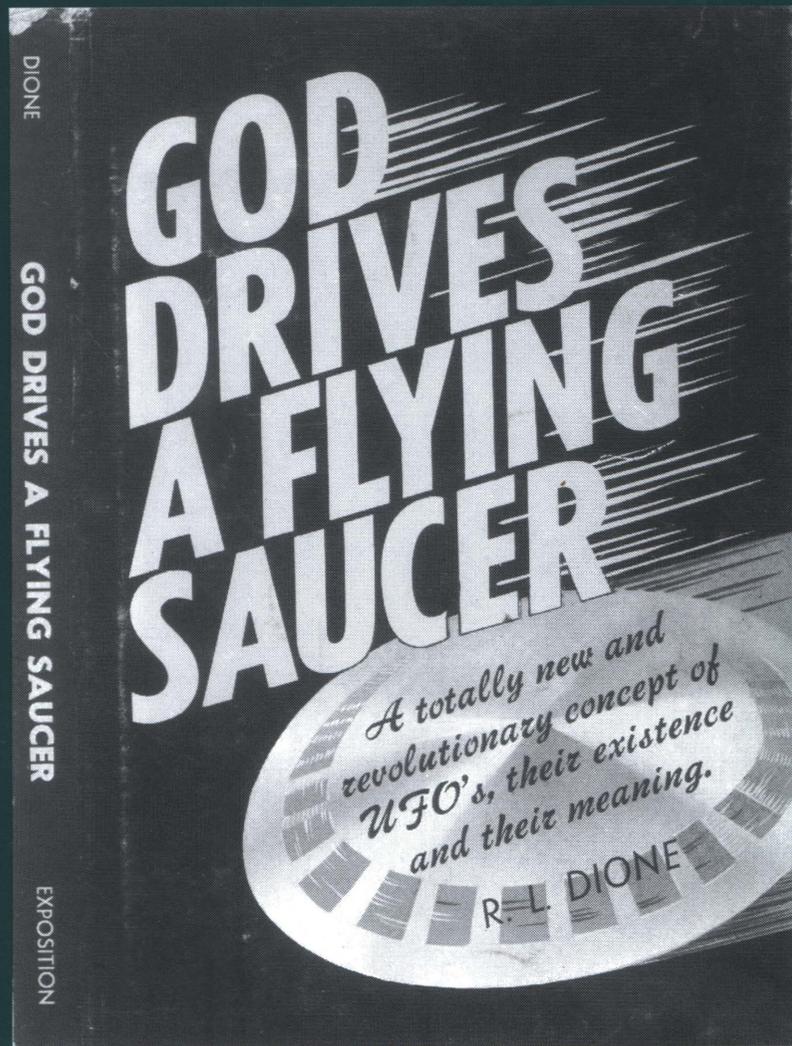


Volume 18 Number 3  
Autumn 2005

# The **Skeptic**



## **How Do I Know What To Believe?**

*Also in this issue:*

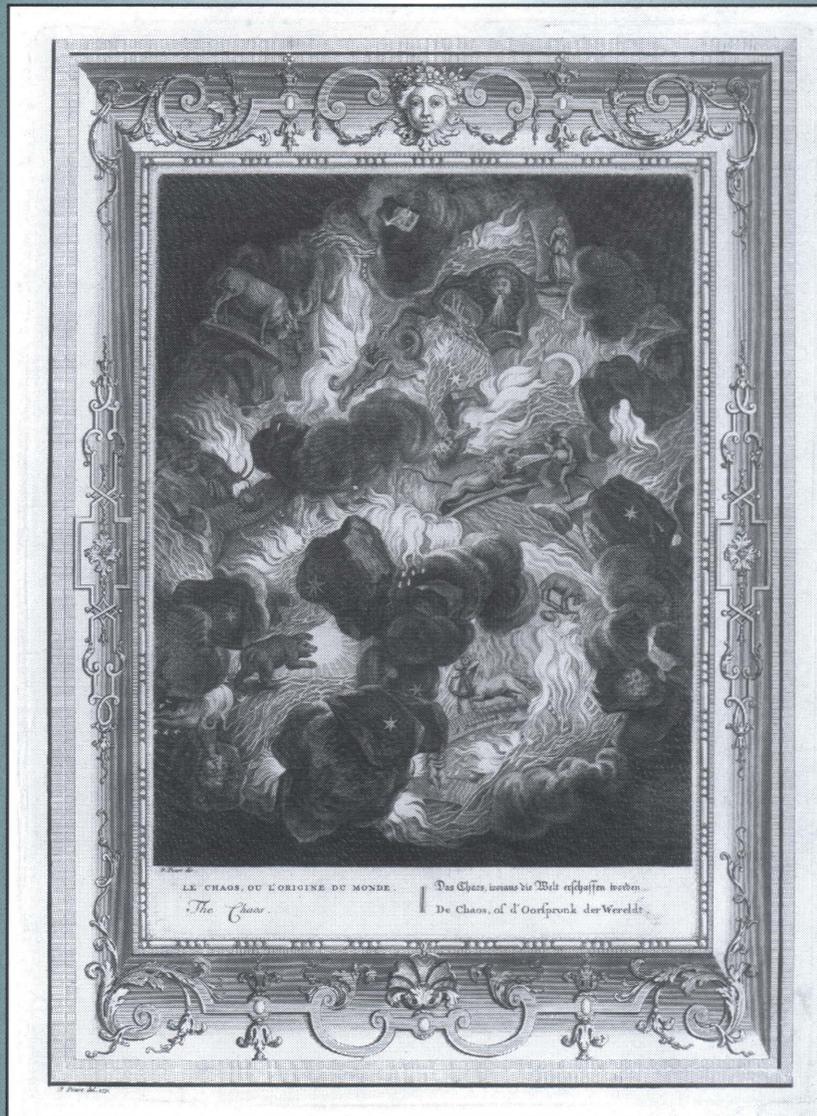
**The Mystery of Hell-Fire Pass Part 1**

**Who the Devil are you?**

**Skrapbook**

*Plus:* News. Book Reviews. Comment. Humour

## *Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery*



### **PRIMEVAL CHAOS**

Primeval chaos pre-existed the Big Bang and God's seven-day Creation. The Zodiac signs and other notable celestial celebrities tumbled about the cosmos every which way.

Source: Bernard Picart in *Le Temple des Muses*, 1730-31

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



The SKEPTIC: Volume 18 Number 3  
Autumn 2005

ISSN 0959-5228

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## Contents

<b>Editorial</b>	
Victoria Hamilton and Chris French	4
<b>Hits and Misses</b>	5
<b>Skeptic at large . . .</b>	
Wendy M Grossman	7
<b>The Mystery of Hellfire Pass: Part One</b>	
Paul Chambers and Robert Bartholomew	8
<b>Skeptical Stats</b>	13
<b>Who the Devil are You?</b>	
Ben Fridja	14
<b>How Do I know what to Believe?</b>	
Martin Parkinson	17
<b>Skrapbook</b>	
David Langford	19
<b>Rhyme and Reason</b>	
Steve Donnelly	21
<b>Philosopher's Corner</b>	
Julian Baggini	22
<b>ASKE News</b>	23
<b>Reviews</b>	24
<b>Letters</b>	26

Published by

**CSICOP** and **Skeptical Inquirer**

International Headquarters  
PO Box 703, Amherst, NY 14226 US (716) 636-1425  
Publication number 0021-458

Postmaster: Send changes of address to:  
CSICOP/The Skeptic, Box 703, Amherst, NY 14226-0703.

*The Skeptic* (ISSN 0959-5228) is published quarterly by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, 1310 Sweet Home Rd., Amherst, NY 14228. Printed in the U.S.A. A year's subscription covers 4 issues. Please make cheques, postal orders (£ Sterling only), credit cards (MasterCard/Visa) payable to The Skeptic. Mail subscription orders to: The Skeptic, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex IG10 4PZ, United Kingdom.



# Editorial

Victoria Hamilton and Chris French



**HELLO AND WELCOME** to the latest issue of *The Skeptic*. In this issue we offer you a varied menu of sceptical treats which we hope will provide you with enough food for thought to satisfy your appetite.

Paul Chambers and Robert Bartholomew present the first instalment of a three-part investigation of the so-called Phantom Sniper of Esher. Over a three-year period in the 1950s, dozens of instances were reported of motorists apparently having their windscreens damaged as a result of the sniper's activity. Strangely, however, despite detailed and thorough investigation by the police, not a single bullet was ever retrieved from the scene and no one was ever charged with causing this mayhem. So what was really going on? Was this really the work of a crazy gunman, wreaking destruction on the windscreens of Esher for his own unfathomable reasons? Or was the solution to the mystery a little more mundane? In this first instalment, Chambers and Bartholomew describe the series of incidents that raised such concern in the first place.

Our next offering, by Ben Fridja, describes two sides of the life of Anton LaVey. The self-proclaimed 'Black Pope' claimed to have led an extraordinary life. Born in the USA in 1930 of Transylvanian descent, amongst other adventures he ran away to be a lion-tamer in the circus at 17 and then had a passionate love affair with Marilyn Monroe before she became famous. He

declared himself the High Priest of the Church of Satan in 1966, a religious institution that at its height had a formal membership of hundreds of thousands. LaVey certainly had an active, or even overactive, imagination. As Fridja shows, LaVey's real life was far less glamorous and far more sordid.

Our old friend Martin Parkinson then asks perhaps the most fundamental question of concern to all sceptics: how do I know what to believe? This is not as easy a question to answer as it might first appear and this article argues that it is all too easy to acquire questionable beliefs for good reasons. Perhaps this suggests that we should all recognise that, outside of our own narrow areas of expertise, our own beliefs may not be as well-founded as we think?

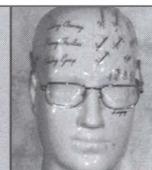
Just in case you are still peckish after all that, David Langford has laid out a range of tasty titbits from his sceptical scrapbook – or Skrapbook, as he likes to call it. Go on, you know you can't resist ...

We also have our letters page, book reviews, cartoons and regular columns to keep you busy. We always appreciate contributions from our readers, and would like to encourage you to send us your views on any of the articles in this issue or, indeed, any other issues of sceptical interest.

With best wishes until the next issue, Chris and Victoria.



## Hits and Misses



### Reviving the Shroud

It seems to be a rule in scepticism that nothing ever stays proven or undisputed. Somebody always has to find a loophole. In this case, it's the evergreen Turin Shroud. When last heard from, the Shroud had been carbon-dated by a team of scientists in 1988, who studied the fabric and concluded: it's a medieval fake from somewhere between 1260 and 1390 A.D. That, you might have thought, should have been that, especially after 1998, when Walter McCrone analyzed the shroud and found traces of chemicals used in common artist's pigments in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

In the immediate shock, some Shroud supporters came up with an explanation for that. The Shroud, they patiently explained, had been artificially 'rejuvenated' by radiation Jesus emitted at the moment of death. Other complicated attempts to prove that the Shroud was not a fake revolve around pollen grains. Teddy Hall, however, the late scientist who led the Oxford carbon-dating team, never had any doubts about the results of the 1988 test.

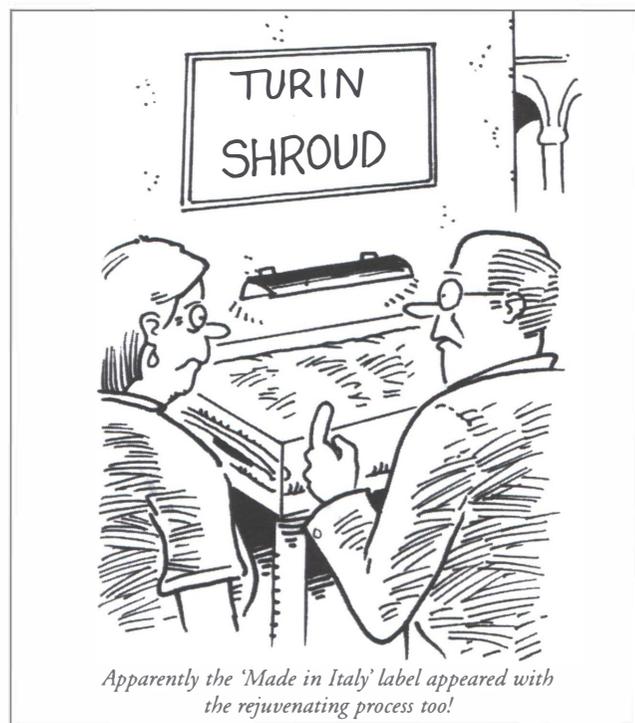
We suppose some Shroud believers must have found that too difficult to believe, because in November 2004 Raymond N. Rogers, a retired chemist from the Los Alamos National Laboratory, published a new study in the journal *Thermochimica Acta* that claims that the sample used for the carbon-dating research was taken from an "expertly rewoven patch". *The Scotsman*, which covered the study in January, simply called the journal "peer-reviewed". The journal's pages on the Elsevier Web site describe it as "An International Journal Concerned with All Aspects of Thermoanalytical and Calorimetric Methods and their Application to Experimental Chemistry, Physics, Biology and Engineering". CSICOP's Joe Nickell, however, has pointed out that there's no way for Raymond to be sure, since the small sample used in the carbon-dating tests was destroyed in the process.

### Science and spirituality

At this year's annual general meeting of the Association of British Science Writers, Imperial College scientist and journalist Sunny Bains raised a question: why were British scientific organisations allowing their research to be funded by money from the American religious right? She meant the Templeton Foundation, which sponsors fellowships for science journalists at Cambridge University's Department of Theology, a \$100,000 essay competition, and a prize for "Progress Toward Research On Discoveries About Spiritual Realities", whose most recent winner spoke (expenses paid by the Templeton Foundation) at the Royal Society. It has also donated £1 million to the Oxford Centre for Science of the Mind. The Templeton Foundation was created by Sir John Templeton, who made his money in the financial mar-

kets; the Foundation also funds three prizes for religious journalism and a number of purely religious activities.

In one sense, it doesn't matter where the funding comes from if the science is sound. But Bains' point in part was that the Foundation's president, Templeton's



son, is also the founder and chairman of a fundraising organisation for the Bush campaign, supporting an administration that is notoriously anti-science. The Foundation itself says it "seeks to focus the methods and resources of scientific inquiry on topical areas which have spiritual and theological significance" and "the Foundation seeks to unite credible and rigorous science with the exploration of humanity's basic spiritual and religious quests". It has several different grant-making programs. First is funding for advanced research in areas including "religion, spirituality, healing, and health outcomes"; second is funding for research into the emergence of biological complexity, which includes "evolution directionality and convergence". Finally, there is a smaller program for local societies of "anyone actively engaged in the science and religion dialogue", intended "to promote a balanced and exploratory dialogue between the discoveries of the natural and social sciences and the wisdom of the world's faith traditions".

In general, sceptics have avoided criticising religion: there is no point in arguing matters of faith. We stick to things that can be tested and look at the evidence. But studies such as Cynthia Crossen's 1994 book *Tainted Truth* have shown that research generally returns the

results its funders would like. Because of the uneasy recent history of religious involvement in scientific subjects such as evolution and medical issues such as abortion, stem cell research, and cloning, it's worth keeping an eye on the Templeton Foundation's research support.

### Medical marketing

Richard Smith, former editor of the *British Medical Journal*, published an essay in the May 2005 issue of *PLoS Medicine* (from the Public Library of Science) claiming that medical journals have become an extension of the marketing arm of pharmaceutical companies.

The problem, he explained, is not the one everyone thinks of first, that is, the pages of advertising that help fund the journal's existence. Instead, he argued, most clinical trials are funded by pharmaceutical companies, and favourable trials net them not only pages of apparently objective coverage in the journal itself through research papers but media coverage around the world. Unlike advertisements, which doctors and the public read critically, coverage of research trials is likely to be viewed as credible. The companies know this, and in some cases spend as much as a million dollars or more on reprints it can distribute globally.

What makes this all even more sinister is that these trials rarely produce unfavourable results, according to a 1994 study by Paula Rochon and others. (We might mention Cynthia Crossen's *Tainted Truth* again here.) Between two-thirds and three-quarters of the trials published in the major medical journals are funded by the industry. Peer-reviewing doesn't solve the problem, because although editors ask authors to send them related studies, they don't know about related unpublished studies – the largest part of the background. In any case, there are other problems with peer review. Smith points to a study published in a medical journal to support this contention, but as long ago as 1992 Marcel C. LaFollette devoted an entire book, *Stealing Into Print*, to the problems with peer review.

Smith's solution is that journals should critique trials, not publish them. More trials should be publicly, instead of privately, funded. Trials should be registered, and researchers, not funding companies, should control publication.

### Behind you

We always have to admire chutzpah in marketing. It's been some years now that you could buy little memory sticks that can hang on a keyring and plug into a computer via the omnipresent USB port. These things can carry up to a gigabyte or two of data – say, three to six hours of illegally downloaded TV shows – and they've become standard giveaways at technical conferences. Part of the secret there is that a USB port can be used to power small devices; even, given the right cable, charge up a mobile phone. There are USB Christmas trees that light up, USB fans, even USB coffee warmers.

Now, there is USB "Ghost Radar", which is essentially a memory stick that beeps and lights up in weird patterns.

According to its Web page, "Its sensors detect and combine any significant related changes in electro-magnetic turbulence, heat, light, and biometrics which may accompany mysterious apparitions". It looks cute, geeky, a little like a game, and a little spooky (what with its ultraviolet LED). The belief that it might detect ghosts or look fashionable will cost you as much as £48 (for the 128Mb version) over an ordinary memory stick that evokes no such beliefs. On the other hand, sceptics may find Ghost Radar useful – for detecting the gullible.



### Scopes II

When most people think of creationism in the US they think of Kansas (these days; they used to think of Tennessee, home of the Scopes trial). But the school district in Dover, Pennsylvania, a town of 25,000 about 25 miles southwest of the state's Harrisburg capitol, is currently imploding over the teaching of evolution. The acute phase of the trouble started last October, when the local school board voted six to three to add the following statement to the biology curriculum: "Students will be made aware of gaps/problems in Darwin's Theory and of other theories of evolution including, but not limited to, intelligent design. Note: Origins of life will not be taught". A group of parents, backed by the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans for the Separation of Church and State, are suing to block the teaching of Intelligent Design. Three school board members have resigned, and candidates to replace them are being evaluated according to where they stand on the controversy. Expect fireworks and international coverage of what would ordinarily be the smallest and sleepest of local elections.

Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Rachel Carthy, Sid Rodrigues, Stuart Campbell, Tom Ruffles, Ernest Jackson, the Wizard's Star List, Skeptic News, and Phil McKerracher.** The Skeptic would like to remind clippings contributors to use the magazine's current address, listed on p.3, rather than the old PO Box address, which has been phased out.

## Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



I CAN'T REMEMBER how old I was when I read that bees conveyed information about food sources to their hive mates by dancing in particular patterns on the walls of the hive. It probably wasn't all that long after the theory was mooted in the 1960s, by Nobel Prize winning Austrian zoologist Karl von Frisch. I thought of it as a proven fact, in that dim way you do when a subject isn't one you think about very often.

Most of the world seems equally convinced. On the Web, you can find plenty of detailed guides explaining the coding. A round dance indicates the food is very close, within 35 yards or less. A figure-eight pattern indicates that the food is further away. The bee indicates the distance of the source of food by how long she dances; she indicates its richness by how vigorously she dances; and she indicates its direction by the angle her dance deviates from an imaginary line drawn from the current position of the sun to the dance floor.

In May, I saw a press release to the effect that a team of scientists at Britain's Rothamsted Research, led by Joe Riley, had used radar tracking to prove it and were publishing the results in *Nature*. They actually attached transponders to bees and tracked them by radar. They read the dance, followed the bees, and compared the direction and distance the bees flew with the direction and distance that were predicted by their reading of the dance. I thought it was a neat story, and I offered it to *Wired News*. Who went for it, but said, essentially, "Wasn't that proven long ago?"

It transpires that there has been, all this time, a controversy over this dance. Most people believe the dance is a code; but a minority insist that although the bees certainly dance it is not to convey information. Instead, they believe the key factor is odour.

This controversy was, I was told by one of the lead researchers, created by von Frisch himself when he said that recruits read the dance and flew directly to the food source. It actually takes them five to ten minutes longer than you'd expect, and this discrepancy left scope for people like UC Santa Barbara's Adrian Wenner to argue for odour.

Hence radar tracking. The results show that the bees do read the dance and fly off immediately in the direction indicated. They correct for wind by looking at the ground and the angle of the sun and correcting their lateral drift. But they very rarely get it absolutely right, and the mean error of about 5 to 6 meters means that at the end of the flight they start circling and looking for what they've been told to find. Looping back and forth can take up to 20 minutes. And at this point they do use odour to help find the food source.

The team did some clever control experiments also, such as moving the bees before releasing them, and removing odour as a factor.

I wrote the story, and *Wired News* came back with a request that I get a quote from some third-party scientist. Wenner, perhaps, or some other bee dance expert: maybe the Rothamsted team could suggest someone. As you may realize, bees aren't my area of expertise; I just thought it was a neat story and a nice example of the way science keeps building on itself. I did some Web searching, and tried to contact a bunch of people. The European ones I found were all out somewhere. I emailed Wenner, but knew the time zones weren't in my favor. In another news report, I found mention of Thomas Seeley, a biology professor at Cornell, where I have friends. Seeley was in and available and, it turned out, had been one of the paper's peer reviewers. He said, "It's a wonderful paper because the results are so clear and they did some very nifty controls".

Wenner responded briefly, saying he needed to read the paper before saying anything much and directing me to his Web site and the commentaries there that I'd already read.

The story ran. I didn't include more than a brief mention of Wenner, because he hadn't said anything specific about this paper yet, and because I thought the Rothamsted research sounded well designed and I trusted Seeley in part because of his Cornell affiliation (I am a Cornell alumna).

Now, this sort of thing is always a judgement call. Journalists are almost always writing about a subject where they are not experts. So you are always trying to decide which sources are reliable. A lot of stories get 'balanced' by including competing points of view. That's perfectly fair in politics, but in science reporting you run the risk of, in effect, including a flat-earther in every story about geology. On the other hand, if you don't include them you run the risk of writing about geology and not including the movement of tectonic plates.

Wenner added me to a small group of email contacts and began circulating his views – unfavourable – about the new paper. He was unhappy at being left out of my story, and noted that the *San Francisco Chronicle's* reporter, with similar deadlines, had found time to talk to him on the phone.

Is Wenner a flat-earther or the guy with the secret of tectonic plate movement?

Should we do a follow-up explaining why Wenner rejects this new research?

How important is Wenner in the scheme of things?

Am I just prejudiced in favour of anyone who went to Cornell?

Am I just lazy and want to be done with the story and move onto something else in the interests of making a living as efficiently as possible?

These questions may never be definitively answered.



**Wendy M Grossman** is founder and former editor (twice) of *The Skeptic*, and author of *From Anarchy to Power: the Net Comes of Age*. Wendy M Grossman also writes for *Scientific American*. Her web site is at <http://www.pelicancrossing.net>.

# The Mystery of Hellfire Pass: Part One

Paul Chambers and Robert Bartholomew investigate the Phantom Sniper of Esher

IN THE 1950's the English town of Esher was apparently subjected to a three-year reign of terror by a phantom sniper. This lone gunman is alleged to have shot at dozens of motorists as they passed through the town, smashing their windscreens and causing other damage. No bullets or other missiles were found that could account for the damage and, despite a police manhunt, no suspect was ever brought to book.

The shootings raised serious concerns in the local community and the story even managed to make it into the national press. Despite its brief moment of fame, the actions of the phantom sniper were quickly forgotten and would have likely escaped attention altogether if the authors hadn't spotted a reference to it in the book *Stranger than Science* written by Frank Edwards in 1959.

Edwards' brief report led the authors to track down further references and eventually to uncover a whole series of events that, as far as we know, have remained hitherto unmentioned upon by social historians. We will, over three issues of *The Skeptic*, fully document the Esher phantom sniper incidents, offer an explanation as to their cause, and briefly compare them to other similar incidents world-wide.

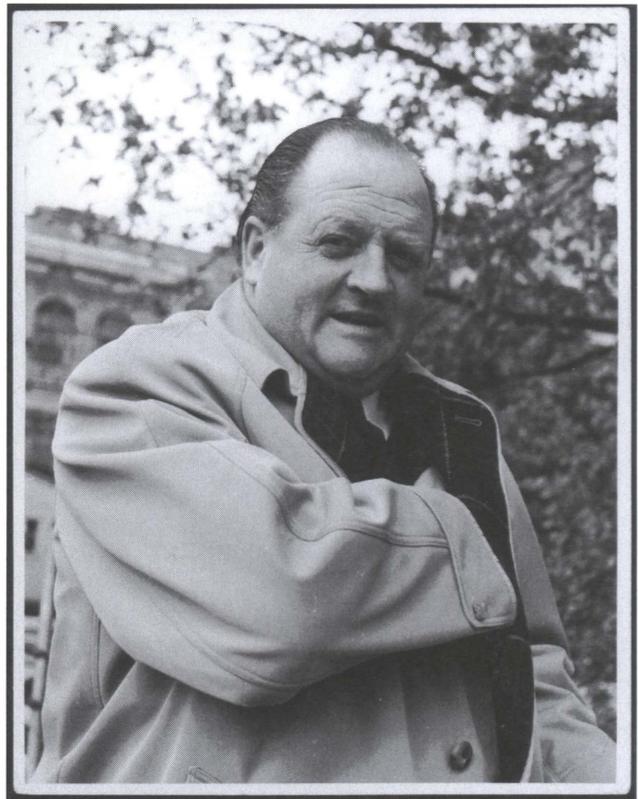
**... a teacher from Cobham was driving south along the Portsmouth Road when he "heard a crack like a pistol and saw his complete windscreen frost over"**

## The start of the trouble

Esher is a small town located on the outskirts of south-west London in the county of Surrey. It is an ancient settlement built around an old Roman road which is now a major highway. This road, known as the Portsmouth Road or the old A3, runs north-south through Esher's town centre and is a direct link between London and the south coast cities of Brighton and Portsmouth and was the focus of the phantom sniper incidents.

The geography and population of this region has changed little since the early 1950s. Although a bypass road, built in the 1960s, takes much of the traffic away from Esher, the Portsmouth Road remains a busy thor-

oughfare. The focus of the phantom sniper incidents was a 4 km stretch of the Portsmouth Road that runs between Esher in the north, to the town of Cobham in the south. Despite high population densities in the Surrey region, this stretch of road runs through largely unpopulated heath and common land before reaching the outskirts of Cobham. Other incidents mostly occurred in the more populated area to the north of Esher either on the Portsmouth Road or on some of the other large routes linking the Portsmouth Road with other London satellite towns such as Kingston, Surbiton and Thames Ditton.



*Broadcaster Richard Dimbleby was possibly the first victim of the Phantom Sniper. That's not a gun he's reaching for, is it?*

The story of the phantom sniper is almost exclusively documented through the pages of *The Esher News and Advertiser (ENA)*, a local weekly paper that was to become obsessed with this mystery. The *ENA*'s first mention of the phantom sniper comes from its edition of 12th January 1951. Under the title *Hell-Fire Pass?* a brief article mentions that since the beginning of December there had been a spate of car windscreens being spontaneously shattered on the same short stretch of the Portsmouth Road between the towns of Esher and Cobham. The road had been nick-named by some

motorists as 'Hell-Fire Pass'. The *ENA* lists three incidents and interviews one of the drivers, a Mr H Tickner of Esher, whose description of his experience would come to characterise those of many people in the months to come:

On Tuesday morning Mr Tickner, of 90, High-Street, Esher, was driving his car towards Cobham when, as he was passing along the Fairmile, he saw a sudden flash, heard an explosion and his windscreen was starred so much that he was forced to pull up. A piece of the windscreen the size of a sixpence fell inside the car, and the spring holding the licence holder in position was shot on to the back seat. At the time no cars were coming towards him, but one had just passed him on the way to Cobham. He got out of the car, but could find no trace of any missile.

The other two witnesses are not interviewed but it is significant that the first person that the *ENA* cites as having been a victim of the sniper is the political journalist and well-known broadcaster Richard Dimpleby. The article indicates that Mr Dimpleby's experience was well-known stating that: "it will be remembered that early last December Mr Richard Dimpleby, the well-known broadcaster, reported to Esher police that his windscreen had been hit, and it was at first supposed the missile was a .22 bullet".

In a later article the *ENA* again asserts that the first acknowledged smashed windscreen was that of Richard Dimpleby, and gives an exact date of the 2nd December 1950 for the incident. Given the national fame of Mr Dimpleby, we wondered whether his encounter might not have been reported in other local or national papers. However, a search produced only one very brief mention of the incident in the 8th December edition of the London *Evening Standard* in which, at the bottom of an article about a BBC coach being hit by a bullet near Birmingham, it adds that: "recently Sonia Holm and her husband, and Richard Dimpleby were shot at when travelling in their cars".

The recognition that there may be a serial sniper at work on 'Hell-Fire Pass' led to the *ENA* running two further articles on smashed windscreen incidents on the 26th January and 9th February 1951. In these articles it lists another four incidents to have occurred along 'Hell-Fire Pass' and speculates that either a sniper or loose stones on the road could be responsible. An editorial requests that either the highway authority or the police look into the issue as a matter of urgency. After this there is a break in the coverage of these incidents of several months.

### The height of the panic

A sustained number of sniper incidents began on the 15th December 1951 when Mr S Jay, a teacher from Cobham,

was driving south along the Portsmouth Road when he "heard a crack like a pistol and saw his complete windscreen frost over". This was again covered by the *ENA* which blames a person with a "catapult, air-gun or a .22 rifle".

Mr Jay's smashed windscreen was to be the beginning of a prolonged period of local, and eventually national, interest in the strange happenings along the Portsmouth Road. By the 11th January 1952 the *ENA* had recorded 12 sniper incidents from the same stretch of the Portsmouth Road. By mid-March this total had risen to 14 and the nature of the *ENA*'s reporting had taken on a more serious tone with one article asking the authorities: "When will action be taken to end this menace at Esher?"

## Not only was the phantom sniper spreading further afield, he was also becoming more adventurous in his shooting, hitting not only windscreens but also the headlights of an ambulance and a private motorist

By now the *ENA* was firmly backing the idea of a sniper with an airgun being responsible, a position that would seem to be justified by the incident that occurred on the 20th March. On this date a Mr Frank C Smith from Thames Ditton was driving north along the Portsmouth Road when he "felt the car rock and pulled up to find out what happened". On examining his car he was shocked to find a 9 mm hole in the driver's door, about 8 cm below the door handle. It appeared as though somebody had taken a pot shot at him. The *ENA* ran a picture of a worried looking Mr Smith sitting in his damaged car and commented on the case:

A ballistic expert has since said that it was probably a .317 bullet, an unusual calibre for a British gun, but one quite common in Italy. If it was fired from a high bank along the side of the road, it might have ricocheted [sic] off the road surface before hitting the panel. If the gun had been aimed at the door, the bullet would have killed the driver.

Mr Smith's incident marks a turning point in the history of the phantom sniper. From this moment on the concerns of the *ENA* and the local community were to be taken seriously by the police and the local council.



*Was a sniper really firing at cars on the Portsmouth Road?*

After the next series of smashed windscreens, which were reported within two weeks of Mr Smith's shooting, the police began to patrol the Portsmouth Road and even instigated a detailed search of the surrounding common land. However, this did nothing to lessen the activities of the phantom sniper and by the 16th May the *ENA* had recorded a total of 20 incidents. It was at around this point that interest in the happenings at Hell-Fire Pass began to attract attention from outside the region. The shattered windscreen of Mr Eric Sykes, which occurred on the 9th May, is the first of the phantom sniper incidents to make it into the back pages of the London *Evening Standard* where the newspaper glibly states that the police are "looking for someone with a gun".

During the following weeks yet more reports of damaged cars came flooding in. For the first time a car windscreen was shattered, not on the Portsmouth Road, but a couple of kilometres to the east on Copsem Lane which leads into the town of Oxshott. Not only was the phantom sniper spreading further afield, he was also becoming more adventurous in his shooting, hitting not only windscreens but also the headlights of an ambulance and a private motorist. In the light of these

revelations the local council swept the Portsmouth Road between Esher and West-End Lane in the hope that loose stones, and not a gunman, might be the cause of the trouble.

The first national coverage came at this time in the form of an article which is referred to by the *ENA*. We could not track down where this national article was published, but the *ENA* reports that it put forward the idea that the sonic boom from low flying aircraft might be to blame. In an editorial on the matter, the *ENA* comments on this idea and ultimately rejects it in favour of a lone gunman stalking the Portsmouth Road. It also summarises its involvement in the development of the phantom sniper mystery:

Months ago, when we started to report it, we were alone. Then, via the county and evening Press, the affair reached the nationals. Last month, over eighteen months after the first incident, Esher Council took official notice of the matter. We are now waiting with bated breath for a question to be asked in Parliament. That, our readers will be interested to learn, is how the machinery of democracy creaks to an ultimate solution. But what an awful time it takes!



*Despite intensive searching of the surrounding area, not a single bullet was ever retrieved by the police*

Again, incidents of broken windscreens kept on being reported but the sniper was also being held responsible for other crimes too, including the smashing of a shop and a pub window in Esher itself. Some of these incidents were accompanied by intense police activity, such as the broken windscreen of Mr V J Wood, which prompted ten constables to search surrounding woodland and undergrowth.

Complaints from local residents spurred the council to demand a statement from the Metropolitan Police on their plans to catch the sniper. "The ratepayers are entitled to know what actions are being taken," wrote councillor N. Jones. The request eventually produced a reply from the Police Commissioner who said that a "special observation had been kept on the road by selected officers, and would be continued for a further period, but that at present there was no evidence to support the theory that the damage was being caused maliciously". It was also mentioned that the Ministry of Transport had plans to investigate the matter. It is clear from these statements that the Metropolitan Police did not favour the sniper theory, but instead looked more kindly on the idea of loose stones causing the damage. Members of the council disagreed, and during a debate on the

matter several councillors expressed their concern at the police's attitude towards the problem. Councillor E Royston said, "There is a solid basis of concern, and it would be wrong for us to shrug our shoulders or laugh at it, and wrong to say that we know what the cause is".

By September 1952 the number of incidents had reached at least 33 but there was yet to be found a single bullet, pellet or other missile in connection with these broken windows. To explain this, readers of the *ENA* were coming forward with their own theories including catapults, falling pine cones, and pellets made from frozen carbon dioxide (dry ice) that would melt on contact. Following attention from the national press, the police and the council, local interest was probably at a maximum during the period between May and September, but it was to tail off at the beginning of October when the number of articles in the *ENA* decreased in number. It is noticeable that during August to October the reports of shattered windscreens came from not only the Portsmouth Road, but also from surrounding areas including East Molesey, Thames Ditton and Hinchley Wood. Between the 16th October and 1st December 1952 there were no reports of shattered windscreens at all, the longest period of quiet in nearly a year.

### The final phase

The six weeks of quiet from the phantom sniper of Esher was in fact only a lull before he committed himself to one final burst of activity. In December 1952 five reports of broken windscreens were recorded in the *ENA*. More incidents in January begged the *ENA* to ask if a new phase of shootings was beginning, but despite this blip in activity, the number of reports was to only be a trickle in comparison to the previous year with the most serious incident being four windscreens shattered in the same week in April.

Other theories continued to be put forward. In February the Metropolitan Police informed the council that “in spite of intensive observation over a prolonged period, the police have no evidence that the damage is being caused maliciously”. In other words the police did not favour the sniper theory. Other theories were not so cautious. Gordon Slyfield wrote to the *ENA* to suggest an esoteric solution to the mystery:

The metaphysical theory must not therefore be ruled out. I am familiar with the physical results attached to psychical phenomena of the séance room. If there is a powerful spiritualist medium dwelling on this road, he or she may be ignorant and need not go into a trance... A rod of ectoplasm proceeding from the medium is strong enough so that an entity can lift physical objects. This is what happens with poltergeist phenomena in the presence of adolescents.

If such an entity were the spirit of a dastardly highwayman, might not he still operate against lawful users of the highway? It may therefore be a case for the Institute of Psychical Research to lay an unhappy spirit.

In a reply to this, G Bird says: “Why stop at earth-bound highwaymen firing ectoplasmic bullets; why not the vibrations of harps twanged by little men landing from flying saucers?” Mr Bird goes on to express local belief in a gunman and suggests that local patrols could be the answer to catching the culprit. These debates in May 1953 largely mark the end of the incidents on the Portsmouth Road. After this time there was only to be another five reports of broken windscreens, three of which did not occur in the local region. As the number

of weeks increased between articles, one definitely gets the impression that local interest in the matter had died, and the *ENA* was reduced to making the odd report near the back of the paper. The last report is from their 11th December 1953 issue, when a Mrs L Perry reported having her windscreen shattered while driving in Ealing, a location many kilometres north-west of Esher. There was also a brief mention in *FATE* of aeroplane windscreens being broken whilst flying over Esher, but no further references could be found for this.

## A single bullet was never recovered, nor a culprit seen, let alone apprehended

By our reckoning the phantom sniper of Esher was active over a period of almost exactly three years, during which time at least 51 individual incidents were recorded. A single bullet was never recovered, nor a culprit seen, let alone apprehended. Interest in the mystery was rapidly forgotten, although a series of articles did appear on it in *FATE* magazine upon which Frank Edwards wrote a small section for his book *Stranger than Science* which was in turn the basis of one further article in the *Fortean Times*.

So, after three years of intense activity by both the sniper and the press, the mystery was no nearer to being resolved. Who or what was breaking the windcreens? There was no shortage of theories, both rational and irrational, and these will be the subject of our next article.

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**Dr Paul Chambers** is a television producer and science writer based in Hertfordshire. His book *Bones of Contention*, which concerns the controversy surrounding the *Archaeopteryx* fossil, was published in July 2003.

**Dr Robert Bartholomew** is a sociologist specialising in culture-specific psychiatric disorders and is the author of several books and numerous articles on the subject. He lives in Whitehall, New York. References and further information can be obtained from the authors at: [pmc@bicameral.co.uk](mailto:pmc@bicameral.co.uk)

# Skeptical Stats

1. Percentage of drugs approved for use in the US by the FDA that have not been comprehensively tested on children: **75**
2. Cost of 1Gb Ghost Radar USB memory stick: **£149.99**
3. Percentage of people in a study by Richard Wiseman reporting unusual phenomena in “haunted” locations in Mary King’s Close in Edinburgh: **78**
4. Percentage of people in the same study reporting unusual phenomena in other locations in Mary King’s Close: **48**
5. Number of US states that between 2001 and 2003 challenged the teaching of evolution at either the state or local level: **40**
6. Ratio of the population density of Manhattan to the US as a whole: **more than 800:1**
7. Number of people in Britain phoning psychic lines every month: **75,000**
8. Number per month seeing psychics at fairs and in the psychics’ homes: **2,000 to 3,000**
9. Number of new species of rodent found on a market stall in Laos: **1**
10. Number of black rhinos in Africa a century ago: **1 million**
11. Number now, due to the demand for rhino horn in Chinese medicine: **2,500**
12. Percentage of mercury (by weight) found by the MHRA in the Chinese remedy Fufang luhui jiaonang: **11.7**
13. Age at which, in 2002, a Hackney girl was nearly drowned in a bag when family members accused her of being a witch: **8**
14. Cost of an on-demand mobile phone Tarot reading by Russell Grant: **£1.50**
15. Date on which the new Broadcasting Code, which restricts programmes from presenting paranormal phenomena as real before 9pm, came into force: **July 25, 2005**
16. Number of confirmed cases of mumps in the UK in 2004: **8,104**
17. Number of confirmed cases of mumps in the UK between 1998 and 2003: **3,907**
18. Date by which BT futurologist Ian Pearson believes that death will be “not a major career problem”: **2050**
19. Date by which a “Top TV psychic” working for TV Commerce Group says that Blair will quit and be replaced by someone other than Gordon Brown: **before mid-November**
20. Number of glaciers botanist David Bellamy claimed in an April 16 letter to *New Scientist* were growing instead of shrinking: **555 out of 625**
21. Number Bellamy told *Guardian* “Junk Science” writer George Monbiot he actually meant to type: **55%**
22. Proportion that the World Glacier Monitoring Service says are actually retreating: **most**
23. Number of British homes psychic television channel operator TV Commerce has access to via Sky Digital: **7.5 million**
24. Number of years German scientist Michael Werner claims to have lived off nothing but sunlight and a little fruit juice mixed with water: **4**
25. Amount for which a Russian astrologer is suing NASA over its Deep Impact project, claiming its plans to bombard a comet will “disrupt the natural balance of the universe”: **8.7 billion roubles**

1 *The New Yorker*; 2 <http://www.ghost radar.co.uk>; 3,4 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/4564383.stm>; 5 The National Center for Science Education; 6 *The New Yorker*; 7,8 British Psychic Registration Board; 9 *The Times*; 10,11 *Tiger Bone and Rhino Horn: The Destruction of Wildlife for Chinese Medicine*, by Richard Ellis; 12 Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency; 13 *The Times*; 14 [http://sourcewire.com/releases/rel\\_display.php?relid=21663&hilit=-](http://sourcewire.com/releases/rel_display.php?relid=21663&hilit=-); 15 Ofcom; 16,17 Bad Science, *The Guardian's Bad Science*; 18 *The Observer* ([http://observer.guardian.co.uk/uk\\_news/story/0,6903,1489635,00.html](http://observer.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,6903,1489635,00.html)); 19 *The Times*; 20,21,22 *Guardian*, [www.monbiot.com](http://www.monbiot.com); 23 [www.sharecast.com](http://www.sharecast.com); 24 Ananova; 25 The Australian daily newspaper, *The Herald Sun*

Both Hits & Misses and Skeptical Stats depend heavily on reader contributions of clippings, story leads, and odd statistics. Please send contributions to [news@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:news@skeptic.org.uk) or via post to the address on the masthead (p.3). Make sure all clippings are clearly marked with the date and the name of the publication.

 Skeptical Stats is compiled by **Wendy M Grossman**.

# Who The Devil Are You?

Ben Fridja exposes the truth about Anton LaVey, the High Priest of the Church of Satan

## The Black Pope's Background

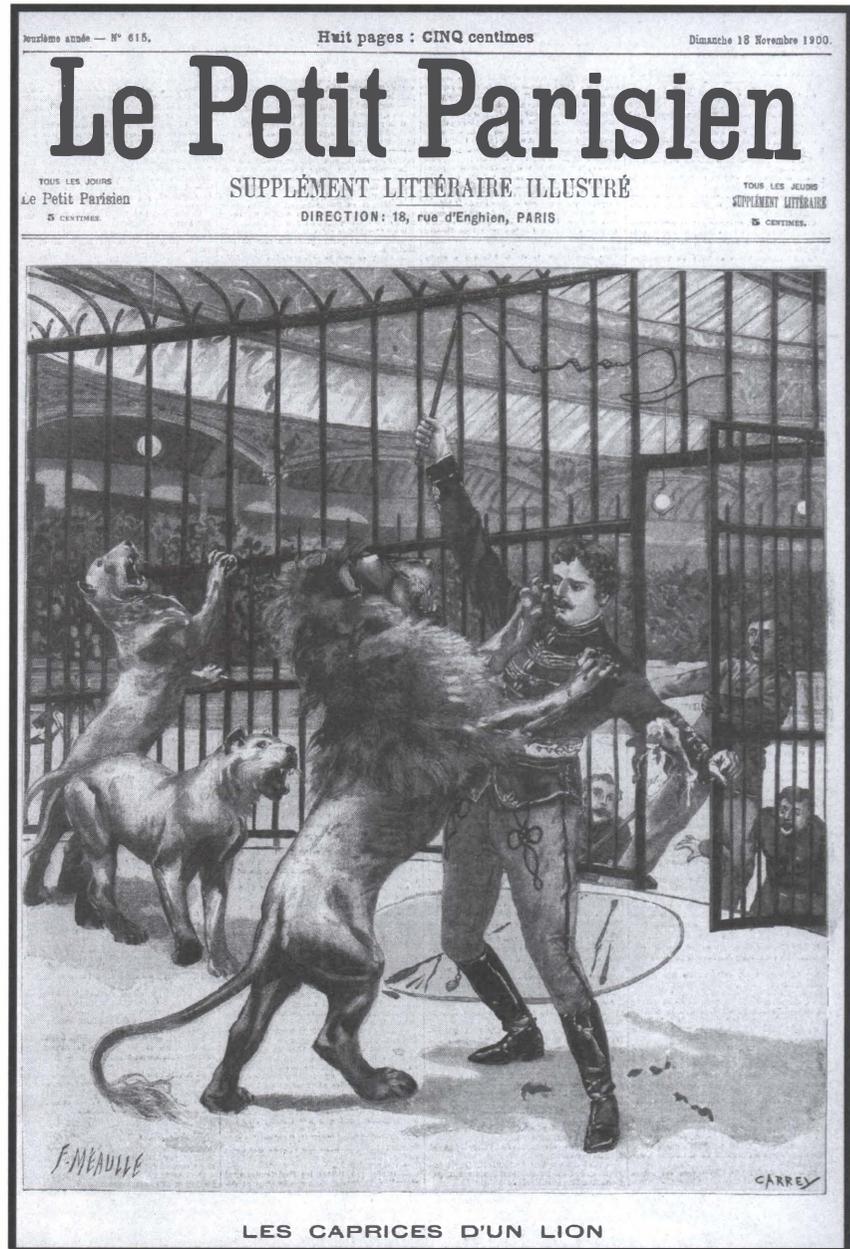
MY MOTHER ONCE put me on her knee and said to me, "Son, let me give you a piece of advice; never trust journalists, politicians or anyone who believes in human sacrifice and claims they had a 'vestigial tail' removed due to their being genetically Satanic". Avoiding the first two at Goldsmiths College has been hard, but the latter character's appearance is not often at the Union bar. Along with Aleister Crowley, Charles Manson and other messianic pop gurus, Anton LaVey served as the founder of the most controversial religion of the sixties, exercising principles of sacrifice and sexual orgies, claiming "life is the great indulgence, death the great abstinence". He served as the ideal bogeyman for the sensation-seeking American media of that tumultuous period. And did he want your soul? Well, he always claimed he had better taste than that...

Anton Szandor LaVey (1930-1997) was the High Priest of the Church of Satan, a notorious figure of the 1960s. A legend was created through interviews with journalists, discussions with his disciples, and two approved biographies, allegedly ghost-written by himself. The self-proclaimed 'Black Pope' claimed that he was introduced to the dark side by his Transylvanian gypsy grandmother, who regaled him as a child with supernatural folklore and tales of vampires and werewolves. His parents, Joseph and Augusta LaVey, gave birth to young Anton in Cook County, Illinois on 11 April 1930. In 1945, the 15-year old was brought to post-war Germany by his uncle, a US Coastguard officer. There, he was shown top-secret films inspired by satanic cult lodges and their rituals.

Once home, he played the second oboe with the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra, making him the youngest musician ever to play with the prestigious institution.

At 17, LaVey ran away with the Clyde Beatty Circus, where he was employed as a lion tamer. Once part of the family, he replaced the Circus calliope player. In 1948, 18-year old Anton was engaged to play organ at

the Mayan burlesque theatre in Los Angeles. There, he met a young showgirl by the name of Marilyn Monroe, with whom he had a passionate love affair before her rise to film stardom. LaVey later in life showed visitors



*LaVey claimed that he was employed as a lion tamer at 17 years of age*

a copy of Monroe's famous nude calendar inscribed "Dear Tony, How many times have you seen this! Love, Marilyn".

In the early 1950s, LaVey became a photographer for the San Francisco Police, and was exposed to the savagery of human nature. Along with this, he studied criminology at the San Francisco City College during

the Korean War. He bought a house, 6114 California Street, which became the infamous 'Black House', the headquarters of the Church of Satan. He bought this particular house upon the discovery that it was a former brothel of Barbary Coast madam Mammy Pleasant. The house was honeycombed with trapdoors and secret passageways, built by Pleasant to elude police raids.

On the night of 30 April 1966, at the German Satanic festival of *Walpurgisnacht*, LaVey pronounced the age of Satan had begun. In a 'blinding flash' he declared himself the High Priest of the Church of Satan, which he founded as a religious institution. His ethos was "nine parts social respectability (and) one part outrage!". LaVey designed the Baphomet emblem as the official emblem of the Church of Satan. He wrote and published *The Satanic Bible*, his alternative scriptures. Later in life he wrote

**Another myth was  
squashed for  
the devil's image  
in relation  
to Marilyn Monroe**

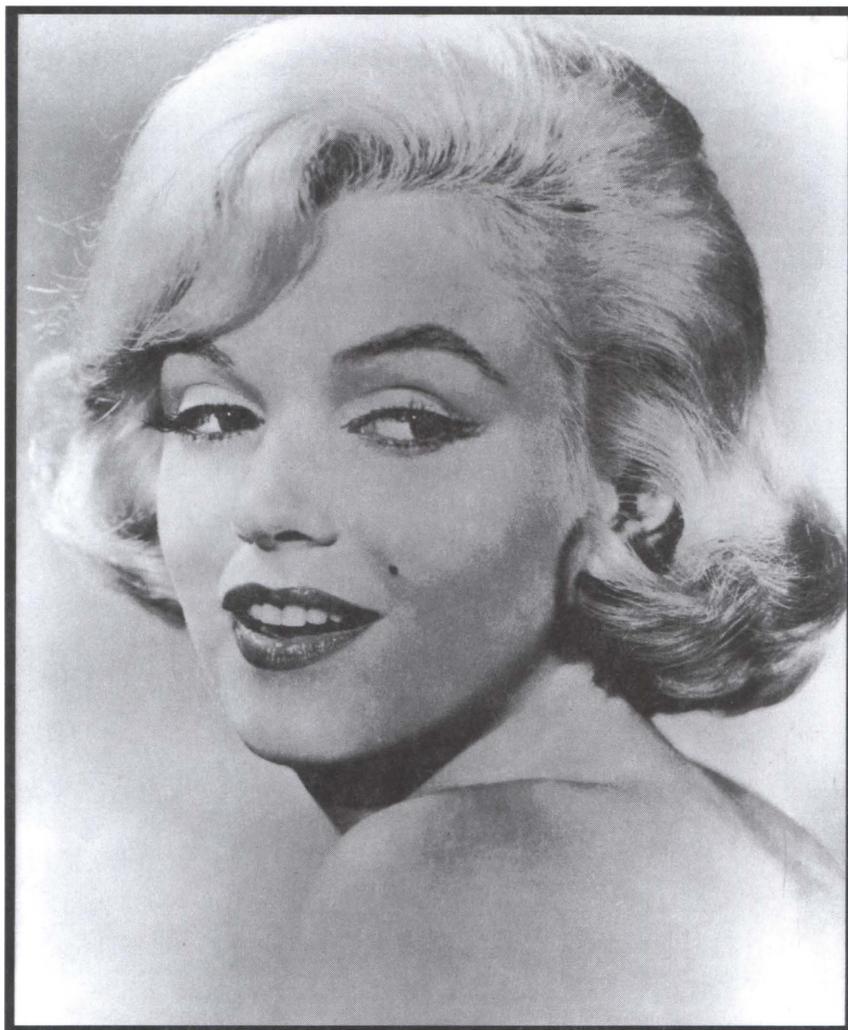
*The Satanic Witch* and *The Satanic Rituals*, selling in excess of a million copies. LaVey claimed at the height of the religion's popularity a formal membership of hundreds of thousands, including pop celebrities such as Marc Almond, Marilyn Manson, and Sammy Davis, Jr. On 31 October 1997, Halloween, sixty-seven year old LaVey died from heart failure.

**The Truth is Out There**

This legend of The Black Pope was somewhat tarnished a year later when on the 2 February 1998, Zeena LaVey, Anton's daughter, revealed a number of truths on a web article entitled *Anton LaVey: Legend and Reality*. It brought to light the truth behind LaVey's dark front. The truth is something quite different from the flamboyant dark prince America had loved to hate.

True parents Michael and Gertrude LaVey gave birth to Howard Stanton LaVey. Boy Beelzebub's ancestry was in fact Ukrainian, not Transylvanian or of gypsy stock. Young Howard spent the entirety of 1945 in suburban north California, and had never visited Germany at any time of his life. The uncle whom he had claimed

had brought him to Germany was incarcerated at McNeill Island Penitentiary for involvement with Al Capone-related criminal activity during 1945, and was never seen in the armed forces. Anyhow, the allied martial law forbade US citizens from entering postwar Germany. The 'German' rituals he wrote of later in his *Satanic Rituals* are poorly written, suspected unaccredited adaptations of the short story *The Hounds of Tindalos* by Frank Belknap Long and H. G. Wells' famous novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau*.



*Yeah, right, LaVey!*

It was found that there were only three oboists in the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra; none of them were named 'LeVey' or 'LaVey'. The same absence of the devil was found in the circus records. No lion tamers, musicians, or bible burners were found under his name. Consistent with this trend, LaVey had never worked for the San Francisco Police department.

Another myth was squashed for the devil's image in relation to Marilyn Monroe, for he never knew her. In 1948, Monroe's agent exposed and discredited the tale. Diane LaVey, Anton's former wife, admitted that she forged the inscription on the calendar. LaVey's former publicist Edward Webber confirmed that he never knew Monroe.

The infamous Black House does not seem so chilling when behind the eerie exterior one finds that 6114 was his parents' house. It had never been a brothel, nor did Mammy Pleasant ever work or live there. LaVey himself created any secret passages and hidden rooms that did exist.

**Anton LaVey served as the founder of the most controversial religion of the sixties, exercising principles of sacrifice and sexual orgies, claiming "life is the great indulgence, death the great abstinence"**

After declaring the age of Satan in 1966, LaVey supplemented his income by presenting weekend lectures on exotic and occult topics. He conducted 'Witches Workshops', for which he charged \$2 a head, filling his living room with the curious, and establishing himself as a local eccentric. When he found he would never make any money by lecturing, and following some careful advice from his publicist Edward Webber, the Church of Satan was created as a business and publicity vehicle. Howard took artwork from another source, plagiarising the Baphomet as his own.

The Church of Satan's membership was grossly exaggerated by LaVey, never exceeding 300 individuals, several of whom were non-member subscribers to the newsletter or friends of LaVey receiving complementary mailings. Behind the dark curtain lay a poor relationship between LaVey and his wife, Highest Priestess Diane Hegarty. In 1991, LaVey filed for bankruptcy, owning just 50% of the house his parents had given to him, which was in such bad condition as to be nearly worthless on the real estate market. Family members have attested to the fact that by the mid-1970s the LaVeys lived in near poverty, frequently having to rely on LaVey's father's generosity. LaVey continued to rely on handouts from friends and relatives until the end of his life.

LaVey violently beat his wife Diane throughout their marriage. In 1984, a police report was made, describing Diane being strangled into unconsciousness by LaVey, who was in such a murderous rage that

his daughter Karla had to pull him off Diane and drag her outside the house to save her life. LaVey routinely beat and abused those of his female disciples with whom he had sex, forcing them into prostitution as part of his 'Satanic Counseling', while pocketing the earnings. In 1986, LaVey was a passive witness to the sexual molestation of his own grandson by an old friend, later convicted of sex crimes with minors. In 1990, LaVey informed a mentally ill stalker of his daughter Zeena's whereabouts and the time and location of a public appearance, thus endangering his own daughter's life.

LaVey always portrayed himself as a great animal lover, keeping many pets. Yet in private he was cruel and neglectful to his pets, including Togare, his pet lion. He was given Togare as a cub in 1964 and was clearly ill-equipped to deal with such an exotic wild animal, despite his pretensions as a circus lion tamer. LaVey used an electric cattle prod to harm and frighten the lion. Animal rights activists protested against LaVey's behaviour towards the lion, which led to his arrest. He was ordered to donate him to the San Francisco Zoo where, due to the early trauma in his life, he needed special care as he did at every animal care facility in which he lived.

The last myth concerning The Black Pope was of his death. An official investigation by the City of San Francisco determined that LaVey's actual date of death was 29 October 1997, not Halloween. The date had been illegally written on the document.

When looking back in an objective historical context, the idea of a supernatural pioneer of the dark side seems intriguing to say the least. Yet a wealth of information concerning the man beneath the Devil's horns reveals a sadder life than the paranormal legend created. So has LaVey converted me to Satan? Well, as Boy George once said, "I think I'd rather have a cup of tea".

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**Ben Fridja** has recently completed a BSc at Goldsmiths College, London. Beyond parapsychology, his psychological interests include hypnotherapy and the philosophy of consciousness. Other interests include music performance and production.



# How Do I Know What To Believe?

It's not as easy as sceptical authors sometimes seem to imply. **Martin Parkinson** draws a quick sketch map of the difficulties of real-world reasoning

**N MY ARTICLE** *Power, Arcana, and Hypnobabble* (*The Skeptic*, 16.4), I avoided technical discussion of the effectiveness of hypnosis by stating that, for the purposes of that article, I was taking a particular book as an authority on the matter. My conscience is nagging me about this because baldly citing something as an authority, with no additional discussion, begs a rather large question. I probably got away with it in this instance because one of the authors of the book I cited is the chair of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry and the other was a well-known sceptic, but the general question of how we judge the trustworthiness and adequacy of information we are given is by no means a simple one.

This is important because so much of the information that we have to use, even in the most everyday of tasks, is second hand. Antoni Diller, an artificial intelligence (AI) researcher, has been looking at this question as one of the central problems which would have to be solved in order to make it possible to design a useful android and he has found that the rules governing 'belief-acquisition' are complicated (Diller, 2003). This is not surprising and is relevant not just to android-designers but to anyone interested in the relations between science and society – and that means anyone concerned with the sceptical project.

Once one moves even a short way away from the really obvious cases (such as Breatharianism and Creationism) it seems to me that people believe dubious things for reasons that are certainly not stupid, and may even be good. This point is expanded by Gilovich (1993) who describes the reasoning strategies we apply and spells out why in certain cases a sound, or unavoidable, strategy can produce poor results. It is often the case, for example, that the reasoning used is perfectly sensible, it's just that we are applying it to incomplete or poor quality information. But how could one know that one's information is inadequate, or what gives one confidence that one has made appropriate allowances for the gaps?

Let's take my old friend Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) as an example (see *The Skeptic*, 16.3). To recap, I argued that NLP is unlikely to be, as claimed, "as profound a step forward as the invention of language", and I think it probable that many readers will have accepted this conclusion for two reasons. The first is overall context: it appeared in *The Skeptic*, and even though I am not an experimental psychologist, the editors who accepted the article are. The second reason is internal textual evidence: the literary tone was right, I clearly shared assumptions with my readers, my arguments indicated that I understood scientific reasoning, and my references showed that I had covered a good range of material.

So far so dull, but how would I get on with an intelligent NLP convert out in the wild?

**PARKINSON:** Aren't you at least a bit embarrassed by the name – surely 'Neurolinguistic Programming' sounds like a piece of dodgy science fiction?

**NLP FAN** (*puzzled*): No it doesn't. It doesn't sound any 'dodgier' than say, *Human Information Processing*, a psychology textbook you used as an undergraduate all those years ago (Lindsay & Norman, 1977).

**PARKINSON:** But look here, despite all the jargon – which is just a bunch of linguistic go-faster stripes – it has no academic credibility...

**NLP FAN:** Oh but it certainly has – there was a series of articles about it in the *British Medical Journal* ... (Walter & Bayat, 2003).

**PARKINSON** (*wincing at the problems of explaining the difference between 'doctor' and 'scientist'*): But...

**NLP FAN:** ...and you can study it at Birkbeck College – I'd say the University of London has credibility (Birkbeck College, 2003a; 2003b).

**PARKINSON:** Yes, but those aren't regular undergraduate classes –

**NLP FAN** (*gleeful*): Well, at Portsmouth University you can take *postgraduate* modules in NLP (University of Portsmouth, 2003).

**PARKINSON:** But that's in the *business* faculty.

**NLP FAN:** Even better! Business folk are notoriously hard-headed and only use stuff that's been tested and works – don't you know *anything*?

You can see I would be in for a long haul, and it would involve explaining not just the 'disciplinary matrix' but how I, a non-academic, can plausibly say anything about these matters. It would also involve explaining why the demonstrations of 'eye-accessing cues' that he will have seen in his training course do not in fact demonstrate anything much. To do this, not only would I have to make quite sophisticated points about the peculiar difficulties of the experimental method when applied to psychology, but I would also have to overcome a very sensible assumption that is inculcated by schooling. When we are shown an experiment in a science class in school everything about the context makes it clear that it is a demonstration of something that is rock solid established fact; we are being shown something valid and quite properly so. Why should the situation of an NLP seminar be any

different? The trainer is obviously not a charlatan and she has as much confidence as any chemistry teacher. Diller's model of belief acquisition starts with the default that you believe what you are told. This rule is of course defeasible but what is there in this situation to defeat that rule?

Let's now look at an example that actually matters: the MMR vaccine. In early 2003 I visited an exhibit at the London Science Museum which dealt with this issue. I recollect it as a superb example of clear, non-patronising, non-propagandising science communication and if I were a parent it would have left me in no doubt about the safety of the vaccine (I found the information that there had been a similar scare in the 1970s about the whooping cough vaccine particularly persuasive). However, I would never have guessed from reading the newspapers that the matter was so clearcut.

### It seems to me that people believe dubious things for reasons that are certainly not stupid, and may even be good

Think about the information available to most parents. They have incomplete and poor quality substantive information given them by newspapers and the internet but they also have plenty of quite good quality information (partly obtained from direct personal observation) about human behaviour. This latter information, which is possibly not even articulated, tells them that the actions of politicians, like everyone else, are driven by motivations other than the disinterested pursuit of truth and the common weal, however well-intentioned they may sincerely feel themselves to be. It tells them that scientists, like everyone else, can become emotionally attached to ideas and that therefore 'trust me, I'm a scientist' *on its own* is not necessarily a good reason for belief *if there is* countervailing information (although I do think that scientists still command a good degree of popular respect – paradoxically, the existence of pseudoscience pays tribute to this). In a situation where we have limited information these sorts of considerations are legitimate. In the light of the poor information which is the most readily available and given what is thought to be at stake, people are making a rational choice in not taking up the triple vaccine.

(The anthropologically aware will have noticed that I have ignored the immensely powerful role of cultural pressure in belief creation. The philosophically alert will have noticed that, throughout this article, I have avoided

defining the term 'belief'. These are very valid considerations which there simply isn't space to discuss here.)

I have argued that it is possible, in real-life situations, to acquire a questionable belief for sound reasons, but so what? Thinking about these matters has suggested a (purely personal) answer to the question posed by Tad Clements (see *The Skeptic*, 6.6 p. 8):

Perhaps what we need to aim for are approaches which manage to reveal the absurdity of positions without at the same time making the credulous person feel like an object of ridicule

The strategy that this suggests to me is one of resolute politeness, or at the very least not using words such as 'absurd' or 'credulous' until I've made some enquiries as to why exactly a belief is held. (Apart from the arguments presented in this article, if, as has been suggested, individual variation in 'superstitiousness' is a reflection of individual neurochemistry, then it seems a little unfair to call people rude names for a quirk they cannot entirely help.) Mind you, there are limits to this approach and I'm not sure how long my pose as a born-again nice guy will last. I am certainly no stranger to the pleasures of indignation, and although Indignation and myself have recently split up and I no longer return her calls, I do sometimes miss her dreadfully.

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**Martin Parkinson** works as an administrator in central London. He has recently discovered the Open University and is thrilled to realise that this enables him to fulfil his ambition to be an eternal student.

# Skrapbook

A sneak peak into **David Langford's** unique archive of sceptical scraps ...

UNLIKE HILARY EVANS, I don't have a picture library, but in twenty-odd years of freelance writing and reviewing I've collected various prose fragments which seem vaguely relevant to *The Skeptic* and its readers. Here's a random dip into the sceptical scrapbook, or Skrapbook for short ...

\* \* \*

US critic Edmund Wilson (1952) concludes his essay on Houdini with a couple of catty anecdotes:

The real situation, however, is of course that with the people who frequent séances, the difficulty is not for the mediums to convince them that the phenomena are genuine but for the tricksters to handle things so badly as to make their clients suspicious. A friend of mine was once told by a professional medium of a séance that had gone wrong when he had found that he could not get his hand free; he had tried to represent the spirit by touching the client with his cheek and then in a panic remembered that he had not yet shaved that day; but the lady allayed this fear, as soon as the séance was over, by telling him that the manifestations that day had been certainly their most successful, since the supernatural essence of the spirit head startlingly communicated itself by a sharp electrical pricking. One thinks also of the French savant who, as a result of methodical research, undertaken at the behest of the government, reported his success in establishing that spirits had hair on their heads, that they were warm, that they had beating hearts, that their pulse could be felt in their wrists, and that their breath contained carbon dioxide.

\* \* \*

Terry Pratchett (personal communication, 1991) reminisces about strange encounters in the days before he reached best-selling fame:

I remember, as a journalist, patiently investigating the claims of some apparently perfectly normal people who had, once you worked out the details of the glowing hemisphere that they had seen, watched the sun set.

\* \* \*

Julius Caesar (1980, translated by A. & P. Wiseman) whose interest in nature rarely went beyond the availability of trees to be felled and converted into endless bridges or fortifications, veers aside to discuss German wildlife for a couple of delirious paragraphs in which he seems to be channelling Herodotus:

There is an ox shaped like a deer; projecting from the middle of its forehead between the ears is a single horn that is straighter and sticks up higher than those of the animals we know, and at the top spreads out like a man's hand or the branches of a tree. The male and female are alike, with horns of the same shape and size.

There are also creatures called elks. These resemble goats in their shape and dappled skins, but are slightly larger than goats and have only stumpy horns. Their legs have no joints or knuckles, and they do not lie down to rest: if they fall down by accident, they cannot get up or even raise themselves. When they want to sleep they use

trees: they support themselves against these, and in this way, by leaning over just a little, they get some rest. When hunters have noticed their tracks and so discovered their usual retreats, they undermine the roots of all the trees in that area, or cut the trunks nearly through so that they only look as if they were still standing firm. When the creatures lean against them as usual, their weight is too much for the weakened trunks; the trees fall down and the elks with them.

\* \* \*

A lady friend passed on this tale (Maple, 1964) of a 19th-century haunting with the delighted comment, "I may have found a vocation for my old age:"

Early in the 19th C, [...] the ghost was first seen by a discharged soldier on tramp, a wild man who had broken every commandment and whose conscience was overloaded with crimes... One night, unable to find a sleeping place in the workhouse, he made up a bed for himself in a corner of one of the wards. He was discovered in the morning a changed man. He [...] described the apparition in tones of terror. A thing had descended the stairs at night on three hoofish legs and with a voice like that of a roaring jackass bellowed through a grating where he was sleeping. It was a dreadful nightmare which came night after night. Watch was kept, and one night an old woman who walked with a stick was caught roaring and braying through the grating. Asked to explain herself, she said that this was her way of converting the tramp to a Christian way of life.

\* \* \*

Diana Wynne Jones (personal communication, 1991), a leading children's fantasy author whom genre insiders rate much higher than J.K. Rowling, sings the praises of Alternative Medicine:

I don't think I've ever been so ill so long and so bizarrely. I mean, I know ridiculous things are always happening to me, but who else in your acquaintance gets themselves poisoned by a homeopath? My agent kept ringing me up and protesting, "But they mix it with water so many times that they don't give you enough to poison you!" Yes, they did. Did you know that in the back-to-front world of homeopathy, the more times you dilute a given poison, the more potent it is said to be? The one I went to kept bleating that she knew I was likely to react strongly, so she only gave me a very low potency – in other words, she gave me quite a hefty dose of some obscure poison, and my body, being unacquainted with Looking Glass World medicine, promptly went on the blink for three months. I feel quite sorry for it.

Which reminds me that after an uncritical BBC programme on homeopathy in the 1980s, the author Bob Shaw (sadly no longer with us) sent a wide-eyed letter to the *Radio Times* asking whether, by the theory of Dilution Is Strength, you should give children twice as many pills as you would take yourself. He was severely dealt with in the letter column. Any dilution or addi-

tion made by a layman, it seems, would not be a true homeopathic process and would not count; and the kids should get a half pill just as in real life. The logic of all this is elusive.

\* \* \*

By eerie coincidence – *or can this be coincidence?* – SF author Ian Watson and our old friend Colin Wilson offered the identical insight into mathematics just a few years apart:

The moment you draw a circle,  $\pi$  exists. Yet it's entirely irrational. There's no rational answer to the sum 'twenty-two over seven'. You can divide twenty-two by seven for ever but you never get a real definite answer (Ian Watson, 1977).

Ironically, the Pythagorean ideas suffered their greatest blow through one of the master's most interesting discoveries – the so-called irrational numbers. The ratio of the diameter of a circle to its circumference is  $3\frac{1}{7}$ . But if you try to turn this into decimals, it is impossible; the decimal for one-seventh begins .142857, and then repeats itself an infinite number of times." (Colin Wilson, 1980).

For non-mathematicians, I should note that this is doubly silly. First,  $3\frac{1}{7}$  (another way of writing  $\frac{22}{7}$ ) is only a rough approximation to the value of the mathematical constant  $\pi$ . Second, a rational number is simply the *ratio* of two whole numbers – if  $\pi$  equalled  $\frac{22}{7}$  it would be rational by definition. All repeating decimal numbers (like  $\frac{22}{7} = 3.142\ 857\ 142\ 857\ \dots$ ) are provably rational; the tricky thing about  $\pi$  is that it doesn't repeat in that simple-minded way.

\* \* \*

Again in the world of science fiction, I've been hearing about the Seattle-based rock band *Blöödhag* which promotes books and whose lyrics are all about SF authors. For example, this haunting couplet from the song "Alfred Bester":

When Campbell fell under L Ron's spell  
Alfred said, "Man, you can fucking go to Hell."

Of course Bester (1976), an author with a living to earn, said nothing of the sort when John W. Campbell – the incredibly influential editor of *Astounding SF* magazine – fell for Dianetics in the 1950s and started babbling things like, "It was discovered by L. Ron Hubbard, and he will win the Nobel Peace Prize for it". Bester describes the embarrassing lunch with Campbell that followed:

Suddenly he stood up and towered over me. "You can drive your memory back to the womb," he said. "You can do it if you release every block, clear yourself and remember. Try it."

"Now?"

"Now. Think. Think back. Clear yourself.

Remember? You can remember when your mother tried to abort you with a buttonhook. You've never stopped hating her for it."

Around me there were cries of "BLT down, hold the mayo. Eighty-six on the English. Combo rye, relish. Coffee shake, pick up." And here was this grim tackle standing over me, practising dianetics without a license. The scene was so lunatic that I began to tremble with suppressed laughter. I prayed, "Help me out of this, please. Don't let me laugh in his face. Show me a way out." God showed me. I looked up at Campbell and said, "You're absolutely right, Mr. Campbell, but the emotional wounds are too much to bear. I can't go on with this."

He was completely satisfied. "Yes, I could see you were shaking."

\* \* \*

Finally, a recent bulletin from Whitley Strieber (2002) reveals what hideous fate lies in store for courageous men like himself who oppose the global UFO cover-up conspiracy...

What has been happening to me is this: every night as I go to sleep, something begins moving against my skin, creeping like some sort of very slow insect. I have seen and held this object. I have tried to crush it. But I cannot. I cannot get a sample. It seems like a living thing, but I do not believe that it is alive in the same sense that we are.

About a week ago, I woke up and found it penetrated into my chest just above my collarbone. I pulled it out and tried to crush it between my fingers, to gouge it with my fingernail. It struggled furiously in my hand. It would not break up. I turned on the light and sat up, with the intention to take it into the bathroom and capture it in a water glass. But when I relaxed my grip just a little, it disappeared before my eyes, for all the world like some kind of a magic trick.

It has tormented me night after night....

Some of us suspect that the great man would do well to abstain from cheese at bedtime. Further *Skrapbook* instalments may follow, unless my editors think better of it.

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# Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly



SOMETHING IN THE alignment of the planets seems to be bringing numbers to the fore in my life of late – for instance, I had occasion to revisit Martin Gardner’s wonderful books *Mathematical Puzzles and Diversions* (Gardner, 1959) and *More Mathematical Puzzles and Diversions* (Gardner, 1962) in order to remind myself how to construct hexaflexagons. (If you don’t know what a hexaflexagon is, go and consult the books.) I was also introduced to the strangely addictive Japanese numerical Su Duko puzzles and, on the same day, a student came to discuss with me some work he was doing involving prime numbers. I also discovered very recently, when perusing the web, that some odd personal experiences with digital clocks are in fact of cosmic significance. (More of this in the next issue.) Actually, I am quite fond of numbers but, as a physicist who now spends a great deal of time involved in university management, there is one aspect of the use of numbers that drives me crazy – the application of apparently quantitative methods to deal with matters that are not easily quantifiable.

There is an increasing tendency in a number of different spheres of activity – promotions committees, job interview panels and just generalised decision-making – to list a number of criteria, to give numerical scores for each one, and then to sum the scores of the group of decision-makers in order to arrive at a single number that encapsulates all of the complex factors that need to go into informing the decision. It all sounds perfectly reasonable, but the problem is that – even if assigning a numerical score to attributes such as ‘team player’ or ‘able to organise own workload’ is justified – the margins of error of such a process must be enormous. However, once all the subjective factors have been reduced to a single number, that number seems to take on an absolute significance such that a difference of just 1% will lead to the higher candidate ‘winning’ – even if it is fairly clear that if the exercise were to be repeated with another group the aggregate score might well differ by 10 or 20%. In some sense, therefore, it seems to me that this kind of approach has a lot in common with the psychic art of numerology.

In the simplest form of numerology (e.g., McClain, 1996–2005) it suffices to take your birth date written as dd/mm/yyyy and to sum all the digits – and to keep summing them until you get a single digit (or the ‘master’ numbers 11 or 22) to give you your ‘lifepath number’. So for instance, taking my own birthdate, 02/04/1952, summing the digits in each component of the number initially gives you 2, 4 and 17. The 17 then

sums to 8, and  $2 + 4 + 8 = 14$  and summing these digits yields the number 5. Associated with each lifepath number is a Barnum statement – I am apparently “versatile, adventurous, and progressive” (can’t argue with that). But also, “in the most negative application of the 5 energies” I could become “self-indulgent and totally unaware of the feelings of those around” me (surely not). A number of numerology websites all carry exactly the same text accompanying each lifepath number although none of them indicates the original source. However, if you don’t much like your character reading, you can hunt around the numerology sites for a better one. For instance, another site tells me that: “FIVES seek freedom, fun, adventure. If they do not live the adventure, their lives become way too dramatic” (McCants, 2005).

You should also carry out a similar process on your name by replacing the letters of your full name with the number representing the position of the letter in the alphabet and again repeatedly summing digits to arrive at your ‘expression’ number. As an aside, if you are a naturalised British, ethnically Russian, Latvian (as friends of mine are) you have a bit of a problem in coping with three versions of your name and one in a different alphabet and thus may have several expression numbers (giving you a very complex character, obviously). My expression number is 2 which means that my “destiny is in the role of the mediator and the peacemaker” – but on the negative side I can be “oversensitive and easily hurt” (McClain, 1996–2005). Astonishingly accurate, isn’t it? And so much easier to figure out than astrology – or indeed the scoring system for my promotions committee. So, for the next one, I’m going to suggest that we dispense with the usual paperwork and simply ask candidates to provide their birth dates and their names. It should be no problem to match Barnum statements with job and person specifications.

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## Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

**AS A DISCERNING** reader of an intellectually challenging magazine, you are probably exercised by many of the big questions of the day, such as, “Can the Tories leave their past behind? Can the electorate ever trust Blair again?” Or, “Will political expediency always come between solutions to global poverty and their implementation?” But if you want to get the attention of the ten million plus who watch *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*, surely you need to ask the questions that speak to them, such as “Can Pat ever really leave her past behind? Will Chloe always come between Sonia and Martin?” and “Can Alfie ever trust Kat again?”

This is precisely what someone recently did in Bristol. Posters started going up inviting you to text your answers to these question (“Yes Alfie!”, “No Alfie!”). I find a lot of ‘d txt c%cha’ baffling, but this seemed madder than usual. If you voted, all you got back was a polite thank you with the promise that all would be revealed on 9 May. If you went to the associated website, [www.getthestory.co.uk](http://www.getthestory.co.uk), all you got was the chance to vote again, tell a friend or sign up for a newsletter. You couldn’t buy anything or see how the vote was going. So why would anyone vote?

And why would anyone want you to? As a business proposition the whole thing sucked. In the precise reverse of the usual practice, the small print showed texts were charged at the standard, not premium rate. And it all looked rather amateurish. The photos were not of the actual soap stars, but rather feeble look-alikes, who were then blurred with heavy pixilation to disguise their lack of similarity to the real thing.

Intrigued, I traced the domain name’s owner, who turned out to be a certain Ian Boulton, active in the Upper Stratton Baptist Church. To prove how thick I am, it took a while for me to put two and two together and work out that this was evangelism, techno-style.

And sure enough, in time, the posters were replaced with ones showing the same images, but the caption, “Soap stories and the Bible. Both full of life struggles, choices and emotions” (see picture on p. 27). The earlier posters were just teasers, and I had indeed been successfully teased. The whole thing was a promotion by the Bible Society. So the *getthestory* website is now full of information on the Bible and what it has to say about

the predicaments of Pat and Kat, Alfie and Chloe. You’ll find that “Many of the most important figures in the Bible had a difficult past,” and that the Bible shows that “Families can be difficult”. A veritable book of revelations, it seems.

The question that I was left with was not how the Bible can shed light on soap plot lines, but how many people actually texted their opinions in response to such a lame request. I contacted the Bible Society to find out, but they were unable to bring me good news, or even a revelatory epistle. I’d like to think the answer was 42.

The fact that I found the whole idea of texting my opinion bizarre made me feel old. I’m not exactly ancient, but I’m not a ‘digital native’ – people generally under 30 who have grown up with the internet, home PCs and mobile phones as a normal part of life. I’m, rather, a digital immigrant – someone for whom even a cell phone is a piece of ‘technology’, not something that has always been here.

Although human nature is remarkably constant over generations, I am sure that this still means digital natives think in some ways that I could never second-guess. For example, the average teenager spends over £25 on ringtones per year. Yes, ringtones. The noise your phone makes when someone calls you. The fact that I find it hard to understand why anyone would spend anything on a ringtone, let alone £25, is enough to show that I have already – far earlier than I could ever have feared – reached the point where the ‘youth of today’ are at least in part a mystery to me.

That’s a sobering thought. It’s very easy to dismiss as crazy things you just don’t understand. But if I don’t even understand the minds of compatriots not much more than a decade younger than me, what hope do I have of understanding people who think even more differently?

Maintaining this scepticism about my own ability to judge the sanity or otherwise of people’s ideas and behaviour, without descending into an overly permissive ‘whatever works for you’ relativism, remains, to my mind, one of the most difficult balancing acts someone committed to reason has to perform. If you agree, text ‘yes Julian’ to the number on page 94...

Comments welcome to [julian@julianbaggini.com](mailto:julian@julianbaggini.com)

Julian Baggini is editor of *The Philosophers’ Magazine* ([www.philosophers.co.uk](http://www.philosophers.co.uk)) and author of *The Pig that Wants to be Eaten and 99 Other Thought Experiments* (Granta), *Making Sense: Philosophy Behind the Headlines* (Oxford University Press) and *The Meaning of Life* (Granta).

See [www.julianbaggini.com](http://www.julianbaggini.com)

## ASKE News

From the chairman of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry, Michael Heap



### Of parrots dead and psychic

Tony Youens, one of our most active members, was recently involved in a project to test the claim, made by the owner of a parrot, that her pet had psychic powers. The outcome of his investigation was .... (*bated breath, roll of drums, etc.*) .... the parrot was not psychic.

This is a variation on the Monty Python "dead parrot" sketch. In that sketch, the shopkeeper insists that the bird is alive while the purchaser confronts him with the reality of its demise, and he exploits the most unlikely of loopholes to deny the obvious. One can imagine Tony and the pet's owner engaged in a similar dialogue (Tony: "You told me this parrot is psychic". Owner: "It is!" Tony: "No it's not!" .....).

I see the "dead parrot" sketch everywhere. It is emblematic of an aspect of human nature that social psychologists have investigated in the form of "cognitive dissonance" (an idea, incidentally, about which I have always had some suspicion, since it seems capable of explaining any outcome). One manifestation of this is that once we have overtly committed ourselves to a particular belief, attitude or opinion, we are reluctant to change it when confronted by contradictory evidence, and will distort our perceptions and thinking to maintain consistency. Even scientists (dare I say *especially* scientists) do this. Years ago, I remember a speaker being rewarded with noises of agreement from his audience when, during his lecture, he observed that scientists value their theories much more than their experimental results. If the two are in disagreement it is the latter that have to be sacrificed ("The disappointing results are probably due to the failure of the experimental design to take into account....."). Will there ever be a time when, for example, Dr Andrew Wakefield will suddenly announce, "Whoops! My theory has been shown to be wrong all along"?

I was propelled along this train of thought when, in response to my request to rejoin ASKE, an erstwhile member sent me an indignant email message to the effect that, with so many problems facing the world, what point is there in getting hot and bothered about daft ideas such as spoon bending, ghosts, alien visitations and mind reading? He cited as an example of a pressing issue, the misinformation and lies by our politicians concerning the war in Iraq.

It is probably not a good idea for ASKE or other sceptical organisations to adopt a stance on something like the Iraqi war. The nature of scepticism is such that there is sufficient consensus on most subjects of interest

to allow the expression of a common sceptical point of view (e.g. there is no convincing evidence for extraterrestrial visitations). Conversely, ASKE members and readers of *The Skeptic* may have widely differing views on the advisability and the rights and wrongs of the invasion of Iraq. However, we can still take a sceptical standpoint when we analyse how and why the politicians justify their own opinions and actions concerning this and other matters. Take, for example, Tony Blair and "weapons of mass destruction" or lack of them. Wasn't his defence of his position rather reminiscent of the attitude of the shopkeeper in the "dead parrot" sketch?

### Fictionology

Jim Spencer recently alerted ASKE members to a report by the American Institute of Religions on a new "religion", namely "Fictionology":

Created in 2003 by self-proclaimed messiah Bud Don Ellroy, Fictionology's principles were first outlined in the self-help paperback *Imaginetics: The New Pipe-Dream of Modern Mental Make-Believe*. Fictionology's central belief, that any imaginary construct can be incorporated into the church's ever-growing set of official doctrines, continues to gain popularity. Believers in Santa Claus, his elves, or the Tooth Fairy are permitted – even encouraged – to view them as deities. "My personal savior is Batman," said Beverly Hills plastic surgeon Greg Jurgenson. "Sure, it's total bullshit," Jurgenson added. "But that's Fictionology. Praise Batman!"

The report also states that, while the Church of Fictionology acknowledges that its purported worldwide membership of 450 billion is an invented number, as many as 70 percent of the church's followers are former Scientologists.

I very much like the idea of committing oneself to believing in nonsense, admitting it to be so, and extolling its virtues. It seems like the purest form of honesty. At present I am putting together a paper that attempts something similar, namely a protocol for devising quack treatments that one can promote as such and that can be guaranteed to be reasonably successful in alleviating the symptoms of a wide a range of complaints. This will appear in the 2005 *Skeptical Intelligencer*, which will have papers of general interest. For further information on Fictionology, see <http://www.theonion.com/news/index.php?issue=411>

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# Reviews



## PET THEORY

### The Sense of Being Stared At and Other Aspects of the Extended Mind

by Rupert Sheldrake

Arrow Books, £7.99 (pb), ISBN 0099441535

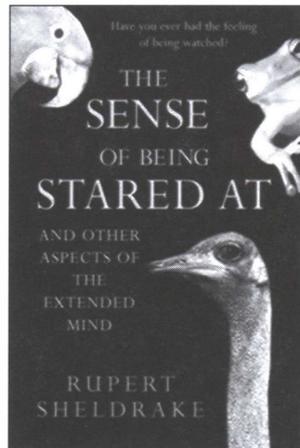
Readers of *The Skeptic* will know of Rupert Sheldrake's work and the robust defence of it he is capable of mounting when the occasion arises. *The Sense of Being Stared At* continues his exploration of psi faculties, but the thesis is by now a familiar one.

The subtitle should not be overlooked because Sheldrake writes about much more than the staring effect, though it acts as a clear illustration of his argument that minds are not confined to brains but are capable of reaching out into the world and interacting with each other. He ties telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition together as components of a general ability affecting, in some unspecified way, not just human but also non-human animals.

Unfortunately this involves repetition from his earlier books, notably *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home* (not *There*, Arrow blurb writer).

The range of research outlined here and its apparent success, not to mention the ease with which he has seen off the often shoddy attempts by critics to demonstrate that his methods are flawed, indicate that Sheldrake's experimental work needs to be taken seriously. The large number of anecdotes he includes, however, though useful in suggesting lines of research, do not strengthen his case as convincingly as he seems to think they do.

Sheldrake includes a variety of straightforward experiments for readers to try, with instructions on how to send him their findings. He has been very successful in encouraging the public to take up his invitation, but using data obtained in this way raises a quality issue. One also yearns for a more rigorous theoretical underpinning to his results. There is much to think about, but a great deal more strictly controlled work would need to be done before Sheldrake's hypotheses could be accepted by the wider scientific community.



Tom Ruffles

## TALL TALES

### The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick

by Peter Lamont

Abacus, £7.99 (pb), ISBN 0349118248

Newspaper circulation wars are nothing new. In 1890, the *Chicago Times* and *Tribune* battled it out with increasingly lurid stories. One described how "A magician throws one end of a rope into the air... A boy then climbs to the top. There, in broad daylight... he disappears". The story spread right across Europe. Four months later, the *Tribune* confessed it had made it up. Too late. The floodgates were opened.

Was there ever an Indian Rope Trick? Why was it so popular?

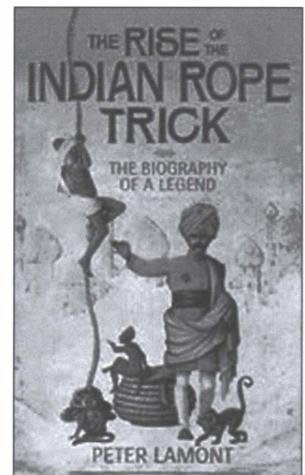
Lamont's book is a detailed exploration of the history of a hoax, colonial attitudes, gullibility, the unreliability of eye-witnesses and how the press rarely lets the truth get in the way of a good story.

In 1890, despite the rise of scientific rationalism, Europeans were still baffled and fascinated by the 'Mystical East'. Some magicians cashed in on the craze; they could perform the Indian Rope Trick on stage, but none could do it in the open air, like the 'original'. Others hated the idea that Indian magic might be superior and sought to debunk the growing legend of the Rope Trick.

Claims and counter-claims about its authenticity flew back and forth for decades, with people claiming to be eye-witnesses and others, including the Magic Circle, doing their best to expose a hoax. The trick itself mutated, from the simple disappearance of the boy to his dismemberment and resurrection.

Attempted explanations, both normal and paranormal, still do the rounds today but Lamont finds no evidence that the trick existed before the *Tribune* hoax (by a journalist who later went on to work for the American Secret Service).

Lamont's solid research is, however, somewhat dissipated by the irritatingly jokey tone of the *Author's Note* and his own trip to India in the *Epilogue*, with its over-obvious comments on Western tourists. Skip these and follow how one man's headline turned into an enduring international fascination.



Tessa Kendall

**SAINT STRIPPERS****Stripping the Gurus: Sex, Violence, Abuse and Enlightenment**

by Geoffrey D. Falk

Million Monkeys Press, Cdn\$7.95 (pdf from &lt;www.millionmonkeyspress.com&gt;), ISBN 0-9736203-3-1

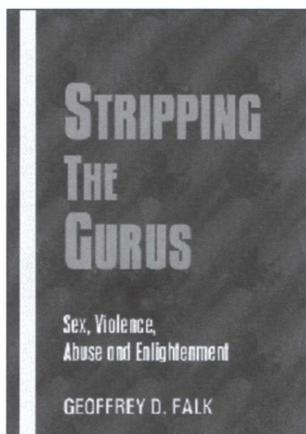
In some 650 pages the author strips contemporary spiritual leaders of their aura of mystery, holiness, and mastery. Most of the individuals to whom he devotes a chapter promote eastern religions. Some are famous, like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi or Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh; others I have never heard of, e.g. Swami Sachidananda, even though he ministered to the original Woodstock music festival. Some operate only in Asia, e.g. Sai Baba. The author's debunking extends from the Roman Catholic Church, to L. Ron Hubbard of Scientology, Werner Erhard of est, the Findhorn community in Scotland, and the Anthroposophy cult of Rudolf Steiner.

We learn something about the historic spread of eastern religions but Falk concentrates on the sins of the saintly spiritual leaders, the clay feet of the holy men who rarely live up to the body mastery and otherworldliness they lay claim to. He discloses the extensive devotion to the use of alcohol and other drugs among ashram leaders, and the emotional, physical and sexual abuses and beatings suffered by the recalcitrant from persons neither impotent nor omnipotent, yet claiming to be one with God.

Followers who remain devoted to a guru generally don't wish to learn about the claims of his accusers. They will charge that there is a conspiracy afoot to darken the guru's name and spiritual efforts, and may compare his case to the persecution suffered by historic leaders like Christ or Mohammed.

The book reads as if the author had spilled his thoughts from an overflowing basket. His style uses one direct quotation after another, generally several to each page. This makes it difficult to read and to get a clear understanding of his line of thought. Perhaps the best use of this book is as a reference. Journalists, editors and other researchers who need to know "the dirt" on a guru – material not likely to appear in biography or official handout – will want to have this book on their shelves.

Wolf Roder

**PLEISTOCENE MODULES****Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology and the Persistent Quest for Human Nature**

by David J. Buller

MIT Press, \$34.95 (hb), ISBN 0-262-02579-5

Our evolutionary heritage is of absorbing interest for those concerned with developing a naturalistic understanding of human cognition and behaviour. Working out what this legacy amounts to is a tall order, as we need to consider a now unobservable human ecology, the so-called environment of evolutionary adaptedness, or EEA.

This set of conditions was faced by early human populations in the Pleistocene epoch, from 1.8 million to 10,000 years ago, and the problems posed by it led, among other things, to that peculiar composite of adaptive apparatuses, the human mind. In evolutionary terms, the modern human will not have had enough time to discard the psychological toolbox painstakingly acquired during that long formative period.

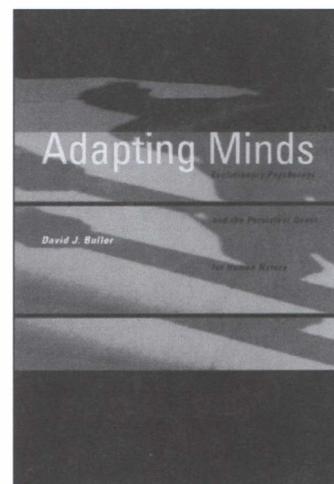
However, the implications of this view, and the reasonings behind it, are in dispute, and not just by blinkered creationists. The controversies discussed in this fascinating and scholarly work are not about whether we are shaped by evolution, but focus on the methods and theories being deployed to explain this shaping.

Buller is an enthusiast for evolutionary psychology, but a critic of Evolutionary Psychology (EP), a school of thought championed by Steven Pinker, David Buss and others. He questions their "reverse engineering" approach to the mind, and examines various problems and issues arising from key work by these and other researchers that is regarded as foundational for this school.

The mind is reckoned by EP to be a suite of modules, each one an adaptation to a specific challenge from the EEA. Leda Cosmides' experimental evidence for a "cheater-detection module" is one case reassessed here, and Buller suggests alternatives to the claim that we have evolved a tool for spotting when people default on a social contract. Certainly, as readers of these pages will know, we are not born with quack-detection modules.

Buller's evolutionary-minded conclusion is that we can be led to see that "human nature is just as great a superstition as the creation myth of natural theologians."

Paul Taylor





# LETTERS

## More on the Kennedy Assassination

As someone who remembers the Kennedy assassination (on the day before my 16th birthday – and yes, it really is true that you remember exactly where you were and what you were doing when you heard) I was interested to see *The Skeptic* had an article on the subject (Jeremy Bojczuk, 17(4), Winter 2004). I thought there might be some common sense after the reams of nonsense published on the subject. I was disappointed.

There is no evidence that any shots came from the front. Saying there must have been because Kennedy moved backwards shows a misunderstanding of how the body reacts to sudden severe injury. All credible evidence indicates that only three shots were fired, all from behind, that Oswald had time and ability, and that his rifle was suitable. There is eyewitness evidence that Oswald was at the window, and none that he was elsewhere. The first shot missed, the second wounded Kennedy and Governor John Connally of Texas, and the third hit Kennedy in the

back of the head and blew out the right side of his skull, causing the sharp backwards reaction.

The overwhelming consensus of eyewitness evidence is that Oswald shot the police officer, J.D. Tippit, and he had every reason to do so: he was stopped because he resembled the description of the assassin put out over the police radio. Oswald wasn't treated as a hero on his return from the Soviet Union. He wasn't charged with anything because he simply wasn't important enough.

Jack Ruby, who shot Oswald, wasn't a Chicago gangster representing the Mob in Dallas, but a born loser type with a string of failed business ventures behind him who sought attention and publicity and put on a rather pathetic 'colourful character' act. The idea that organised crime would entrust him with anything significant is ludicrous, and vast amounts of surveillance, telephone taps, etc. of organised crime figures contain no mention of him. He just wasn't the kind of person they would entrust with their business: he couldn't keep his mouth shut, and would have blabbed any

such connection to the police.

Ruby went to the press conference, a radio station, and possibly the hospital because he liked to feel "in" on dramatic events and that he was making use of his police and media contacts. He was well known at police headquarters and, given the chaos that reigned there, would have had no trouble getting in. (The late John Peel, the disc jockey, who was working in Dallas at the time, and a friend simply walked into the conference unchallenged.)

All credible evidence indicates that Ruby was greatly affected by the assassination, again sneaked into police headquarters, by pure chance found Oswald passing a few yards away, and on impulse shot him, apparently thinking he would be treated as a hero and soon be on his way home.

Always mentally unstable, Ruby completely lost his marbles in prison after his conviction and death sentence for murdering Oswald, raving about millions of Jews being tortured and murdered in the same building. He died of cancer while awaiting a retrial.

**Ray Ward**

Please send your letters to: **The Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW** or e-mail [edit@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:edit@skeptic.org.uk). Email communication is preferred. We reserve the right to edit letters for publication.

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