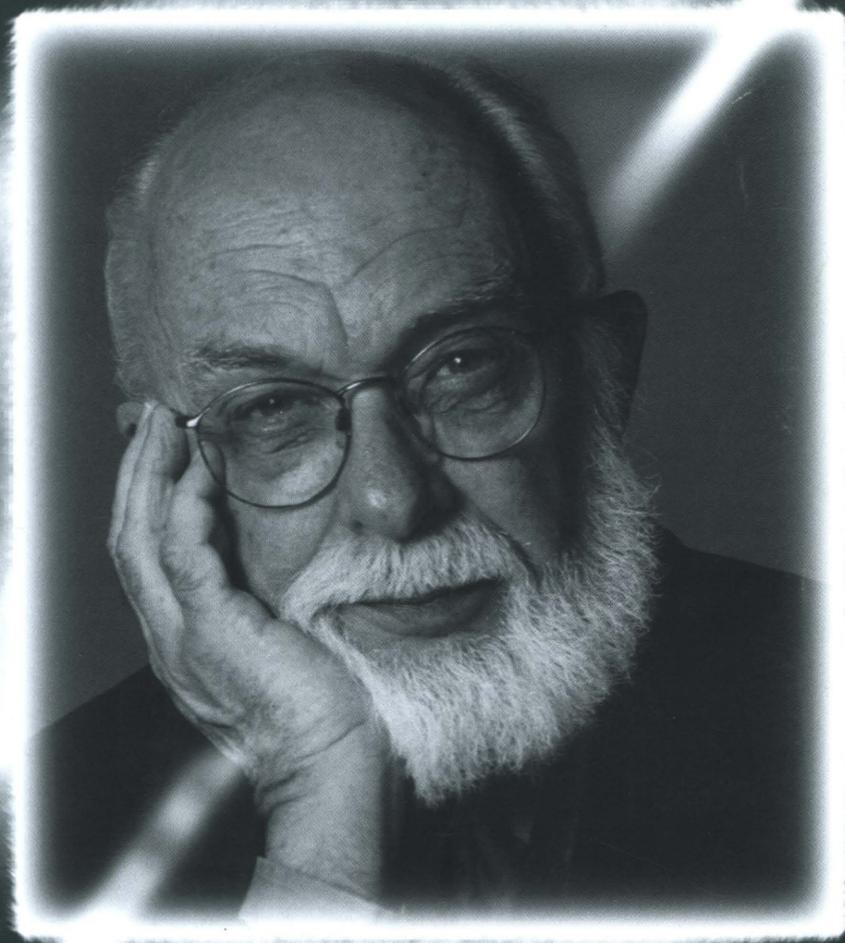


The

Skeptic

Volume 15 Number 1
Spring 2002



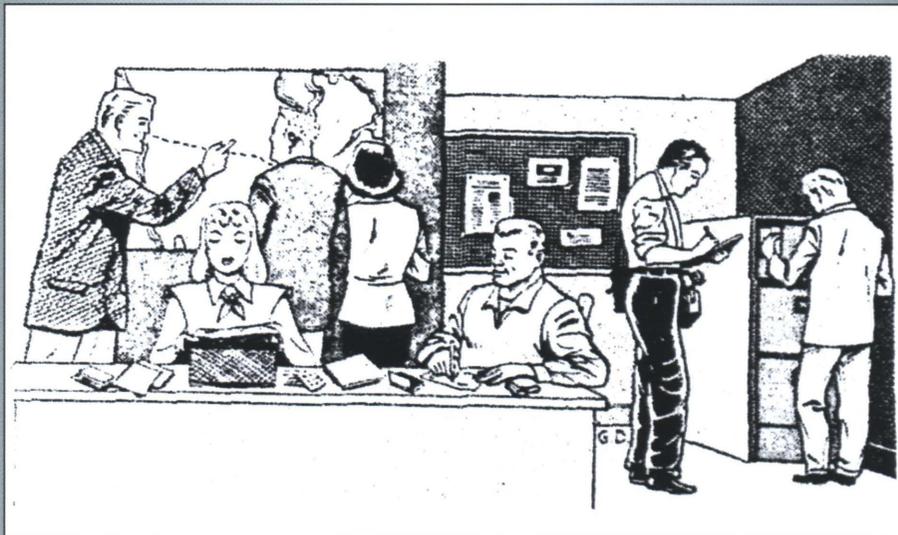
Randi Insights

Also in this issue:

Investigating the Case of the Missing Airmen
Wild About Harry Potter?

Plus: News. Book Reviews. Comment. Humour

Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery



FAREWELL TO THE SAUCERS?

The sickness and imminent demise of ufology is a favourite topic with the media: yet Google will find you 410,000 sites on UFOs and a further 59,000 on flying saucers, evidence that interest still runs high. Be that as it may, though, UFO investigation will never again be as it was back in the 1950s. In this nostalgic reminiscence we see the headquarters of an American investigation group, agog with activity. Sightings are plotted on wallcharts, files are consulted, while a field investigator, camera slung round his neck, makes notes preparatory to going out on a case. For these starry-eyed enthusiasts, this very day may bring the news that a saucer has landed on the White House lawn, this very night a domed disk may hover over our own back yard...

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



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Editorial

Kate Holden and Chris French

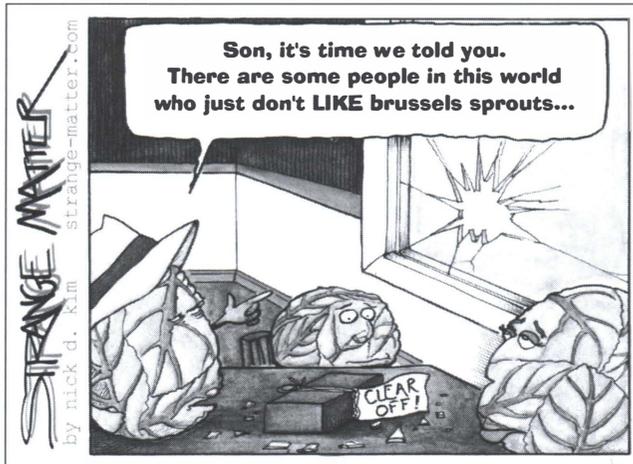


HELLO AND WELCOME to issue 15.1 of *The Skeptic*. We are very lucky in this issue to be able to bring you an interview with James Randi, care of Tony Youens. Tony met with Randi during a recent trip to the United States and the final article certainly makes for interest-

ing reading. Also in this issue, Paul Chambers investigates the case of the missing airmen and Chris Willis asks if children's literature such as *Harry Potter* really is adversely affecting a future generation, as some people would have us believe. You will also find our regular features such as the *Skeptic at Large* column, *Hits and Misses*, *Philosopher's Corner*, *Rhyme and Reason*, and of course our book reviews and letters sections. We hope that you enjoy this issue and would like to remind readers that we are always keen to hear from anyone who is interested in writing an article for us, or who can recommend a potential contributor. In addition, if you can help in other ways, such as proof-reading, we would be very pleased to hear from you.

Finally, to thank you all for your continued support we have a number of special offers for you below, which we hope that you will take advantage of.

With best wishes until the next issue, Kate and Chris



Discover a Lost Tribe in Brazil!

Pre-arrange for a selection of tribal elders to reveal themselves in a designated Amazon forest clearing to your unsuspecting guest. Unique birthday gift for any friend or relative. Tribal elders subject to availability. Flights to Sao Paulo not included. **£2500 plus drinks.**

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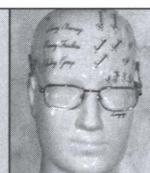
Charcoal extra.

Pagan Boules!

£9.99 per set.



Hits and Misses



Getcher cures here!

IT'S DISMAL TO NOTE that since the US Postal Service discovered it was in the anthrax delivery business all kinds of quacks have been popping up touting all kinds of questionable remedies. Congressional representative Dan Burton (R-IN) apparently even suggested that government agencies (such as the FDA) should be considering alternative remedies until the US can add to its stockpiled 15.4 million doses of smallpox vaccine.

Sort of encouragingly, the Web's *Skeptic News* site notes that one manufacturer of homoeopathic remedies – Boiron – has actually gone so far as to issue a press release reminding customers that the company's homophonically named Anthracinum is in fact only for the treatment of acne and boils, and has no effect against anthrax. You can see why people would be confused, given that the basic principle of homoeopathy is “like cures like”, and according to the press release, “Anthracinum is obtained from the bacteria that cause Anthrax infection (*bacillus anthracis*). The Anthracinum sold by Boiron is obtained from a solution of inactivated *bacillus anthracis* originating from The Pasteur Institute in France. The strain is deactivated prior to use in manufacturing Boiron products and presents no risk to patients.”

So fear has concentrated at least some people's minds on the remedies that have been proven to work. Though that's about the only good thing you can say for it. Media reports say that Americans have been buying up gas masks and stockpiling Ciprio. Given that eight people have died of anthrax and 20,000 die of flu every year, a rational reaction would be to go get their flu shots.

Stress busters

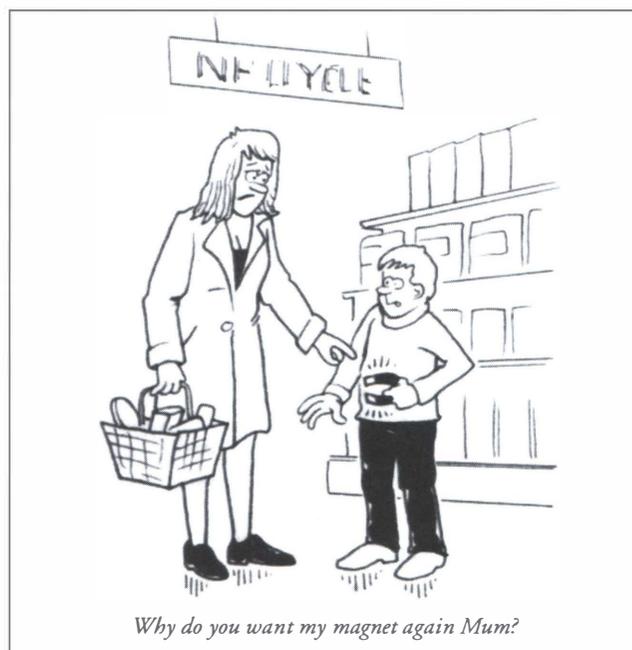
WE CAN'T IMAGINE any situation in which a needle being poked through our skin would make us feel better, but the stress-busting qualities of acupuncture have been much in the news, what with Cherie Booth's attendance at the opening of her former (we presume) guru's alternative health centre after being seen earlier this year wearing an acupuncture needle in her left ear (ow!). In addition, the results of a study of using acupuncture to relieve stress in patients with acute heart failure, conducted at the University of California at Los Angeles School of Medicine, looked positive to the researchers.

The heart patient study involved 14 patients who were ill enough to require transplants. A third were

given acupuncture at traditional sites. A third were given acupuncture at non-acupuncture points. A third (yes, we know 14 is not divisible by three) were given a non-needle simulation; that is, a needle holder with no needle in it was used. The researchers monitored blood pressure, heart rate, and sympathetic nerve activity, and then tested the patients' stress levels by, for example, making them do math problems in their heads. We support scientific research into alternative medicine, and these researchers have done similar research on healthy people but we have to say, it sounds like the last thing we'd want to go through when critically ill.

Magnetic moods

USUALLY WE MANAGE to restrain ourselves from lambasting the media too much; after all we are the media too. But we must make an exception for the *Evening Standard*, which in late November highlighted the use of magnets to help reduce menstrual cramps. The woman they picked to profile as Exhibit A complained of terrible “stomach pains” (some anatomy lessons clearly needed here), mood swings, and headaches, especially on days when the restaurant where she was head chef was really busy and she was under acute pressure. OK, leave out the obvious role of stress. Here's our question: the woman said she was having periods “two or three times a month, and they lasted seven or eight days at a time”. Post-magnet, the pains stopped, the length dropped to five days a month, and the frequency dropped to once a month. Dare we guess that the



efforts doctors were making to find her a contraceptive pill that worked might have had more to do with it? You'd have thought a little elementary math would have made the female journalist who wrote the article wonder about the likelihood that a magnet could cure the very real medical problems of someone who is menstruating 21 days a month.

Decomposing

THE WORLD LOST not just one musical figure in November, but contact with dozens more. No, not George Harrison. Rosemary Brown, who died in London at the age of 85 on November 16. For those who don't remember her, Brown was the woman who back in the 1960s claimed to be channelling dead composers, "taking dictation" of supposedly new compositions from deceased greats like Beethoven, Bach, Chopin, and Liszt. Although she claimed only three years of piano instruction and claimed never to listen to music or go to concerts, she did record some of the easier pieces. Her last recordings were in 1988. It is not known whether she is likely to be able to continue her work via another medium.



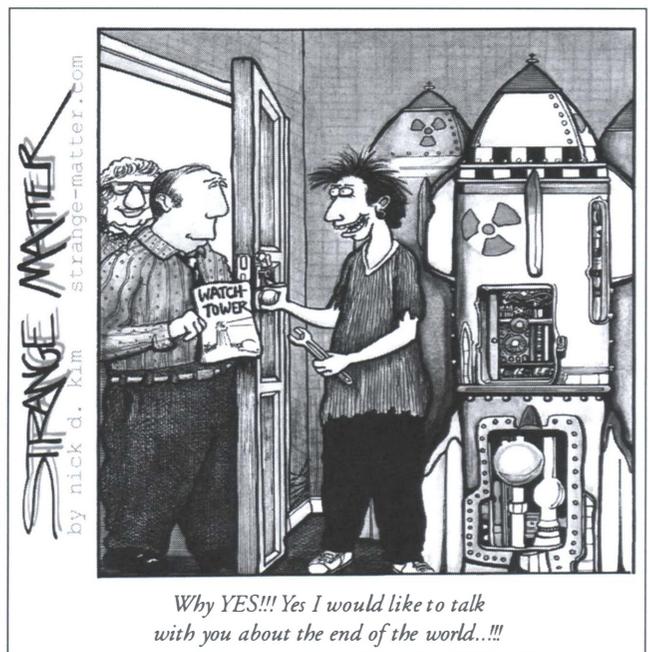
Channeling the economic downturn

SCOTLAND ON SUNDAY reported in October that the Findhorn Foundation is selling off some of its assets in order to pay off debts of some £600,000. It has already sold its organic food shop, and hopes to sell its Cullerne House mansion, plus some of its 17-acre site for private housing. Somehow we can't manage to summon up the requisite Schadenfreude, even though the centre hosted a conference on angels last year. Yes, we think it's kind of silly if grown people travel to Scotland to experience the Zen version of golf, but on the other hand Findhorn has managed to exist for nearly 30 years without harming anyone. Also, there is the sad fact that the reason Findhorn is in trouble is not so much the economic

downturn (although that can't help) nor the September 11 attacks (ditto), but that it faces increased competition in the form of 30 other similar centres around the world, plus a 40 percent drop in tourists in its general area. Even New Age spiritualism is a business like any other. Increased skepticism – if such exists – has nothing to do with it.

Silly science seasons

SEPTEMBER is the traditional month for stories about silly science, which may explain why we got calls from a TV researcher frantically looking for someone to debate the subject (we referred him to William Hartston, author of the marvellous *Drunken Goldfish and Other Irrelevant Scientific Research*, who also does the chess column for the *Independent*). The *Sunday Times* complained about research showing that taller men were more likely to marry than shorter ones; the influence of watching football on mental health; and Bristol University's 1999 conclusion that the best way to dunk a digestive biscuit in a beverage is to lay it flat on top. *The Guardian* was annoyed about myths, misquotations, and copying errors. The culmination, of course, was the October 4 Ig Nobel awards, which went to such research gems as an investigation into injuries caused by falling coconuts, the invention of air-tight underwear equipped with a charcoal filter to remove smells, and the founder of the Apostrophe Protection Society. So it was a good month for poking fun at science and its silly tricks. Though someone really ought to remind the media about stones...glass houses...pot...kettle...black.



Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M. Grossman



Nobel wars

IT ALL STARTED with a bunch of stamps. In October, the Royal Mail issued six commemorative stamps in honour of the centenary of the Nobel Prize. The set of stamps included a booklet, and the booklet claimed that modern physics will one day lead to an understanding of physics and the paranormal. Um. Storm of criticism. Rather heartening, really. The Royal Mail's defence: the booklet was written by Nobel Laureate (physics) Brian Josephson. Oy.

In a letter Josephson wrote to the *Observer* after it reported on the row, he complained that the *Observer* had misrepresented the general level of acceptance of telepathy among scientists: "Contrary to suggestions in the article, surveys show that a large proportion of scientists accept the possibility that telepathy exists; if it appears that the contrary is the case, this is because such scientists wisely keep quiet about their opinions when in scientific company". And he calls skeptics "biased" and accuses journals like *Science* and *Nature* of censoring research showing that the paranormal exists.

The Royal Mail's explanation was simple: they asked a winner in each category to write a short article about their own field and the implications of research within it. There aren't a lot of British winners for physics, and of the couple they had to choose from, they picked Josephson. You can see their point: they did their best. It's surely not up to the Post Office to tell a Nobel Laureate he's got it wrong.

As the *Observer's* Robin McKie pointed out, the real problem is that someone who's won a Nobel prize is immediately anointed a guru of extreme authority and is assumed to be extraordinarily knowledgeable, not just on his own subject but on all others. Of course, as a society we have a tendency to assume vast knowledgeability on the part of anyone who's famous and successful anyway: that's why people ask movie stars what the best diets are (ask a nutritionist!) and why the newspapers let Richard Dawkins pontificate on the subject of child development and religious warfare.

We do this despite the fact that the last three decades have seen traditional authority figures and structures – lawyers, doctors, the church – severely

questioned. But we still tend to exempt Nobel Laureates; there's something about that prize and its prestige and the pinnacle of intellectual achievement it represents. It's precisely because the Nobel prize is so venerated that the *Annals of Improbable Research* can each year run its Ig Nobel awards and get a live audience of 500 people to laugh happily at the sight of a former prize winner dancing gently with three or four of his peers and making a one-minute speech in front of a festoon of pink, plastic flamingos.

It's arguable that Nobel Laureates don't have a better record than anyone else when they stray from the fields they know best. Linus Pauling, for example, won two Nobel Prizes – staggering – and yet researchers generally have not been able to support his contention that Vitamin C could cure colds. Though that doesn't stop millions of people from taking it just in case. But in Josephson's case, his field is physics, and he claims that quantum theory might be able to explain telepathy. Who are we to argue with him?

One answer is that Josephson's comments are based on his belief that telepathy exists. It is logical for a physicist who believes a particular effect exists to look for explanations as to why. The question for skeptics, however, is, *does* it exist? Josephson cites work of his own, plus the CIA's 1970 Stargate project to argue that it does. Stargate was a 1990 to 1995 effort by the CIA to conduct experiments into remote viewing, part of a larger, longer, more expensive effort that began in 1970. Josephson may be impressed by it, but the American Institute for Research, which reviewed the programme's results, concluded that there was no case in which ESP had provided data that could be used to guide intelligence operations, and recommended it be discontinued.

It's clear from the way our everyday world works around us – we have spent immense efforts to build myriad communications systems we surely wouldn't need if we were all telepathic – that if it does, its effect is minute and unreliable. The impact of the beliefs of famous and successful people, by contrast, is easily felt. We don't have to argue about whether they exist, or even why people believe in them. We just have to argue back.

Questioning Randi

Tony Youens provides us with an exclusive interview with James “the Amazing” Randi.

LAST YEAR I was fortunate enough to spend two weeks in Orlando, Florida. My wife Ruth and I had decided that our two daughters, Becky and Sophie, were at the age when they would get the most from such a visit. However going to Florida would have other personal benefits as it is also the home of the James Randi Educational Foundation. Fort Lauderdale is not exactly near Orlando but I considered that this was the closest I was ever likely to get and so arranged an interview.

Travelling by car the actual journey to Fort Lauderdale was around 5 hours but with the help of air conditioning and the sheer novelty of driving in the U.S. it somehow seemed much shorter. In one context I suppose the trip might be considered a pilgrimage. Randi has had an enormous influence on me and had it not been for his appearance on British television in the early 1990's I doubt that I would have been involved in either skepticism or conjuring.

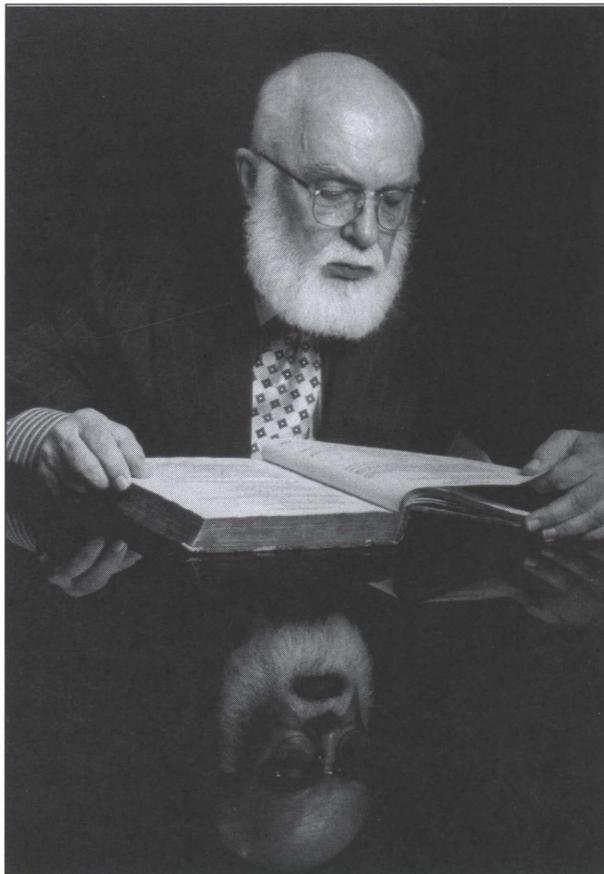
I surprised myself with how easily I found the JREF and arrived around ten o'clock in the morning. As I walked in the first thing I noticed was the large plaque of Pigasus the flying pig, symbol of the million dollar challenge, proudly displayed on the wall. I had a brief wait while Randi finished a phone call but soon found myself being shaken warmly by the hand. It is difficult to gauge the character of a person when your only contact has been via television and email and I hadn't been at all sure how I would be received, but Randi greeted me with a friendly smile and I soon found myself being given a personal tour of the premises. The things that struck me most about him were his enthusiasm and energy which were supplemented by his obvious sense of humour. Eventually we settled down in the library and began the interview.

In preparation I had done much pondering about what questions to ask but in the end I simply focused

on what interested me most. My assumption being that what interested me would interest others, I can only hope that this is indeed the case.

What do you see as the purpose of the Foundation?

Randi: Several purposes we have in mind. First of all to promote critical thinking, particularly among young people. To that end we send out lecturers locally here in the United States and internationally. I'm the one who does the international ones speaking on the subject of critical thinking about things that appear or claim to be paranormal, occult or supernatural. We also serve as an information source and exchange for the media (that's television, radio, the whole thing), and for writers and researchers and such. As you can see, surrounding you here in the library at the JREF we have a rather considerably sized library and we have half as many books in the other office that are still not sorted. We're waiting for volunteers to do that. We have a vast video library



as well which people come in here to see. We have recordings from as much as thirty years back on video and these are all available from a carefully arranged index so they can look up any subject, any person and particular programme or date on the computer and we'll get it out for them.

So we are a media resource. We are teachers and we run a web page which is updated at Friday noon every week with current news about what's happening at the Foundation or what's happening in the so-called “paranormal” world. We try to keep people up to date on that and with the new Forum section in place now, we're now getting an astounding average of 20,000 hits a day, so it's rather impressive to know that people all over the world are clicking in that number of times. It means that our message is at least being perused.

What do you see as the major achievement of the JREF?

Randi: Well the fact that we are increasingly getting on the Rollerdexes and the address books of the media around the world. I heard from the BBC the other day as a matter of fact on two different matters independently, so it's from around the world that people contact us. So, I think the fact that we've made this information available and made ourselves available is our major accomplishment here. Up until the Foundation was founded five years ago I was an independent operation, I was one person doing it. Now we have a staff of anywhere from four to six that handle this sort of thing, particularly the million dollar challenge which is handled by one specific person here, Andrew, and he has his hands full handling that every week as we get lots of applicants.

What plans do you have for the immediate future?

Randi: Well, we're amplifying in all directions. We have changed the web page to the extent that it's far more accessible, it's richer and it's more easily used. But the major thing is that we're going on the Internet radio on Thursday nights at nine pm Eastern Time here in Florida. We'll be going on live for one or two hours depending on the evening in question on the Internet. Now the programme that I do here locally in Florida is on the Internet already but it's at a very awkward hour. Nine o'clock in the evening will give us six o'clock on the west coast of the United States and it will be archived at the same time, so people at any time zone anywhere in the world for the following week will be able to tap in on it and listen to the entire programme. So we're expanding in that direction.

What relevance do you see (re: JREF) for the UK?

Randi: I think via the Internet, our web page www.randi.org – that's the way to stay in touch Tony. I think that skeptic groups all around the world ... we have a lot of communication with Argentina at the moment and with Brazil, where they're starting major groups down there, and we gave them a lot of assistance and advice. Also, in Peru. As a matter of fact we had sitting at this very table a couple of weeks ago a couple of gentlemen from Peru who are starting an active skeptic group down there. So we believe that it's been a certain amount of inspiration, our web page. We now do sixty percent of our actual business on the Internet, which is astonishing. So that's the way we're going and I think that that's the way the skeptic movement can be most powerful.

The membership fee of \$50 (£36) every year seems a little high, particularly as many skeptics subscribe to more than one organization. Why \$50?

Randi: We're considering that right now Tony. It's a difficult problem because we offer, we always have offered, a free gift along with the membership. We just about break even on this. It is an expensive thing. We've got to keep all the records ourselves – we got staff here to keep all that together. You've got to understand that it's not just a case of writing it down on a piece of paper and index card someplace and putting it in a cabinet. No, it's got to be updated, regular follow-ups have got to be made. Also, we have given a lot of free memberships to students who just can't afford it because we consider it more important that they become members and that they become affiliated and have an interest and feel that they have a voice in it as well. The only reason for the memberships frankly is to know that we speak with the voice of these people as well. It's not just James Randi and his staff here that are issuing this statement – it's the membership, and that's a thousand or so people that are speaking out and we are speaking on their behalf. It gives us more of a voice, I believe, more of an effective voice. You're absolutely right though, we are under serious consideration of what we can do about the fee. I admit that it is a bit steep for some people.

What with the seemingly unstoppable psychic industry, the continued growth of alternative medicine, and pseudo-science in general, do you ever get disheartened or frustrated at the overwhelming scale of the task?

Randi: Well there are a lot of sighs. I see poor Andrew walk by, by looking out my office door I can see him with a piece of paper in his hand, a letter from some individual out there who says he makes the sun rise every morning and he wants the million dollars. Actually, we had a claim like that from two brothers in Abu Darbi who said that they make the sun rise every morning. We didn't take it too seriously and I think one of them has died since and the sun still rises. I see Andrew walking by with mighty sighs coming out of him and shaking his head – he just can't believe what the latest thing is. Or somebody will walk in and we get these rather wild-eyed looking characters who will walk in the front door here, sit down and say they can tell the colour (red or black) of any playing card held up behind their head. They get 50% of them right and they shake their head and say, "Gee, it always worked before" and they walk out. You have to get a little discouraged over that, but what makes up for it is the fact ... well my sec-

retary called me a few weeks ago and said “You’ve got to come out to the front”. I got up from my office at the back and there’s a young man standing there with a briefcase in his hand and he introduced himself. He said, “You’ve never heard of me, but I bought your book *Flim-Flam* [Prometheus: Buffalo, New York] many years ago when it first came out and I was seventeen years of age and, boy, did I hate you! I have a well-thumbed copy of it at home and I went through the whole thing and I got together some of my friends who believed in all these things. By golly half way through the book we decided, “I think he’s right”, and by the time I’d finished the book I was convinced you were right. I was going to become a parapsychologist but now I’m studying abdominal surgery and I’ve got through all the primary med schools and within a few years I’ll be a fully trained doctor doing abdominal surgery. It happens to interest me and I think I’ll be of some service, while with parapsychology I would have been spinning my wheels for the rest of my life”. It’s that kind of thing, Tony, that makes it pay off.

I got a letter from China from a young kid, who is a deaf mute and yet is reading and writing English and Chinese, which is astonishing in itself. He wrote to me and said that he would like to thank me because he had seen my programme on healers over there with his family, and he and his family had made the decision that they were not going to go to healers anymore. They had been touring this kid all over China, using every bit of their savings on healers to try and cure this kid of his deaf mutism. This is something that happens of course. But after seeing my programme, and hearing me talk, they were then convinced that they had been wrong all that time. The boy thanked me for having relieved them of this burden. This is what makes you go on, when people tell you that you have had some effect on their lives. I would say to skeptics groups all over the world who are doing this same kind of investigative work and taking their message out to the world, that I am convinced that we are right. I would not be doing it if I weren’t convinced that we were right. It is not a popular point of view, but the rewards are huge. If I get one letter like that, amidst all the ones that say that I am Satan, and I am going to hell and all the rest of it, then it makes up for it.

Since the “Masked Magician” conjurers generally seem even more sensitive to “exposure” than they used to be. Do you ever get accused of giving away too many secrets?

Randi: I get accused by other magicians, but they are absolutely wrong. I learnt that from my good friend

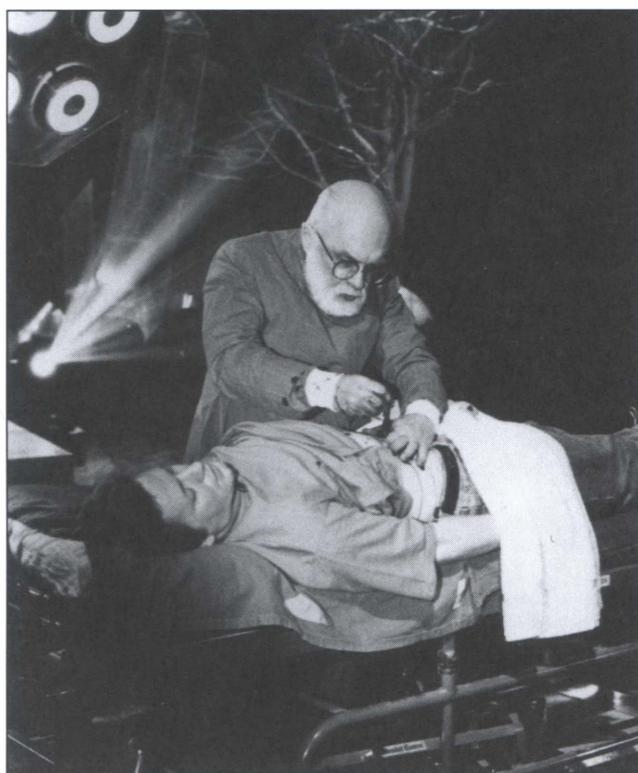
Johnny Giordemaine, a tiny little guy who taught me many of my first magic tricks as a kid. The kids would complain when they bought a thumb tip – this is like a shell over your thumb which is used for doing magic tricks as a magicians prop. The kids would say “this isn’t the colour of my skin” because maybe the thumb tip was a little too brown, or too pale, or too pink or whatever. Johnny would call over a spectator walking by in the store and say to them “Come here, I want to show you a miracle”. He would do a trick using a thumb tip and then when the guy had been amazed and walking away laughing and slapping his thigh, he would show us the thumb tip that he used and it would be a chrome plated piece of brass tubing. Chrome plated, Tony! That is so obvious! It was like a traffic light on the end of his thumb! But he would do the trick in such a way that the man’s attention would be drawn away from it, so it was all in the way he did the trick. It didn’t matter what his thumb looked like. You’d think that people would see it straight away, but no they don’t because they won’t be looking for it! So what we have here is that, when I expose, say for example, well I have exposed the thumb tip as it is used in the psychic surgery scam – and you should see what those guys used – they have thumb tips the size of a potato, seriously, like the size of a potato that you would have with the goose at Christmas! Believe me it is very obvious, but they manage to get away with it because it is not what people are looking for. And when I expose it, all I say is “just watch the video tape”. I can do what they do. It is only a trick using a thumb tip. It won’t even occur to people that this is being used.

The JREF \$1M Challenge seems to come in for criticism not only from believers who say it’s unfair, but occasionally from skeptics who say it is unscientific. Could you spell out what you see as its function?

Randi: It is parading, it is blowing the trumpet. But you see, back in I think 1968 I was confronted on a radio programme in New York city by a parapsychologist who said “Why don’t you put your money where your mouth is?”. That was a challenge that I couldn’t pass up, so I offered a thousand dollars to any psychic who could do what they say they could do. It then went to ten thousand dollars for a long time, and then went to a million dollars. That doesn’t mean that I have a million dollars. It is in a special account and has been given to us for that special purpose. What that does is throw down the gauntlet. It has been very effective. What we are saying is, “If you are psychic and are claiming that you have psychic powers and psychic abilities and you say that there are psychic forces out there then prove it!”. There will be certain conditions, to which we

shall both agree in advance. No judges required because the results will be self-evident. We don't have to examine them and make a decision on it. It is like falling off a log: he either fell in the river, or he didn't fall in the river. So what we do is we line it up in advance. All the rules are on my web page. The money is carefully looked after. It is not a fake, and it is not a scientific gimmick in itself.

We have also offered it to the University of Arizona because a fellow named Gary Schwartz, a PhD there, has said that he won't compete for prizes. So what we have done is we have offered it as a grant, a financial grant to the University of Arizona, which they can put to any use that they wish. All they have to do is to pro-



vide evidence for what Gary Schwartz has declared to the press – which is that he has established the existence of life after death. That evidence can then get examined by an independent panel, that he and I will both agree, so that a qualified panel can make a decision on it of “yes” or “no”. So it is now also a grant, if people do not want to look upon it as a prize. You see he can't turn down a grant. That's where it works very well. *The University of Arizona has just sent me a letter officially declining the million-dollar prize. How embarrassed they must be!

The million dollar prize has been very useful in bringing us to the attention of the public. There are hundreds and thousands of psychics all over the world who are ignoring this. I think that is some sort of evidence. Or perhaps they haven't heard about it, but

believe me they have heard about it. Or perhaps they are intellectually challenged in some way, or, the other possibility is that they can't do what they say they can do. They are being offered this carrot which is on the end of a string, and we have said that we invite them to take a bite of the carrot, but “No thank you, I am not interested”. That seems to say a lot to me.

The wording of the Challenge has altered slightly over the years but some still claim that the wording of the Challenge makes it unwinnable. How do you counter this view?

Randi: The way the tests are designed are that we meet with the claimant. They say what they can do and in what conditions they can do it, and with what accuracy. Then we design ... and I do this in conjunction with scientists, because I'm not a scientist. I will call Ray Hyman, Jim Alcock, I can call anyone. I have great access to people anywhere in the world, from Cambridge, England, to Cambridge, Massachusetts. I can call scientists and philosophers all over the world who can help me in the design of these tests, and do so regularly. We design the tests on paper and we say that these would be the circumstances, and again, it is something which is self-evident and not something that we have to make a decision on, asking “Did they pass the test or not?”. You are either on the log or you are off the log. Then we get approval between the psychic claimant and ourselves and the board of scientists. At that point I back off. I retreat from the whole thing. It is all in writing. Everyone has to sign the papers. We give them to the scientists and the scientists are people that the claimant has to approve of, and he can bring his own people in. We don't care, as long as it's all signed, sealed and delivered and decided well in advance that the evidence will speak for itself. Then they do the test.

Now, I must tell you that this test has never taken place, because we do preliminary tests first to weed out those people who are not likely to succeed, like 100 percent of them. And it does. We have not yet had one successful preliminary test. One group of people came all the way from Indonesia. A couple of rather naïve gentlemen there paid all their expenses. It must have cost a small fortune to bring them over, but they were convinced that they were going to win the million dollar prize. We did a simple test with them and they failed. The money that was invested in them was lost and for twelve months they cannot re-apply. They were screaming about it. But they had agreed to the protocol in advance and when the test was over, before the results were announced, they agreed that the test was perfectly fair and said that they would abide by the results. But they didn't abide by the results. Are we surprised? No, not much. [*postscript]

Your high profile seems to have exposed you to a great deal of personal abuse from some quarters. In fact, on occasion it seems little short of an attempt at total character assassination. On a personal level how do you deal with this?

Randi: On a personal level, well, people are very fond of character assassination because they can't get to what I say. They can't fight it so they have to resort to character assassination. Years ago, say twenty or so years ago, the popular thing was to accuse someone of being a communist. They said that I had spent time in jail in Canada and that I was a member of the communist party in Montreal and in Toronto. Then they dropped that because it wasn't popular anymore, and people didn't care about it any more. Remember at that point I was not an immigrant of the United States, I was just a visitor, so that made me rather sensitive to these things as I was applying for citizenship. Of course, now I am a citizen. I think that the next thing was that I was accused of being a child pornographer, and yes, a child molester was in there some place I think. I don't remember the order of these things, but they probably all came up at around the same time. Anything that they could think of that was really nasty they would accuse me of. Now of course people think "I wonder why they would say that if it wasn't true", thinking in terms of no smoke without fire. But there is often a lot of smoke and no fire accompanying it. It often happens, and we know that from past experience. There was an event that was in New Jersey, it would be in the late 1970s I guess. There was someone in New Jersey when I lived there, I forget his name, anyway, there was a dreadful thing that happened. I was working on radio at that time, from midnight until five in the morning and I was subject to phone calls from kids. Whenever it was the holiday weekend I knew that the phone was going to ring all day, and it could have rung all night too, but I wouldn't know about that because I was on the air in New York, working from midnight on. And so they would call me during the day, and they wanted to be aggravating. You would get little teeny boppers on there who would shout obscenities into the phone and all this sort of thing. And I put the phone company on to them



and they traced the number and they arrested a kid who got fined and sent home with his tail between his legs. This was published in the paper at the time, but it was a minor event. At the same time the local police had suggested that if I had a tape recorder (I did have a tape recorder which I sometimes used to record phone conversations – always with permission) that I recorded some of the phone calls. So I did record some of the phone calls. So that proved to be very useful because another group of kids started to give me the calls and I was able to trace some of them. I had to keep them on the line for at least five minutes so that they could be traced – not like nowadays when these things are instant. The phone company informed me of where the calls had come from, and what I did was that I called that number (it was what the police had told me to do – it was a wonderful gimmick). As soon as the little girl at the other end of the line answered, I played the tape back. I heard screaming at the other end of the line and the phone calls stopped for one reason or another because the little girl realised that a) I had it on tape and b) I knew her phone number.

So this story got all out of proportion when it was discovered that there was a tape of some of the phone calls. I had given the tapes to the police, which they had used in the arrest and subsequent conviction of the guilty party, two guilty parties actually, in New Jersey. Somehow that tape got into the hands of some of the bad guys and that went circulating around, all over the place and everyone was very happy saying "Oh well now it has been shown that James Randi is making obscene phone calls". Those phone calls got the culprits, because I had to keep them on the phone for at least five minutes remember. None of the phone calls last more than five minutes, and at the end of the five minutes you just hear "click" and that is the end of it. I only stayed on as long as I had to. We got the convictions and we got the arrests with that tape. So this story started circulating around and people were printing transcripts, very carefully selected transcripts. Not the conversations with Martin Gardner, or Paul Kurtz of CSICOP, or any of the regular phone calls that are on that tape. Of course they leave all that out because they want to make it look like I did nothing on the telephone except make dirty phone calls back

and forth. I have been quite open about all of this and why there were the tapes, and the proof of it, and this is the final proof of it, and then I hope we can close this stupid door. When I applied for citizenship (I am Canadian by birth) in New Jersey and I went to see the immigration officer, he greeted me and said that he knew who I was (I had been in the papers and on a couple of television programmes). He sat me down and he asked me questions and he said to me "Have you ever been arrested?" and I said "Yes, in New Jersey" and he just waved his hands and he said "No, no, no, we know all about that...". The immigration officer was very happy about all of this and he celebrated the fact that I was there and then he asked me the crucial question, he said "I have to question you about American law and system of government". I was terrified about this as I knew nothing about it. He said to me "Who was the first president of the United States, Mr Randi?" and I said "Ummm ... Richard Nixon?" and he said "No, but that's close enough, welcome to the United States, sir" and he shook my hand. Now this was obviously a little bit of a gag. He wasn't going to make it too difficult for me to become a citizen. So, Tony, I am a citizen of the United States. They knew all about all this crap that had taken place. He had mountains of paper, including some really bad letters from people who had decided to "turn me in" to the immigration people. They had considered all of this. It wasn't just this one man either. The whole immigration and naturalisation service in New Jersey had discussed this and considered it. They would not have allowed me to come in for the examination if they thought that I was anything that was described in those papers. So they accepted me as a citizen of the United States and that was many years ago, and I am happily a citizen of the United States, so "Rule Britannia!" or whatever (I don't know what they say in the United States).

Skeptic groups exist in virtually every country in the world and there are numerous skeptic organizations in the US alone. Do you think there is enough co-ordination and co-operation between them?

Randi: I don't know, because I don't know what that co-ordination consists of. All I know is that we have very good relationships with the *Skeptic magazine* over in California. Michael Shermer is not only a very good friend, but he is very co-operative with the foundation here and in fact I get co-operation with everyone from across the world. CSICOP and I had a falling out some years ago because of the Uri Geller debacle. They decided that I should never mention Uri Geller's name again and I told them that that was what we were set up

to do, that I don't belong here and I walked out. I am good friends with all the people in CSICOP, but not as an organisation. I don't have anything to do with them now. I am not really up with what is happening, but I do know that I get invited by skeptics groups all over the world to contribute to their newsletters and magazines. And I ask them to contribute. In fact perhaps I'll make that appeal right now for submissions to *Swift*, which is now a part of our weekly web-page changes. I am looking for articles and I would certainly like to have some from abroad as well, so get those articles in here folks!

Do you have any plans to return to the UK?

Randi: Oh, I always have plans to return to the UK. I love the UK. London to me is one of the most exciting cities in the world. That and Paris – two of the most exciting cities. I get there every possible chance I can. The British Museum is the centre of my world. I go directly from the airport to the British Museum before I go to the hotel. I do want to go back, but I don't have any immediate invitation to go back. I will respond favourably to invitations.

Apart from your own books, do you have any reading suggestions, particularly for new skeptics?

Randi: There are two books that I would highly recommend. One is *Why People Believe Weird Things* by Michael Shermer [1998, Freeman and Co.: New York]. Shermer writes well, certainly much better than I could ever hope to. His most recent books, and there are three or four of them that I won't trouble you with the titles of as you will know them [see suggested further reading], any of those books are very good. But if you want a highly popularised book, I really miss Carl Sagan enormously. *The Demon-Haunted World* [1987, Ballantine Books: New York] is one of the most successful books I have ever read. On any subject it is lucidly done. I received an early draft of it. It was written in Carl's usual style and the publishers said that he was basically going to make a lot of changes. He did make a lot of changes. Instead of saying such things as "this seems doubtful" he would say "this is absolutely ridiculous". He knew that it was his swan song Tony and he knew that he wouldn't be writing again and he wanted to make it stronger. He threw all academic caution to the wind and he told it (very much more than he did in his other books), he told it the way it really is. He was much harder in his language. He wasn't as hard as I would be though. There was a big difference in our approach to the thing. So I recommend those books – anything by Shermer in particular.

Have you any plans to write another book?

Randi: There is always another book coming up. I've got two books. One of them is *Wrong!* I am basing that upon my investigations into the great ship Vasa, which in Stockholm is in the museum called the Vasa Museum appropriately enough. This was the ship from when Gustav Adolf the third of Sweden had power. That ship set sail with the builders already knowing that it was going to sink. And yet, Gustav was the king and he said "Build it taller, build it faster, make it heavier, put more cannons on the top of it", and they said "But your majesty, it is going to sink" and he said "I'm the king – build it". So they built it and it sailed out into the harbour and it was there for just fifteen minutes before it laid over on to its side and it sank, with one hundred and forty people on board. It stayed there from 1620 something, I've forgotten now, until, among other people, Prince Charles came along and decided to help lift the thing up and paid for some of the bills. They put it in the museum as a sign of man's folly and lack of technology and dependence on authority. That's what I'm getting at with *Wrong!* because we have done so many things with using authority and following authority, like "I'm the chief of police so I have to be right". So that book is dedicated to that. The other one is *A Magician in the Laboratory*, which sounds like "a rat in the pantry" or something like that, but in that I am getting my swan song. I am ... what am I? ... seventy one or seventy three now, and so I have to bear that in mind. So *A Magician in the Laboratory* will tell everything, exactly as it is, everything left hanging out. I am going to say, for example, what happened with Benveniste in the laboratory, when we exposed the

homeopathy. The mistakes, or the series of blunders that was going on there, and some of the things that were said. It will be strong. I'm working on it on the computer right now.

Did you get an invite to Uri Geller's recent marriage ceremony?

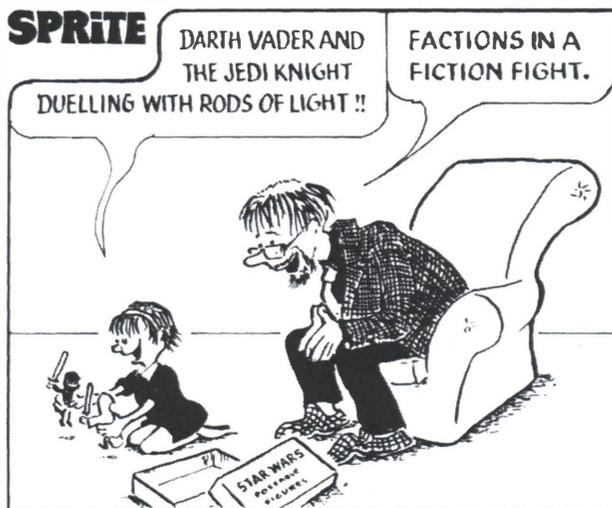
Randi: No, I was off the list somehow, but maybe I missed the invitation when it came in the mail. But he had Michael Jackson there. If you have read some of the newspaper articles they are so funny because they mention that he was at Uri Geller's second wedding and then they went on to Michael Jackson and he was sitting there with a crutch and his leg in a cast, and how he nodded at the people, how he smiled, how he half fell asleep and nodded off and a few other things, and then they finally got back to Geller and they just mentioned him in closing. I bet you Geller must have been really annoyed by that kind of coverage, but hey you don't invite the local hurricane to sit down at your birthday party unless you want the newspapers to report that there was a hurricane there too.

Suggested Further Reading

- Shermer, M. (2000). *How we Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science*. W. H. Freeman and Company: USA.
- Shermer, M. (2001). *The Borderlands of Science*. Oxford University Press Inc: USA.
- Shermer, M. and Grobman, A. (2000). *Denying History*. University of California Press: USA.

Pictures courtesy of the James Randi Educational Foundation

Tony Youens is a co-founder of ASKE and the editor of their quarterly newsletter. He is a part-time psychic conjuror and currently attempting to do a philosophy degree. Following the above interview he is also a member of the JREF. His star sign is Picalus the Onion.



Skeptical Stats

Number of birds Miami resident Carlos M. Rodriguez Avila allegedly had hidden in his trousers on arrival from a flight from Havana, Cuba: **44**

Percentage by which the CEOs of the 30 companies with the largest announced layoffs in 1997 saw their salaries, bonuses, and long-term compensation increase: **67.3**

Amount per attack victim raised by *Tribute to Heroes* telethon: **\$21,500**

Amount per attack victim given to airlines by Congress: **\$700,000**

Amount per attack victim Congress approved for war: **\$5,700,000**

Number of murderous watersprites said to inhabit the new Perthshire mansion of *Harry Potter* author JK Rowling: **1**

Number of American deaths due to anthrax in October/November: **5**

Number of Americans who die each year of flu: **20,000**

Length of the world's fibre optic telecommunications networks: **39,000,000,000 miles**

Worldwide debt of the telecommunications industry: **\$500 billion**

Number of journalists killed covering the war in Afghanistan as of November 30: **8**

Percentage of equipment tonnage shipped to the Persian Gulf during the six-month deployment before the war that was fuel: **70**

Percentage by which the fuel efficiency of tanks would have to be improved to reduce set-up time to one month: **50**

Date American psychic claimant Sylvia Browne accepted protocols for James Randi's \$1 million challenge: **September 3, 2001**

Number of nude news services on the Internet: **3**

Amount of grant from the DTI's SMART scheme to develop a device that automatically places golf balls on the tee: **£10,000**

Weight of a six-week-old broiler chicken in 1976: a little over **1kg**

Weight of a six-week-old broiler chicken in 2001: **more than 2.6kg**

Weight of a near-future six-week-old broiler chicken using new methods developed in Essex: **3kg**

Amount donated to charities by the British public in 2000: **£5.3 billion**

Percentage of income that represents: **34.6 percent**

Number of fatal attacks on humans by mountain lions in the US since 1991: **7**

Age of child whose vision of "the Devil" while asleep in a chair drove his family to flee the haunted house: **2**

Size of debts of the Findhorn Foundation: **£600,000**

Number of codes for religions in the Census code book for the UK 2000: **177**

Number of codes for "Jedi knight": **1**

Number of UFO sightings the MoD's 1950 working party concluded, after eight months of studying collected reports, were worth further study: **3**

Number they thought were actually alien spacecraft: **0**

Sources: 1 *Miami Herald*; 2 Canadian Labour Congress; 3,4,5 news media; 6 *Independent*; 7,8, general news media; *The New Yorker*; 9,10 PBS; 11 news media; 12,13 *Business Week*; 14 <http://www.randi.org>; 15 *Annals of Improbable Research*; 16 DTI press release; 17,18,19 *Independent*; 19,20 *Guardian Society* survey; 21 *Discover*; 22 *Hull Daily Mail*; 23 *Scotland on Sunday*; 24,25 Census code book; 26,27 *Fortean Times*, reporting on DSI/JTIC Report No 7

Thanks for clippings to Rachel Carthy, Tom Ruffles, and Steuart Campbell.

The Missing Airmen

It is a small enigma in a world of unceasing strangeness, but there in Charles Fort's *Wild Talents*, at the start of Chapter 17, is the bizarre case of the vanishing airmen. **Paul Chambers** investigates...

THE STORY OF THE MISSING AIRMEN concerns the last flight of Pilot Officer Donald Ramsay Stewart and Flight-Lieutenant William Conway Day, both of whom went missing over the Persian desert on 24th July 1924. Seven days later their intact plane was found sitting on the Arabian sands, miles from civilisation. There was no sign of the airmen apart from two sets of footprints leading away from the aeroplane but which stopped abruptly after 40 yards. It was as if the two pilots had suddenly vanished into thin air in mid-stride. Fort remarks that no meteorological or mechanical reason could explain why the pilots needed to land in such a remote location and that their sudden disappearance was inexplicable to all. Their remains were never found.

Although not a classic in the annals of the paranormal, the case of the vanishing airmen has nonetheless been repeated a number of times, most notably by Frank Edwards in *High Strangeness* (his report is lifted entirely from Fort's *Wild Talents*) and from a number of ufology web sites, most of whom cite Edwards as their source. Like most sudden disappearances, the case of the "vanishing airmen" is most commonly cited as an early example of alien abduction. One assumes this means that a UFO must have forced the plane to land before kidnapping the pilots as part of some dastardly intergalactic plot.

This case caught my attention a couple of years ago and for some reason remained at the back of my mind. I recently found myself at the British Newspaper Library and, having finished my own research, thought that it would be worth trying to track down the facts of the vanishing pilots' case.

Charles Fort obtained his information from two articles in the *Sunday Express* (21st & 28th September 1924). These were easy enough to find, and sure enough there was the story of the "vanishing airmen" portrayed in such a way as to make their disappearance look highly unusual.

It was apparent that several weeks had passed between the incident itself, which occurred on 24th July, and the *Sunday Express* articles in late September. I felt that the next logical step was to look through the newspapers for the weeks after the disappearance itself for more contemporary accounts. Sure enough, *The Times* and *Daily Mail* (31st July 1924) both carried a small notice announcing the discovery of the plane and that the pilots had been missing for a week. It was from this that the first inconsistency became apparent.

The *Sunday Express*, Fort, Edwards and others were all keen to stress that there was no logical reason why the pilots had to land where they did. The plane was intact and there was no sign of injury to the pilots.

The weather had been fine. The implication was that some mysterious power or incident had forced them from the sky.

However, both *The Times* and *Daily Mail* state clearly that the two pilots had had "...to make a forced landing during a sandstorm" and that their machine had been "...found in a damaged condition". So there was no real mystery as to why they needed to land. Bad weather forced them to land during which process the plane probably became damaged and was unable to take off again.

Neither *The Times* nor *Daily Mail* make any mention of abruptly finishing footprints although they do report that both men appeared to have been trying to walk towards a railway track eighteen miles away. This suggests that footprints were probably found at the scene.

The next mention comes from the *Daily Mail* (8th August 1924) when the father of Flight-Lieutenant Day complains about the Royal Air Force's lack of progress in tracing his son. The RAF issued a denial which was printed the next day. After this come the two aforementioned articles in the *Sunday Express* which firmly turn the case into a paranormal mystery by describing the suddenly finishing footprints, but neglect to mention the sandstorm or damaged plane. The *Express* acknowledges the enigma but suggests that Bedouin tribesmen might be to blame, kidnapping the officers and then sweeping away their footprints as they retreated.

Charles Fort dismisses this idea, while most later writers ignore it altogether, suggesting instead an explanation which centres on bug-eyed extraterrestrial beings bent on mischief. In this form the mystery has stood for over three-quarters of a century, a potential classic in the annals of ufology. It was, however, a mystery that took less than five minutes to solve.

Having found some original articles relating to the disappearance, I then turned to the computerised *Index for The Times 1905-1980*. I typed the airmen's surnames and within seconds was presented with an entry for 12th March 1925. It had the headline "Missing R.A.F. Officers' Bodies Found". I ordered up the microfilm and there was the solution to the mystery which had regrettably been missed by Fort, Edwards and others.

The Times article provided a detailed history of the whole case. The damaged aeroplane had been forced to land in a sandstorm, apparently injuring Flight-Lieutenant Day whose blood was found inside the cockpit. Although no written note was found, there was a set of footprints heading into the desert which became obscured by blown sand after 40 yards. An examination of the plane revealed that the pilots had taken food and water supplies and then set off in the

direction of Jalibah railway station, 12 miles to the north. They did not reach it and after months of searching by RAF crews, their two bodies were eventually found together in the desert.

The Times says that “. . . from the positions where the remains were found it was obvious that the unfortu-

nate officers had lost their way . . . in view of the time of day and the season during which they were subjected to exposure, there is no reason to doubt that death ensued from heat exhaustion.” Mystery solved and not an alien in sight . . .

Paul Chambers is a freelance science writer and television researcher. He can be contacted at paulmchambers@hotmail.com.

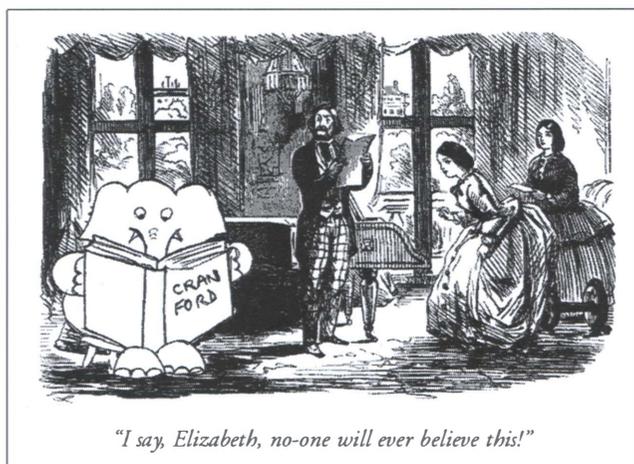
Mrs. Gaskell's Elephant: The Story of a Hoax

by Chris Willis

HOW DIFFICULT is it to convince academics of the truth of something totally false? Frighteningly easy. Sometimes you don't even have to try, as was proved by a recent unintentional hoax which fooled several supposed “experts” on nineteenth-century culture.

One of the leading internet resources for nineteenth century scholars is an e-mail discussion list which includes over 1000 academics working on Victorian history and literature. Whatever you need to know about the Victorians, someone on the list will have the answer. To spare members' blushes, I won't give the list's name.

During the 2001 summer vacation, list members began to have fun. One member made a passing joke about a pet elephant belonging to Victorian novelist Elizabeth Gaskell. Of course, no such creature ever existed. Picking up the joke, another participant replied with tongue firmly in cheek, “But I thought everybody knew about the elephant?”. More people joined in the fun, and over the next few days a series of delightfully frivolous emails constructed a complete fictional biography for the mythical elephant, whose adventures grew stranger and stranger.



According to these imaginative academics, the elephant was presented to Mrs Gaskell by an Indian fan. It arrived by post, in a crate with a rhinoceros. Mrs Gaskell sent the rhinoceros back, but the elephant became her constant companion and accompanied her on reading tours. She dosed it with opium to keep it from following

its natural instincts during the mating season. It used to fall into drug-induced slumber in the doorway of the Reverend Gaskell's study, preventing him from getting in to compose his sermons. In 1859 the elephant was murdered by a jealous rival who had found out about Mrs Gaskell's passionate affair with Branwell Brontë. Mrs Gaskell was heartbroken and kept the elephant's left tusk as a memento. Three different museums now claim to have the tusk in their collection.

So far, so unbelievable. Then the story got even more extravagant. The elephant had, of course, arrived complete with its mahout, Ahmed. Ahmed's memoirs are under lock and key in the India Office, after being found in a trunk bought from a white elephant sale. The only other copy of them was lost a few years ago in an air crash (the plane, of course, being a jumbo jet). The memoirs are too politically sensitive to release, as they reveal that he was a double agent in the Indian Mutiny. He used a code based on elephant diseases to communicate with Mrs Gaskell, who was in fact the first head of MI5.

Would anyone believe this? Surely not. But it suddenly became evident that several unwary academics had fallen for this unintentional hoax, and believed firmly in the elephant's existence. The perpetrators apologised profusely and retreated in embarrassment. As one list member commented, “Elizabeth Gaskell's elephant is actually a shaggy dog”.

But the story raises serious points about academic credulity. Over the past year or two newspapers have carried claims that Byron was a psychopath, Charlotte Brontë was a murderer and Victorian painter Walter Sickert was Jack the Ripper. Are these any more believable than Mrs Gaskell's elephant? The press are happy to promulgate such unlikely theories, and can usually find a “rent-a-quote” academic or two to back them up. But what has happened to academia when such things can so easily be accepted as true?

Maybe it's time I gave up serious academic work. I've just had this great idea for a money-spinning book about how Florence Nightingale murdered Prince Albert during her lesbian affair with Queen Victoria. After all, if people believe in Mrs Gaskell's elephant, they'll believe anything!

Wild About Harry

Chris Willis takes a look at children's fiction in the light of criticisms by religious fundamentalists.

WHAT DO a dead theologian, a prize-winning author and the richest woman in Scotland have in common? If you read children's fiction, you probably know the answer. CS Lewis, Philip Pullman and JK Rowling have all been attacked by religious fundamentalists for supposedly having a Satanic influence on the children who read their books.

Fiction doesn't come much more Christian than Lewis's chronicles of Narnia. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is apparently based on the story of Christ's resurrection. In Lewis's book the lion Aslan, who represents truth and goodness, submits to being killed in order to save the world from evil. He is then resurrected and his enemies are vanquished. Lewis was a distinguished theologian and the book is full of moral homilies about Christian values. But according to the Kidspeak website (to be found at <http://www.mugglesforharrypotter.org/iq.html>), some of the more extreme factions of the ranting religious Right condemn it because the leader of Aslan's enemies is a witch. And anything with witches in it must be Satanist ... mustn't it?

Well, no actually. Many fundamentalist Christians approve of the Narnia books. Some people even feel that the books are *too* Christian. According to the *New York Times* (3rd June 2001), publisher HarperCollins are to commission sequels to the Narnia stories, leaving out the Christian element, which they feel is offputting to modern readers. Condemned by the forces of commercialism as well as fundamentalism, it seems that CS Lewis just can't win.

Philip Pullman is quite another matter. Christian fundamentalists regard this best-selling author as being only one step removed from the devil – and it's easy to see why. Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (*Northern Lights*, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*) is a fascinating reworking of Milton's *Paradise Lost* from a skeptical, anti-religious viewpoint. *The Amber Spyglass* shows God as a senile old man who has been deposed by rebel angels and is glad to die. Organised religion is

seen as a repressive force. One of the most sympathetic characters explains that, "all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity ... the followers of wisdom, have always tried to keep open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed" (*The Amber Spyglass*, chapter 36).

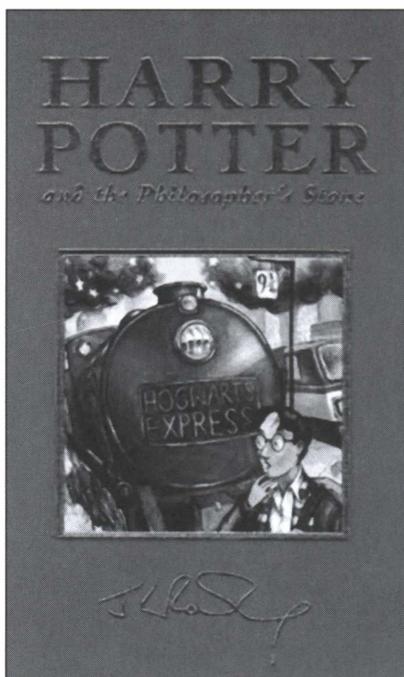
No wonder fundamentalist Christians are apoplectic with fury.

Children and adults love Pullman's books, which have sold millions of copies worldwide. According to the *Guardian's* Ed Vuillamy, their phenomenal US success is "subverting the influence of the Religious Right at the moment of its greatest political triumph" (*Guardian*, 26th August 2001). Pullman seems to enjoy the controversy. He told the *Guardian*, "Blake once wrote of Milton that he was a 'true poet, and of the Devil's party, without knowing it'. I am of the Devil's party, and I know it."

But the fundamentalists' greatest fury is reserved for Harry Potter. According to the "Exposing Satanism" website (<http://www.exposing-satanism.org/harrypotter.htm>), JK

Rowling's Harry Potter books are "laced with witchcraft and demonology" and giving them to a child is the equivalent of giving that child a cup of arsenic. You thought the Z-shaped scar on Harry's head was the result of an attack by evil wizard Voldemort? Not according to this site, which claims that it is in fact the mark of Satan. When I first saw this website, I thought it must be a spoof but, sadly, it's genuine. It's one of many which spout this kind of nonsense. Parents in South Carolina unsuccessfully tried to get the Harry Potter books banned from schools, and Santa Fe education authorities have removed them from school libraries. Thankfully, common sense still prevails in some quarters. An organisation called Muggles for Harry Potter (<http://www.mugglesforharrypotter.org/>) has been set up to defend the books. So far, over 17,000 people have joined.

So what is so "evil" and anti-Christian about Harry Potter? To any rational person, the books seem to reinforce Christian morality. In all of the books, Harry and



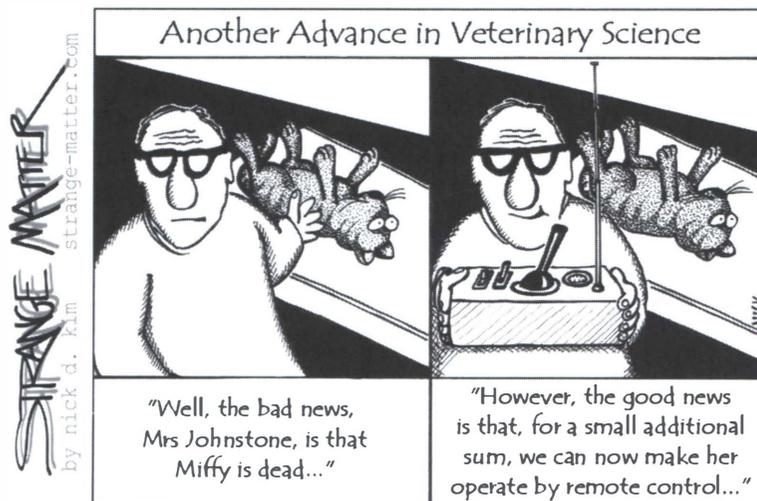
his friends overcome evil, and good triumphs. What could be more moral than that? But according to fundamentalists, Harry *must* be evil, just because he's a wizard and performs magic. Couldn't the same be said of Jesus turning water into wine?

Lewis, Pullman and Rowling all use basically the same moral theme. Good vanquishes evil. The heroes (Lewis's Pevensie children; Pullman's Will and Lyrá; Rowling's Harry, Hermione and Ron) are portrayed as embodiments of good. They fight enemies who represent pure evil (Lewis's White Witch; Pullman's soul-eating Spectres; Rowling's evil wizard Voldemort). There are strong elements of Christian mythology in all the texts. Lewis's *The Last Battle* is about Armageddon. In Pullman's *The Amber Spyglass*, Will and Lyrá's descent into the world of the dead echoes medieval Christian myths about the Harrowing of Hell. Harry Potter's continual battle with Voldemort reflects Christian beliefs in the continual fight between good and evil. I wonder how long it will be before the pendulum will swing back, and some academic will write a thesis on Harry Potter as a symbolic Christ-figure?

Of course, this kind of thing has been going on for years. In 1941 Dorothy L Sayers was attacked for blasphemy when she wrote a series of radio plays about the life of Christ for children. Fundamentalist Christians were horrified by the mere thought of having an actor play Christ, and tried to have the play banned before it had even been broadcast. Newspapers sensationalised the debate and questions were asked in Parliament. The first episodes of *The Man Born to Be King* were finally broadcast in December 1941. The blasphemy outcry had ensured plenty of publicity, and the series was a great success. Tongue firmly in cheek, Sayers could not resist the temptation to thank the protesters, "the Lord's Day Observance Society and the Protestant Truth Society, who so obligingly did all our publicity for us".

If religious fundamentalists really want to prevent children from reading about witches, demons and ghosts, there's one book they really should turn their attention to. It includes tales of demoniac possession, supernatural events, and even a king who consults a witch to bring someone back from the dead. Now what was it called again? Oh yes - the Bible.

Chris Willis teaches at Birkbeck College, where she recently completed her PhD on gender and popular fiction.



SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Speakers: TBA

Skeptics in the Pub is an evening held once a month (in a pub, strangely enough) for anybody who has an interest in, or is skeptical about, the paranormal. Each month an invited speaker gives a talk on their chosen specialisation. The talk is followed by an informal discussion in a relaxed and friendly pub atmosphere. The event is held at the **Florence Nightingale Pub, Westminster Bridge Road, London**. Entry fee is £2. For further information, such as details of forthcoming meetings and travel directions, please contact **Nick Pullar 07740 450 950**, nickp@coleridge.co.uk or log in to <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub>.



Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly

Parsnips and plugholes . . .

I DECIDED to make a New Year's resolution this year: to stop being weird. It all began in the fruit and vegetable section of the supermarket where I was closely examining the parsnips as I always do at this time of the year, just before my final lecture to first-year Physics undergraduates on classical mechanics. As the final topic on my lecture course, I talk about Newton's conic sections as these link the mundane with the cosmic and serve beautifully to illustrate the simplicity that often underpins the apparent complexity of the universe. What are conic sections? Well, if you take a solid cone and slice it in four different ways the edges of the different cuts form a circle, an ellipse, a parabola and a hyperbola respectively and these curves are precisely the orbits of celestial bodies—planets, comets and others—as they move through the heavens. Parsnips are the most conical vegetable in my supermarket and are easily sliced and so I have been using them for several years to illustrate conic sections in my lectures. All very logical and reasonable, you might say; however, that view didn't appear to be shared by the young woman in a Tesco uniform who noticed me perusing the parsnips. "Can I help you?", she kindly enquired. "No, it's OK", I replied. "I'm just trying to find the most conical parsnips".

The look on her face as she slowly backed away and said "Yes, OK . . ." in a sort of placatory way was one with which I am very familiar. For instance, on my very first flight across the equator, the fact that I spent 30 minutes locked in the toilet trying to determine which way the water went down the plughole (i) just north of the equator, (ii) exactly on the equator and (iii) just south of the equator seemed entirely reasonable to me. Unfortunately, the reply that followed my explanation of my temporary absence ("You what?!") was accompanied by exactly the same kind of facial expression as that of my Tesco fruit and vegetable assistant. And there is the nub of the problem; a problem, by the way, that I imagine is experienced by all scientists whose nearest and dearest do not share their profession: the walk around the reservoir interrupted by the physicist trying to work out why the light reflected off the water is making that complex pattern on the dam wall or by the entomologist trying to understand why the crane fly is behaving in such an odd manner. Or perhaps, the afternoon on the beach with the meteorologist preoccupied

with the odd movement of the clouds or with the chemist trying to understand the origins of the foam that flecks the water's edge. All of these seem like entirely legitimate concerns to me (as do water in plugholes and conical parsnips) but unfortunately to most of the rest of the world they just come over as, well . . . weird. Thus my New Year resolution.

But then I got to thinking about it. Trying to figure out how tiny little bits of the universe work is what my training and my profession is all about. But it is also the underlying reason for my interest in all things paranormal. I am confronted with an apparently strange phenomenon and want to find the real explanation for it. The fact that many people interpret it as a UFO, a ghost, an angel, a perpetual motion machine or the direct intervention of God is really of no consequence to me and doesn't much enter into my attempts to determine the true explanation. And that attitude is weird. I mean, if millions of people all over the globe believe that the virgin Mary is manifesting herself in Medjugorje or Lourdes how could I possibly fail to agree with them? Everyone knows that, although sun-sign/newspaper astrology can't really work very well, when you go to a REAL astrologer and get a SERIOUS reading that you will really learn things about yourself that you didn't know before and you may even get some genuine information about your future. I may be a physicist but what right does that give me to disagree with so many people? The royal family use homeopathic medicines so how can a mere commoner possibly query the clear beneficial action of a complete absence of molecules dissolved in water (nothing acts faster than Anadin!)? Anyone who disagrees with so many people, including royalty and Nancy Regan, must be foolish, arrogant and, well . . . weird!

So I had a good think about it and decided that I am going to withdraw my New Year resolution and continue asking odd questions and engaging in strange activities with parsnips and plugholes. In fact, although it is too late for a new, New Year resolution for this year, next year I am going to resolve to continue to be weird and perhaps to launch a campaign to promote my particular kind of weirdness. I'd write more about this, but I have just noticed that a little tiny drop of water on my computer monitor is producing a strange coloured pattern and I just want to figure out what's going on . . .

Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini



I CAME ACROSS a staggering example of the absurdity of superstition recently while staying in Spain. The Spanish are even fonder of their various national lotteries than the British, and the biggest of all is the Christmas lottery. The tickets have five-digit numbers and, as you might expect, “lucky” numbers are much sought after. This year the ticket everyone wants is 11901 – the number that corresponds to the date of the attacks on the World Trade Centre.

When I first heard about this on the television news, I thought I must have misunderstood. My Spanish is okay, but far enough from fluent for me to doubt the testimony of my own ears. But subsequent newspaper reports confirmed that people were indeed deliberately buying the “Osama” ticket in the belief that it was a lucky number.

What was so disconcerting was the complete lack of scorn or disapprobation in the media coverage. It just seemed natural that people should want to buy this ticket and the idea that the whole thing might be in bad taste or patently absurd was not even countenanced. Familiarity had led even skeptical Spaniards to cease to be amazed.

In this instance, the belief that such a ticket could be lucky is linked to the wider superstition that good comes out of bad. By this logic, if something really bad happens then something really good must also come to pass as a result. So the greatest tragedies and disasters are perversely the greatest source of good fortune.

This belief that the universe contains some kind of mechanism for balancing good and bad is not as batty-sounding as the belief that the date of a terrorist attack could be a lucky lottery number. But perhaps the absurdity of the second should provide a hint for the absurdity of the first: any belief which might reasonably be taken to support something so patently ridiculous must be treated itself with suspicion.

However, the idea that there is some kind of cosmic check on the distribution of good and bad is generally treated with a great deal of respect. It is not considered polite to be too rude about belief in Karma, perhaps because this is considered to be a religious belief rather than a superstition. What's more, it is an eastern religious belief, and people who are quite happy to be rude about the Pope and the Church of England are often much more squeamish when it comes to the “more spiritual” orient.

Of course, there are differences between the doctrine of Karma – where individual good or bad acts have their

eventual reward or punishment – and the cruder “good-from-bad” belief that motivated the lottery-playing public. But these differences are essentially of detail. What both beliefs have in common is an assertion that some force ensures that for every good there is an equal and opposite bad and vice-versa. If one is obvious nonsense and superstition, why is the other dignified with the epithet of “religious belief”?

This question vexes me, because ever since I started this column I've been intrigued by the attitude of the readers and publishers of *The Skeptic* to religion. When I started out, I assumed that most of those involved with the magazine would be atheists. In fact, there seems to be a kind of tacit understanding that religious belief itself is not a suitable target for *The Skeptic's* skepticism. Perhaps the reason for this is that religious belief makes no claim to be based on rationality and is therefore an inappropriate target for rational criticism. Matters of faith therefore fall outside of the compass of rational scrutiny.

But this ring-fencing of religion can only be sustained if one can distinguish clearly between matters of faith and superstition. If not, then either superstition too must be considered immune from the skeptic's critique or religion must be admitted into the category of legitimate targets.

This is an example of how important words and concepts can be. Philosophers have been criticised for being too interested in fine conceptual distinctions and questions of meaning. But in situations like this, it should be obvious that the distinction between religion and superstition must be made clear on a conceptual level in order to decide which is or is not a suitable subject of skeptical scrutiny. To proceed without first doing this conceptual clarifying is like a vet trying to perform an operation without identifying what animal they're dealing with first.

One problem here is prior prejudices. A religious believer, for example, will try to come up with a pair of definitions that creates a difference between religion and superstition; an atheist is more likely to try to define superstition in a way that also makes it apply to religion. What I'm after is a pair of definitions that reflect the truth, without prejudice. Only then can we decide whether the skeptics who treat religion differently from superstition are right.

Comments welcome to editor@philosophers.co.uk

Reviews



HUSH-UPS

The Hunt For Zero Point

by Nick Cook

Century, £17.99, ISBN 0712669531

I walked into the bookshop, my eyes glanced from side to side and then I saw it, "The hunt for zero-point"! My heart sped up as I slowly approached; here was the answer to the problems that had been plaguing me...

Do you find the above prose style irritating to the point of distraction? I do, but unfortunately it was the style that Nick Cook decided to use when writing *The Hunt For Zero-Point*.

Nick Cook was a journalist with *Jane's Defence Weekly*, a fact that I have managed to independently verify. I had heard a lot about antigravity and thought that this might be the book to pull together all the various strands of the pro- and anti- arguments into a sensible debate about the subject.

I wish! The book is written in the first person and chronicles not the history of "antigravity" but the author's attempts to investigate the field. The result is a bizarre entertaining high-tech film-noir thriller, but not a history book.

Mr Cook seems unaware of how history books should be written. First you present your facts and documents, then separately you interpret them. This book makes no distinction between the two — the reader is unaware of whether he is reading historical fact, or supposition.

The research into the subject, however, was excellent. I have found many of the documents he mentions on the Internet. (Some of T T Brown's antigravity patents mentioned in the book can be found at www.soteria.com/brown/info/patents.htm. The document "ELECTROGRAVITIC SYSTEMS: An examination of electrostatic motion, dynamic counterbary and barycentric control" which was supposedly a study funded by the U.S. Government and mentioned in the book can be found at www.padrak.com/ine/INE24.htm).

The gist of the book is that in the 30s and 40s there was a lot of work concerning new propulsion systems, jet engines, rockets, pulsejets, and also anti-gravity machines, some of which was instigated by the Nazis. The book goes on to "prove" that this information was hushed up by the US Government in the 50s and that

the anti-gravity programs went on as "deep black" projects in Area 51 and other such sites.

Personally, I think that Nick Cook has unearthed enough information to support the idea that research *was* hushed up in the 50s... (The CIA dabbled in telepathic spying so the idea of antigravity research isn't too far fetched.) However, the simple fact of a lack of antigravity 747s or Stealth bombers throws doubt on the idea that these projects came up with anything. A more realistic scenario is that these secret research projects carried on for a few years, came up with nothing, and were cancelled.

If you're interested in antigravity then I would recommend getting this book from a library. It holds up quite well as a science-fiction thriller, but not a science history book. The book does suffer from the lack of an index, but the bibliography is very useful. I would suggest obtaining the documents listed therein and making up your own mind.

Jon London

OPEN THE BOX

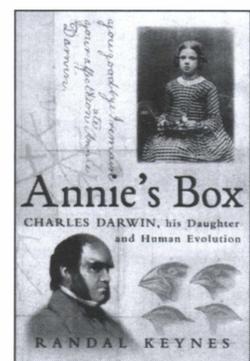
Annie's Box: Charles Darwin, his Daughter and Human Evolution

by Randal Keynes

4th Estate, £16.99, ISBN 1841150606

On 23 April 1851 Charles Darwin's beloved ten-year-old daughter Annie died after a long illness. Randal Keynes' book argues that this bereavement marked a turning-point in Darwin's life and work: "After Annie's death, Charles set the Christian faith firmly behind him" (p.222) and threw himself further into the researches which were to result in *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*.

Keynes is Darwin's great-great grandson, and has access to an impressive archive of family papers and artefacts, including the "box" which gives the book its title. Annie's box was a portable writing-desk (the Victorian equivalent of a laptop computer) filled with her personal possessions. After her death, her grief-stricken parents treasured it as a memento of her, and it became a family heirloom.



Annie's short life is central to this book. Keynes posits that Darwin's theories on the evolution of humanity from apes were formulated partly by observing his children's growth from babies to fully sentient beings. But does Keynes over-estimate the effect of Annie's death? Would Darwin's scientific research have led him to reject Christianity anyway? Yes, probably, but Keynes' book is none the less interesting for that.

The book offers a detailed and reliable account of Darwin's life, which will be welcome to those of us intimidated by the prospect of ploughing through Moore and Desmond's authoritative biography (*Darwin*, by Adrian Desmond, James Moore, 1992, ISBN 0140131922). Keynes' touching picture of the Darwins' family life makes the book eminently readable even for those with no great interest in Darwin.

Of course, this scholarly and erudite book will not be welcomed in Fundamentalist Christian quarters where it will be yet another red rag to the Creationist bull. But for skeptics, that's a definite recommendation!

Chris Willis

MAGICAL IRRITATIONS

The Encyclopedia of Magic and Witchcraft

by Susan Greenwood

Little Brown, £17.95, ISBN 0754805816

This is a beautiful book, well-presented, with high quality paper, print and illustrations. The title is a bit misleading: it is not an encyclopaedia in the usual sense, where one can look up a certain subject. Instead, it is a collection of short chapters treating a wide variety of topics concerning magic and witchcraft from ancient times to today, across many civilisations.

The author tries to define and describe magic, shamanism, occultism, and their relations with society and religion, and provides a lot of interesting information along the way. Since the scope is so wide not all subjects will appeal to all readers, but that goes for any encyclopaedia.

Some chapters are less informative, and the illustrations can even be irritating because many have but little relevance to the subject. As a reader of an encyclopaedia one does not draw much information about the Greco-Roman or the Celtic period from reproductions from paintings by 18th to 20th century European artists, unless one accepts that this book is more intended as entertainment.

Another uneasy feeling came to me as a skeptic when I started to realize that the author is writing in defence of magic and really believes in it; and often the limit between objective data and the personal beliefs of the author is not well-defined. Some topics are treated too narrowly or are one sided, such as the small chapter

called "Science and Magic". The scientific view is represented only by one philosopher and two anthropologists. The personal view of Greenwood on this subject sounds peculiar:

"Magic is similar to science. It also offers an explanation of the world although it uses the medium of spiritual connection that cannot be measured in a laboratory. The cause effect relation in spiritual Magic and science are different ways of thinking. All humans can exercise two ways of thinking: logical analytical and analogical or magical . . . both can be examined and understood through a scientific world view."

This kind of threw me off, but then there followed some very good texts on famous witches and witch-hunts, although with many illustrations that certainly have aesthetic value but provide no information on the subject.

When discussing astrology, the author laments that the link unifying the individual with the cosmos has been lost, and also states that the elixir of immortality was invented in China in the 4th century BC. Again it gave me a von Däniken feeling and it made me wonder how much all the other information can be trusted.

Do I recommend this book? I don't know – it depends what you are looking for. It certainly is entertaining, and nice to have on the coffee table, not least for the illustrations. Some parts are very good and others are less so, but all are pleasant to the eye. Perhaps I should not have taken the title too literally.

Willem Betz

UNRAVELLING THE DEAD

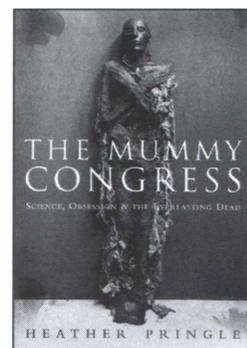
The Mummy Congress: Science, Obsession and the Everlasting Dead

by Heather Pringle

4th Estate, £15.99, ISBN 1841151114

Among the theatrical attractions of 1830s Britain was "mummy unrolling". Audiences of up to 2000 people paid to see entrepreneurs unwrap Egyptian mummies on stage. Heather Pringle's book is the 21st century equivalent, investigating myths and the truth about mummies.

It's not just Egypt. Pringle found mummies in Russia, China, Peru, Chile and Scandinavia, and interviewed the dedicated (and sometimes eccentric) people who study them. She met many mummy experts, including one of the men who embalmed Stalin, and a forensic scientist who specialises in investigating the "incorruptibility" of saints' bodies.



Interest in mummies has not always been purely scientific. A 12th-century mistranslation of an ancient manuscript implied that powdered mummy was a powerful medicine for a range of illnesses. So tombs were raided and mummies ground into powder. Until less than a century ago, the powder was also used as a pigment for oil paint. Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones was horrified to discover what he had been using, and promptly gave the tube of paint a decent burial in his garden.

Early mummy collectors were a strange bunch. Victorian racist George Gliddon obsessively measured the size of mummies' brain cavities in a forlorn attempt to "prove" white "superiority". Edwardian Egyptologist Grafton Elliott Smith collected mummified penises. Why? Today's experts are more respectable, but no less interesting. They complain that their studies are underfunded. Maybe this will change now that Pringle has given them such good publicity.

Chris Willis

DREAM THEORY

The Dream Drugstore: Chemically Altered States of Consciousness

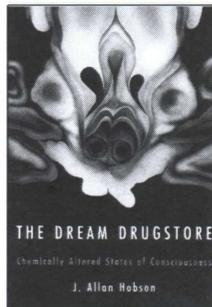
by J Allan Hobson

MIT Press, £19.50, ISBN 0262082934

The title of this book is a reference to the chemical mechanisms of the brain that cause dreaming. As someone who has read other books about the brain and sleep this one was of particular interest to me. The author's aim is to investigate states of consciousness with reference to his three-dimensional state space model known as AIM. Briefly, the dimensions of this model are: "Activation" (energy levels in the brain), "Information Source" (input/output status of the brain), and "Modulation" (modulatory status of the brain). As a layperson I'm not in a position to decide how good or useful this model is, but at least it's not too difficult to understand.

There are six chapters in the book, the subjects of which effectively split it into two parts. The first three chapters look at states of consciousness: normal ones such as waking and sleeping, and abnormal ones caused by dysfunctions like temporal lobe seizures. The last three chapters look at drugs (both prescribed and "recreational") and the implications for treatment.

From reading this book I gained a greater knowledge of how conscious states are reflections of, and



affected by, the chemical goings on in the brain. However, I did find myself becoming overloaded with information at times. There's no doubt that this book is worth reading by anybody wanting to understand more about the brain, and especially dreaming, but it does take quite a lot of mental effort in places to keep up with.

I think the reader is best served by using the book as a source of knowledge and should be wary of buying too much into the author's conclusions. Many popular science books put forward new ideas and the problem is that lay readers are often not the best people to evaluate them.

Dene Bebbington

UNLIKELY FRIENDS

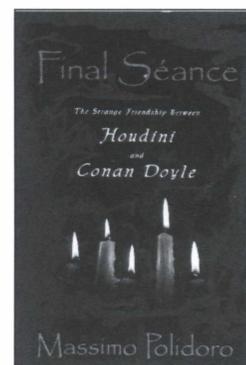
Final Séance: The Strange Friendship between Houdini and Conan Doyle

by Massimo Polidoro

Prometheus Books, £21.99, ISBN 1573928968

In 1932 Ernst and Carrington wrote *Houdini and Conan Doyle*, a fascinating account of the relationship between Houdini, the famous magician and investigator of psychic fraud, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, an educated medical doctor famed for his Sherlock Holmes books, but also a renowned proponent of Spiritualism. In *Final Séance* Massimo Polidoro becomes our tour guide, embellishing and updating Ernst and Carrington's subject matter with extensive research. Beginning with the mutual interest in the Davenports in 1920, possibly their first meeting, then giving us a florid whirlwind chronological tour of investigations. These investigations, and especially the subsequent comments by Doyle, are related with a waggish smile from Polidoro. Despite this there is utmost respect for their obsessional hunt for truth.

Massimo's mammoth tour of mediums investigated by the two central figures takes us through Eva C., Nino Pecoraro, Ada Besinnet, Margery Crandon, and George Valiantine with many more gracing these fascinating pages. Correspondence between Houdini and Doyle provides an intriguing insight into a friendship that has as its battleground one of the most interesting periods in the history of psychical research. Frequently we see Doyle attempting to gloss over Houdini's reputation, somewhat of a hindrance, in an effort to have him sit in on séances. Conversely, we are



given eyewitness accounts of Houdini's replications of mediumistic phenomena and his attempts to convince Doyle not to turn to a paranormal explanation so facilely. The "Final Séance" that the book title refers to occurs in Atlantic City where, even now, fortune-tellers and parlour-room psychics ply their trade. It is this simple séance that holds the key to the friendship's demise, and one can almost feel the frustration with which Houdini tries to deny his own apparent psychic ability that Doyle so readily insists he has. Polidoro's tour of this unique duo with their common Spiritualism interest forging a friendship that moulded psychical history books, provides us with delightfully written snapshots – perfect for showing the guests at your next circle!

Ciaran O'Keefe

HIDDEN FUN

Inventing the Victorians

by Matthew Sweet

Faber and Faber, £16.99, ISBN 0571206581

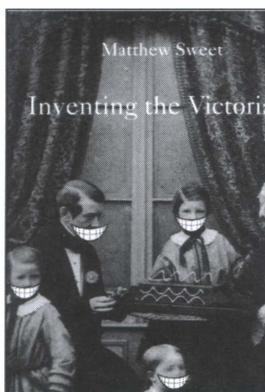
Opium, sex crime and serial killers aren't usually the first things that spring to mind when anyone mentions Victorian values. But Matthew Sweet's book argues that the Victorians may not have been as straight-laced as we'd like to think.

Sweet takes a skeptical look at our ideas about the Victorians, and reveals the truth behind the myths. Victorians did not drape piano legs in chintz to save their modesty, nor were Victorian ladies advised to "lie back and think of England".

Even their restrictive rules of etiquette make sense once you know the reasons behind them.

Victorian readers enjoyed reading about the exploits of serial killers, and best-selling sensational novels of the time featured bigamous, murderous heroines who would not be out of place in a modern thriller. Victorians invented the mass-production of pornography and enjoyed freak shows, whose star performers earned a fortune even by modern standards.

Sweet aims to rescue the Victorians from "the enormous condescension of posterity." Unlike many academic books, this is immensely readable and vastly entertaining. Even his most controversial statements are backed up by an impressive amount of facts, and I can't fault his extensive research.



This fascinating and thought-provoking book is well worth reading. Who would have thought the Victorians had so much fun? As Sweet comments, "If Queen Victoria wasn't amused, then she was in a very small minority."

Chris Willis

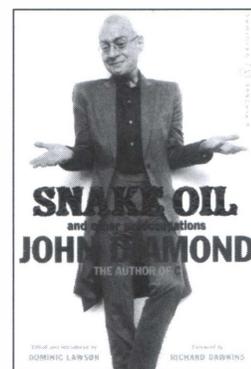
DIAMOND GEEZER

Snake Oil and Other Preoccupations

by John Diamond

Vintage, £7.99, ISBN 0099428334

Because the medium through which most people knew John Diamond was his *Times* column, in which he could pick and choose the facts around which he built his witty and sometimes scathing opinions, it's easy to forget that first he was a journalist. The surprise in *Snake Oil*, his unfinished "uncomplimentary look at the world of alternative medicine" is the extent to which he knew the subject (he also had an excellent researcher).



It's not just that once he made public his cancer diagnosis thousands of people wrote to him recommending he try this and that cure. He'd already spent years researching articles on the subject for a wide variety of publications. Certainly, the years he spent in treatment for his cancer gave him a thorough understanding of how the medical establishment and the human body work, if he didn't already have those.

The unfinished book is polemical, well-reasoned, and entertaining ("Look," he writes, "at any advert for those cosmetics which claim to rid the body of 'toxins' and you'll understand what the popular understanding of the function of the kidneys is."). But it is unfinished – and hard to tell how he'd have been able to weave together the disparate strands of his discussion.

To fill out the rest of the book, the editor (brother-in-law Dominic Lawson) selected a representative sampling of Diamond's popular journalism. Many are from his *Times* column; others are from publications such as the *Jewish Chronicle*, and the *Spectator*, and cover the range, from the physics "experiments" conducted by his baby daughter to Nostradamus' prophecies. All in all, worth reading, though in the rush to publication it's a great shame they didn't include an index. Also sadly missing is any sample of his online postings, which were some of his best writing.

Wendy Grossman



LETTERS

Ball Lightning

While some luminous phenomena have been created in laboratories, it is not clear that they were ball lightning. While some were the result of radio-frequency emissions, it is thought unlikely that this can occur in the free atmosphere. Furthermore there is no evidence for its creation. "Guide stars" are barely visible to the astronomers who create them high in the stratosphere; in any case, they are vertical columns, not spheres. It is true, as David Hambling claims (14/3) that the existence of ball lightning is now accepted by most scientists. However this acceptance is not based on much good evidence and most of the scientists who express an opinion are not familiar with the counter-evidence. Atmospheric scientists have more important matters on their minds. There is only one report from a scientist (Prof. R C Jennison) who, unfortunately, was already a believer in the existence of BL. The hole in an isinglass screen was almost certainly caused by a normal lightning strike. Mr Hambling should be more sceptical.

Steuart Campbell, Edinburgh

Ball Lightning: A Reply

It is not clear who believes that radio-frequency emissions are unlikely or why "Guide stars" are dim because they are produced by very low powered lasers; much brighter versions have been proposed (nor is it correct to say they are columns). I would be interested to know what the "counter-evidence" against ball lightning is; it is significant that the phenomenon has been observed around high-voltage electrical equipment by electrical engineers and others on many occasions. Nor is it

correct to say that Jennison is the only scientist to witness it. There are various other accounts, including one by the Canadian physicist Arthur Covington in *Nature* from April 18 1970; something like 5% of the population have seen it. I do not know why Mr Campbell suggests that the hole made in the isinglass screen was made by normal lightning; presumably he would ascribe the same cause to holes left in the fuselage of an Ilyushin-18 after a 10 cm ball lightning drifted through it (as reported by *TASS* 15th January 1984). Simply denying the existence of a phenomenon because it does not conveniently fit with our current theories is unlikely to advance our knowledge. Scientists now accept ball lightning; to continue denying it makes sceptics look like flat-earthers. Mr Campbell should be more scientific.

David Hambling, London

Editors' note: Readers may also be interested in the following press release by the Royal Society, brought to our attention by David Hambling, in relation to the above matter.

Press Release - The Science of Ball Lightning

This December 2001 theme issue of *Philosophical Transactions* deals with the phenomenon of ball lightning, a rarely seen and slow-moving luminous phenomenon usually associated with thunderstorms. A collection of previously unpublished sightings is presented, including close-up encounters describing the detailed internal structure of the balls.

Many of these observations are from scientifically or technically trained people, probably doubling

the number of such observations available in the literature.

Discussed separately are a limited number of balls which showed high energy impact on their surroundings – above that traditionally expected from chemical energy storage. These observations and others where ball lightning passed through walls and window glass have been given new interpretations consistent with the nanoparticle model. This metal oxidation model also relates closely to recently made self-heating luminous metal materials with fine porous structure, which are the topic of one of the papers. See http://www.pubs.royalsoc.ac.uk/phil_maths/news/balllight_template1.html

Emergent Stupidity

David Hambling's article in *The Skeptic* 14/2 raises an incidental point (nothing to do with his argument) about the rarity of intelligence. When the first species of flying insect occurred, about 350 million years ago, flight had "only worked out for one species" in all the 4,200 million years since life began. It was another 200 million years before the occurrence of flight in entirely different kinds of animals showed that the flying ability was not necessarily, but only contingently, unique. The first species of fish to generate electric shocks also had a unique ability for a time, and so did the first organism able to survive out of water. We cannot have a general theory of life, knowing only one life form, but it seems reasonable to speculate that, taking the long view, humans are the *first* intelligent species to occur on earth, not necessarily the *only* intelligent species.

Donald Room, London

Please send your letters to:

The Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths College, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW or e-mail edit@skeptic.org.uk. We reserve the right to edit letters for publication.



Appeals

The Paranormal Medical Centre

Due to the ever increasing interest in the paranormal, the Paranormal Medical Research Centre desperately needs your support. The Centre, which attracted a blaze of publicity last year in the Worthing Gazette, has been established to deal with conditions unique to the paranormal. Brian, one of their first patients, was diagnosed with Spotter's neck in 1997. He explains:

I've spent the last twenty years looking skyward for UFOs. Last year I saw a particularly suspicious shape, glanced up, and heard a click. Needless to say, I have not been able to glance down since. I used to love gazing at the sky at night, pointing enthusiastically and saying "There's one!". Now sadly young kids do exactly the same thing to me. The local headmaster says the word in the playground is that it's called "spotting spotters". Thanks to help and treatment from the Centre, there has been a ten degree improvement in my neck in as many months.

Spotter's Neck. Dowser's Thumb. Ghost-hunter's Insomnia. The list is endless. They all need your help. Please give generously. Documentary film crews by prior arrangement.

Crop Circlers Anonymous

Imagine your predicament. One evening you go out and create a crop circle. Just one. Just for fun. The next night you feel obliged to go out again. And again. And again. Crop Circlers Anonymous aims to help those people who have fallen victim to this addiction. Jim, from Epping, explains:

I was doing five fields a night, but when I stood up at my first CCA meeting and said "My name's Jim...and I create crop circles", it was like someone lifting a bail from my back. To prevent frequent countryside visits, with the help of CCA I started growing my own cereal (which in a flat in Epping is an achievement in itself). I am still creating circles, but am currently down to two window boxes a day, and I hope to be clean by Christmas.

Please give generously. Sponsored by the International Farmers' Union. Documentary film crews by prior arrangement.

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