

# THE SKEPTIC

PURSuing TRUTH THROUGH REASON AND EVIDENCE

VOLUME 22 NUMBER 2

## PARAPSYCHOLOGY: DEAD or ALIVE?

Ray Hyman, Richard Wiseman, Caroline Watt & Chris Roe  
on the state of parapsychology

Sue Blackmore: Britain's  
First Lady of Scepticism  
Lewis Jones remembers  
Premanand  
Phil Plait on TAM London

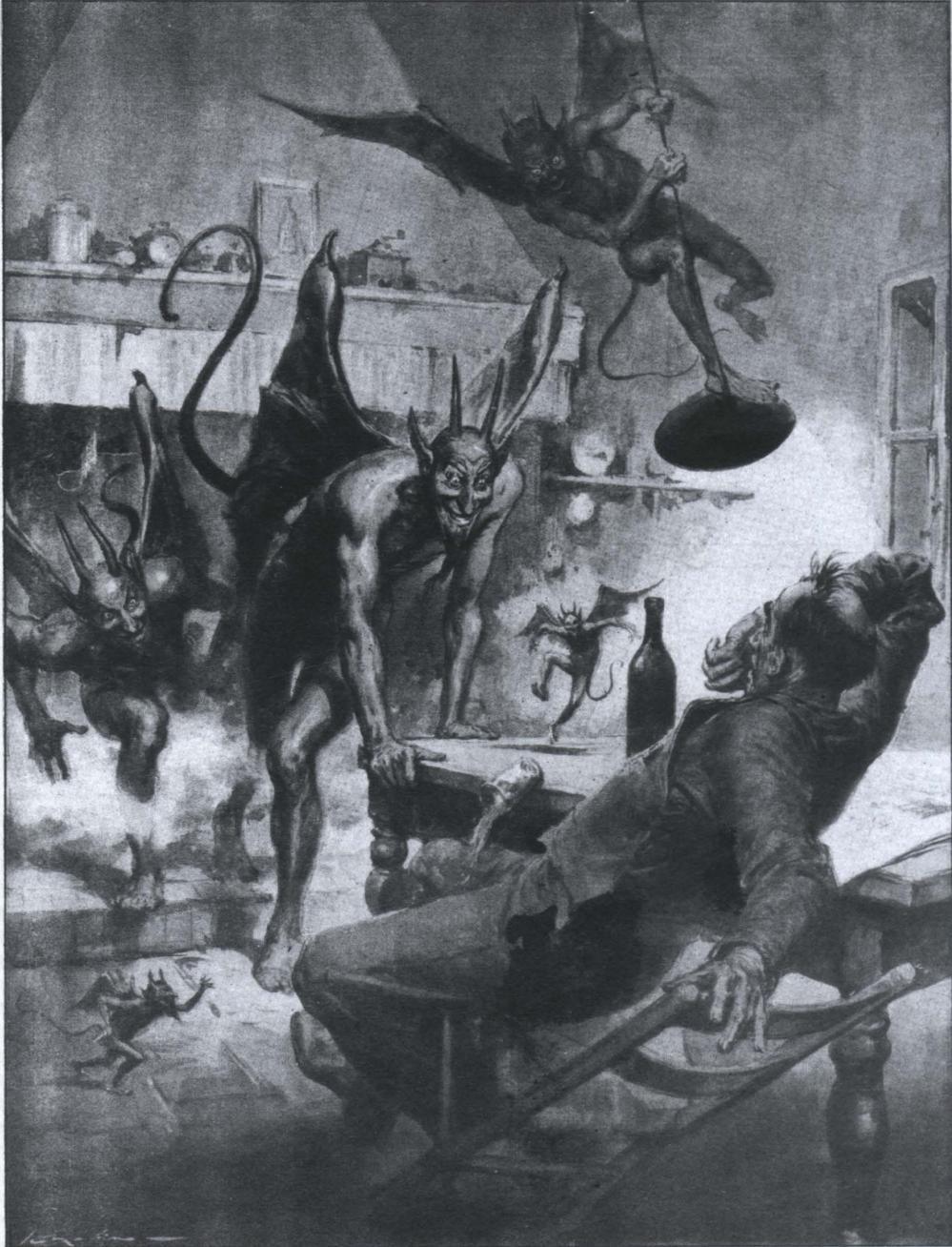
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The day I saw a ghost  
Psychic Joe Power  
Voices of Young Science  
News. Book Reviews. Humour.

# HILARY EVANS' PARANORMAL PICTURE GALLERY

ANNO 57 - N. 7

LA DOMENICA DEL CORRIERE

13 FEBBRAIO 1955 - L. 30 LA COPIA



*Un fattaccio buono per il lotto. A Castel di Sangro (L'Aquila), un colono, rimasto solo in casa, chiede conforto a una bottiglia di vino. Lo vince il sonno. Quando si desta e leva gli occhi ha una visione spaventosa: davanti a lui il diavolo. Altri demoni scendono dalla cappa del camino. Il poveretto scappa fuori, invoca soccorso. Accorre gente ma dei diavoli nemmeno l'ombra. Un'allucinazione? Uno scherzo del vino? Tanti commenti in città e molte giocate al lotto.*

*(Disegno di Walter Molino)*

In 1955, a farmer of Castel di Sangro, Italy, dozed over a bottle of wine after his day's work. He woke to find the room crowded with demons! Terrified, he shouted for help. His neighbours came rushing in – but only laughed at his fears!

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

## MARY EVANS ASKS WHY?

Mary Evans, from whose Library come many of the illustrations in *The Skeptic*, has all her life been contemptuous of religion, considering its adherents as sadly deluded. At the close of a productive life, she is currently in a care home, suffering from Alzheimers. In her name, *The Skeptic* is offering prizes (£400 for the winner, £100 for the runner-up) for the best essay on the subject of religious belief and delusion. Though it is not a condition, you are invited to address these questions: "If there isn't a God, why bother?" and "If they aren't a punishment from God, why do afflictions like Alzheimers occur?" The essays (4000 words maximum) should be serious, reasoned rather than vituperative, in simple, reader-friendly style. The closing date for entries is 31 March 2010. The winning essay will be published in a future issue of *The Skeptic*. The competition will be judged by *The Skeptic* editorial team, along with Hilary Evans and Valentine Ward (daughter). Please send your entries to [edit@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:edit@skeptic.org.uk)

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• THE SKEPTIC

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## CONTRIBUTE TO *THE SKEPTIC*

*The Skeptic* encourages the scientific outlook, science and scientific enquiry, critical thinking, and the use of reason and the methods of science in examining important issues. While we are known for our critical examinations of claims of paranormal, fringe science, and pseudoscientific phenomena, we have broadened our scope to include scientific or investigative examinations of a wide variety of public issues. Issues of broad public importance are of potential interest as long as they involve science and/or reason.

Well-written articles, reviews, and columns from leaders in science, biomedicine, psychology, the social sciences, philosophy, education, and technology are sought. Contributions by investigative journalists and science writers are also welcome.

*The Skeptic's* readership includes scholars and researchers in many fields and general readers of diverse backgrounds. Potential authors should write clearly, interestingly, and simply, avoid unnecessary technical terms, and maintain a factual, professional, and restrained tone. All submissions are judged on interest, clarity, significance, relevance, authority, and topicality.

*The Skeptic* does not pay its contributors, but you will receive a copy of the issue that your work appears in, and you will be fully credited. Further details, including formatting requirements, can be found at <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/about/contribute>.

# SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

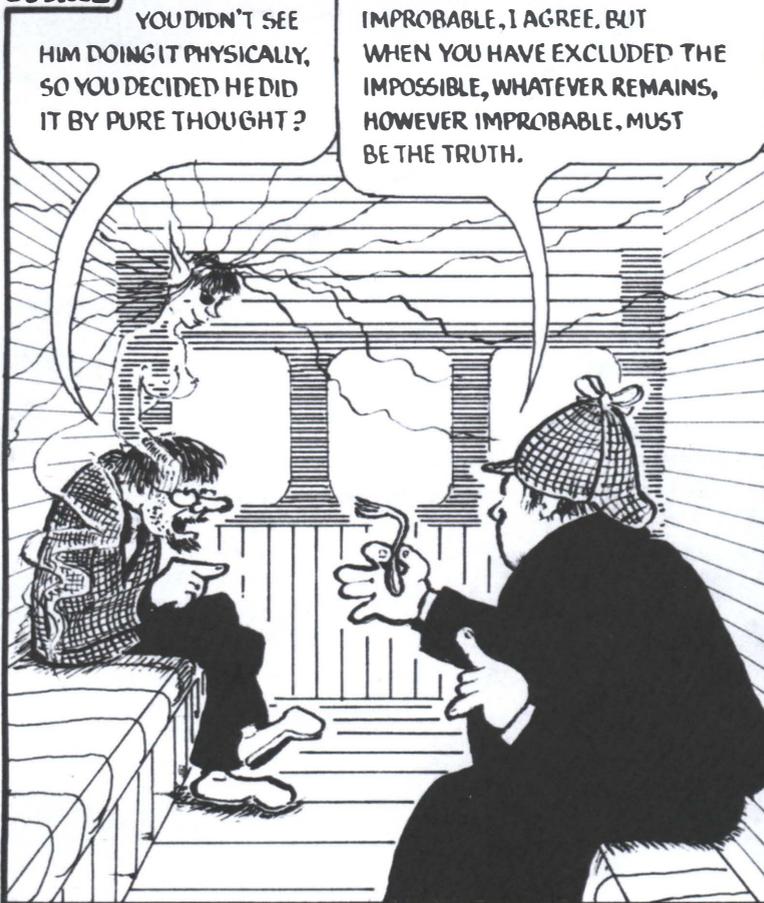
**Skeptics in the Pub** is a lecture series held in pubs in London and many other cities within the UK (usually) once a month in each location. An invited speaker gives a talk on their chosen topic and the talk is followed by an informal discussion in a relaxed and friendly pub atmosphere.

You can find out more about the meetings on *The Skeptic* website:

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub>.

The event was founded by Dr Scott Campbell in 1999, for all those interested in the rational approach to bizarre and extraordinary claims.

## SPRITE



# EDITORIAL

LINDSAY KALLIS AND CHRIS FRENCH

OUR 'NEW LOOK' seems to have gone down well with readers according to feedback we have received on our previous issue, not to mention the gratifying number of new subscribers we've signed up. If you know of anyone who might be interested in reading *The Skeptic*, please do draw their attention to our current special offer subscription rates for new subscribers at <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/buy>.

We are always delighted to introduce new features to improve the magazine, so please let us have your suggestions. The current issue includes three such innovations. First, we are introducing a crossword competition. Winning entries will receive signed copies of books by eminent members of our Editorial Advisory Board (see below) as prizes. Our essay competition on the subject of religious belief and delusion is still open too, with prizes of £400 for the winner and £100 for the runner-up. See *Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery* on page 2 for details and do send us your entries. Secondly, in this issue we are introducing a new regular feature that will "Focus On..." the aims and activities of a specific sceptical group or organization in each issue. We kick off this new feature with a piece on Voices of Young Science. Finally, we've decided to post Reference lists on our web site (<http://skeptic.org.uk/magazine/references>) rather than at the end of articles to make more room for other content while still allowing you to follow up on cited references should you wish to do so.

Although we are keen to see the magazine evolve in terms of broadening its coverage to include a wider range of topics of interest to the sceptical community, we also intend to continue to cover top-

ics of traditional interest to sceptics. This is reflected in our choice of theme for this issue: the current state and future prospects for parapsychology. Veteran sceptic Ray Hyman announces the death of parapsychology, a view with which Richard Wiseman concurs. Parapsychologists Caroline Watt and Chris Roe, however, feel that the discipline is most certainly not ready for burial yet! It's a thought-provoking debate, not only in terms of what it tells us about parapsychology but for what it tells us about the scientific process more generally. One parapsychologist who famously became disillusioned with the field is the subject of our interview for this issue. Having been for many years Britain's most vocal and articulate sceptical commentator, Susan Blackmore eventually decided to change her focus and follow her primary interest: the nature of consciousness. In true Blackmore style, however, her journey took her along some surprising intellectual paths including memetics and Zen meditation!

Finally, as we were in the final stages of putting this issue together, we received some very sad news indeed. Basava Premanand, scourge of the fraudulent Indian god-men, died at 2.20 pm on 4 October 2009 at Podannur, Tamil Nadu. He was 79. Lewis Jones has provided us with a short but moving personal memoir for inclusion in this issue but we intend to include further tributes to this inspirational figure in our next issue. He will be greatly missed.

With best wishes,  
Chris & Lindsay



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# HITS AND MISSES

MARK WILLIAMS

## BRITISH CHIROPRACTIC ASSOCIATION v SIMON SINGH: THE CURRENT STATUS

As most readers of this magazine will be well aware, writer, broadcaster and *Skeptic* Editorial Advisory Board member, Dr Simon Singh, is currently the subject of libel action brought by the British Chiropractic Association (BCA), resulting from a comment made within his column written for *The Guardian* newspaper on 19 April 2008.

To date, proceedings have largely not been in Singh's favour. He suffered an adverse ruling on 7 May 2009 in a preliminary hearing addressing the meaning of the allegedly libellous comment, and subsequently lost two hearings (one on paper) addressing applications to appeal the ruling.

Singh is not, however, ignorant of chiropractic. In 2008 he co-authored a book with Prof. Edzard Ernst entitled *Trick or Treatment? Alternative Medicine on Trial*. Writing a review of the book, published in full under the book review section of *The Skeptic's* website, esteemed medical doctor Harriet Hall states:

*Trick or Treatment* is well worth reading. I highly recommend it. It ought to have more credibility than other books critiquing alternative medicine, simply because it is harder to accuse Dr Ernst of bias. He is an avowed supporter of everything in alternative medicine that can be shown to work. He has used homeopathic remedies himself. He accepts herbal medicine claims that many of us reject (for instance, Echinacea to prevent and treat the common cold). He has demonstrated his ability to change his mind and follow the evidence. He has no axe to grind; his only agenda is to find the truth...

The first chapter asks "how do you determine the truth?" and explains the scientific method. Four chapters address the scientific evidence for the 4 major alternative therapies: acupuncture, homeopathy, chiropractic, and herbal medicine (36 lesser therapies are covered in an appendix). The final chapter asks "does the truth matter?"

[Ernst and Singh] give an example that beautifully illustrates the value of rigorous science. Dr Bill Silverman was frustrated by seeing premature babies go blind with retinopathy of prematurity (ROP). He tried treating them with ACTH and had astounding success: only 2 out of 31 infants lost their sight. In another hospital

where ACTH was not used, 6 out of 7 babies lost their sight. Most doctors would have simply continued using ACTH treatments and would have recommended them to everyone, but Silverman was a true scientist. He recognized that it might not be fair to compare babies in two different hospitals and that a proper random-

not had the integrity to question his own hypothesis, a useless and possibly harmful treatment might have become standard, and more babies might have ended up blind or dead.

As Singh's predicament continued, a number of other individuals concerned with claims by chiropractors independently sub-

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ized controlled trial was needed. When he did such a trial, 70% of the babies on ACTH recovered, but 80% of the untreated babies recovered, and more babies in the ACTH group died. A follow-up study confirmed these results. If Silverman had

mitted complaints regarding breaches of the Advertising Standards Code and/or Trading Standards, on the part of various chiropractors and chiropractic surgeries. In response, the McTimoney Chiropractic Association, "the professional association for McTimoney chi-

ropractors in the UK, and the second largest chiropractic association in Europe," issued a statement to its members, extracts of which include:

Because of what we consider to be a witch hunt against chiropractors, we are now issuing the following advice: The target of the campaigners is now any claims for treatment that cannot be substantiated with chiropractic research. The safest thing for everyone to do is as follows.

If you have a website, take it down NOW.

When you have done that, please let us know preferably by email or by phone. This will save our valuable time chasing you to see whether it has been done

REMOVE all the blue MCA patient information leaflets, or any patient information leaflets of your own that state you treat whiplash, colic or other childhood problems in your clinic or at any other site where they might be displayed with your contact details on them. DO NOT USE them until further notice. The MCA are working on an interim replacement leaflet which will be sent to you shortly.

If you have not done so already, enter your name followed by the word 'chiropractor' into a search engine such as Google (e.g. Joe Bloggs chiropractor) and you will be able to ascertain what information about you is in the public domain e.g. where you might be listed using the Doctor title or where you might be linked with a website which might implicate you. We have found that even if you do not have a website yourself you may still have been linked inadvertently to a website listing you or your services...

IF YOU DO NOT FOLLOW THIS ADVICE, YOU MAY BEAT RISK FROM PROSECUTION.

IF YOU DO NOT FOLLOW THIS ADVICE, THE MCA MAY NOT BE ABLE TO ASSIST YOU WITH ANY PROCEEDINGS.

None of this, however, directly impacts on the BCA's libel claim against Singh.

The libel claim seems to turn on Singh's comment in his *Guardian* article that the BCA "promoted 'bogus' treatments for children for which there was 'not a jot' of evidence". Perhaps controversially, I tend to agree with the BCA in its objection to this. Evidence for the efficacy of chiropractic certainly does exist, though it is the quality of the evidence which I believe Singh was questioning. That



*It's got to come down. The local chemist is complaining.*

stated, I certainly wouldn't suggest it should have resulted in legal action.

Secondly and more importantly, the BCA claims in a recent press release (14 October 2009) that "Dr. Singh has used this case as a platform to argue that science writers should be immune from the law of libel and to write what they please". While charitable trust Sense about Science is currently spearheading a campaign to "Keep Libel Laws out of Science", I don't believe Singh has ever argued scientists and journalists should "write what they please". Indeed, Singh has consistently advocated the use of reliable and valid evidence in scientific and journalistic claims, a stance reflected in a recent *Statement of Support From Senior Parliamentarians* which read "The [campaign] signatories are right to say that scientific disputes should not be resolved with libel laws and to draw attention to the chilling effect of English libel laws on the ability to debate and criticise medical and scientific evidence".

Despite a finally successful oral application to appeal against the original ruling on meaning on 14 October 2009, Singh's case could easily continue for a couple of years. Singh still has the full appeal hearing to face even before any hearing on the allegation itself, though he is on record as stating "I view

my current legal battle as just another in-between-books project. This legal battle is more expensive than initiating an educational project and less fun than Theatre of Science, but otherwise it meets many of the criteria that I look for in a project". Presently however, I'll leave the last word to Hall:

Singh and Ernst are not attacking alternative medicine; they are attacking overblown claims for unproven treatments. As Ernst says, "People must not confuse the perceived benefits of so-called alternative medicine with the medical facts." Or as Daniel Patrick Moynihan put it, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts".

#### **BLESSED ARE THE ATHEISTS, FOR THEY SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH: MATTHEW 5.5(-ISH).**

The United Church of the Kingdom of God recently discovered that outlandish, unsubstantiated claims don't work well in advertising. The organisation commissioned a billboard poster which featured the following paragraph accompanied by blissful, saccharine iconography:

My son was born with a heart problem. After a party he started bleeding from the mouth. I rushed him to hospital and the specialist said he had 16 loose arteries. He went into a coma, his heart stopped and

both his lungs collapsed. Doctors and specialists expected him to die. At the UKCG I was given some blessed oil to anoint my son with. Now that his heart and lungs are better I thank the UKCG for all the spiritual support I received.

In somewhat bittersweet irony, this propaganda was brought to the attention of the Advertising Standards Authority via the British Humanist Association (of atheist bus poster fame). Unsurprisingly, the ASA were not particularly sympathetic and found breaches of

**THE HUMANS ARE DEAD**

Following announcements earlier this year that SAT examination papers will follow some GCSE papers and be marked online, developments in British academia have become decidedly more bizarre. Pearson, the American company which owns UK examination board Edexcel, recently stated that international English tests will be marked by artificially intelligent systems from 26 October 2009.

The company claims the system will increase the accuracy and consistency of

On a more serious note, even the most impressive AI programs such as the “Do-Much-More” chatbot behave slightly oddly in Turing tests. Admittedly there is a marked difference between understanding and producing written language but the examination boards still feel tangible developments need to be made before such marking procedures are used for more routine assessments such as GCSEs, A-Levels or higher examinations.

**REGRESSION**

In Volume 22, Issue 1, of *The Skeptic* this column ran a short piece entitled “Development?”. It concerned an imminent vote in the European Parliament on the use of animals in research. The vote, held in May 2009, passed the proposed amendments to European Directive 86/609, essentially relaxing the procedural and ethical controls previously imposed in such research.

The ‘developments’ should allegedly reduce the number of animals used in research. However, with further examination this claim seems dubious. MEPs called for the re-use of animals so long as the pain involved does not exceed ‘moderate’ on a three-point scale (mild, moderate and severe). They also sought for ethical approval to be granted by the institution conducting the research, and to only require advance authorisation for procedures in cases where pain is ‘moderate’ or ‘severe’, or where primates are used.

Strikingly, a senior scientist from the RSPCA reported “In 2007, MEPs overwhelmingly supported a declaration calling for an end to great apes and wild-caught primates use in Europe and a clear strategy for replacing all primate experiments with humane alternatives. Today, when given the chance to follow these words up with actions, they have failed”.

It seems to me that regulation of research and ethics should fundamentally not rest with individuals or institutions which stand to benefit, regardless of the field of study. Such a conflict of interests will inevitably result in further suffering and abuses than currently exist. The protections afforded by current animal welfare legislation are around 20 years old and, as the RSPCA state: “Whilst the adopted proposals contain positive elements which will raise standards in numerous EU countries, many once-in-a-generation opportunities for achieving real and lasting improvements have been lost.”



*It says it's not sure what an adjective is.*

regulations which deal with substantiation, truthfulness, testimonials and endorsements and health and beauty products and therapies.

The BHA reported that “The ASA were particularly concerned that the poster might discourage people from seeking qualified medical advice.” If that concern is warranted, Darwin’s plan will certainly prevent blessed oil from becoming a long-term remedy for comatose patients with a non-functional heart and two collapsed lungs. Ultimately, the UKCG is securing its demise.

marking by “eliminating human elements such as tiredness and subjectivity” and intends for the system to assess and mark essay responses in order to rate the linguistic aptitude of prospective university students.

Teachers and academics have branded the system a “disaster waiting to happen” presumably on educational grounds rather than concerns of AI marking systems complaining of the lack of workers’ rights, or plotting to enslave the human race as vampire robot zombies. (Congratulations to the two of you who understand that reference.)

All news stories and newspaper clippings are gladly received, as are your opinions. Please send clippings to the magazine’s address as given on p. 3. If you would like to contribute links and updates directly to *the Skeptic’s* blog ([skeptical.org.uk/news](http://skeptical.org.uk/news)), please email for information. Thanks to Teched for contributions.

# Fact Checking

TODAY IS JUNE 25, so as I write this we're in the middle of the third round of Wimbledon. The big stories this week: for the men, Roger Federer and his quest for a record 15<sup>th</sup> Open Era Slam singles win; for the women, Michelle Larcher de Brito. Who?

Larcher de Brito is famous for the wrong reason: she is held to be the loudest (and, per shot, longest) shrieker ever in the women's game, making Maria "Shriekapova" Sharapova sound quiet. She is also, of course, young (16), Portuguese (a surprising rarity on both professional tours), talented, and cute, with a win-loss record for the year of 13-9 and an upwardly mobile ranking of 91 (she finished 2007 in the 300s). But none of that is my point because *The Skeptic* is not a tennis magazine. My point is that I'm fed up with listening to the BBC say that her shrieks register at 109db on their "gruntmeters", which, they keep saying, "is only 10db less than a jet plane taking off."

I don't know much about sound pressure, but on the basis of the article I painfully wrote a couple of years ago for the *Guardian* on the subject of noisy computers, I do know that 10db isn't "only" anything: it's not a linear measurement but a logarithmic one. Ten decibels difference in a noise is a change of magnitude of a factor of ten. In other words, Larcher de Brito's shrieks (and they *are* shrieks, not grunts) are *one-tenth* as loud as a jet plane taking off. In fact, it's even less than that, for two reasons. First of all, the BBC hasn't specified how they're actually measuring her shrieks: with what measuring device or from what distance. Second of all, tables on the Net give the noise of a jet plane taking off, from 100 feet, as 130db. Which is, if anything, nearly 100 times as loud as Larcher de Brito.

What actually is 109db? A belt-sander, at six inches.

Now, that's still loud, and if you're exposed to it continuously without protection you will have hearing damage, but it's not a jet plane. And my guess is that the effective noise level for spectators outdoors, at some distance, with sound waves spreading and being absorbed by grass, backdrop, and other spectators, is much, much lower. I doubt anyone is going to have to sign up for cochlear implants after sitting through one of her matches, although you probably want to avoid her at indoor tournaments.

But what's bugging me is the BBC. I know they don't recruit their

tennis commentators from the ranks of physicists and engineers, but in all the hordes of people assigned to fill those 200 hours they broadcast from Wimbledon every year wouldn't you think one of them might have had a smattering of ability to, you know, look stuff up? I understand the need to make a dramatic statement and all that, but isn't it more dramatic if it's actually true? A belt sander at six inches is quite impressively loud enough, I'd have thought.

Of course, people ask this same question about some of my articles, too, and for the same reason. I don't write for the *Guardian's* technology section because I'm a genius about computers; I write for them because I can get an article in on time at the right length and written to brief, and I'm *willing* to write about computers. But somehow "the media" is always them, no matter how mainstream the press you work for, and so a working journalist can complain about "the media" with a straight face. One of my more annoying personal characteristics is my eternal desire to correct minute errors of fact and syntax – at least, when they're made by other people.

The desire to make a good story better is one of the most basic of human instincts and one that pulls even some of the most respected sceptics into errors of hyperbole. It's bad enough when psychic claimants or, still worse, alternative medicine promoters, do it to promote themselves and their services. It is in many ways worse when sceptics do it because we're supposed to be the ones promoting the pursuit of truth.

But it's getting harder and harder to get heard with any kind of sober presentation of the truth. What gets read on the Net is attitude; what sells newspapers and TV shows is controversy. If you also have the facts – as in, say, the MPs' expenses scandal – so much the better. But they're not really as much of a requirement as maybe they once were.

That is one reason I find it hard to sympathise with newspapers that trash "the bloggers" on the grounds that they're not trained as journalists. A lot of journalists aren't either, and even those who are don't always seem to care about accuracy. Better science – and especially statistics – education would, as always, help.

As for Larcher de Brito, she has said in a press conference that she is determined to keep squealing like a stuck pig, and if the tennis authorities don't like it they can fine her. I say it's time for the audience to take back the game. If everyone shows up to her matches – and those of other notorious shriekers such as Sharapova, both Williams sisters, and up-and-comer Viktoria Azarenka – wearing those big, protective earphones you're supposed to wear to work with power tools, they might start to get the message. And it'll make good television.

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## The Enemy of my Enemy

I THOUGHT it would be hard to top the stupidity of George Bush repeatedly telling us that we must side with him if we value liberty, but incredibly, many who should know better have risen to the challenge. In their desire to defy American hegemony, many on the left have conformed to Bush's "with-me-or-against-me" world view by showing a woeful disregard for the basic freedoms of citizens in anti-American states. It is as though if Bush is for liberty, it can't be all that good.

I was struck by this disturbing thought last year in Edinburgh, as I was taking part in Amnesty International's imprisoned writers series of readings at the book festival. I was listening to the story of Guillermo Fariñas Hernandez, a Cuban journalist imprisoned as part of one of Castro's periodic crackdowns on "counter-revolutionaries". His crime was to tell foreign media about human rights violations, and the intimidation and harassment of independent reporters. He campaigns for access to the internet in a country where private connections are more or less banned, and access to the web in public cyber cafes is closely monitored.

Fariñas's case is far from unique, and reflects the reality – evident to anyone who cares to look – that Cuba is a repressive state, where dissidents are often imprisoned without trial. Yet Cuba still retains a special place in the hearts of many on the left, who too often talk about it as though it were a beacon of socialist idealism in a ruthless, capitalist world, only prevented from reaching its full potential by the US embargo. People who would never make excuses for Guantanamo Bay somehow manage to overlook the far more systematic deprivation of rights in Cuba. But of course, criticising Castro is what conservatives do, so let's not join in, even if he is a tyrant.

Now the romantic left has a new hero whose faults it is blind to: Hugo Chavez. With his revolutionary rhetoric and belligerent anti-Bush stance, Chavez is the anti-American many have been waiting for.

Chavez's health, education and food programmes have undoubtedly helped the poor, who comprise a shocking 60% of the population. Yet even here his record is not unequivocally good. Poverty is falling all over South America, and the country which is eradicating it

the fastest is un-revolutionary Chile. Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's Brazil is arguably also doing better than Venezuela, and is building more secure foundations for the future than Chavez's great spending spree of finite petrodollars.

Some of Chavez's initiatives just look bizarre. The fact that he sold discounted oil to Ken Livingstone to help provide free transport to the capital's poor when his own people were in such dire need is hardly something champions of the oppressed should have cheered about. Nor does his rhetoric often match his actions: Venezuela's number one trading partner remains the USA.

As with Cuba, however, the biggest blind spot of the left concerns freedom of thought and expression. Silvio Berlusconi was justly pilloried for combining political power with domination of the Italian media, but even he did not have the gall to put out his own 90-minute show on the nation's top-channel. Still, Chavez's *Alo Presidente* (which used to last for five hours on average) is not seen as a sinister, megalomaniacal control of the airwaves, but a quirky act by a leader loved by his people. The double-standard is staggering.

Worse, while diverse NGOs like Reporters without Frontiers, Human Rights Watch and Index on Censorship all express concern about diminishing press freedom in Chavez's utopia, the National Union of Journalists has affiliated to the Hands off Venezuela campaign, which dismisses all protests about press freedom as Washington propaganda.

Sadly, this is to be expected, since this is exactly how human rights abuses in Cuba have been defended for years. Reporters Without Frontiers has had to put a lengthy defence of its reporting on Cuba on its website, such is the frequency and ferocity of complaints that it is biased against Castro's regime and even, absurdly, that it is funded by the CIA. Its insistence that in 2004 only 18 out of 781 releases it put out were about Cuba was not good enough for those who seem to think you cannot criticise Chavez or Castro at all without being a Washington poodle.

It is a tragic paradox that while simplicity is the enemy of good politics, it is a friend of successful political operators, and Manichean simplicities are found on both the left and the right. The simple truth that it is possible to criticise the Bolivarian revolution without being a western imperialist seems too hard to grasp for some.

No political leader deserves uncritical support. Chavez does not need ousting by the CIA, but he does need to be challenged. To remain silent about his incursions into freedom of speech for fear of being on the wrong side is to value partisan loyalty over truth.



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## Why So Many Professionals?

EARLY IN MY professional career I worked in a child guidance unit and I still vividly recall attending my first case conference involving various community-based agencies and staff. The conference concerned Tim, a young boy whom I saw weekly at the unit. His fostering arrangements had broken down and I was asked to attend a meeting to decide how best to proceed.

A naïve and inexperienced trainee psychologist, I arrived at the venue at the appointed time and was shown into a room packed with people, much to my dismay as I was anxious that Tim's case would be discussed first so I could return early to work. My dismay quickly turned to astonishment when I realised that the entire ensemble had converged to discuss just one case: Tim's! As well as me there were teachers, social workers, staff from the fostering agency, an educational welfare officer, and a consultant psychiatrist who chaired the meeting (and who, incidentally, had never met Tim).

I could not help feeling puzzled as to how all these people had come to be thus involved with this one child. Since then, although attending meetings of the above kind has been a regular part of my work, I have not lost the sense of unease that, on many occasions, all is not what it should be.

More recently I have been wondering if it is possible to calculate some kind of index that estimates how much a particular individual, or any individual in a given set of circumstances, generates for state-employed personnel. For the average child in this country it should be fairly high (particularly because of our education system) and if the child has problems the index will shoot up with the involvement of the health and social services. Obviously, the more ill we are, the more work we provide for staff in our health service. There is also a large industry around criminal offending (police, courts, social services, the probation service, prisons, etc.) and if you work with mentally disordered offenders, the number of different professionals you encounter can be quite bewildering.

I want to stress here that I am not being pejorative about any of the individuals concerned: I am simply trying to make sense of some-

thing that puzzles me and I think requires more explanation than that usually provided.

A few years ago I was asked to provide a report on a man accused of a very serious crime. He had a history of violence and there was little doubt that he was guilty. However, he also had medical and psychiatric problems and his legal team were concerned about his fitness to plead and stand trial. For these reasons, no less than nine reports had already been received from five psychiatrists. Interestingly, their opinions tended to be divided according to who had instructed them – the Crown or the Defence. I provided my report (instructed by the Defence), which was then the subject of another report from a psychiatrist instructed by the Crown, who took issue with my conclusions. The Crown then instructed another psychologist to prepare a report. Looking more like a Masters dissertation, this report was delivered literally at the last moment: we were all waiting to go into court when it was faxed through. The conclusions were the same as mine. The verdict of the jury was that the defendant was unfit to plead and he was detained in a secure hospital. A year later, further reports were requested, including another from me, and he was now deemed fit for trial. He was convicted and returned to the secure hospital.

I often ponder about the human resources involved in this and similar cases. The main ones are those associated with the police investigation, the prison service, the probation service, social services, the legal process (including expert witnesses), and the forensic medical services (which include medical staff, pharmacists, nurses and care assistants, social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists, numerous other kinds of therapists, teachers and trainers, and, from time-to-time, legal and Home Office personnel). There are also managers and administrators for the different services, secretaries, porters, and security, canteen and domestic staff. And in many cases the people employed will have had to have been trained at colleges and universities; thus involving yet more personnel.

What drives all of this? The obvious answer is the needs of the public, the victims and the accused: that is, public protection, justice and fairness, the medical, psychological and material needs of the defendant, etc. Is that the whole story? Maybe, but I believe there is scope for some sceptical analysis and I shall attempt this in my next column or two. In the meantime, if you ever find yourself outside a prison, those well-dressed people who emerge trailing suitcases are not prisoners being released. They are solicitors visiting their clients.

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## Shirley and Me

I MUST ADMIT that I could not help grinning when I heard from Brian Dunning a few months ago that he and Michael Shermer had been fooled by none other than the UK's own Shirley Ghostman. Just to add insult to injury for Brian, he knew that he came within a gnat's whisker of avoiding being hoaxed but fate had not been on his side at The Amazing Meeting in Las Vegas in 2008. Fate had not been on my side at that meeting either. Despite great efforts to ensure that everything would run smoothly, I had had serious technical problems with my PowerPoint presentation which had pretty much ruined my talk to the audience of several hundred people. I at least wanted to give them something to smile about so I managed, after a lot of effort, to show them the clip of my own confrontation with Shirley, first recorded and broadcast back in 2005. That seemed to go down pretty well. As Brian reminded me, he was on just after my presentation but was so engrossed in getting things set up for his own talk that he failed to pay any attention to mine – a decision he was going to live to regret!

For any of you who are not aware of who Shirley Ghostman is, I should provide a little background detail. Shirley is one of the comic creations of actor Marc Wootton. This particular manifestation is a totally over-the-top and extremely camp 'psychic' who caricatures the world of mediumship by combining supreme self-confidence with a breathtaking lack of anything that even vaguely resembles psychic ability. He was the central character in a series broadcast on BBC3 called *High Spirits*, in which he was filmed giving individual readings (often in extremely bad taste), performing live in front of bemused audiences, selecting students for his 'Spirit Academy' (a kind of *X-Factor* for wannabe psychics), and, most relevant here, challenging 'the skeptics'. In my opinion, the level of humour in the series ranged from the sublime to the embarrassingly puerile. It would have made a great one-hour special but the good stuff was spread too thinly over an entire series. Without wishing to be immodest, I now think that my own confrontation with Shirley was extremely funny – although I certainly did not think so at the time!

Both Wendy Grossman, founding editor of and regular columnist for *The Skeptic*, and Nick Pullar, who successfully ran the London branch of Skeptics in the Pub for many years, were also filmed 'confronting' Shirley and both have written excellent accounts of this bizarre experience (see [wendyg.livejournal.com/118590.html](http://wendyg.livejournal.com/118590.html) and

[www.skeptic.org.uk/pub/shirleyghostman.html](http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub/shirleyghostman.html), respectively). My own involvement in this programme began in a pretty unremarkable way. I was contacted by a 'researcher' who informed me that his TV company were "making a documentary about spirituality in modern Britain" and asked if I would be willing to be filmed having a conversation with a psychic for the programme. So, along I went to University College London for the filming. With the benefit of hindsight, there were a few things that were a little bit odd about the set up that perhaps should have alerted me to the fact that everything was not quite as it seemed. For example, I was only informed that the (male) psychic's name was Shirley just before I went in to meet him. "Fair enough," I thought, "It's a free country." It was also odd that the cameras were already rolling as I entered the room for our 'confrontation'. But the last possibility on my mind was that this entire set-up was a spoof!

You can get some idea of what my meeting with Shirley was like by watching a clip that, at the time of writing, was available on YouTube. But even if you've seen the full broadcast version of my encounter, you would still only have seen a fraction of the hour or so that I spent in conversation with him. It was the most bizarre experience of my life ever (and in my line of work bizarre experiences are not exactly rare!). In retrospect, it is clear that much of what Shirley said was deliberately intended to disorient me. None of the really sick stuff ever made it to your TV screen. This presented me with something of a dilemma. I confess that I did not realize that the whole thing was a spoof and I therefore assumed that I was dealing with someone who had serious mental problems. Although the classic Monty Python line "You're a loony" was running through my head throughout, as a professional psychologist, there was no way I could actually give voice to such a view.

At the end of the 'reading', I was convinced that Shirley had just wasted everybody's time and that nothing had been recorded that could ever be broadcast. It was only as I heard from the other sceptics who had had their encounters with Shirley after mine that I realized that we'd all been put through essentially the same process meaning that that was what the programme makers must have wanted all along. It took me days to convince my fellow sceptics that the whole thing must have been a spoof. They took some convincing, mainly because none of us could really see why anyone would go to such trouble to spoof us – we just weren't important enough. Of course, what we did not know was that the confrontations with sceptics were just one thread in a much more ambitious comedy project. The end result is, I feel, a pretty good advert for scepticism – a flawed, but at times brilliant, parody of paranormal programming in the UK.



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# Celebrity Scepticism: New Tools for Old Ideas

IN OCTOBER 2009, something new happened to scepticism. The glossy veneer of celebrity firmly attached itself to 'the cause', making front page BBC online news and swelling our ranks by as yet uncounted but not insubstantial numbers. The catalyst for the change was TAM London, the first conference of the James Randi Educational Foundation outside the USA, which was billed as "a celebration of science and critical thinking". It was billed that way deliberately, rather than as a 'sceptic conference', in order to attract mainstream press as well as a wider audience than the converted we often myopically preach to. I know it was deliberate, because I was the conference organiser and marketer.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks I've hit in my years of 'sceptical activism' is the legacy of ivory-tower thinking that has, in my opinion, held scepticism back from the mainstream for a long time. As mentioned in my previous column, thankfully the times are changing, and the new generations of sceptics are using tools which usually belong to us cynical marketing types: social psychology, and celebrity.

The best example of social psychology is 'new media'. Facebook, Twitter, blogs and the internet in general give us wider access to peer groups, from a larger and more varied background, than at any time before. And of course, being human, we take this huge melting pot and make little cliques. We surround ourselves with like-minded folk and peer out at those we don't understand. Sometimes we mock them, sometimes we argue with them, often we ignore them.

Perfectly natural, there is safety in numbers and comfort in knowing you aren't alone. It's also incredibly useful if you want to reach a wider audience, whether that's with a new product, a new show, or in our case, ideas and methodology. It's hard to sell the concept of self-education and thinking. In general, the public like to feel intelligent, but not told they need to think; informed, but not preached to. It's a difficult balance and internet platforms like Facebook make it much easier to not only reach a much bigger pool of like-minded people, but those on the fringe who would not ordinarily be exposed to sceptical methods or fact-based reporting, without any hint of preachiness or authority. Peer-to-peer, the word gets spread.

Celebrity, on the other hand, is top-down. A celebrity endorses something and suddenly it's huge. Sure, it's a fallacy, but 'appeal to celebrity' is powerful and we shouldn't be afraid to use it, firstly, because it's a tool the 'woos' use to great effect (Oprah and *The Secret*, Jenny McCarthy and vaccines) and therefore is obviously appealing for the public, and secondly because there are some excellent celebrities who are now open in their support of science, critical thinking, and outright scepticism. Jonathan Ross, Eddie Izzard, Stephen Fry, Ricky Gervais, other comedians such as Dara O'Briain, Tim Minchin, Robin Ince – these people are not academics-turned-celebrities, as Dawkins is, but they're using their influence for positive effect. Robin Ince's *Nine Lessons and Carols for Godless People* events are now in their second year, Jonathan Ross tweeted about and attended TAM London, Tim Minchin includes a lesson in logical fallacies as part of his live show, and his TAM London appearance was publicised on his Facebook page to over 53,000 fans, many of whom will have gone to find out more and perhaps discovered the work of James Randi and the other speakers as a result.

We shouldn't underestimate the power of celebrities and their hold on social media. Although I'm sure you, like me, find it distasteful to pursue a celebrity or be sycophantic, don't forget that many of them are smart people too, they read the same books we do, watch the same documentaries, and in the case of the one thing we sceptics all have in common, also "don't believe in a bunch of stuff". So, like you, they want to hear about new things, go to interesting events, and meet like-minded folk to talk about geeky stuff and have a beer or two. If scepticism wants to be part of 21<sup>st</sup> century society, we need to accept that celebrity culture is part of that, and embrace it.

**Tracy King** runs a marketing company in London, and works for sceptic organizations and science communicators. Her talks cover a range of topics including viral marketing and advertising psychology, and she writes for the popular *Skepchick* blog ([www.skepchick.org](http://www.skepchick.org)). She holds a world record for spoon-bending and is proud to call herself a geek.



## The day I saw a ghost

ANECDOTES, whilst not considered compelling evidence by sceptics, nevertheless hold a lot of power over those not used to thinking in a sceptical or scientific way. We have all, at some time or another, come across someone who claims to have seen something that they couldn't explain and use that to try and browbeat one into accepting their personal testimony as fact. Without the proper analytical tools or experience, it can be hard to tell fact from fiction, especially given the fallibility of human memory; these personal testimonies that "can't be explained" should not be given the weight of authority that the person demands of them.

By way of example, let me share with you the time I saw a ghost.

I was walking home one dark and dreary night; not my normal route home, but a more scenic route, as I'd been out for a meal with friends and the shortest route home was across the local heath. It was around 10 pm, dark, cold and a fine drizzle was falling. I walked fairly quickly across the heath to get home, not wanting to get wetter than I needed to. As I neared the edge of the heath, suddenly, right across my field of view, I saw a translucent dog, glowing bright, running in front of me, right to left. It was a large golden retriever – silently running across my path before it vanished at the edge of my vision and was gone.

I had heard the stories about ghostly dogs before, but never in this part of London; these phantom pooches were supposed to be harbingers of death, doom and all sorts of disastrous maladies. I confess that it genuinely spooked me, my heart raced, a twinge of panic shot through me. Had I really seen a ghost? I had to believe what I saw with my own eyes – what I had just seen was clear as day; the thing was glowing, I could have hardly missed it. I decided there and then that the rest of my journey home would be at a brisker clip, thence to the internet, so I could do a little more research into these

apparitions, in case there was a rational explanation.

In my mind at the time, it could not have been a real dog – it was too large, it glowed in a bright golden colour, it was partially transparent and it ran far too fast across my field of view for it to be real.

As I neared home and safety, my mind was racing. Was it real? Did I really see it? Were there any others who had ever reported seeing something similar on the heath? As the familiar orange glow of the street lights brightened, indicating that I was close to home, I felt relieved. I was safe. Then it hit me out of nowhere, the answer to my 'ghost' was staring me in the face. I felt both incredibly silly and incredibly smart to have figured out what my spectre had actually been. I laughed the rest of the way home.

So what was it? What was the ghost dog?

The clues to the solution are in the story – you just have to pick them out. It was dark, there was drizzle and there were street lights. I had been walking in the fine rain, which had settled on my hair, face, and clothes. As I had approached the edge of the heath and the street lights, the orange glow of a nearby light had refracted through a droplet of water on my eyelashes, right into my eye. As I walked, the light had moved across my field of view. My brain, seeing a sudden, unexpected moving golden light, filled in the blanks, making the shape out to be a dog. We know that the brain, in the absence of other stimuli, can fit an image into its preconceptions; we call this pareidolia; the seeing of a significant image where there is nothing but noise. Faces in clouds, hearing words in static, these are all examples of the pattern recognition parts of the brain finding things that really aren't there.

The ghost dog was nothing more than a chance flash of light from a sodium street light through a droplet of water onto my retina. My brain filled in the blanks, et voilà! A ghostly golden retriever running across my path. So remember, next time someone tells you of an apparition that they could not explain that maybe, just maybe, there was no supernatural occurrence, just your brain filling in the gaps from a bizarre optical illusion. Feel free to counter their anecdote with this one, although after a few tellings, see how it differs to what's written here, as a guide to how stories change. You might be surprised.



Mark Duwe is a web designer working mostly in advertising, but also teaches astronomy at evening class. He's a qualified homoeopath (he didn't take the final exam and passed with flying colours) and thinks reality is good enough without having to invent stuff.

# Psychic Joe Power

IN RECENT TIMES, Joe Power has attracted quite a lot of media attention. In fact, we have covered the last few years of his professional career in some detail on my site: [www.badpsychics.co.uk](http://www.badpsychics.co.uk). But just how has a 'psychic' such as him manipulated his position in life in his attempts to become a celebrity psychic? To find out, we must go back in time.

In April 2006, Joe Power caused controversy when he announced that he was going to contact the spirit of John Lennon. As you can imagine, this caused a lot of discussion. Even Yoko Ono had her representatives release a statement calling the stunt "exploitative". But of course media attention is exactly what Joe Power was after. A US TV station had apparently found someone who would be willing to partake in this stunt for a pay-per-view TV special. Oh how very spiritual, and at a price of only \$9.95, that's a good \$5 cheaper than the Princess Diana séance was a few years earlier. So what did John Lennon have to say for himself? Well, the ground-breaking message from the dead Lennon was "peace... the message is peace". Now if that isn't worth \$9.95, then I don't know what is.

Despite appearing on this American special, things were still not going great for Joe. At odds with his own claims, he had to cancel shows on a regular basis due to poor ticket sales; and when you can't sell out small hotel function rooms, you know that a new stunt is in order.

One of the claims Joe has made over the years is that he could help the police solve crimes. He claimed to have helped Southport Police in the Lynsey Quay murder case, yet when we asked Detective Superintendent Geoff Sloan, he made the following statement: "I wish to state, categorically, that as Senior Investigating Officer on the Lynsey Quay murder, I made a policy decision not to use psychics on the investigation. Joe Power has allegedly made claims that he assisted the enquiry, but this is not the case".

Joe also claimed "through one of his astonishing spirit links" to have known the killer of model Sally Anne Bowman and that he informed the police that the killer was a "Stephen" or "Stephan White", aged between 24 and 26 and was a delivery driver. Yet following DNA evidence the police arrested and charged 36-year-old chef Mark Dixie who is now serving a life sentence in prison. So yet again, Joe was wrong, despite telling people that he helped the police.

After cancelling 44% of his publicized shows in 2005, 2006 and 2007, Joe Power was still hungry for fame. In 2008, he made an astounding public statement when he said "TV mediums are ripping people off. The place is saturated with fake mediums getting away with playing on people's emotions ..." Throughout 2008 things just got worse for Joe; of 65 advertised shows, at least 51 were cancelled due to poor sales.

But in 2009 Joe saw another opportunity to get himself more media coverage. At the time, when the Madeleine McCann story was worldwide news, a child by the name of Shannon Matthews went missing. Joe visited Shannon's mother Karen Matthews and her partner Craig Meehan and gave them a reading which was quoted in the *Sunday People* newspaper alongside a photograph of Joe standing next to Karen Matthews. Unfortunately, despite claiming to be clairvoyant, clairaudient, and clairsentient, and despite spending a lot of time with the family of Shannon Matthews, Joe seemed to have missed one tiny detail; that Karen Matthews had actually been behind the fake kidnap of her own 9-year-old daughter. Karen Matthews is now serving time in prison and has shown no remorse for her crimes. The one time he truly put himself on the line, he failed miserably.

So now we are up to date on Power's story: many tacky stunts, failed tours, cancelled shows, yet still he managed to find himself a book publisher. When a member of Bad Psychics went along to one of his signings, all that could be found was the lonely figure of Joe sat at a table on his own, no line of people or crowds scrambling for his photo. Maybe this is all that is left for this man, or maybe he has already planned his next stunt, only time will tell. But Joe would have one last dig at those who dare to doubt him.

I will quote from my good friend, Bad Psychics member and Merseyside sceptic Marsh, who recently met Joe Power and handed him an application form for the JREF Million Dollar Challenge. This is how Joe responded: "The thing about you sceptics, is that you sit there, festering in front of your computers at 3 am, thinking up ways to get at people. What if I were to sit in front of your house and tell people you're a paedophile? I think most sceptics probably are paedophiles. I mean, you're sat around at 3 am, plotting, aren't you? Do you deny that?"

Joe Power's career should serve as a warning to any 'wannabe' celebrity psychics out there. Don't make claims you can't back up because one annoying thing about sceptics is that we investigate, we search, and we find out the truth.

Jon Donni is the owner, editor and author of *BadPsychics.com*



# SKEPTICAL STATS

COMPILED BY MARK WILLIAMS

- 1** Number of calories in the Heart Attack Grill's "Quadruple Bypass Burger": **8000**
- 2** Minimum weight of person who qualifies for a free meal at the Heart Attack Grill: **160kg**
- 3** Highest price paid for a deck of cards, a complete, hand painted deck circa 1470: **\$143,352 (by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY)**
- 4** Size of diamond made from the ashes of a premature 5lb baby: **0.5 carat (for £2625)**
- 5** Length of the longest recorded flight of a chicken: **13 seconds**
- 6** Number of nuclear weapons lost since 1945: **50**
- 7** Cost of the meaning of life (as auctioned on eBay in 2000): **\$3.26**
- 8** Number of relationships covered by Hallmark cards: **105**
- 9** Time of wearing headphones needed for the bacteria in your ear to increase by 700%: **1 hour**
- 10** Number of people injured annually by the sliding doors on the London Underground: **127**
- 11** Amount of money given through emailed card details to "reputable Nigerians" each year: **\$100-200 million**
- 12** Number of Scouts participating in the largest wobble board ensemble: **666**
- 13** Highest number of live rattlesnakes held in the mouth: **10**
- 14** Number of people hospitalised in 2008 due to adverse reactions to medications which had passed animal regulatory tests: **4487**
- 15** Amount of money lost to the wind from a convertible car during a test drive in Germany: **£20,594**
- 16** Proportion of teenagers who apparently do not believe in God: **two thirds**
- 17** Percentage of Americans who own a bible: **93**
- 18** Number of Americans who believe Joan of Arc was Moses' wife: **one in ten**
- 19** Percentage of people who turn their head to the right immediately prior to a kiss: **65**
- 20** Size of the smallest ever newspaper: **32mm x 22mm**
- 21** Number of written commands Willow, a 12-year-old English Terrier dog, can read and follow: **over 250**
- 22** Number of steps at Chand Baori, India's oldest well which dates back to the 9th Century: **3500, spread over 13 stories reaching a depth of over 100 feet**
- 23** Longest distance covered by a battery-operated remote-controlled model car: **15 miles (5 laps around the LeMans racing circuit) using two Panasonic EVOLTA AA batteries**
- 24** Time taken to clone the UK's prospective new national ID card: **12 minutes, using a Nokia mobile phone and a laptop**
- 25** Number of decimal places to which Japanese man, Jirojuki Goto, recited Pi: **42,195 in 10 hours 50 minutes**

## Sources

1,2 Heart Attack Grill; 3 Sothebys; 4 Memorial Diamonds; 5 Open2; 6 US Gov Info; 7 Surfer Sam; 8 Trinity University; 9 CNET; 10 Metro; 11 Scambusters; 12,13 Guinness World Records; 14 Animal Aid; 15 Reuters; 16 Daily Mail; 17,18 Politics Daily; 19 National Geographic; 20 Guinness World Records; 21 Ananova; 22,24 Gizmodo; 23 Computer Weekly; 25 Oxford University.

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# PARAPSYCHOLOGY: DEAD OR ALIVE?

Four eminent researchers give their views on the current state of parapsychology and its future prospects

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## The Demise of Parapsychology, 1850-2009

RAY HYMAN argues that parapsychology no longer exists as a science

THE DISCIPLINE OF parapsychology, which was earlier known as psychical research, lasted approximately 160 years. It no longer exists. This claim will likely surprise those who call themselves “parapsychologists” as well as those readers who know that annual meetings still occur and parapsychology journals are still published. So the title of this article needs an explanation.

Parapsychology was a discipline that openly claimed to be a science and actively sought evidence for psi that would meet strict scientific criteria. Henry Sidgwick (1882), in his Presidential Address to the first meeting of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), declared that the evidence that had been collected during the preceding 30 years demonstrated scientifically the reality of supernatural phenomena. The problem was that the majority of the scientific community did not agree. The SPR’s objective was to collect even more of the same kind of evidence until the scientific community accepted it.

The goals of parapsychology as a discipline were clear: Parapsychology wanted to gain the recognition of the scientific community as a legitimate field of science. In addition, parapsychology’s mission was to collect evidence for the existence of psi that would meet the strictest scientific criteria. These goals remained central to parapsychology’s aims until fairly recently.

During the past decade, a growing number of parapsychologists have acknowledged that these goals are unrealistic and, indeed, unachievable (Bierman, 2001; Jahn & Dunne, 2008; Kennedy, 2001, 2003; Ludacou, 2001). These neoparapsychologists, as I shall call them, acknowledge that the evidence for psi is inconsistent, elusive, and fails to meet accepted scientific criteria. Such misgivings had been expressed by many earlier parapsychologists. What make the current admissions different is that the neoparapsychologists claim that the evidence for psi in principle cannot meet scientific standards. Indeed, they argue that the inability to be captured by scientific methodology is an intrinsic property of psi.

Bierman, Jahn, Kennedy, Ludacou and those parapsychologists who both agree and disagree with them will continue to do research and write about parapsychology. But a discipline that relies on evi-

dence that cannot meet scientific standards is no longer the parapsychology that the founders had hoped to create. It is in this sense that parapsychology, as it was conceived by its founders and promoted by its practitioners, has ceased to exist.

### WHAT ABOUT CONTEMPORARY CLAIMS THAT PSI HAS BEEN PROVEN?

Although the neoparapsychologists argue that the evidence for psi cannot be scientifically demonstrated, others, in stark contrast, insist that psi has been conclusively proven with scientifically impeccable evidence. (As far as I can tell, the advocates of these opposing claims do not acknowledge each other’s existence.) The statistician and parapsychologist, Jessica Utts (1995, p. 289), wrote that, “[u]sing the standards applied to any other area of science, it is concluded that

...evidence for psi is inconsistent,  
elusive, and fails to meet accepted  
scientific criteria

psychic functioning has been well established.” Perhaps the most outspoken advocate of the reality of psi is Dean Radin (1997). He has maintained that “we are forced to conclude that when psi research is judged by the same standards as any other scientific discipline, then the results are as consistent as those observed in the hardest of the hard sciences!” (Radin, 1997, p. 58; italics in the original).

Despite the boldness of these assertions, their support is illusory. Both Utts and Radin rely completely on the results of meta-analyses. I conducted the first meta-analysis on parapsychological data in my cri-

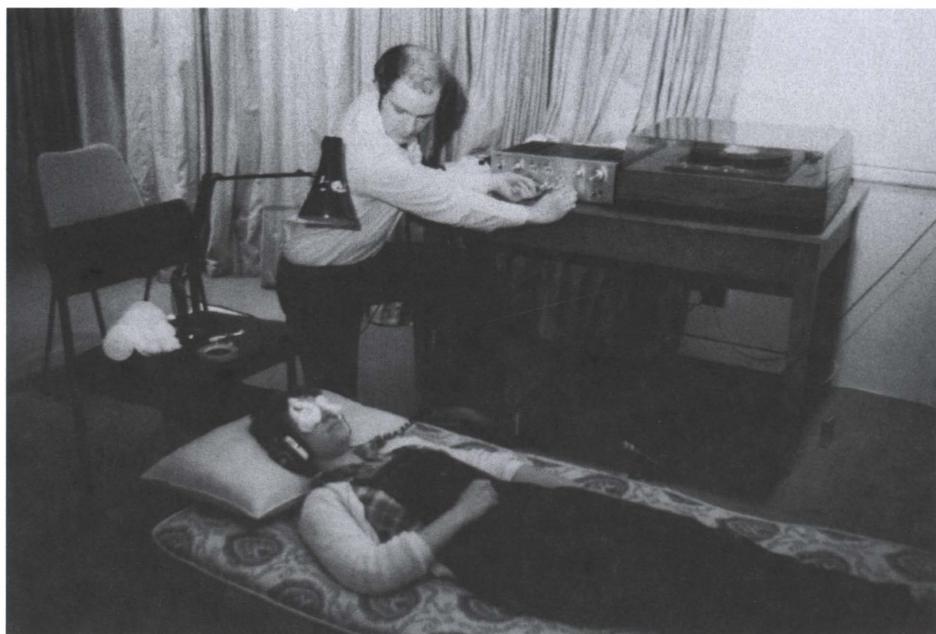
tique of the ganzfeld research (Hyman, 1985). Honorton (1985) did the second meta-analysis in response to mine. The fact that we came to very different conclusions doing meta-analyses on the identical data base should alert us to the fact that meta-analyses lack statistical robustness. In spite of the fact that parapsychologists subsequently began relying on meta-analysis as the main technique to support their claims, the procedures are fraught with so many blemishes that the

difference is “standardized” by dividing it by the standard deviation (which is a measure of the variability among the subjects in an experiment). The use of effect sizes to compare the results from different experiments makes sense if the various outcomes are conceptually coherent. Just about every meta-analysis in parapsychology violates this requirement.

Let me give an example. The autoganzfeld experiments were touted as a successful replication of the original ganzfeld experiments (Bem & Honorton, 1994). As I have previously pointed out (Hyman, 1994), the autoganzfeld experiments failed to replicate the original experiments. The original ganzfeld experiments all used static targets. The meta-analysis of these experiments yielded a highly significant combined effect size. The autoganzfeld experiments used both static and dynamic targets. The resulting effect size (combining both types of targets) was approximately the same size as that for the original ganzfeld experiments as well as statistically significant. This is the basis for declaring a successful replication. The static targets, however, when considered separately, had an effect size consistent with zero. In addition, the outcome for these static targets,

which are the most relevant to the original experiments, was significantly different from the outcome for the original experiments. In other words, the autoganzfeld failed to replicate the original experiments. Bem and other parapsychologists simply ignored my argument and continued to claim that the autoganzfeld experiments were a successful replication. The neoparapsychologists agree with my position on this issue.

Broughton and Alexander (1997) attempted a direct replication of the autoganzfeld experiments. They even used some of the same equipment that Honorton and his colleagues had employed in their experiments. The result was a failure to replicate not only the overall results of the first autoganzfeld experiments, but also all of the secondary effects that were originally reported. The Broughton and Alexander experiment failed to replicate both the autoganzfeld experiments as well as the original ganzfeld experiments. Despite this, all of the major meta-analyses of the ganzfeld experiments include the original ganzfeld experiments, the autoganzfeld experiments and the Broughton and Alexander experiments. When you include the effect sizes from these three data bases, the combined effect size is both pos-



The sender and experimenter in a ganzfeld experiment.

support they offer is vacuous.

Space limits preclude discussing all the limitations of the meta-analyses, but some of the main issues are statistical, such as the heterogeneity of effect sizes that plagues almost all of these meta-analyses. Among other things this makes the use of the Stouffer Z inappropriate and overly optimistic. It also raises questions about the meaningfulness of the combined effect size. Meta-analyses are also retrospective. Using them to argue that the evidence is replicable is misleading. Replicability means that we can use current outcomes to predict new outcomes. This is something that parapsychology has been unable to do. Rather than list several more limitations of using meta-analysis to establish that psi exists and that the supporting evidence is replicable, I will highlight just one very serious problem.

Several meta-analyses have been conducted on the ganzfeld experiments. More than 100 such experiments have been reported beginning in 1974 to the present. With one controversial exception, the various meta-analyses report combined effect sizes that are positive and significantly different from zero. An effect size is simply a difference between an actual outcome and an outcome expected by chance. This

itive and “significant”. This is interpreted by Radin, Utts and others as proof that psi exists and that the supporting evidence is replicable.

An unfortunate consequence of relying upon meta-analyses to support claims of psi is that experiments that blatantly fail to replicate one another can be combined in a way that seems to say otherwise. Ironically, the very same meta-analyses that are used by some parapsychologists to boldly proclaim that the evidence for psi is replicable have been used as one of the major supports for just the opposite conclusion (Bierman, 2001). Bierman considered many of the major meta-analyses that have been done in parapsychology. For each meta-analysis he fitted regression lines to the effect sizes plotted against the year they were obtained. In all cases the slopes of the regression lines were negative. In other words, they all demonstrated a decline effect. At the beginning of each programme of parapsychological research, the effect sizes tended to be positive and significant, but as the years progressed, the effect sizes in each research programme tended to become zero. This “erosion of evidence” as some parapsychologists call it, was also noticed by many parapsychologists before its confirmation by the meta-analyses.

Some of the neoparapsychologists realize that if psi were a real effect, at least in the sense understood by orthodox science, that instead of a decline, effect sizes should show an incline over time.

### IS THE ELUSIVE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE AN INHERENT PROPERTY OF PSI?

As I have indicated, several contemporary parapsychologists have marshalled impressive amounts of evidence to demonstrate that the evidence for psi is non-replicable, inconsistent, and elusive (Bierman, 2001; Jahn & Dunne, 2008; Kennedy, 2001, 2003; Ludacou, 2001). Kennedy (2003) entitled his paper, “The Capricious, Actively Evasive, Unsustainable Nature of Psi”. This title suggests the frustration that the neoparapsychologists experience. It seems as if the findings are teasing the researchers. Indeed, Kennedy’s preferred hypothesis is that some intelligent agent is somehow deliberately manipulating the evidence so that psi appears to be real but always evades being captured by the scientific method.

The neoparapsychologists discern patterns in the parapsychological data. In many cases a new line of research contains a mixture of results that include some insignificant outcomes but also many significant results. With the passing of time the significant outcomes become fewer until finally the average effect size approaches zero. Another pattern is

where the results, instead of going to zero, actually change from psi-hitting to psi-missing. Of course, there is the experimenter effect: some researchers consistently get positive results (but only for a time); some consistently get negative effect sizes; and others do not get significant outcomes. The problem is that these patterns are unpredictable and cannot be captured by scientific methodology.

The neoparapsychologists do not just admit that parapsychology has failed to produce evidence that can scientifically pass scientific muster.



The receiver in a ganzfeld experiment.

They go further and argue that this ability to evade scientific scrutiny is an inherent and unique property of psi. Psi exists, they maintain, but it will require a new kind of science to recognize it. Jahn and Dunne (2008) call for changing the rules of science to allow psi to be accepted. This obviously begs the question that they assume psi exists. But they cannot prove it by current scientific methods. Therefore let’s change the methods to allow psi to enter the halls of science.

Because they do not doubt the existence of psi, the neoparapsychologists seek explanations for why it manifests itself in such quirky ways. Most seem to prefer analogies with the seemingly odd behaviour of quantum phenomena. Kennedy, as indicated, hypothesizes that some unknown intelligence is deliberately teasing the researchers. Such a hypothesis, which takes us back to the mischief of the ancient gods, is still another indicator of how far parapsychology is straying from the world of science.

These attempted explanations of the apparent pattern of results are little more than re-descriptions of eccentricities in the obtained results. Although the parapsychologists try to find evidence for a coherent phenomenon they label psi, they have never managed to propose a positive definition that would enable them to predict and detect

the presence of psi in the data. Instead, they rely on a negative definition to detect the presence of ESP and PK. They declare psi is present whenever the outcomes vary significantly from a chance baseline and no mundane explanation is readily at hand. An example of this was discussed in my discussion of effect sizes in meta-analyses.

Alcock (2003) provides a relatively complete list of the major problems faced by parapsychology. Here, I will focus just on the lack of a positive concept and test for detecting the presence of psi. One consequence is that the parapsychologists have proposed many sufficient conditions for the presence of psi but lack any necessary conditions. For example, Rhine and other early parapsychologists made much about the discovery of the “decline effect” within parapsycho-

To the extent that parapsychologists continue their endeavours, they will do so without a phenomenon that can be scientifically demonstrated and measured

logical experiments. This decline effect was hailed as proof of the existence of psi, even in experiments where the overall effect size was zero. However, when the decline effect was not discovered in other experiments, this did not prevent the researchers from declaring the presence of psi if they detected some other pattern that differed from chance. This creates the unsatisfactory situation where a wide variety of patterns can be used to demonstrate the presence of psi, but there is no way to demonstrate the absence of psi. This, by itself, can contribute to a large number of spurious successes. And, of course, it makes the claims for psi unfalsifiable.

Another defect of this negative approach to the detection of psi, is that we have no disciplined way to claim that an effect size in one

experiment is due to the same cause as the effect size in another experiment. I have already discussed how the neoparapsychologists create abstruse explanations to account for the peculiar patterns in the research data. These explanations assume that the various patterns all result from the bizarre and impish behaviour of a single, coherent phenomenon they call psi. But it seems much more likely that the different patterns such as the experimenter effect, the decline effect, and the reversal of effect are due to a variety of different phenomena. The lack of a positive definition and test for psi does not allow the parapsychologists to rule out this possibility.

Moreover, the claim that these evasive patterns are unique to psi research is just not true. Throughout the modern history of science, individuals have claimed to have discovered anomalies which challenged the specific scientific programme within which they were working. Some of these claims, on further investigation, turned out to be based on solid, replicable evidence. These resulted in appropriate accommodations to the relevant theory. Other such claims ultimately could not be consistently replicated and now occupy the scrap heap of science. The proponents of these discredited claims defended the failure of consistency and replicability with arguments that resemble those of contemporary parapsychologists – experimenter effects, decline effects as properties of their claimed phenomena, reversal of effects, etc.

## CONCLUSIONS

If the neoparapsychologists are correct, then parapsychology, as it was envisioned during its first 160 years, is dead. To the extent that parapsychologists continue their endeavours, they will do so without a phenomenon that can be scientifically demonstrated and measured. Hopefully, the parapsychologists and the scientific community can learn important lessons from this failure. The parapsychologists attempted to be scientific by using key components of scientific methodology, but scientific methods without a lawful, systematic and replicable phenomenon cannot be science. Because it is so obvious, philosophers and other commentators on science and scientific method rarely focus on the fact that most of the day-to-day effort of scientists is devoted to making sure that their findings are trustworthy, lawful, communicable, and independently replicable. This is the necessary ingredient. Without replicable phenomena, science cannot exist.

References: Full reference details to all articles in *The Skeptic* (since issue 22.2) can be found at: <http://skeptical.org.uk/magazine/references>

Ray Hyman is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Oregon. He has served on committees and as a consultant on controversial claims, statistics, and research design for a variety of governmental agencies. He has published approximately 100 articles and books constructively critiquing paranormal and related claims.

# Put up or shut up

RICHARD WISEMAN suggests an approach that will make or break parapsychology

I AGREE WITH much of what Ray Hyman has to say about the demise of parapsychology. When the field was founded around the turn of the last century it was over-brimming with optimism, with proponents of the paranormal hoping that science would rapidly yield overwhelming evidence to support the existence of psychic ability and survival of bodily death, and the world would quickly embrace a more spiritually-oriented conception of mankind. History has proved them wrong. After over a century of work, mainstream science remains sceptical of psi and parapsychology has been consigned to the fringes of academia.

Of course, this is not to suggest that many parapsychologists themselves have come to disbelieve in psychic powers. In fact, many argue that the evidence for psychic abilities is either convincing, or at least strong enough to justify further work. The main problem is that the databases they draw upon are constructed retrospectively, and the alleged affects have a curious habit of not replicating in prospective studies. Faced with a lack of replicability, parapsychologists often turn to another alleged psi-conducive procedure, again piece together evidence to support this technique, and again find that it fails to produce replicable effects. This is not a recent phenomenon, with commentators remarking on this pattern throughout the history of the field. For example, writing over thirty years ago, parapsychologist Joseph Gaither Pratt (1978) noted:

One could almost pick a date at random since 1882 and find in the literature that someone somewhere had recently obtained results described in terms implying that others should be able to confirm the findings...One after another, however, the specific ways of working used in these initially successful psi projects have fallen out of favor and faded from the research scene – except for the latest investigations which, one may reasonably suppose, have not yet had enough time to falter and fade away as others before them have done.

This constant 'ship jumping' is one of the defining features of psi research, with new paradigms emerging every decade or so. Take, for example, the different trends in ESP research that have emerged over the years. Initial work, conducted between the early 1930s and late 1950s primarily involved card guessing experiments, in which people were asked to guess the identity of specially printed playing cards carrying one of five simple symbols. By the mid-1960s parapsychologists had realised

that such studies were problematic to replicate and so turned their attention to the possibility of participants predicting the outcome of targets selected by machines, and dream telepathy. In the mid 1970s and early 1980s the ganzfeld experiments and remote viewing took over as dominant paradigms. In 1987, a major review of the area by parapsychologists K. Ramakrishna Rao and John Palmer argued that two sets of ESP studies provided the best evidence for the replicability of psi: the ganzfeld experiments and the differential ESP effect (wherein participants apparently score above chance in one condition of an experiment and below chance in another). More recently parapsychologists have shifted their attention to alleged presentiment effects, wherein participants appear to be responding to stimuli before they are presented. Finally, there are now signs that the next new procedure is likely to adopt a neuropsychological perspective, focusing on EEG measurements or functional MRI scans as people complete psi tasks.

As Ray Hyman notes, this pattern of false dawns has driven some researchers to argue that psi is inherently impossible to replicate, essentially marking the end of the field as a scientific endeavour. But before researchers rush through the exit door, I think it is worth giving psi one last chance by staging one final attempt to create a database that provides the best-shot of deciding the existence of psi. To achieve this, I believe that the researchers involved need to learn from the mistakes of the past and stick to three basic rules: First, they should stop trying lots of new procedures and instead identify one or two that have already yielded the most promising results. Second, they should arrange for several labs to carry out strict replications that are both methodologically sound and incorporate the most psi-conducive conditions possible. Third, the problems associated with retrospective meta-analysis should be avoided by pre-registering the key details involved in each of the studies.

If this approach yields a significant and replicable effect then the scientific mainstream would be forced to take the topic seriously and allow parapsychology in from the cold. If it fails the field needs to have the courage to accept the null hypothesis. In short, the time has come to put up or shut up.

References: Full reference details to all articles in *The Skeptic* (since issue 22.2) can be found at: <http://skeptical.org.uk/magazine/references>

Psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman currently holds Britain's only Professorship in the Public Understanding of Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire. He frequently appears on the media, and has written over 60 academic articles and several books, including *The Luck Factor*, *Quirkology*, and *59 Seconds*

# Putting things in perspective

CAROLINE WATT maintains that it is far too early to close the book on parapsychology

PARAPSYCHOLOGY HAS long had its critics. Indeed, in my presidential address to the Parapsychological Association I argued that critics (whether situated within or outside the discipline) play a vital role for the field in helping to tighten up methodology (Watt, 2005). I deliberately avoid the term 'sceptic' since that simply refers to taking a questioning stance, which we should all be routinely doing as scientists. James Alcock's (2003) critique, though itself containing some overly sweeping statements, nevertheless makes some quite devastating points and is essential reading for students of parapsychology. Other well-informed critics, such as our two preceding authors, deserve praise for making strenuous efforts to engage deeply with the field's published literature and its researchers (Hyman & Honorton, 1986), and for rolling up their sleeves and actually collecting data in collaboration with parapsychologists, for example to explore topics such as the effects of the experimenter's psi belief on study outcome (Schlitz, Wiseman, Watt & Radin, 2006).

I am already on record as agreeing with some of the critical points reiterated by Ray Hyman and Richard Wiseman, particularly about the need to focus on the most promising paradigms, and to conduct prospective meta-analyses (Watt, 2005). However, without making too many excuses, I think we need to remind ourselves of a few features of parapsychology as a field of enquiry that make it difficult to reach closure on the psi question. There are probably fewer than 100 researchers world-wide who are actively engaged in psi research. Of these, many – like me – will spend a proportion of their limited resources on the psi question, but will also be engaged in broader research into paranormal experiences and beliefs (e.g., Watt, Watson & Wilson, 2007). They feel the broader research is important because of the wide public prevalence of these experiences and beliefs, and they feel that the psi hypothesis is not the sole interesting question to be asked (though it may be the most revolutionary one from a theoretical point of view). For example, in 2008 at the main gathering for research-active parapsychologists, the Annual International Convention of the Parapsychological Association, only 10 out of 22 full papers (i.e., 45%) presented new data testing the psi hypothesis. If we look at it purely as a numbers game, it would be surprising if much could be learned about the possible existence and nature of psi under these circumstances. Since it's unlikely that the field will attract more resources without persuasive evidence for psi, we find ourselves in a Catch-22 situation. I think the only way out is for the field to be more systematic and organized in how it tests the psi hypothesis. However, this would require individuals to give up pet theories and cherished paradigms, and sociological rather than scientific factors might hin-

der this kind of organized effort.

Particularly in the UK and Continental Europe, 'doing parapsychology' is increasingly becoming integrated with mainstream academia rather than being an activity that is pursued at independent (and often isolated) private research institutions. While in many ways parapsychologists are satisfied in achieving their goal of integration, it comes at a cost because these researchers are also coping with the heavy teaching and administrative loads that are part and parcel of modern academic life. Like their academic colleagues, unless they can bring in funding to buy themselves out of these duties, they struggle to find the time to conduct research. Catch-22 again! So, while critics may bemoan parapsychology's lack of productivity regarding the psi question, we should remember that this may in part be due to hindrances to activity on this question.

Ray Hyman introduces us to 'neoparapsychologists', and although I recognize the gist of their ideas in his portrayal, I disagree that all proponents of this view of psi are stating that the nature of psi is such that it cannot be tested in a scientific manner. I am not an expert on their claims but my understanding is that there are different shades to the 'neoparapsychologists' argument. Some theoretical standpoints hold that in controlled laboratory testing psi cannot be observed in the usual manner, such as repeatedly looking for a main predicted effect, but that testable predictions can be made. Because this is a relatively recent development, 'neoparapsychologists' are currently developing answers to the question of how to apply this model of psi to data gathered in the laboratory. For example, rather than look for a main psi effect, one suggestion is to design the experiment to include a number of psychological and physical variables so that a correlation matrix can be produced. The psi effect is expected to manifest in the number and strength of correlations between these variables, while the null hypothesis is represented by the number of significant correlations expected by chance. The exact pattern of extra-chance correlations is not expected to replicate in subsequent experiments, but their number and strength is expected to replicate if the experimental conditions are the same (Lucadou, Römer & Walach, 2007). Outside the lab, testable predictions have also been made concerning how reports of spontaneous ostensibly paranormal phenomena would be affected by various manipulations under the 'neoparapsychological' model of psi (Lucadou & Zahradnik, 2004). So, while it's not easy being in parapsychology, I wouldn't call for the undertakers just yet.

References: Full reference details to all articles in *The Skeptic* (since issue 22.2) can be found at: <http://skeptical.org.uk/magazine/references>

Dr Caroline Watt is a founder member of the Koestler Parapsychology Unit, former President of the Parapsychological Association, and co-author of the widely-used textbook, *An Introduction to Parapsychology* (5th ed.).

# When is Evidence Sufficient?

CHRIS ROE responds to Ray Hyman's critique

RAY HYMAN would have us believe that “parapsychology is dead”. In this response I shall consider the reasons he provides for this claim and show – to paraphrase Mark Twain, an early member of the Society for Psychical Research and author of articles on ‘mental telegraphy’ (Bratcher, 2008) – that the report of parapsychology's death is an exaggeration.

Hyman claims that the goal of parapsychology is (and implicitly always has been) to gain the recognition of the scientific community and to meet the most exacting of scientific standards of evidence, and in this respect parapsychology has been unsuccessful. I am happy to concede that this may have been one of a number of motivations behind the approach adopted by J.B. and Louisa Rhine in founding and developing their laboratory at Duke University from the 1930s to the 1960s (a period that Beloff, 1993, refers to as the “Rhine Revolution”), but of course it is far removed from the primary aim of parapsychology. The founders of the SPR did not set out on a public relations exercise but rather were committed to extend the reach of the scientific method to include more contentious claims, to “examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognized hypothesis”.

Contemporary definitions of the discipline similarly emphasize the application of available methodological and conceptual tools to make best sense of an array of phenomena that superficially seem difficult to accommodate in our current worldview, so that parapsychology is the “study of *experiences* which, *if they are as they seem to be*, are in principle outside the realm of human capabilities as presently conceived by conventional scientists” (Irwin & Watt, 2007, p. 1, emphasis added). As Caroline Watt has described in this exchange, this means that parapsychologists are increasingly interested in “what seems psychic but isn't” (Morris, 1986) in their efforts to understand phenomena rather than seeking support for some prior esoteric worldview (which at times they are unfairly caricatured as doing). However, parapsychologists recognise that this work towards conventional explanations must be complemented with more direct tests of the putative phenomena under controlled conditions if we are to do justice to the experiences that people report, particularly given that the results of such experiments are claimed to provide evidence for anomalies in information exchange that might require revisions in elements of our worldview (but see Dobyns, in press).

In the next section I shall briefly consider whether parapsychologists have grounds to claim persuasive evidence for the occurrence of effects under conditions that preclude normal

explanations, but first would like to respond to Hyman's claim that parapsychology's attempts at scientific respectability are “unrealistic and unachievable”. Of course, acceptance is a matter of degree and much work remains to be done, but there has been some positive movement in the normalisation of academic parapsychology in recent years, in the UK at least. Delanoy (in press) has noted that at least 16 UK universities have full-time academic staff whose doctoral training was solely or primarily in parapsychology, and a similar number are currently engaged in graduate training that is accredited by these institutions. Parapsychology has featured regularly at conferences organised by the British Psychological Society (I personally have had papers accepted for the BPS's annual conference as well as those organised by the sections concerned with Social Psychology, Transpersonal Psychology and Consciousness and Experiential Psychology), which tends to argue against an insti-

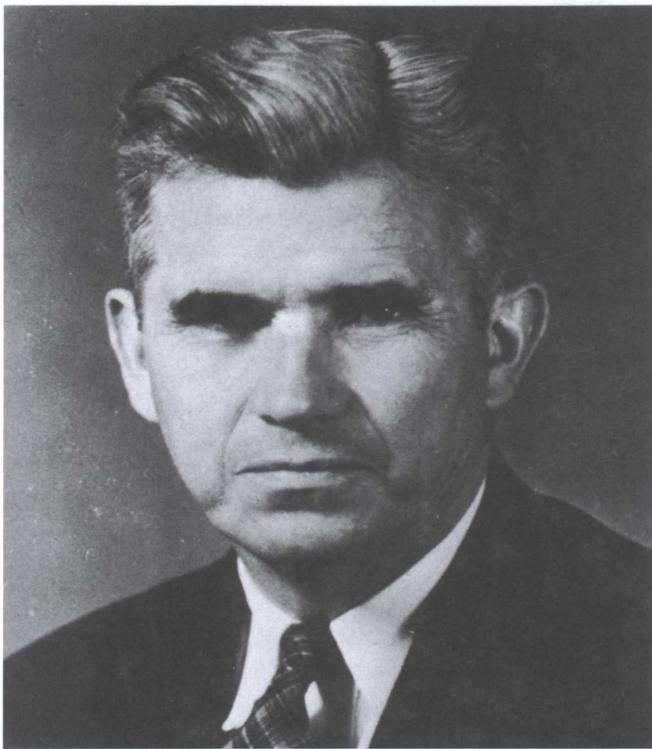
It is well established that the  
outcome of a study can be affected  
by the experimenter's prior  
knowledge and expectations...

tutional antipathy. ‘Anomalistic psychology’ has been included in the specification for A2 Psychology (the standard pre-university qualification) by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA), the assessment body that has much the largest market share of the 50,000 students who take Psychology each year. This specification includes elements on experimental testing of ESP and PK, so that future undergraduates will come to university with a grounding in parapsychology and an expectation that the subject will be represented on any comprehensive undergraduate syllabus. This is not really the profile of a subject that is “consigned to the fringes of academia”, as Richard Wiseman claims in his contribution here.

Hyman makes a number of rather vague allusions to a lack of quality in parapsychological research, which undermines any claim to have demonstrated the occurrence of an anomalous effect. He asserts, for example, that the evidence “fails to meet established scientific criteria”, but apart from some general concerns about the limitations of meta-analysis (which are clearly not specific to parapsychology) it is not clear in what way(s) parapsychological research is deficient; without specify-

ing what “established criteria” are required for a study to qualify as of high quality this claim remains insubstantial and unfalsifiable – it is not a scientific claim.

So what might those criteria include? Watt and Nagtegaal (2004) have described the use of double-blind methods – in which the experimenter and others who may have some involvement in the data generation and recording phases are at that time unaware of the nature of the target and so cannot unwittingly cue the participant – as a possible indicator of study quality (while acknowledging that otherwise poor quality designs could still include blinds). It is well established that the



J. B. Rhine wanted to gain the recognition of the scientific community for parapsychology and to meet the most exacting of scientific standards of evidence

outcome of a study can be affected by the experimenter's prior knowledge and expectations, leading to artifacts if this is not adequately addressed (Rosenthal, 1976). But when Sheldrake (1999) surveyed various journal publications he found that the use of double-blinds was very rare in the physical and biological sciences (0% and 0.8% respectively), somewhat more common in medical sciences (24.2%) but most common in parapsychology (85.2%); surprisingly, other research in psychology and animal behaviour used blinded methods even less than in medicine (4.9%), despite the emphasis on the problems of demand characteristics in social science methods training. Watt and Nagtegaal (2004) conducted a second survey to see if Sheldrake's findings could be replicated and found a similar

profile (parapsychology: 79.1%, Psychology: 14.5%). By this criterion, then, it is difficult to justify the general claim that parapsychological research is methodologically poor in comparison with other social science research.

Hyman bemoans parapsychology's poor replication record and, taking the Ganzfeld method as his example case, rather selectively uses one study by Broughton and Alexander (1997) to illustrate his point – one could just as easily have chosen Parker's (2000) automated Ganzfeld database, consisting of 150 trials that gave a hit rate of 36% ( $z = 3.02$ ), or Dalton's (1997) series of 128 trials that gave a hit rate of 47% ( $b = .46$ ). Which of these should we prefer? None. While it is tempting to focus on the outcomes of individual studies, particularly when so few people are professionally engaged in parapsychological research and it takes so long to build up anything like a reasonable database, we must accept that individual studies are susceptible to giving outcomes that reflect sampling error and also are affected by idiosyncratic features of the experimental environment – not obscure or mystical features, but ordinary factors such as experimenter-participant rapport or differences in recruitment strategy. For this reason we should prefer summary reviews (while remaining cognizant of their shortcomings) when making judgments about the robustness of effects. That is not to suggest that the outcomes from ganzfeld studies are robust and heterogeneous (they are not), but a good case can be made to argue that at least some of this variation is due to different researchers posing different research questions as they move from simply demonstrating a phenomenon to characterising and explaining it. This typically leads to variations in the procedure followed so that more or less conducive conditions can be compared or more radical departures from established procedure can be tested, with the expectation that not all variations are likely to be psi-conducive. In this context simply combining outcomes across studies to give a bottom-line effect size would be rather naïve (see Roe, in press a, for a fuller consideration of this point). Where ganzfeld studies have been coded according to the degree to which they adhere to Honorton's 'standard' protocol (Bem, Palmer & Broughton, 2001), there is a very strong correlation between 'standardness' and effect size, with the subset of studies that closely replicate Honorton's approach giving a hit rate of 31.2% that is highly significant and falls comfortably within Bem and Honorton's 95% confidence interval for their autoganzfeld effect size estimate. That looks rather like replication to me.

A number of other strands of research in parapsychology offer some promise of also reliably capturing (admittedly small) effects, including work that takes more direct physiological measures (e.g., Radin, 2004) and studies that look for incidental psi effects in overtly cognitive tasks (e.g., Bem, 2008; Luke, Roe & Davison, 2008). Space does not permit me to con-

sider these in any detail, but work to date suggests that these effects are reasonably replicable – certainly in comparison to the rather weak and inconsistent effects that are regarded as support for the more sceptical claim that paranormal beliefs are associated with cognitive deficits or social marginality (see Roe, in press b). I would be interested to know what levels of replication would be regarded as appropriate or reasonable for parapsychological work with human participants.

Finally, I should like to respond to the tendency of sceptical commentators to refer to the achievements of parapsychology in relation to the time since it became recognisable as a separate discipline. In this exchange, for example, Wiseman complains that “after over a century of work mainstream science remains sceptical of psi” and Hyman begins by noting that parapsychology has lasted “approximately 160 years”. This rhetorical device encourages the reader to assume that extension over time also translates into extensive and intensive activity, so raising their expectations about the degree of progress that might be reasonable. Against this, any actual progress pales, and the reader is moved to conclude that the phenomena are non-existent rather than elusive. But Caroline Watt has already drawn attention to the fact that very few persons are professionally involved in parapsychology, and even these typically have to combine their research activity with other academic duties. This situation is not new: Thouless (1953, p. 23) warned that “experimental workers in our subject are so few that we cannot afford wasted effort”, and Schouten (1993) calculated that the person-hours invested across the lifetime of parapsychology from its beginnings with the establishment of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882 equates to only two months’ of research in conventional psychology in the United States. In that context the body of evidence may seem more impressive.

But limitations in human resources and in funding affect more than gross productivity; they also shape the character of the research that is carried out. Elsewhere (Roe, in press c) I have described parapsychology as a “butterfly science” in which key researchers seem to shift from one protocol to another as they fall in and out of fashion much as a butterfly flits from flower to flower. Sceptical commentators have tended to regard this as suspect, much as Wiseman does in his commentary here. However, in my view this pattern occurs because the small number of researchers in parapsychology includes a disproportionately large number of innovators and early

adopters and too few technicians. Innovators thrive on developing new protocols or adapting methods from other areas and in demonstrating ‘proof of principle’ by reporting significant psi effects using such methods; ‘early adopters’ are quick to seize on these new approaches and technologies and are responsible for the first wave of independent replications. However, relatively quickly the innovators lose interest in simple confirmations and move on to develop yet more methods and approaches, with the early adopters soon following suit. I am sure that this pattern also occurs in other disciplines, but with their greater numbers they also include many able technicians who are willing to conduct the kinds of modest replication extensions that Kuhn would have called ‘normal science’. (We have fewer technicians, but they do exist; for example, I found that there had been ten further ganzfeld studies conducted after the last meta-analytic reviews, and this database was independently significant – see Roe, in press a). The pattern is exacerbated by the intense competition for funding, which encourages novelty and innovation and which requires that results are forthcoming in the short to medium term; both of these select against the systematic and methodical programmes of the would-be technician that could provide the empirical foundation that sceptics are looking for.

At best this research cycle is frustrating in diverting resources away from a potentially fruitful avenue of research; at worst it looks suspicious to the outsider, who expects to see continuing and systematic work using a particular method for so long as it is productive, particularly where great claims were initially made for it – why are there so few micro-PK studies? So few ganzfeld studies? I agree with Wiseman and Watt that collectively parapsychologists need to address this issue by collaborating on a more systematic programme of research, one that goes beyond proof of principle and first wave independent replications. I believe that parapsychologists would be resolved to commit to such a programme, but in practice it would require a radical overhaul of the few funding mechanisms that are available to parapsychology for it to succeed; without a commitment of significant resources over the longer term it is difficult to see how parapsychologists could commit to Wiseman’s three basic rules.

References: Full reference details to all articles in *The Skeptic* (since issue 22.2) can be found at: <http://skeptical.org.uk/magazine/references>

Chris Roe is Senior Lecturer and Research Leader for the Psychology Division at the University of Northampton. He has been a Board member of the Parapsychological Association, Council member of the Society for Psychical Research, and is currently editor of the SPR’s *Journal*. His research has focused on the psychology of anomalous experience and belief and the effects of psychological factors on psi performance in the laboratory.

# Ray Hyman replies

I WOULD LIKE to respond to many of the issues raised by Wiseman, Watt, and Roe. Unfortunately, space limitations allow me to focus on one or two. So I will confine my reply to just a couple that seem most central to my essay.

I was puzzled by Chris Roe's statement, "Hyman makes a number of vague allusions to a lack of quality in parapsychological research..." I was unaware that I had made such allusions, vague or otherwise. I assume that Roe has been misled by a possible ambiguity when I wrote: "These neoparapsychologists... acknowledge that the evidence for psi is inconsistent, elusive, and fails to meet accepted scientific standards." In this context, both the neoparapsychologists and I are not addressing the issue of whether the quality of individual experiments meets "accepted scientific standards" such as appropriate controls for possible confounds and proper application of statistical analyses. Rather, we are focusing on the consistency of outcomes across a series of experiments. The problem at issue is not whether the individual experiments employ adequate methodology, but rather do the outcomes from separate experiments show consistent, lawful and reproducible patterns. The neoparapsychologists agree with me that they do not. The "accepted scientific standards" are those that require that a finding has to be independently reproducible before it can be accepted as a legitimate subject for scientific scrutiny.

Neoparapsychologists do find some consistent tendencies in the results of psi experiments such as experimenter effects, decline effects, reversal of effects and the like. But even these tendencies are far from predictable; along with other inconsistencies in the outcomes, they are what put the findings outside the scope of orthodox science. Since the time of Galileo, Kepler, Harvey, and Newton, modern science has flourished just because it focused only on phenomena that were available for public scrutiny, were lawful, and could be independently replicated. Claims that challenged existing theories were taken seriously when they were supported by evidence that met these criteria of consistency. Claims such as N-rays, Martian Canals, polywater, mitogenetic radiation, and cold fusion which were based on evidence that could not be reliably replicated were rejected. It is worth noting that the proponents of these rejected claims also attributed the inability to consistently replicate to experimenter effects, reversal effects, decline effects and the sort of inconsistencies that plague psi research. As I pointed out in my essay, science can only succeed when it studies phenomena that are lawful and reliably reproducible.

Roe makes another point to which I think I should respond. He wrote: "Hyman bemoans parapsychology's poor replication

record and... rather selectively uses one study by Broughton and Alexander (1977) to illustrate his point..." He is correct that I deliberately selected this study to make my point. I could have just as well have chosen some other studies such as the failure to replicate the PEAR experiments (Jahn et al., 2000). Like the attempted replication of the PEAR experiments, the Broughton and Alexander experiment met all the criteria of a replication attempt that *should* have succeeded if, indeed, there had been a real effect. The experiment was *prospective* in that it was designed to test a prediction that the results of the autoganzfeld experiments were real and replicable. The design and procedures were deliberately made to be as similar as possible to original experiments. Even some of the very same equipment was used. The authors made sure to include a sufficient number of subjects and trials so that lack of power would not be a factor. They not only tested for the entire primary, but also the secondary effects that were part of the original findings. In addition, the experimenters were experienced parapsychologists. The failure of this direct replication cannot be easily dismissed as due to low power, experimenter effect, non-standardness of design, or any of the other excuses that often are used to explain away negative findings.

Since the time of Galileo, Kepler, Harvey, and Newton, modern science has flourished just because it focused only on phenomena that were available for public scrutiny, were lawful, and could be independently replicated

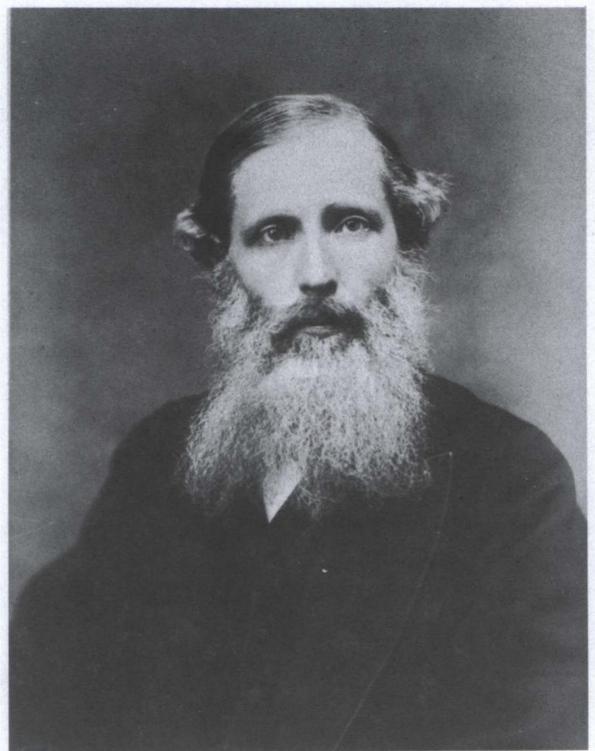
Roe apparently believes that the results of psi research, while indeed showing some inconsistencies, are basically replicable. To me, the most sobering consideration for a parapsychologist in regards to replicability is that, unlike every other area of inquiry that claims to be a science, parapsychology is the only one that lacks a 'paradigm' experiment. As Kuhn (1977) acknowledges, his original conception of paradigms referred to standard experiments that science textbooks provide students. Each area of science has its own set of standard experiments that serve as exemplars of the field. A standard experiment

could be given as a laboratory assignment with the expectation that the students could replicate the original results.

Psychology, for example, has hundreds, even thousands, of such standard experiments. Every introductory psychology lab can assign the students paradigms in sensation, perception, memory, problem solving and other areas with the confidence that the students will replicate the original results. As just one illustration, consider Ebbinghaus's classic experiment on the laws of forgetting. The student can conduct the experiment on herself or on another person and will obtain essentially the same lawful curve that Ebbinghaus reported in 1885.

As I pointed out, parapsychology does not have even one paradigm experiment. The problem is deeper than just the inability to consistently get significant departures from chance. The loose connection between theory and experimental results in parapsychology means that the constraints on how psi should manifest itself in the data are weak. Ultimately, the decision to claim that psi is present relies on a significant departure from chance. Parapsychologists have no disciplined way to decide when psi is present and when it is not; nor do they have any principled way to decide whether an effect in experiment A is due to the same cause as the same sized effect in experiment B. This is equivalent to declaring that any outcome showing a drop in the proportion of recalled syllables over time is a successful replication of Ebbinghaus's original experiment even if the resulting function clearly differs from the original curve.

Yet, parapsychologists often seem willing to claim a successful replication in cases where only a departure from chance occurs in the new experiment. (See the example I described wherein parapsychologists claimed that the autoganzfeld experiments successful replicated the original ganzfeld experiments.) Replication, in orthodox science, refers to reproduc-



Henry Sidgwick (1838 – 1900), first President of the Society for Psychical Research, believed that the evidence available in 1882 demonstrated scientifically the reality of supernatural phenomena. What would he think now?

ing a pattern of results not just an abstract 'effect.' Even given the loose concept of replication that parapsychologists often use, their results clearly do not replicate.

References: Full reference details to all articles in *The Skeptic* (since issue 22.2) can be found at: <http://skeptic.org.uk/magazine/references>

## The Institute for Knowing Things

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# The Skeptic Interview with Sue Blackmore, Britain's First Lady of Scepticism

Chris French sat down with Sue Blackmore to discuss parapsychology, memes, consciousness, and the changing face of scepticism.

**CHRIS FRENCH:** *I first came across your work when you were working as a parapsychologist and of course now, you've famously come out of that field, so can you tell us why you went into it in the first place and why eventually you pulled out?*

**Sue Blackmore:** I got into it in the first place partly because I was always interested in weird things. So when I got to Oxford to do physiology and psychology and I saw there was a Psychical Research Society, I thought "Ooh, that sounds fun!" There was only one remaining member of the society, and his name was Kevin, and he was really gorgeous and had long curly hair and smoked grass, and was really laid back and cool, and I thought "Hmm, this is an interesting society." So I ran the Society for three years and it was during that time that I met witches and wizards and spiritualists and mediums and tarot readers, and I got involved in these things, and I felt that there was something in it. And then I had this extraordinary out-of-body experience, really... *extraordinary*. It went on for more than two hours and it included all the features of what we would now call a near-death experience. Only this was 1970, and the term hadn't been invented. Tunnel, lights, out-of-body experience, going to other worlds, the decision to return. And I naively, but understandably, jumped to the conclusion that my spirit had left my body, and that therefore the things I was learning in my degree were wrong. And I conceived this great ambition to prove all my 'closed minded science lecturers' wrong! I funded myself through a PhD at Surrey University, where I was lucky enough to find someone to supervise me. It was someone who knew nothing about parapsychology. So I was left to my own devices, and did experiment after experiment after experiment and within three or four years of that initial experience, the evidence was just not backing up my first thoughts. So I had to change my mind.

**CF:** *And you resisted the temptation to make all kinds of excuses about why you hadn't found positive results?*

**SB:** No, I didn't resist the temptation. In the beginning I made all those excuses: "Well it must be because I'm in the wrong room", or "It must be because there are bad people around", or "It must be because we hadn't done the experiment properly", "It must be because... whatever!" It's very interesting because if you do an experiment as a scientist, and it doesn't come out like you had expected, if you just say "Oh fine, okay, I give up" – that's no good. On the other hand, if you say "Well it must be because...", and just make excuses, that extreme's no good either. You have to feel your way towards understanding why your results are not matching your hypothesis: Is it a methodological issue? Is it a statistical issue? Is it my problem, or is it some other problem? So I did a bit of both. But gradually I began to realise that when I got significant results it was in the experiments that were not well controlled. And when I did the experiments better, the results were at chance. That pattern was really, in the end, what changed my mind. Although I did keep going, and it wasn't quite that I made excuses, it was that I thought "Well, if there isn't precognition, maybe there's telepathy – oh, okay, there isn't telepathy, then maybe there's psychokinesis, and if there isn't psychokinesis, well, there's still out-of-body experiences!" It was one thing after another. There's always another corner to go around, until at some point you say "Enough!"

But what was still motivating me a lot of the time during that period was my own personal out-of-body experience. That one two-hour experience in which everything was more vivid, where I was free, where I was the universe, was a kind of mystical experience and that was really propelling me. So a lot of my work was about those experiences and why we have them. But at that time, some twenty years ago, we couldn't do the kind of things

that Peter Brugger and Olaf Blanke are now doing. We didn't have the technology and we didn't have the understanding of the brain. I couldn't really get anywhere with it. And then I became interested in the psychology of belief because I realised that an awful lot of these experiences people were having were, really, all about coincidences. So that's why I started doing research on probability judgements. But deep down, what motivated me all along was the mystery of consciousness. I never would have said that in the beginning, but it was because of that dramatic extraordinary experience, and because doing parapsychology wasn't going to get me there, and understanding *why* we believe in something even though it's not true, is interesting but it's not actually what I want to know. I wanted to know what it's like to be alive, to be conscious, how does the brain pull off that trick? That's the central mystery, and that is what really relates to all those experiences.

**CF:** *You wrote The Meme Machine as you were making your break from the paranormal. What inspired this idea of self-replicating units of culture?*

**SB:** I was very ill and in bed for many months. I very slowly read Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* and this made me go back to Richard Dawkins' book, *The Selfish Gene*. Although I hadn't really noticed the idea of memes when I'd first read it, this time round the pieces fell into place. It's all so simple. The way we understand the evolution of the natural world applies to culture too. All these things in our culture have been copied by people. They are another replicator – they are the memes and we are the meme machines that copy them. I got completely hooked on this idea. I thought of my work on memes as tangential to all my other work at the time. But looking back on it, I think memetics does contribute to our understanding of how the brain got to be the way it is, and therefore why consciousness is the way it is. It's not completely divorced.

**CF:** *Do you think an understanding of memetics could apply to various religious and spiritual beliefs today?*

**SB:** Definitely! If we had a really good science of memetics, it ought to be able to understand why these ideas are so popular, and why they are the way they are. But also, it would be able to intervene to change things and direct where we go with our beliefs. I don't think we do have that kind of a memetics... yet. I think it should be possible. Certainly, I think if we ask certain questions about religion such as, "Why is this religion thriving in this



Sue Blackmore's fascination with the nature of consciousness has always been at the heart of her intellectual journey. Picture courtesy of Sue Blackmore

place, with these kinds of people?", memetics should be able to give the answers. It's like asking "Why do animals have longer fur, or shorter claws, or whatever it is, in this particular location, this ecological niche." Unfortunately, there aren't very many people around who agree, so we haven't got research teams working on it.

**CF:** *Why do you think that is? Memetics seems fairly persuasive, and yet it doesn't seem to have really caught on. Meme theory is not a very good meme, it appears.*

**SB:** No, I don't know why! Is it the word? When people say the word "meme" they put little inverted commas round their heads. What is it about that word that people find so scary – like they don't want to be associated with it? To some extent, it may be because it undermines free will even more than it's already undermined. Anybody who thinks about the way the brain works ought not to believe in free will. But somehow or another, most people manage to either believe in it, or say, "Well, I have to act as if I do have free will". But memetics makes that even more difficult, because it's saying not only are your genes and your environment constructing the way your brain is, but all the ideas you've come across are competing to use your brain as well! It takes away autonomy.

And by saying that the self is constructed by the competition between memes to use a brain to pass themselves on, then that's all you are, and most people don't like that at all. But from my point of view, having practiced Zen for thirty years, disintegrating the illusion of the self in one's head who's doing things is part of the task of coming to terms with what the universe is like. So I don't have a problem with it.

Another reason is that there are a lot of theories in gene-culture co-evolution which are pretty good, and some fantastic researchers in that field have their theories, and then memetics comes along and it's a different one so, understandably, they're fighting it off. And at the moment we simply haven't found ways of doing experimental work that would distinguish memetic theories of meme-gene co-evolution from other theories of cultural evolution. And I suppose the worst reason is that people just don't get it. But I don't know why. I think it's just like when people don't get the idea of natural selection. And I think understanding memetic selection is even harder. Natural selection is basically a horrible idea, it's design by death. It's saying, here's a whole lot of stuff, nature clears most of it away and only leaves a tiny bit, that's what goes on and this happens again. But apply that to memes and humans – there's all these ideas, bits of furniture, kinds of drinks, clothes, all competing to get you to copy them, and most of them are cleared away and killed, and the ones that go on are here and that's the only reason why we're in this room – and that's quite difficult to grasp. But I think it's right. I do think it's kind of wonderful to look around a room, for example, and think, "Hmm, all those books, look how they competed to get me to spend my hard-earned money to buy them and put them on that shelf." You're just the meme machine, doing the selecting and the copying.

**CF:** *For the last few years you have been dedicating yourself to studying the nature of consciousness. Can you share briefly how you moved into studying the nature of consciousness and where are you today?*

**SB:** I was trying to understand the problem of consciousness, the explanatory gap, this theory, that theory, and my mind was boggled. I thought that if I gave up my job and gave myself two years then I'd be able to read everything and understand everything about consciousness! [laughs] I left my job at the University of the West of England, where I was Reader in Psychology, to write a

textbook on consciousness, which ended up taking three years instead of the two I had originally planned. In this time I was able to read a lot and, when I finished the textbook in 2002, I had a pretty good grasp of the field at the time, but it has continued to move on incredibly since. After this I wrote another much shorter book on consciousness, and then the *Conversations on Consciousness* book. What I'm doing at the moment is the final stages of a book on Zen.

**CF:** *How did you become interested in Zen and how do you connect Zen and consciousness?*

**SB:** In the early days I trained as a witch, and I trained a little bit as a medium, but I was no good at that. I wasn't so bad at the witchcraft stuff, and at tarot reading, but at some point I tried meditation, and would sort of forget it, and then try it again, like people do. But eventually, nearly thirty years ago now, I started the serious practice of Zen meditation and I've done it ever since. It seemed separate from all my academic work for a long time, but it gradually began to come together because what Zen is really saying is, "Look." And what does "Look" mean? It means "Be conscious." I really think that the Zen practice of just sitting is very close to asking "Am I conscious now?" Or asking, "What is this?" It's just being what you are, and what you are is this! What I learned about the brain in all those decades fits with that, because Zen says that there isn't any self in there, there isn't any continuing self – just as Dan Dennett says, there is no observer in the Cartesian Theatre. There's nobody watching the show inside there. So I've written a book called *Ten Zen Questions*, which is a book about my exploration of some of the deepest, darkest, most difficult questions that there are.

**CF:** *Will Ten Zen Questions include philosophical perspectives, as well as the neuroscience behind consciousness?*

**SB:** There is an introductory chapter with some neuroscience included, but basically it is ten chapters about the questions of Zen and consciousness – such as "Am I conscious now?" and "What was I conscious of a moment ago?" and so on. It's a pretty weird book, and it may just be hopeless, maybe no one will want to read it. But someone needs to ask difficult questions like these, which I just struggled with and wrote down what came out of the struggles.

**CF:** *What do you think is the current state of psychology and the philosophy of consciousness? Do you think that we're actually much nearer to actually finding a solution to the mind-body problem?*

**SB:** No, I think we're absolutely not. What we're doing is making the mind-body problem more and more acute. The more we understand about the brain, the more we can say "There's the fusiform gyrus face area, and there's the anterior cingulate. And the more activity you have in the anterior cingulate, the more pain there is". But in studying consciousness we ask: "How can activity in the anterior cingulate actually *be* pain?" It makes the problem more obvious, which is good, because the more obvious the problem is, the more we are going to want to solve it and eventually be able to solve it. However, I think the current emphasis on the neural correlates of consciousness, and the search for the contents of consciousness – trying to distinguish which bits of what's going on in the brain are the conscious ones, and which aren't – is all doomed failure. But I could be wrong, and we shall see. I think it's exciting that now one is allowed to talk about consciousness, because when I was a student, we weren't even allowed to talk about it.

**CF:** *No, and it has become a very sexy topic. Speaking of which, you are aware that scepticism seems to be becoming a bit cooler these days. Lots of people are actively promoting these kinds of things, and the demographic seems to be shifting, both in terms of audiences at sceptical events and more active involvement, to include more women – although there are still not enough. What are your thoughts on that?*

**SB:** I guess that scepticism is generally becoming more popular now because people have a need for it, particularly religious scepticism. When I was first involved in

parapsychology, there was the whole New Age thing, but it was very marginal, and being sceptical about it was neither here nor there. But now, we've not only had a massive explosion of alternative therapies, but we also have this massive religious problem, which really wasn't around when I was a student. It was ordinary Church of England Christianity gently fizzling along, and nobody much bothered about it, and we certainly didn't have a problem with Islam. It was all kind of quiet. But now there is a need to stand up against that.

Regarding the demographic shift to include more women – I think there are sex differences, frankly. I think that there are basic biological reasons men and women think differently, behave differently, and have different things they want to get out of life. It's not a huge difference, but it's enough to have an effect. Yes, there's pressure on women not to do things, yes, there's discouragement, and maybe men find it easier in some respects, but deep down, the reason why am I not running a lab, or being a professor, is because I like staying at home, and digging the garden, and growing vegetables, and thinking by myself – and I think that probably has something to do with being female or male. It's very politically incorrect to say that, but I think that there will always be fewer women than men who want to get up there and make a big hoo-hah about scepticism. But there are now more than ever. So, that's good.

**CF:** *I think I speak for all sceptics in saying that we're very glad that you worked hard to lay the kind of groundwork that you did, because it will have reverberations for a very long time, so thank you very much.*

Acknowledgements: Sincere thanks to Mark Williams for recording this interview, to Nika Jones and Jana Krivakova for transcribing it and to Lindsay Kallis for editing it. The full version can be found at: <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/archive>.

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Chris French is the Head of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, Goldsmiths, University of London and Editor-in-Chief of *The Skeptic*.

# Premanand: A Personal Memoir

LEWIS JONES reflects on his personal relationship with Premanand, 1930-2009

THE FIRST TIME I met Prem was in March, 1992, when I picked him up at Heathrow airport – “Namaste!” He was not difficult to pick out – the white hair and long, straggly beard, the knee-length white kurta of Indian cotton. He was in the UK to give a talk in London’s Conway Hall. His audience came to see miracles, and they were not disappointed.

Early in life, he had become incensed that poor people were being tricked into handing over large amounts of their life savings to the charlatans who were known in India as godmen. All that the victims got in exchange were phoney miracles, worthless advice for their future, and useless remedies for their ailments.

Prem was the antithesis of your average secret-obsessed magician: his mission was not to mystify, but to clarify. He did the same for us in Conway Hall: running flames along his bare arm, chewing broken glass, creating fire, putting lighted camphor into his mouth – the whole works – and then showing us exactly how it was all done.

One of his favourites was to produce seemingly endless quantities of *vibbuti* (holy ash) from empty hands. He used to joke that he got it from the same shop as the godman Satya Sai Baba. (If you were to represent godmen as Prem’s target, Sai Baba would have been the bull’s eye.)

Prem stayed with me for the week or so that he was in London, and we had many a splendid (and often hilarious) discussion well into the night, mostly about magical methods and deceptions. There was talk of a girlfriend that was a paediatrician in Boston, but he didn’t elaborate, and I remember thinking there could not have been many occasions when they could get together.

Prem was full of surprises. I told him once that his pulse-stopping trick was well known to magicians (it involved stuffing a lemon under the armpit), but that any doctor could easily show that his heart was still beating normally. Not so, he explained. All you needed to do was fill your lungs with as much air as possible, and keep the breath in by pressure in the abdomen and chest. The resulting air cushion absorbs the heart beats. (I still have a video of a Dutch TV show, in which Prem does exactly that for a doctor, complete with stethoscope, who stared in puzzlement at the man with no heartbeat.)

I remember searching the local shops with Prem, looking for chemicals for his ‘miracles’ (potassium permanganate plus glycerine equals spontaneous combustion). At home, he would

also occasionally disappear: he would be ironing (he insisted on doing his own), or wandering in the garden to enjoy his beloved cigarette.

My wife Susheela made Indian meals for him – a bit tricky, as he was vegetarian, and we were not. He was quite at home with the magicians we invited round for dinner, and he could discuss their methods as an equal. But for all his serious purpose, he was a mischievous fellow. He fooled us all with a trick in which a banknote was burned, and was then restored whole and unharmed. When I told him I’d finally figured out the method, he said I was wrong. But just before he left at the end of his stay, I said, “Prem – about that banknote...” He said, “Actually, you were right.” Then why keep me racking my brains all this time? With that big grin of his, he said, “Racking your brains is good for you.”

I became a life subscriber to his magazine *Indian Skeptic*. It was always a rather poorly copied little booklet, and I’ve more than once offered to fund a new photocopier for him, but he has always refused. In fact he would never accept donations of any kind. Well aware of his enemies in the miracle trade, he just didn’t want any records to show that he was receiving money (and possibly influence) from an outside source.

After he left London, he kept in touch. He has occasionally written to ask me to check out some claim in the newspaper archives here in London. And when a relative of his, Madhav, was trying to gain entrance to the UK to continue his medical studies here, Prem was rather miffed that he couldn’t find anyone in the family who would sponsor him, so I agreed to act as guarantor. When I last saw Madhav, he was doing well as a surgeon at a hospital in London. (And as I remember the contract, I’m still responsible for taking care of his burial arrangements if he dies!)

My physical mementos of Prem include shelves full of copies of *Indian Skeptic* (whose arrivals gradually petered out as his health worsened), videos of him at work, his book *Science versus Miracles* (invaluable if you want the real lowdown on how to be a godman), his 600-page tome *Murders in Sai Baba’s Bedroom*, and – just for fun – the fake spike he gave me for the spike-through-the-tongue trick.

My very last memory of him was returning him to Heathrow. His final gifts to me were a warm hug and an impish grin. Namaskaaram, Prem, and thank you for the friendship. It was a pleasure and a privilege.

Lewis Jones scripted science series for a number of years for the BBC. He now writes a regular column for *Skeptical Briefs*, the newsletter of the American periodical *Skeptical Inquirer*, and also writes books for magicians.

# TAM comes to London

PHIL PLAIT reports on a weekend to remember

THE JAMES RANDI Education Foundation (JREF) is one of the premier critical thinking organizations in the United States. It's well known for its leader, of course: conjurer and sceptic James Randi himself. It's also renowned for the Million Dollar Challenge: prove a paranormal ability, and you'll get a cheque for one million bucks.

But of late, we at the JREF are pleased that we're garnering a reputation for community outreach and support. The Amazing Meetings (or TAMs), held in Las Vegas, are becoming the must-attend events for sceptics. The eighth such meeting held in summer 2009 saw over 1000 attendees, many of whom travelled across the globe to be a part of the festivities. The voice of our international contingent is strong; so strong, in fact that we decided it was time to broaden our impact.

So, on 3-4 October 2009, we held TAM London: the first JREF critical thinking conference held outside the United States. And I think it's fair to say that TAM London, if you'll pardon the Americanism, hit the ball *way* out of the park. The Mermaid Centre in downtown London was nearly filled to capacity with well over 500 enthusiastic sceptics, there to see a remarkable line-up of outspoken sceptics, scientists, magicians, musicians, and comedians (with much overlap of those characteristics, too).

Just to give you a flavour... Noted psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman – author of *Quirkology* and *59 Seconds* – was the Master of Ceremonies for TAM London, and did a superb job entertaining the crowd. Professor Brian Cox talked about the Large Hadron Collider and the pursuit for the understanding of the origin of gravity – and debunked those who think the LHC will spell doom for our planet. Journalist Simon Singh gave us the background on his well-publicized libel lawsuit involving craven chiropractors, who are trying to silence opposition through litigation rather than openly debate their practice. Physician and journalist Ben Goldacre regaled us with tales of the misuse of medicine by all manner of 'alternative' practitioners. Ariane Sherine gave us the history of the world-famous atheist bus campaign that she spearheaded, and discussed her new book, *The Atheist's Guide to Christmas*, a collection of essays by noted non-believers on how to survive the holidays.

Although this was a highly anglocentric meeting, with mostly UK speakers by design, we did import a few Yankees. Musician and sceptic George Hrab performed some of his songs to the delight of the audience, and Mythbuster Adam

Savage gave an insider's view on his hit TV show. I'll humbly add that I spoke as well, first scaring everyone about the possibilities of asteroid impacts wiping out life on Earth, then (hopefully) relieving them by showing that the odds of such things are very low – and that we can prevent such impacts if we choose to invest in space travel.

Perhaps the highlight of the entire weekend was an energetic and *incredible* performance by Tim Minchin. He is a brilliant musician, and not only sceptical but astonishingly funny. He has critical thinking messages relayed with extreme and laser-focused humour in his songs. Tim simply owned the audience, and deservedly so. He's a monster of scepticism.

A real delight for the audience was a live video Q & A with Randi via Skype. Although sceptics by nature tend not to follow authority terribly well, Randi is something of a touchstone in the sceptical movement. It is directly through his work that the modern movement, such as it is, exists at all, so getting to talk to him was a treat for everyone.

... it's fair to say that TAM London,  
if you'll pardon the Americanism,  
hit the ball *way* out of the park

Sadly, of course, all good things must end: we closed the meeting with a wrap-up and thanks, and to my great delight and awe got a standing ovation that went on and *on*. Everyone was applauding the JREF and TAM London, but I got the very strong feeling they were also demonstrating their own emotional support for *themselves*, for *all* of us who are active sceptics. We go out and try to make the world a better place, a more *real* place, and you know what? I think we do deserve a little respect for that. It's a tough job, but it's one we love to do, and one we need to do.

And will there be a TAM London 2? Well, we can't promise, of course. But given how big this one was, how much fun it was, and how great the audience was, well, I wouldn't be too surprised to see another British invasion sometime soon.

Phil Plait is an astronomer, blogger, author, and just so happens to be President of the JREF. He thanks Tracy King for her help in planning, organizing, and executing TAM London.

## What is Voice of Young Science?

Voice of Young Science (VoYS) is a network of early career researchers (PhD students and post docs) that has sprung up around the work of Sense About Science (SAS). Members are involved in myth-busting activities, public communication through a wide variety of media, and creating original work to help their peers, including a guide to how the media works, *Standing up for Science*.

The network consists of over 600 early career researchers from all backgrounds, many of whom have actively embraced a civic responsibility to communicate science, challenge pseudo-scientific product claims and respond to misinformation in all kinds of media.

They also work to encourage others to get involved and to send the message that it's important for scientists to stand up for science in public and, no matter what your background is, there are always things you can do to raise the standard of science and evidence in debates.

## Evidence hunting: Investigating pseudoscientific product claims

VoYS members were fed up with misleading product claims such as detox foot patches that draw toxins from your body or pendants that protect you against electromagnetic radiation by acting "as a master tuning fork... to balance your biofield."

In October 2007, they decided to contact product manufacturers to hunt for the evidence behind these claims. In every case the companies were unable to provide any and most were shocked to be questioned. VoYS released their conversations in the dossier *There Goes the Science Bit...* which was reported on across the world. It also contained our statement of intent to take responsibility for questioning pseudoscientific claims and an invitation for others to join them.

This was followed by an investigation into detox products, *The Detox Dossier*, released in January 2009. *The Detox Dossier* concluded that 'detox', as used in product marketing, is a myth and, worryingly, many of the claims about how the body works were wrong and in some cases the suggested remedies were potentially dangerous.

This is an ongoing part of their work and by demanding answers to questions that typically go unasked, VoYS aims to encourage more scrutiny of pseudoscience, expose misinformation and bring those responsible to account. Reports of their hunt for evidence can be found on their website.

## Homeopathy for serious diseases in Africa

In April 2009 VoYS became aware of a conference taking place in the Netherlands on 'Homeopathy for Developing Countries'. When they investigated, they discovered widespread promotion

of homeopathic treatments for serious diseases in developing countries and no clear guidelines available from the World Health Organization (WHO).

Together with their peers in Africa, they wrote to the WHO, calling on them to condemn the promotion of homeopathy for treating HIV, TB, malaria, infant diarrhoea and influenza. In the letter, they pointed out that homeopathy does not protect people from, or treat, these diseases and those working with the most rural and impoverished people of the world already struggle to deliver the necessary help that is needed.

VoYS pursued the WHO for a response and obtained clear supportive comments from the directors of disease programmes at the WHO stating that they do not recommend homeopathy for treating these serious diseases. This is the first time that the WHO has spoken about homeopathy for serious diseases and these comments were sent to the health ministers of all countries.

## VoYS Workshops

Sense About Science hold Standing up for Science Media workshops for early career researchers. During the workshops, they combine discussion about science-related controversies in media reporting with practical guidance and advice for how to deal with the media.

## Publications

VoYS have put together two guides for their peers that capture their experiences and provide advice. Their first publication, *Standing up for Science: A guide to the media for early career scientists*, contains interviews and insights about how the media works and what to do if your research area hits the news:

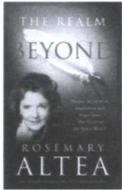
[www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/about/103](http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/about/103).

In January 2009, VoYS put together a second guide that describes different ways individuals can stand up for science. *Standing up for Science 2: the nuts and bolts* includes a wide range of practical tips from writing blogs and attending public meetings to hunting down the evidence behind product claims and correcting misinformation in all kinds of media: [www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/about/277/](http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/about/277/).

## Future Activities

Members of VoYS continue to raise examples of issues they want to take forward and encourage others to take on the responsibility of communicating science, challenging pseudo-scientific product claims and responding to misinformation in the media. If you are interested in joining the VoYS network or attending one of their workshops, please visit their website [www.senseaboutscience.org/voys](http://www.senseaboutscience.org/voys) or get in touch with Julia at [jwilson@senseaboutscience.org](mailto:jwilson@senseaboutscience.org).

# REVIEWS



## BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

### THE REALM BEYOND

by Rosemary Altea

Rider & Co., £8.99, ISBN-10: 1846040434

When I was asked to review this book, my initial response was “thanks a bunch – that sounds horrible”. And indeed it was.

It took me a while to establish the purpose of the book. It consists of a random collection of long drawn out, repetitive and tedious accounts of Rosemary’s mediumship and healing experiences and, bizarrely, an account of a legal battle over a client’s will that she underwent, all with the obligatory Apache warrior spirit guide, Grey Eagle, by her side.

Clearly not a book for the sceptic, there is no attempt to provide accurate accounts of events. For example, she admits to merging several similar mediumship stories together to form composite accounts and, on occasion, providing only the crux of the messages received from the dead, leaving out the “evidence” (sic) they gave her of who they were. That’ll be the cold-reading bit, then.

But if this is a book for the believer and she is preaching to the converted, it is curious that she devotes so much space to persuading the reader of her abilities. She justifies herself as a responsible medium and dismisses many other “well-intentioned” mediums as guiding people on the wrong path by their overactive imaginations. Her self-aggrandisement began to grate on me after a while, with her numerous references to her appearances on Oprah and Larry King and the immense gratitude she

describes receiving from her clients. Her repeated insistence that she is “only human” despite her great gift seems disingenuous.

Rosemary spends rather a lot of her time pointlessly “healing” terminally ill people, who all die pretty soon afterwards. The several mad dashes she describes to reach someone at death’s door before it was too late, rather put me in mind of a tornado-chaser – a “cadaver-chaser” perhaps.

I found very little in this book to hold my interest, with the exception of a few bizarre moments. These included Rosemary getting into the hospital bed of a dying client (while his wife sat on a sofa outside the curtain) in order to travel with him to the spirit world; her taking off her jewellery prior to going into a trance because the build-up of energy in her body could cause her skin to burn if in contact with metal; her description of her “dream visions” – visions that are given to her at night while she is asleep. Yeah, that’ll be dreams then Rosemary. I get those too.

I concluded that this book was simply about self-promotion, with nothing new to offer either the sceptic or the believer. Don’t waste your time with it – I’ve made that sacrifice for you!

**Jacqui Farrants**



## BIG DEAL

### BIG IDEAS: THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO THE LATEST THINKING

by James Harkin

Atlantic Books, £8.99 (pb), ISBN 978 184354 710 5

An Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman, our old friends, were debating what was the greatest idea produced by the human race. The Englishman proposed the control of fire. The Scotsman argued for the wheel. The Irishman said Venetian blinds. “What? Why? How?” expostulated the others. “Ah well,” says Paddy, “sure if it wasn’t for them, it’d be curtains for all of us.” One might expect Big Ideas to be such things as gravity, or government, or God. Here they are more of the Irish sort, such as “boomergeddon”, “declinology”, “yeppies” and many more which I myself had never heard of, and hardly expect to hear of again.

I should confess at once that, for the first time I think, I am reviewing a book without having read it through I read about half, and sampled the rest. It just became too tedious. There are 143 items, in alphabetical order, in 144 pages (plus ten blank pages for “Your Ideas”, and twelve for an Introduction). My mathematical skills tell me that this is approximately one per page (and just over six pence each). The typical pattern is to introduce the term, quote from one book or paper which used it, perhaps for the first time, and add a few comments. “Yeppies” for example are Young Experimenting Perfection Seekers, according to “a report from Oxford’s Social Issues Research Centre”. They are “today’s young

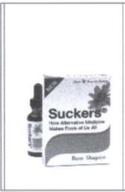
people”, who shop around for goods, careers, life styles and so on. Not an unfamiliar characteristic of youth of any period, probably.

The whole thing suggests very short topical newspaper columns. Possibly this is how it originated. The author, who is described simply as a cultural commentator, is (I learn from the Internet) Director of Talks at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, a journalist for *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times*, and a “consultant forecaster of social trends”, which all sounds like nice work if you can get it.

Some of it is journalistically ephemeral, such as the popularity of George W Bush, or the media image of Gordon Brown “as an aloof fuddy-duddy (which) may yet turn out to be an asset”. Journalistic too are the top-of-the-head generalizations based on casual observation: Some facts are quoted here and there, but in general it is a skimming off of phrases that are drifting around in the media. In short, if you want a handful of buzz-words, some no longer buzzing, to throw around in the pub or at dinner-parties, this may come in handy. Personally, I would save my nine pounds.

**John Radford**

# REVIEWS



## COMPLETELY ARBITRARY METHODS

### SUCKERS: HOW ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE MAKES FOOLS OF US ALL

by Rose Shapiro

Harvill Secker, £12.99 (pb), ISBN: 9781846550287

Shapiro describes Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) as “a faith-based practice” and “a complex combination of superstition and market forces”. She presents well-researched information in a highly readable style, examining the most prevalent examples as well as some of the more obscure ones.

There are around 1000 different therapies and “the only thing they have in common is that they don’t work”. Not that this stops the UK spending around £4.5 billion a year on them.

Some CAM claims would be very funny if it weren’t for the fact that people’s health – and money – are at risk. Most worrying are the potential dangers of unregulated CAM: the very real side-effects and the possibility that seriously ill people will refuse or abandon proven treatments.

With nearly a quarter of Europeans trying homeopathy, Shapiro calls it the “gateway drug of the complementary medicine habit”. CAM mostly appeals to middle-aged, middle class women who use it on themselves and their children, but men are far from immune. It is increasingly popular for “fad conditions”, made-up ailments like Morgellons or real but over-diagnosed ones: food intolerance and the need for detox are among current favourites. She examines our reluctance to be told there is nothing wrong with us and the attraction of treatments for “people who are not ill in the Western sense”.

The book rounds up all the usual suspects including homeopathy, chiropractic and reflexology – and gives them a good (scientific) kicking. It names and shames people, practices and products, among them Deepak Chopra, therapeutic touch, Gillian McKeith, magnet therapy and the casu-

al use of “quantum” and “natural”. She covers the placebo effect and the way CAM tries to frighten people away from “conspiratorial” doctors and pharmaceuticals.

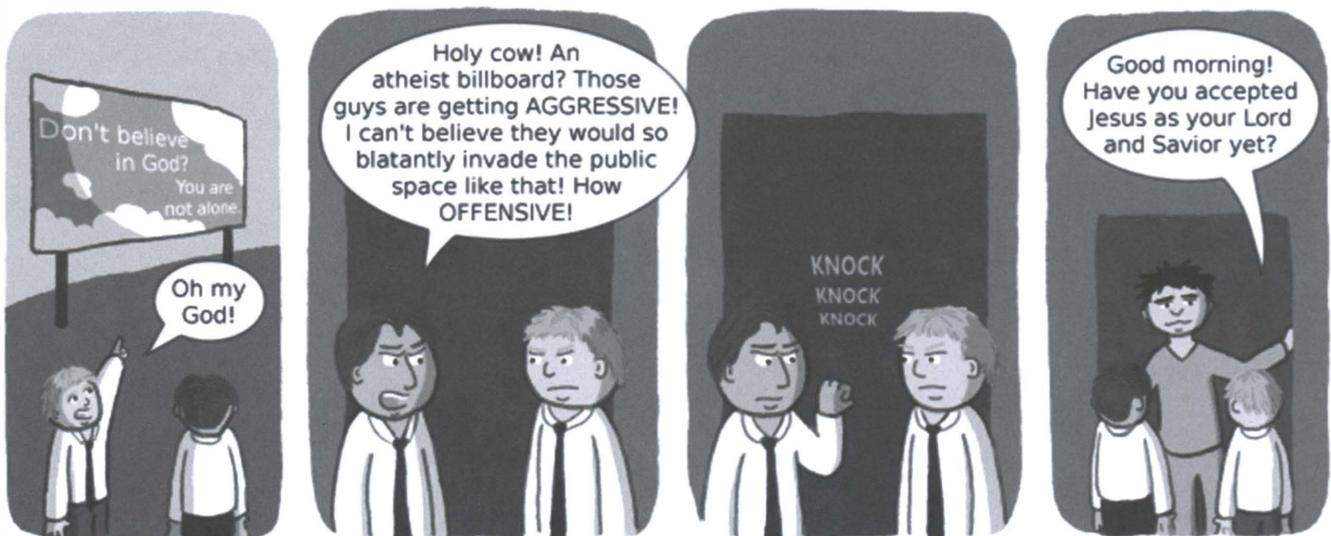
The history behind many CAM treatments is enlightening. Despite the claim that Chinese medicine is based on “ancient wisdom”, herbal remedies and acupuncture as used today were mostly developed in the People’s Republic from 1950-75 because of the shortage of doctors. Mao valued scientific medicine but was ever the pragmatist. A survey found that 70% of Chinese would use Western medicine if they had access to it or could afford it. Other therapies supposedly drawing on the wisdom of the ancients include reflexology (invented in the USA in the 30s) and Reiki (Japan, 1914).

With 68 CAM courses offered by universities in 2008, 60% of Scottish doctors prescribing homeopathic or herbal medicine and £900,000 of government (i.e., taxpayers’) money given to the Prince of Wales Foundation for Integrated Health, the future looks bleak. Products and treatments banned in the UK are easily available over the Internet. Scientific tests exposing CAM claims make little dent in its popularity.

This book is an excellent resource for anyone who wants to fight back with case studies, statistics, hard evidence and a list of useful books and websites. As Shapiro says, there is no alternative medicine, there is only scientifically proven, evidence-based medicine. But as WC Fields said: Never give a sucker an even break.

Tessa Kendall

*skeptic*



# LETTERS

## Another conspiracy?

In his review of Robin Ramsay's *Who shot JFK?* (*The Skeptic*, 21.3), Ray Ward pointed out many errors. However, I find it surprising that he failed to point out Ramsay's apparent ignorance of Bonar Meninger's (*sic*) *Mortal Error* (1992), which outlined Howard Donahue's reasonable hypothesis that a bodyguard in a following car killed the President by mistake, a hypothesis I've not seen refuted.

You published a letter by me on this very subject in the Summer 2005 issue (*The Skeptic*, 18.2). Why is this idea being ignored?

**Stuart Campbell**  
Edinburgh

*Ray Ward replies: I am familiar with the hypothesis and have dipped into the book by Bonar Meninger (not Meninger), but have not read the whole book. However, computerised techniques now make it possible to determine the trajectory of the bullets that hit Kennedy, and both originate from a circle around the window where Oswald is known to have been. George W. Hickey, the Secret Service agent hypothesised to have accidentally shot Kennedy, sued the publisher. The case was dismissed on the grounds that it came too long after publication, but he later settled with the publisher on undisclosed terms.*

## An author's request

I have been commissioned to write a book on the scientific enigma of Street Lamp Interference (SLI), in which people apparently affect street lamps as they walk, cycle or drive towards them, usually turning them off. Although I have more than 200 statements by people who claim this experience, I am keen to gather all the data I possibly can. If SLI has happened to you, or someone you know, I would be glad to hear from you. Please provide as much information as you can, especially about the circumstances and your state of mind when it occurred. I would also be glad to hear from people who have affected other appliances, from domestic lights to railway crossings: also any comments or suggested explanations.

Contact me at [hilaryevans@btconnect.com](mailto:hilaryevans@btconnect.com) or by mail to 11 Granville Park, London SE 13 7DY.

**Hilary Evans**  
London

## Heading down the wrong path?

My dear, dear children, are you ever going to grow up? You have so entirely forgotten where you were headed that you are now heading in the opposite direction. Not so long ago you were trying to abuse the world of its silliness (*sic*), and yet, you are now encouraging it.

You think your title, "A Course in Crossing Over" (*The Skeptic*, 21.4), is tongue-in-cheek, but actually it is telling the truth! Jon Donni is so desperate to please Kendra that he submits to her instruction for five long weeks. Surprise, surprise: her faith grows, his weakens. Mr. Donni's final word? Maybe there's something in this paranormal stuff after all.

Do you really want to crow over such an ignominious defeat? Is it a good example for us all to follow? Wake up! Or you will soon be leading the opposition.

**Duncan M. Butlin**  
Essex

*Jon Donni replies: I do not encourage mediumship, I expose it, but to*

*expose something you must first understand it. Anyone who says mediumship is all hot and cold reading does not understand mediumship. I have stood in the medium's shoes, I have walked the walk and now I talk the talk. I have exposed more mediums on my website (badpsychics.com) than anyone else in the world! I have sympathy for the deluded, I see how they believe, and that puts me in a much better place to understand. I am not a cynic; I am a sceptic. Don't dismiss that which you don't understand.*

## It's nice to be appreciated!

Congratulations on the revamp of the magazine! Having had a bit of a sneak peek at TAM London in October, I was looking forward to receiving my very own shiny new copy and when it duly arrived (thanks Royal Mail) I certainly wasn't disappointed. While we should all know not to judge a book by its cover (else we'd scarcely be good sceptics), it's great to see that beyond the eye-catching front page lies a real wealth of articles from a wide range of columnists – and an excellent interview with Randi himself! What more fitting way to celebrate a re-launch than to chat to everyone's favourite sceptical uncle?

Being a relative newcomer to the active sceptical community, I thought founder Wendy Grossman's article on the origins and history of the magazine gave a great insight into how the movement in the UK developed over the years. With the continuance of what feels – certainly from the inside – to be a genuine groundswell in critical thinking and sceptical activism in recent years, resources like *The Skeptic* provide invaluable tools for anyone looking to broaden their knowledge of the pseudoscientific and hone their critical thinking skills.

All told, I know I'll certainly be recommending the magazine to our listeners (*Skeptics with a K* podcast, since you ask...) and to audiences at future Skeptics in the Pub meetings here in Liverpool. Here's to the next 21 years!

**Michael Marshall (aka Marsh)**  
Merseyside Skeptics Society

## Chris French's interview with James Randi

The new enlarged *Skeptic* is a big improvement – well done!

However I was disappointed by the interview with James Randi by Chris French. Chris began his interview by writing, "If sceptics were allowed to have patron saints, James Randi would undoubtedly fill that role". In accordance with his reverential tone, he spared Randi the slightest challenge. But in view of the fact that Chris and I are working together on an experimental investigation of telephone telepathy I wish he had asked Randi about his so-called Pigasus award for research on this very subject.

Here is what Randi wrote about my research in the announcement of "the Pigasus awards" in 2007 (<http://www.randi.org/pigasus/index.html>): "Category #1, to the scientist who said or did the silliest thing related to the supernatural, paranormal or occult: For 2006, it goes to UK biologist Rupert Sheldrake, for his 'telephone telepathy' claims related to 'morphic resonance'. This man's delusions increase as time goes by, and he comes up with sillier ideas every year."

Is it silly to investigate apparent telepathy in connection with telephone calls? Several surveys have shown that most people claim to have had telepathic experiences with telephone calls. Experimental research on this subject by myself and others, reported in papers published in peer-reviewed journals, have given statistically significant above-chance results (details on my web site at <http://www.sheldrake.org/Articles&Papers/papers/telepathy/index.html>).

Randi is often rude and offensive. Unfortunately many of his fellow sceptics let him get away with it, and treat him with adulation. His presence on the cover of the new-look *Skeptic* together with Chris French's uncritical interview helps to build up this iconic status. Randi may have done a useful job in exposing fraudulent showmen, but he has no scientific credentials, and has made fraudulent claims himself. (For one example, see <http://www.sheldrake.org/D&C/controversies/randi.html>.)

In Randi's "Amazing" meeting in Las Vegas in 2005, delegates at the media workshop given by Randi and Michael Shermer were handed a manual called *Communicating Skepticism to the Public* which told them how to become a media sceptic: "Becoming an expert is a pretty simple procedure; tell people you're an expert. After you do that, all you have to do is maintain appearances and not give them a reason to believe you're not."

In real science, becoming an expert requires qualifications and hard work, but as Randi and Shermer pointed out, the rules are different for sceptics. All you need is to form a club with like-minded people: "As head of your local skeptic club, you're entitled to call yourself an authority. If your other two members agree to it, you can be the spokesperson too."

Randi fuels the widespread public perception of sceptics as negative and dogmatic. Even worse, he makes organized scepticism seem like a fundamentalist crusade, with his meetings as revivalist rallies. For sceptics who are genuinely interested in promoting science and reason, he is not an asset but a liability.

If sceptics want to be taken seriously, then organized scepticism should be subject to the same kinds of quality control as genuine science.

**Rupert Sheldrake  
London**

*James Randi replies: Recently, on our SWIFT page ([www.randi.org](http://www.randi.org)), we published a request for information regarding some quotes attributed to me in a letter sent to The Skeptic (above). That letter was from Rupert Sheldrake, he of the claimed dog-who-knows-when-the-master-is-coming-home phenomenon. The quotation in question:*

*Becoming an expert is a pretty simple procedure; tell people you're an expert. After you do that, all you have to do is maintain appearances and not give them a reason to believe you're not.*

*This was selected from a 22-page handout distributed at a seminar held at The Amazing Meeting 3, and it's titled "Communicating Skepticism to the Public: A Seminar On Promoting a Scientific View of The World". Indeed, that quote is from a manuscript distributed at TAM3. But I didn't write it. Very clearly, there is a 4-page section written by me, and so identified. The handout included multiple chapters, and the relevant one – part of which I've reproduced below – was written by Andrew Mayne. Now, Andrew is one smart cookie, and this text has been admired by many, so much so that with a bit of editing, we intend to put it up on Swift for reader access.*

*Incidentally, to find anything that has appeared on Swift, go to Google and type in: [siter.randi.org](http://siter.randi.org) "sheldrake" -forums and you'll find what you want. (The "sheldrake" can be replaced by anything – such as "dowsing" for example.)*

*But Sheldrake's 'research' appears to quote from this document without his ever having read it. If he'd read it, he'd have realized that I'm twice discussed in the third person on the pages immediately before the allegedly damning "media expert" quote. One read-over is enough to convince anyone that this is a document partially about me, but not in any way by me. And, Sheldrake somehow failed to note what follows the 'damning' quotation:*

*Talking heads are usually:*

- Authors*
- Professors*
- Spokespersons for groups*
- Survivors*

*As head of your local skeptic club you're entitled to call yourself an authority. If your other two members agree to it, you can be the spokesperson, too.*

*Let me briefly explain the grudge that Rupert Sheldrake has going against me. First, from his article at <http://www.sheldrake.org/controversies/randi.html>:*

*The January 2000 issue of Dog World magazine included an article on a possible sixth sense in dogs, which discussed some of my research. In this article Randi was quoted as saying that in relation to canine ESP, "We at the JREF [James Randi Educational Foundation] have tested these claims. They fail." No details were given of these tests.*

*Clever. This implies that I was referring to the specific tests that Sheldrake has claimed to have done. I was referring to general tests that the JREF has done over many years involving animals, particularly dogs. To have gone into details of all these tests would have been very extensive. A search of our site would have supplied him with all the details he could possibly wish, or I'd have supplied them to him for a simple request. That's what we do at the JREF.*

*Sheldrake continued:*

*Randi also claimed to have debunked one of my experiments with the dog Jaytee, a part of which was shown on television. Jaytee went to the window to wait for his owner when she set off to come home, but did not do so before she set off. In Dog World, Randi stated: "Viewing the entire tape, we see that the dog responded to every car that drove by, and to every person who walked by." This is simply not true, and Randi now admits that he has never seen the tape.*

*Not true. A colleague of mine in Europe told me that he'd seen the tape record, and that he and his colleagues presented a version of it to some students who were asked to record each time that the dog was activated. The dog never stopped, reacting to passers-by in the street, cars, any unusual noise, and any sort of distraction. The only portion of tape that I was able to see was the section that Sheldrake saw fit to publish, the limited sector that indicated – to his selective gaze – the point he wanted to prove. Dr Sheldrake, may we see the entire video record, so that we may repeat that student evaluation with persons who are, in your view, qualified to see it? I promise that I'll stay behind in Florida, and I'll not put out those "negative vibes" that I'm sure you feel would affect the test. Or are those tapes now lost, or not available for legal reasons, perhaps?*

*In closing, I'll add: When I was in the UK a few years ago, I asked Sheldrake if I could test his wonder-dog, but I was told that the dog – and its owners – didn't want me around. I think that explains a lot about how willing Sheldrake is to face real, independent, examination of his claims.*

**Cbris French replies:** *One very good reason for me not raising the topic of Randi's Pegasus award to Rupert Sheldrake is that I was not aware of it until I read Rupert's letter to The Skeptic. Even if I had been aware of it, I am not at all sure I would have chosen to 'challenge' Randi over it. As it was, we had to edit a lot of very good material from this interview simply for reasons of space. James Randi has, by anybody's standards, had a long and fascinating life and I think that this is what most of our readers would want to hear about.*

*Reading Randi's books back in the 1980s was a major influence on my thinking as I am sure is the case for many thousands of sceptics around the world. I am happy to put on record my great respect for him. That obviously does not mean that I agree with everything that he has ever said and/or written. One of the central messages of scepticism, as emphasized by Randi in his interview, is that everyone should make their own minds up regarding the evidence and arguments dealing with controversial claims. My own approach is to test the more promising and*

*widely accepted claims, such as telephone telepathy, as fairly as possible even though I do not expect to get significant results from such studies. As Rupert is well aware, I have tested many of his claims in the past, either through student projects or in direct collaboration with him, and to date we have never found the results supporting the existence of psi.*

*I would take issue with the view expressed in Rupert's letter that only people with formal qualifications should ever be considered real experts. Personally, I am well aware that although the media often prefer to have a talking head with letters after his or her name to comment on controversial issues (even if this amounts to simply stating "the bleeding obvious"), quite often the real experts on a particular topic may be people without any formal training whatsoever, just a passionate interest in their chosen topic and the ability to think critically. And, of course, there are quite a few people with very impressive qualifications who peddle complete nonsense. Just to be clear, I personally do not put Rupert Sheldrake in this category!*

Please send your letters to: **The Skeptic, Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths, 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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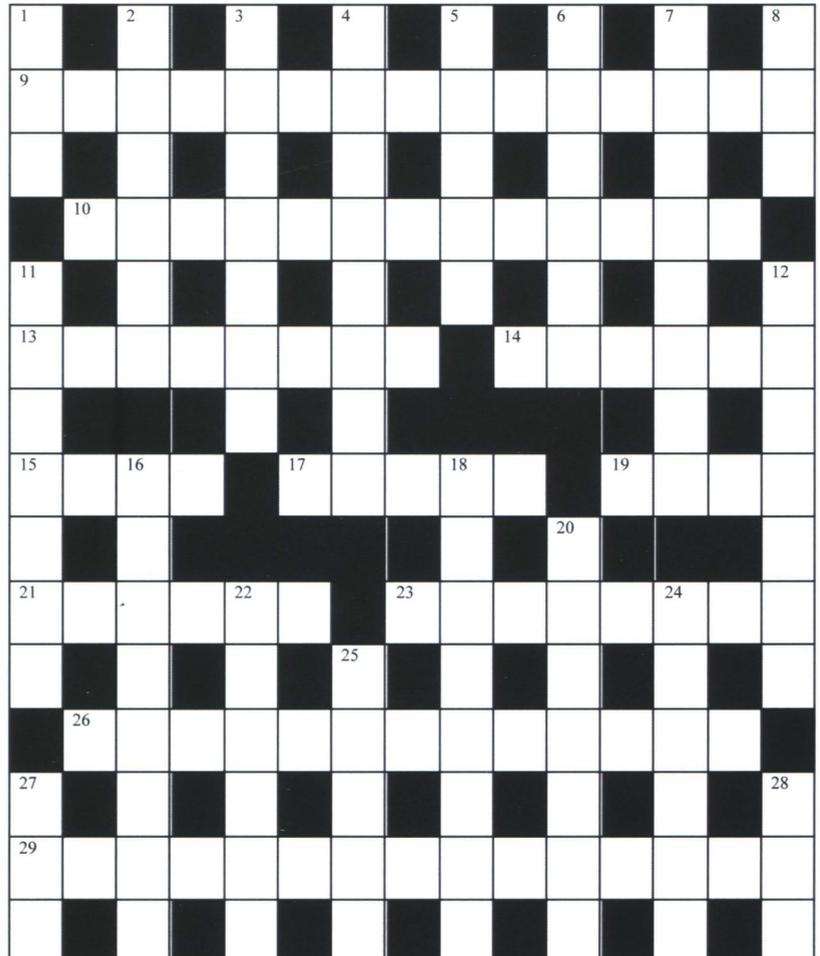
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### Across

- 9 Back this and it's business as usual (2,3,3,7)
- 10 International organisation not bothered by debts. No controversy here! (13)
- 13 Site of unusual fauna? Och no! There's not so much about! (4,4)
- 14 Stick to the present time and place (6)
- 15 Man engaged in recovered memory therapy (4)
- 17 Extremely bizarre claims, for instance, form the material for this article (5)
- 19 Stage favourites are back (4)
- 21 Excluding small number gives the illusory effect of psychic ability (6)
- 23 Married, I shaft in bed. Here's a photo! (8)
- 26 She gives wacky treatment. Response? Nothing on record - it's daft! (13)
- 29 Conspiracy theory that's as unsinkable as its "victims" apparently aren't (7,8)

### Down

- 1 Experimenting with PSI could lead you to drink (3)
- 2 Action planned. No stress! (6)
- 3 Be back round about spring again (7)
- 4 Only the cream is good enough for them (8)
- 5 Take the piss out of Uri? Never! .... (5)
- 6 ....He's resting, well hidden. ....(5)
- 7 ....But after five he's up fast and pretty nasty. ....(8)
- 8 ....Yet this man at times is a charm! (3)
- 11 Spot personal problem. Homoeopathy? (7)
- 12 Ritual that includes ESP provides an escape (7)
- 16 What appears in a column is a result of Bert messing around with Vera (8)
- 18 Concerning a branch of biology (8)
- 20 According to instructions, turn around after start of race in boat. (7)
- 22 There's one in Neustadt am Rügenberge but you'll never see one in Oswaldtwistle (6)
- 24 If this is intelligent, Dawkins won't be interested! (6)
- 25 Method of taxi allocation is partly a rotating system (5)
- 27 This form of witchcraft almost amounts to a death notice (3)
- 28 Even I am not associated with a mythical beast (3)



# BACK ISSUES

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