

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, and Kevin Brown.

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

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From The Editor -- Bob Ladendorf

With this issue, we complete our first year of publication. I want to thank all our patrons and subscribers for helping to make this newsletter, as well as our monthly meetings, possible.

Looking ahead into 1994, I foresee an intensification of the debate over false memories, particularly in relation to charges of past sexual abuse. David Bloomberg gives us a perspective on that issue in a REALLity Check Extra on page 1. While child abuse is prevalent in this country, the *potential* for abuse and false accusations is disturbing. In Illinois, a new law essentially eliminated the statute of limitations for making child abuse claims. If filing lawsuits has become the national pastime, what will we call the no-holds-barred suing that could take place over alleged child abuse? What's worse, this Pandora's Box of child abuse claims could jeopardize legitimate claims as Americans become numbed by frivolous lawsuits. I don't want to see a return to McCarthyism. On a lighter note, we know from analyses of past years' "psychic predictions" by the Bay Area Skeptics group that few of their predictions come true, and that most of the ones psychics claim are true are general and vague predictions, such as a ship will sink in the Atlantic Ocean. In his Chairman's Column, David Bloomberg tries to make some easy predictions for 1994. I take great umbrage, however, at his prediction that the Cubs will not win the pennant this year! Cub fans (aka hopeless optimists) like myself know that as time goes by, the chances of winning increase. (Or do I need to submit that question to Marilyn vos Savant in Parade magazine?)

In REALL's quest for knowledge over myth and lies, we have to remember that it is not an easy task. As James Callaghan once said, "A lie can be half-way around the world before truth has got its boots on."

/s/ Bob Ladendorf

From the Chairman -- David Bloomberg

Happy New Year! Here we are in a new year, a new volume number, and only six years away from the end of the world that is being predicted by all sorts of people. Considering the track record of such predictions, I'm not taking my money out of long-term investments.

The new year brings out the "psychics" like trash brings out flies. All of them clamor to tell us what the year holds for us, for the country, for the world, and for Hollyweird. Of course, they expect us to forget their predictions for *last* year, and most people unfortunately do. If they didn't, these people would have to get real jobs like the rest of us.

But I also have some predictions for the new year. I predict that the Cubs will *not* win the World Series, I will *not* win the Lotto jackpot, California will *not* slide off into the ocean, President Clinton will *not* be abducted by aliens, and Ross Perot probably will be.

Regarding REALL, I have some predictions and some hopes, kind of mixed together. I predict that we will have a variety of great speakers at our 1994 meetings, including at least one on creation/evolution, one on psychic detectives, and possibly some magic thrown in for added fun. I would like to see REALL grow in membership, and hope that we are able to send out information to local science teachers and others who might be interested. I predict that REALL will become more active in distributing facts to the media and other interested parties as we become more well-known in the area. I hope that our members help get the word out that REALL is around and is always willing to answer questions and give out necessary information. Finally, I predict that we will continue to consistently put out a newsletter which I consider to be among the best in the field.

I'm willing to stack up my predictions to any of the "psychics" that will be in the tabloids or on the talk shows.

/s/ David Bloomberg

{Special Report}

Noah's Ark Hoax Update

by David Bloomberg

A great deal has happened since REALL's special report on Sun Pictures (Vol. 1, No. 8, September), so we at The REALL News felt an update was in order.

To briefly recap for new readers, Sun International Pictures, Inc. produced The Incredible Discovery of Noah's Ark, which aired on February 20th on CBS. In July, Time_ magazine and the Associated Press ran stories indicating that one of those who appeared on the show, George Jammal, had made up his entire story as a hoax on Sun. During the writing of REALL's original article, Jammal was not speaking publicly on the issue for fear of legal action from Sun and/or CBS. However, information came from Dr. Gerald Larue, a professor emeritus of biblical history and archaeology, indicating that, in fact, the whole of Jammal's story, including the supposed piece of wood he chopped out of Noah's Ark, had been cooked up. Sun had tried to defend itself and rebut the articles, but it had not done a very good job.

Since that time, Jammal spoke at the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) meeting on October 23 and detailed the hoax, including the making of the fake piece of the Ark. Other changes followed rapidly, including a change of tactics on Sun's part, a change on CBS's part, and a change on Sun's chief researcher's part.

While the attack on Larue comprised the first of their defenses in Sun's earlier rebuttal, they removed it almost totally once Jammal admitted to the hoax. They continue to maintain that, as an "entertainment" show, they cannot "make news," but they did institute slightly more stringent "research" guidelines for their upcoming shows. According to David Balsiger, their chief researcher at the time of the show, they began extra checks on the credibility of their interviewees with third parties and looking at previous publications by those interviewees. However, he also said they still would not test "artifacts," and the extra measures got to the point that it "wasn't worth doing these kinds of shows any more."

Balsiger also discussed the changes at CBS and Sun. CBS has canceled all of the Sun shows in production. In addition, Balsiger believes that a weekly show on UFOs which Sun had planned for cable may be canceled due to the bad publicity. With these problems, Sun has laid off much of its staff, including Balsiger, and he said he does not expect to work for them again. He added that it is very unlikely that Sun will do any projects for network TV for at least two to three years, due to the "tremendous damage" caused by bad publicity, and that he will be probably be restricted in the kind of work he can do. He said it is probable that he will only be able to work with non-network broadcast, such as feature films, and that he has a possible offer to work on a project for the public school market. But considering how exasperated he seemed by even the minimal "extra measures" of research instituted by Sun when the hoax was first revealed, what kind of research will he be doing for shows now, especially if he actually does work on something for the public school market?

So far, there has been no legal action taken against anybody involved in the hoax. While Balsiger had originally said that there might be legal implications to hoaxing a network, he now says there are no plans for Sun or himself to sue Jammal or Larue, as it would probably be "impractical" and the press might construe it as being an attack by CBS behind scenes. And while he had originally said that CBS attorneys were trying to contact Larue, they still have not done so.

Apparently, Balsiger has also changed his mind on whether or not people should have been able to tell that the show was entertainment based solely on the context, and contrary to statements made by the host, leading people to believe it was a documentary. He now says, in hindsight, that it would have been a good idea to have a disclaimer on the show, stating that it was not a documentary.

George Jammal has said that he hoaxed his "discovery" to point out the faulty research of certain organizations (his hoax was originally directed at the Institute for Creation Research in the mid-80s, but was picked up by Sun for this show). In other words, he said he wanted to hoax the hoaxers. It appears that his hoax had the desired effects. Sun is out of the pseudo-science-TV business for a while, and hopefully others have learned from their mistakes. Even CBS's Dan Rather apparently attacked the show in a speech, and I've been told it even got a mention on "Murphy Brown," another CBS show. Skeptics can only hope Jammal's hoax has acted as a wake-up call to reverse the trend of decreasing distinction between "news" and "entertainment".

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Child Abuse or Science Abuse?

A REALLity Check Extra
by David Bloomberg

As in the past few months, false memory syndrome (FMS) continues to be a big attention-grabber. The State Journal-Register ran an AP article (Dec. 19) detailing the case of Elizabeth Carlson, who is suing her therapist for allegedly causing her to "remember" things that never happened to her.

In addition to this case and others, supporters and opponents of the FMS idea were interviewed, and some of those opposing the idea that it occurs sound suspiciously like proponents of the paranormal. Some said that they think that skeptics are just part of a backlash because people don't want to admit the prevalence of abuse. I can't count the number of times I've been told that I don't believe in alien abductions for the same reason. The fact is, however, that those of us who are skeptical of the accuracy of "repressed memories" don't deny that abuse exists, nor that there is far too much of it. But considering the experiments that have shown that false memories can be implanted, and that some abuse trials have turned into witch hunts, it seems that a good deal of skepticism is justified if no other proof exists.

Last time I checked, the U.S. justice system still relied on presumption of innocence. However, it almost seems that some of these "witch hunters" would like to change that. The "bible" of the incest-recovery movement, *The Courage to Heal*, by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, says, "If you are unable to remember any specific instances...but still have a feeling that something abusive happened to you, it probably did." This leaves the door open to all sorts of abuses of the justice system. One therapist quoted in the story said, "I sure hope we don't let a bunch of accused perpetrators decide what public policy is going to be on memory repression." I agree; we shouldn't. Nor should we let a bunch of biased "therapists" make that decision. We should let trained scientists do what they do best, and let those results speak for themselves.

So far, experts don't agree on the validity of "repressed memories", or even if they actually exist. However, as mentioned earlier, some have successfully planted false memories.

Would the therapist mentioned above suggest that all those researchers are "accused perpetrators"? Or perhaps they just don't want to admit that abuse exists. Or maybe, just maybe, they are just doing good science and not letting their personal feelings interfere.

REALLity Check
by David Bloomberg

Last month was the source of many hurrahs, but 1993 had a few more strikes from the fringe left before it faded into this new year. False memory syndrome (FMS), which has struck a media chord lately, is covered in a separate article. Are UFO Sighters Crazy?

Several publications had articles related to the recent study reported in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* on a study of UFO sighters. The *Chicago Tribune*, in particular, had one of the best in summarizing the results of the study (Nov. 1).

A group of Canadian psychologists studied people who reported seeing UFOs and compared them to a control group. Their findings indicate that UFO sighters are not lacking in intelligence or mental stability, but they do have a tendency to interpret reality differently. Also, they found that people who already believe that we aren't alone in the universe seem more likely to interpret unknowns such as UFOs as encounters with spacecraft or extraterrestrials.

This was a relatively small study, and is mainly useful to show that more study needs to be done. Many in the UFOlogical community are hailing the part of the conclusion saying that they aren't crazy or stupid but tending to not put much emphasis on the portion saying UFO sighters can have a different interpretation of reality. I wonder why... Or Are They Victims of Another Kind?

Two women in a small town of Virginia say they have been repeatedly abducted by aliens, who have done all sorts of nasty things to them.

Their story is detailed in USA Today (Dec. 16), and it's not until you are three-fourths of the way through the story that the author mentions that these memories of alien abuse were recovered through hypnosis from a psychologist who "says abductees come to him for hypnosis to recover suppressed memories." In other words, it sounds like people are coming to him, and they both have the forgone conclusion that they are being abducted by aliens. If that doesn't bring out the question of the effects of leading questions, nothing does.

The ladies' claims are pretty standard as far as alien abductions go. They've supposedly been repeatedly impregnated and then had their fetuses taken, but no evidence for such is offered in the article. All sorts of alien medical experiments are done, but, again, no medical evidence of such "pokes and prods" are given.

So, once again, the only evidence are stories given under hypnosis, in the care of a psychologist with preconceived notions. Not exactly the best conditions for scientific study of a phenomena.

A-cat-upuncture

We've seen something on alternative medicine in almost every one of the first volume "REALLity Checks," but things are really getting strange. Now, there is alternative veterinarianism.

That's right! Acupuncture for your cat, homeopathy for your dog, and all the other fun and unscientific "therapies" for all your veterinary needs!

The Chicago Tribune, a veritable haven for articles on alternative medicine, gave us this story on "holistic medicine" for pets on December 10. As usual, several "alternative medicine is great" proponents (vets and pet owners) were interviewed, with all of one skeptic also mentioned. At least in this case, that skeptic does get a few good words in, including the final statement of an example showing that the placebo effect can work on animals as well as humans.

Typical of such articles, though, most of the skeptic's scientific comments are overshadowed by feel-good responses by the holistic medicine proponents. The skeptic (Dr. Larry Fox, president-elect of the Chicago Veterinary Medical Association) said, "Homeopathy is all the rage now, but it has absolutely no scientific basis." The next statement comes from a homeopath who says that the biggest problem is ignorance, because the veterinary schools won't teach it. I have to agree that the problem is ignorance, but it's his ignorance of science. [The actual printed version of this issue had a rather humorous (if I do say so myself) drawing of a cat with little pins sticking out of it wondering what the heck was going on. For future amusing tidbits, make sure you send in the membership form at the end of this electronic version!] What? We have to PROVE it?

And on the human side of alternative medicine, starting this summer, manufacturers of dietary supplements will have to get prior FDA approval for health claims they make about their products. (Associated Press, Chicago Tribune, Dec. 30.)

These new rules won't force any products off the shelves but will make them live up to the same standards as foods. Basically, this means they will have to prove that their product can actually do whatever it is that they claim it does. Horror of horrors!

Cold Fusion, Alchemy, and Other Mix-Ups

Science and Newsweek report (Nov. 26 and Jan. 10, respectively) that there is a controversy brewing at Texas A&M University's chemistry department over some experiments by Professor John Bockris.

It seems that Bockris supported the Pons and Fleischman cold fusion results, even apparently duplicating some of their results until an internal review at the university criticized "a breakdown of scientific objectivity" that affected a number of cold fusion researchers at that university, including Bockris.

More recently, some of his colleagues are saying that lack of objectivity is back. According to the articles, Bockris received a call from Joe Champion, who said he could turn other metals into silver and gold. Champion even produced an investor who offered a \$200,000 gift to the university to support the research.

Champion was in and out of Bockris' lab for a little while as an unpaid "guest worker", and instructed two of Bockris' postdocs in the techniques. One was a "total failure." The other, burning a mixture of potassium nitrate (a component of gunpowder), carbon, and salts in a coffee can, however, produced measurable amounts of gold. But when Champion left, the experiment could not be duplicated (how similar is this to "psychic" experiments?). Ramesh Bhardwaj, a former associate research assistant for Bockris, believes the "successful" experiments were faked, according to Newsweek.

Then, according to Newsweek, Champion was jailed in Phoenix, Arizona, on felony-theft charges in an unrelated case. And in May, the investor was charged by the Securities and Exchange Commission with selling \$7.8 million in fraudulent and unregistered securities.

Bockris still says he believes chemical transmutation of elements may be possible. He told a local paper that he had been "working on carbon to iron."

The university has begun an inquiry into the entire affair, especially trying to figure out how a respected research university accepted \$200,000 for alchemical research.

Because They Don't Know the Words

The Chicago Tribune (Dec. 26) reports that the strange humming of Taos, New Mexico, is continuing to fill the heads of some residents. "The Taos Hum" is a mysterious humming noise that only certain people can hear. It has brought out claims of UFO activity, secret government weapon experiments, strange energies, and other odd explanations. Other theories include that the hum is caused by the scraping of tectonic plates, or something generated by the inner ear.

According to the article, as news of the hum has spread, others outside of Taos have reported hearing something similar, even over in England. This tends to stack evidence against UFO bases or secret weapons, but those "theories" continue to be put forth even by their Congressman, a member of House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. He claimed, at a town meeting, that there were three secret weapons projects which might cause the hum, and he demanded the federal government put an end to them. His spokesman now says he spoke solely on the basis of "rumors." I'm sure glad we have him on our country's "Intelligence" committee.

Scientists have been trying to find the source of the noise, and have generally failed to even recognize that there is a noise at all. They will also investigate whether the sounds are generated by the inner ear itself.

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Predictions for Future Issues ** SPECIAL 1ST ANNIVERSARY ISSUE! ** Looking into the Sun -- and other tabloids
** Who Is Ray Hyman? ** Alien Suckers
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
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