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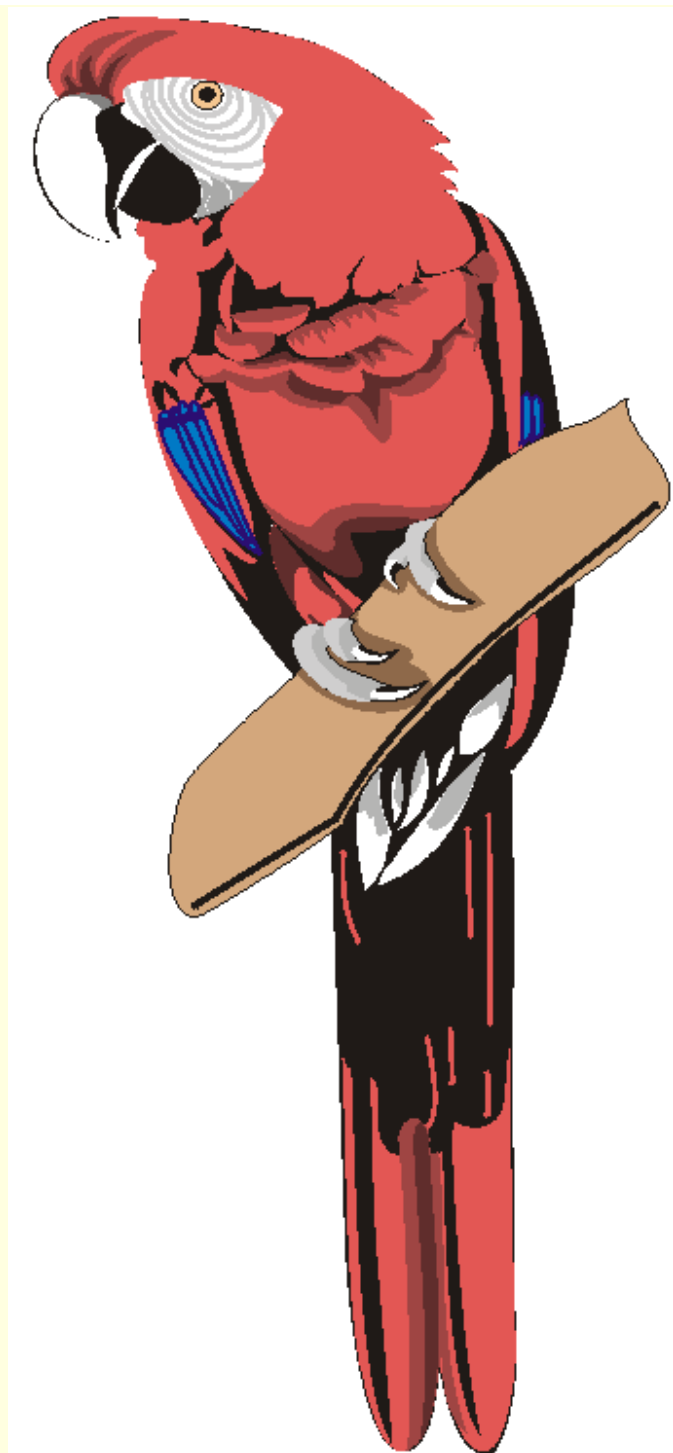
Homeopathy and Veterinary Medicine: Has *Bird Talk* Magazine Been Quacked?

The Infinitesimal Dose and an Immense Dilemma for Pet Owners

By Laura Ainsworth and Daniel Barnett

The two of us have a few things in common. For starters, both of us love birds (especially parrots), and we've welcomed a few feathered friends into our homes (especially Laura). Also, we're both married to truly wonderful people who share our fascination with birds. There's one more thing we share – we're both skeptics. As such, we affirm that rational and scientific processes provide us with a pretty accurate view of how and why things work the way they do in biology, chemistry, and veterinary medicine.

It therefore came as a surprise to us when Laura opened the September 2000 issue of *Bird Talk* magazine – one of America's most recognized bird care periodicals – and found, of all things, an article singing the praises of homeopathic medicines and their supposed efficacy in treating avian illnesses.



Corel image

Shortly after reading the article, we sent a letter to *Bird Talk* expressing our concerns about the information presented. It has been about three months since we mailed our response to *Bird Talk*, and so far we have yet to receive any response from the magazine, let alone see the letter published. Since this controversy deals with medical treatment for pet birds, we think we've waited long enough. Therefore, we shall discuss the problems we have found with the homeopathy article, covering all of the points mentioned in our initial letter to *Bird Talk*.

The article, entitled "Exploring The Homeopathy Option," was authored by Alicia McWatters, PhD, CNC, who currently works as a holistic avian nutritional consultant in New Mexico. Dr. McWatters incorporates various alternative medical therapies into her treatment programs, including herbalism, vitamin/mineral therapy, and homeopathy. ¹ She also helps promote the Pet Power line of avian nutritional supplements, which contain bee pollen, royal jelly, and propolis. ²

Despite the fact that McWatters owns several birds and has bred them, she offers no credentials to suggest that she knows

anything whatsoever about treating them when they are ill. McWatters also fails to note that there is no consensus within the medical community that homeopathy produces anything more than a placebo effect (which, she rightly points out, is nonexistent in birds), and also fails to quote any conclusive American studies that validate its use.

In her article for *Bird Talk*, McWatters gave very brief summaries of the underlying theories behind homeopathy, including the Law of Similars and the practice of using infinitesimal doses of medication. She also detailed what to expect when visiting a homeopathic veterinarian and explained how homeopathic medications should be administered to birds. McWatters then offered this information concerning scientific research and homeopathy:

Scientific studies have been performed and published in British, German, and Indian medical journals that support the effectiveness of homeopathy. In one double-blind study, nearly twice as many flu patients recovered within 48 hours after receiving a homeopathic remedy than those receiving a placebo. In another study, hay fever sufferers experienced six times as much relief from symptoms after taking a homeopathic remedy as those who received placebos. Both of these studies were published in *The Lancet*, a prestigious British medical journal. 3

Granted, such results produced by scientific research sound pretty impressive. Both of us were interested in getting our hands on the actual *Lancet* articles themselves, but McWatters did not supply the reference notes to those articles in her essay for *Bird Talk*. We sent e-mail to McWatters asking for the references and eventually received them with the following explanation: "Only one of the studies was published in *The Lancet*. The other one was published in the BHJ." 4 It should be noted that BHJ is shorthand for the British Homoeopathic Journal.

We were understandably disappointed that both articles mentioned by McWatters were not available in *The Lancet*, contrary to her statement in *Bird Talk*. Unfortunately, we weren't able to get hold of the BHJ article, which detailed the results of a double-blind study in which a homeopathic remedy was tested on patients with influenza-like symptoms. The fact that this glaring error by McWatters somehow made it past the editors of *Bird Talk* seems fairly irresponsible, and we wish that they caught it before the article went to press.

The other study cited by McWatters, which dealt with hay fever pollen (published in the October 18, 1986, issue of *The Lancet*) has been criticized for numerous flaws, including subjective assessment of response, dropout rate, method for assessing improvement, and subjective interpretation of results. The way we see it, things currently aren't looking good for McWatters' arguments in favor of avian homeopathic therapy.

McWatters has made two additional claims in the *Bird Talk* article that could endanger the health and even the lives of many beloved pet birds. Concerning recovery from illness, McWatters states:

In the recovery stages, an initial brief period called a "healing crisis" may occur. This is the process of shedding the "layers" of a disease, with its many deep-rooted levels of biological stress as well as the physical pathology. 5

The last statement of McWatters' article in *Bird Talk* asserts that since birds are not influenced on a mental level by receiving a homeopathic medication, one can assume that "when a cure occurs, we can acknowledge that indeed a cure has resulted from the medicine given." 6 This assertion left us with further concerns about her understanding of the scientific method and the controls necessary for testing. Recovery sometimes occurs when no medicine at all is given (as in the case of self-limiting illnesses); in other cases, there may be some other reason for improvement.

The problem is that, as many bird owners can attest to, birds often don't show symptoms of illness until they need immediate medical attention. What truly worries us is that if McWatters' methods are applied to birds, death could occur while the owner is tinkering with finding the "right" homeopathic remedy. When dealing with a sick bird, there is no time to treat the bird with a specific homeopathic "cure," give it five more times to see if the bird's health improves, and then try another homeopathic concoction if the first one didn't work – not to mention the process of waiting for the "healing crisis" of aggravated symptoms to pass!

A sick bird needs to be examined by a competent avian veterinarian – without delay. As skeptics who have welcomed various parrots into our respective families, we plead with readers of *Bird Talk* and all other bird owners not to deny their birds prompt, scientific, and professional medical care.

References

1. "Avian Nutrition with Dr. Alicia McWatters." *The Parrot House* Web site. <http://www.parrothouse.com/McWatter.html>. Accessed August 16, 2000.
2. For further information on the use of bee pollen and royal jelly compounds in supplements intended for human consumption, read: Barrett S. "Bee Pollen, Royal Jelly, and Propolis." *Quackwatch* Web site. September 17, 1999. [Http://www.quackwatch.com/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/DSH/bee.html](http://www.quackwatch.com/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/DSH/bee.html). Accessed August 16, 2000.
3. McWatters, Alicia. "Exploring The Homeopathy Option." *Bird Talk*. September 2000;18(9):60.
4. Personal correspondence with Alicia McWatters. August 11, 2000.
5. McWatters, *Bird Talk* 18(9):59.
6. *Ibid*, 62.

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The National Center for Science Education

by John Blanton

Done your Christmas shopping already? If not, save something for someone who's looking out for you. The National Center for Science Education (NCSE) works 24/7 to support the teaching of evolution in public schools. From their Web site at <http://www.natcensci.org>:

...a nonprofit, tax-exempt membership organization working to defend the teaching of evolution against sectarian attack. We are a nationally-recognized clearinghouse for information and advice to keep evolution in the science classroom and "scientific creationism" out. While there are organizations that oppose "scientific creationism" as part of their general goals (such as good science education, or separation of church and state), NCSE is the only national organization that specializes in this issue. When teachers, parents, school boards, the press and others need information and help, they turn to NCSE.

While most of NCSE's work involves defending evolution against attacks, we also work to increase public understanding of evolution and science "as a way of knowing." We also have programs to help teachers who want to improve their teaching of evolution. Here you'll find information and resources for all these activities.

Director Eugenie C. Scott travels the country throughout the year appearing on talk shows, testifying before Congress, and giving speeches. Their office staff and contributors produce the NCSE Journal and turn out a stream of information in response to inquiries from journalists, educators, and lawmakers. Their on-line book store is a gold mine of literature on the creation-evolution issue.

Purchases from their store help the organization, and cash donations are tax-deductible. NCSE publishes a list of major donors, and it includes some of the heavy hitters of science. If you give to the NCSE you will be in very good company. All you skeptics out there, get in the Christmas spirit and give.

The NCSE can also be contacted at

PO Box 9477
Berkeley, CA 94709
(510) 526-1674

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Jack Chick

by John Blanton

If you don't know creationism, then you don't know Jack Chick.

For nearly forty years Jack Chick has been pushing that old time religion in a series of illustrated gospel tracts in nearly 100 languages. The number of published tracts is now in the hundreds, and some of them are displayed in the Smithsonian Institution.

Besides that old time religion, another of Jack's concerns is that old time evolution. He's agin' it. His Web site at <http://chick.com/> exhibits samples of his work.

A 1994 issue reviews Scott M. Huse's *The Collapse of Evolution*.

"Beetle Warfare
Little Bugs That Evolutionists
Would Like to Forget!"

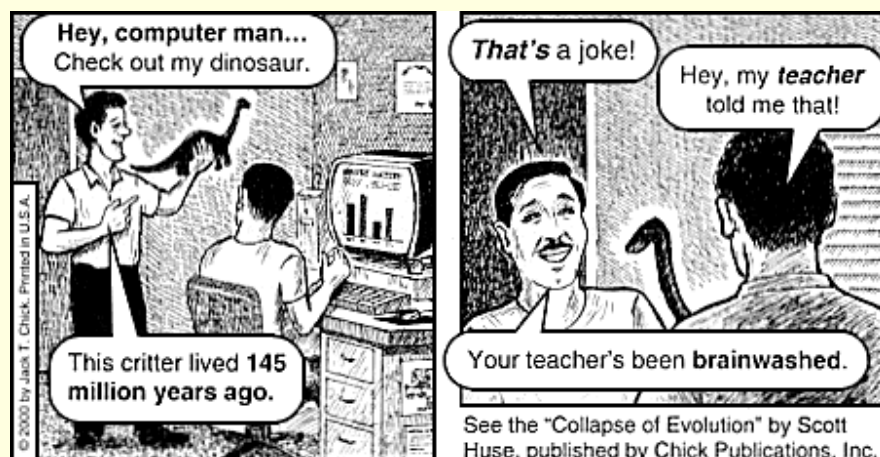
Did you ever notice how sometimes big surprises often come in little packages? Well, consider the little bombardier beetle. The bombardier beetle is a small insect that is armed with a shockingly impressive defense system.

Chick, like other creationists of the first kind, finds a favorite in this famous beetle. It's one of those critters that creationists say could not have evolved in a series of small steps. They equate their inability to comprehend with impossibility to happen. If they can't figure it out, it just can't be.

A delightful cartoon booklet *In the Beginning* just blows away evolution by pointing out that the Bible tells how we really got here. In the story, Computer Man's friend shows off his new dinosaur toy, and Computer Man reminds him that the dinosaur did not really live 145 million years ago, despite what the friend's teacher said. "Your teacher's been brainwashed" Computer Man reminds him.

"Evolution is the religion of scientists who **laugh** at God" Computer Man points out. "145 million years?... Those guys are only guessing" he says, and Jack Chick provides the scholarly reference: "The fool has said in his heart. There is no God. Psalms 14:1."

Each of the friend's challenges from science are skillfully parried by CM, who recites the Biblical passages that explain what science cannot. The friend is left confused and distraught. All he had believed has been shattered by the unassailable logic of Genesis.



Computer Man shows his friend the error of his ways.
(from Jack chick's Web site at <http://www.chick.com>)

The story has a happy ending, though. CM goes on to explain how the rest of the Bible assures him that there is hope and salvation in his religion, as indeed I am sure there is.

Although the main thrust of Chick's writings are just fundamentalist Protestant ideology ("we're right, and they're all wrong"), the anti-evolution theme comes up often. Here is an example:

Primal Man? (Crusaders Comic Volume 6) is one. "This story proves evolution is impossible. Connelly says he's convinced, but keeps producing evolution films. You'll learn why."

The Ark is another, of course. "While helping an expedition search for the ark on Ararat, the Crusaders learn about its history and of sightings this century."

Besides his own anti-evolution works, Chick reviews and offers for sale on his site works by other notable creationists. Besides the Scott Huse book previously mentioned he also offers Kent Hovind's creation seminar video series. I haven't seen any of the series, but from the titles they look like the real Hovind we have come to know and love:

#1 – The Age of the Earth ...

The Bible teaches that God created the universe in six literal days about 6000 years ago. Could this be true? Can it be scientifically proven that the earth is not billions of years old? This tape shows that evolution is actually a religion, not science. It also gives scientific evidence against the big bang, that the Bible is scientifically accurate, and that the earth is young.

#2 – The Garden of Eden

The Bible teaches that people before the Flood lived over 900 years. How is this possible? What was the Garden of Eden like? Were there ever cave men? Why do we find fossils that are huge compared to plants and animals today? Did dinosaurs live with Adam and Eve?

#3 – Dinosaurs and the Bible

Discover when dinosaurs lived, how Noah fit dinosaurs in the Ark, and how they died. See where dinosaurs are reported in the Bible, in history, and even learn about the few that are still alive today. Watch this tape and see eyewitness interviews with people who claim they've seen them.

#4 – Evolution: Lies in the Textbooks

See how evolutionists have permeated public school textbooks with false and fraudulent information simply to promote their religious world view. Learn what you can do to stop this mass indoctrination. Every public school student, teacher, and school board member needs to watch this tape.

#5 – Evolution - The Foundation for Communism, Naziism, Socialism and the New World Order

Dictators throughout history have used the evolution philosophy to rationalize their brutal actions. See how evolutionary propaganda is being used today to prepare people for the "New World Order."

#6 – The Hovind Theory

Throughout the earth, geologists and paleontologists find physical anomalies that they cannot explain with evolutionary theory. The Hovind Theory is a fascinating explanation of the Ice Age, as well as the formation of the Grand Canyon, coal, and mountain ranges.

#7 – Question and Answer Session

How does carbon dating work? Are there contradictions in the Bible? Where did the races come from? What about starlight? Learn the answers to these and many other questions not covered in any of the other Seminar tapes.

Hovind, it will be recalled, is a relentless opponent of evolution. According to the talk.origins (www.talkorigins.org) Web site he "claims to possess a masters degree and a doctorate in education from Patriot University in Colorado. According to Hovind, his 250-page dissertation was on the topic of the dangers of teaching evolution in the public schools."¹ Past issues of this newsletter have covered the Hovind phenomenon.² His book *Claws Jaws and Dinosaurs* (Living Dinosaurs) is featured in the cryptozoology book list on the NTS Web site.³

Wait there's more.

The Jack Chick site also sells posters. The current feature is the "Evolution Poster." As described on the Jack Chick site "This 2½ foot long poster from the two middle pages in BIG DADDY? uses humor and facts to show the foolishness of evolution. Exposes the truth about Heidelberg man, Piltdown man and others. Teens love it!" Here are the high points of the poster from the Web page:

1. Heidelberg Man – Built from a jaw bone that was conceded by many to be quite human.
2. Nebraska Man – Scientifically built up from one tooth and later found to be the tooth of an extinct pig.
3. Piltdown Man – The jawbone turned out to belong to a modern ape.
4. Peking Man – 500,000 years old. All evidence has disappeared.
5. Neanderthal Man – At the Int'l Congress of Zoology (1958) Dr. A. J. E. Cave Said his examination showed that the famous Neanderthal skeleton found in France over 50 years ago is that of an old man who suffered from arthritis.
6. Cro-Magnon Man – One of the earliest and best established fossils is at least equal in physique and brain capacity to modern man...so what's the difference?
7. Modern Man – This genius thinks we came from a monkey.
8. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools – Romans 1:22

Not only scientist, but honest people of faith will get considerable heartburn from Jack Chick's publications. In addition to hacking at evolution, Chick has kind words for Catholicism, Masonry, Islam, and errant versions of the Bible, as well.

Sometimes I find myself worrying about otherwise serious scientists like Michael Behe, out there preaching the anti-evolution line. When real scientists knock evolution, it becomes necessary to point out in a rigorous manner where they are wrong. When extremists like Jack Chick wade in with their obvious nonsense, the defense of evolution becomes considerably easier. The quality of an idea can often be gauged by the character of its enemies.

Thanks, Jack. We needed that.

References

1. See this excellent Web site covering the full range of the evolution/creation controversy at <http://www.talkorigins.org>.
2. See "Traveling creationism," *The Skeptic*, [December 1994](#); "Creation science education," *The Skeptic*, [July 1998](#), " Web news," *The North Texas Skeptic*, [March 2000](#).
3. <http://www.ntskeptics.org/books/cryptozoology.htm>

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What's new

by Robert Park

[Robert Park writes "What's new" for the American Physical Society at <http://www.aps.org/>.]

New age medicine: the celebrity factor, a royal pain. In the U.S. we are treated to Hollywood stars testifying before

Congress on the benefits of alternative medicine (WN 12 Feb 99), which Congress supports at a level of \$50M a year. In the UK, Prince Charles created the Foundation for Integrated Medicine in 1996. He is now urging the government to shell out 10M pounds for a 5- year research program in alternative medicine. However, a Lords' committee has just completed a critical year-long study of alternative medicine, detailing the risks posed by lack of recognized training, standards and research.

One step forward, two steps back, the Pennsylvania polka? The same day that Penn State scientists concluded that life on land originated 1.4 billion years earlier than previously thought, the Pennsylvania School Board this week proposed Science Standards that allow teaching of theories "that do or do not support the theory of evolution." Many local board members support the move, one proclaiming, "Our beliefs in Butler [school district] are pro-creationist." Written public submissions will be accepted.

Book review: "Icons of Evolution" by Jonathon Wells. There are lots of unscientific books out there, but only a few of them are truly anti-science; this one qualifies. Wells seems particularly incensed by Dobzhansky's 1937 observation that nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution. Nonsense, says Wells, it all makes perfect sense once you realize that a supernatural intelligence decides everything. Who are we to ask why this intelligence chose to trick us with false clues?

Genes, we learn, aren't the whole story. "If our developmental genes are similar to those of other animals," he puffs "why don't we give birth to fruit flies instead of human beings?" (Clearly, we do give birth to fruits.) Wells also frets over a conspiracy, led by a "small faction in the National Academy" who have "exploited the Academy's reputation to propagate Darwinian dogma". But he's confident that scientists will retaliate once they "realize what is being done in their names." Yawn.

Cold fusion: conferences held, patent rejected. The American Nuclear Society is holding an embarrassing session on cold-fusion at its meeting next week in Washington. Capitalizing on the presence of so many fanciful minds, the new-age Integrity Research Institute (WN 5 Mar 99) holds its free-energy conference two days later. A likely topic of discussion is last Wednesday's ruling by a Circuit Court of Appeals to reject the appeal of Michael Swartz for a cold-fusion patent on the grounds of "lack of operability." The Court ruled that the patent didn't convince sensible people that the idea could work. But, not everybody falls into that category. Testifying for Swartz were two invited speakers at the IRI conference – Eugene Mallove and Scott Chubb.

Science education: some laws are too important to pass? How do you save an important bill from a Supreme Court challenge? House Democrats came up with a novel answer this week. Citing fears of constitutional problems with physicist Vern Ehlers'(R-MI) National Science Education Act, Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX) implored "we know the urgency of the provisions of this bill. But we do not want to risk the outcome." Solution? Thirty of the bill's Democrat co-sponsors led the charge to defeat it. WN suggests that bills like Ehlers, which promote training in analytical skills, seem urgently needed.

Polygraphs: some laws shouldn't be passed. Congress snuck in a provision to the defense authorization bill requiring polygraphs for 5,000 additional Energy Department employees. Including the provision from last year's bill (WN 10 Sep 99), the total is now 20,000. Hmmm. Now how many polygraph tests did Aldrich Ames pass? Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org

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Remembering L. Sprague de Camp

by John Blanton

Skepticism lost two good friends this year. On November 6 noted writer and skeptic L. Sprague de Camp passed away. His wife Catherine died earlier this year.

After presenting a talk for us in 1991 and meeting with us at the CSICOP conference in 1992, Sprague became a member of

our advisory board and attended a number of our social gatherings.

Sprague is best remembered as a writer of science fiction/fantasy of the genre's Golden Age, but he was also the author of many serious works. *The Great Monkey Trial*, his book about the 1925 Scopes trial is the most comprehensive recount of that episode in the creation/evolution controversy. We have previously reviewed his recent *The Ape-Man Within*, and his autobiographical *Time and Chance* was published in 1996.

Notable fiction works include *Lest Darkness Fall*, which came out in 1941 and is still in print. Most famously he co-authored many of the recent stories of the Robert Howard creation Conan the Barbarian and was a consultant for the first of the Arnold Schwarzeneger Conan movies.

Sprague was a close friend and associate of science fiction writers Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein. The three of them worked together at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard in World War II, giving conspiracy theorists something to chew on when the movie *The Philadelphia Experiment* came out a few years ago. He was one of the founding members and a long time fellow of CSICOP, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

Sprague and Catherine were both born in 1907, and they moved to Plano in 1989. Widely traveled and master of numerous languages, he was, as I have said, a man who has trod the length and breadth of the Twentieth Century.



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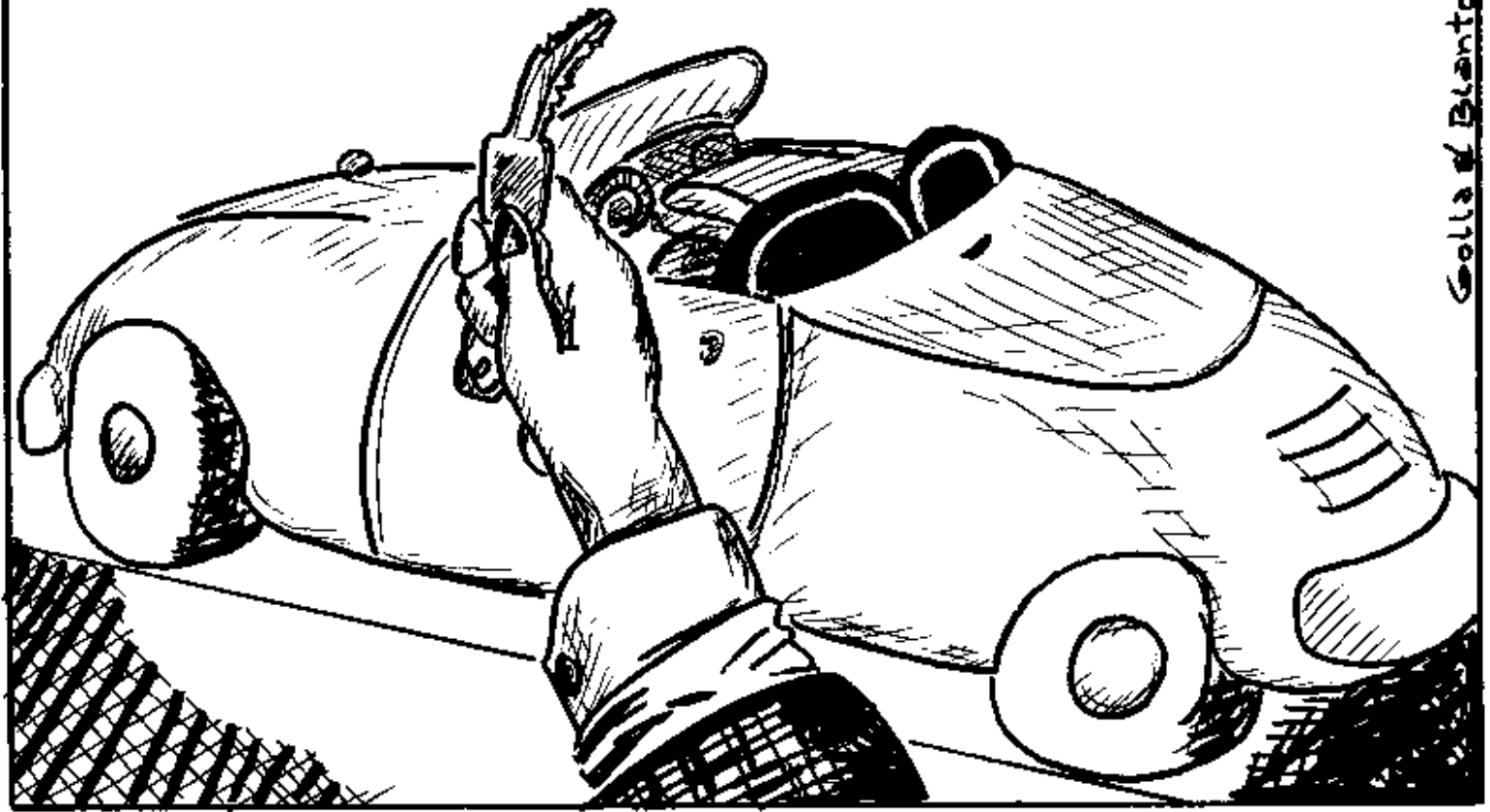
Skeptical ink

By Prasad Golla and John Blanton

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Why Uri Geller doesn't
drive a car



Golla & Blanton

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