



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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NTS News and Events

We have completed our evaluations of the predictions made by The Association for Parapsychology (formerly the North Texas Parapsychology Association). These predictions were made last January at the Meta-Psychic Fair in Richardson. NTS is preparing a press release on the results, and a related article is included in this issue.

In the meantime the TAP seers are at it again. Another Meta-Psychic Fair was held last week in Richardson, and the psychics made their predictions for 1989. Channel 8 News featured a story about the predictions on Friday, January 6. They also included NTS Chair John Thomas who had some comments about their poor showing in 1988. Our thanks to Channel 8 for providing balanced coverage.

Channel 8 News recently called us for comment about the Rapha counseling group in Arlington. Reporter Peggy Wehmeyer was unable to find informed comment on the activities of this group until we referred her to Dr. Tom Woods, one of our members. Dr. Woods is a psychiatrist with experience in the unhealthy mix of psychiatry and fundamentalist religion represented by the Rapha. His interview as a spokesman for NTS appeared on Channel 8's evening news. Our appreciation goes to Ms. Wehmeyer for making the extra effort to get a balanced comment on this story.

Graphology again...

We were recently attending a seminar on Pre-employment screening sponsored by the Texas Employment Commission. To our astonishment, one of the speakers advocated the use of graphology for testing potential employees. We challenged the speaker's claims and pointed out that graphological personality assessment has no scientific support. It turned out that the speaker (a licensed counselor) was not a graphologist, but had taken the claims of some local handwriting analysts at face value. We later sent her information from our file on the scientific status of graphology. Being at the right place at the right time prevented more than a hundred personnel managers from leaving the seminar with a very mistaken impression of the merits of handwriting analysis.

The NTS Board has decided that meetings in 1989 will be on the third Sunday of each month. The scheduled dates for this year are listed in the "Meetings" section of this letter.

We hope that the coming year will be as exciting and productive as the last. What we need, though, is your help and your input. If you have any, idea that you wish to put forth, or any contribution to make, now is the time. Be sure to come to our January, meeting to help us get off to a good start!

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NTS Needs Some Volunteers

In only a year and a half, our membership is almost 120 and growing. We have built the foundation for a solid and influential advocacy group sooner than most of us expected. Our challenge now is to continue our growth and expand and improve our educational and investigative activities. To do so, we need to engage more members in our activities.

Areas where we particularly need volunteers are:

1. Programs. We need a program chair who will identify and evaluate potential speakers and make scheduling arrangements with those chosen.
2. Publicity. The publicity chair will prepare our regular press releases about our programs and also special events. This person will also handle publicity on the UTA campus. Note that the publicity chair is not the same as the NTS spokesperson who responds to inquiries from the news media.
3. Newsletter Production. We still want to split off the production of the newsletter from the editing task. What we have in mind is use of a desk-top publishing system with a laser printer. The system should be able to receive text by modem, assemble, pre-edited text on the pages and print a master copy for later reproduction.

Anyone who might be interested in these positions should give us a call We can tell you in detail (and with no obligation) how much time and effort will be involved.

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Year-End Program Reviews

NTS closed out the year with three exciting programs. In addition to our regular programs on November 20 and December 11, we hosted a special presentation on November 21 by B. Premanand of India.

Professors Ray Eve and Dana Dunn of UTA discussed their research on pseudoscience beliefs among high-school science teachers at the November meeting. Even though the researchers called their study "exploratory and preliminary," the results were statistically significant and alarming. For example, some 30% of the teachers believe in biblical creationism; 33% either agreed or weren't sure whether dinosaurs and humans lived at the same time; and 26% believe some races of people are more intelligent than others. Twenty-eight percent of the sample believed that some people can predict the future by actual psychic powers and 34% thought that other people's thoughts can be read by psychic powers.

Obviously something is wrong with a teacher-training and certification system that can produce these results. Eve and Dunn pointed out that only about 25% of the teachers surveyed had biology degrees and often only an education major. The small size of the sample did not allow the researchers to draw conclusions based on such factors as demographic profile, gender or type of school attended.

As reported in the last issue of *The Skeptic*, Eve and Dunn hope, to carry out a much larger survey and dig into these and other factors. Prof. Dunn mentioned that a correlation seemed to exist between a belief in creationism and religiosity, to the extent it could be inferred from the survey responses. This probably accounts for the finding that fewer than 1% of

the respondents expressed a belief in astrology. This inverse correlation is a sad comment on the education of teachers if the best we can hope for is disbelief in one pseudoscience on account of belief in another.

Through the help of CSICOP we were able to host B. Premanand on November 21. Premanand is a magician, a skeptic, and one of the leaders of the rationalist movement in India. He has spent most of his career investigating the claims and miracles of the "godmen" of India. Premanand described the activities of these religious predators, who range from village fakirs to cult leaders commanding the allegiance (and money) of millions. His practice is to study a claimed miracle—such as the production of the holy ash, vibuthi, from nothing—and then reproduce the effect with conjuring tricks. These challenges, while often successful in deflating the reputation of a godmen sometimes lead to threats and violence. Premanand's program consisted of one exotic miracle after another, each one explained and put into social context. The last miracle was left unexplained as a challenge to the ingenuity of the audience Those of us who talked to Premanand at length found him ready with fascinating information about Indian religion and philosophy, and the clash between traditional belief and scientific rationalism. I came away with the impression of a brave man doing difficult but essential work in a society struggling to escape from a powerful and sophisticated pre-scientific world-view.

Following up on the theory and practice of deception, our December- program by Dan Korem covered the techniques of cold reading and their use by psychics and astrologers. Korem is Dallas area journalist, video producer and former magician who has a special interest in deceptive techniques. His first TV film, in 1981, exposed the claimed telekinetic powers of psychic James Hydrick. His current project, on faith healing, should be aired in 1989.

"Cold reading" is the method whereby a reader convinces a client (often a victim) that the reader knows all about him. Done properly, the result is a practically unshakeable belief in the powers of the reader. The client abandons his critical faculties and begins to subjectively validate what he is being told. Character reading has been practiced for centuries, but it has recently been studied by psychologists and its workings made explicit. Korem lists six techniques the aspiring cold reader should use. Briefly:

1. Peg the psychological profile of the client. Use any information handy, such as occupation, dress, demeanor, demographic profile, etc.
2. Start with 'Barnum statements'—a line of patter containing ambiguous assertions that could be true about anyone.
3. Carefully observe the client's facial reactions and body language during the spiel. Learn to sense when you make a hit on something the client feels is significant. Ask questions in the form of tentative statements and get the client to tell you about himself.
4. Load the language—make prior general statements sound specific later. Remember, this is happening quickly, and the client can't refer to a transcript of what was said 10 minutes earlier.
5. Always be ready with an educated guess. A hit here can have a powerful impact. The client will probably not remember the misses.
6. Get information ahead of time. If you require an appointment for the reading, you gain time to thoroughly check out the client. This is a must for the pros.

Korem emphasized that the creation of a feeling of personal validity by the reader is essentially a technique of control. He does not believe that the activities of astrologers and psychics are harmless. At the least, those readers who are not self-deluded but well aware of what they are doing are taking money under false pretenses. At worst, the client may turn over to the psychic not only money, but also control over his thoughts and feelings, and give up the ability to make independent decisions about his life. Someone at an emotionally vulnerable pass is an especial y easy mark and more likely to be deceived about what is really happening. I was reminded of the remark by Oliver Wendell Holmes: "The devil has many tools, but a lie is the handle that fits them all."

- John Thomas

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Tough Times for Psychic Seers

by Tony Dousette

NTS has completed a review of the predictions for 1988 that were made last January at the MPTA-sponsored Meta-Psychic Fair. The results are, as we would have predicted, consistently bad. The psychics (John Catching, Bertie Catchings, Barbara Spencer, Robert Burkett, Jan Browning, and John Rice) are united, if not in their predictions, at least by their fondness for ambiguity. As a result, quite a few of the predictions were impossible to evaluate, as they didn't say anything that could be evaluated.

Three of the psychics admit that they have a tough time with time. Barbara Spencer, who channels the predictions of the spirit Mag, tells us "Mag has trouble with time." Jan Browning adds "I, too, have difficulty with time. I think that's because, in reality, time does not exist." John Rice tells us "Time is awfully difficult to deal with..." And yet each of these seers make economic and financial forecasts where, obviously, time is of the essence.

This difficulty with time does provide an excuse for past failings. Jan Browning admits that her 1985 predictions were bad, but some of them are still coming true, so she declares that "...my score was not so bad after all." John Rice exhibits the most blatant exploitation of this excuse when he tells us that, in 1985, "I predicted that Bill Clements would be involved with some type of political scandal involving money and .. it would keep him from being elected ..." He then claims that this was a prediction of the SMU scandal that occurred after the election! He's quite confident that if the scandal had preceded the election, we'd have a different governor. It's impossible to tell from our tape of the evening's predictions Mr. Rice was able to make this statement with a straight face, but we presume that he did.

John Catchings makes a number of sports predictions, including one that the Cowboys "... will get back into the playoffs... they're going to do a lot better." Mr. Catchings does not admit any difficulty with time, so if this prediction does come true in 1989, we're confident that he won't try to take credit for it. But, we've been wrong about these folks before.

Mr. Catchings makes a number of other sports predictions, all of which are wrong. He tells us, for example, that San Francisco will defeat Cleveland to win the Super Bowl; in fact, Denver won by defeating Washington. Mr. Catchings admits "I hear little voices in the back saying do I want to bet on them?" He answers "Well, yes, if the odds are right." We only hope that Mr. Catchings listened to this momentary, but very healthy lapse into skepticism and saved his money!

Predictions of earthquakes, airline disasters and floods abound, and yet none of the major disasters of 1989 were predicted. No one predicted the earthquake in Armenia or the floods in Bangladesh or the downing of the Iranian airliner by a U.S. warship. No one predicted the Delta crash at DFW, or the terrorist bombing of the Pan American flight in Scotland. Mr. Catching did predict August floods in western Virginia, and floods in Mississippi, Iowa and Ohio. He did predict earthquakes in Turkey, China and Czechoslovakia, an airplane crash in the Gulf of Mexico, and an airline collision at Chicago's O'Hare airport. Perhaps psychics also have a tough time with geography?

Some predictions have come true. For example, both John Catchings and John Rice predicted Ronald Reagan would live out his term of office, and this very reasonable prediction seems about to be fulfilled. Mr. Catchings, though, ruins his success as a predictor of life spans by also predicting that the Ayatollah would pass on in 1988. Barbara Spencer predicted that the space shuttle would fly twice in 1988, and this did happen, but we note, first, that three launches were scheduled for the year with the last in December. And also note that a December 1987 failing of a solid rocket test-firing pushed the schedule back, and this delay was public knowledge at the time of Ms. Spencer's prediction.

NTS member Mark Meyer provides an interesting summary of Barbara Spencer's predictions. Of the 35 predictions that he looked at, 11 are too soon to call, two could not be confirmed, fourteen were definite misses, and eight were "...hits of varying degrees of triviality." He notes that "Educated guesses could 'do just as well.'" and quotes his father as saying "Even a blind pig can find an acorn once in a while."

Jay Woods evaluated 28 of Bertie Catchings' predictions. One was scratched as being too wishy-washy to evaluate. Of the remaining 27, four are unevaluated, three are hits, and the remaining 20 are misses.

The records of the other psychics are as bad or even worse. John' Rice has the poorest showing, with only one (probable) hit when he predicts that Ronald Reagan will live out his term. Otherwise he predicts war between Nicaragua and Honduras, a heating up of the Gulf war, massive starvation in Honduras, and the resurgence of Jim and Tammy Bakker.

NTS thanks members Jay Woods, Mark Meyer, Donnie Anderson, and Michael Patterson for volunteering to critique predictions, Thanks, also, to NTS Chair John Thomas for preparing a press release summarizing their results.

We would like to conclude on a positive note by quoting Jay Woods. Jay has a copy of the *National Enquirer* containing the Enquirer's predictions for 1988. Jay tells us that "In all fairness, our psychics appear to have a much better trick record than the *Enquirer's* picks." Our congratulations to The Association for Parapsychology (formerly NTPA) far outperforming the *National Enquirer*.

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Travels

by Michael Crichton. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1988 337 pp. Cloth \$17.95.

Reviewed by Tony Dousette

This book is a narrative of the. Author's transformation over the years from a student at the Harvard Medical School, to his present status as a believer in psychic phenomena. Michael Crichton is a Harvard-educated M.D., an author of several books, and a successful movie director. If anyone is able to provide an intelligent, well thought out defense of psychic phenomena, he would certainly seem to be the one. At least from this reviewer's perspective, however, the author succeeds only in establishing his own credulity. He draws vast conclusions from inadequate evidence, and seems so eager to believe in psychic phenomena that he fails to ask even bee simple questions that one would expect from someone with a minimal insight into the scientific method.

The book's chapters fall into three categories. The first, and most interesting, are concerned with the author's medical training. He writes an entertaining narrative about his medical school days and the experiences that led to his decision to become a writer rather than a physician.

Other chapters are devoted to the vacations that Mr. Crichton has taken over the years. The author has traveled to a great many remote parts of the globe, and has written a chapter for each vacation that he regards as relevant to his message. His skills as a writer are evident as he tells of his experiences, including climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, diving off the coast of Venezuela, and observing gorillas in Rwanda. These chapters provide the inspiration for the book's title.

The author finds a message in every vacation. He explores a wrecked ship on his dive off the coast of Venezuela. But he also discovers his own suicidal tendencies as he stays too long in the depths and nearly exhausts his air supply before he can surface. His Kilimanjaro climb is also the vehicle for his discovery that some experiences have an intensity that cannot be communicated. His observations of gorillas lead to his comments on the similarities between humans and gorillas. If the author has ever had a vacation purely for pleasure, it's not in this book.

The remaining chapters are concerned with the author's experiences that lead him to believe in at least some psychic phenomena. He tells us about the death of his father, his experiences with London psychics, and his newfound abilities to channel, to see auras, and to bend spoons. He discovers a spiritual entity that has been with him since his childhood, and describes the New Age equivalent of an exorcism that rids him of it.

The chapter an London psychics provides an excellent example of Mr. Crichton's willingness to be taken in by those claiming paranormal powers. The author was working m his movie, *The Great Train Robbery* in London in 1978. He would visit the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain in the evenings. Mr. Crichton is aware of the experiences of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, as detailed in James Randi's *Flim-Flam!*. He decides to take precautions to be sure that he doesn't

follow in Conan Doyle's footsteps. One of the precautions is "I tried to keep my mind blank. Just in case someone could read my mind. You never know." (Page 191) The author, in other words, took steps to prevent a mind reader without paranormal powers from reading his mind and then using what he had read to fool him into believing in the paranormal!

Mr. Crichton tells us "As luck would have it, the first psychic I saw was wonderfully suited to my plans. She was past sixty, and nearly big. She couldn't hear very well, either, because she thought I was from London." (Page 191) The evidence for her blindness isn't specified, but presumably he took her word for that also.

The psychic makes rambling comments for half an hour or so, and then begins to tell Mr. Crichton some remarkable things. The author tells us: "There was absolutely no way this little blind lady with swollen ankles could have known about that." (Page 192) And yet there are ways that she could know. The author seems to have been taken in by cold reading, as explained by Dan Korem at our December meeting.

Several of the other psychics impress Mr. Crichton with their abilities to read him. And yet cold reading, combined with a little research, could accomplish a lot. The author had already attained a certain degree celebrity in 1978. His unusual height, well in excess of six feet, makes him easy to identify. If only one psychic were to recognize him, he could do some research prior to the author's next visit. This could explain many of the things that Mr. Crichton experienced.

One of the more absurd chapters in the book concerns the author's experiences with spoon bending. The author dismisses spoon bending as trivial and common, "...like doing the laundry, or riding a bicycle. No big deal. Not really worth much conversation." (Page 321) Although oddly enough, worthy of an entire chapter in his book. The author attends a party where he and his friends are instructed to choose spoons from a pile in the center of the floor and ask

"Will you bend for me?" The author tells us "...if we had a positive feeling about our chosen spoon, we were instructed to hold the spoon vertically and shout 'Bend! Bend! Once intimidated by being shouted at, the spoon was to be rubbed gently between our fingers and pretty soon it would bend." (Page 318)

The author finds a spoon that he has a positive feeling for, and manages to intimidate it into becoming "...completely pliable, like soft plastic... I easily bent the bowl of the spoon in half, using only my fingertips. This didn't require any pressure at all..." (Page 318)

This ability to bend spoons can be extended to other metals. The author looks around the party scene and sees "...little children, eight or nine years old, bending large metal bars. They weren't trying to trick anybody. They were just little kids having a good time. (Page 320)

The author's willingness to jump to conclusions without evidence is apparent. He admits that he didn't investigate why the spoons bent, while also insisting "... how impossible it was that everyone could have been tricked" (Page 321) If the author's descriptions are true, we can only live in dread of the day that prison inmates discover how easy and common it is to bend the "large metal bars" that confine them!

Other chapters are as silly, if not sillier, than the one on spoon bending. In the chapter entitled "Cactus Teachings," he tells of attending a Brugh Joy conference at the Institute for Mentalphysics" (Page 246) in California. Brugh tells the participants to "...walk in the desert until we find a rock or tree or a plant that seemed to have a special relationship with us, and then to spend same time with this "teacher and talk with the teacher, and learn." Unfortunately, the author settles upon a somewhat uncommunicative cactus that chooses to ignore him for several days. The cactus eventually acknowledges the author, and a dialogue of sorts begins. But the cactus is taciturn, and the author has to do most of the talking. Eventually, the author develops a psychological profile of the cactus as he describes it as "...psychologically defensive and guarded. I thought the cactus tended to be judgmental. The fact that the cactus would attract me and then refuse to speak suggested that he might be a little hysterical. The cactus had not allowed his mental development to catch up with his physical development." (Page 250)

In addition to developing a certain empathy for plant life, the author also learns about chakras, has his aura fluffed, has mystical experiences and has a vision at the conference He exhibits both empathy and vulnerability when, on the last day of the conference, he pauses to bid adieu to the cactus that has taught him so much. As usual, the cactus ignores him—we can only wonder why. The author describes his reaction in the following bit of inspired prose:

"Then I realized that from its position in the garden the cactus could never see the sun set. The cactus had been years in that position and had been deprived of seeing sunsets. I burst into tears. The cactus said, 'It's been good having you here with me.' Then I *really* cried." (Page 266)

The author details his experiences with channeling, auras and spiritual entities. And yet at the end he seems almost skeptical. He cautions the reader to be cautious of anyone who implies that he has the answer; those who create proselytizing followers; those who seem interested in money. He urges the reader to expect results and to trust his instincts. One can only wonder if Mr. Crichton is speaking of his own bad experiences.

The postscript to the book is an unusual essay that may be of interest to skeptics. The author tells us of his invitation to speak to the Pasadena Skeptics. He does a lot of research in preparation for his talk, and shares his impressions of CSICOP and skepticism. He then devotes about 20 pages to the points that he made in his talk, and then ends the postscript with "Well, that was my speech far the skeptics at Pasadena. But I was never invited to speak there, so I never gave it." (Page 376)

It's difficult to imagine what the author gains from this brief deception of the reader. The postscript would be as effective if he had identified it as a message that he would like to give to skeptics. It is at least to the author's advantage that he didn't give the speech, as he would have had a difficult time defending it to a critical audience.

This is a most curious book. Parts are entertaining and well worth reading. Other chapters are absurd, hilarious, and beyond belief. The author makes incredible statements and jumps to bizarre conclusions, while also giving the reader ample evidence to discredit them, Mr. Crichton, despite his status as a Harvard educated M.D., tells us that science is really a religion (page 356), and questions the germ theory of disease. He has a caring relationship with a cactus, while also admitting "I could not escape the sense that I was projecting onto the cactus." (Page 250) He accepts all kinds of paranormal claims, and then tells us at the end that he doesn't believe in "...biorhythms, palmistry, astrology, UFO's and the Bermuda Triangle..." (Page 356)

Those who believe that young children can bend spoons and then begin bending iron bars, will find this book to be an excellent defense of the paranormal. Others of a more skeptical nature will be aghast at the spectacle of a Harvard education gone to seed.

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Questions that Left Michael Crichton Speechless

by Tony Dousette

I didn't attend the speech that Mr. Crichton didn't give to the Pasadena Skeptics, but I did ask a number of questions that he seemed unable to answer. No doubt that's because he wasn't there either. He makes a number of points that are at least superficially attractive, so I'd like to take some space to answer them.

The author begins by pointing out that he doesn't expect to change anyone's point of view. Rather than argue, he suggests that history will eventually prove him right or wrong. Question: Aren't both science and paranormal claims several centuries old? At least to date, history is on the side of science. The author chooses, very conveniently, to ignore history to date and focuses, instead, on the history that he hopes will emerge.

Mr. Crichton makes some interesting points regarding medical care. He points out a number of practices that he refers to as superstitious medicine. Removal of tonsils and adenoids, radical mastectomies, coronary bypass surgery and intensive care are all identified as examples of our modern superstition. Mr. Crichton asserts (or would have): "This society spends billions of dollars a year on superstitious medicine, and that is a problem—and an expense—far more important than astrology columns in daily newspapers. which are so vigorously attacked by the brainpower of

CSICOP." Question: Admittedly, our society wastes a lot of money on improper use of medical care. But isn't control of this the responsibility of insurance companies and the Federal government, rather than CSICOP And isn't medicine, at least in practice, more of an art than a science? The unnecessary procedures that the author mentions were discredited by doctors and scientists, weren't they?

Mr. Crichton identifies the various cases of fraud committed by scientists. Prominent historical figures such as Isaac Newton and Gregor Mendel are identified as having fudged their data. Various modern frauds in scientific research are mentioned as well as trends and fads in science. The tendency among scientists to believe that they know it all, and to resist the acceptance of new discoveries is excoriated. Question: But weren't the frauds exposed by scientists? Weren't the new ideas accepted despite the resistance? How many psychic frauds have been exposed by psychics? It's very curious that the strength of science, namely, its self-correcting nature, is seen by the author as discrediting it.

The author offers a bizarre theory as to why there is no evidence for psychic activity. He argues that before psychics can function, they have to be in the mood, and the presence, of anyone gathering that data ruins the mood. Psychic functioning is compared to both sexual intercourse and creative work, where we must be "in the mood." He argues that "It is true that progress in the paranormal investigation is slow, but so is progress in many scientific fields, particularly when they are poorly funded." Question: Is this the same individual that, just a few paragraphs ago, was urging society to stop wasting money on doctor's bills? Should the savings that he hopes we will realize be wasted in psychic research?

The author asserts that scientists resist examination of paranormal phenomena because the conflict with known physical laws. Darwin and evolution is offered as one example of the "primacy of theory." Per the author, "...data to support the idea of evolution—such as the fossil record—were long known; but a convincing theory to explain the data was lacking. Once Darwin provided the theory, the data were accepted." He then argues that remote viewing, and psychokinesis, are areas where data exists, but the data is rejected because there's no theory to justify its acceptance?

Comment: This is an incredible statement for the author to make. To begin with, the theory of natural selection was derived independently, by both Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace. Darwin is remembered as the author of the theory, while Wallace is at best a footnote, if he's remembered at all. The reason is that Darwin presented not only the theory, but also gathered a massive amount of data, as presented in *The Origin of Species*, to support it. It's appalling that someone with Mr. Crichton's credentials would make an error of this magnitude. In addition, *The Skeptical Inquirer* has published articles on remote viewing, and the data that Mr. Crichton thinks so much of is, in fact, very questionable. Elliot H. Wineberg's article, "Some Remote-Viewing Recollections" in the Summer 1986 issue of *The Skeptical Inquirer* provides an interesting perspective on the data that Mr. Crichton holds such high regard.

The author makes some other points, but about all he really accomplishes is to demonstrate that scientists are human and do have foibles and prejudices. His errors are of such magnitude that he's fortunate indeed that he didn't have a critical audience to question him.

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Late News

Larry Powell, of *The Dallas Morning News*, has provided an interesting column in the January 10, 1989 issue of *The News*. Larry mentions some of the problems and failings of psychic predictions, and then mentions North Texas Skeptics and our efforts at monitoring the Dallas psychics and their predictions. Mr. Powell quotes John Thomas on the results and includes a number of comments on our organization and our goals.

The Dallas Morning News deserves our thanks for this well-written article. Larry Powell exhibits the skepticism that we should all expect from the press.

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