein, I once wrote a letter to the *New Statesman*, arguing that the evidence, as it is, for life after death is approximately zilch. The following week, I was greeted with the reply that it is not surprising we have no evidence for the afterlife, as we would have to be dead to collect it. So I'm the idiot for not realising that of course the kind of evidence I demand isn't there.

My response to both my critics is cheap, abusive and hackneyed, but, what the hell, it works. I want to accept their arguments and on that basis I'm going to believe in invisible, intangible fudge-fairies that live under my table. Now, the skeptics among you (of which I assume there might be a few) might ask, what evidence do I have that such beings exist? My reply is obvious – you fools! You've missed the point. As these fairies are invisible and intangible, of course there is no evidence available to us that will confirm their existence. You'd have to be fudge-fairy yourself or else eat the special magic double fudge-fairy muffin which opens your eyes to their world to see them. The evidence is such that it is simply not available to living, human beings such as ourselves.

While it might be considered rude to put belief in my fudge-fairies on a par with the religious beliefs of millions, the risk is worth running because it shows up an important philosophical point about claims to belief. If one wants to argue that one is justified in believing something, the evidence for which is only ever hypothetically available in some other mode of being, it really does open up the door to all sorts of nonsense. If that's what you really believe, then, yes, I would put karma and the afterlife on all fours with fudge fairies.

However, their objections notwithstanding, I suspect my critics would argue that there is an important difference between their beliefs and the fairies. The difference is that I have no reason whatsoever to believe in the fairies – they're just a fiction I dreamed up to score cheap debating points with. But they have all sorts of reasons to believe in either karma or the afterlife.

My first response to this is, how dare you accuse my fudge fairies of being mere fictions! Have you no heart? My second response is simply to ask what those reasons might be. These may be many, including: personal religious experiences; the testimony of millions of believers and religious texts; alleged communication with spirits or ghosts; and the fact that I rather like believing in it, thank you very much.

Now we would be talking. For what does this list comprise if not evidence, available to us now, in this life? If one's religious beliefs are based on religious experience, we have to ask how reliable a basis for belief such experiences are. Given that Catholics tend not to see visitations of Vishnu and Hindus don't report sightings of the Virgin Mary, we may have reason to believe cultural rather than transcendental factors are at work in many such experiences. The idea that only religion can explain what science cannot is also a moot point. Even if true, there is still the question of why one religion's explanations are to be preferred to another, let alone the point that we should prefer no explanations to bad ones. As for the reliability of human testimony and sacred texts, well, come one. It's such a hard belief to maintain it's just bullying to bother to knock it down. No matter. The point is, the argument does end up with evidence after all. In fact, one can put it more succinctly, in terms of what philosophers call a two-pronged dilemma – a particularly vicious implement they try to impale opponents upon. Either evidence is neither here nor there, in which case leave my fudge fairies alone; or evidence does come into it, in which case, frankly, there ain't much of it about for karma or the afterlife. Either way, I win.

Of course, the devil is in the detail, so the philosophically inclined can continue the debate to further levels of sophistication. Personally, I'd rather quit while I was ahead, but I suspect that's an argumentative move which is hard to justify on philosophical grounds. Damned convenient though. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some fudge fairies waiting to see me.

**Julian Baggini** is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine*. A four-issue subscription to *The Philosophers' Magazine* costs £11.80. (Phone 0171 538 8288 to order)

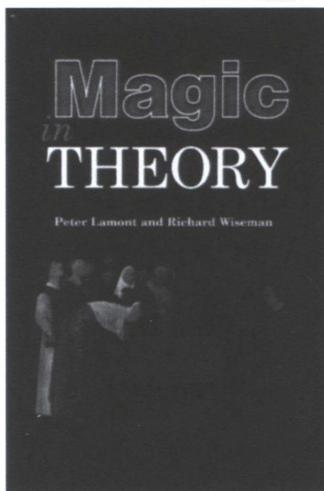
# Reviews



## NO SECRETS

### Magic in Theory

by Peter Lamont and Richard Wiseman  
University of Hertfordshire Press, £18.99,  
ISBN 0-900458-93-3



Coming as closely as it does to the publication of *Abra-cadabra!: Secret Methods Magicians and Others Use to Deceive Their Audience* (reviewed in *The Skeptic* 12.1), this book might seem like carrying coals to Newcastle.

The authors are both described as former professional magicians. Lamont is a Research Associate at the Koestler Parapsychology Unit, University of Edinburgh, and Wiseman heads a research unit into deception and the paranormal at the University of Hertfordshire. Wiseman's thesis was on an assessment of psychic claimants.

In preparing the book, the authors have combined their own experience with extensive interviews with well-known practising magicians. They feel that the study of magicians' methods will help them to detect fraudulent "pseudo-psychics" in their work at the two universities mentioned, where they apparently still believe in "real psychics".

Do they crassly reveal carefully-guarded secrets of the magician's trade? To read all the excitement on some of the magicians' websites, one would think so. However, as they point out themselves, most of these can be discovered in books available to the public at any well-equipped library. They refrain from "tipping" (revealing the secrets of) the TT and IT (magicians' shorthand for .....ooh, but I shouldn't say), but they do tell the reader that some magicians use decks of cards which are all of one value, some coins are not what they seem, a card can be held invisibly in the palm of the hand, there are schemes for signalling information secretly to an accomplice, and other esoteric facts.

Chapter 1, "Magic Tricks and How They are Done", covers the broad definitions of Appearance, Vanish, Transposition, Transformation, Penetration, Restoration, Extraordinary Mental and Physical Feats, Telekinesis, and ESP. For example, under Restoration we find three subheadings; object was not really damaged, object was not really restored, or a duplicate object was used. This is the level of treatment for all the other headings. Chapter 2, "Misdirection" is prob-

ably the most valuable, both to the reader who wishes to learn how not to be fooled and to the reader who wishes to fool. Chapter 3, "Reconstruction", delves into the very interesting area of how the spectator analyses the trick he has just seen, how what the magician actually did is misremembered, and how the magician can take advantage of this. Chapter 4 is called "What's the Difference Between a Magician and a Pseudo-psychic?" The chapter heading is worth repeating:

"Did you see that guy on TV that can bend spoons with his mind?"

"No, but I once saw a magician in a restaurant who could do it."

"Ah, but that was just a trick. The guy on TV does it for real!"

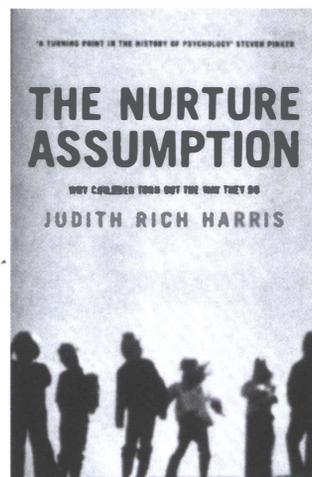
The purpose of Chapter 5, "Conjuring Theory in Perspective", is unclear except that it states at some length that magicians disagree with each other on theory. Chapter 6 is an extensive bibliography of conjuring psychology and theory, most of which is due to Marcello Truzzi's earlier listings. Readers will not find most of the listed books at the public library, but the interested can purchase them from Magic Books by Post, 29 Hill Avenue, Bristol BS3 4SN, England.

Frank Chambers

## PEER PRESSURE

### The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out The Way They Do

by Judith Rich Harris  
Bloomsbury, £18.99, ISBN 0-7475-3599-X



Judith Harris used to write college textbooks on child development, until one day she faced the fact that much of what she had been telling her readers was wrong.

This book cuts the ground from under those who think that how kids turn out can be put down to "the parents" or "the family". She surveys the evidence to show that this "nurture assumption" is a cultural myth.

In the book's foreword, Steven Pinker writes:

"Being among the first to read this electrifying book has been one of the high points of my career as a psychologist. One seldom sees a work that is at once scholarly, revolutionary,

insightful, and wonderfully clear and witty ... I predict it will come to be seen as a turning point in the history of psychology."

Harris combs through the theories that children's personalities are significantly affected by various factors: birth order, having only one parent, having two parents of the same sex, being brought up by working mothers or by mothers who stay at home, being only children, early bonding between mother and baby ... one after another they fall, these theories, under Harris's relentless scrutiny ("the plural of ANECDOTE is not DATA").

It is the peer group that controls children's culture. They even learn their language from their peers, not from their parents. And immigrant children bring the culture of their peers home to the parents; not their parents' culture to their peers.

Harris's "group socialization" theory makes this prediction: "that children would develop into the same sort of adults if we left their lives outside the home unchanged ... but switched all the parents around."

The clatter I heard as I read through this book turned out to be the toppling of some of my unexamined assumptions – one of the most exciting sounds in the world.

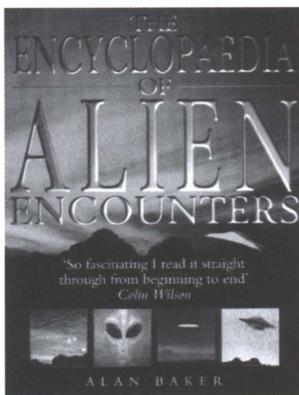
Lewis Jones

## THEY'RE OUT THERE – MAYBE

### The Encyclopaedia of Alien Encounters

by Alan Baker

Virgin Publishing, £20, ISBN 1-85227-734-3



Alan Baker's stated intention is to produce a reference work, rather than a general account of the topic: ironically, the book is probably more successful as the latter.

Despite covering a wide range of material, the selection of entries can sometimes seem odd. For example, there is an extensive entry on the "Mad Gasser of Mattoon" –

useful perhaps as an illustration of the power of rumour and group hysteria, but with no clear link to alien encounters – yet nothing on Heaven's Gate or other "UFOs as saviours" groups, such as Festinger's classic "When Prophecy Fails").

Within entries, the decision to include or exclude can also appear questionable (for example the entry on "Hollow Earth" theories contains no reference to Teed or Bender, nor to Himmler's espousal of the theory during WWII). Nevertheless, the book is an enjoyable – if inevitably superficial – tour through the byways of UFOlogy for the non-specialist. The tone is "balanced" or, except in discussing the most blatant frauds such as Adamski, uncritical, although one should take into account the author's decision to "refrain from using words such as 'allegedly', 'apparently' and 'supposed' in the text", since "were I to include them as often as warranted, the text would quickly become very tedious indeed."

There is no index but the book includes 35 photos and some 77 "suggestions for further reading", ranging from Philip Klass to Whitley Strieber. While the vast majority

of these can be categorised as "credulous" – this is, arguably, a fair reflection of the balance of published literature.

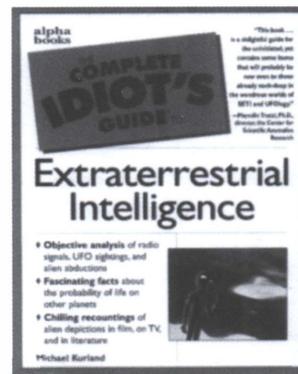
John Gillies

## ET FOR IDIOTS

### The Complete Idiot's Guide to Extraterrestrial Intelligence

by Michael Kurland

Alpha Books, £10.99, ISBN 0-02-862387-8 325



This book is part of a series which attempts to help the average person master some difficult task, or learn about a difficult subject. In this case the subject is one about which nothing is known but much surmised, and Kurland tries to touch on every surmise that has ever been entertained, from Ezekiel and Lucian of Samosata to Barney and Betty Hill and Arthur C Clarke.

Hence this is a wide-ranging survey, and inevitably no topic is treated in depth. He includes ancient astronauts, medieval sightings of angels, 19th century mysterious airships, miscellaneous Fortean phenomena, UFOs, crop circles, alien abductions, a brief history of the Universe, the origin of life, the possibilities of alien life and civilisations, the possibilities of interstellar travel and aliens in fiction, amongst other things.

Kurland claims to have an open mind on all matters extraterrestrial, only drawing the line when logical inconsistencies appear. Thus people who claim to have visited Venus in a flying saucer are lying or deluded, because we now know Venus to be completely inhospitable to our form of life, while the alien autopsy film is "very convincing," though "probably a phoney" because "such an exciting and important story ... couldn't have been kept secret all these years."

The latter view indicates that the author has not done much research on this particular subject. Consulting a few special effects experts might have led to him finding the autopsy footage less convincing. And in general, I suspect that the research he has done has been mainly of the armchair variety. There is no sign of the in-depth investigation of a Philip J Klass or the fieldwork of Jim Schnabel.

Plus I have a few accuracy quibbles. The K-T extinction did not occur 35 million years ago, most astrophysicists would not nowadays consider quasars "one of the great mysteries of the universe," and Captain Kirk's U.S.S. Enterprise was not on a seven year mission. Which makes me wonder if other errors may be lurking in areas of which I'm less knowledgeable.

I think that Kurland's avowed neutrality will appear too credulous to sceptics, too critical to believers. For someone with very little knowledge of speculations about alien life, but a keen interest (and who has miraculously failed to read or watch any science fiction) this might be a good starting place, but I doubt that many sceptics will find it a useful addition to their collections.

Charles Goodwin

## AWESOME QUESTION

### Are We Alone in the Cosmos? The Search for Alien Contact in the New Millennium

by Ben Bova and Byron Preiss (Editors)  
Ibooks, £9.99, ISBN 0-671-03892-3



Some scientists shy away from this subject because of associations with UFO crackpottery – “They’re keeping the truth from us!” etc. – but this is a sober collection balanced between some of the leading scientists involved (Frank Drake, Donald Goldsmith) and speculative thinkers (Isaac Asimov, Arthur Clarke). It even contains Stanley G. Weinbaum’s classic 1934 story “A Martian Odyssey”, with its memorable Martian, Tweel.

As the Preface says, extraterrestrial life would be the single most important discovery ever made by humanity. And, as Clarke says, *either* answer – there are intelligent extraterrestrials, or there aren’t and we are alone in the entire vast universe – would be awesome.

As might be expected, his contribution, surveying views of the universe, and Asimov’s, defining intelligence and discussing the significance of technology, are the most entertaining. There is much on where extraterrestrials might have left signs of long-ago visits – the theme of Clarke’s story “The Sentinel” and the magnificent film *2001: a Space Odyssey*.

The Fermi Paradox – if the universe has many intelligent species, some of which must be far in advance of us and might be expected to have achieved interstellar travel, why do we see no sign of them? – is also discussed. The most fascinating suggestion is that the apparently soaking wet Earth is actually quite dry compared to other life-bearing planets, and that intelligent beings on them could therefore never discover fire and thus never develop advanced technology. A thought-provoking collection, which would, however, have been much improved by an index.

Ray Ward

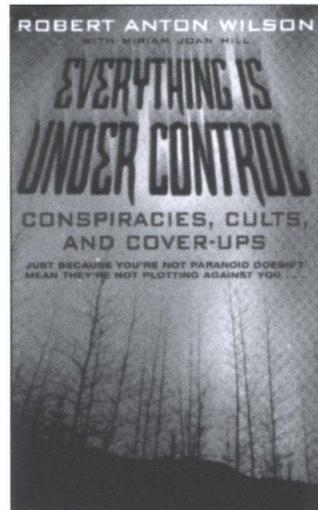
## CONTROL FREAK

### Everything Is Under Control

By Robert Anton Wilson, with Miriam Joan Hill  
Pan, £10, ISBN 0-330-38994-7

When I received my copy of this book, I was enthused by its apparent purpose almost at once. The idea of condensing all the conspiracy theories in the world into a single volume, indexed alphabetically, seemed an excellent one, likely to produce a reference work that would grace any skeptic’s bookshelf.

To some extent, I wasn’t disappointed. The book lists a fairly comprehensive catalogue of conspiracies, including the JFK assassination, Roswell, the Banco Ambrosiano, the Knights Templar, the Holy Grail, and many more.



Each topic is explained, along with cross-references and links to websites and other related material. Wilson and Hill have clearly done a lot of research, and the references, if short, are clear and concise.

So why wasn’t I enthused by the book? Well, for a start, there were too many entries. The Banco Ambrosiano scandal, for example, has no less than eleven articles in the book (though strangely none under ‘Ambrosiano’) whereas a single section would have sufficed, with cross-references. The same was true of the JFK assassination, and a number of others, so that I constantly found myself re-reading material previously covered.

Then there was the subject matter itself. It’s a difficult task covering such a wide range of subjects, but, on numerous occasions, I felt a little more research might have been in order. For example, in the Bermuda Triangle article, the description of the Flight 19 disaster is pure Charles Berlitz, with no reference to the established facts.

As if this wasn’t bad enough, the article contained a gross inaccuracy. According to the authors, the ‘Triangle’ is “one of the two places on Earth where a magnetic compass does not point to true north” (p 67). As anyone with a modicum of navigation knowledge will tell you, almost nowhere on Earth does a magnetic compass point to true north, and the places where it does are constantly changing.

Crop circles, too, are treated by the book in a manner that clearly displays a lack of research (‘New circles... had traits that none of the hoaxers could duplicate.’ p132). If this was the level of accuracy in articles about which I had some knowledge, who knows how many other errors there were?

This book certainly does have its good points. The authors have an amusing and easily readable style, and it has its use as a first line of reference.

But, if you’ve got ten pounds to spend, I can think of better ways to spend it.

Mike Walsh

## POTS AND KETTLES

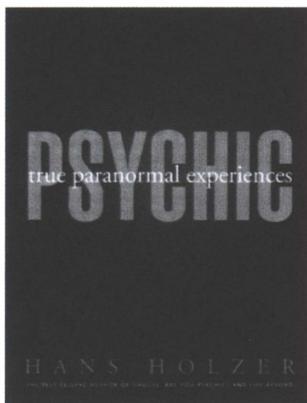
### Psychic: True Paranormal Experiences

by Hans Holzer  
Smithmark Publishers, £16.99, ISBN 0-7651-0953-0

In this book Hans Holzer promises a pragmatic search for the evidence and truth surrounding psychics and the psychic world. His failure to fulfil this promise is dramatic.

We are first informed that the psychic dimension is just as real as the physical world – obeying specific scientific laws and possessing substance and purpose in the general scheme of existence. We are then reassured that everybody has psychic powers, which can range from an ‘uncanny feeling’ or ‘intuitive impression’ through to a vision.

And so begins a journey with the author as we read about amazing ‘evidence’ to support the existence of



such phenomena as psychic photography, possession, ghosts, and reincarnation. Gasp as you read the 'proof' – page after page of dated anecdotal tales, accompanied by fuzzy black and white photographs to 'verify' the stories.

As if that wasn't enough, we are then invited to test our own psychic powers. To do this sit two yards away from a friend and try to tele-

pathically 'send' them a series of five numbers from one to ten. Don't worry if your friend does not receive the numbers in the correct order, as Hans explains that 'this is due to the fact that telepathy works in a non-time, non-space dimension where all things, all thoughts, coexist simultaneously' (p.333).

According to the author, skeptical writers 'make it their business to select a bibliography of source material that contains only the sort of proof they want in light of their own prejudiced purpose' (p.5). I'm getting an 'uncanny feeling' of irony as the words 'pot', 'kettle' and 'black' spring to mind.

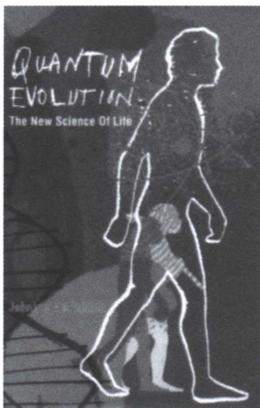
Kate Holden

## Life's leaps

### Quantum Evolution: The New Science of Life

by Johnjoe McFadden

HarperCollins, £16.99, ISBN 0-00-255948-X



Hang up your lab coats: reductionist biology has 'run its course'. This book proposes a new mechanism of adaptive evolution, in which fully functional replicating molecules or novel enzymes arise in a single step. Also, in compliance with recent EC Directives on popular science books, free will and consciousness are explained in the final chapter.

It's drastic, but Johnjoe McFadden believes something of the kind is necessary; he does not think natural selection can account for the evolution of novelty or complexity. He notes that present-day proteins fall into distinct families, and concludes (unnecessarily) that molecular evolution must have occurred by large leaps.

Quantum evolution is the proposed mechanism for these leaps, and the first such leap was the origin of life. The idea is that cells exist in many states simultaneously until one of the states is 'chosen'. A quantum mechanical effect, known as the inverse quantum Zeno effect, would preferentially choose states in which the cell has most physical interaction with its environment. McFadden claims that such states will be those most beneficial to the cell, and that feeding, locomotion, or replication may

thus have appeared instantaneously without the need for selection. As evidence, experiments are cited in which beneficial mutations appear to occur more often than expected. These experiments have been widely criticised, but this is blamed on neo-Darwinian dogmatism, rather than any flaw in their design. More evidence may be on its way – McFadden reckons that quantum evolution could create life in the lab pretty soon. Until then, I'm not making the leap of faith.

Louise Johnson

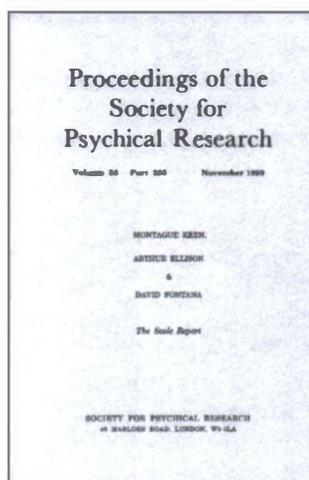
## SCIENTIFIC SELECTION BOX

### The Scole Report

by Montague Keen, Arthur Ellison and David Fontana

The Society for Psychical Research, £10,

ISBN 0-900677-06-6



The vast majority of this large volume is taken up with a description of the methods, results and conclusions of over twenty sittings with a group of physical mediums based in Norfolk.

The group mainly worked in total darkness, and held the vast majority of their seances in one location – the cellar of one of the medium's houses.

The investigators – three senior members of the So-

ciety for Physical Research – observed various phenomena being produced but were unable to introduce effective methods for controlling the behaviour of the mediums.

Under these circumstances the investigators experienced the production and movement of small lights, 'spirit touches', and various apporpts. The investigators also carried out several experiments, in which, for example, the group attempted to persuade the spirits to produce images on film sealed in locked boxes.

Unfortunately, the Scole group did not allow infra-red filming of any of the seances and the validity of the controls used in many of the experiments has been called into question by several critics, including three other senior SPR members whose comments are included at the end of the volume. The investigators are clearly convinced that the Scole group produced genuine paranormal phenomena.

Given the conditions under which their investigations were carried out, I suspect that most skeptics will find the evidence less than watertight. Even so, the book is deserving of attention as it presents a detailed insight into the difficulties encountered when examining the claims of physical mediumship.

Richard Wiseman

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# Letters



## Fishy engineering

Surely the description in *Hits & Misses* (issue 12.3/4), when Terminator gene technology was described as a bad thing because of what might happen if other plants picked up the gene, completely misses the point of how Terminator works? Any plant carrying it *cannot* survive more than one generation. Perhaps as a safety measure it should be closely linked with every new gene inserted into crops. Would that satisfy Greenpeace?

I must admit to not having quite the gung-ho faith in genetic modification that I saw in colleagues when I worked in research, and that many advocates of the technology seem to possess. In my experience there are many better, cheaper, non-GM ways to improve agriculture, but there is no fat high-tech profit in them.

We had a wonderful baculovirus that could be cultured from local wild-type very simply in a shed in a field in any (poor) country, which effectively killed its host within a day in the case of first instar infection, and which was non-persistent, being broken down within a few days by UV. Because we worked in a "near market" area we had to consider engineering a perfectly good wild-type by adding the gene for BT toxin, thus generating a profit-making product, and an expensive and pretty well pointless mission if feeding the world is truly your objective.

I think with genetic modification, the precautionary approach is essential because the consequences of a mistake could be so huge. It has been shown that, in the Japanese Medaka fish (*Oryzias latipes*), by the addition of an engineered variant carrying the gene for human growth hormone (hGH) into a wild population, within 40 generations the population would be extinct. Though such engineered fish have a greater breeding success their offspring are less viable and fewer survive to breeding age (PNAS 96, p13853). Such modifications are being

experimented with in commercially important fish both here and in the US, as they grow bigger and faster. Perhaps a good dose of scientific scepticism is needed when approaching these hot issues?

**Simon Birnstingl**  
Upper Beeding, West Sussex

## Positive and negative

While it was encouraging to see (issue 12.3/4) an account of the last international conference of the Society for Psychical Research in your columns, I'm afraid Matt Colborn's inability to attend the first day's sessions will have given readers an entirely negative impression of what's happening in psychical research outside the narrow confines of university labs.

In particular, the evening symposium under the title "Is the medium the message?" heard an account from Professor Archie Roy of his and Trish Robertson's extensive tests to discover what level of veridicality is reached in platform messages from various mediums. This ongoing experiment, involving both single and double-blind tests and an extensive database, has produced results which appear wholly inconsistent with the common skeptical view that all can be put down to deception, body-language, guesswork, inference and the like.

More striking was the account I gave of Professor Gary Schwarz's after-death communication experiment, full details of which will be published later this year, in which five of America's best-known mediums were invited to the Department of Psychology at the University of Arizona to give blind "readings" to a much-bereaved sitter who had provided Schwarz with details of six near relatives who had died in the previous ten years. With no prior knowledge of the person or visual contact, and only yes/no responses when necessary, and no communication between the mediums themselves, the number of dead

relatives identified averaged (almost) 4, with resemblance ratings somewhere between "very strong resemblance" and "definite communication". In addition nine further dead persons, not on the list but later identified by the sitter were recorded, with similar resemblance ratings. The protocol eliminated fraud and statistical coincidence. I heard an account of this experiment, widely publicised in the USA by a television sponsor, from Professor Schwartz when I attended the annual conference of the Society for Scientific Exploration in Albuquerque last July. The odds against a chance explanation are astronomical.

I am sure your readers would welcome a critical appraisal of this unique experiment when full details become available.

**Montague Keen**  
Sudbury, Suffolk

## Have a breather

Your contributor Simon Brophy (issue 12.3/4) need not rent a house in France previously occupied by a reader of *Woman* in order to find out about Breatharianism.

It is described in that excellent reference work *A Skeptic's Guide to the New Age*, by Harry Edwards, who discusses not only USA and Australian proponents of the 1980s but also refers to a book *An Examination of the Imposture of Ann Moore, Called the Fasting Woman of Tutlebury*, published in 1813.

**Bernard Howard**  
Christchurch, New Zealand

*We have an article in preparation on the history and current practice of Breatharianism – Ed.*

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