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Conjuring

Book Review

By Mike Sullivan

Just about any book that has James Randi's name on the front cover and Penn & Teller's on the back cover should be of interest to skeptics, and such is the case with Randi's new coffee-table book from St. Martin's Press, *Conjuring*.

Actually, the dust jacket of this handsome 300-page volume reads, "Conjuring <197> Being a Definitive History of the Venerable Arts of Sorcery, Prestidigitation, Wizardry, Deception & Chicanery and of the Mountebanks & Scoundrels Who Have Perpetrated these Subterfuges on a Bewildered Public, in short, MAGIC! By James Randi, Esq., A Contrite Rascal Once Dedicated to these Wicked Practices but Now Almost Totally Reformed." Perhaps this marks the first instance where a book's title, synopsis and brief biography of the author are all included on the cover of the book!

Randi's newest book is a richly illustrated history of the performing art of magic, from early beginnings in Egypt and the Middle Ages through to some of today's most notable workers. Nearly every page has a photograph, etching, lithograph or show poster illustrating the artists described in each chapter, and makes *Conjuring* a delight for the eye as well as the mind.

Chapters are included for all of the greatest names of modern magic: Robert-Houdin, The Herrmanns, Kellar, Thurston, the Blackstones, and of course, Houdini. Randi also spends entire chapters on categories of performance ranging from escape artists and mentalists to sleight-of-hand experts and street performers.

Sketches of some of art's lesser-known but still astonishing performers can be found throughout the book. For example, Randi tells of the work of Borra (Borislav Milojkovic), The King of the Pickpockets. Borra's amazing act would include the on-stage removal of nearly everything from a person's clothes and pockets without their detection, including wallets and coins, watches, suspenders, belts and even eyeglasses!

The chapters on the present-day artists are equally interesting. Randi provides a description and in most cases a photograph of dozens of big-name performers from around the globe. Many of the names will be instantly familiar to

skeptics: New York's Ricky Jay (Guinness-record-holding card-throwing wizard and close-up magic innovator); Emmy-winning Canadian Doug Henning (now departed from the stage as a follower of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and TM); Las Vegas sensation Lance Burton (who produces thousands of playing cards and dozens of live birds from his empty hands); TV and touring big-magic star David Copperfield; and the inimitable Penn & Teller.

Uri Geller also gets his due in Randi's book in two very carefully-worded pages. Randi describes Geller's early notoriety as an Israeli mentalist who produced effects known to magicians through the ages, including envelope reading and various blindfold stunts. What made Geller stand out from the thousands of other conjurers plying the trade was his claim that his work was the result of special powers he received from a distant planet called Hoova in another solar system.

Randi goes on to describe the work done by other magicians to duplicate and in many cases surpass all of Geller's effects with standard conjuring methods, but gives Geller credit as one of history's greatest illusionists and mentalists, but most definitely a mortal conjurer and not a supernatural being.

Randi's *Conjuring* is certainly a requirement for any amateur or professional magician's library and serves as a colorful but somewhat brief history of the 3,000-year old art. People not skilled in the discipline themselves will find it an excellent overview of the breath and genealogy of the trickster's trade. With full indexes, a glossary, bibliography and other references, including a directory of magic dealers and periodicals, *Conjuring* is both a good resource for those interested in the history of the craft and those wishing to find out how they can work their own little miracles.

Conjuring by James Randi. (St. Martin's Press, New York \$29.95) cloth; 312pp. with index; fully illustrated in color.

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The third eye

There's a little movie out now, something of an art film, probably in limited release, I don't know if you're heard of it. It's called *Jurassic Something-or-other*. Oh, yes: *Jurassic Park*, that's it!

Assuming you have heard nothing about the plot, I shall explain it briefly: a genetics engineering cartel recovers some dinosaur DNA from a prehistoric mosquito trapped in amber and clones a bunch of live dinosaurs. These dinosaurs are then put into an amusement park, something like "Six Flags Over Texas," except the attractions aren't as scary. The security system is sabotaged, the dinosaurs get out and run amok, but we know they're really not all that bad because one of them eats a lawyer.

Well, it seems that this little flick has caused quite a stir in the scientific community. Some say it's good, because it has sparked interest in genetics and paleontology among children. But others decry the film, because they claim that it (and the Michael Crichton novel upon which it is based) is not scientifically accurate, and that it contains one-sided and inaccurate attacks on scientists.

I'm not a huge science-fiction fan, but in order to compare-and-contrast, I did read the novel. Not great, but not bad. Some of the characters are flat and annoying, there are a couple of gaping plot holes, but overall, it's a page-turner. A pot-boiler, but a darn good one. The science is not great, but there's enough of a kernel of truth at the bottom of it to make it acceptable. Personally, I don't expect fiction to meet the standards of a textbook: as Stephen King once said, a novelist's job is to pile "lies on top of lies."

But the anti-science diatribes from the character of Ian Malcolm, the mathematician, were at times a bit hard to take ... for example, his assertions that scientists only want to make discoveries so they can put their names on them, that they do not consider the consequences of their discoveries nor look at the big picture, and particularly his statement that scientific method is merely another passing fad which will soon be outdated and replaced, just as science once replaced the superstition of the Dark Ages. He seems to think that science is just an invention of arrogant white European males,

which will be replaced by some vague Eastern, New Age spirituality. This is itself arrogant, since it ignores all the accomplishments of non-white, non-European, and non-male scientists down through the centuries. But remember the context: these are the words of an arrogant, eccentric character. And the good news is, most of it was excised for the movie. In addition, Malcolm is played by Jeff Goldblum, who mumbles his lines so badly, you can't understand a word he says anyway.

There are also lots of inconsistencies with the dinosaurs, as pointed out in an Associated Press interview with professor Peter Dodson of The Dinosaur Society. For instance, velociraptors were tiny dinosaurs, not six-foot monsters ... the depiction of the uncovering of a complete dinosaur skeleton with whisk brooms was highly unlikely ... and there is no evidence that a Dilophosaurus spit venom or had a frill around its head. But as Prof. Dodson says, "It's fine to depict it in art or fiction, just as long as we don't fall into the trap of believing it." Words to live by.

At this point, though, I am afraid I must part company with my scientist friends who say that the overall premise of the novel/film ... creating a dinosaur in modern times and seeing it run amok is impossible. I know it is possible, for it happened to me.

Back in the late 1980s, I was employed as senior staff writer and producer for The Lyons Group, an in-house audio-video production wing of DLM Inc. in Allen, Texas. The boss' daughter-in-law came up with the suggestion of doing a series of videos for children, featuring a toy that came to life. At first, it was a clown, but I objected that this was downright frightening, so it evolved into a dinosaur. Since I was the only person on staff with actual experience at creating such things, her suggested treatments were given to me to make them filmable. The major change I made, plot-wise, was to make the dinosaur come to life via imagination, rather than her idea of "magic dust" (I've always hated that *I Dream Of Jeannie* stuff, and I always try to include the message of "use your brain, kids!" in all my writing).

I continued working on the project for several months at long distance, since during this time, I had moved to the Northeast. Eventually, I sent back scripts for three home videos featuring this dinosaur, all of them filled with material that would appeal to children and adults alike, and all encouraging children to use their imaginations. I thought that the highest compliment we could receive would be to stimulate children's minds so much that they would turn off the TV, go outside, and play the same kind of pretend games they had just seen.

Unfortunately, upon returning to Dallas for the shooting, I discovered that there had been a tragic breakdown in the system. Educators had gotten hold of the blueprints and rewritten the scripts without my knowledge or permission. Gone was the more sophisticated humor that would appeal to older kids, replaced with endless exposition, repetitive dialogue, and a type of slow, hypnotic pacing that seemed designed to glue children to the screen indefinitely, not to stimulate their minds. Like Ian Malcolm, I argued forcefully against this, and ended up getting bitten for my trouble. I was soon fired by mail and my name removed from all public statements on the history of the project. And thank God for that!

Today, I recoil in horror as I watch this dinosaur replicate, break down the barriers of TV, and devour children's minds (and via the relentless, unconscionable merchandising, devour parent's bank accounts). So to all you parents, I would like to issue a public apology and a warning:

I'M SORRY! Please believe me, it was not my fault that it turned out this way! I have learned my lesson: Don't meddle with Mother Nature. It is best to let dinosaurs stay dead. And keep them away from your children ... or this could happen to you!



And now on to a more pleasant subject: syringes in Diet Pepsi cans. It now appears that the whole brouhaha was nothing more than a hoax that snowballed. The first report came in and was widely trumpeted by the national media. This inspired a second person to grab the limelight by dropping a syringe in a Pepsi. Since local newscasts are always on the lookout for local angles on national stories, the easiest way to get on TV (and perhaps to set up a lucrative product liability lawsuit) was to phone the local TV station and report that you, too, had found something untoward in your beverage.

The hysteria quickly spread. Soon, reports poured in from 25 states of people finding metallic objects in their Pepsi. And not just syringes: nails, screws, bolts, and other assorted hardware. Buy enough Diet Pepsi, and you'd soon be able to build your own hospital!

Fortunately, the FDA stepped in, identified the fraud, and started throwing the book at the hoaxsters, some of whom are now facing up to five years in jail and \$25,000 fines. Immediately, new claims stopped, and older ones were rescinded. And as quickly as it began, the wave of Pepsi hysteria subsided. That's good, since a lot of frightened consumers were on the verge of buying Crystal Pepsi, which I, purely in my own personal opinion, think tastes like carbonated cough syrup.

This whole incident was no surprise to us skeptics. It falls perfectly in line with over a hundred year's worth of research on popular delusions and the psychology of crowds. When James Randi makes an appearance on local radio, he often begins the show under an assumed name and claims that on the way to the station, he spotted a UFO in the eastern sky. Soon, the switchboard is filled with callers who also saw that UFO! They fill in all sorts of details. And they're crestfallen when Randi reveals who he is and admits that he made the whole story up.

The funny thing is, many callers are not so much embarrassed as disappointed or angry. They are furious at Randi for snatching this exciting anecdote away from them. People really want to believe in the fantastic, no matter what the facts. And sometimes, this pressure to believe the prevailing rumor and to jump in and embellish it yourself, is hard to resist, even for the most reasonable, rational person.

Makes me glad I only drink Diet RC Cola.

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Fringe Theory Update: Quake Prediction Fails

Richter Scale & West Coast Still Safe

By Mike Sullivan

The April issue of The Skeptic carried a prediction of an impending major earthquake in California, offered as our Fringe Theory of the Month and authored by Michael-Gordon Scallion. I noted at the time that Mr. Scallion's prediction was unusual for such prognostications in that he defined a date certain by which his prediction was to come true, which led us to publish his article in an effort to put it on the record.

Among other things, Mr. Scallion predicted that the "super-mega" quake would have more than one epicenter; that the open-ended and logarithmic Richter scale would not be sufficient to measure the magnitude of the temblor; that portions of San Diego and much of the Imperial Valley would be submerged; that tidal waves would wash along the entire West Coast; that much of California would be left without power; that earth from San Francisco to Sacramento would be displaced by hundreds of feet; and that all of this would result in a huge loss of life and damage amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars. Most notably, Mr. Scallion predicted that all of these things would happen absolutely no later than May 9, 1993.

I am delighted to report that from all indications, Mr. Scallion's predictions were a total bust. No reports of any of the above events have been made, and if anything, California and the West Coast have had a slightly below-normal three months of seismic activity.

I have delayed this update on Mr. Scallion's complete goose egg while I sought comment from him on the reasons he may cite for his total failure. I left several messages with staff members at his New Hampshire office and to date have not received a return call from Mr. Scallion or any of his assistants wishing to reply to our questions. One staffer,

Carolyn, told me that no one there wants to comment on failed predictions, but eagerly referred me to a 900-number service which would let me hear his latest vision. She also reminded me that they are still publishing his monthly "Earth Changes Report" and "Future Map of the United States."

Based on this spectacular, complete and unequivocal miss, I'd be a little hesitant to ask for Mr. Scallion's opinion on tomorrow's weather, to say nothing of his vision of the future coastline of the continent.

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"LEAN BODIES" HIDE SKELETONS

By **Tim Gorski, M.D.**

Certified clinical nutritionist" and best-selling Dallas diet book author Cliff Sheats rocketed to local celebrity status after preaching to listeners of Dallas' *KLIF-AM* talk radio the message that every overweight person wants to hear: that you can eat more to lose weight. Billed as "The Revolutionary New Approach to Losing Bodyfat by INCREASING CALORIES," Sheats' "Lean Bodies" program claims to do this primarily by means of "metabolically activating" foods and spreading meals throughout the day in combination with an exercise regimen. Sheats proudly presents himself as a masters degree nutrition expert and a fellow of the American Council of Applied Clinical Nutrition (ACACN).

But *Dallas Morning News* staff writer Kim Pierce, in a lengthy front-page article on June 19th, presented a wealth of material showing that the program is scientifically unsound. One of Sheats' key claims, for example, rests on a 1989 *New England Journal of Medicine* article comparing the metabolic effects of three versus 17 meals a day, calories and nutritional content kept constant. Sheats claims that "even without eating less, [the frequent meal subjects] lost weight, their metabolism boosted and they lost body fat." In reality, neither group in the study lost weight and the investigators never even measured metabolic rate or bodyfat. Sheats also cites the work of Dr. Peter W. R. Lemon at Kent State University in support of the claim that a very high protein diet markedly increases metabolic rate. But Pierce quotes Lemon as saying that if Sheats were right, "people on high-protein diets should be losing weight like crazy, and that's not the case."

Not detailed by *The News* is that Sheats relies heavily on a little known property of foods known as "specific dynamic action." It's been long known that starvation-type diets don't work well because the body responds to very low or no caloric intake by diminishing caloric expenditure. Re-feeding fasting subjects increases the basal metabolic rate, and that's the "specific dynamic action" of foods. It turns out that the specific dynamic action of protein is a bit greater than that of fats and carbohydrates. No one knows for sure why this is, but the body does go through a more complex biochemical pathway (and thus performs more work) to burn amino acids, the constituent elements of proteins, than it does either fats or sugars.

But simply on the basis of protein increasing metabolic rate more than carbohydrate and fat when fed to fasting (and resting!) subjects, Sheats jumps to the belief that by substituting protein calories for fat and carbohydrate calories, indeed, simply by greatly increasing the intake of protein, one can "boost" one's metabolism very significantly and lose weight.

Sheats' program does include very vigorous exercise, but his recommendations for dietary protein go far beyond that needed for increasing muscle mass. Any dietary protein over and above that necessary for the body's structural needs cannot be stored. Instead, it's converted to glucose and other metabolites which can be burned or converted to fat, producing waste by-products that must be eliminated by the kidneys. *The News* quotes both Dr. Harry Brenner, chief of the renal service at Harvard's Brigham and Women's Hospital, and National Kidney Foundation president Dr. Neil Kurtzman as having serious concerns about this. Many millions of Americans, possibly more than one in five, have undiagnosed kidney disease which could be exacerbated by such large amounts of dietary protein. And whether or not such large protein intakes over the long-term might be harmful even for healthy people is an open question.

Unaccredited Degrees

In a second front-page story on the same date, *The News* reported its findings concerning Cliff Sheats' credentials. After first claiming, and then denying that he had attended the University of Alabama, Sheats indicated that he attended a junior college in Decatur, Alabama. But both his bachelors and masters degrees were awarded by Clayton University, an unaccredited organization in St. Louis that was investigated by authorities as a diploma mill before it closed down.

The D/FW Area Council Against Health Fraud has learned that the same course of study completed by Cliff Sheats is still available through the ACACN, the first seven of ten parts available on cassette tape for \$600. Although there are no academic prerequisites, enrollees are taught "how to use nutrients therapeutically depending on the findings of CBC, SMAC, urinalysis and other tests" and advised to "work with a doctor so that his license covers what you do." Mr. Sheats, by virtue of his completing this course, also became a fellow of the ACACN. But, other than conducting the course, the ACACN has no meetings, no journals or other publications, no dues, or anything else that distinguishes it as an actual professional or academic organization. The "FACACN" that Sheats lists after his name means no more than his academic degrees.

Also not mentioned in *The News* articles is Sheats' unwarranted promotion of medium-chain triglyceride supplements as a way of increasing metabolic rate. Of course, he cites another journal article, creatively interpreted, as justification. The "Lean Bodies" book also implies that the average person is at risk for "a nutrient deficient state" and puts a heavy emphasis on an array of amino acid, vitamin, and other supplements, most of which are offered for sale by Sheats' organization.

Although *The News* could find experts who called Sheats' ideas "novel" and "interesting," the same could be politely said about reports of UFO abductions. Even Gay Riley, a registered dietitian whose endorsement of "Lean Bodies" appears on the book's jacket, is quoted in the article as saying that "the average individual ... is not going to follow the program 100% ... [but] to eat starchy vegetables, to eat corn, to eat lean fish, to exercise ... these are good." Unfortunately, the good information in the "Lean Bodies" book is hopelessly lost in a welter of pseudoscience that amounts to Cliff Sheats making of a few facts and selected articles from the scientific literature what David Koresh made of the Bible.

This information is provided by the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud. For more information, or to report suspected health fraud, please contact the Council at Box 202577, Arlington, TX 76006, or call metro 817-792-2000.

Dr. Gorski is a practicing physician, chairman of the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud and a North Texas Skeptics Technical Advisor.

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