

The REALL News*

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." -- James Randi

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A Look into the Sun -- and Other Tabloids

Part 2 -- The Elements of Proof

by Bob Ladendorf

In Part 1 of this three-part series, I pointed out that two of the five major supermarket tabloids featured many more paranormal/pseudoscientific articles than did the others. While the National Enquirer, Star and Globe concentrated on celebrity gossip, the Weekly World News (WWN) and the Sun featured the range of the supernatural.

How credible then are the latter two? Are they convincing in proving or raising questions about the paranormal? How seriously do they need to be treated? In a nutshell, I conclude from this study that the answers to these questions are basically negative -- the tabloids are not credible or convincing, and they are more like Mad magazine than a journal of scientific inquiry. This will probably come as no surprise to anybody reading this. More

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To look into those questions in order to make those conclusions, I evaluated the content of the relevant articles in relation to the sources cited. A lack of credible sources undermines one's proof.

As critical thinking, legal testimony, or even common sense would indicate, human beings have an enormous capacity to lie, or to at least stretch the truth. Even the reliability of multiple witnesses can be called into question; crime investigators, for instance, often get contradictory eyewitness accounts of a crime. In testing hypotheses through the scientific method, the reproducibility of experiments is an extremely important part of any proof. When non-common events occur, the importance of the sources' evidence and its repeatability for others is necessary.

If tabloids do include articles that are untrue, how do they get away with it? "It's no big deal," Steve Coz, senior news editor for the National Enquirer told the Chicago Tribune (Kidnews, Aug. 2, 1994. sec. 5, pg.1). "Tabloids avoid trouble and lawsuits (Coz says the Enquirer is sued less than any other major publication) by neither confirming nor denying the truth of a story. "If you look closely," he says, "we never say a story actually happened," though a witness might swear a story's true.) Coz will only confess to using "exciting headlines."

Horoscopes ... and beyond

The National Enquirer, Star and Globe primarily confine their paranormal/ pseudoscientific information to their horoscopes. For the purposes of this study, then, a look at the Sun and the Weekly World News will show the pattern of techniques used to "prove" their stories. While there are subtle differences between the two, both tabloids primarily employ the following:

Single eyewitness of an event, or multiple eyewitnesses with no addresses.
Experts as unnamed generic sources or ones with only titles confirming "facts."
Event and witness are in a foreign country.
Repeatability of event is unlikely.

Of Eyewitnesses and Experts

In many articles in these tabloids, an extraordinary event is observed by a single eyewitness, whose observation is claimed to be confirmed, directly or indirectly, by "experts" (my emphasis). Other articles mention multiple eyewitnesses but give little or no information about them. In an article about a World War II dogfight that occurs on the same day every year since the war (World Without End, Sun, Nov. 9, 1993), Victor Nankuti relates how his father had observed the original American/Japanese duel in the skies over an obscure Pacific atoll called Brooks. The article then states that "Chicago psychic" Dr. Frank DeLucca witnessed the duel. No further source information, such as DeLucca's business affiliation or address, was made available in the article. [In this reference and subsequent article references, I have and will include all of the source information and will place that information in quotes.]

In that same issue of the Sun, "archaeologist" Henry Masters (no further source information available) found transistorized parts of Helen of Troy's body in "Helen was an Android."

Here is a partial list of other articles with questionable witness(es) and generic or title only confirmation sources in the issues studied:

Angry Neighbor Makes Her Ears Grow, Sun, Nov. 9, 1993. Margaret Boone has long ears, lives in Johannesburg, South Africa, and received them after gossiping about a neighbor, Rachel Clark, who summoned spirits in revenge. [Photo looks like bunny ears pasted on.] Sources: "Clark" and "Boone."

Branded with Evil Mark of the Devil, Sun, Nov. 9, 1993. Bonny [no last name] has the word "Satan" appear on her back from a curse, which is replaced by a cross when exorcised [photos]. Sources: "psychiatrists," "religious experts," "Father Helmut Bergen, Bonny's suburban Chicago parish priest," husband "Roger," and "Dr. Nils Wilson, hospital psychiatrist." Article says Bonny posed for photos, hoping someone might know how to lift the curse -- yet, no address or phone number was given!

How JFK Saved the World, Sun, Nov. 9, 1993. Kennedy talked to and managed to scare off aliens -- at least until the next century. Sources: "the Sun has learned," "Sun investigators," and "unnamed presidential aide," who told the Sun that he wanted to remain anonymous because he is writing a book about the alien encounter.

Catholic priest taken to Heaven & Hell -- by two angels! WWN, Nov. 16, 1993. Source: "A Catholic priest at the Vatican"; "Father Fabio Martini."

Woman heals the sick -- with medicine from outer space!, WWN, Nov. 16, 1993. Lupe Garcia has healed thousands in Guadalajara, Mexico, with medicine made from formulas given to her by space aliens. Sources: "Lupe Garcia," "scores of Mexican doctors," "Dr. Carlos Perez," and "Dr. Luis Mendez."

Shape of your ears reveals your personality, WWN, Nov. 16, 1993. Source: "Louis Marschand of Bordeaux, France, a world renowned aurologist."

Girl hears ghostly voices on her tape player -- from 1906 Frisco earthquake, WWN, Nov. 16, 1993. Sources: "Sandra Mitchell" and "three recording experts."

Travel by Fax machine, WWN, Nov. 16, 1993. Upcoming invention. Source: "Swedish physicist Dr. Peter Sigmundsen," who heads a Stockholm lab.

New gadget gives you a college education -- overnight!, WWN, Nov. 16, 1993. Source: "Dr. Hubert Durr, inventor of the 'Durr Informatrex.'" [Big drawback -- costs nearly \$100,000 plus it takes three days to get a medical degree!]

Animal psychic probes mind of Nicole's dog and discovers . . . O.J. is innocent!, WWN, Aug. 23, 1994. Source: "Linda Wortham"; "Tacoma, Wash. psychic."

UFO Sucks the Eyeballs out of 12 People, WWN, Aug. 23, 1994. Sources: "Raymond Toomet of Albuquerque," "Wildlife authorities," "experts," and "federal medical officials."

TV fan changes channels by ESP, Sun, Dec. 28, 1993. Sources: "George Cosgrove" -- the human remote control; "Psychic experts" were witnesses; and "Dr. Daniel Marol."

In a Foreign Country

Another trait of these articles is the foreign location of the event or witness(es), making it more difficult and costly to independently corroborate the story.

In the Dec. 28, 1993, issue of the Sun, "Debbie Martin" eats a wooden door a week in Bizarre Disease Turns Woman into a Termite. Not literally, of course. Debbie just has big jaws, and she lives in Johannesburg, South Africa. "Dr. Charles Benton" says she's "healthy." Meanwhile, a "team of top American doctors" [no other source information] plans to go there and check on her. There is a photo of "Debbie Martin," who is standing over a door.

In the same issue, Jim Page, his wife, Pam, and sons Andrew and David are all vampires. They live in Leicester, England, and are members of a club called "Fangs for the Memories." [A bit of Mad humor, no doubt]

There are other examples:

Bizarre Jungle Tribe Worships Electricity, Sun, Aug. 16, 1994. Location: "jungles of New Guinea."

Girl Raised by Monkeys, Sun, Aug. 16, 1994. Location: Sierra Leone in Africa.

Corpse Waives to Mourners, Sun, Aug. 16, 1994. Location: Not listed; just indicates funeral director is from Rome, Italy.

I Play Chess with my Dead Husband., Sun, Aug. 16, 1994. Location: Tunbridge Wells, England.

Satan Appear in Paris -- and she's a Woman!, WWN, Jan. 4-11, 1994. Location: Paris, France.

Devil's Triangle Planes Last Seen near Mars, WWN, Jan. 4-11, 1994. Location: Basil, Switzerland.

Angry German sticks 917 Iraqis' heads to the floor, WWN, Jan. 4-11, 1994. Location: Iraq

Secret Horror Chamber of the Copycat Killer, Sun, Nov. 9, 1993. Location: "island in the Scottish Hebrides."

While many of the locales are foreign in these stories, there are others that allegedly take place in America, but often in small or obscure areas, such as Albany, Illinois (population 835) [5-yr.-old girl drowns -- & visits dead grandparents in heaven, WWN, 8/23/94], or Greenland [UFO found in Iceberg, WWN, 11/16/93]. If specific larger cities or well-known areas are mentioned, no other specific information is given that would allow an independent investigator to follow-up and study the phenomenon claimed.

Would you repeat that, please?

Many of the phenomena that the tabloids claim have happened are difficult to duplicate because they are one-time, singular events, obscure inventions that some isolated genius allegedly produced, are at some obscure location, of feature non-physical aspects that would make it difficult to scientifically test and evaluate.

There are many examples above in each category above to illustrate the point that it would be difficult to confirm the phenomena alleged without additional source information that could be checked or tested independently. Sometimes, the evidence conveniently also goes up in smoke. For instance, a psycho reenacted Edgar Allan Poe murder themes using real people on "an island in the Scottish Hebrides [Secret Horror Chamber of the Copycat Killer, Sun, Nov. 9, 1993]. The home where all this happened was gutted by fire started by lightning shortly after police arrived.

Singular events, of course, such as JFK diverting the aliens, could only be shown through documents. But how much credence can a researcher give to a purported transcript of a talk between Kennedy and the aliens "just months before the Cuban missile crisis" that includes this "quote" from Kennedy: "Mr. Ambassador, if you have been monitoring us as closely as you say, you know that the men we admire most are men of peace, not warriors. Men like Hitler and Pol Pot, are considered criminals by most humans." [How JFK Saved the World, Sun, Nov. 9, 1993, p.16]

Few could disagree with the statement about Hitler, but at the time of the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, Pol Pot's name was Saloth Sar, who in 1962 was in Cambodia's underground Communist party and fled to the hills in 1963 fearing repression when the country's leader invited a number of "subversives" into the government [William Shawcross, Sideshow, (paperback), New York: 1979, p. 239.] Not until he emerged to take over Cambodia in the middle 1970s and then exposed in 1979 for his responsibility in the killings of more than one million Cambodians did the name Pol Pot become compared to Hitler.

Non-believability

The tabloids, particularly the Sun and the Weekly World News (see Part I, The REALL News, Nov. 1994), have many short articles about odd people or events that seem true. They are the true-sounding articles that probably leave many readers with the feeling that if these non-paranormal, non-pseudoscientific articles are innocent and true, then perhaps the supernatural types of articles have a kernel of truth in them.

But common sense should prevail in most of these articles. For instance, the Weekly World News featured a cover story headlined Abraham Lincoln's Corpse Revived. In response to the article, Nan Winn, tomb site manager for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, told the State Journal-Register (Sept. 24, 1994, p. 1) that Lincoln is "buried in a steel and concrete vault beneath a floor made of Arkansas red marble. You would need a jackhammer to get him out. And considering that we have 1,500 visitors a day during our peak seasons, surely someone would have noticed."

Perhaps columnist Russell Baker expressed it best last year in his sly way when he said, "Science is an ornament of our age. One of these days it will solve the riddle of the age, which of course is, 'People can't really believe a thing they read in a grocery tabloid, can they? So why do they?'"

That, I will address in Part 3 next month.

[Bob Ladendorf is the editor of The REALL News.]