

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

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Purpose:

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL) is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe- science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL not not reject paranormal claims on a priori grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

Membership information is provided elsewhere in this newsletter.

Board of Directors: Chairman, David Bloomberg; Assistant Chairman, Prof. Ron Larkin; Secretary-Treasurer, Wally Hartshorn; Newsletter Editor, Bob Ladendorf; At-Large Members, Prof. Steve Egger, Frank Mazo, (one vacancy).

Editorial Board: Bob Ladendorf (Newsletter Editor), David Bloomberg (electronic version editor), (one vacancy).

REALL

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From The Editor -- Bob Ladendorf

My film production instructor at Sangamon State University in the '70s once made a commercial for a blood bank that showed a vampire chasing a victim. As the black-clothed figure caught the screaming woman, a narrator's voice was heard, "Voodunt you rather be a voluntary blood donor?"

The funny commercial showed the traditional vampire seen--and still seen--in scores of movies, from the early German film *Nosferatu*, featuring a lanky brute in with even larger shadows, to Frank Langella's sensual *Dracula* in the movie and stage play. None, however, has been funnier than the parody starring George Hamilton as *Dracula* in *Love at First Bite*.

That mythical figure is explored in Robert E. McGrath's book review feature, "Vampires--Myth and Reality." While book reviews are rarely featured in newsletter lead stories, this lone one by McGrath, a University of Illinois research programmer who lives in Urbana, presents a lot of interesting information that pertains to skeptical inquiry.

Having been elected as your newsletter editor, I wanted to thank Wally Hartshorn for doing a fine job in getting REALL's newsletter off the ground. I only hope to continue in that vein and bring together information and opinions of note.

In the coming months, I plan to build on our REALL start, adding the works of new, as well as experienced writers, inserting more graphics, and working towards a design that would make an easier- to-read newsletter.

As always, your comments and suggestions are welcome. I want to make this newsletter a forum for all of us skeptical inquirers.

/s/ Bob Ladendorf

From the Chairman -- David Bloomberg

I now write this column for the first time as the "real" REALL Chairman. The Organizing Committee is no more, and the Board of Directors is now in charge.

At our May meeting, we found out just how to make certain we get as few people as possible to attend: announce that elections will be held. I would like to thank those who did come and participate, and especially those who volunteered to join the Board and/or help in various tasks. We still have one "at-large" Board member position open, which we will fill at our upcoming meeting (please don't let this scare you away, though).

After the elections, we discussed some of the short- and long-term goals for REALL. In the short term, we need to gain more exposure and attract more interested people, so that we may follow our long-term goals of education and investigation. Several ideas were tossed around, but we are always looking for new ones. So, if you have an idea, let us know. Either call one of us, write a letter, or, better yet, come to a meeting.

We are also always looking for good speakers for our meetings. If you have any suggestions, or would like to volunteer yourself, just get in touch.

Incidentally, we also discussed Detective Walstad's presentation, and we STILL don't know how he did one of those card tricks. Announcements:

This month, I will be speaking on cold reading. While I don't claim to be anything close to an expert, I have recently been looking into it, and I'll discuss what I've found.

We have been granted a special discount from Prometheus Books for REALL members. Catalogs will be available at our upcoming meeting. If you've been waiting to get a certain book, bring your checkbook and we'll get the order in ASAP. We need at least 10 books from the group per order to get the discount. I know I'll be getting two, so that's only eight more we need to get our first order in.

/s/ David Bloomberg

{SPECIAL BOOK REVIEW}

Vampires -- Myth and Reality

A review of *Vampires Burial and Death: Folklore and Reality*. By Paul Barber. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988, 236 pp. Paper \$9.95 (Cloth \$30.00)

"Vampires" and similar "undead" creatures are known to us all from popular fiction and cinema. The fictional vampire emerged from the folklore of many cultures and throughout historical records. What are the origins and bases of these tales? Are they anything more than scary stories? In this book Paul Barber investigates the folklore skeptically and shows that there are some interesting facts to be found. In doing so, he also provides an instructive example of critical thinking and writing.

Barber examines the folklore of vampires from European and non-European cultures.

Vampires differ from other monsters of folklore: although they have an active life in legends and tales, there is an endless array of evidence -- folkloric, archaeological and even legal -- of what they were believed to do and how it was explained. Vampires were often dug up and "killed," and both the appearance of the bodies and the reasons given for the actions of both corpses and the living are recorded. We can, therefore, ask questions about these beliefs and how they arose with considerable hope of finding reasonable answers. (p. 120)

Barber approaches these reports "assuming that few of our informants are deliberately fabricating evidence" but making "a sharp distinction between observed phenomena and explanation, for one may be accurate while the other is not." (p. 88) This is a vital distinction to learn for the investigation of reports of any extraordinary phenomena.

The reader will hardly be surprised that the "real" vampire of traditional folklore has little resemblance to the Hollywood creation of the same name.

If a typical vampire of folklore, not fiction, were to come to your house this Halloween, you might open the door to encounter a plump Slavic fellow with long fingernails and a stubby beard, his mouth and left eye open, his face ruddy and swollen. He wears informal attire -- in fact, a linen shroud -- and he looks for all the world like a disheveled peasant." (p. 2)

No black cloak, no fangs, and not even a gentleman!

Barber emphasizes that it is necessary to "study the actual phenomena to determine whether it is our informants or we ourselves who lack adequate information." (p. 88) Accordingly, Barber inquires into the science of decomposition and unearths a considerable body of information about what happens to dead bodies. These details are not well known to most of us, because most people have as little to do with dead bodies as possible. The details also will not appeal to all readers, and I shall not recount them here. Suffice it to say that, detective stories to the contrary, the decomposition of a body is a complex and active process. Despite what many of us might think, "bodies continue to act long after death." (p. 9) Today we interpret this activity as due to other entities, such as microorganisms. In the past this activity was seen as a continuation of the life of the person.

The heart of Barber's thesis is, then, that the normal "activities" of corpses have often been interpreted as signs of continuing or renewed life of the person. He identifies many sources of change that act on a corpse including decomposition, attacks by scavenging animals, and the ejection of the body from its resting place by weather. In the absence of direct observation of the agent that caused the body to move or change, it is easy to see that one might conclude that the change was caused by the body itself, and that the body was still alive or alive again. For instance, " {a} body dug up by dogs is not unusual. But seen as a tableau, with the scavengers no longer present, there is nothing to account for the hand emerging from the earth except its own volition." (p. 135)

Barber makes several points of interest to skeptics. In analyzing the recorded literature of vampires, he finds that in many cases the description of the appearance of the corpse is very accurate and matches what is known today about how corpses decompose. For instance, although the vampire stories almost always report that the corpse had not decomposed, "they almost always present evidence that it really was decaying." (p. 191) Here we see that it is essential to take the folk accounts seriously, but to attempt to separate the observation from its interpretation.

If vampires of folklore have no fangs or cloaks, they do have some frequently attributed characteristics, including, especially, drinking blood. Barber shows that a decomposing body may well be found that has blood in its mouth, is bloated, and bleeds when cut; these are normal conditions for some decomposing bodies. The evidence could easily lead, however, to the conclusion that the body is swollen from a recent feast of blood. Barber similarly "disposes" of other supposed characteristics of vampires, attributing them to normal features of decomposing bodies.

Barber proceeds to consider folk beliefs about contagion, death, and the dead. The newly dead may, not unreasonably, be suspected of causing death. The mysterious and alarming activities of dead bodies become very threatening in times of epidemic or other disaster. Even in normal times, the dead are considered by many cultures to be dangerous to the living, especially while the body is active, that is, until it has fully decomposed to bones.

In this light, Barber interprets some otherwise opaque funeral and mortuary customs as measures intended to protect the living by appeasing, warding off, or even fooling the newly dead. Barber suggests that many folk beliefs and practices can be seen as efforts to keep the soul of the newly deceased from reentering the body and thus becoming a threat to the living. This idea links folk theories of the soul with vampire lore. For instance, a reflection in the mirror or in still water is often held to be able to hold one's soul. In some cultures, mirrors are turned to the wall and standing water is covered or poured out when someone dies. This, Barber, suggests, might be done in an effort to prevent the soul from being captured by a reflection and thus lingering nearby where it might reenter the body. Similarly, vampires are often reported to attack victims in dreams, which are clearly a realm of the soul in folklore.

Barber sees the goal of many customs as not only protecting the living from dangerously active dead, but to hasten the dead to a safely inert, fully decomposed state. Various methods of body disposal are discussed in this light. Some cultures routinely mutilate or restrain corpses, possibly to interfere with their further activity during the danger period. Such practices are also observed in prehistoric burials. For instance, the "bog people," well-preserved bodies discovered in European peat bogs, were staked down. Barber sees this as efforts to make sure the bodies did not rise to the surface and thereby "threaten" the living.

Here we can see that Barber is venturing rather far afield, and presenting his own imaginative reconstruction of events he has not observed. Barber rejects the "bizarre" attempts by scholars to explain vampires as due to various rare diseases, yet his own speculations about the meaning of death and mortuary customs, while not bizarre, are certainly open to criticism. For instance, Barber notes that archaeologists have found many bodies buried in a contracted position. This, Barber says, "may be explained by the corpse having been tied up so that it could not return from the dead." (p. 55) While the evidence for binding corpses may be fairly tight, there are many possible explanations for this custom, and too little evidence to tie us to any single theory.

Barber may also be criticized for interpreting folk tales and practices solely in light of his theory, sometimes with too little regard to the cultural context in which the practices occurred. It is important to note that in folklore the dead are not always seen as a threat to the living. The departed are often benign or even helpful, as when a loved-one is said to return to protect, instruct or warn the living. It must also be remembered that folklore is an imaginative creation, not an effort at scientific explanation. Folk stories about the dead serve many purposes besides accounting for the mysterious behavior of dead bodies: they illustrate and defend cultural beliefs and values, and they might even be intended to entertain. For an appreciation of the complexity of beliefs about death, readers might consult *Appearances of the Dead* (Prometheus Books, 1984) by R.C. Finucane (Reviewed in *Skeptical Inquirer*, Winter 1989).

Altogether, this book is an interesting and well-written interpretation of folk beliefs and instructive example of skeptical inquiry. Barber shows that one must always take reports of first-hand observations seriously, while remaining skeptical of interpretations and inferences attached to them. Separating observation from interpretation is not always easy, but it is completely impossible unless one takes care to study the actual phenomena in question. And, as always, one has to be aware when one is speculating and be properly skeptical of one's own imaginings.

Conversation with a Creationist

by Ranse Traxler

There are just some things that are too memorable for a person to forget. A few years ago I had such an experience at

one of the monthly meetings of the Missouri Association for Creation is St. Louis. Even though I consider myself something of a "wordsmith" (you should hear the words I can come up with when I hit my thumb while hammering), the following is something too "unusual" for me to have created. I swear it took place.

The event would be memorable already because of something David Menton, President of MAC, Washington University professor, and Technical Advisor to the ICR [Institute for Creation Research], said in response to a question from the audience. When the topic of embryonic features was brought up, he replied, "Look! I'm a professor of anatomy at Washington University Medical School, and I assure you that at no time during development does a human embryo have anything remotely resembling a tail or gill slits!"

During that meeting I noticed a young female who looked very out of place there; she had a Levis jacket loaded with pins, spiked hair, and all sorts of chaings and medals around her neck. After the meeting I happened to meet her in the parking lot and we started to talk. She: "I came to the meeting tonight to learn more about evolution." I: "Would you want to learn more about God by asking the Devil? You should instead talk with a biologist at one of the local universities. You need to ask someone with a good science background to learn more about evolution." She: "Oh, I have a good science background. I'm a nursing major at [a local junior college]." I: "What do you know about evolution?" She: "Well, if evolution is true, then I ought to be able to walk down the street and see a dog turn into a cat." I: "That's not what evolution says. Evolution says that dogs and cats have a common ancestor. Let me give you an example: you and your cousin have a common ancestor, a grandmother, right?" She: "Yes, but she's not a monkey." I: "No one is saying your grandmother is a monkey. All I'm saying is that dogs and cats share a common ancestor just like you and your cousin share your grandmother as a common ancestor." She: "But she's not a monkey!" I: "I'm not saying your grandmother is a monkey! What I'm saying is that to say, 'A dog will suddenly turn into a cat,' is like saying 'You will turn into your cousin overnight.' We both know that you will not turn into your cousing overnight even though both of you share a grandmother for a common ancestor, right?" She: "Yes, but she's not a monkey!"

At that point I gave up, encouraged her to take a university biology course, said "Good night," got into my car, and drove home in a state of disbelief.

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

The biggest story of the media this past month was the CBS show, "Ancient Secrets of the Bible, Part II" (see related article). Besides that, we have word of some strange lawsuits and poor investigation.

Hg + Potato = Au

According to the April 5 Chemical & Engineering News, an alchemist decided that he could make gold by baking mercury in a potato. So, in the best scientific tradition, he, while left alone on a towboat as a caretaker, tried to use the galley to realize this goal. Needless to say, it didn't work exactly as planned.

As the judge wrote, "Not surprisingly, [he] sustained injuries while breathing mercury vapors escaping from the very hot oven containing the mercury-laden Idaho potato. [He], again, unsurprisingly, reasons that because injuries occurred on a towboat in drydock, he asserts he is a seaman and seeks refuge under that rock of protection the Jones Act, and under general maritime law. This court must deny him safe harbor." The judge added, "The court cannot find, nor does the plaintiff supply, any case law to support the proposition that the practice of alchemy is within the duties of a seaman who is acting as a caretaker."

In order to report more fully on this incident, I have studied the procedure. I am firmly convinced that it didn't work because he forgot to add the necessary ingredients of sour cream and chives.

Starry Suit

A second strange lawsuit was reported this month in the Chicago Tribune, with a short blurb (5/26/93) discussing a Madison, Wisconsin newspaper being sued for libel. The paper published an opinion column in which astrologers were called "purveyors of hogwash." Neil Marbell, who runs a business that gives astrological forecasts over the phone, is suing because he says the column was, "false, malicious, defamatory and libelous."

Now I'm no lawyer, but those who I have consulted don't believe this case has a chance of ever getting past an opening hearing, since neither Mr. Marbell nor his company appear to have been mentioned by name, but rather a whole "profession" was discussed. However, I almost want it to go the distance, just so we can see if Mr. Marbell has any evidence that horoscopes are anything but hogwash. I'm not holding my breath.
Investigation? What's That?

George de Lama wrote an article for the Chicago Tribune about support groups in California for supposed alien abductees (5/14/93). The only problem is that Mr. de Lama apparently didn't bother to investigate anything for the article.

I've come to this conclusion from the way he discusses the phenomenon. Comments such as "local residents who have been abducted by aliens," and "Smith's clients have been poked, prodded and studied, shot up with needles and fitted with implants" make it sound like this has all been verified (note the lack of such words as "alleged" and "supposed"). In fact, however, all of these things are nothing more than personal allegations, with little or no evidence. The testimony of these people is often garnered through hypnosis, which is a suspect method of obtaining information when conducted by a biased hypnotist, as in the cases described in this article. The few supposed implants presented for study have been shown to be mundane, not extraterrestrial. Does Mr. de Lama know this? If so, he certainly didn't bother to tell the readers.

Another obvious point is that de Lama says we should not be surprised if support groups like this pop up all over the country. I hate to break it to him, but these groups have been around for years. Even the smallest amount of research would have shown him that.

Once again, we see the Tribune acting as though anything that appears in the Tempo section is "soft news" and doesn't need to be researched or verified.

Goodbye Sightings

The grapevine tells me that Fox's Sightings has been canceled. Rest assured that REALLity Check mourns the passing of such an unbiased, investigative show. Also rest assured that I could not keep a straight face while typing that sentence.

Unfortunately, the time slot will now be taken by The X-Files, a show about an FBI team that investigates "unexplained" phenomena. Oh well, you win some, you lose some.

Logic Abuse and CBS

A REALLity Check Extra

by David Bloomberg

The Creationist Broadcast System (sometimes known as CBS) and Sun-PKO Productions were at it again. This time they broadcast Ancient Secrets of the Bible, Part II at 8:00 on Saturday, May 15, hosted by Dennis Weaver.

You may remember that these were the same people who put together the Noah's Ark special a couple months ago. Well, the only good thing I can say about this one is that it wasn't quite as bad as the Noah one.

As you know, REALL does not take any position on religion. However, when people play fast and loose with the scientific evidence, whether it deals with psychics or alleged miracles, REALL will do it's best to point it out. Also, these "researchers" often associate themselves with the very same people who want Creationism taught as science in the public schools.

Four Biblical stories were featured in the two-hour show. In each case, they showed skeptics making a statement, and the proceeded to apparently demolish those arguments. However, paying close attention to what was actually said shows that, in fact, their "logic" is not exactly up to par.

For example, to "prove" that the story of David and Goliath is true, they cited "archaeological evidence" that there were giants in the region (no citations or references, of course, so we have no way of knowing anything about this "evidence"). They also did a demonstration showing that the sling can be a deadly weapon. Finally, they said since there is no evidence to disprove it, the story must be true. If conclusion-jumping were an Olympic sport, these guys would have gotten the gold medal.

While this story doesn't deal with supposed miracles, it does illustrate the misuse of logic often present in their arguments.

Another story featured Moses and the Ten Commandments. They claimed that they had found the Biblical mountain on which Moses received the stone tablets, but, just as they were about to delve deeper into it, the Saudi government closed it off. And they found the actual Ark of the Covenant beneath Temple Mount (I guess Indiana Jones didn't really find it), but, just then, that area was walled off with concrete! Darnit, this is as bad as all those mishaps trying to photograph Noah's Ark. Actually, it rather reminds me of many UFO conspiracies. Hey, maybe they're all linked together in some mystical way. Where's Oliver Stone when you need him?

The third story dealt with the Book of Daniel, and three of his friends who were supposedly tossed into a furnace and survived. In this one, they couldn't even get their own "experts" to agree with each other on what happened, and the dramatic "recreation" was different from all of the explanations. But did they mention these contradictions? Heck, no! They just claimed the "evidence is on our side" and went along their merry way.

The fourth and final segment was about Samson and Delilah. One of the skeptics interviewed was Canton, Illinois' own Farrell Till, editor of *The Skeptical Review*. I called Mr. Till the day after the show aired and talked to him about it. Suffice it to say he was not happy. According to him, the producers and/or directors reneged on several promises about the way his segments were to be done. They originally came to him with a script (when I was watching, I had a feeling most of those people didn't look very natural when speaking, now I know why). He said he would only do it if he could rewrite his portions of the script. They agreed and allowed him to do so, but then cut most or all of his changes out in editing. He was supposed to be in three scenes. He was removed entirely from the third, and replaced by somebody else who would simply say what was on the script. To sum up, Till told me, "They gutted everything I said."

All in all, this program basically did the same thing its predecessors had done. Often, when they showed somebody who agreed with the beliefs being espoused by the program, they referred to them only as "Bible Professor" or something similar. In the Noah's Ark show, many of those were affiliated directly with the Institute for Creation Research. While I didn't catch any names that I recognized as being from ICR in this show, Till mentioned to me that several of the professors they were highlighting were from obscure religious junior colleges, and were not nearly as "expert" as they would like us to think.

Once again, I'm emphasizing that this has not been an attempt on my part to attack a religion or their beliefs. But when people try to bring science into it and say it supports those beliefs, I will not stand by silently while they misrepresent the evidence. Especially since, in many cases, this leads directly to the idea of teaching those religious beliefs in a science class using the "logic" of "since the Bible was proven scientifically correct here, it must be in all cases."

As before, I encourage our readers to write to/call CBS and let them know what you think of these shows. They can be reached at (212) 975-3166; 51 West 52nd Street, New York, NY 10019. A CBS spokesman told one person that only 25 people called to complain about the Noah show, while 400 people called in support. REALL always appreciates copies of letters that are sent, and also copies of any replies you might receive.