

The REALL News

=====

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land
Volume 1, Number 9 October 1993

Electronic Version

If you like what you see, please help us continue by sending in a subscription. See the end of newsletter for details.

In This Issue:

From the Editor -- Bob Ladendorf

From the Chairman -- David Bloomberg

Who is Susan Blackmore? -- Robert E. McGrath The Omega Projection -- Martin Kottmeyer

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, and Kevin Brown.

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

REALL
P.O. Box 20302
Springfield, IL 62708

Unless stated otherwise, permission is granted to other skeptic organizations to reprint articles from The REALL News as long as proper credit is given. REALL also requests that you send copies of your newsletters that reprint our articles to the above address.

The views expressed in these articles are the views of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the views of REALL.

From The Editor -- Bob Ladendorf

In this month's issue, we feature articles by writers who wrote for The REALL News previously. Robert McGrath, who

also spoke to our group on his photoanalysis of the Loch Ness "monster," discusses the work and career of parapsychology researcher turned skeptic (and now CSICOP board member), Susan Blackmore. His account may introduce many of our readers to her work.

Martin Kottmeyer reviews a book concerning the connections between those having near-death experiences and end-of-the-world fantasies with those alleging UFO encounters. The book by Kenneth Ring also deals with a "Mind-at-Large" concept. "Ring advances a theoretical construct termed 'Mind-at-Large,'" Kottmeyer writes, "that senses that the planet is now imperiled and releases seeds of salvation into mentally fertile humans to later flower with prophecy." Kottmeyer's description of "some quasi-transpersonal external Mind-at-Large" reminds me of the "Overmind" in one of my favorite sci-fi novels, *Childhood's End*, by Arthur C. Clarke. In that book, the Overlords (aliens) take over the earth just as the Americans and Russians were going to annihilate each other, ushering in a period of peace - uneasy at that. Humankind eventually evolves into the "Overmind," flowing into an amorphous, cosmic consciousness entity.

Perhaps there is truth in the old saying, "Life imitates art."

/s/ Bob Ladendorf

From the Chairman -- David Bloomberg

Well, it's been a rather hectic month for me. On the 1st and 2nd of the month, I manned a booth along with Steve Best of Gateway Skeptics and Ransie Traxler of the St. Louis Association for Teaching and Education at the Illinois Science Teachers Association (ISTA) annual convention. The three groups, along with the National Center for Science Education (NCSE), went in together on the booth in order to inform Illinois science teachers about creationist activity in public schools, as well as generally trying to interest science teachers in our groups.

NCSE sent us some wonderful literature to hand out, and I kept a copy of each brochure so you can look through it yourself if you're interested. We printed up an informational sheet which we hoped would be of particular interest to science teachers, and still have extra copies of these, so if you know any science teachers you'd like to introduce to REALL, come pick some up and hand them out freely.

Between the ISTA convention and then a family emergency, I couldn't get a "REALLity Check" together for this issue, but watch for a bigger and better one next month.

Our next meeting is on Monday, October 18 (probably just a few days after you get this issue). I will be speaking on the ISTA convention and a bit on the creation/evolution controversy in public schools. I don't want to give away too much, but here is a teaser: The representative of a scientific equipment company in the booth across the way from ours was a good friend of the head of the Missouri creationists group and was himself a "young-earth" creationist. But to find out what happened, with him and others, you have to come to the meeting!

/s/ David Bloomberg

Who is Susan Blackmore?
by Robert E. McGrath

I'm not particularly skeptical about Susan Blackmore. I consider her one of today's most important skeptics, scientists and students of the paranormal. Her life and work are an inspiration and a model of creative engagement, rational inquiry and personal integrity. She has shown the right way to scientifically study paranormal phenomena, courageously pursued the truth wherever the evidence has led, and has repeatedly criticized "skeptics" who reject claims of the paranormal on less than rational grounds. When Dr. Blackmore speaks, I listen.

Blackmore's scientific work is impressive. *Beyond the Body* [1] is the most complete examination of "out of body experiences" (OBEs) to date and will probably never be surpassed. This book is based on the unparalleled archives of the Society for Psychical Research in London, anthropological data, esoteric lore and scientific data of various kinds. She examined theories of the OBE based on religious, philosophical, pseudoscientific and scientific ideas.

Characteristically, she personally experienced as much as possible of the "out of body" phenomena and gives careful consideration to the reported experience of others. Blackmore emphasizes an experiential definition of the OBE: the experience of being "out of the body" is real and scientifically indisputable. This approach provides a rational basis for examining the OBE, without committing one to any particular explanation of it. Blackmore is sure the experience is real, if somewhat rare, although she is convinced that nothing actually leaves the body during an OBE.

Beyond the Body represents the foundation of one of Blackmore's continuing lines of research. She has investigated other phenomena which may or may not be related to OBEs, including "near death experiences" (NDEs), "lucid dreams," and altered states of consciousness, including meditation. Throughout this work, Blackmore seeks to understand these experiences and their meaning. She examines questions that scientific psychology recognizes as fundamental, if scientifically intractable: the nature of consciousness, self-consciousness, experience, imagination and memory. She holds (quite correctly) that the "paranormal" experiences she examines can and must be brought into "normal" psychology, however difficult that may be. This she has done with some success.

In seeking to understand the "out of the body" experience, Blackmore has asked: "What is an 'in the body' experience?" Despite the fact that we all have this experience much of the time, and usually take it for granted, there is precious little "scientific explanation" of this phenomenon. Blackmore's theories seek to tie together the everyday "in the body" experience, OBEs, NDEs, and other altered states of consciousness, using rational, testable scientific hypotheses. In this she has had some impressive success. [2,6,7]

Professor Blackmore has had much less success investigating conventional parapsychological phenomena, such as precognition, psychokinesis, and remote viewing. She has written of her initial belief in psi, the tantalizing hints she observed, and how the apparent evidence of psi vanished each time she applied tighter scientific controls. Her personal experiences seemed to show the reality of psi, yet she was unable to produce any scientific evidence for it, or replicate studies by others which seemed to show it. Further, she found much of the published "evidence" and "theory" to be invalid or inadequate. Her scientific training forced her to conclude that she could find no evidence that psi exists. These developments are discussed autobiographically in two books [3,4].

The conflict between her convictions based on personal experience and what she knew based on science presented a personal crisis for Blackmore. This sort of crisis has probably happened to many people. In response, some people might conclude that there really is "nothing there," and move on to easier scientific topics. Others might abandon rationality and science, preferring to trust their own personal experiences of psi. Blackmore could not do either; she responded to the crisis by seeking to explain the conflict itself. If psi does not exist, she considered, why did she (and so many others) believe it did? Like the question of "in the body experiences," this leads to profound and important psychological questions, such as, "Why do people believe in the paranormal?" and "Why are some experiences felt to be 'paranormal' and others not?"

These ideas have led to a second important line of research: the examination of the psychology of "psychic experiences." Blackmore has identified what she describes as "cognitive illusions" analogous to "perceptual illusions." Just as "visual illusions" are "the price we have to pay for a perceptual system that does very well in a confusing world," cognitive illusions may be "the price we pay for the way our brains look for connections in chance and probability." [5, p. 62] Psychologists find perceptual illusions valuable because they may reveal details of how people normally perceive the world. Blackmore's "psychic illusions" may be valuable for the same kind of reason: they may reveal how people ordinarily judge chance, infer cause and effect, and find patterns.

Examination of cognitive illusions has led to the consideration of the psychology of belief and skepticism. In her 1991 address to the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) at the time of her selection for its Executive Council, Blackmore discussed the classic parapsychological concept of sheep (those who tend to believe in the paranormal) and goats (those who tend to disbelieve the paranormal). Events in the world are usually ambiguous and might be produced by a known cause, an unknown cause, or chance. We usually do not know "the truth," and routinely draw inferences based on limited data. When faced with a pattern of occurrences for which there is no solid explanation (which happens all the time), different people will draw different inferences. Sheep will tend to infer that operation of unseen "psychic" forces. Goats will tend to see coincidence, or perhaps unknown but "perfectly natural" forces. Attributing all ambiguous events to mysterious, psychic powers closes one to much of the real

world. Attributing all ambiguous events to chance closes one to the unexpected and the new. Both these positions are undesirable. Blackmore calls upon us to be open to the unexpected, while critical of what it seems to show. She imagines continuously soaring, at first sheep-ish, then more goat-ish, and back again. She calls this, "being a `flying horse,'" and calls upon us all to join her in this category. (See [8].) This is both sound psychological theory and good skeptical practice.

Beyond her contributions to knowledge, I am attracted to Susan Blackmore because she takes it all so darned personally. Her work is completely self-centered: she has spent her life attacking the questions she thinks are important. She asks, "Who am `I'?", "What does it mean to be `me'?", "Is there something more than physical reality?", "How can we really know?" She has repeatedly said, "I don't know", and "I may be wrong", but she has never stopped asking good questions. Despite the difficulty of these questions, she has not given up, nor has she compromised her high standards of inquiry. Who is Susan Blackmore? Even she doesn't know. But I think she's great.

Some Books and Articles by Susan Blackmore 1. *Beyond the Body*. Heinemann, London, 1982. American paperback edition, Academy Chicago Publications,

Chicago, 1992. 2. "A Psychological Theory of the Out-Of-Body Experience,"

Journal of Parapsychology, Volume 48, 1984, pp. 201-

218. 3. "The Adventures of a Psi-Inhibitory Experimenter," in *A*

Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology, Paul Kurtz, ed.,

Prometheus Books, Buffalo, 1985. 4. *The Adventures of a Parapsychologist*. Prometheus Books,

Buffalo, 1986. 5. "The Lure of the Paranormal," *New Scientist*, Volume

127, September 22, 1990, pp. 62-65. 6. "Lucid Dreams," *Skeptical Inquirer*, Volume 15, Number

4, 1991, pp. 362-370. 7. "Near Death Experiences: In or Out of the Body?",

Skeptical Inquirer, Volume 16, Number 1, 1991, pp. 34-

45. 8. "Psychic Experiences: Psychic Illusions," *Skeptical*

Inquirer, Volume 16, Number 4, 1992, pp. 367-380. [Robert E. McGrath, a University of Illinois research programmer who lives in Urbana, wrote our June cover story, "Vampires--Myth and Reality," and presented a photoanalysis of the "Loch Ness "monster" at a recent meeting of REALL in Springfield.] (A graphic ran on the front page, with this story. It had the quote, "The sleep of reason produces monsters" within it and can be obtained by download or FidoNet file request as SKEPTIC.BMP from The Temples of Syrinx BBS, (217) 787-9101, Fido 1:2430/2112. The graphic is courtesy of the Georgia Skeptics.)

The Omega Projection

by Martin Kottmeyer Review of Kenneth Ring's *The Omega Project: Near-Death Experiences, UFO Encounters, and Mind at Large*, William Morrow, 1992.

_The Omega Project, it must first be said, is a marvelous achievement and will be properly recognized as a landmark in the study of the psychology of the UFO experiences. It gives us a solid empirical base for the first broad overview of the mental landscapes of people who have been caught up in the UFO myth.

Two fundamental observations should perhaps be offered before proceeding to my particular bone of contention: how UFOlogy's world destruction fantasies should be interpreted. Ring's finding that UFO encounterers believe in alternate

realities will prove to be crucial in the inevitable questions about their reality-testing skills and definitions of psychopathology. Second, the compelling linkages between near-death experiences and UFO encounters will prove to be eventually explicable in terms of the neurophysiology of the brain in crisis. The self-observed inversion of behavioral patterns after near-death experiences and UFO-related mental states has obvious parallels in the generalized reversal of conditioned behavior observed by Pavlov when some dogs nearly drowned in a flood at his lab. He subsequently achieved the same result by means of torture. Ring's findings suggest a significant portion of UFO experiences are a product of transient or reactive paranoid psychosis. This does not exclude other obvious mechanisms such as nightmares, active imaginations, and hoaxing from being reasons for alleged UFO experiences. No one should expect every experience to be explicable by a single process.

The treatment of world destruction fantasies among UFO experiencers by Ring is the topic I choose to focus on here because it is a subject which has captured my theoretical interest in the past. (See "Dying Worlds, Dying Selves," *Ufo Brigantia* #47, Jan. 1991, pp. 24-32, and "Ego Freakout and Saucerers of Doom," *The Wild Places* #3, late 1991, pp. 24-28.)

Ring found that fully 85 percent of UFO experiencers report an increase in their concern for planetary welfare -- 60 percent said it strongly increased. This provides a nice panoramic backdrop against which to view a study of Bedroom Visitor Contacts by Jenny Randles in her 1983 book *Ufo Reality*, which found the motif of imminent earth catastrophe as a reason for alien visitation in 28 percent of the cases of this form of UFO experience. This also provides solid support for the often expressed sentiment that end-of-the-world style beliefs are an unusually repetitive feature to UFO experiences. Certainly, it is a feature of the UFO landscape which is hard to overlook.

Ring echoes the consensus that the message of apocalypse pervades the literature of UFO abductions. He brings us Betty Andreasson's abductions and the portents of ecological horror in *The Watchers* as a prominent example. He shuns Raymond Fowler's literal acceptance of her experiences as truly extraterrestrial, but he feels "the message" should not be ignored. There is a sensitivity among abductees to the concerns of ozone depletion and deforestation. Confronted with somewhat similar yet somewhat different nuclear annihilation concerns of contactees, he squeezes them into his schema by regarding them as a similar species of ecological consciousness. Ring advances a theoretical construct termed "Mind at Large" that senses that the planet is now imperiled and releases seeds of salvation into mentally fertile humans to later flower with prophecy. Abductions reflect dark forebodings and intuitions that dress messages in space age fascinations to steal our attention and awaken us to the planet's plight before it is too late. They are a diagnostic warning coded in symbols and images which, correctly interpreted, spurs us to right action.

This all sounds hopefully rational and leaves one with the gentle glow that abductions are really important after all and not the waste of time they can seem when the spaceship model is found in the attic or the current guru shoots himself in the foot. The glow fades, however, in the cold dark of history. Most alien prophecies of cataclysm over the decades have no evident ecological component. Contactees have warned of cosmic debris clouds, comets of doom, colliding suns, nuclear firestorms, and our planet blowing up. The most common scenario in the literature has the earth flipping over with the continents sinking Atlantis-like into the drink. Trying to decode these images into environmental concerns would require elaborate and dubious apologetics. Moreover, the aliens rarely request political or other substantial action. They ask us to be good and transmit good vibes, which environmentalists would not regard as a helpful response.

The prophecies have an absurd air of caricature. Andreasson warns that mankind will soon become extinct through sterility - an outrageously perverse sentiment in the context of earth's ballooning population. Aliens repeatedly warn that human actions threaten "the balance of the universe." Can aliens be that astronomically illiterate or contactees be that prideful of human powers? Dates for the end-time cataclysm have been repeatedly set and repeatedly shown to be wrong. Why does the Mind at Large present its message in a roundabout way, so overdramatically, so irrationally? If the planet is in peril, why not say it straight out and present the argument in a reasonable form?

World destruction fantasies have been with humans since aboriginal times and pervade mythology and cultural history. This suggests a more uniformitarian approach involving human psychology as its locus of genesis. In fact, psychologists have already done some thinking on world destruction fantasies since they encountered them often in their work. The idea which seems to have gained widest acceptance is that they represent projections of an internal catastrophe. The self when faced with death and mental disintegration expresses its personal loss of stability through a metaphor involving

the fate of the world. Such fantasies have long been known to occur in conjunction with paranoid fantasies and within states of reactive psychosis. Triggers include certain forms of individual crisis events, organic brain dysfunction, and hallucinogens, such as LSD.

That the genesis is personal and not societal or some quasi-transpersonal external Mind at Large is sometimes reasonably apparent. Andreasson's prophecies of sterility make simple projective sense when we recall her painful memories of having had a hysterectomy that necessitated an abortion. To speak of the balance of the universe may puzzle one at first in its blatant derangement, but to fear one's own balance of mind is threatened by the fears prompted by nuclear annihilation is easily understood. This will perhaps seem to be a species of interpretation analogous to Ring, but the intent is not to decode a message but to unscramble a fiction to recognize its creative mechanisms and understand why a UFO experience should not fool you to think it should be treated with the same respect as a logician's syllogism.

Ultimately, world destruction fantasies should be seen more as a diagnostic sign that the UFO mythos is a paranoid delusion than as an omen of the fate of the world sent by a cryptic Mind at Large. Ring may have gotten the wrong angle on the data in this instance, but, on the positive side, at least he did not follow Fowler into naive apocalyptic belief that Andreasson is literally correct. Abductions, I safely predict, will be explained by known psychological processes. The Omega Project, knowingly and unknowingly, is proving to be an important advance in demonstrating that proposition. [Martin Kottmeyer is a regular contributor to The REALL News and has written for several British publications, including Magonia, _UFO Brigantia_, and _The Wild Places. He lives in Carlyle, Illinois.]

The report of my death was an exaggeration. -- Mark Twain [Death is] nature's way of telling you to slow down. -- Newsweek (4/25/60)

A Nod to our Patrons

REALL would like to thank our patron members. Through their extra generosity, REALL is able to continue to grow as a force for critical thinking in Central Illinois. Patron members are those giving \$50 or more. To become a patron of REALL, please see the membership form below. Patron members are:

Alan Burge, D.D.S., Pekin Wally Hartshorn, Springfield

David Bloomberg, Springfield Bob Ladendorf, Springfield

BUY PROMETHEUS BOOKS THROUGH REALL AND GET A 20% DISCOUNT NOW We are placing an order as soon as we have a minimum of 10 books. To order through REALL or to get a Prometheus Books catalog, come to the next meeting, or send us a check for the book(s) minus 20% + \$1 for shipping and pick u the book(s) at a following meeting, or call us.

Predictions for Future Issues * Current Research Updates on Top Ten Paranormal/Fringe Science Activities * Paranormal Beliefs in Medieval Times * The End of the World! * Using Computer Bulletin Boards for skeptical information * Who is Susan Blackmore? Skeptics Online

If you have a computer and a modem, you owe it to yourself to participate in the skeptic message areas on the computer BBS networks. Here in Springfield, call The Temples of Syrinx at (217) 787-9101. David Bloomberg operates this BBS, which carries the FidoNet SKEPTIC, EVOLUTION and UFO conferences, internationally distributed message areas for discussing topics of interest to skeptics. He is also carrying ParaNet conferences, all dedicated to UFO and paranormal topics. You can also find a wide variety of skeptic text files. The Temples of Syrinx -- (217) 787-9101
Membership Form

Regular membership includes The REALL News and all of the benefits of membership. A subscription to The REALL News, without membership, is available. Full-time students can join at the discounted rate. A patron membership includes all of the benefits of a regular membership, plus a listing in The REALL News and our eternal gratitude (where

"eternal" is defined as "one year").

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, ZIP: _____

Phone: _____

Interests: _____

- ☐ Regular Membership (\$20/Year)
- ☐ Student Membership (\$15/Year)
- ☐ Family Membership (\$30/Year)
- ☐ Patron Membership (\$50 or more/Year)
- ☐ Subscription Only (\$12/Year)
- ☐ Trial or Gift Subscription (\$3 for 3 issues)

Bring to a meeting or mail to: REALL, P.O.
Box 20302
Springfield, IL 62708