



Selected articles from  
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## Noreen Renier doubly featured on Court TV documentary series

By [Gary P. Posner](#)

The March 24 and 31 installments of Court TV's criminally credulous documentary series *Psychic Detectives* profiled two crimes for which Noreen Renier has been credited with providing police with invaluable "psychic" assistance. The second program dealt with a case that was not entirely convincing to the detective. But the first (discussed below) was quite another matter.

Renier, who lived in Florida for many years before moving back to the rural Charlottesville, Virginia, area in January, was described as having "cracked cases for law enforcement agencies around the country, including the FBI." I have had occasion to investigate one such claim -- her Williston police case, and reached contrary conclusions (see *TBS Report*, [Fall 1996](#), [Winter '96-'97](#), and [Summer '97](#)). During a 1986 libel trial involving a skeptic who had accused Renier of "fraudulent activity," now-retired supervisory special agent [Robert Ressler testified](#) that Renier's FBI-related claims are "not true from the standpoint of being a paid employee [or] being on a retainer or being used in any regular capacity. She does not work on FBI cases. . . . [We don't use] psychics in our investigative process."

But the specific case profiled by Court TV on March 24 involved an elderly couple in Colonie, N.Y., near Albany, who had been murdered in their home in 1986. According to the narrator, as the detectives begin to formulate a list of suspects, "One family member grabs investigators' attention, the . . . grandson," described by lead detective Ray Krolak as a "habitual liar" with a police record who, just one day after the murders, demanded to see his grandfather's will. But he had an alibi, as did another suspect -- an acquaintance of the grandson's who had an extensive criminal record and was contracted to do some tile flooring for the murdered couple.

With no arrests after two years, at the urging of the son and daughter Krolak consulted Renier by

phone. At her request, he then sent her some objects belonging to the victims. In their follow-up conversation, "Krolak is stunned, as Noreen describes the crime scene to a 'T' even though he has given her no background on the case." No background? Krolak: "I didn't give her much information. I just told her it was a homicide, a double-homicide, and Jake and Dora's names." Oops! Renier (or an associate) could have researched the newspaper coverage of the case, had she so desired. Krolak says he obtained Renier's telephone records to see if she had made calls to the Albany area but found none, convincing him (if not me) that she had done no such research.

According to Krolak, during Renier's reading "she felt the killer . . . had eaten [at the house] on a few occasions . . . and had done some work or was going to do some work in the . . . house." She also is said to have come up with the initials "R.S." -- those of the sleazy grandson's sleazier acquaintance. But, again, they had alibis. I suspect she may have learned of these prime suspects by non-psychic means, but Krolak believes otherwise.

Frustrated, Krolak decided to fly to Renier's home (in Orlando at that time), taking with him photographs of his top 10 suspects. As reenacted on the Court TV program, he laid out the 10 photos (upside down at Renier's request) on a tabletop. Narrator: "Noreen immediately eliminates seven photos. . . . Krolak is astounded as Noreen, using only her psychic powers, finally reveals the face underneath [the first of the three remaining cards]. . . . It is Robert Skinner, the [R.S.] man who has been a suspect all along. . . . Her second pick is . . . Skinner's associate [in past crimes]." We hear Renier saying that she believes Skinner to be the shooter.

But now we get to this case's signature claim. Noreen turns over her third card, revealing the face of *the grandson*. Yes, Renier fingers the grandson, saying, "This man planned it." And at Renier's urging, Krolak checked the trio's alibis more carefully, found holes, and all three suspects have now been convicted.

I suspect that most viewers came away with the strong impression that Noreen Renier must be the real deal. I doubt that more than a fingerful of viewers had benefit of tapes of the following two television programs: *Geraldo* (syndicated, May 30, 1991) and *48 Hours* (CBS, May 13, 1992).

In the latter, CBS News correspondent Doug Tunnell says, "One of the people Noreen led police to was a *new suspect*, a member of the victims' family . . . the grandson." In this version, not only did Renier finger the grandson, but by indisputably "psychic" means, since he had not even been a suspect. But the Court TV version makes clear that the police were highly suspicious of the grandson from the get-go.

Now for the smoking gun (if there is one) on *Geraldo*. With Renier on the stage and both Krolak and the grandson's mother -- who had encouraged that Renier be brought in on the case -- in the studio audience, Geraldo asks the mother, "Marge, are you confronted now with the incredible dilemma that the psychic has apparently fingered, or helped to accuse, your own flesh and blood of killing your parents, his grandparents?" Marge's reply: "*She did not do that. She did not finger my son. She did finger the other two.*"

The camera cuts to Renier, who merely smiles. She had earlier told Geraldo that she retains little memory of her "psychic" readings once they are over. Nor did Krolak contest Marge's statement, although he did say immediately thereafter, "During the session . . . Noreen had mentioned that a

family member [unspecified, it would seem] had brought the killer to the house." Yes, the grandson had brought his acquaintance to the house on some previous occasion to arrange for the tiling job, but Krolak made clear on the Court TV show that the grandson was definitely not in the vicinity of the house on the night of the murders. (Once again, I suspect that Renier may have learned about the prime suspects via newspaper accounts or by other prosaic means.) Moments earlier, Krolak did tell Geraldo that "I presented [Renier] with 10 photographs and she picked out the killer's picture." But there was no mention of Noreen picking out the grandson's picture and fingering him as the mastermind.

So, is Noreen for real? We now know that the CBS News claim of Renier fingering the grandson as a new suspect was false. Contained within Geraldo's question to Marge was that, new suspect or not, Noreen had nonetheless fingered the grandson. But Marge stated unequivocally, and uncontradicted, that even that was false. And the sensational small-town double homicide must have received considerable press coverage over the two intervening years. Given all this, it would seem a leap of faith to conclude, as Detective Krolak has done, that genuine "psychic" power was required to obtain the sort of information that Renier provided. Krolak had even acknowledged on *Geraldo* that "she more or less reaffirmed what we knew previously."

Upon his discovery (several years after its 1994 publication) of [my chapter about Renier](#) in *Psychic Sleuths*, in which I discussed the *Geraldo* and *48 Hours* programs, Krolak sent me an e-mail in November 1999:

. . . In your quest to debunk Noreen you had mentioned my name several times [[here](#) and [here](#)]. . . . You quoted newspaper articles and Geraldo Rivera who, by the way, I had no conversation with prior to the show or backstage. As a journalist or reporter or whatever it is you do, you would think that a professional like yourself would only deal in facts. You made no attempt to contact me before doing your article.

My reply of the same date, which went unanswered:

Thank you for your note. . . . I presented your very positive comments, as elicited by professional interviewers, regarding Noreen's assistance in the case. It's hard to imagine how you could have been any more glowing in your praise of her had I interviewed you personally, and I am confident that my readers understand your point of view re: Noreen's role in the case.

Your note implies that I may have conveyed false, inaccurate, and/or misleading information to my readers. Your comment in this regard seems related to the matter of whether or not you had told Geraldo, prior to his show, that Noreen had fingered the grandson as a suspect. Thank you for clarifying this peripheral issue about which I included a parenthetical aside in my chapter (I did not state as a certainty that you had been Geraldo's source for this information). But your clarification begs the following questions:

- 1) Even if you didn't tell Geraldo "prior to the show or backstage," were you still the one who told Geraldo (or his staff) that Noreen fingered the grandson?

2) Were you the one who told Doug Tunnell (or his staff) that Noreen fingered the grandson?

3) If you weren't the one who told Geraldo and Tunnell, who else could have told them? It wasn't the daughter (she adamantly denied on Geraldo's show that Noreen had fingered her son, and you -- sitting next to her -- did not contest her denial, nor did Noreen). The only other obvious source would seem to be Noreen.

4) Was the daughter telling the truth when she adamantly contested Geraldo's statement? If so, whoever fed Geraldo and Tunnell this claim was not being truthful.

5) If Noreen did not finger the grandson, and if Noreen is the source of untruthful information about this to two (at least) national TV shows, have you written to her to complain?

One would think that Court TV's *Psychic Detectives* staff has watched at least a few hours of the station's daytime programming. If so, they must have encountered a cross-examination or two. How could they be unaware that the best way to get to the truth of a controversial claim -- especially if it involves supernatural powers -- is to present both sides of the issue and subject the claim to intense critical scrutiny?

One would also think that the staff would be aware of [this "Psychic Detectives" section](#) of Court TV's website, in which James Randi and I are quoted and my chapter about Renier in *Psychic Sleuths* is mentioned -- there are even photos of Randi, me, and the book cover (see chapters [7](#) and [11](#) of the site's section). To turn the tables on Detective Krolak, why did *he* not have the staff interview *me* -- or, better yet, the daughter -- for the March 24 program?

I won't even charge Court TV for my idea for a new series, *Under Oath*, loosely patterned after F. Lee Bailey's 1983 show [Lie Detector](#) but kicked up a notch: a judge would preside over a mock mini-trial with the witnesses strapped to a polygraph, and would have discretion to dispense community service sentences to anyone he concludes is deceptive. I'd even pay to have Renier, Krolak and the daughter flown to Hollywood.

*Epilogue:* I have managed to revive my dialogue with Det. Krolak ([see here](#)).

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## **As Jesus is re-crucified on film, Mary is decapitated in glass**

By [Gary P. Posner](#)



Just days after the opening of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, depicting the crucifixion of Jesus in excruciatingly gruesome detail, the major local news story was the destruction of three window panes (upper right photo) containing the image of Mary on a building in Clearwater.

By that March 1 afternoon, virtually every local media website was erroneously reporting that the image had first appeared in December 1996, shortly before Christmas.

The *St. Petersburg Times*, in its March 2 front-page headline story "[For Mary's faithful, a shattering loss](#)," ignored its own previous reporting about when the image was first known to exist. The article included a chronology sidebar titled "History of Mary Image," which began with the December 17, 1996, sighting. However, as the *Times* had reported on December 20, 1996, a [1994 Florida Department of Transportation photograph](#) showed that the stain had been present even then, though at the time it was largely obscured by the palm trees that helped create it -- and which had been removed shortly before the 1996 sighting.

In light of the ubiquitously erroneous reporting, by the evening of March 1 I had sent the following information to numerous local media outlets including Channels 8, 10, 13, 28, and Bay News 9, plus the *Times* and the *Tampa Tribune*:

Please be reminded (or made aware) that the "Virgin Mary" stains were present in the windows for years before they were first noticed in December 1996 shortly after the palm trees that helped form them were removed. For details, [see here](#) and be sure to follow the story's link to the 1994 Florida Department of Transportation photograph of the building, which can also be seen [in color] at [www.takingvalue.com/VirginMary.html](http://www.takingvalue.com/VirginMary.html).

The Clearwater office building was later obtained by the Shepherds of Christ Ministries in 1998 and converted into a shrine that they call [Our Lady of Clearwater](#). And while hundreds of thousands of people (including myself) have made the pilgrimage to witness the once-resplendent windows, some have become obsessed. The March 2 *Times* article begins: "Nearly every day for the last eight years, Sam and Jean Meo have sat beneath the image of the Virgin Mary that adorned the glass windows . . ."

From later in the article: "Ministry leaders said they planned to board up the broken windows . . . then possibly install new ones. Though some visitors expressed hope that God would redraw the Virgin Mary image on the windows, ministry leaders said they don't expect that to happen."

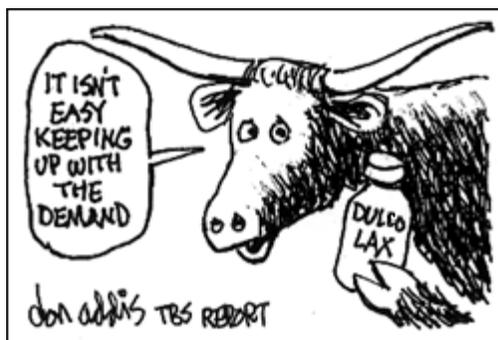
The ministry leaders exhibited admirable insight. If their eyesight is comparably acute, they should realize that all their problems might be solved simply by removing a few trees from the building's

west wall, to reveal a [similar palm-related stain](#). Because the foliage is so much denser there today than in 1996 when TBS member Guss Wilder took this photo, it is difficult to say whether this image is still more reminiscent of the Buddha than of Mary -- as it seemed in 1996 -- or if it has become taller and more elegant in the interim.

Of the individual or individuals responsible for the vandalism (he would later be [identified as a troubled youth](#) with no intent to commit a "hate crime"), the March 2 *Times* article quotes one devout visitor as saying, "I hope God forgives them." I am not a Catholic, but I couldn't help but wonder at the time if the shattering event was not a loving act of God. After all, what better way of conveying the heavenly message, to people like the Meos, that there may be more productive pursuits in this wondrous world than to obsess on mineral-and-tree-sap-stained window panes?

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## Snippets



Las Vegas is where the hot action is in terms of debunking the paranormal in all its forms -- in the work of the bad boys of magic, Penn & Teller. So hot, in fact, that the newspaper was too timid to print the entire name of their TV series: [Penn & Teller: Bullshit!](#) Because of Penn Jillette's liberal use of profanity when describing the [maternal fornicationists] who are deceiving and sometimes harming the public, the show, currently in its second year, is confined to the Showtime channel. But Penn reports that a school district has asked for a version of the show with the obscenities bleeped out, for use in classrooms. And *TBS Report* has heard elsewhere that, some day, a redubbed, profanity-free version of the entire series will be available for more widespread TV airing.

(Knight-Ridder via *St. Pete Times*, April 3)

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Fortunately, for practitioners such as Largo's Deborah Dienstbier, most people don't get enough *Bullshit!* So they seek it out in other forms, such as, in this case, Shusta card readings. A self-described "spiritual counselor," Dienstbier uses Shusta, apparently a hybrid of astrology and Tarot, to contact literal "spirits" who then impart their wisdom through the cards. Her more fortunate clients have been able to take advantage of her special rates at the Largo Spiritual Center Church's monthly "ESP Festival," the profits from which are in turn donated to the church.

(*Tampa Tribune* [Pasco edition], April 4)

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And "pet psychics," beware. It seems to me that it is only a matter of time before multi-species versions of the following item become available. Clearwater mom Cara Thornton has invented a baby pacifier that, when sucked, turns a particular color depending upon whether the child is happy, anxious, or otherwise stressed. "Green is good. Royal blue may mean . . . a fever," says Thornton. But she knows the limitations of her non-scientific breakthrough: "This isn't a medical pacifier, just a novelty gift." Yet, it has been deemed so unique that Thornton is among the 100 finalists in the inaugural "Invent Now America" contest sponsored by the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

(*St. Pete Times*, April 8)

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## TBS in the Media

Gary Posner was quoted in *The Record* (northern New Jersey) in [Bob Ivrey's article](#) about prayer and healing, as well as in [Reed Williams' article](#) in the Charlottesville *Daily Progress* about Noreen Renier and her move back to Virginia from Florida (also see Posner's [unpublished letter](#) to the *Daily Progress*).

On May 4, [Posner was one of Kathy Fountain's guests](#) on *Your Turn*, along with Donna Jean Guerra of Tampa's Harmony Metaphysical Church, and "Quantum Touch" promoter Richard Gordon.

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## Letter to the Editor

Editor: After reading the [Daily Progress article](#) about Noreen Renier in which you were quoted [see above], I reread [your chapter on Renier](#) in *Psychic Sleuths* and, for the first time, [your follow-up articles](#) on the web. I am very impressed, indeed overwhelmed, by the time and effort you have put into investigating Renier's claims. Your analyses are very effective and compelling. We all owe you many, many thanks for so arduously pursuing these investigations.

--Bruce Martin, Ph.D.  
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## A Creepy Coincidence

I am still a dyed-in-the-wool skeptic, but on May 20 I got a taste of the kind of coincidence that is so rare it fuels non-skeptical beliefs. Two days earlier, I had dreamed about an old high school friend of mine, someone I hadn't thought about in years and years. I even went to our yearbook the next day to look up his picture. Just one day after that, I received an e-mail from another classmate, telling me that our old friend, who lived in Austin, Texas, had died a few days earlier. (Cue the *Twilight Zone* theme, but then read [John Allen Paulos' writings](#) about coincidences.)

--[Terry A. Smiljanich](#)  
TBS Chairman

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