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Nostradamarama

By Elena M. Watson

*The year 1999, seven months,
From the sky will come a great King of Terror:
To bring back to life the great King of the Mongols,
Before and after Mars to reign by good luck.*

—Nostradamus, Quatrain 10-72

1994. The countdown has begun. We are no longer just at the beginning of a new decade, but in the midst of one. While we complacent types are busy nestling into the nineties, the apocalyptically-minded among us are thinking ahead, about one thing. The end, as in the end of the world. The end, as in 1999.

It even sounds exciting, or at least, mysterious; 1999. As if one isn't really sure what comes after all those nines. A silly notion, yes, but a very human one. It reminds me of an incident in my childhood. It was late at night, and I was riding in the car with my parents, on vacation. Our car was rather old and had racked up a lot of miles, due to my father's peculiar notion that a car should be kept for at

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The following text was originally a talk presented to the National Capital Area Skeptics on 22 January 1994.

Qigong

By James E. Alcock

Traditional Chinese medicine grew out of an ancient Chinese philosophical and cosmological belief system which eventually came to be known as Taoism. The concept of *Tao* (pronounced "dow") is somewhat enigmatic from the perspective of Western philosophical and religious thought, for, although *Tao* is said to have existed before the universe was created, and indeed created the universe, the concept refers neither to a deity nor simply to nature itself. *Tao* literally means "the way" or "the way of the world." It keeps the world running through the release of its energy (Ross and Hills, 1956). Around 600 BC, the great moral philosopher Lao-Tzu wrote his highly influential *Tao Teh Ching* (Classics on morality), which instructed people on how to carry out the *Tao* of life. He taught that one must accept life as it comes rather than trying to change it, and he stressed the importance of relaxation and calmness (Shen, 1986).

Since antiquity, *Qi* (pronounced "chee", and sometimes transcribed as *Ch'i*) has been the fundamental concept of traditional Chinese medicine. The term means vital breath (somewhat similar to the *élan vital* of early European philosophy), and Lao-Tzu taught that it is the unimpeded flow of *Qi* through a network of invisible meridians throughout the body that keeps a person alive. This flow of *Qi* maintains an essential harmony between the two basic energies, yin and yang. When the flow of *Qi* is impeded or disturbed in some way, one falls ill. Acupuncture is aimed at restoring the proper flow by directly stimulating a particular part of the network of meridians. By stimulating the appropriate spot, often far from the site of sickness, the flow of *Qi* is restored, and sickness is overcome. However, one does not need acupuncture if one can learn to control the movement of *Qi* in the body.

It was Lao-Tzu who first developed Qigong (a term which means "manipulation of *Qi*" and pronounced "chee gung"), as an art to be practiced both for martial and

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See also the report on James Alcock's and James Randi's presentations at the NIH, page 16



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therapeutic reasons. Through Qigong, Lao-Tzu said, one can maintain the proper flow of Qi and therefore prevent or overcome illness. Lao-Tzu taught that it was necessary to learn how to close oneself off from external stimuli, to focus one's attention inward, and to breath in a particular way. He said that one must achieve a state in which one has no desires; only then can one manipulate the flow of Qi within the body.

While Lao-Tzu stressed a focus on one's body - promoting health through relaxation and calmness, some of his disciples added some additional features to the practice of Qigong. For example, they claimed to be able to see with the ears and hear with the eyes, and to be able to hear conversations which were being conducted hundreds of miles away. Thus did Qigong come to be associated with what in modern Western terms would be called paranormal powers.

Taoism as a religion all but died away, although its influence carried on through the impact it had on both Confucianism and Buddhism. Qigong survived over the centuries only through the devotion of small numbers of monks and martial arts practitioners. However, unlike acupuncture, it had little medical impact in China until it was rediscovered by Chinese physicians in the 1950s. The effects of Qigong practice on ailments such as hypertension were examined, and it was found - not surprisingly since Qigong involves extensive relaxation training - that there was a therapeutic effect. However, this renewed interest in Qigong did not last long, for it was swept away by the tide of political and social upheaval brought about by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Qigong was denounced as anti-Marxist (due to its quasi-spiritual basis) and even as witchcraft. (It was in good company: psychology was declared to be a pseudo-science!)

As has so often been the case throughout history, periods of great social or political upheaval are often very fertile ground for paranormal and occult belief, and China was no exception. With the eventual downfall of the Gang of Four and the end of the Cultural Revolution, there was a new intellectual freedom which quickly spread across China, and with that freedom, Qigong flourished. To allay any concerns that it contradicted Marxism, a new term was introduced for those Qigong features which seemed to be paranormal or spiritual in nature: Extraordinary Functions of the Human Body (EFHB). Just as Western parapsychologists have generally tried to separate their field from the spiritual domain by considering ESP and PK to be as yet undiscovered but natural properties of human beings, Qigong proponents could now refer to EFHB as something mysterious but natural, rather than supernatural.

In 1981, a film entitled *Do You Believe?* was widely shown on Chinese television and in cinemas across the country (Zha and McConnell, 1991). It included footage of a twelve-year-old boy whose EFHB enabled him to break wooden matches that had been sealed in a match box, or restore broken matchsticks, again while they were in a sealed matchbox. Just as hundreds of British children were mysteriously able to bend spoons after watching a television demonstration by Uri Geller, so too did large numbers of children across China suddenly manifest EFHB.

Hundreds of researchers were drawn to the study of these children and their amazing abilities. It was reported that they could see with their ears—by holding a crumpled ball of paper next to the ear, they could read what was written on the paper even though they had apparently had no opportunity to see the inscription. They were able to move the hands of watches without touching them. All sorts of other miraculous feats were demon-

strated for eager researchers. It was soon recognized that EFHB was something that at least half of all children possessed (Zha and McConnell, 1991). Young girls between six and twelve years of age proved to be the best practitioners, but it was observed that their abilities waned at puberty, in line with some speculations about what happens to the flow of Qi at menarche.

Enter Dr. Qian Xuesen, a man revered as the father of the Chinese space programme. He studied in the United States, both at MIT and at the California Institute of Technology where he obtained his Ph.D. He subsequently was named Goddard Professor of JetPropulsion at that institute. He also was made Director of the rocket section of the United States National Defense Scientific Advisory Board. However, he wanted to return to China, something which was problematic for the U.S. government because of his extensive involvement with defense research. In 1955, in exchange for a group of U.S. pilots captured during the Korean war, he was allowed to go home. He was of major importance in helping the Chinese quickly develop atomic weaponry and satellite-launching ability.

It was Dr. Qian who in 1980 publicly advocated support for Qigong research. He believed that EFHB exhibited by Chinese children is attributable to their ability to manipulate Qi. He saw Qigong research as vitally important. One Chinese psychologist told me that Qian had described Qigong as the leading edge of the leading edge of technology, and he has also been quoted as saying that Chinese Qigong is modern science and technology—high technology—absolutely top technology (Zha and McConnell, 1991, p. 132).

Qian was and is a very influential man in China. His call for a significant investment in Qigong research fell on receptive ears. However, not everyone was impressed. The Vice-Chair of the Chinese Academy of Science, Mr. Yu Guangyuan, challenged Qian, and condemned Qigong as pseudo-science (Yu Guangyuan, 1982a, b). He set out to put a stop to Qigong research, and to this end, a conference of several thousand scholars met in Beijing in 1982 to criticize EFHB studies. The controversy between Qian and Yu was now out in the open, and as a result of that conference, it seemed that Yu had won, for it was decreed by the Communist party that EFHB/Qigong research was not to be officially sanctioned, although a concession was made in permitting such research to be conducted on a small scale.

Dr. Qian was not to be so easily side-tracked, and he set up the Institute of Space Medical Engineering, which in reality was a research laboratory dedicated to the study of Qigong. Just as Uri Geller performed his amazing demonstrations for scientists at SRI in California, so did Qigong masters demonstrate to Chinese scientists their remarkable ability to extract marked pills, and even live insects, from sealed pill bottles without breaking the seal. And just as Geller had done,

the Qigong masters admitted that for some unknown reason their powers sometimes failed them, and they did not know why - conveniently accounting for unsuccessful efforts.

Through the efforts of Qian and others, interest in Qigong had mushroomed by the late 1980s. Now in the 90s, Qigong is highly respectable in China. Government ministries fund Qigong research and training courses in Qigong are offered at a number of universities upon the official authority of the Education ministry. Hundreds of Qigong clinics have opened up. Qigong research is supported by the Chinese National Science Foundation, and in 1989, a Qigong Cancer Treatment Research Association was formed as part of the China Cancer Research Foundation. The Qigong Cancer Treatment Research Foundation comprises three research institutes, two recovery centres, and 14 regional organizations (Zha and McConnell, 1991)

The distinction between internal and external Qigong has become an important one. Most individuals practice internal Qigong—in the manner originally advocated by Lao-Tzu, using a breathing exercise and relaxation techniques to focus inward on the body to promote healing and maintain fitness and health. External Qigong, on the other hand, refers to the apparent ability of Qigong masters to emit Qi from their finger tips, in order to heal others, or move objects, and so on. And the applications of external Qigong are almost limitless, it seems. Some masters claim to be able to hear conversations thousands of miles away, just as some of Lao-Tzus disciples had supposedly done. Others claim to be able to start fires with their thoughts, to deform the paths of laser beams or to see thorough opaque objects such as walls. Qigong masters are said to be able to diagnose illness by hearing with their ears, and some claim to cure cancer, AIDS, and broken bones.

The embracing of Qigong has become a virtual mass movement in China. In 1991, according to a report in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 60 million Chinese were practicing Qigong on a regular basis. And just as psychics have commanded considerable attention in the West, Qigong masters have become celebrities in China, appearing on popular television programmes to demonstrate their powers. Feats such as standing on a piece of plate glass balanced on a balloon, without breaking the balloon, are treated by television hosts as major miracles. Before we smile at such naivete, we need to compare this to the reaction of people in the West to the equally silly notion of using psychic powers to—of all things—bend spoons.

Consider this newspaper account (*Globe and Mail*, 13 August 1988): “Qigong masters have no problem renting auditoriums such as the Workers Sports Stadium, which seats 13,000. On a recent night, people flocked to see a demonstration. In the centre of the stadium, like a faith healer at an old-fashioned revival meeting, a Qigong master stands slowly waving his arms. He is, he tells them, emitting

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Qi. As the Qi supposedly starts flying around the stadium, a woman in a white dress starts wailing uncontrollably. Another shrieks, then swoons. A young man beats his breast. People twitch and shake. Others cry, some laugh hysterically. An old man talks in tongues, then screams that he is cured.”

Yan Xin is a leading Qigong master who has given many scores of lectures carrying the Qigong effect (Zha and McConnell, 1991). These lectures attract many thousands of people, as many as 30,000 at a time and go on for between six and fourteen hours each! As Yan sends his Qi around the room, it is reported that the lame throw away their crutches or rise from their wheelchairs and walk, that pain disappears, and cancer goes in to remission. Now watch some of the more popular evangelical healers on U.S. television. Is there really much difference? I think not.

In 1988, a CSCIOP team consisting of Paul Kurtz, James Randi, Phil Klass, Ken Frazier, Barry Karr and myself went to China at the invitation of Mr. Lin Xixin, editor of the *Science and Technology Daily* of Beijing. We were asked to evaluate Qigong claims, and to give a number of lectures at various universities. The visit was of two weeks duration and included stops in Beijing, Xian and Shanghai (See Kurtz, et. al., (1988) for a fuller report).

It very quickly became clear that the proponents of Qigong were in a position of dominance in China and that critics were fearful of speaking out, lest—as one professor told me—they be sent to the farms to slop pigs in the event of some sudden turning of political sensibilities. We were told that people high up in the party believed in Qigong and thus, it was risky for Chinese to be too critical. There was also the suggestion that some viewed our visit in terms of us being CIA agents out to discredit Qigong research in order to stop the development of Qigong technology by the Chinese.

Two special demonstrations were presented to us at the Beijing College of Traditional Chinese Medicine. This is an imposing institution. Founded in 1956, it involves 120,000 square metres of floor space, over 2000 staff members, 600 teaching staff, 1500 students, including Masters and Doctoral degree students. It comprises the Faculty of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the Faculty of Chinese Pharmacy, the Faculty of Acupuncture, Moxibustion and Massage, and among other institutes, the Institute of Qigong Science. It also has a central laboratory which boasts an electron microscope, liquid chromatographs, and other precision research tools. The College edits and publishes the journal *Chinese Qigong*. In other words, this is a serious institution of considerable magnitude.

The first demonstration was of psychic diagnosis. A woman was introduced to us who claimed to be able to see

into our bodies. She told me that she could see three pens in my inside pocket (there were in fact only two), and then she pointed to Phil Klass, who had one pen, and explained that this made up the three. She said she could see some sand-like substance in my gall bladder, and that Phil Klass was experiencing a heart irregularity and a problem in the coronary artery. Neither of these diagnoses corresponds with any symptoms we have experienced or anything we have learned about ourselves from the point of view of Western medicine.

The second and major demonstration was by Qigong master Dr. Lu. He had been treating a woman who had been suffering for 11 years from a lump on her spine at lumbar 4/5. Western medical techniques had failed, we were told. His treatment had reduced the size of the swelling, reduced the pain, and restored movement. His power apparently radiated from his fingertips, and we were assured that it could pass through walls. He stood about eight feet from the foot of the table on which the patient was lying, face down. She could not see him. He began rhythmically moving his hands and arms. Gradually, the patient began to move on the table, sometimes in a slow fashion, sometimes in a violent manner. Dr. Lu said that the Qi emanating from his fingertips was making her move. He said the power would be effective even if he were in another room, and he agreed to a test of this.

We set up ten three-minute trials. On each trial a coin was tossed to decide whether or not Dr. Lu would send out Qi. If the coin came up heads, he would send for the first 15" of the trial; if it came up tails, he would remain seated and do nothing. Randi and I stayed with him, while the others in our group observed the woman on the table. Using synchronized time intervals, the observation team made careful notes of all the woman's movements, and when she did move, she was asked to stop after 15" so that there would be no carry-over into other intervals. Her behaviour proved to be independent of what Dr. Lu did. Indeed, the only two trials on which the woman did not move happened to be trials when Dr. Lu was actually sending his Qi, and on a series of four contiguous trials during which he did not send—he did not transmit for almost a full 15 minutes—she writhed continually.

It is interesting that Chinese scientists had apparently attempted to detect radiation emanating from Dr. Lu's fingertips, but no one had stopped to consider whether or not there was a significant correlation between his movements and hers. Indeed, it was clear to us that when they were in the same room. Dr. Lu's movements followed rather than preceded the woman's movements. Each was, I am sure, totally honest; each was involved in tacit coordination and each was a victim of self-deception. Dr. Lu appeared genuinely puzzled by the results of our test. He did not offer explanations for the failure. He had just always believed that he was causing her to move.

Another Qigong master came to visit us at our hotel in Beijing, with a bundle of news clippings about his powers, taken from a German newspaper. He brought

along his psychic sister who could do diagnosis at a distance. She eagerly tried to demonstrate. This, too, failed.

In Xian, we met with officials of the local Qigong Institute. They too, claimed that Qigong can cure a variety of illnesses. We were presented with two students from the local police academy who were apparently able to see into the body and do psychic diagnosis. Randi proposed a simple test: They were to tell us who amongst us still possessed tonsils and appendixes. This meant two decisions for each of us. We each wrote down in advance our own state with regard to appendix and tonsils. They passed on two of the twelve decisions, and of the remaining ten, were correct five times. They were distressed when we told them that this is what one would expect by guessing alone and they assured us that they are usually 100% correct. Of course, they had never had the opportunity to do such a simple test with such immediate feedback before. It struck us in this instance, and repeatedly during our travels in China, that there is little knowledge of basic statistical reasoning. Had we not introduced the idea of a guess rate, they would easily have been content to view the five correct decisions as evidence of their powers.

We next met with Mr. Ding, the secretary-general of the Xian Paranormal Function Application Association. He was the first to have made public the now celebrated tests of the children with clairvoyant and psychokinetic powers (EFHB). He told us that EFHB provides diagnostic scans that are more precise than X-rays and match CAT scans in accuracy. We were introduced to some eleven-year-old children who, it was claimed, could read with their ears: If a Chinese character were written on a piece of paper without the children seeing, and then was crumpled up, the child, after holding it to the ear, (and sometimes to the buttock), would read the character. Earlier in Beijing, a Chinese psychologist had spoken to us about how he had secretly videotaped the children when he was allowed to observe them, and he had found that while transferring the paper from ear to buttock and back, the children were copping a look at the character as they passed their hands briefly under the table.

Thus we opted for a little more control. The children claimed that they could just as readily read characters written on paper which was then sealed in an envelope—or rather, Mr. Ding made this claim on their behalf. When tested, they totally failed to do so. They were also supposedly able to break wooden matchsticks which were sealed in matchboxes, solely by the power of their minds (and Qi), or to restore matchsticks which had previously been broken. When tested under our careful conditions (on two separate occasions), they did not show any success. We then observed another test under Mr. Ding's direction, and we were astonished to find that the children were allowed to run from the room with their respective matchboxes, and play in the park. When they returned, they announced that they were tired and so Mr. Ding allowed them to return home with their matchboxes, and they

returned eight hours later, after having had supper! One matchbox failed to return. We were told that one of the children had been consumed by curiosity and had opened it. Randi noted that of the three remaining matchboxes, two appeared intact, while one appeared to have been tampered with—dirt and a bit of grass were found on the underside of the sticky tape with which the box had been wrapped. The two intact boxes when opened revealed no miracles, but the third box, which had contained a broken match, now held an unbroken one—and to top it off, the colour of the head of the match had changed from green to red! This initially concerned Mr. Ding, but after consultation with the child who had been in charge of that matchbox, he told us that the boy had been challenged by his father while at supper, who had told him that if he had such power as to be able to mend the match, why not really show his power by changing the colour as well! Mr. Ding accepted this as evidence of a double miracle.

In Shanghai, we visited the Shanghai College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, where the focus is primarily on internal Qigong, and the staff are somewhat skeptical about external Qigong. Again, we found a great lack of statistical knowledge; they were excited by the concept of double-blind studies, and informally asked if they could arrange to have us come back to China to teach them about this concept.

Our trip to China did not involve a set of carefully controlled experiments—such was not possible. Hence, we cannot claim to have demonstrated that there is nothing of the miraculous in Qigong. However, we were able to run a number of short, impromptu studies—some described above—aimed at eliminating cheating, self-deception and extraneous variables.

We found no miracles in China. We witnessed nothing that could not be done by a good Western televangelical faith-healer or performing psychic. What we did observe was much the same as what we see at home when supernatural or paranormal claims are made. In every instance, the Chinese researchers either:

- 1) were mistaken in their belief that they were using research methods impervious to cheating and self-deception, or
- 2) were so impressed by their subject's ability that they allowed the subject to control the conditions of the experiment, or
- 3) believed that Qigong powers are so obviously real that they did not have to worry about self-deception or cheating, or
- 4) were unsophisticated in their analysis of the results, taking chance levels of success as meaningful and indicative of the success of Qigong.

With regard to those claiming special powers for themselves, we found, as we find here at home, that some of them seemed to be very sincere, while some others were

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almost certainly deliberate in their cheating. As Randi has suggested, others, such as the children, were possibly caught up in a game that pushed them to prove to their researchers that they could continue to fool them, regardless of supposed controls.

The researchers we met were markedly unsophisticated regarding research with human subjects. Such lack of research sophistication made them easy targets for self-deception. They lacked knowledge acquired over many years in the Western research community about how we can so easily fool ourselves, and how researchers working with humans can be readily misled if proper precautions are not taken. They were not familiar with the literature that deals with research problems such as experimenter effects, subject effects, placebo effects, base rates, spontaneous remissions, regression towards the mean, or the Clever Hans effect. Their statistical acumen was weak to non-existent.

Although the Western public has no leg up on the Chinese when it comes to critical thinking in the face of nonsense, Western science has developed procedures to offer protection against both cheating and self-delusion. The use of controlled conditions to eliminate extraneous variables, the use of control groups to establish base rates of response, the use of sophisticated statistical analysis to reduce the likelihood of misinterpreting chance effects, the use of double-blind techniques, the demand for independent replications, all of these practices came about as Western scientists learned from their own mistakes—about the power of self-deception. The formal procedures of science are vital since within each of us is a propensity towards self-deception, and towards magical thinking.

Let me conclude with a personal anecdote which reminds me of my propensity to think magically. (By magical thinking, I mean the linking of two events in a causal way, assuming one to have caused the other, without any evidence about the nature or even the existence of an actual causal link.)

Beijing was very polluted when we were there, and perhaps because of that or because we were giving lectures every day, or perhaps because of something going around, I developed a severe case of laryngitis. It seemed to be worsening, and I wanted to have it attended to before leaving Beijing to go to Xian. With the help of our interpreter, I asked at the desk of the large hotel where we were staying if there were a hotel doctor. There was, and I was sent to the 10th floor, only to be met by the hotel doctor - an acupuncturist who assured me that he could cure laryngitis. I decided instead to find a treatment more within my own range of experience, and ended up at the outpatient unit of Beijing Hospital. I was cursorily examined by a physician, whose only actions were to peer quickly into the oral cavity, tap my tongue with what appeared to be a hand-carved tongue depressor, and then

write out a prescription. I was alarmed to find that he was using the same tongue depressor on all the patients!

The prescription was quickly filled in an adjacent room, and I left with two boxes, labelled in both Chinese and English. One label identified the contents as entromycin—obviously an antibiotic of some sort, it seemed to me. The other box contained a medicine made from snake bile! Its label further stated that “This is an efficacious drug for sputum crudum, cough, asthma caused by cold, bronchitis and bronchitis chronic etc.” At any rate, although one of our Chinese associates assured me that she always used the snake bile for her children’s sore throats and that it was very effective, I chose the antibiotic. Indeed, by a couple of days later, I was cured.

When this incident was later mentioned in *The Skeptical Inquirer*, a physician wrote in saying that my symptoms were in all likelihood the result of a virus, and that antibiotics don’t touch viruses. Most likely, then my throat would have cleared up without treatment. I attributed the cure to the pills while had our Chinese associate persuaded me to use the snake bile, she would have credited the improvement to that intervention. This is magical thought—take substance x, feel better, give the credit to x, without knowing anything about what x really does or does not do. Without the safeguards of scientific inquiry, we all are prey to magical thinking, much more often than we realize. Anyone who is not aware of that is as open to self-delusion as were the Chinese researchers we observed.

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least ten years. And so the odometer on this one was already filled with a lot of nines. Driving through the night, we got closer and closer to that magic moment when the odometer would display all nines. After that, we weren't sure what would happen. There was no place to the left to add a new digit.

Would it just stay there, stuck forever as 99,999? I started to get really concerned, especially as my parents began to joke, saying the car would fall apart once the numbers flipped. I watched and waited, frightened, yet excited. The numbers did eventually turn over, to all zeros. But it wasn't nearly as exciting as I had imagined it would be. Neither, I suspect, will be the transition from 1999 to 2000.

But the allure is still there. Whether it is the fear of the unknown, or the dread of the end, fascination with 1999 will most likely increase the closer we get to it.

And so, no doubt, will interest in the prophecies of one man who some seem to think has already predicted the end of the world by the year 2000. He is Michel de Notredame, the 16th century French physician known to most of the world as Nostradamus (1503-66). Older than Jeane Dixon, and dead longer than Edgar Cayce, Nostradamus is probably the world's most famous prophet. His predictions were written in books called *Centuries*, first published in 1555. There are 10 books in all, each having 100 verses. The verses are written in four lines each, called quatrains. And although the *Centuries* are said to contain prophecies for the next two thousand years, most are not dated, nor do they appear in any chronological order.

The quatrains themselves are composed in archaic Latinized French, making them difficult reading. But it is this difficulty, in part, that has kept the prophecies of Nostradamus alive, allowing so many to read so much into them. The variations in translations alone are enough to keep people debating their true meaning. But numerous attempts at modernization, including the de-scrambling of alleged anagrams, and the de-coding of secret puns, has fostered over the years a Nostradamus industry, one which has produced hundreds of interpretations of his writings. And a quick look at any library or book shop will tell you that Nostradamus and his writings remain just as popular today.

The following is just a sample of the many books devoted to prophecies of Michel de Notredame, "The man who saw tomorrow."

Cannon, Delores. *Conversations with Nostradamus.* Boulder, CO.: American West Publishers, 1989. v.1,2.

This is a gimmick book, instead of just re-interpreting the writings of Nostradamus, Cannon actually speaks to him through several hypnotically regressed individuals, all of whom apparently knew Michel in their past lives. Which, I guess, explains why the library citation lists the author as "Nostradamus, 1503-1566 (Spirit)." As for what Cannon and company say about the quatrains, consider 10-72 (above), which is said to refer to eugenics, and the secret breeding of less civilized, fiercer humans to be used in war. Comes in 2 volumes.

Cheetham, Erika. *The Prophecies of Nostradamus.* N.Y.: Berkely, 1981. *The Further Prophecies of Nostradamus: 1985 and Beyond.* N.Y.: Putnum, 1985.

Cheetham's Nostradamus books are among the easiest to read and the most readily available. The first one contains the complete *Centuries*, translated and commented upon in order. The commentary is generally an attempt to fit some historic events to the quatrains. Like many Nostradamians, Cheetham seems obsessed with finding Kennedy and Hitler references. Used as the basis for the "documentary" film, *The Man Who Saw Tomorrow* (1981). The second book contains a lot of speculation about time and precognition, and references to such modern prophets as Edgar Cayce and Jeane Dixon. For the future, Cheetham sees John Paul II as the second to the last pope, and 1986 as the start of World War III.

Criswell. *Criswell's Forbidden Predictions based on Nostradamus and the Tarot.* Droke House, 1972.

Another gimmick book, as if the effete Criswell isn't enough of one himself. The author claims: "I lived, read, studied and absorbed the personality of Nostradamus for almost a year before I would dare present his forbidden predictions." Right.... Self-proclaimed psychic Criswell once had his own TV show, "Criswell Predicts," but is now most famous for his histrionic introduction to the movie *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. In this book, Criswell tells of seeing a vision of Nostradamus, who, he assuredly claims, was 5'10" tall. Criswell then predicts: From 1975 until the end of the century, land will change, it will be continuous destruction. A new monarch will exceed Hitler in cruelty, the polar ice caps will melt and monsters will unfreeze and walk the earth. Fortunately the latter will be herbivores. In 1987, all books will be censored and in 1984 there will be war, during which sick children will be rendered for lard to oil the war machine.

Hogue, John. *Nostradamus and the Millennium: Predict.* N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987.

A lavishly illustrated tome, that, among other things, portrays Nostradamus clutching a small telescope. And as he was an astrologer/astronomer, as well as a physician, this seems reasonable at first, except that Nostradamus died in 1566, about forty years before the invention of the telescope! Otherwise, in his interpretations, Hogue is

catastrophe oriented. He states that if the year 2000 is the correct date for the end of the world, then the British Isles will sink by 1993. Hogue also predicts superquakes and that the worst world drought in history would occur in 1990-1991.

Leoni, Edgar. *Nostradamus and His Prophecies*. New York: Bell Publishers, 1961.

A massive undertaking, this contains the complete prophecies, in French and English. While Leoni is obsessive and even gullible he is not a believer, and this is the most complete objective and scholarly book available on Nostradamus.

Lorie, Peter and Hewitt, V.J. *Nostradamus: The End of the Millennium: Prophecies, 1992 to 2000*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991.

Also lavishly illustrated like Hogue (1987), this is another gimmick book. The gimmick in this case being a confusing code scheme, devised by Hewitt, to date the quatrains. It all starts with replacing "archaic" letters, finding anagrams, and then after some smoke and mirrors, voilà! Modern predictions, such as Bush will be re-elected in 1992 and in 1993 sound waves will be used to kill cancer. But what really put this book on the map was the authors' prediction for quatrain 10-74: that a major California earthquake, to occur on May 8, 1993, would cause San Diego to sink, changing the coastline. It was further predicted that actor Tom Cruise would become a national hero due to his efforts to help others through the quake. This is even more bizarre when you consider that Q. 10-74 says, "The year of the great seventh number accomplished, it will appear at the time of the games of slaughter, not far from the age of the great millennium, when the dead will come out of their graves." (Cheetham, 1981). Maybe the book's cover should have been a tip-off, it pictures Nostradamus clutching a big red flashlight-type object that seems to be a....telescope! (see Hogue)

Lorie, Peter and Greene, Liz. *Nostradamus: The Millennium & Beyond: the Prophecies to 2016*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993.

Lorie is back, with a new gimmick, and proud of it. The book-jacket announces "Completely New," as this profusely illustrated book, like its predecessor, features yet another cover portrait of Nostradamus, clutching yet another telescope! I suppose this explains how he could see tomorrow: through the telescope of the future. What is new is co-author Greene, billed as an astrologer/Jungian psychotherapist. And using their new method, Lorie and Greene boldly predict the following: 1996-2000, AIDS will develop into a multi-plague; 1999, the end of so-called Holocaust; a new religion emerges; 2002, U.S. and Russia have a falling out; 2004, a woman president is elected; 2015, the fall and ruin of the Catholic clergy; and 2016, there will be major government scandals.

McCann, Lee. *Nostradamus, the Man Who Saw Through Time*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982.

Originally written in 1941. Sees a rise of the orient, the downfall is to take place between the double eclipse in 1999 between July 28 and August 11.

Noorbergen, Rene. *Invitation to a Holocaust: Nostradamus*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981.

Predicts World War III, which will be a clash between East and West, and will happen between the 1980's and 1995. A change in Russia leads to a friendship with the U.S. But this will get us into a conflict with China, the Mid-East and the Far East.

Pitt Francis, David. *Nostradamus: Prophecies of Present Times? Great Britain: Aquarian Press, 1984.*

Another gimmick book, in that the author tries to combine his interest in biblical prophecy and statistics to explain the success of Nostradamus' predictions. Credits Michel with borrowing heavily from the apocalyptic books of the Bible, but also recognizes the "fudge factor" used by the Nostradamians to twist the quatrains to fit their interpretations.

Randi, James. *The Mask of Nostradamus*. New York: Scribners, 1990.

A biography of Michel de Notredame by magician/skeptic author Randi, aka "Amazing Randi." Also effectively examines the ten quatrains most often cited as evidence that Nostradamus really could see the future, only to find very different meanings in them.

Robb, Stewart. *Prophecies on World Events by Nostradamus*. New York: Liveright Pub., 1961.

Just in case you have any questions about the author's objectivity regarding matters metaphysical, he lets you know right up front where he's coming from, with statements such as, "Dedicated to all those who want to know that man is an immortal being superior to space and time." And if that doesn't make things clear enough, consider that he also says the book's "Prime purpose is to prove that prophecy is a scientific fact." Taking a look at Quatrain 10-72, Robb sees war and armageddon in 1999, but only after a 27 year long war of the anti-christ, to begin in 1973. Hmmm, so much for Robb's prime purpose.

Roberts, Henry C. *The Complete Prophecies of Nostradamus*. Oyster Bay, N.Y.: Nostradamus Co., 1982.

Originally published in 1947, Roberts was a book collector and occultist. He based his book on the 1672 first English translation of Nostradamus, *The True Prophecies or Prognostications of Michael Nostradamus* by Theophilus de Garencières, of which Randi (1990) states "...the least offensive of the Nostradamians, though even I can improve upon his poor translations from the French." In his original introduction, Roberts describes how upon

reading a copy of this translation he felt an immediate familiarity with it, as though it was “my book.” Apparently Roberts was not exaggerating, as Randi (1990) notes that once in a radio interview “with me many years ago, he declared that he believed himself to be the actual reincarnation of Michel de Notredame.” The current 1982 edition has been revised by Roberts’ daughter, Lee Roberts Amsterdam and her husband, Harvey Amsterdam.

Ward, Charles A. *Oracles of Nostradamus*. Albuquerque, N.M.: Sun Publishing Co., 1981.

Originally written in 1891, Ward is characterized by Randi (1990) as a true believer. Ward defends the vagueness of Nostradamus’ predictions by explaining that if a prophecy were clearly understandable before the event, it might prevent the event from occurring, and then it would no longer be a prophecy. Well, he certainly straightened that out. 

Nostradamus, the Motion Picture

Unfortunately, Nostradamus’ film career never really took off, with the following exceptions:

The Man Who Saw Tomorrow (1981)

No time to read the book? Watch the movie! This low budget documentary is unfortunately narrated by Orson Welles, who could make anything sound believable. Predicts a massive earthquake for May of 1988, and a nuclear attack on New York City by Moslems in 1999.

The Man without a Body (1957)

Low budget science fiction/horror movie about a rich megalomaniac with a brain tumor, who decides his only cure is a head transplant. Since he wants a really good one this time, he goes to France and digs up the 400 year old head of Nostradamus. The transplant doctor revives the head, which can still speak, but is no doubt puzzled as to how it ended up in such a lame movie.

Nostradamus—Still Alive?

He’s back! According to a tabloid report (*Sun*, May 25, 1993) the world’s greatest prophet, Nostradamus is alive again. And making predictions, of course. According to the *Sun*, he has been reincarnated as 76 year old Spaniard Carlos Salvadore. Salvadore, a loner, emerged from his mountain hideaway to make some new predictions. They included:

The cure of AIDS and cancer, the downfall of the British monarchy, nuclear war in the Mid-East, and finally a glorious appearance of the Virgin Mary at Mt. Rushmore in the year 2000. That’s a pretty busy next six years!

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Have a Nice Doomsday

By Elena M. Watson

While waiting for the end of the world, why not take a sneak preview at what’s in store for you when you get there. The safest way to do that is throw your own “Doomsday Film Festival” in the comfort of your living room. Who says Armageddon can’t be cozy?

Basically most end of the world movies are one of three types:

- 1) Waiting for the catastrophe
- 2) Last survivors trying to cope
- 3) Post-Apocalyptic society brutality

In the first type, the catastrophe can either be natural, man-made or alien produced. In the fifties this type of movie proliferated, and regardless of the menace on the screen, the real underlying fear was of the atom bomb. Waiting for the catastrophe movies also exploited the public’s ambivalence towards science. On the one hand it’s those scientists and their experiments that mess everything up in the first place, but then it was just as often a scientist who saved the world, that is, when the world was saved.

The last survivors trying to cope film usually depicts a small group of people who try to survive the immediate after effects of world destruction, generally in the form of nuclear war. While often not very realistic in terms of the real effects of nuclear war, these movies are usually the most serious and disturbing type of end of the world movie, and are generally antiwar statements. Of course there are exceptions to this, like *Robot Monster*.

Post-Apocalyptic society films are nearly a genre to themselves, and show what it is like to live in a brutal future, ruled by anarchy. *Mad Max* and *Road Warrior* are examples of this, a sub-genre they nearly invented. Movies like this don’t have much positive to say for the future of mankind.

Filmography

(vc) indicates available on video

A Boy and His Dog (1975)

Based on Harlan Ellison’s novel, and starring Don Johnson as the young man who tries to survive the brutal post-nuclear world above ground with the help of his telepathic dog, Blood. As you might expect, the dog is the smart one. (vc)

The Chosen (1978)

Originally titled *Holocaust 2000*, this stars Kirk Douglas as a nuclear power plant executive whose son plans to blow up the world because he’s the Anti-Christ. (vc)

Chosen Survivors (1974)

Eleven people go down a vault deep in the earth as a test, only to have WWII breakout. They survive thermo-nuclear war only to be attacked by bloodsucking vampire bats.

Crack in the World (1965)

Dana Andrews sets off a bomb at the center of the Earth, claiming he was just looking a new source of energy, but, oops, then the Earth starts to crack in two.

Damnation Alley (1977)

Jan-Michael Vincent and a futuristic tank, surviving in a post-atomic world inhabited by giant scorpions and roaches. (vc)

The Day the Earth Caught Fire (1961)

Reporters at a London newspaper discover that recent natural disasters are the result of simultaneous atomic testing by U.S. and U.S.S.R. The Earth is knocked out of orbit, into the Sun. This is a compelling drama, as opposed to a special effects movie. (vc)

The Day the Sky Exploded (1959)

A missile from the Earth hits the Sun, which causes space debris to head on a collision course with Earth. Scientists fire atomic bombs to stop it. Wow, what a great idea! (vc)

The Day the World Ended (1955)

A Roger Corman cheapie, in which a bunch of stereotyped characters hide out in a modernistic house to avoid the radioactivity left over from Armageddon. As they fight amongst themselves, a hideous mutant lurks outside. (vc)

Def-Con 4 (1984)

The crew of a satellite see the Earth destroyed in a final war. They return to find mutants and anarchy. (vc)

Deluge (1933)

Catastrophic destruction of the Earth, climaxed by a massive tidal wave which destroys New York. The last survivors are two men and one woman.

Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964)

Black comedy, directed by Stanley Kubrick, featuring Peter Sellers in three roles. By accident four planes carrying atomic bombs have been sent to Russia; a frenzied attempt to call them back follows. Required viewing. (vc)

End of the World (1977)

Stars Christopher Lee as a priest who is really an alien out to destroy the world, to stop humans from contaminating the Universe. You let humans in, and, whoops, there goes the neighborhood! (vc)

Escape From Planet Earth (1967)

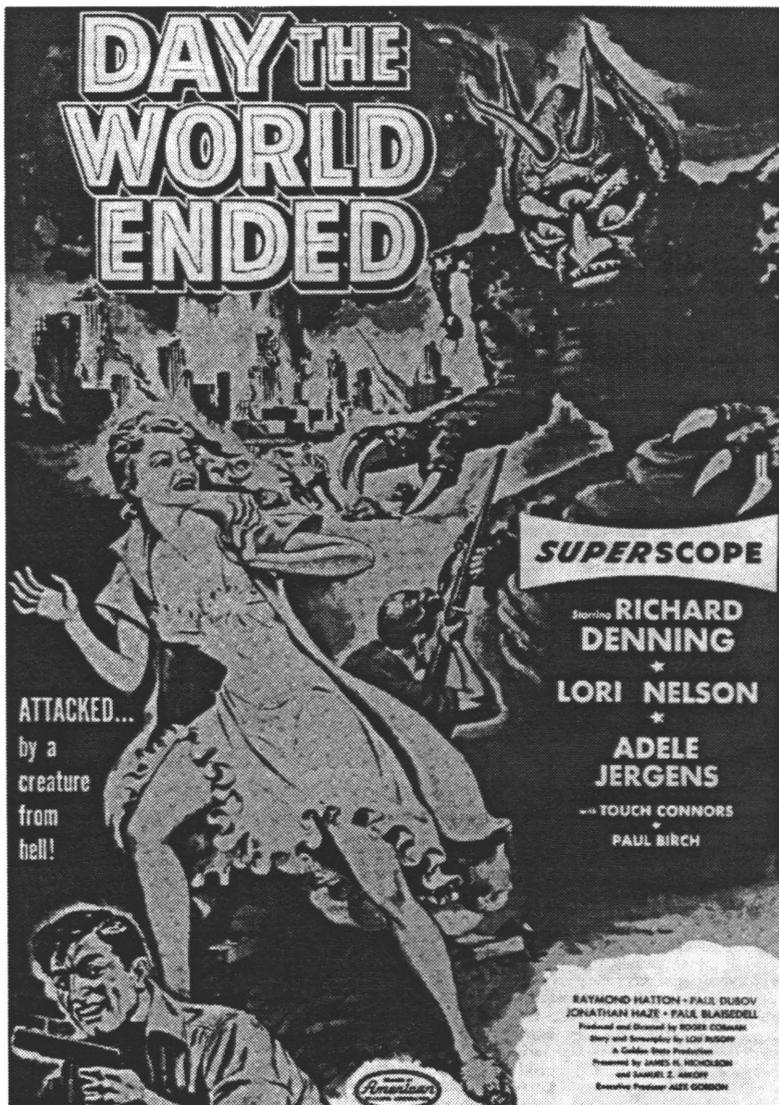
Also known as *Doomsday Machine*, this stars Grant Williams and Bobby Van as astronauts who view the Earth's nuclear holocaust from space. Speculation that China may have dropped the big one prompts one character to say, "You mean those chopstick jockeys came up with a planet buster?"

Five (1951)

This is the original post nuclear war survivor movie, as the last five people left on Earth shack up together in a Frank Lloyd Wright house. Moody film became a hit and put director Arch Oboler on the map (until he made *The Twonky*, that is.)

Hell Comes to Frogtown (1987)

Wrestler Rowdy Roddy Piper stars as title character, Sam Hell, who ventures into mutant-ridden Frogtown on a rescue mission, in this post-apocalyptic adventure film.



Last Days of Man on Earth (1973)

Also known as *The Final Programme*, this British film is based on writer Michael Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius character, who is searching for a microfilm to give him the secret to self-reproduction in the sterile post-nuclear world. (vc)

The Last Man on Earth (1964)

First version of Richard Matheson's book *I Am Legend*, in which Vincent Price as the sole human survivor of a deadly plague must kill off the vampire-like victims of the plague. (vc)

The Last Woman on Earth (1960)

A typical Roger Corman cheapie in which the post-nuclear holocaust only leaves one woman and two men, who fight over her. (vc)

The Last War (1962)

A Japanese film showcasing massive destruction by tidal waves, earthquakes, atomic explosions, and just about everything else, except for monsters. No Godzilla.

Mad Max (1979)

Australian post-apocalyptic world, where anarchial road warriors rule. Gave the world Mel Gibson, two sequels and lots of imitators. (vc)

Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome (1985)

Third entry in the series, again starring Gibson, but with the special added attraction of singer Tina Turner. (vc)

Meteor (1979)

Oh no, a five mile wide meteor is about to collide with the Earth! Better consult scientists Sean Connery and Natalie Wood. Then again, maybe not. Just watch the all star "Loveboat"-style cast suffer through it. (vc)

Miracle Mile (1989)

A guy answers a pay phone, only to learn that the U.S. has just fired a nuclear warhead, and that the end of the world is only about an hour away. (vc)

Night of the Comet (1984)

Passing comet kills or makes zombies of everyone but three teenage Valley girls, and some mad scientists. (vc)

The Omega Man (1971)

A remake of *The Last Man on Earth*, starring Charlton Heston as only one immune to deadly disease. Less faithful to the book, missing the vampire element. (vc)

On The Beach (1959)

Nuclear war in 1964 leaves the only survivors in Australia, and on a submarine captained by Gregory Peck. A grim look at people waiting for death from radiation fallout. Features Fred Astaire in a rare dramatic part. (vc)

Panic in the Year Zero (1962)

Both directed by and starring Ray Milland, this is the story of a family surviving the A-bomb, and the total anarchy that immediately follows. Frankie Avalon co-stars.

The Quiet Earth (1985)

From New Zealand, an energy experiment goes terribly awry, wiping out the entire world except for three last survivors. (vc)

Radioactive Dreams (1986)

A look at the post-nuclear world, full of grotesque mutants. This is an attempt at a comedic *Mad Max*. (vc)

Road Warrior (1982)

This is *Mad Max*, part two. Even better than the first. (vc)

Robot Monster (1953)

Originally in 3-D, the alien Ro-Man, who looks like a gorilla wearing a diving helmet, lands in Bronson Canyon with his bubble machine to terrorize the last few survivors on Earth by forcing them to watch bad dinosaur movie stock footage. This is required viewing. (vc)

The Seventh Sign (1988)

Pregnant Demi Moore starts to see the signs of the coming apocalypse. For those who prefer biblical doom. (vc)

The 27th Day (1957)

An alien abducts 5 people, giving them each a capsule capable of destroying the world. If the capsules are not used within 27 days, the aliens will not invade, otherwise the aliens expect humankind to destroy itself. The holders of the capsules try to hide out. (vc)

Testament (1983)

Originally made for PBS, this is a grim realistic look at life after a nuclear war, focusing on a family in a small town coping with fallout and radiation sickness. Stars Jane Alexander. (vc)

Threads (1984)

BBC docudrama, very depressing look at life in Sheffield after nuclear war. (vc)

When Worlds Collide (1951)

Based on the novel by Philip Wylie. The wandering star Bellus is heading for earth. As its captive planet Zyra gets closer, tidal waves hit. So, a rich guy finances an escape rocket built to take the lucky few to Zyra. (vc)

The World, the Flesh and the Devil (1958)

Harry Belafonte, Inger Stevens and Mel Ferrer are the last three people left on earth after a nuclear accident, they meet in a deserted New York City. (vc) 

Book Reviews



Crafting the Art of Magic, Book I: A History of Modern Witchcraft 1939-64, Aidan Kelly. (St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn, 1991), \$10.95.

Has anybody ever told you she was a witch, or a Wiccan? And that the Wiccan religion is incredibly old—5,000 years old, surviving the Age of Matriarchy, when there was no war? Or predating and supplying the source of the world's great religions? Or 10,000 years old? Older than the dawn of man?

In *Crafting the Art of Magic*, witch intellectual Aidan Kelly asserts that such claims are nonsense. He has been trying to assert this for a long time: He wrote much of this book in the 1970s, and had been promising the rest ever since. He has only recently gotten around to delivering.

In his book, Kelly challenges a pillar of most Wiccan belief. This religion, also known as Craft, often mixes several popular enthusiasms in one big pot. It can be feminist: most Wiccans worship a Mother Goddess. It can be ecological: most worship nature. It is certainly anti-authoritarian: it lacks theological conformity and nearly all organizational structure beyond the coven. It is sexually liberated: its ritual often incorporates sexual rites.

Most important here, Wiccans have often claimed great age for their cult. We really live in a reactionary time and yearn for the ancient, the traditional, the primitive. In our rootless world, we crave roots. In our fast-paced world, we crave the ageless. Wiccans have claimed to give us all that.

According to Kelly, this claim is false. And he proves his case with meticulous, maybe overly meticulous, scholarship. He demonstrates that although covens purveying "folk wisdom" or practicing Satanism may date to the nineteenth century, Wiccan pagan covens date only to 1939. The person most responsible for spreading the Wiccan faith was Gerald Gardner (1884-1964), a retired British civil servant who picked witchcraft as a hobby.

Gardner's inspirations included Aleister Crowley's "Gnostic Mass," Samuel Mathers's *Greater Key of Solomon*, and Margaret Murray's *God of Witches*. None of these sources predates 1939 by even a hundred years, a far cry from the matriarchal 4,000 or 5,000 years that many Wiccans claim.

Kelly himself is one of the witch intellectuals that Margot Adler mentions in her book *Drawing Down the*

Moon (1985). These intellectuals, probably few in number, have long been embarrassed by their fellow witches' beliefs. They wish to inject more conventional science and reason into Wicca. They have tried to reconcile magic and conventional science by making them noncontradictory modes of thought. Also, the witch intellectuals have, as Kelly does here, challenged myths about Wicca's pedigree.

If Kelly realizes Wicca was made up in 1939, why does he remain a witch? He says Wicca meets his needs better than other religions. And, he claims, imposture is no reason to give up a religion, for other major religions also were founded on imposture. This last contention may or may not hold water, but Kelly doesn't prove it—not as he proves the imposture of Wiccans.

—Richard A. Dengrove

Big Footprints: A Scientific Inquiry into the Reality of Sasquatch, Grover S. Krantz. Boulder: Johnson Books, 1992. 300 pages. \$14.95.

During a speech at the University of Maryland a few years ago, arch-skeptic James Randi asserted that most skeptics harbor a dirty secret: There is at least one paranormal phenomenon they quietly hope is real. Randi said his is the Loch Ness monster. Mine is Bigfoot. I've been a fan of the hairy humanoid since my childhood in the late 1960s and '70s, in Western Pennsylvania. The state was crawling with Bigfoot reports at the time, and wire-service stories chronicling sightings were fairly common in the local newspaper. I started a scrapbook and began picking up lurid paperbacks about Bigfoot. Today I retain an interest in the subject, albeit with a much more skeptical outlook.

Most anthropologists flatly reject the notion that an unknown primate of Bigfoot's size could live undetected in North America. One anthropologist who does not is Grover S. Krantz of Washington State University. Krantz's recent book, *Big Footprints: A Scientific Inquiry into the Reality of Sasquatch*, is an attempt to do the impossible, prove the animal's existence without a corpse or live specimen. Not surprisingly, he fails outright.

Krantz begins his book with a reasonable observation. He concedes that the burden of proof rests with those who believe in Bigfoot, and says the scientific community has no obligation to accept the creature's existence without a body, live or dead. Unfortunately, after that brief bout with lucidity it's all downhill. It isn't long before Krantz is blasting the "Scientific Establishment" (a term he always capitalizes) for refusing to look at his plaster casts of footprints and home movies of furry objects running through the woods.

Logic fails Krantz early on. The first section of the book deals with Sasquatch footprints, which Krantz says

have been found all over the Pacific Northwest. He says he knows a fellow Sasquatch enthusiast who has 1,000 footprint reports on file. Krantz then postulates there are probably 100 footprint reports in other investigators' files for each one his friend has collected. He says one should multiply that number, 100,000, by 10 to cover all the tracks that Bigfoot hunters see, but don't report. Furthermore, *that* number, 1 million, must be multiplied by 100 to account for all the tracks left in places inaccessible to humans, but not to Sasquatches. The result? 100 million tracks that skeptics must account for. Krantz then asserts that the tracks must be real, because it would take an army of fakers working full time to create 100 million false footprints!

This is rubbish. Skeptics are *not* responsible for explaining away millions of hypothetical tracks that no one has ever reported. They must deal only with the 1,000 or so offered as "evidence." The skeptics' job becomes a lot easier, as Krantz acknowledges, when the known hoaxes are omitted.

Elsewhere Krantz shows an inclination toward duplicity. A good example is the story behind a 1970 Bigfoot track that Krantz says convinced him that the creature is real. A series of tracks, he reports, was left by a "crippled" Sasquatch near Bossburg, Washington. The tracks supposedly showed a seriously deformed giant foot in such detail that Krantz believes they could not have been faked. He was led to these tracks by a Bigfoot enthusiast named Ivan Marx. What Krantz doesn't tell his readers is that Marx has a history of fabricating Bigfoot evidence. On two occasions Marx attempted to pass off phony Bigfoot films. Both were obvious fakes. One attempted to depict the "crippled" Sasquatch. And in one instance Marx was observed purchasing a fur coat just days before his film appeared. Krantz must know that Marx is not a reliable source, since his bibliography includes a book by Bigfoot hunter Rene Dahinden which exposes Marx. Yet Krantz relies on Marx to provide convincing proof of Bigfoot's existence.

Krantz also shows an unfortunate tendency toward gullibility. For instance, he speaks favorably of the "Jocko incident" from 19th century British Columbia, whereby a "baby" Sasquatch was allegedly captured by locals in a small town. He mentions in passing that the incident might be a hoax, apparently unaware that fellow Bigfoot researchers proved that Jocko was a newspaper hoax *15 years ago*.

Crackpots who research the paranormal often become paranoid, and Krantz may be no exception. Pursuing Bigfoot, he claims, has caused him to be ridiculed in the anthropological community and has threatened his tenure. He asserts that Northwest logging companies might be paying people to spread wild tales about Bigfoot to discredit the movement. Their motivation? If Sasquatches are found they will surely be declared endangered, and logging will be restricted.

Like other science cranks, Krantz refuses to confront aspects of the mystery that conflict with his pet ideas. He confines his discussion to the Pacific Northwest, touching only briefly on the creature's appearances elsewhere. Yet, Bigfoot has been reported in every state, except Hawaii and Rhode Island, and has been spotted in semi-urban areas that simply do not have sufficient forest cover capable of harboring such an animal. (Locally Bigfoot favors counties north of Baltimore. In 1976 a cab driver said he spotted one rummaging through some trash cans behind a shopping mall!)

And for all of his talk of footprint dermal ridges and arches, Krantz steers clear of footprint evidence that clouds the issue. Krantz contends he has proven the creature's existence by studying an abundance of five-toed tracks that are so detailed and were found in such inconvenient places that they cannot be fakes. He mentions in passing that clear four-toed tracks have also been found, but he never reports that numerous three-toed, and even two-toed, tracks have as well been photographed and cast in plaster. If Krantz's five-toed tracks are good evidence, then why aren't the others? Perhaps because he knows that the idea of a primate with less than five toes is absurd.

The real story behind Bigfoot reports, that extends beyond poor vision, mistaken identity, or outright fabrication, is in the way such monster sightings occur in flaps, which in rural areas can spread easily from town to town as rumors circulate. In this climate, social scientists and folklorists are the proper experts to examine the Bigfoot legend. But Krantz, whose bitter book is full of useless speculations, is only putting his professional reputation further beyond the pale.

In short, *Big Footprints* is a big disappointment. If you want to read a book about Sasquatch, I recommend *Creatures of the Outer Edge*, by Jerome Clark and Loren Coleman. They are every bit as gullible as Krantz, but at least they know how to spin a monster yarn so that the reader gets an occasional chill.

—Rob Boston



From the Archives

Skeptical Activities Around the World

By Mike Epstein

Alternative Medicine

The newly-created Office of Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has obviously hit a nerve with a large number of skeptic's groups, or perhaps it has just directed some of the more credulous members of the news media to the subject. In any event, alternative medicine and the publicity surrounding its use have been the recent focus of much skeptical activity. Besides our (NCAS) activities related to the "remarkable" demonstration of the Chinese art of Qi Gong at a public lecture held at NIH (Denman, 1993), the Rocky Mountain Skeptic published an article on the same topic by Dr. Zhang Honglin (1992), head of the Department of Qi Gong Research at the Institute of Acupuncture and Moxibustion, part of the China Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Beijing, China. Dr. Zhang decried the "pseudo-Qigongists" and said they "deceive people by putting on a show, not offering scientific proof." His extensive investigations have found "no scientific evidence that proves the existence of supernatural remote Qi Gong."

A number of other skeptic groups have looked into alternative medical practices:

- the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL) commented critically on Chicago area media coverage of treatments such as naprapathy (Bloomberg, 1993).
- the New York Skeptics heard Dr. Robert Baker talk on fringe medicine (Arents, 1993).
- the *New Zealand Skeptic* published articles on the placebo effect (Morris, 1993), acupuncture (Dutton, 1993), herbal medicine (Walker, 1993), and a wide variety of other alternative medical treatments (Welch, 1993).
- the Rocky Mountain Skeptics are challenging the use of therapeutic touch by Colorado nurses (Rojas, 1993).
- the North Texas Skeptics presented a highly critical article on life extension pseudo-science, particularly the work of Pearson and Shaw, and an expose of diet supplements (Gorski, 1993).
- recent CSICOP *Skeptical Briefs* contain critical articles on chiropractic and alternative medicine (Barrett, 1993).
- every skeptic's favorite whipping boy and faith-healer, W. V. Grant, was highlighted by both the Georgia Skeptics (Hestevold, 1992) and the Bay Area Skeptics (Critelli, 1993).

Worth Repeating - Rules for Skeptics

The REALL News (Hyman, 1993) recently reprinted an article on proper criticism written by Ray Hyman, professor of psychology at the University of Oregon and a Fellow and member of the Executive Council of CSICOP. The article, which first appeared in *Skeptical Briefs*, May 1987, presents eight rules for skeptics to upgrade the quality of their skepticism:

- Be prepared
- Clarify your objectives
- Do your homework
- Do not go beyond your level of competence
- Let the facts speak for themselves
- Be precise
- Use the principle of charity
- Avoid loaded words and sensationalism

Fun with Psychics

A Tampa Bay skeptic visited a psychic fair in Sunrise, FL in order to seek help in contacting his father. After forking over \$20, the skeptic was told by the apparently versatile psychic/ astrologer/and spiritualist (at least according to his business card) that his father (and mother) were both on the "other side" and still in love. The psychic batted zero. The skeptic's father and mother had divorced bitterly thirty years ago, and his father (who is still alive) thought the whole thing was hilarious (Johnson, 1993).

Not to be outdone, a South Shore skeptic visited a Cleveland psychic fair where he sought guidance from a tarot reading and a numerologist. The tarot reading didn't last too long after the skeptic pointed out to the tarot card reader that she should have seen that the upturned card of the devil indicated that he belonged to a skeptics group (Emrich, 1993).

Fun with Chemistry

In order to transmute mercury into gold, an "amateur" alchemist in Larose, La. decided to do some baking in an endeavor reminiscent, if not worthy, of Paracelsus. To be exact, he attempted to produce gold in a hot oven through a combination of fire, mercury, and one half of an Idaho potato. Unfortunately, the attempt failed and he was overcome by the mercury fumes. Undaunted, he sought redress through the courts for workman's compensation as a seaman under general maritime law (the episode took place in a ship's galley). The court ruled that alchemy is not within the duties of a seaman (Reese, 1993).

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Copies of all of these articles are available from the NCAS archives. Requests should be directed to:

Mike Epstein, electronic mail at CompuServe: 76640,1540 or Internet: mse@enh.nist.gov or by U.S. post at Michael Epstein, B-222 Chemistry, NIST, Gaithersburg, MD 20899. 

Church of Elvis?

Is the worship of Elvis Presley a religion? That's the question proposed by a recent British documentary for television, "The King and Me." Shown on the Faith and Values Channel, the show was part of the weekly series "The Human Factor."

The producers estimate that worldwide there are a million people who are devoted followers of Elvis. They also point out that, depending on which poll you use, between 6 and 16 percent of Americans believe that Elvis is still alive, not to mention all those alleged sightings reported in the tabloids.

But the real spooky part concerns the man who just before his son underwent a serious operation, felt someone touch his shoulder, giving him a warm feeling that everything was going to be all right. That someone was Elvis Presley, who died back in 1977. (Associated Press, January 28, 1994)

Finally ... an Authority Speaks Out on the Issue of Dinosaur and Human Coexistence!

By Mike Epstein

Young earth creationists from the Institute for Creation Research (ICR) have long claimed that dinosaurs and humans coexisted. Citing questionable biblical and geological evidence, such as the Paluxy river footprints (see *Skeptical Eye*, Vol 7/2), they respond to the scientific evidence that refutes their claims with the question: "Were YOU there?" But now, finally, someone WHO WAS THERE has at last spoken up. Yes...BARNEY THE DINOSAUR, in a recent television appearance, authoritatively described to children what it was like to be a dinosaur: "no cities, no cars, no people." So, take THAT Duane Gish!

Although the author is a frequent visitor to the USENET news group alt.barney.dinosaur.die.die.die, he is often forced to watch the Purple One with his two-year-old daughter ... over and over and over ... which is where he picked up this gem.

Yo!

Check the date printed on the mailing label on this issue. If you are looking into a past-life, then it must be time to renew your membership in NCAS.



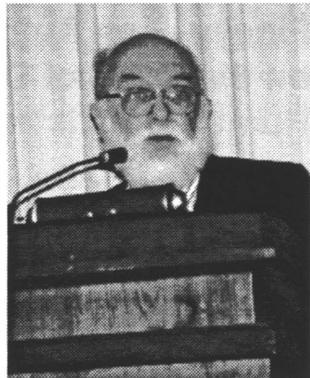
Past Life Reporting

Randi and Alcock Speak on Investigating Extraordinary Medical Claims

By Chip Denman

On January 21 two of the world's best known skeptical investigators reported on their personal experiences in evaluating unusual medical claims. Speaking at the Masur Auditorium, James "The Amazing" Randi and Dr. James Alcock were warmly welcomed by an audience who had braved both glacial cold and frozen parking lots to be there.

Alcock, professor of psychology at York University, Toronto, and Randi, a professional conjuror, had traveled to China at the invitation of China's leading scientific newspaper in 1988, specifically to provide perspective on aspects of Qi Gong healing techniques. Prof. Alcock described the historical traditions of Qi Gong [pronounced chee-gung], beginning with Lao Tze's Taoist teachings of the 6th century BC and culminating with the political strictures of modern China.



James "The Amazing" Randi



Jim Alcock

According to Alcock, the modern distinction of "soft" (or internal) and "hard" (or external) Qi Gong is relatively recent. Soft Qi Gong, which emphasizes meditation and personal control, has the longer tradition. Hard Qi Gong, based on the idea that a Master can project some kind of vital energy to another individual, is in part the reflection of the hard-line materialism of the Maoist Cultural Revolution.

Alcock showed a video taken on his trip in which a Qi Gong Master appeared to control the acrobatic movements of a patient several meters away, much like a conductor controlling an orchestra. Alcock reported that when the patient was taken out of the sight of the Master, there was no correspondence between patient's and Master's movements; apparently the Qi Gong Master was simply following the patient's motions rather than the other way around.

Tea Leaves and Entrails

...don't help much. But the future is clear for these upcoming NCAS meeting dates:

February 19-20
March 26
April 23
May 21

Communicating Skepticism NCAS workshop weekend in Harpers Ferry
Roger Nelson, PEAR Lab. Bethesda Library
John Spencer, NIH Office of Alternative Medicine. Bethesda Library
Roger Corliss. Bethesda Library

Program topics and speakers are still being considered. Special events—like the ever-popular NCAS Movie Nites—will also be happening from time to time.

Are there events, topics, and/or speakers that you would like to see? Would you like to help plan an event or host a Movie Nite? Let us know! Call Joe Himes (703-280-2503, evenings) or leave a message on the NCAS line (301-587-3827) at any time.

On the same trip, Alcock and Randi also conducted simple trials with children who, it was claimed, were able to read with their armpits and buttocks and to be able to break and restore matches by mental control of Qi energy. These tests, without exception, did not support these claims. Some of their Chinese colleagues cautiously told them about video tape that clearly caught the children cheating. For fear of reprisals, the Chinese psychologists could not openly criticize these Qi prodigies. Alcock said that it was his

sense that the careful Chinese scientists welcomed the western visitors as individuals who could openly express criticism, skepticism, and good science in those months leading up to Tiananmen Square.

Randi continued the report of their investigations into Qi Gong. With the help of Iiro Seppänen, a magician visiting from Finland, a “hard” Qi Gong stunt previously seen at the Masur Auditorium last September [see *The NIH Record*, 10/12/93] was duplicated. A few months ago a large audience at the NIH saw Qi Gong Master Wang-Pong Cheng demonstrate his supposed control of Qi energy by shattering stones and by breaking a chopstick with a folded dollar bill. Randi explained that the chopstick stunt is a summer camp style trick accomplished simply by the magician sticking out a finger to break the stick. Randi, an internationally known performer and MacArthur “genius” Award winner, touched upon his many personal investigations including “psychic surgery” in the Philippines, homeopathy in France, and recent “innovations” in Russia. Randi further entreated scientists to do a much better job of policing themselves and reaching out to the public with the values, the facts, and the methods of science.

Randi concluded by calling upon the NIH to focus their efforts to evaluate “alternative” medicine. Rather than spreading limited resources thinly across many little projects, Randi suggested that Federal money would be best spent to settle once and for all the efficacy—or lack thereof—of certain well-known alternatives such as homeopathy, acupuncture, and chiropractic. “One must be careful,” he urged, “to not throw the baby out with the bath water. But when the bath has been carefully examined and no baby found, throw it out!” 



Randi (r) looks on as Iiro Seppänen prepares to duplicate a Qi Gong stunt of breaking a chopstick with a dollar bill.

At his talk at the NIH, Randi raised ten points regarding the failures of the scientific community in addressing psychic, quack and crackpot claims:

- 1 Attitude that all claims are equally deserving and must be examined.
- 2 Willingness to grant undo weight to the authority of Ph.Ds.
- 3 Tendency to regard a published scientific paper as a fact.
- 4 Reluctance to fly in the face of any colleague.
- 5 Dismissal of whistleblowers.
- 6 Failure to educate on the actual nature of science.
- 7 Failure to challenge the media.
- 8 Failure to follow up—and put to rest—spurious claims.
- 9 Failure to take notice of skeptics and serious critics.
- 10 Fear of crippling legal actions.

Randi Legal Fund

Contributions to the James Randi Fund may be sent to:

The James Randi Fund
142 West 49th Street, Suite 12H
New York City, NY 10019

The fund is still needed to assist in covering legal costs incurred by Randi in fighting the suits brought by Uri Geller and others.

Helping Hands?

By Mike Epstein

“The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one. The happiness of credulity is a cheap and dangerous quality.”

— George Bernard Shaw

As a *known* skeptic, I am sometimes asked why I write things that only serve to take away people’s hope, or that hurt and destroy their beliefs. The answer is simply that the happiness borne of belief is often, as Shaw describes it, a “cheap and dangerous quality.” A case in point may be the recent charge in Frederick County, Maryland against a retarded man who faces trial for rape based on accusations obtained by “facilitated communication” from a 9-year-old autistic girl.

Facilitated communication (FC) is a controversial method to overcome the conversational limitations of the disabled, particularly autistic children. In FC, an aide or “facilitator” supports a disabled person’s arm or wrist so the person can type a message on a computer keyboard. Often the autistic child appears totally oblivious to their surroundings, yet intelligible statements appear on the computer screen. The question is whether the child or the facilitator is actually doing the communicating.

Opinions concerning the validity of the method vary from those who believe that tests of FC have “failed 100 percent of the time” to those who report success in a small percentage of cases. Dr. Howard Shane, director of the Communication Enhancement Center of Children’s Hospital in Boston, has tested thousands of disabled individuals, and states that “there’s never been one bit of evidence found that facilitated communication works. It certainly looks real but it never stands up to validation. I don’t think that there is any reality to this phenomenon. Maybe it’s no different from ESP or believing in aliens. There are many people who believe in them. But are they real? I don’t think so.”

On the other hand, Dr. Michael Weiss, a Boston psychologist, has been quoted that “a published review of 218 reported cases of facilitation assessed four as valid. I want to know more about what’s going on in that small percentage of cases where it works.” Some have found similarities between belief in FC and belief in ESP. Tests designed to validate FC are similar to those used in studying anomalous processes of information transfer, such as telepathy, and are intended to determine who is communicating, the disabled person or the facilitator? It is a highly charged issue, since belief in the validity of FC provides hope and comfort for parents who are able to communicate with their children for the first time. Some skeptics have been so emotionally torn by investigation of FC that they now refrain from involvement.

But there is another side to the issue. While U.S. courts do not usually accept telepathic communication as the basis for successful cases, more than 60 charges of various sorts based on FC have been filed, splitting the courts over the issue. A spokesman for the American Bar Association said that of the four cases in New York State, two judges allowed facilitated testimony and two banned it. And now another is scheduled for trial in Frederick County, MD.

This case involves a 9-year-old autistic girl who used FC to accuse a 27-year-old mentally-retarded teacher’s aide of rape, child abuse and sexual offense. According to the charging document, the girl typed a series of connected words indicating that she had been sexually assaulted and naming the assailant. The girl allegedly said these events happened first when she was 5 and last when she was 7. The defense, however, has questioned how the girl, who, at the time of the accusation had the developmental ability of a 2-year-old and no reading instruction, could communicate at the level of a 10-year-old; type sentences and spell. As a result, the judge in the case has ordered a scientific trial of the girl’s ability to communicate. “There must be a level playing field,” said the judge. “If there is to be a fair trial, there can be no suggestion of the facilitator influencing the trial testimony.” The judge is expected to act as the independent observer of the test, now set for March, the details of which will be decided by the prosecuting and defense attorneys. The trial is scheduled for June 1994.

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The Electric Skeptic

occasional articles about skepticism
on the electronic frontier

Smiley When You Say That, "Pardner"!

By Gary Stone (grstone@mcimail.com)

Along with heavier discussions about UFOlogy and quantum mechanical appeals for ESP, participants in the internet e-mail discussion group SKEPTIC* also found time recently to leave their mark on the Electronic Frontier itself, by adding new symbols representing "skepticism" to the internet's unofficial vocabulary of emoticons (emotional icons), better known as smiley faces.

Used ubiquitously by many in e-mail, and disdained as frivolous by some, the smiley is a happy face turned sideways : -) It is generally used as punctuation to mean "just joking" or that the preceding statement should be taken in good humor. Smileys lend body language to the text-only medium of e-mail. There are over 650 emoticons, such as :- (meaning "sadly" and ; -) for "wink" or | - p for "yuck."

In-depth research revealed that the standard internet emoticon for "skepticism" was :-/ which we suspected was not coined by qualified skeptics such as ourselves. Here is what we came up with as our discussion progressed.

EMOTICON Meanings suggested by SKEPTIC participants:

- : - <> "What!?" (more astonishment than skepticism, but a good start)
- : - ? "query-cum-cynical" expression most suitable for skeptics (internet emoticon glossaries carry this as "User smoking a pipe")
- ` : - ? "I'm Skeptical of that preceding comment" or for those who must see the pipe, a Sherlockian contemplation, with eyebrow raised and Calabash poised,...
- B - ? "Skeptics are cool" (B is "sunglasses" in emoticon speak) or "The preceding remark is an insightfully skeptical observation, demonstrating once again that Skeptics are COOL"
- (@ "Skeptical Eye" (logo of the National Capital Area Skeptics)
- B - S "I'm Skeptical about that!" The sunglasses indicate coolness and the double curved mouth indicates uncertainty — half a smile of approval and agreement, half a frown of disagreement. Yes, this does have another, compatible meaning, "cut the crap."

If any of this leaves you cold, well, you had to be there, "pardner" ; -) ...online, on the Electronic Frontier... B - ?

*Skeptical Eye, Vol. 7, No. 2, page 22. Or send an inquiry by e-mail to:

SKEPTIC-REQUEST@JHUVUM.HCF.JHU.EDU 

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Would you like to be included in a future NCAS electronic directory? Send e-mail to Gary Stone.



A Skeptic's Response

This feature of the Skeptical Eye is designed to assist skeptics when they respond to challenging topics. In so responding skeptics must take care to use proper critical arguments. Over the last few years a number of defamation lawsuits have been filed around the world against skeptics. We asked a lawyer (and NCAS member): just what constitutes defamation anyway?

Value of a Good Name

By B. Diane Martin

*Good name in a man and woman, my dear lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls:
Who steals my purse steals trash; t'is something, nothing,
T'was mine, t'is his, and has been a slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed.*
Othello, act III, scene iii

The laws of Alfred the Great provided that if anyone was guilty of public slander, and it was proved against him, this was to be compensated with no lighter penalty than the cutting off of his tongue.¹ In 13th century England, ecclesiastical courts had jurisdiction over the crime of slander, which was treated as a spiritual offense. The sinner was wrapped in a white shroud and required to kneel publicly and acknowledge his false witness before the priest and parish wardens, begging the pardon of God and the injured party.² By Shakespeare's time, the common law courts had begun to assert jurisdiction over cases involving defamation.

The desire to protect one's good name has not changed with time. Here in the U.S., Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart noted that the individual's right to protection of his own name reflects no more than our basic concept of the essential dignity and worth of every human being, a concept at the root of any decent system of ordered liberty. The protection of private personality, like the protection of life itself, is left primarily to the individual states, under the Ninth and Tenth Amendments. But this does not mean that the right is entitled to any less recognition by this Court as a basic of our constitutional system.³

The law of defamation, as practiced in the U.S., was primarily a product of the laws of each individual state until 1964, when the United States Supreme Court, in the case *New York Times vs. Sullivan*,⁴ held that the First Amendment places limitations on the defamation rules created by the states. Since that landmark decision there have been a number of drastic changes to the First Amendment rules governing defamation, which essentially relax the constitutional restrictions on the states. This article will provide a historical context for modern defamation law as well as a few practical definitions.

Defamation actually consists of two torts (private or civil wrongs): libel and slander. The simple way to distinguish between the terms is that libel is defamation by written or printed words, while slander consists of communication of a defamatory statement by spoken words. Originally, libel was treated as a more serious tort than slander. This distinction arose when relatively few people could read and the written word was awe-inspiring, and thus more credible.⁵ But now, with radio, television, and computer electronic communication such an integral part of our modern life, oral defamation is often as damaging or even more damaging than written libel. Generally, a communication is considered defamatory if it tends to harm the reputation of another, as to lower him in the estimation of the community, or, to deter third persons from associating or dealing with him.⁶

The law of defamation serves an important social interest as a deterrent on the publication of false and injurious speech. The deterrent in most cases involves the award of punitive damages. Of all the functions served by the law of defamation, this is perhaps the most controversial and problematic, for it tends to conflict directly with free expression values, particularly because of the danger that juries may exact such punishment primarily against unpopular causes and ideas, punishing the speaker more for what he stands for than for the real harm in what he said.⁷

But what about an individual's right to publish his or her opinion? In common law, courts began to recognize that valuable discourse might be furthered by intuitive, evaluative statements that could not be proved either true or false by the rigorous deductive reasoning of the judicial process.⁸ The fair comment privilege was gradually developed for this purpose and provided limited legal protection. The fair comment privilege ultimately came to encompass comment concerning persons, institutions, or groups who voluntarily inject themselves into the public scene or affected the community's welfare, persons taking a public position on matters of public concern, and those who offer their creations for public approval, such as artists, performers, and athletes.⁹ What is important to remember is that the Supreme Court has set the outer boundary of protection, that opinion is a protected right but misstatements of fact are not. There is no hard and fast rule or test to determine what is fact (or more important what is not fact) and what is opinion, and, to make matters worse, these decisions vary from state to state. However,

in the case of *Milkovich v. Lorain Journal Co.*,¹⁰ Chief Justice Rehnquist emphasized that fair comment was generally privileged when it concerned a matter of public concern, was upon true or privileged facts, represented the actual opinion of the speaker, and was not made for the sole purpose of causing harm.¹¹ So it appears that there is some constitutional immunity for genuine opinion.

Readers of the *Eye* will find that most of their comments fit into this generally protected area of opinion or fair comment. What must be remembered is that once you step off of this path by, for example, accusing someone of engaging in a criminal activity, such allegations will usually not be construed as protected opinion. Remember that increasing numbers of defamation suits have been filed recently and juries have been extremely sympathetic to plaintiffs, both in determining outcome and in the size of damage awards.

Notes

¹Smolla, Rodney, *Law of Defamation* S 1.02[1] at 1-4 (Release 7 1994)

²Id.

³Id.

⁴376 U.S. 254 (1964)

⁵Id at S 1.04 at 1-9

⁶Restatement, Torts 2nd S 559

⁷Supra, note 1, S 1.06 at 1-17

⁸Id at S 6.02 at 6-6

⁹Id at S 6.02 at 6-7

¹⁰497 U.S. 1 (1990)

¹¹Supra, note 1, S 6.03 [7][d] at 6-16.9 

Like a Sturgeon

The Loch Ness monster, known affectionately as Nessie, is often imagined to be a giant long-necked prehistoric sea creature. But now new comprehensive research on the ecology of the lake indicates that Loch Ness is unable to support such a creature. This is based on a recent survey estimating the loch's fish population, which is relatively low; certainly not enough to feed a family of giant sea monsters. In all, the loch was found to have no more than 20 to 30 tons of fish. The researchers estimated that any predators who live off these fish should, in total, weigh no more than 10% of the total weight of the fish, or prey. This gives us a weight of 2 or 3 tons, not bad for one monster, but assuming at least 10 of them are needed to support a population, reduces to about 500 pounds each. Too small for a giant prehistoric sea creature.

So, does this finally end the years of speculation about the nature of Nessie?

Of course not! Instead it just inspires a new one. This time Nessie could be a 500 pound fish, the sturgeon. At least according to the theories of naturalist Adrian Shine, leader of the Loch Ness Project. He conjectures that wayward sturgeon could sometimes find their way up the Ness River into the loch and then wander back out to sea, leaving behind reported sightings of monsters. Sturgeon, which have long snouts and ridged backs, live in the ocean, but come into fresh water to spawn. And according to Shine local newspapers from the 19th century support a tradition that there was a large fish in the loch. It was much later that the prehistoric monster idea, or as Shine calls it "the media monster," took over.

The continuing Loch Ness research project has nothing to do with searching for a monster. A set of 14 papers from the project are to be published in the next edition of *The Scottish Naturalist*.

(Kudos to *The Washington Post* for a front page story this past December which showed how cool real science could be when addressing extraordinary claims.)

In Search of:

NCAS would like to find possible facilities for future events. Can you suggest locations? Rooms of different sizes are sought which could accommodate 75-500. Metro accessibility, parking, audiovisual equipment, and weekend availability are all factors which need to be considered. Please phone Joe Himes at 703-280-2503.

Keep Your Eye Open

Send your articles, letters, and original artwork for future publication in the *Skeptical Eye*. Contributions should be typed, not handwritten. If you use a computer, please send hard copy along with your floppy disk (5.25" or 3.5", WordPerfect or ASCII). Please be sure to include your name, address, and telephone number. Send all contributions to *Skeptical Eye*, 8006 Valley Street, Silver Spring, MD 20910.



The Last Word

Predicting the Future

By Elena M. Watson

Technically, this is the last issue of the *Skeptical Eye* for 1993. But, since it's already February, this issue really marks the start of a new year. And a new year always brings with it two traditions. The first is that of looking back, in which all sorts of lists are formed, naming the best of this and the worst of that, all from the year past. The other tradition of the new year is to look ahead, to make resolutions, to set new goals. But to a confessed tabloid junkie like myself, looking ahead at the new year means one thing:

PREDICTIONS!

Yes, every January the tabloids feature "psychic predictions" for the year to come. But by the next January no one even vaguely remembers the previous predictions, nor do the tabloids themselves ever keep score. And nearly every year I think to myself, "Wow, I should keep these predictions, and then look at them next year and see if any came true." Of course, every year I either forget to keep them, or keep them, but misplace them. Okay, lose them might be more accurate.

This year is no exception. I didn't keep any predictions from last January, but with a little digging around I found some I did keep. And thanks to NCAS Archives keeper Mike Epstein I discovered that according to the *Weekly World News*, 1993 was supposed to be the year that Madonna revealed she was Jim Nabors love child, an earthquake killed thousands in Manhattan and Dolly Parton's left breast was to explode during a nationally broadcast TV special. Gee, I don't remember any of those happening.

Of course the *Weekly World News* goes so far out of its way to be outrageous, one can't take predictions like those very seriously. So let's look at some other predictions I found. These come from Jeane Dixon, billed by the *Star* as "the World's Greatest Psychic." Apparently, her only rivals for the title are Edgar Cayce and Nostradamus, both of who are, rather conveniently, dead. I guess that makes Jeane the world's most famous living psychic. And Jeane Dixon is indeed a brand name among psychics, so let's look at her "Fall Predictions" from the *Star* (October 12—19, 1993).

They are divided into two parts, for "the stars" (October 12, 1993) and for the "rich and famous" (October 19, 1993). Because I, unlike Ms. Dixon, am not personally acquainted with any of these folks, it is difficult to tell if the more intimate predictions have come true. Like, how am I supposed to know if Oprah and Steadman had a falling out and then got back together for Christmas? And

being the pro that she is, many of Jeane's predictions are so vague they could apply to a number of things. She is also careful to use a lot of qualifiers, saying that something "may happen" as opposed to "will happen." And even though these predictions are for a narrow time period, October-December 1993, Dixon rarely uses exact dates. So how good was she? How many have since come true?

Well, it's kind of hard to say. Of the nearly fifty predictions for "the stars" most of them were either so vague or so personal, that I couldn't say one way or the other. Has David Letterman's dedication to his new show at CBS "evaporated" a romance? Who knows? Letterman doesn't talk much about his personal life. On the other hand, Rosanne and Tom Arnold, who do, are not expecting a baby, just as Jeane predicted. I think she was also right about Marla Maples and Donald Trump having their baby before getting married. Her third "hit" is the breakup of Ted Danson and Whoopi Goldberg, although Dixon sees them renewing their love over the next two years. So, we'll have to come back for that one. But on at least nine items she was clearly wrong. Eddie Murphy did not make a huge film comeback, Conan O'Brien hasn't become famous for outrageous stunts, in fact he hasn't become very famous, period. Janet Jackson hasn't gone into seclusion, nor has Cher been involved in a recent scandal. And Shannen Doherty didn't make headlines for going to the hospital, but for getting married.

The second set of predictions are more current affairs/politically oriented. There are about twenty-two of them, but Dixon doesn't seem to have been much more accurate. Was there an assassination attempt on the Pope? I must have missed it. Did Daryl Hannah and JFK Jr. break up yet? I thought I read something about them just a few weeks ago. And what about airline disasters? Jeane predicted late November through December 4 as the most likely time for them. She also predicted that AIDs researchers will discover two new viruses could be hiding "behind the mask of HIV." One may be a bovine or cow virus thought to be non-toxic to humans. The second virus will be traced to Hansen's disease (leprosy) "which has roughly the same incubation period as HIV." (*Star*, October 19, 1993) One of the big problems with this one is that the infectious agent in leprosy is not a virus, but a bacterium. It is slow growing, taking 3—5 years. But just having a long incubation time doesn't in any way relate it to AIDs. Dixon's closest hit for this section is the one that says a "lone gunman is likely to go on a killing rampage." However, she specifies November, and the Long Island train shooting happened in December. Plus, her prediction is so vague, it would have matched any such shooting. And, unfortunately such incidents are not so rare any more.

So, where does that leave me? Dissatisfied. The few hits that Dixon made required no special talent. My mother could have told you Rosanne probably wasn't

going to get pregnant this fall. And we can't really count Ted and Whoopi as a hit until they get back together in two years, as predicted. That leaves Marla and the Donald, which just makes sense. After all, no woman dreams of looking like a blimp on her wedding day. It'd be even worse knowing that the pictures might end up in *People* magazine.

So, what about next year? I already missed the issue of the *Enquirer* that had 1994 predictions. I had considered trying to come up with some predictions of my own, but for some reason I kept having trouble tuning into the cosmic consciousness. Maybe I'm just late on my cable bill again. In any event I've decided to call upon a higher power; to seek out one of greater wisdom.

Skeptical Eye readers may recall the 39,000 year old spirit of Naphtha, whose wisdom (read: ravings) once filled these pages during the early years of this publication. Holding hands, we at the *Eye* tried to contact him through his favorite medium, NCAS Board Member Jamy Ian Swiss:

JIS: Eenie-meenie, chili-beenie, the spirits are about to speak!
Naphtha: Go away. We don't want any. I gave at the office. BOO!

JIS: I smell a noxious chemical odor, he must be in the area.
N: I am a dirt road on the information superhighway of the spirit plane. How may I serve you?

JIS: Naphtha, where have you been? We've been trying to contact you for quite some time.

N: Naphtha? Jeez, for a while there I thought everybody was saying NAFTA!

JIS: Well, what do you think of NAFTA, now that you mention it?
N: I think ever since the debate you're gonna need a medium to contact the remains of Perot's political career.

JIS: Do you have any 1994 predictions for us?
N: Disco is coming back!

JIS: Oh no!
N: Just kidding. We spirits are supposed to be scary.

continued on next page

Mystery Solved

Finally, someone at the Associated Press (January 11, 1994) has discovered the answer to the question that has long tortured the television viewing public. The question, of course, is, where do the talk shows find those outrageous people? You know the ones, the Elvis fans who get plastic surgery to look more like him, the 29 year old woman who dated a 13 year old, and the guy who has collected over 5,000 Chinese food takeout menus.

The answer is through the National Talk Show Guest Registry, a San Fernando Valley-based database run by Chris Darryn. He started it last August as an offshoot of his database search company, the Research Department, which he began in 1986. Darryn doesn't say much about which shows use the registry, as talk show producers don't like to reveal their sources. Those that use his services are charged only \$2.50 for each name he provides. Monthly subscribers pay a flat rate, under \$100 a week.

So far there are about 1900 entries in the registry. This includes people like Mike St. Lawrence, a UFO abduction insurance salesman, who pays \$3.00 a month to be listed. Since registering, St. Lawrence has appeared on four or five shows. And no wonder, his company, UFO Abduction & Casualty Insurance Co., issues \$10 million policies to those worried about alien abduction. The policies sell at \$9.95 each, a bargain. Especially so, since abductees can get double indemnity if the aliens refer to them as "a nutritional food source." Hmm, in that case, maybe the aliens are really just looking for the guy with all those Chinese food takeout menus.

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Last Word, from page 23

JIS: What else can you tell us?
N: I predict that Jeane Dixon will make some predictions, many of which will be wrong.

JIS: Your accuracy is astounding. What else?
N: I see an earthquake.

JIS: You've been watching CNN again.
N: No, just "Talk Soup" on E! the Entertainment Channel.

JIS: Tell us something that will happen in the future.
N: Foretelling the past is much easier, y'know.

JIS: How about some words of wisdom?
N: They didn't do it. Or else, they did it, but they didn't mean to do it. Or they didn't want to do it.

JIS: I don't understand, what does all that mean?
N: That's my prediction for major criminal cases in the coming year.

JIS: Unbelievable.
N: You'd believe it if you watched Court TV.

JIS: You've spoken of politics, the courts, and natural disasters. How about the world of science?
N: I don't think you're gonna hear much from the Mars Probe.

JIS: Can you offer me any personal insights for my own life?
N: Yes, I see you meeting a dark, beautiful stranger.

JIS: This is getting interesting, tell me more...
N: She is from a far away land.

JIS: Can you tell me more about her? Does she have a name?
N: Name? Yes, I see letters...L...O...R...E...N...A...

JIS: Well, ah, um, thank you Naphtha! That's about all we have time for today!
N: Hey, wait! I'm not finished here...

JIS: You are now.
N: Same to you, buster. Over and out.

Thank you, Jamy, thank you, Naphtha! Tune in next year for more voices from beyond the veil.

As for me, I think I'll give up on predictions for a while. 

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