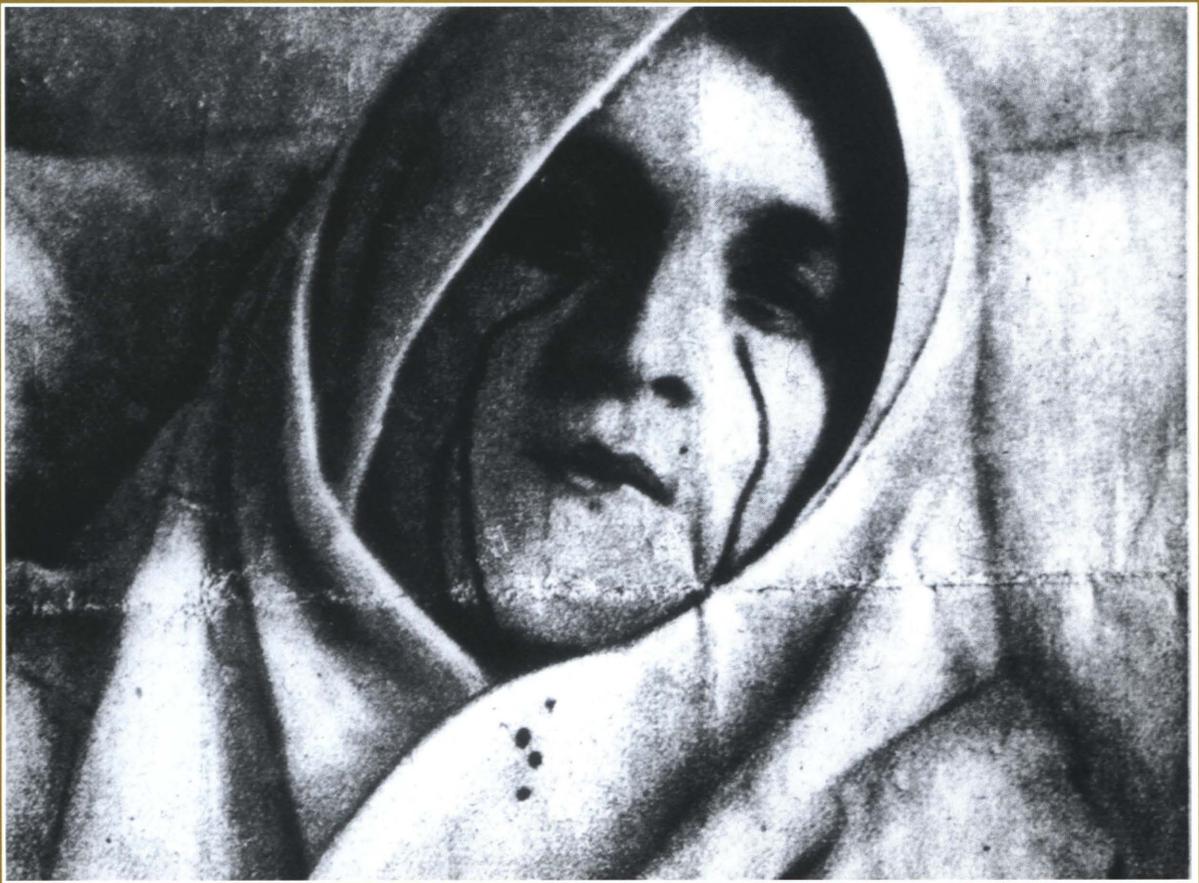


Volume 13 Number 2

The **Skeptic**



THE ONGOING **MEDJUGJORJE** spectacular

Also in this issue:

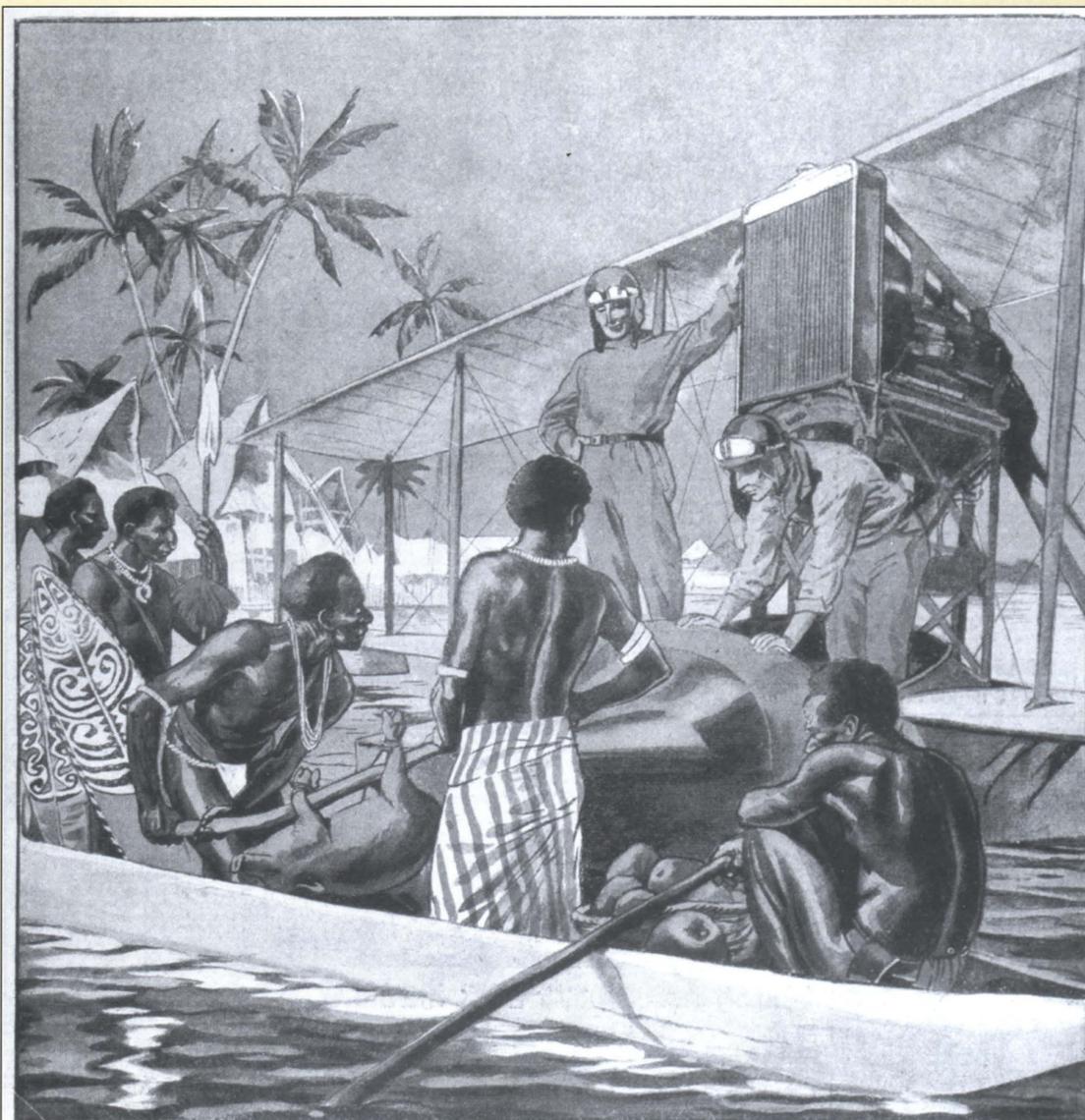
Eating: Just a lifestyle choice

TM and world peace

Electromagnetic fields

Plus: · News · Book reviews · Comment · Humour

Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery



Une Flatteuse Méprise

Aujourd'hui encore les inventions modernes peuvent donner lieu à d'étranges confusions. Ainsi les indigènes d'un archipel polynésien, ayant vu récemment un hydravion amérir, ont cru que leurs dieux descendaient du ciel et se sont empressés d'aller, en pirogues, offrir des présents aux aviateurs surpris de cet hommage inattendu.

Ah, the simple innocence of days gone by, when aviators arriving in their seaplane at a Polynesian island were greeted as deities from the heavens. In 1923, gifts were brought to them as placatory offerings. Today, assuming their credit cards checked out, they would be expected to patronise the tourist shops and buy their own souvenirs.

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Skeptic in Chains

Wendy M Grossman

FIRST, a piece of news. It's taken us more than a year to get organised, but *The Skeptic* is pleased to announce that as of mid-June we have an area on AOL where any AOL subscriber can drop by and chat with us online. Of course, lots of people are not AOL subscribers, and there are plenty of other online areas where skepticism is discussed: on CIX, in the skeptics conference; on Usenet, in sci.skeptic and alt.folklore.urban, among many other places; and of course the many skeptical Web sites (ours is at <http://www.skeptic.org.uk>). Come on by if you do have an AOL account, and of course we'd be glad to hear from anyone who'd like to help run the area.

That said, the big story of the summer seems likely to be the House of Lords Science and Technology committee, which is debating whether alternative/complementary medicine should be made available on the National Health Service. *The Skeptic* sent in some comments before the deadline passed for submitting testimony. Essentially, I wrote that: given its limited resources, the NHS should focus on treatments for which there is solid evidence of efficacy; that the money would be better spent on preventive medicine; that therapies should not be adopted just because they are popular and make people feel good (or where would it end); and that alternative therapies should be held to the same standards of testing as medical ones.

This all seems pretty straightforward to me. It's one thing if people who can afford it want to spend their money on whatever the latest fad is, but it's quite another to funnel public resources into them. Yet, of course, that is precisely the argument that's turning up: that poor people deserve to have the same access. The thing is, where do you stop? If people feel better for being prayed over, or treated with aromatherapy, or faith healing, or the laying on of hands and on that basis we include these things in the NHS, should we also be including foreign vacations, meditation, and who knows, maybe even haircuts? To be fair, this is not a debate that's limited to alternative medicine: we're having the same kinds of discussions about so-called "lifestyle" drugs such as Viagra and cosmetic surgery.

You can get into remarkably vituperative situations when you're arguing this sort of thing. A couple of months later, I got called in to restate a couple of these things on *Woman's Hour* – a researcher for the programme had seen the testimony on our Web site. Before the show, in the green room, I got talking with an opera singer who said her GP had recommended she try aromatherapy, at a cost to her per session of £60. It only took a couple of exchanges from my saying that I'd be pretty annoyed if my GP recommended such a thing for her to get hostile enough to suggest perhaps we shouldn't discuss it.

As hostile as people get if you cast doubt on astrology, dowsing, UFO sightings, or predictive dreams, apparently they get infinitely more hostile if you cast doubt on their most cherished beliefs about health. I'm not sure why that should be, except that health practices are much more intimately connected to our deepest fears, of aging, sickness, and death. I suppose it's only logical that the things we do to try to gain control over the ultimately uncontrollable should be the things we get most upset at having questioned. But when it happens, it takes you by surprise. How can anyone seriously believe, for example, that scented oils are any more efficacious a health remedy now than they were in bygone centuries when they were all people had? Why do people want to reject centuries of advancements in medical practice and understanding in favour of treatments that are comforting but ineffectual?

I can, of course, come up with the standard answers. Doctors have little time to spend with their patients, where alternative practitioners have more, and spend it talking about how special the patient's case is and how personalised the treatment needs to be. That kind of attention is comforting and flattering. Medical treatments are often scary and sometimes dangerous; alternative therapies are generally harmless and even friendly.

And they're so...*Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous*. We don't read articles in the papers about how Madonna swears by the dentist she sees twice a year, or how Prince Charles is a staunch supporter of chemotherapy to treat cancer. It's just not enough of a story to write that celebrities are ever sensible about anything. It's only a story if they believe something bizarre. That way, we get to make fun of the silly things people do when they have too much money and fame – and then quietly taste the magic by emulating them when no one's looking.

There's a side issue that goes with the NHS debate that is probably underestimated in importance: licensing. As columnist John Diamond noted recently, if these treatments are going to be part of the NHS, someone will have to come up with acceptable standards for them to meet. Quite apart from the fact that the thing is impossible – how do you tell if a reflexologist is doing his job properly? – simply creating a licensing body will give "altmed" as it's now being called a veneer of respectability that will be very hard to erase.

Enquiries about the progress of the Lords Sub-Committee report on Complementary and Alternative Medicine should be addressed to Miss Mawson, (0207) 219 5358.

Hits and Misses



Shattered Hopes

WHERE DO YOU like to get your science news from? If you're like most of us, you don't have much choice: you rely on media reports. Much as we love the media (and we have to, since we seem to be part of it), it's easy to see why people wind up so confused about and angry at science after trawling through some of the clippings that have come into the PO Box recently. Based on the case of one (1) woman who became pregnant, the Independent reports that a doctor thinks Viagra might be a cure for infertility. Did Pfizer, the maker of Viagra, rush this out as a press release? The doctor in question of course voices the usual caveat that one isn't enough to prove anything and much more extensive testing needs to be done. But if that's true, why didn't he wait to announce the results? You just know that a year or two from now we're likely to be reading a story similar to the sad news published in the Telegraph that the drug secretin, hoped to be a cure for autism, is no better than salt water in treating children with the condition, and that any apparent improvement the children showed was due to the placebo effect. Why did desperate parents think secretin would work in the first place? A report on the American TV soft news show *Dateline*, which touted the case of one three-year-old boy who had improved dramatically during the week after an injection. We're all for freedom of speech and all that, but in the eagerness to show off a miracle cure, shouldn't someone — the doctors involved, perhaps? — be responsible enough to think ahead a little bit?

As John Cleese's character said in the 1985 movie *Clockwise*, "I can stand the despair. It's the *hope*."

Top Ten Carrots of all Time

NO DESPAIR, however, for *Daily Telegraph* writer Robert Matthews, who managed to send his son off to school with a very nice little machine that seemed to defy gravity — though despair for his readers, since he didn't let us know too much detail about how he did it. Matthews has been writing a number of entertaining columns on interesting scientific subjects, among them an explanation for the end-of-millennium phenomenon of the List of the Greatest <fill in category> of the Century/Millennium that is made up almost entirely of people who lived towards the tail end of whatever the time period is. We had observed this phenomenon extensively on Usenet's rec.sport.tennis newsgroup, where every list of the all-time greatest tennis players is always biased towards Graf-Seles-Navratilova-Evert, and people have to be reminded about King, Court, Lenglen, and Wills Moody. Matthews calls this bias the "availability fallacy" and sees its application everywhere: doctors diagnose patients with illnesses they've just seen in other patients, for example.

That all seems simple enough. What Matthews can't explain is the following weird phenomenon. Ask someone to multiply two by two, then double the result, then double it again, and then double it yet again. Once they've reached 32, ask them to name a vegetable. Apparently around 90 percent of people (by which we presume Matthews means British people), come up with "carrot". Neither Matthews nor *New Scientist*, where he found the mystery debated, can explain it. Neither can we. Although sixty-four, the next logical number in the sequence sounds more like carrot than it does like, say, Brussels sprout.

Maria Duval update

ONE OF *The Skeptic's* editors decided to see what "clairvoyant" Maria Duval was up to in advertising a "lucky talisman," as the ad in question read suspiciously like one designed to build up a rentable mailing list. Accordingly, using the pseudonym "Adele Myers", we signed up for the lucky talisman. Nothing much arrived at first other than the talisman itself (a disappointing bit of gold-inked card) and several offers of personal readings from Duval herself. Then, after about six months, Adele started getting ads from a Florida outfit called Perfume Warehouse and trashy lottery offers, apparently chosen for their similarity to lucky talismans. Meantime, the Autumn 2000 issue of the *Australian Skeptic* contains more information about the prolific advertiser and dispenser of lucky tokens. Their conclusion was the same as ours: this is someone compiling a direct mailing database. Being more efficient than we are, they organised a test involving ten genuine and two fictitious respondents, each with a different birth date and astrological sign. Their results, though more comprehensive, were the same as ours: offers to buy Duval products, followed by junk mail. When they called the company Duval uses for her mail order operation in Australia, however, they learned that there were 70,000 records in the Maria Duval database, and of those 12,000 had bought the first offering, compared to a mention they found on the Web of the British buying rate, which was a whopping 40 percent. Even in Australia, however, the first offer brought in just over A\$1 million. As they conclude: "a superb money-spinner." Kudos to the Australian Skeptics for investigating the thing in detail.

Pulp Fiction

THE CHURCH of Scientology has lost its bid to be registered as a charity in Britain (the CoS intends to appeal). Just in time (though we presume there's no connection) for the release of the movie of Scientology founder and pulp fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth*, in which Scientology adherent John Travolta plays a leading role. US critics have panned the movie. "This movie is awful in so

many different ways," wrote leading TV and print critic Roger Ebert, concluding, "There is a moment here when the Psychlos [the alien race inhabiting Earth in the year 3000] entire planet (home office and all) is blown to smithereens, without the slightest impact on any member of the audience (or, for that matter, the cast). If the film had been destroyed in a similar cataclysm, there might have been a standing ovation." However, Ebert was at least lucky enough to have escaped the movie without falling prey to the subliminal recruitment messages the anti-Scientology organisation FACTnet is alleging are present (he wrote, "The film contains no evidence of Scientology or any other system of thought").



This beats the graveyard tonight!

His Master's Grave

RUPERT SHELDRAKE has been in the news again; this time, he apparently told the *Edinburgh Evening News* that animals are telepathic. The animal singled out in the article is Greyfriars Bobby, a dog famous for sitting and pining on his master's grave. There are plenty of conflicting claims about this story: whether the dog was sitting on the right grave, in the right cemetery, or even sat there at all. A smart dog that was telepathic, instead of sitting out in the cold rain, would have made his way a few yards up the road to Sandy Bell's bar, where the resident folk musicians would no doubt have welcomed him warmly and offered him a whisky.

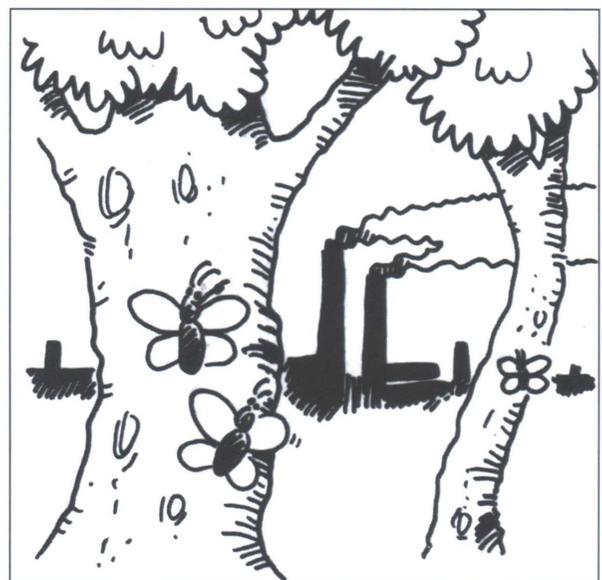
Reverent Marketing

DEITY, IT SEEMS, is everywhere: in one of the knots in a pine board (Jesus). One of the older clippings in our undigested pile (sorry, folks) concerns Wall's ice cream, which revamped an entire marketing program at the last minute because – oops! – it resembled the Arabic for Allah. A few years ago, Nike withdrew some 40,000 pairs of

basketball shoes with a logo intended to look like flames for the same sort of reason. Either these companies don't think to hire consultants of the right belief system or the resemblances are quite subtle. It's a sad commentary on the percentage of atheists, agnostics, and skeptics in the population that no one has ever pulled a marketing campaign because of our sensibilities. Perhaps instead of displaying all this trenchant humour we should be more hurt and distressed. Sensitive, that's us.

Moth-eaten

SCIENCE has its shocks, too. One of the few images we retain from our early education is the picture of the white peppered moth and its dark brother and their part in proving the workings of natural selection. The story, which we're sure everyone else heard, too, went something like this: in pre-industrialised Britain, all the moths of this species – *Biston betularia* – were peppered whites. When industry moved in, the bark of the trees blackened, and the moths died out because they were easy for birds to spot and eat. In their place, the black moth flourished because of its superior fitness for the new environment. Then, in the 1950s, when the Clean Air Act came in, the white variety reappeared and the black moths dropped in numbers. But. Last year, according to the *Telegraph*, evolution experts started picking holes in the moth research, the work of Oxford University's Bernard Kettlewell. Apparently the white moths began reappearing even before pollution levels dropped. The black ones still thrive in other, unpolluted places. And hardly any moths rest on tree trunks anyway. Maybe birds don't even like to eat them. To get enough numbers for his experiments, Kettlewell bred some of the moths in his lab, leading scientists to wonder whether the moths he bred were as vigorous as those born in the wild. The upshot: Darwin was still right. Pollution may have had something to do with it. But Kettlewell's experiments don't prove anything. We have to ask: is nothing sacred?



Quick lads! Lets go, the industrial revolution has begun!



The Ongoing Medjugorje Spectacular

Scam artists or visionaries? Hilary Evans looks at the commerce surrounding 20 years of daily apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary

I IMAGINE that every reader of *The Skeptic* is as eager as I am to know what is going on in Medjugorje, Croatia. If you are not, that can only be because you are not interested in religious scams. For what is going on in Medjugorje out-scams any scam ever mounted in the name of religion.

Those of us who are not Roman Catholics find it quite easy to believe that Mary, the mother of Jesus of Nazareth, now resident up there with her son and the other two members of the Trinity, has never made any return visits to the planet where (it may be) she once lived. Consequently, when we read of the millions of pilgrims who have been flocking to Medjugorje in the belief that six of the young villagers have been privileged to meet Mary on a daily basis since 24 June 1981, we shake our heads sadly at yet another example of human gullibility, without feeling the need to look into matters more closely.

But if you happen to be an intelligent believer (and the terms are not inevitably mutually incompatible) things are rather more complicated. Indeed, what makes the Medjugorje affair so much more interesting – dare I use the word “entertaining”? – for the atheist is the fact that a good deal of the skepticism about the visions comes from Catholics who are embarrassed by the spectacle of pilgrims flocking from all round the world to a scene of charlatanism, commercialism, and self-interest unmatched in the frequently unsavoury history of alleged visitations by the Virgin.

Very briefly, what happened is that on that June day in 1981 some teenagers from this small Croatian village went up on a nearby hillside – some say to pick fruit, others, to enjoy a forbidden smoke or even mild drugs – and on their return to the village, claimed to have seen the gospar (the local name for the Mary-figure). Their claims were met with mixed belief and skepticism by the very Christian but shrewd peasant community, but were enthusiastically welcomed by the parish clergy, consisting – for reasons too complicated to go into here – of Franciscan monks. To make sure they kept control of things, these clergy asked the visionaries to ask Mary if she would mind visiting them in the church rather than outdoors. Being a good sort, she obligingly agreed, and from that day to this she has appeared every evening at six, at first in an annex to the church itself and subsequently in a detached church building. A few privileged persons, carefully vetted, are permitted to be present; the rest of us must wait outside or in the church until the daily communiqué from the Queen of Heaven is relayed to us. And this has been going on, evening after evening, for nearly twenty years!

This unique event attracted worldwide attention from the start. Pilgrims flocked, with reporters and tv crews in attendance, shops and hotels sprang up to meet the pilgrims' needs, and the small village became one of the world's hottest tourist destinations.

It sounds like Lourdes all over again, but – this being the former Yugoslavia – there are important differences. First, the political context. Nothing that happens in the Balkans is simple, and events in the Medjugorje region are particularly tangled. What is clear is that during World War II the oustachi – the local Croats – treated the Serbs with a savagery which matches (and perhaps explains, though it does not excuse) anything the Serbs have subsequently done to anyone else. Entire communities were butchered, often with appalling cruelty – there are reliable accounts of men, women and children being thrown alive off cliffs, that sort of thing. What connects this with the Medjugorje visions is that the local Franciscan clergy collaborated with the oustachi to the extent that one pious churchman boasted of having been responsible for the deaths of 40,000-plus Serbs!

The earliest messages of the Medjugorje virgin spoke of reconciliation, but this was not at all what the Franciscans wanted to hear. Reconciliation is no more the aim of political activists in the Balkans than it is in Ireland. Hence the rapidity with which the priests took command of the situation. Fortunately, tape recordings of the earliest interviews with the visionaries were made and exist. From these it is clear how the priests laundered the children's testimony with leading questions and suggestions and subsequently manipulated their further activities to suit their own agenda.

But that is not all. Since then, the visionaries have published their own accounts of what happened, and these are full of blatant contradictions to their original recorded testimony. The whole story has been re-worked to create a new scenario. In particular, the Virgin's messages, which originally concerned local matters, have been “adjusted” to bear a worldwide character suitable for attracting American, Japanese and German pilgrims happy to believe that the Virgin chose Medjugorje as her favourite place – for she is on record, now, as having said just that.

Not only that, but she has stated that the six visionaries are absolutely her favourite people, privileged above all others. Not only has she appeared to them more often – by far – than to any other visionaries in history, but she has stated that this is her final, ultimate visit. If you hear of any visions from now on, you'd better disbelieve them, you have



Mary's word for it. Or rather, you have Vicka and Ivan's word for it that you have Mary's word for it, for of course all the messages come to us via the visionaries. You have to trust them.



Well, but do we? For Mary's favourite people, privileged above all others, they are a somewhat unlikely lot. Christians they may be, but that doesn't mean too much in a country where everyone is nominally Christian – except of course for the benighted Moslems, but they are mostly being ethnically cleansed or otherwise disposed of. Before they met the Virgin, these children were not notable for their piety. Nor, since then, have their lives been notably exemplary. You'd think that someone who had met anyone from Heaven – let alone the Queen of Heaven – would somehow be transformed and transcended. Born again, even. Alas, no: like all those American housewives who get to be abducted by extraterrestrials, their lifestyles have been singularly unaffected.

Apart from the contradictions, inconsistencies, lies and outright inventions in their testimonies – two of them claim that one afternoon the Virgin took them on a personally conducted tour of Heaven, Purgatory and Hell! – their behaviour has been of the earth, earthy. None has adopted the religious life as a vocation, though this has hitherto been considered the career option of choice for one who has met with the mother of Jesus. Instead, celebrity tours of Europe and the United States, ostensibly seeking charitable donations and stimulating pilgrim-tourism, have made each of them a showbiz star, reflected in the lifestyle some of them have adopted. Some have married (one to a wealthy American). All have become wealthy, thanks to donations and prudent investment – each of the six is the proprietor of a hotel or some other tourist-directed enterprise.

Are we to infer that they programmed the whole Medjugorje thing as a planned fraud? Impossible to say, but I think we can give them the benefit of the doubt and say almost certainly not. Unless and until one of them chooses to reveal the truth, we must simply either believe or disbelieve their story of how things began, choosing whichever version – for they contradict one another over and over again – we find least unbelievable. But of one thing there is no possible doubt, for the tapes are there to prove it: once the bandwagon began to roll, the appearances and the messages have been manipulated by the Franciscan clergy, to ensure that a sufficiently acceptable version is available for public consumption. And the visionaries have happily gone along with that.

Oh, come now, you say, surely priests don't really behave in this way? Well, apart from the one who boasted how many Serbs he was responsible for killing during the war, there is no doubt of the Franciscans' dubious affiliations with the authorities, and their arrogant challenging of the bishop responsible for the region who – almost single handed – has from the start condemned the visionaries' story and the role played by the clergy. The priest who took control of the visionaries right at the outset, and who more than anyone was responsible for the disreputable charade, was eventually transferred and expelled, whereupon he and a similarly-inclined nun founded a community dedicated to the proposition that spirituality starts with physical sex. Which may or may not be so, but hardly qualifies him as the ideal mentor for the chosen visitees of the Virgin.

Hardly less to blame are the commentators. Apart from the media, who know a lucrative thing when they see it, even reputable religious figures have been guilty of a reprehensibly partisan presentation of the story. Above all, the distinguished writer René Laurentin, probably the world's highest-profile author on religious visions, has flagrantly concealed unwelcome episodes, has placed his own spin on the facts, has selected and even rearranged the story in favour of the visions and the visionaries.

Underlying the whole matter is the psychology of the individual visionaries, but this remains almost totally unexplored. It is clear that one of them, the girl Vicka, took the lead right from the start and more or less dictated what her companions would say they saw and what they would report Mary as saying. If not outright hysterical, she is certainly a very disturbed person who, even before the first vision, was liable to undiagnosed illnesses which her family called "comas". But what motivated her? And what motivated her companions? This has not been explored, because it goes without saying that the visionaries have been subjected to no real testing, only a few pointless tests designed to look scientific but in fact proving nothing at all.

And what of these nightly meetings with the Virgin, watched by a privileged few in a small room, at first attached to the church and then – by order of the angrily sceptical bishop – transferred to a detached building nearby (the Virgin, kind soul, went along with these changing arrangements contentedly enough)? Are the visionaries simply play-acting, putting on a charade for the sake of – what? Self-importance? That must surely be part of it: from uninteresting adolescents in a remote Balkan village they have become world stars of press and television. How could they now give it up and relapse into obscurity? Or are they trying to please the priests? That, too, must be part of it, for the role of the Franciscan clergy has been one of the most flagrant duplicity from start to finish. Even if we give them the benefit of the doubt and believe them when they claim they were promoting the Medjugorje visions as a means of spreading the Church's teachings and to bring strayed sheep into the fold, even then, we cannot pardon the lies and manipulation that were the means to the end.

To justify their belief, those who promote the visions quote the words of Jesus himself – “by their fruits shall ye know them” – and point to the millions of pilgrims who flock to Medjugorje on the say-so of a half-dozen teenagers. From the Church’s point of view, this is a Good Thing. But even among those who welcome such interest there are some who are appalled that it should be created by such dubious means. Apart from the bishop who has consistently condemned the whole shoddy business, there have been a handful of skeptics within the Catholic Church who have produced chapter and verse to show up



the hollowness of the claims and the scandalous way they have been promoted.

But what are their efforts, compared with the flood of writings which favour the visions? Those who condemn the visions are but a handful compared with the coachloads of believers from all over the world who flock to Medjugorje. Even if the skeptics were to stand in the road and flag down the charabancs and proclaim the sham, their words would fall on deaf ears. Just as skeptical books on UFOs fail to make the best-seller lists, so those who try to puncture the Medjugorje balloon make no impression on its tough skin. Those who want to believe will believe, whatever the reasons to disbelieve.

Further reading

IF YOU BELIEVE, or would like to believe, that Mary appeared at Medjugorje, you can wallow in the vast literature available. René Laurentin, the doyen of visionary commentators, published the first major book on the sightings, *La Vierge apparaît—Elle à Medjugorje?* (*Does the Virgin appear at Medjugorje?*) which was a best-seller; there is of course an English translation. He has since written at least five other books updating his first. A visit to your friendly neighbourhood Catholic bookshop will undoubtedly reveal plenty of inspirational believer books. Enjoy!

If, on the other hand, you think that perhaps Mary isn’t manifesting herself at Medjugorje, you will find support from a few writers, all of whom are Catholics. The most recent, and the most trenchantly skeptical, is the recently published *Medjugorje, ou la fabrication du surnaturel*, (Editions Salvator, 103 rue Notre-Dame des Champs, F-75006 Paris) by Joachim Bouflet, an excellent commentator on this sort of stuff whose writings I admire even though I don’t share his beliefs. One major book has been published in English, *The hidden side of Medjugorje* (Psilog Inc, 465 Notre-Dame, Saint-François-du-Lac, Québec, Canada J0G 1M0) by Ivo Sivric, a priest from the Medjugorje region who retired to St Louis, Missouri. This may still be available and I thoroughly recommend it.

▶ Hilary Evans is joint proprietor of the Mary Evans Picture Library, and author of many books on apparitions. He wrote about UFO abductions for *The Skeptic*, 12.1.

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Skeptics in the Pub meet on the 3rd Thursday of every month except December at the Florence Nightingale Pub, Westminster Bridge Road.

Guest for September is Peter Ward, speaking on Satanic obsessions. October/November TBA.

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). Talks are 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 or Robert Newman at (0208) 686 6800.

Calorie-free living

How can anyone believe Breatharians? asks Rachel Carthy

DO YOU LIVE TO EAT or eat to live? Neither, if you're Breatharian.

The latest purveyor of the weird belief that you can live on light, never needing to eat or drink (and that this is somehow a more spiritual way to live) is 42-year-old Brisbane native Ellen Greve, known in her foodlessness as Jasmuheen, the name she adopted in 1993 after undergoing a 21-day "conversion" fast.

Jasmuheen doesn't exactly claim she hasn't eaten or drunk since 1993; she just claims she hasn't needed to eat or drink. She likes a cup of herbal tea a day and the occasional chocolate biscuit (just for the flavour, of course). She's the latest and most publicised practitioner of what is possibly the oddest of all New Age beliefs – that you can survive and even thrive on nothing but *prana* – the "cosmic life force." Crystals in the air apparently provide all the necessary nourishment, no food or water necessary. Normally this would just be the far end of the spectrum of amusing and daft food fads, except that, not surprisingly, belief in her claims is killing people.

According to the *Independent on Sunday*, there have been several deaths among people attempting the 21-day conversion fast.[1] In 1997 Timo Degen of Munich collapsed and fatally fractured his skull on the 12th day of his fast.[2] Her death followed that of Lani Morris, who died of a dehydration-induced stroke in Brisbane, Australia in 1998; the Breatharian couple who supervised her fast were convicted of her manslaughter in November 1999.[2,3] The paper concentrates, however, on the third death, that of full-time Findhorn member Verity Linn, who was found dead near a remote Scottish loch with a diary and a copy of Jasmuheen's *Living on Light*, the international bestseller in which Jasmuheen explains her philosophy. Unfortunately for Verity Linn, the book also contains instructions on putting yourself through an introductory 21-day fast, after which presumably you're capable of doing without food altogether. Findhorn staff, who knew her well, told the paper that she was a born leader and organiser of constant energy – exactly the kind of person no one would expect to become interested in absurd cultish beliefs, however much she had adopted spiritualism of the Findhorn variety as a way of life.

Nonetheless, Verity Lynn's body was found, dead of dehydration and hypothermia, outside her tent overlooking a remote Scottish loch. Her diary made it plain she'd been attempting the breatharian introductory "cleansing" – seven days of total fasting, not even water allowed, followed by 14

days when you're permitted sips of fruit juice. The last diary entry is dated on the seventh day of the fast; her body was found five days later.

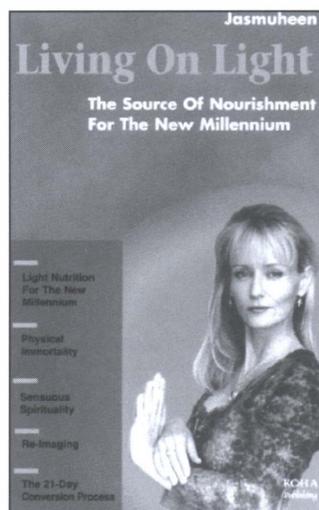
“Last year, 280,000 people in America died from obesity. Why does everybody talk about three people who died over three years from Breatharianism?”
 (<http://abc.net.au/science/correx/archives/jasmuheen.htm>)”

A cruel and horrible temptation to hand out Darwin Awards all round aside, a visit to Jasmuheen's website made me dislike her so thoroughly that I'm quite happy to blame her instead.[4] Did you know, for example, that people in the Third World are only starving because the mass media tell them that they need food?[5,6] No, I didn't think you did... Unfortunately my tolerance for offensive New Age smugness (not to mention offensive New Age chanting – turn your sound down for this site!) is too low for me to search it for the notorious remark of Jasmuheen's about how delighted anorexics are to discover the wonders of Breatharianism [6], or the interesting comment that the money you save on food can be used to buy clothes. I can see this becoming the cult of choice among the Bridget Jones generation.

Breatharianism is not a new fad by any means, though perhaps the group aspect of Jasmuheen's teachings is. The earliest mentions of such a notion go back to Pliny and his wonder-tales of one-footed sciapods and men with their faces below their shoulders. These included mention of a race with mouths too small to eat who lived on the smell of flowers; their relatives also appear in ancient Chinese annals. But there is no suggestion that humans could or should live as such. Even the early Christian ascetics tended to balk at not eating at all, preferring to survive on what the desert (or passing ravens) provided.

There are occasional mentions of extended fasting in classical times. According to George M. Gould and Walter L. Pyle's compendium of medical peculiarities, *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*, for example, Democritus survived for 40 days on the smell of honey and hot bread.[7]

In the West, the heyday of heavy-duty fasting seems not to have begun until about the 13th century. Since then there have been a steady trickle of (mostly) women, of



Cyrano travels to the moon thanks to flasks of dew



various religious denominations and levels of determination. Many of the most famous inedics – as people claiming not to need to eat have been called [8] – have been Catholic, from St Catherine of Sienna (d. 1380) to Thérèse Neumann (d. 1962 but claimed to have eaten nothing since a vision in 1927). In the more extreme cases there seems to be a strong correlation between their inedia and

other behaviour that today seems suspiciously like self-harm; while visions are obviously common there are a startling number of cases that also demonstrate stigmata, the “Wounds of Christ.” In the notable cases of Neumann and the earlier Domenica Lazzari (d. 1848) the blood from their feet is reported as trickling up over their toes as they lay in bed.

But inedia is not only a religious phenomenon. *Chambers' Book of Days* mentions what can only be called hunger strikes.[3] For example, Cecilia, “wife to John De Rygeway,” was jailed for the murder of her husband and “there remained mute and abstinent from meat and drink for 41 days.” An order attesting to the fact was sworn on the 25th April 1357. There are also cases of apparent medical loss of appetite (anorexia), and that perennial human favourite of amazing stories about how long people can survive under avalanches/ruined houses; as popular then as in these tabloid days.

Cyrano de Bergerac, admittedly not most famous as a science-fiction writer, imagined non-eating Lunarians in his *Voyages to the Moon and Sun*. [10] They lived off the smell of good food alone, and explained to Cyrano that the intestines were in fact the Serpent of Genesis, responsible for all ills of the world.

According to Jasmuheen, she was inspired to adopt Breatharianism by a visit from the Ascended Master St-Germain (she claims he's also been, among others, Shakespeare, Merlin, Christopher Columbus and Francis Bacon – presumably the early scientist, not the modern artist...). Her philosophy, including *prana*, seems heavily derived from the Theosophist syncretism of Eastern religions. While not needing to eat is not in itself one of the standard siddhis (miraculous powers gained during the practice of yoga) there is apparently a yoga mystery

referred to as “Vayu Bhakshina” or “air food.” However, it's hard to tell whether Jasmuheen derives her belief system directly from Theosophy, which still has a thriving presence in the New Age community, or via some lost or obscure book or cult.

Breatharianism has generally been a small-scale movement, and therefore not well documented. Who remembers Wiley Brooks these days, for example? He was the most successful Breatharian guru before Jasmuheen, claiming to have been food-free for 20 years. Just as Jasmuheen was caught ordering a vegetarian meal at an airline check-in desk, Brooks was caught in 1983 buying Twinkies at a 7-11 convenience store. Both found excuses: Jasmuheen, that the meal was an error, Brooks that the Twinkies story was fabricated by a jealous ex. (As proof that Breatharians never die, Brooks, like Jasmuheen, has a Web site promoting himself and his beliefs.[12]

It doesn't seem that anything can slow Jasmuheen down any more than Brooks has been deterred. She commented, for example, that Verity Lynn's death was caused by a lack of “spiritual fitness.”[13]. Some Australian (and, more recently, Scottish) newspapers have taken an interest in her since the fasting deaths, and in October 1999 the Australian TV program *60 Minutes* finally carried out the experiment her claims had been crying out for.[14] Jasmuheen agreed to be kept under strict observation for a week to check that her food intake was in fact zero. Unsurprisingly, the supervising doctor called the fast off after four days on medical grounds. Equally unsurprisingly, Jasmuheen was utterly unfazed and is now happily complaining that the doctor was incompetent, the air was polluted and the TV crew deprived her of sleep, but that she is nonetheless grateful for the “amazing learning experience.”[15]

“...if we, as the masses, keep focusing our thoughtforms, media, attention, on world starvation affirming outmoded beliefs that ‘if you don't eat you must die’ then the starving masses will die.”

One of the problems that any backlash faces in dealing with Jasmuheen is that Breatharianism is not an organised cult. To quote her: “Our teachings encourage self-mastery and inter-dependence, not co-dependence or the master-student relationship of guru-disciple. We are an organisation dedicated to responsibly sharing good quality information that, if applied, will benefit both individual lifestyles and also global affairs.”[15] My translation: she'll sell her books, charge high fees for her seminars (the *Sunday Times* noted that she charged £1,500 for her London seminars), and comfortably deny any responsibility for the people who read her drivel and starve themselves to death, on the uncomfortably accurate grounds that it's their choice.

There are scattered pockets of resistance, notably in her hometown of Brisbane, Australia – the *Brisbane Courier Mail* (9) has been particularly vitriolic about both Jasmuheen and her husband, Jeffrey Ferguson, and adds

some interesting historical sidelights on the pair. According to the *Courier Mail*, Ferguson used to run a financial advisory service with Jasmuheen (then Ellen Greve) as an assistant. He was jailed for fraud in 1992 after misappropriating \$947,000 from his clients, and the *Courier Mail* insinuates, like the *Independent on Sunday*, that adopting Breatharianism is far safer and more lucrative.

Depressingly, the situations unlikely to improve much. Basic common sense stops most people from doing anything other than laughing at Breatharians, although there are mutters that anti-cult lawyers in Germany want her in court over Degen's death. But Jasmuheen has a website, and, given the penetration of the Net and New-Agery (which is exploiting it more and more successfully) into Western culture, there's a good chance that her already healthy bank account will be swelled, even if only a tiny percentage of the population is innocent and optimistic enough to believe in the possibility of what Jasmuheen offers. The *Independent on Sunday* notes that the linking of Verity Linn's death to *Living on Light* actually increased the sales of Jasmuheen's books.

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▶ Rachel Carthy lives a troglodyte existence in a book-lined den somewhere in south-east London. She thanks Peter Darben and Felinda for Australian articles.



Skeptical Stats

1. Percentage of 1,000 15 to 24-year-olds polled by the Guardian and Observer who said they believed in or thought there was some truth in humanism: **25**.
2. Percentage in that same poll who believed in or thought there was some truth in Scientology: **19**.
3. Number of domestic accidents per year in which slippers are implicated; **27,000**
4. Percentage of men in London who are rejected as sperm donors: **70**
5. Percentage rejected in Hampshire or West Sussex: **L 40**.
6. Number of men detained in Vietnam for allegedly trying to create apparitions of the Virgin Mary: **3**.
7. Number of woman stoned, strangled, or hacked to death on suspicion of being witches in Bihar, India in the past six years: **400**.
8. Amount it costs to have a female newborn baby killed in the same region, the poorest in India: **>5.50**.
9. Number of marriage ceremonies in Scotland in 1999 that included jumping over a broom: **19**.
10. Date of annual Kook Day: **June 26**.
11. Average four-week healing rate for duodenal ulcers among patients taking placebos twice a day: **36 percent**.
12. Average four-week healing rate for duodenal ulcers among patients taking placebos four times a day: **44 percent**.
13. Number of reports of protective-suited aliens in the 1950s: **22**.
14. In the 1960s: **17**.
15. In the 1970s: **24**.
16. 1980s: **5**.
17. 1990s: **0**.
18. Percentage of Americans who reject evolution and accept the literal interpretation of the Bible's Creation story: **45**.
19. Percentage of Britons holding the same belief: **7**.
20. Number of calls, per month, taken by British Association of Homeopathic Veterinary Surgeons from people requesting treatment for their animals: **500**.
21. Number of fingertips found in computers sent to PC World for repair in October, 1999: **1**.
22. Number of cattle slaughtered in 1998: **2.2 million**.
23. Number of cattle likely to be infected with BSE: **3**.
24. Date the world ended, according to author Richard Noone: **May 5, 2000**.
25. Number of years, as of June 24, 2000, that the Blessed Virgin Mary has been appearing regularly to six visionaries in Medjugorje: **19**.
26. Number of secrets to go before she issues three warnings and the world must convert: **3**.

SOURCES: 1,2 *Guardian*; 3 *Rospa (Independent)*; 4,5 *Independent*; 6 *Reuters — Scotsman*; 7 *Daily Telegraph*; 8 *Wall Street Journal Europe*; 9 *Guardian*; 10 *Email*; 11,12 *Focus on Alternative and Complementary Therapies* (Vol 5, No 2); 13–17 *Magonia*; 18,19 *The Freethinker*; 20 *Independent*; 21 *Daily Mail*; 22,23 *Guardian*; 24 Richard Noone, 5/5/2000 *Ice: the Ultimate Disaster*; 25,26 <http://www.medjugorje.org>

 Skeptical Stats was compiled by Wendy M. Grossman and Marc La Chapelle, with thanks to Rachel Carthy for additional assistance.

A Promise of Utopia

Dene Bebbington examines Transcendental Meditation

WORLD PEACE, lives of fulfilment, perfect health, eradication of poverty, lives free of mistakes and suffering: these are the laudable but extraordinary and undoubtedly too-good-to-be-true promises from a movement which claims to have the solution to all mankind's problems, and thus a blueprint for "Heaven on Earth." The movement is Transcendental Meditation (TM), which was founded by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. An example of his vision is:

This is a book of revival for the age. If the golden era is ever to dawn on human society, if the age of Enlightenment is ever to be on earth, this book will provide a freeway for it to come. A new humanity will be born, fuller in conception and richer in experience and accomplishments in all fields. Joy of life will belong to every man, love will dominate human society, truth and virtue will reign in the world, peace on earth will be permanent, and all will live in fulfilment in fullness of life in God consciousness. [1]

How is this utopia to be brought about? The Maharishi's blueprint boils down to the following:

- Developing perfect individuals by use of Transcendental Meditation techniques.
- Eliminating crime and conflict by having groups of "Yogic Flyers" around the world who generate harmony in surrounding populations by meditating.
- Creating ideal villages, towns, and cities using Maharishi Sthapatya Veda – a "science" of architecture in accord with the Maharishi's "Natural Law".
- Perfect health for everyone resulting from the use of Maharishi Ayur-Veda – a modern version of a traditional system of medicine.
- National self-sufficiency and eradication of poverty brought about by using Maharishi's farming and economic methods.
- Perfect government in every country modelled on "nature's government".

There is nothing new about individuals or groups claiming to be in possession of great truths regarding life, the universe, and everything. TM is worth looking at because not only are some of its claims pseudoscientific and paranormal, but it gives an insight into how and why people can get carried away by wishful thinking. Looking below the surface of the movement's hyperbole the emperor seems to have a distinct shortage of clothes.

Transcendental Meditation

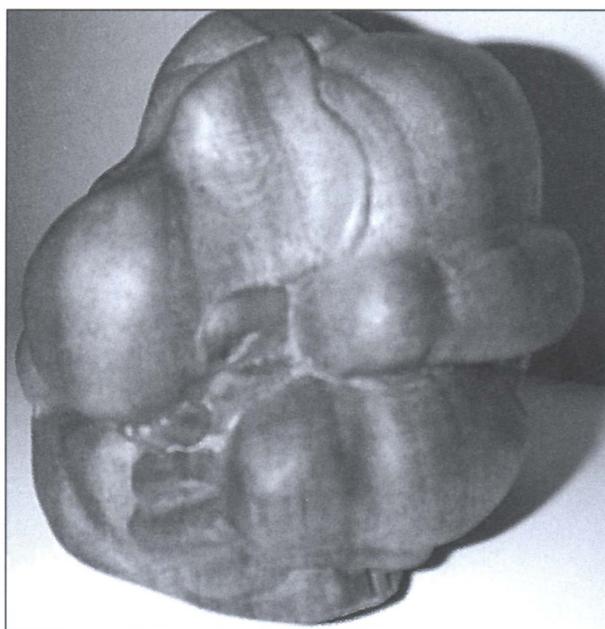
THE ORIGINS of the TM movement go back to the 1950s, when the Maharishi founded the Spiritual Regeneration Movement with the aim of spiritually regenerating mankind. He developed a meditation technique which has roots in

ancient Hindu scriptures. Over a period of time, the movement gathered support and became known as Transcendental Meditation. It now has a multi-faceted, worldwide presence that includes educational establishments, commercial interests, a plethora of websites, and even a political party (the Natural Law Party). The term Transcendental Meditation is a registered trademark.

The TM technique is said to be effortless, lead to higher states of consciousness, and reduce stress; thus it is for spiritual and/or relaxation purposes. The technique makes use of a mantra, purportedly a meaningless sound allocated on an individual basis so that it should be personal. The reality is rather different than the official line; there is a limited number of mantras from which one is allocated according to the age group of the recipient. A book written by the Maharishi and published in India in 1955 gives an insight into what the mantras really are:

For our (householder) practice we select only the mantras of personal gods. Such [deity] mantras fetch to us the grace of personal gods and make us happier in every walk of life.[2]

Apparently there are four states of consciousness that can be experienced through the practice of TM – Transcendental Consciousness, Cosmic Consciousness, God Consciousness, and Unity Consciousness. The pinnacle of TM's spiritual experience is Unity Consciousness, aka Enlightenment. Rather than TM enabling a person to achieve contact with an underlying reality beyond the individual mind, it is more plausible that a meditator is merely having unusual and



interesting subjective experiences. The human brain is capable of producing many kinds of bizarre subjective experience that do not accord with reality outside a person's mind.[3] It's not clear how one could verify or falsify the proposition that TM is a path to experiencing an underlying reality ("Being" in TM parlance).

An advanced meditation technique known as the TM-Sidhi programme is also part of the movement's portfolio, and a well-publicised aspect of this programme is Yogic Flying. A Yogic Flyer sits cross-legged and practices a particular form of meditation which is said to give an experience of "bubbling bliss" and can lead to a person hopping while sitting cross-legged – a most peculiar spectacle! It is claimed that the Sidhis can develop supernormal powers including levitation, flying, and even invisibility. At one time TM advertisements [4] and other material [5] gave the misleading impression that such supernormal phenomena were already being achieved. Nowadays, TM output about Yogic Flying is clearer that what people are actually achieving is no more than the hopping stage. There is no publicly verified occurrence of levitation or flying.

Maharishi Effect

THE PHILOSOPHY behind TM envisages a form of consciousness as the basis for all reality: "It [Being] is the source of all time, space, and causation... Experience shows that Being is bliss consciousness, the source of all thinking, of all existing creation." [1] This may not be an uncommon belief in some mystical traditions but it is not an accepted view in modern science, although arguments grounded in quantum physics have been made for it by Goswami [6] and TM scientists.

One prominent claim is that groups of meditators can influence the consciousness of the surrounding population by generating "coherence". The conjectured explanation is that a collective consciousness is in the unified field of physics, and hence this is the suggested mechanism for the paranormal effect. This supposed influence on non-meditators is known as "The Maharishi Effect" because the Maharishi predicted the effect based on a statement in one of the Yoga Sutras.

The coherence that is generated by groups of meditators is supposed to influence the consciousness of the population within the Maharishi Effects sphere of influence. Allegedly, this leads to positive social outcomes such as lower crime, fewer accidents, reduced conflict, and so on. Other specious claims have been made for the Maharishi Effect – for example, that it can positively affect crop yields [5] and weather patterns [7].

What determines the sphere of influence? It seems that the range of the Maharishi Effect is determined by demographics rather than geographical distance. It is claimed that a group comprised of 1 percent of a population performing standard TM is enough to affect that population. [8] Further, the square root of 1 percent

of a population doing Yogic Flying is supposed to be enough to affect that population. The implication of this can be shown by the following formula:

$$P = 100 \times (S + Y^2)$$

where:

P = size of population which will be influenced (sphere of influence)

S = number of standard meditators

Y = number of Yogic Flyers

According to this model, approximately 7,700 Yogic Flyers would be a large enough group to bring about positive trends throughout the entire world. In fact nearly this many Yogic Flyers have been brought together on occasion, and credit has even been claimed for bringing about an end to tensions like the Cold War and the Balkan conflict!

Researchers involved with the TM organisation have carried out studies on the Maharishi Effect, some of which have been published in minor academic journals. The most vaunted of these published studies is probably one regarding conflict in the Middle East [9]; other prominent studies have pertained to crime levels in Washington DC and Merseyside. A critique of these studies is beyond the scope of this article and my expertise; however, there has been criticism focusing on both conceptual and methodological problems of the Middle East study.[10,11] Apparently there has been no verification of the Maharishi Effect by any researchers not involved or associated with TM.

It is reasonable to give TM-sponsored studies into the Maharishi Effect little, if any, credence and for the time being to assume that the phenomenon is a statistical artifact. There is reason to wonder if something fishy is going on. Barry Markovsky (from the Department of Sociology at the University of Iowa) made repeated requests for the data used in the Middle East study. Orme-Johnson refused on the grounds that Markovsky is supposedly biased against TM. Orme-Johnson also said the data had been given to two non-TM researchers but refused to divulge their names or say whether they had published any analyses using the data [12].

In the spring of 1999 a group of Yogic Flyers convened in Dubrovnik (Croatia) as part of the Dubrovnik Peace Project. During that time Serb soldiers crossed into a demilitarised zone of the Prevlaka Peninsula near the Croatian border. After less than two weeks the Serbs withdrew and the DPP claimed credit for this:

We feel confident to claim this withdrawal of Serbian troops from the Prevlaka Peninsula as an achievement of the Dubrovnik Peace Project. We base this claim on three factors. Firstly, on the repeated experience with groups of Yogic Flyers reducing conflict and promoting peace. Secondly, on the scientific verification of this approach. Thirdly, that the numbers of Yogic Flyers at the Dubrovnik Peace Project were more than the required minimum (the square root of 1 percent of the population of the region), and so sufficient to cause the withdrawal. We look forward to scientists verifying this claim. [13]

I'm not a scientist but I don't mind taking a closer look at the claim. According to the Dubrovnik Peace Project, the Serb incursion took place on April 18, 1999 and by the next day there were enough (actual number not stated) Yogic Flyers to create coherence for the Dubrovnik/Prevlaka region. The Serbs were said to have withdrawn on April 28. I made several requests to the Dubrovnik Peace Project asking for their source of information regarding the Serb incursion, but no response was forthcoming. However, I was able to obtain a press report which mentioned this incident.[14] I don't know how accurate its information is but it doesn't concur with the project's timeline. The press report states that the Serb incursion happened on April 21 – two days after the Dubrovnik Peace Project claimed it had enough Yogic Flyers to provide “an unseen invincible armour of defence against destructive outside influences.”

Even if the Dubrovnik Peace Project's version of events is correct, how do we know if the person who took the decision to withdraw the Serb soldiers was within the Maharishi Effect sphere of influence? Rather than invoking paranormal explanations which bolster TM's image, it is more plausible that political factors are the explanation. It's interesting to note the spin the Dubrovnik Peace Project put on this event: the Serbs are described as withdrawing “suddenly, without any obvious reason.” What they didn't mention or didn't know is that Croatia protested to the UN Security Council about the Serb action, and that:

According to some sources, the head of the UNMOP mission, Colonel Graeme Williams, on Tuesday held talks with the commander of Yugoslav Army, Vice-Admiral Milan Zec, who told the Colonel that the Yugoslav Army would pull out from the demilitarised area by the end of the day.[14]

Perfect Health

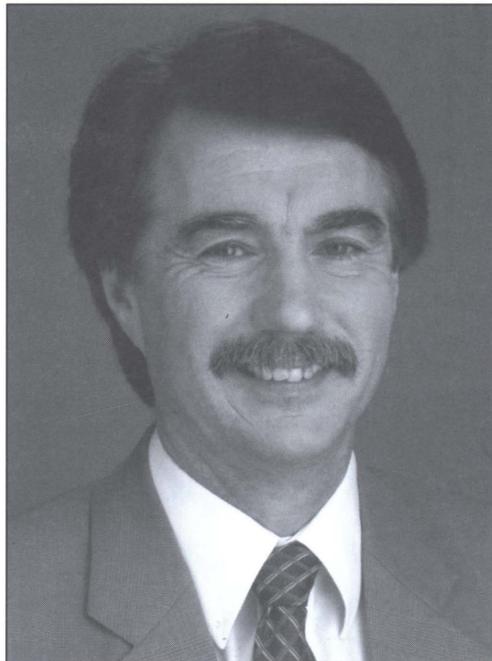
THE IDEA OF perfection permeates the movement's world view, and this includes health. Ayurveda is a traditional Hindu system of medicine. The Maharishi has incorporated a modern version of this known as Maharishi Ayur-Veda along with other practices to form an approach to health. Maharishi Ayur-Veda is a prevention-oriented health care system, and problems with health are said to result from “imbalances” in the mind and body. Help is at hand though:

The purpose of the Maharishi Vedic Approach to Health program consultation is to allow the physician

to determine any imbalances in the system. The physician then makes recommendations based on the Maharishi Vedic Approach to Health program to enliven the inner intelligence of the body and help restore balance to the system. Recommendations may be given for diet, daily routine, and herbal supplements, including the Veda herb program.[15]

Not everyone can afford Maharishi Ayur-Veda products. One of the herbal supplements (Maharishi Amrit Kalash) costs the equivalent of several hundred pounds for a year's supply. So, it seems that perfect health is not a benefit that can be enjoyed by everyone just yet. Then there is the question of the feasibility of producing enough Maharishi Ayur-Veda herbs to supply the entire world's population.

It strikes me as somewhat dangerous and irresponsible to promise perfect health. It would be interesting to know how they think changes in diet and daily routine, plus the consumption of herbal supplements, could prevent serious infectious diseases. The honesty of some people involved with Maharishi Ayur-Veda has been called into question.[16]



*Dr Geoffrey Clements, Natural Law Party
Candidate for Mayor of London*

Global reconstruction

ONE WAY OF achieving positive changes in good fortune is to close off any southern entrances to your house, at least according to Maharishi Sthapatya Veda – a modern version of a Vedic system akin to Feng Shui.[17] It is a set of principles for the architecture and construction of buildings to make them in accord with Natural Law. We are told that residents of buildings adhering to Maharishi Sthapatya Veda principles can expect to enjoy “perfect health, happiness, prosperity, and fulfilment.”[18]

What proof there is, if any, for these wondrous outcomes from a building's architecture and materials is unclear. Again, this is something that cannot be afforded by everyone; the cost of building based on Maharishi Sthapatya Veda is higher than normal due to the materials suggested, and a consultation costs a minimum of US\$3,000. However, one free piece of advice is to close up any southern entrances to one's house as these are apparently inauspicious. If there's any truth in this then my workplace definitely has a southern entrance!

The movement has a global construction plan to bring all buildings in the world to the Maharishi Sthapatya Veda standard. The logistics, let alone the cost, of such a gargantuan undertaking would be incredible even if it were

planned as a gradual process. Never mind heaven on earth, the movement needs to come *down* to earth.

Wishful thinking

IS THE TM movement really in possession of profound truths about life and able to deliver heaven on earth? Far from it. Such fantastical beliefs are most likely explained by wishful thinking. It is natural for people to seek answers to the big questions in life and to hope for a better world, but those who believe they have found The Truth can become blinkered.

Not only is there a constellation of bizarre beliefs and claims emanating from the movement but there have been many allegations by ex-TMers that the movement's self-publicised idealistic image is a façade.[2,19] In TM publicity materials, a particular source of pride is the number of scientific studies that have been conducted on various aspects of TM. They cite over 500 studies but give no indication as to how many of those were conducted by researchers involved with TM. Former insiders have claimed that negative data was often suppressed, and while such accusations should perhaps not be taken completely at face value, the knowledge of ex-TMers is valuable to help in understanding a movement which is not especially open.[19] Generating an ostensibly scientific aura around mystical and essentially religious beliefs is important to the movement, and doing this perhaps helps to create a larger market for their products and services.

The small town of Fairfield, Iowa (USA) is a headquarters for some parts of the TM organisation, most notably the Maharishi University of Management. TMers constitute a significant portion of the Fairfield population (somewhere between 5 and 15 percent), yet crime hasn't been eliminated in that area. This seems surprising considering the grand claims for the Maharishi Effect, especially bearing in mind that the town has had a sizeable TM presence for over 20 years. Not all people who spent time on the TM campus are of the opinion that it was a heaven on earth in microcosm.

People who believe in the Maharishi's utopia have a rose-tinted perception of its possibilities. But the bottom line is that everyone will not take up TM and alter their lives to his beliefs. It is reasonable to accept that for some people TM yields benefits of relaxation and spiritual meaning, but many of the movement's claims are dubious at best, and crackpot at worst. Highly educated people, including scientists, involved with TM should know better. Some have stated that the Maharishi Effect is a proven technology, yet it is nothing of the sort: a few published studies by biased researchers do not constitute proof.

Utopian thinking is flawed because the world is a complex place and is not amenable to a "one size fits all" and virtually all-encompassing system for living. Worse, reports by ex-TMers suggest that for some people TM actually has deleterious effects.[19] A sincere desire to make the world a better place is admirable; the TM

movement does seem to be concerned for the welfare of mankind and the environment. Nonetheless, visions of utopia are best left to works of fiction, where they belong.

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Tim Pearce

Dene Bebbington wrote about the statistics of prayer in *The Skeptic* 131 He would like to thank Andrew Skolnick, Barry Markovsky, and especially Albert Miller for helpful feedback after reviewing this article.

Reply to Fantastic Skepticism

by R. W. Morrell

IN THE course of his article, "Fantastic Skepticism" (*The Sceptic*, Vol 13, Nos. 3–4), Mr.D.J. Eccott correctly points out it was not Robert Schoch who claimed that the Sphinx at Giza had been carved in 10,000 BCE, but Mr.J.A. West, who was the person who had interested Dr.Schoch in the question of the monuments date. Mr. West, who describes himself as "an independent Egyptologist", whatever that is supposed to mean, entertains a number of strange ideas about ancient Egypt which he has adopted from his guru, the late Mr.R.A.S.de Lubicz, author of number of esoteric studies and who was, according to Mr.West, "well versed in hermetic wisdom, with a solid founding in the religions of the East, passed out through Hindus, Chinese, Buddhists, Theosophists, Anthroposophists and Yoga," and who had also, he goes on, "found the same wisdom built into the glyphs, statues, and temples of Egypt".[1] Moreover, Mr.Lubicz viewed Egyptian hieroglyphs as "symbolic carriers of a hermetic message", a belief which brings to mind the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher's (1602–1680) interpretation of a single name, Apries:

The protection of Osiris against the violence of Typho must be elicited according to the proper rites and ceremonies by sacrifices and by appeal to the tutelary Genii of the triple world, in order to ensure the enjoyment of the prosperity customarily given by the Nile against the violence of the enemy Typho.[2]

At least Fr. Kircher is credited with important practical pioneering work on Coptic, but as the distinguished philologist Sir Alan Gardiner said of his work on hieroglyphics, his theories "as to the content of the hieroglyphic inscriptions exceed all bounds in their imaginative folly,"[3] a comment some may feel also applies to many of Messrs. Lubicz's and West's fantasies.

Contrary to what Mr. Eccott maintains, Mr. West appears convinced that Dr. Schoch's "minimum date for the carving of the Sphinx," which he estimated to have been done between 5000 and 7000 B.C., could be considerably extended, for he stresses that Dr. Schoch "acknowledges" his dating to have been "a minimum" dating.[4] Consequently, he hints strongly that an adjustment was possible which would then bring it into conformity with his own preferred minimum date of 10,000 BCE. I emphasise the word minimum as it is clear Mr.West would like to give the Sphinx an even older date, perhaps sometime between 12,000 and 15,000 BCE, for according to his beliefs Egyptian civilisation commenced sometime between 23,000 and 36,000 BCE,[5] being introduced by people from Atlantis. This proposition requires hard evidence, and he believes this is to be obtained from a study of certain of Egypt's more spectacular early monuments, hence his obsession with establishing an earlier date for the Sphinx.

Much water has flowed down the Nile since 1992, when Dr.Schoch published his paper "Redating the Great

Sphinx",[6] and several other geologists have challenged his ideas, the first being Professor James A.Harrell of the University of Toledo, whose paper "The Sphinx Controversy: Another Look at the Evidence" was also published in *KMT*,[7] followed by a response from Dr.Schoch. In his paper Professor Harrell critically examines Schoch's hypothesis, and while allowing for the important part water played in producing the erosion profile of the Sphinx (except for the neck which all parties, even Mr. West, agree was caused by the action by wind-borne sand), demonstrated that there was no need to invoke a lengthy and intense period of precipitation as called for by Dr. Schoch.

Another particularly important and interesting study of the problem, "Geological Weathering and its Implications on the Age of the Sphinx", by Drs. K.L. Gauri, J.J. Sinai and J.K. Bandyopadhyay, lends additional weight to Professor Harrell's viewpoint while at the same time adding significant new observations.[8] As far as I know, this paper has not been replied to by Dr. Schoch, who seems to have lost interest in the debate. The paper contains an interesting illustration which speaks volumes for the rapidity of erosive action. A recently quarried block of limestone, intended for use in restoration work on the Sphinx, had been left lying in a nearby ditch for some months. During this time it had weathered in such a way as to display similar characteristics to those seen on the monument itself, something that should not have happened in such a short time if Dr. Schoch's hypothesis is correct. While these studies do not invalidate his hypothesis, they do demonstrate that a long period of intense rain is not required to account for the erosion that has taken place on the Sphinx. Consequently, the date for the carving of the monument, estimated on archeological grounds as being between 2,520 and 2,494 BCE, stands.

Mr.Eccott disagrees with this last statement, as he claims "no irrefutable archeological evidence has been forthcoming to support any age for the building of the Sphinx." If he seriously believes this to be the case I would simply refer him to the debate which took place in several issues of *KMT* following the publication of Dr.Schoch's paper, in particular Dr. Mark Lehner's, "Notes and Photographs on the West-Schoch Sphinx Hypothesis".[9] "Is it so unreasonable to propose that the Sphinx was built between B.C. 5000 and 7000 by a proto-Egyptian people?" he asks, resorting to a debating trick which seeks to place the onus of proof on individuals who do not accept the idea rather than those making the assertion. It is for those who believe in the existence of "proto-Egyptians" to produce their evidence for examination and debate.

Having claimed there is no "irrefutable archeological evidence" connecting the Sphinx with any age, Mr.Eccott promptly contradicts himself by disputing the evidence that he says does not exist, namely the appearance of Khafre's name on a stela found between the paws of the Sphinx, thus connecting him with it. The stela was found during the excavation of the monument carried out in

1818 by Captain G.B.Caviglia and has become known as the Dream Stela because it carries an account of a dream the future Thutmose IV (c.1398–1388 BCE) had when he fell asleep near the Sphinx. In this, the Sphinx spoke to the prince, who was not yet even Crown Prince, promising him he would become king if he cleared the sand from it. He did so, became king and had the stela erected to record his dream. When discovered it was, as Mr. Eccott notes, badly flaked. It has subsequently deteriorated further, and all the isolated fragments of text remaining below the last complete register present when it was found have been lost.

The lost text includes the fragment referring to “Khaf”, which was accepted as a reference to the 4th dynasty king, Khafre. This, Mr. Eccott, maintains, is only a “supposed” reference, although he must have doubts, as he qualifies himself with the words, “even if this syllable (Khaf) was intended to be the first part of Chephren’s (the Greek rendering of the king’s name) name”, there is still no mention on the stela of his being the builder of the Sphinx. Quite correct. There is, however, no “supposed” about the name, for shortly after its discovery a careful drawing of the stela was published as a large, two-page plate in by Colonel Howard Vyse.[10] This shows not only the two hieroglyphic symbols which constitute the first part of Khafre’s name, but also confirms that these were part of a royal name as they were enclosed by a cartouche. This allows a comparison to be made with the serekhs and cartouches of other monarchs, which in turn makes it possible to recover the missing hieroglyph, which transliterates as r’, indicative of Re. Thus we obtain the transliteration Kh-f-r’ (Khafre) which translates, “Appearing like Re.” Mr.Eccott might not relish the fact but this is certainly evidence for the association of the king with the monument, even if it does not state he had ordered its carving. Thus the stela provides the evidence whose existence Mr.Eccott denies.

It is all too evident that despite his strongly expressed denial Mr.Eccott realises the Dream Stela seriously damages his case. Otherwise, there would have been no need for him to draw attention to a second stela, which he maintains is evidence for the Sphinx’s existing prior to the reign of Khafre. For reasons best known only to himself he declines to identify the stela in question. However, it is evident from what he writes that it is the so-called Inventory Stela discovered by Francois Mariette in 1858. This, Mr.Eccott says, relates the discovery by Khufu of “a temple of Horus in the vicinity of the Sphinx, “whereas what it says is that Khufu discovered” the House of Isis, Mistress of the Pyramid, by the side of Hwran. “This last term is a reference to the Sphinx. Interestingly, he is also careful not to make any reference to the date of the stela, but it was made sometime between c.589–570 BCE.

By not mentioning this, Mr.Eccott is evidently attempting to give the impression that the stela is of great antiquity, whereas in terms of the history of ancient Egypt it is relatively modern. It was found in the remains of a

small temple to Isis at Giza which had been built around 900 BCE against the eastern side of the southernmost (GI-c) of the three satellite pyramids on the east side of Khufu’s tomb, the Great Pyramid, around 900 BCE, where a college of priests worshiped the god-kings who had built the pyramids. As evidence for the existence of the Great Pyramid the stela is a non-starter, for the information on it is at best pious fiction, at worst outright lies.

The value of the Inventory Stela as evidence that the Sphinx existed when Khufu lived, and by implication before then, depends upon establishing that Isis was a major deity in the 4th dynasty, so much so that a major temple (house) dedicated to her was situated on the Giza plateau in the 4th dynasty and that she was looked upon as mistress of the Great Pyramid, which was situated near the Sphinx. However, at this time and for many years later Isis was a minor fetish deity with a small shrine at Behbet-el-Hagar near Busiris in the Delta. There is not a single unambiguous reference to Isis until the 5th dynasty when her name appears in the pyramid texts in the pyramid of Unis at Saqqara. Prior to this only three possible references to her are known. These are: a glazed amulet from a first dynasty tomb at Helwan which resembles the tyet knot or girdle that came to be associated with Isis from the period of the New Kingdom (1550 BCE) onwards; a rock cut inscription on a hill near Buhen which may mention her; and what later became the sign used to write her name found on the clay sealing to a jar excavated from the tomb of the 2nd dynasty king, Peribsen, though it is extremely doubtful whether this has anything to do with her. It is clear then, that the claims made for the Inventory Stela as evidence for the existence of the Sphinx during the time of Khufu can be dismissed as so much special pleading by Mr.Eccott.

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Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly

Lines of enquiry

A FEW YEARS AGO, a former colleague of mine was involved in research into the effects of electromagnetic (EM) fields on human beings. Unfortunately, the more I learned about this research, the more I felt that it should be carried out in a psychology (or even parapsychology) department rather than an engineering department. The research appeared to be anecdotal rather than scientific, and indeed when it was eventually published in popular form [1] the book sat more comfortably in the paranormal section of the bookshop than on the science shelves.

Interest in this topic has continued to grow and newspaper headlines such as "Cancer magnet clue to electric pylon mystery" [2] and "Fresh evidence found of cancer risk near pylons" [3] capture the public attention and undoubtedly leave the impression that there is a clearly established link between EM fields and various diseases. More restrained headlines such as "Electricity link with cancer is ruled out" [4] probably do little to offset growing fear about the relationship between EM fields and health. So what is the true story here?

Well, there is no doubt that electricity can be bad for you, as anyone (still living) who has connected himself to a live 240-volt terminal will testify. And even without direct contact, EM fields can have significant effects, as illustrated by the old poodle in the microwave, friend-of-a-friend urban legend. However, almost all the research points to there being no measurable influence on health of the EM fields that we encounter in our everyday lives. Both electric and magnetic fields are associated with electricity power lines, but the electric field will in general not penetrate into the home or even into our skin. Any biological effect, therefore, would almost certainly be due to the magnetic field which is present whenever current flows through the lines. In principle, magnetic fields can have effects on us by directly exerting forces on cells or by inducing currents to flow inside us. However, the effects of fields from power lines, even on people living nearby, are swamped by random thermal agitation and naturally occurring currents within the body and so are extremely unlikely to have any effect [5].

More important than any theoretical assumptions are the outcomes of relevant experimental and large-scale epidemiological studies. Many studies have been published on the effects of EM fields on biological cell cultures and the results of these are overwhelmingly negative despite, in some cases, exposure to extremely large fields [5]. A small number of experiments have yielded positive results but these have not been replicated. Likewise, many studies on animals have been carried out, in some cases also involving exposure to very high fields, and again in these there is no

replicated evidence that even long term exposure to EM fields has any effect on animals.

Finally, and most importantly, epidemiological studies of the relationship between proximity to power lines and cancers in humans show no clear association. Among the numerous studies that have been carried out over the last decade or more, an occasional study does indicate a positive association, but the vast majority of studies do not. In particular, the largest study of childhood cancers, which took place in the UK over a five-year period [6], concluded that exposure to the levels of magnetic field found in the UK does not augment risk for childhood cancer. This study looked at all children who had contracted leukemia or tumours over the period of the study and compared their living conditions, including electromagnetic fields in their homes, with those of healthy children. It found no difference in exposure to EM fields between the two groups.

Of course, as with all potential hazards where effects, if any, are subtle, no conclusions concerning risk are absolute. Science will never be able to give a 100 percent clean bill of health to electricity pylons, nuclear power stations, GM foods or British beef. On the other hand, the same is true for analysing the risk associated with eating mushrooms, living in a house with stairs, or playing tennis. In the conclusions of a comprehensive document on EM fields and human health [5], Dr John Moulder of the Medical College of Wisconsin states: "Public controversy about electricity and health will continue until: future research shows conclusively that the fields are hazardous, or until the public learns that science cannot guarantee absolute safety, or until the public and media get bored by the subject. Neither of the first two outcomes is particularly likely, but the third may be happening". I think this is just as true in the UK as in the US. On the other hand despite what I believe to be an informed assessment of the risks involved, I have to be honest and say that I would probably not rush to buy a new house with a 132,000-volt power line suspended above it, GM crops in the field next door and a nuclear power station at the end of the garden.

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Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini



The perils of self-publishing

AS I'M SURE you'll need no persuading, the world of philosophy is a dynamic, exciting one. Only the other week, for example, I received a book which promised "a new, revolutionary, way of thinking about the scientific quest". You could see by the punctuation alone that the author certainly was original. I also have on my shelf a work which offers "an alternative to conventional philosophy". Yet another offers a "radically different approach to the prevailing reductionism" in the philosophy of mind. A fourth author explains that "I did not even wish to continue the line of traditional philosophy. Indeed, I am convinced that it is impossible to do so."

Phew. Heady stuff. How can I fail to be excited in such a thrilling maelstrom of original thinking? Yet I have to confess, I have not read any of the books above. Despite their claims to radical discovery, they sit gathering dust.

How can such cavalier disregard of new ideas be justified? Surely a philosopher has a duty to examine ideas, the newer the better? Yet these books remain unread because they are all examples of self-published philosophy and that's a genre I try very hard to avoid.

Surely, you might say, the validity of a philosophical argument is not dependent upon whether those ideas are published by a mainstream publishing house or a lone individual with a PC. Of course, that is right. But the fact is that hundreds, if not thousands, of books of philosophy are published each year. As in any subject, one can only read so much. If one always takes the attitude, "well, this one might indeed be the great breakthrough in philosophy it promises", you'd end up having to read any book which makes sufficiently grand claims for itself. This does not strike me as a good use of time. Nor is it a sound way of reasoning. By the same token, I'd have to think, "well, maybe this lot have got the date of doomsday right".

It's not a question of being dismissive. It's all about being rightly skeptical about authors who make great claims for the originality or importance of their own work. What impresses me more is if other people, whose judgement I respect, make great claims about an author's works. The peer-review process which mainstream academic presses put manuscripts through ensures that at least some good minds believe the book is worth reading. With self-published work, I only have the author and her mother's word for it.

What worries me about much self-published philosophy is that it is being produced in isolation, free from external critique. It is only human nature that when we come up with ideas we tend to be bedazzled by the creations of our own minds. We feel we have had an important insight and we soon get to work constructing our beloved theory. What then happens is that we get so attached to it, we find ourselves committed to it and no longer subjecting it to rational scrutiny. The idea becomes something to nurture and protect. That's much easier to do if we don't let skilled minds get to work on it. It also helps if we persuade ourselves that it's such a revolutionary idea that people are bound to dismiss it out of hand.

It is a depressing thought, but very few of us have any truly original ideas. (I'm sure I have not been blessed with any). What is more, the unoriginal ideas we do have will almost certainly have already been subjected to great scrutiny by minds often equal or superior to our own. If we sit in our studies, building our theories while paying no attention to what others have contributed to the subject, then we are risking making the same mistakes others have done. So rather than setting out to complete our pet theories in isolation, we should always attempt to seek out the contributions of other thinkers. That means actively seeking challenge.

It is only by responding to such challenges that our ideas really develop. This is why the images of the philosopher in the garret, alone in thought is a misleading one. From the time of Socrates, arguing in the streets, through the academy of Plato, the lyceum of Aristotle through to the modern university, philosophers have always relied on contact with fellow thinkers to sharpen their skills and hone their arguments.

This is why philosophers sometimes come across as such argumentative souls. Whereas often conversations tend to be no more than exchanges of ideas, the philosopher wants to examine these ideas and probe them more. To those unfamiliar with this approach, such scrutiny can seem like a challenge or a threat. But the aim is not to quarrel, it is to pursue the truth. When I pick up a self-published work of philosophy, I don't usually see any evidence of this rigorous interchange. What I tend to see is the pet theory of the loner at her desk. With the odds this stacked against it, I think I'm right to put it at the bottom of my reading pile. On the other hand, if someone doesn't publish my "Treatise on the Meaning of Absolutely Everything" soon, I'm off down the printers. I can assure you that my own work is always the exception that proves the rule.

Julian Baggini edits and publishes the quarterly *The Philosopher's Magazine*.

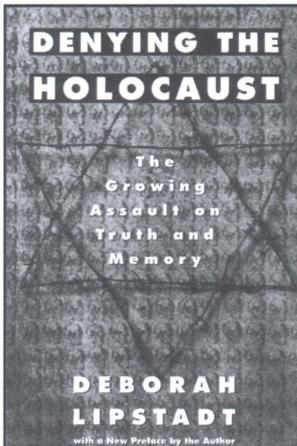
Reviews



IN DENIAL

Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory, by Deborah Lipstadt.

Penguin, 1994, £8.99, ISBN 0140241574.



This five-year-old book tracing the development of the Holocaust denial movement was called to my attention by the news coverage of the ongoing London trial: Lipstadt was sued by author David Irving over comments she makes about his work in this book, which he claims damaged his reputation and made it difficult for him to get further book contracts.

When Lipstadt originally began writing about Holocaust denial, people seem to have thought it was a rather batty topic to pick. After all, no one can seriously doubt the reality of the Holocaust, which happened within many of our lifetimes, except a tiny lunatic fringe. In the years since Holocaust denial has become much better established and professional, and organisations exist to give it the gloss of historical scholarship. A former religious correspondent for one of the British national newspapers used to tell me that the Holocaust denial literature he regularly received as part of his “crank” mail was always the most expensively produced. As the years go by and more and more Holocaust survivors die off, the Holocaust becomes less real to many people every day. Nazis become cartoon villains and it becomes increasingly possible for a relatively small and vocal group to make inroads into the historical record.

As Lipstadt says, it’s in this distance that the denial movement has its opportunity.

One point Lipstadt makes is an interesting one for skeptics: she notes that she rigorously refuses to appear in televised or other debates with Holocaust deniers, because she believes that doing so would give them a kind of credibility as “the other side” of a legitimate debate. This court case, therefore, may be the only chance for the people she writes about to argue directly with her.

Wendy M. Grossman

QUACK THEORY

Freud and the Question of Pseudoscience

by Frank Cioffi.

Open Court, £19.95, ISBN 081269385X

Frank Cioffi (pronounced “Choffy”) is Senior Research Fellow in Philosophy at the University of Kent at

Canterbury, and he is indisputably Chief Scourge of the psychoanalysts. Freud’s claimed therapeutic successes turn out to be non-existent.

He claimed that his clinical experience led him to his theories, though this reversed the true cause and effect. The independent investigations that were claimed to validate his theses were never in fact undertaken. The therapeutic success of the “founding case” of psychoanalysis (“Anna O”) was a fabrication. Contrary to Freud’s claims, he did not base his seduction theory on stories of infantile seduction – in fact his patients told him no such stories.

After a century of practice, Freud’s theories have produced no clinical grounds to validate them. His proponents have been consistently indifferent to the failure of validation tests, and have blatantly evaded all falsifications. The claimed examples of success have been spurious. The entire enterprise has been a pseudoscience, in the sense that it has involved “the habitual and wilful employment of methodological procedures that are calculated to lessen the uncovering of potentially falsifying evidence.”

“As befits a Teflon culture hero, Freud is rarely permitted to be straightforwardly wrong about anything; whatever turns out to be empirically false is pronounced poetically true. What fails as fact succeeds as parable.”

To put it in the words of Thomas Szasz, this collection of papers “shows why Sigmund Freud was a quack”.

Lewis Jones

A MATTER OF OPINION

The Tipping Point, by Malcolm Gladwell Little.

Brown, £14.99, ISBN 0316648523

Why does public opinion change? How does it change? Writer Malcolm Gladwell shows how the actions of particular people have wider effects, and how small events contribute to changes in epidemics, teen suicide, crime waves, votes in national elections, and the financial success of companies.

If you think you think for yourself, you might be interested in Gladwell’s account of an experiment with college students who believed they were being asked to evaluate the quality of headphones. The students listened to music and a spoken editorial about college tuition.

During the editorial, students received different instructions – some were asked to move their heads up and down while listening, some to move their heads from side to side, and some to make sure they held their heads still. When the students filled out a questionnaire afterward about the sound quality of the headphones, they were also asked about tuition. Students who had nodded agreed

tuition should be raised, those who shook their heads thought tuition should decrease, and those who held their heads still thought tuition levels should stay the same.

Gladwell ties this study to another that found that the expression on the face of the person reading the news influenced people to favour a candidate even when the news report was negative. He combines information on how preschoolers learn, how groups of 150 or fewer work best, and how repairing broken windows reduces crime with profiles of people who start or watch trends. His readable book provides a new look at why groups of people change their beliefs or behaviour.

Even though Gladwell doesn't talk about psychics or fad diets, his book is worth serious consideration if you are interested in how public opinion is formed.

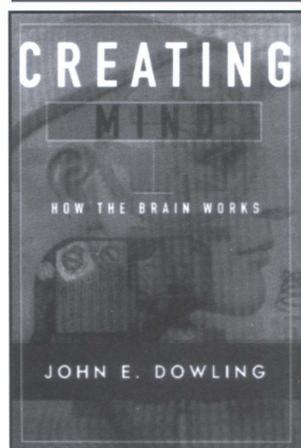
Barbara R Phillips Long

BRAINY STUFF

Creating Mind: How the Brain Works

by John E Dowling

WW Norton, £10.95, ISBN 0393974462



This book is an accessible review of basic brain physiology and function. While not pretending to be a totally comprehensive text for the expert, it nonetheless lays the groundwork for a fairly thorough knowledge of brain workings. It is no light swish through interesting facts and personal experiences, but an in-depth look at what the brain does and how it does it.

The author is an experienced neuroscientist who is also able to write well and communicate his ideas in such a way as to keep the reader interested. Terms are always well defined, the text is accompanied throughout with a good number of clear diagrams, and the organisation of the chapters makes for a good flow of comprehension. The author holds the reader's interest by referring to case-notes and everyday experiences that relate to the part of the brain under discussion.

The book falls into three main parts. In the first, Professor Dowling surveys the neuron and the effect that various drugs have on the brain through its functioning. In the second section brain architecture and development are covered in some depth.

Finally the author examines what humans actually do with their brains; topics include vision, language, memory, emotion, consciousness, and the bits of the brain that appear to be associated with these activities. At no stage does the author lose sight of the idea that this is a physiology book and become involved in philosophical debate about the meanings of mind and consciousness, or other such subjects..

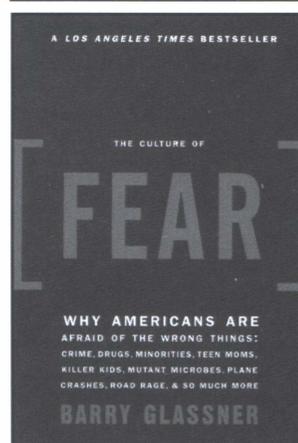
I loved this book and would recommend it to all students involved in studying the brains' structure and function. It would also be rewarding reading for anyone who wants to be brought up to date with our current understanding of how the brain works, and is prepared to do a bit of "applied" reading to achieve that goal.

Ruth Kim

RUNNING SCARED

The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Scared of the Wrong Things, by Barry Glassner.

Basic Books, \$14, ISBN 0465014909



The cover blurb explains what this book is about. "Why Americans are afraid of the wrong things: crime, drugs, minorities, teen moms, killer kids, mutant microbes, plane crashes, road rage, and so much more." Since British people are also afraid of a lot of these same things, and for similar reasons, the book makes good reading even on the "wrong" side of the puddle.

Glassner both praises and castigates the media. Plane crashes, for example, make good, sensational copy and are easy to cover. But the real, ignored, story of transport deaths is car travel, which kills many more people. Similarly, the danger to children from "childhood" diseases easily outpaces the risk of being killed or crippled by vaccines – but it's the vaccine scare stories that get the press attention. Kids are generally safer in school than out of it, no matter how much attention is given school shootings. On the other hand, as Glassman says, "Sometimes the media bite the scare that feeds them," as when *Washington Post* reporter Sharon Walsh broke the story that increasingly guns are being marketed to teenagers and children.

On the subjects covered in the book that I know most about the claims of Internet addiction, "cyberporn," – Glassman is absolutely accurate, pointing out one-person scares, fraudulent studies, and classism where appropriate. On all subjects, he is interesting, puncturing a number of contemporary myths along the way.

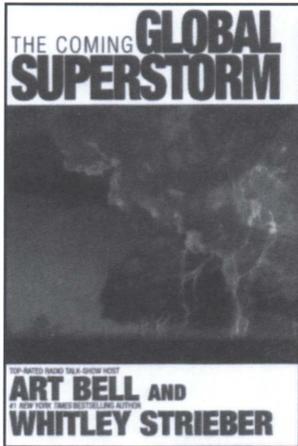
Rachel Winston

SCARE STORIES

The Coming Global Superstorm, by Art Bell and Whitley Strieber

Pocket Books, \$23.95, ISBN 0671041908

This is a scary book. Which is, of course, just what it's meant to be. It reminds us that we live on a small, fragile planet which is continually vulnerable to cosmic forces that at any moment could immensely damage, perhaps destroy, all life on Earth. Colossal disasters have taken place in the past, and another could happen before this weekend..



We've heard it all before, haven't we? Gentlemen with no scientific qualifications – Bell is a radio talk-show host, Strieber a writer of dubious abduction – stand up and claim to know better than the scientists and planners who control humankind's interaction with natural resources, climate and environment. They draw on all kinds of questionable readings of history, they select evidence from analysts of

environmental trends, each of whom offers a different and often contradictory agenda, and predict a global superstorm which would wipe most of us off the face of the planet. They package it all up in fancy writing, interspersed with rather yucky accounts of what a global superstorm would be like to live through (or die in). And they sell it to us at \$23.95

Except... except that this is impressively researched, documenting past catastrophes plausibly enough to be persuasive. Persuasive, yes. Convincing? That is perhaps too much to expect, when every step of the way another analyst could come up with an alternative reading of the evidence from millions of years before humanity arrived on the scene. Our understanding of Earth's early history can only be a matter of interpretation, and how can we trust any one interpreter when there are so many around? But at least this one has no hidden agenda (ancient astronauts, God, Space Brothers etc): the authors do their axe-grinding in public, and their message is simple – don't think it can't happen!

The book has its worrying aspects. Since the central theme is the damage that Nature can do, the stuff about how difficult it must have been to move the stones of Baalbek, though fascinating and thought-provoking, seems irrelevant. And there's too much of the sort of woolly speculation we associate with von Däniken.

Yes, there is much to discourage the reader, even apart from the controversial nature of the authors' interpretation of prehistory. But having started the book with a built-in prejudice against self-anointed prophets, I have to say that this book won me over. The authors have a lot to say that is immensely worth saying, and they back it up with persuasive reasoning. Given the reputations of the authors, this book is inevitably destined for the bestseller lists. Well, I think it deserves it. This is a scary book, and there's nothing like a good scare for stirring the mind.

Hilary Evans

PSYCHIC LIVES

Lives of the Psychics: The Shared Worlds of Science And Mysticism, by Fred M Frohock

Chicago Univ Press, £19.50, ISBN 0226265862

The book starts with a clairvoyant premonition by the author's daughter. His plane did crash, although it was one

day later, on a different route and with other passengers. Later we learn that the author himself also has a gift for ESP.

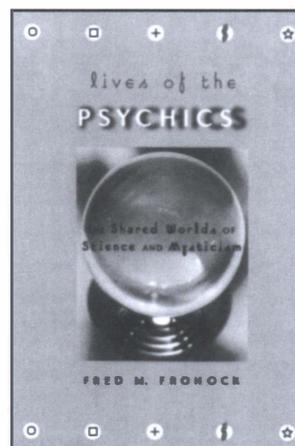
Most of the book consists of interviews and life stories of "famous" psychics, and others, including Rhine, and even James Randi. There are many amazing events – but few critical notes.

Some sceptical and scientific criticism is cited, but very little and it is not very convincingly presented. The limitations of traditional science are depicted in contrast to the heroic [sic] research by Rhine and others.

Frohock admits that the research on subjects ESP, psychokinesis, alternative medicine, OBE, NDE and alien abductions has not produced convincing evidence yet, and tries to find explanations. New and different research is needed – psychics should be selected out of the group of socially successful persons and tested in their own environment, not in laboratories, just as sightings of saints cannot be tested in a laboratory. Perhaps even then no results will be apparent, since "the psychic powers are beyond the dimensions of human experience, even when they are exhibited as abilities in normal life". It's like love and poetry – which also can not be reproduced on demand in a laboratory setting. Can we see beyond the parameters of the conventional world, to have access to realities that exceed the boundaries set by natural sciences?

Frohock praises alternative medicine and predicts the total collapse of modern health care. Medicine should not be a pharmaceutical war, but an enhancement of the body's natural defenses, based on nutrition. Treating diabetics with insulin is bad, because it allows the patient to continue bad eating habits. Therapeutic Touch is a marvel. The experiment by Emily Rosa that contradicted its value should not be taken seriously since the people surrounding her were very hostile to TT.

Several OBE and NDE testimonies are recounted in vivid detail, but Susan Blackmore is not mentioned. The crucial question is: how to explain that some people did not have an NDE? What are the selection criteria for those who are allowed to have a life after death? That brings us to a serious discussion on how the soul can go along with a heart-lung transplant and give the donors memories to the receiver.



Mystic experiences are the next chapter. Are they real? Well, "a fake does not invalidate the real thing, every fake depends on the existence of the real item". The subject of altered states of consciousness is discussed, scrupulously avoiding the word hallucination.

The author was a witness to some very impressive demonstrations of aura

reading. After giving a straw man representing science a good thrashing, we head for the effects of prayer on health, citing some trials but omitting that they have been thoroughly discredited.

Even the most complete and satisfying scientific explanations can not rule out a spirited story of reality (such as alien abduction, alien implants).

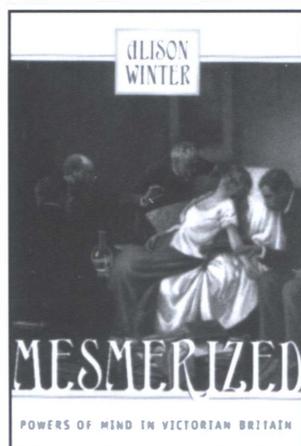
Those who would like to try to understand the mind of a genuine believer will not mind the sloppy printing, even with some handwritten corrections and all the end notes referring to pages 000. The general impression is that this book is a hasty copy and paste job.

Wim Betz

BLOCKHEADS

Mesmerised : Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain, by Alison Winter.

University of Chicago Press, £12, ISBN 0226902234



The Victorian age was a profitable time for charlatans. As science advanced, so did pseudoscience, and fake spiritualists and mesmerists made fortunes exploiting the credulous.

Alison Winter's book examines the activities of Victorian mesmerists and their associates. Her well-illustrated and entertaining study is scholarly, but mercifully free of the worst excesses of academic jargon.

Unfortunately, she chooses to use mesmerism as "a diagnostic tool to study Victorian culture" (p 11), providing herself with a neat get-out clause allowing her to explore reactions to mesmerism rather than investigating the mesmerists themselves. However, she remains staunchly objective while discussing the activities of mesmerists such as William Topham, who mesmerised a patient undergoing a leg amputation. The patient supposedly felt no pain. Winter accepts this might be possible, but she also suggests some distinctly non-mesmeric ways in which this might have been achieved.

She is less sceptical about the activities of 1840s "clairvoyant" Alexis Didier, overestimating the extent of his popularity. Not everyone was taken in by him. G W M Reynolds' "penny dreadful" serial *The Mysteries of London* (1844–46) features a "Professor of Mesmerism" whose bears a strong resemblance to Didier. Reynolds shows the tricks he uses to achieve supposedly supernatural effects. The chapter closes with the fake mesmerist gleefully announcing, "My fortune is made! These English blockheads bite at anything!"

The "English blockheads" are no longer so credulous, and Winter's study provides ample material for sceptical

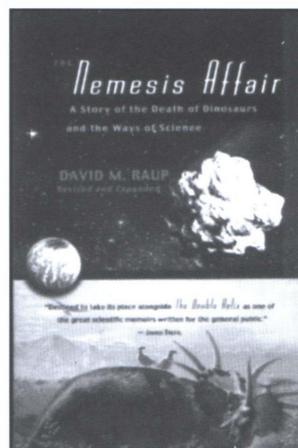
discussion. The extent of her research is admirable, and the result is a fascinating and intriguing book.

Chris Willis

ANSWERS NO CLOSER

The Nemesis Affair, by David M. Raup.

WW Norton, \$13, ISBN 0393319180



Are mass extinctions on Earth an inevitability occurring at regular intervals? There are some scientists who think that such extinctions happen approximately every 26 million years, and that the cause may be a so far undetected star that has been called Nemesis.

This book is a kind of rough guide to the science and controversy involved in the idea of periodic mass extinctions, and also the

realities of life for someone practicing in a scientific discipline.

The author is a paleontologist who has a significant interest in the effects of large body impacts (such as meteors and comets) on the Earth.

There have been several possible explanations given for the supposed periodicity of extinctions, one of which is that of the Nemesis star. One suggestion holds that this lies around two light years from Earth, and at a point in its orbit passes near to the Oort cloud causing gravitational disturbance – hence comets heading to the inner solar system. So far this hypothetical star has not been detected, as is also the case with another proposed idea of Planet X causing similar disturbance.

Discussed in the book are also other suggestions to explain the 26 million year extinctions – such as reversal of the magnetic poles and the collapse of ecosystems. We get no closer to any definite answers; the coverage of the science is cursory and the book was written some 14 years ago, although it contains an update written in 1999.

However, the value of this book is as much in the "view from the trenches" of the scientific world as in the scientific issue itself.

Dene Bebbington

GLOSSY DUALISM

The Created Self, by Robert J Weber.

WW Norton, £17.95, ISBN 0393048330

The author seems to have been inspired to write this book by the writings of Walt Whitman, the psychologist and pragmatist William James and his own discovery of something called "Evolutionary Psychology". We can, we are told, divide our self into three components: body, persona and spirit, and just as the first two can be changed at will so too can we set out on The Quest to get mystery and awe into our lives and "build an entirely new religious concept".

Weber is unconcerned (or unaware) that this looks suspiciously like a new gloss on the mind-body dualism that has bedevilled science and philosophy for two hundred years or more. If we don't mind this either then how do we achieve this new spiritual self?

Well, quite easily really. Starting from the idea that any god or faith should help us in time of trouble and provide us with guidance and direction in our quests we can

"choose religion... like culture – a piece of this and a piece of that to sculpt our spiritual selves as we go".

How you get this spiritual make-over if you don't have a base of religious faith to start with is something else the author is unconcerned about. If, like this reader you have a profound problem with the idea of a unitary "self" that can be reshaped like a piece of clay then you will gain little from this book. The author thoughtfully gives his e-mail address so you can let him know how your own reshaping is progressing.

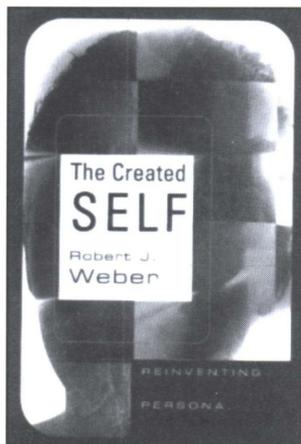
Mike Hutton

UNCONVINCING BEASTIE

The Encyclopedia of the Loch Ness Monster

by Paul Harrison.

Robert Hale, £14.99, ISBN 0-7090-6461-6



Paul Harrison's latest book is a gift for Nessie lovers, yet one which is honest enough not to entirely convince. His *Encyclopedia* sets out to provide a comprehensive reference work on Britain's favourite beastie.

It contains entries on all the main sightings and many of the important players in the Loch Ness drama. Also included are entries on Nessie Ephemera (like a monster number plate). Harrison has clearly researched his topic thoroughly and on the whole he goes back to the primary sources, which are listed in the extensive bibliography. He has also investigated first hand some of the cases. The result is a considerable improvement on several previous works whose authors merely rehash 'classic' Loch Ness books.

An attempt is also made to represent the sceptical side of the many Ness controversies, but Harrison remains candid about his own opinions in each case.

Harrison's Achilles heel is that factual errors and omissions still creep in. The number of typos is also annoying and the prose occasionally jars, making one wonder if another proofread wasn't needed.

Just as important is that he underemphasises the role misperception can play in eyewitness testimony, a crucial point that has led some to dismiss all the surface sightings. Even if Harrison disagrees, one wishes that he'd addressed these problems more than he does. It is also difficult to assess

his conclusions about the photo data when there aren't any illustrations in the book.

This is a worthwhile reference work for those hungry to know about the mysteries of the Loch. But before casting a vote for Nessie, the reader should consult the sceptical books listed in the back. Ronald Binn's *Loch Ness Mystery Solved* would be a good place to proceed.

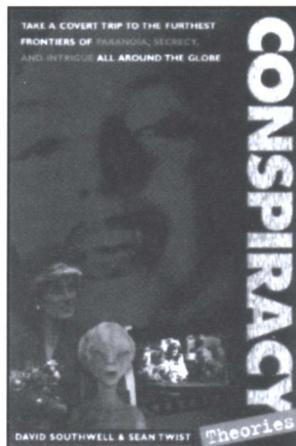
Matt Colborn

SOMETHING FISHY

Conspiracy Theories, by David Southwell and Sean

Twist : Carlton, £6.99, ISBN 1858687349

When I offered to review a book for the last issue of *The*



Skeptic, the editor sent me one about conspiracy theories, which I duly reviewed. This issue I've been given a book about... conspiracy theories. I'm beginning to suspect that this is not a coincidence. Could it be that the editor is in league with the Government/CIA/MI6 /Aliens/Treorchy Male Voice Choir (delete as appropriate) in some kind of plot to

ensure that only I review such books?

Then, when the moment is right, I'll be discredited and everyone will believe that aliens really did land at Roswell, Diana's Mercedes was rammed off the road by a Fiat Uno and Jim Davidson is actually funny.

Trouble is, there's not much more to say about this book. Poor research has meant that, even where a real possibility of a conspiracy exists (such as JFK) the reader is so swamped with erroneous and incorrect information that a value judgement is impossible. I'm sure there is some wheat in with this chaff, but I for one couldn't be bothered to search for it.

Each item contains a brief description, a list of suspected conspirators and any unusual facts surrounding the issue. Subjects covered range from Banco Ambrosiano to Nazi bases in Antarctica.

The authors have been very lazy throwing this together though, and there are glaring discrepancies. (The FBI is not mentioned as possible conspirators in the murder of Robert F. Kennedy, despite the animosity between RFK and J Edgar Hoover. The Mafia and neo-Nazis are mentioned, however).

I get irritated by books like this. There do seem to be some genuine conspiracies out there, but to mix them in with the likes of Men In Black and Anastasia Romanov is to make them seem just as trivial. You could buy this book if you really needed a paranoid's handbook. Otherwise, save your money.

Mike Walsh



LETTERS

Experiments needed

I was disappointed to learn that Julian Baggini thinks you can put a causal hypothesis to the test by collecting correlational data – a common enough mistake among first-year students but one that surely should not appear in the pages of *The Skeptic*. In his article on how studying philosophy affects what you believe in he implies that if people who have studied philosophy are found to be more skeptical than those who have not this would be evidence that studying philosophy causes increasing skepticism. I imagine most readers can think up plenty of alternative hypotheses, the most obvious being that skeptics are more likely to choose to study philosophy in the first place or to stick with the course once they've started. Perhaps my first-years can come up with more imaginative ones and with some true experiments which are, as Baggini should know, the only way to test his hypothesis.

*Sue Blackmore,
Bristol*

Praying Direct

In the *Daily Telegraph*, Thursday, 2nd June 2000, on page 7 Uri Geller lists some of his favourite Web sites. One is <http://www.newprayer.com>, of which Uri says: If you feel inclined to say a prayer, but you are worried that God won't be listening, then go to the Newprayer site. They've tracked God to his last known address – that point in the sky where the Big Bang occurred – and they've made the bold assumption that the Supreme Deity hasn't moved in the past 12 billion years. Type in your prayer and it will be broadcast through the ether by radio telescope, free of charge, to God's home.

I feel this is information your readers are entitled to have!

*Dr Richard Brown
Winterbourne, Bristol*

The Scoble Effect

Together with my fellow authors I welcome Richard Wiseman's fair-minded review of the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* (sub-titled The Scoble Report) detailing an investigation by experienced and well-qualified scientists into the physical phenomena produced in so-called séances by a group based at Scoble in Norfolk. However, Richard will have written his review before attending the Study Day organised by the Society for Psychical Research to debate the Report. At the Study Day, James Webster, an experienced former professional stage illusionist and Associate of the Inner Magic Circle (whose involvement in the investigation is referred to in the Report), gave a detailed description of his experiences at Scoble. In the course of his description he made it clear that he had found no way to account for the range of phenomena he had witnessed. In his professional opinion, it would be difficult for highly skilled magicians to duplicate the phenomena even with the help of elaborate pieces of equipment, none of which was present at Scoble. The testimony of an experienced magicians is clearly of relevance in view of the frequent criticisms that magicians are rarely present at psychical investigations.

It is not easy to dismiss such evidence without charging witnesses with deception. Richard also wrote his review before having the opportunity at the Study Day to observe the demonstration by one of our associate investigators, a highly qualified German mechanical engineer (Walter Schnitger), of the secure method he used to retain a locked box in his hand throughout one of his sittings with the Group. The box contained an unopened tub

of film which, when developed, showed a series of X-ray like impressions of fingers and thumbs. At no stage did the film (which was supplied by Herr Schnitger and developed under his supervision) come into contact with any member of the Scoble group. We know of no professional illusionist who allows the equipment and its operation to be under the control of a suspicious investigator from start to finish.

It was evidence like this which made it clear to us that the phenomena produced at Scoble merited serious objective study.

*Professor David Fontana,
Society for Psychic Research, London*

Reich Spots

This is in response to the article 'Scientists and the Paranormal' (Vol 12, 3-4 of *The Skeptic*). In particular, I want to comment on the item about Wilhelm Reich. You have not made it clear why Reich was a "respected scientist" and have left out the most important of his crank ideas. Here it is: he believed that he had discovered a "gastric spot" in the nose and that cauterising (or applying cocaine to) it could cure certain gastric pains. He believed that in women such pains were caused by masturbation, and he and Freud actually carried out at least one nose-cauterising operation, on an unfortunate woman called Emma Eckstein.

Your article says that Reich was sent to prison for two years in connection with "orgone energy accumulators." He and Freud, in my view, deserved a much longer stint in jail. And had Freud been jailed, the intellectual history of this century might have been considerably different.

*SA Owais,
Srinagar, India*

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