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Noreen Renier and the Williston case on Court TV's *Psychic Detectives*

By [Gary P. Posner](#)

Noreen Renier, once Florida's most famous "psychic detective" before moving back to Virginia in early 2004, is clearly emerging as the darling of Court TV's one-sided *Psychic Detectives* weekly series. Having been twice featured earlier in the year ([see here](#)), her involvement in the [Williston, Florida, case](#) was the subject of the September 22 episode.

I investigated this case intensely, initially at the behest of a producer for A&E Television's series *The Unexplained* for its January 9, 1997, episode, in which I appeared. My findings were published in several issues of TBS Report ([Fall 1996](#), [Winter 1996-97](#), [Summer 1997](#)), as well as in an article for *Skeptic magazine* (Vol. 5, No. 4, 1997) which in 2002 became [a chapter](#) in *The Skeptic Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience*.

In summary, Norman Lewis, an elderly resident of the tiny town of Williston (just southwest of Gainesville), disappeared on March 24, 1994, and had been missing (along with his red truck) for a year. Only after Renier was called into the case was his body eventually found, submerged (inside his truck) in the murky waters of a deep quarry.

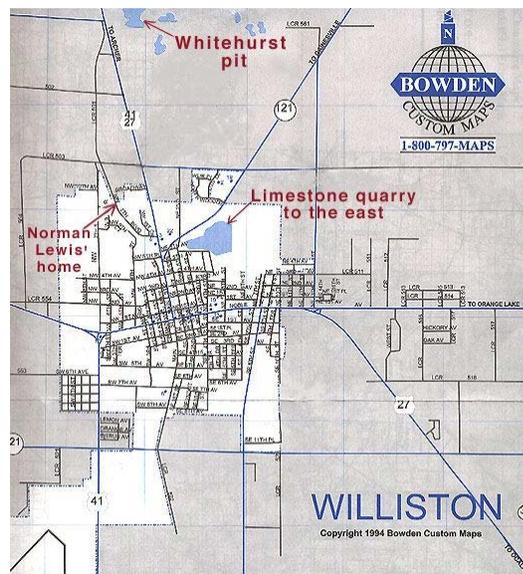
The Court TV program begins with Williston Police Chief Olin Slaughter stating that when police first checked Lewis' house, "There was nothing out of the ordinary . . . no indication whatsoever of foul play." Unmentioned was that Lewis, who suffered from emphysema, had left behind his life-saving inhaler, as well as his wallet.

After an intensive initial search yielded nothing, Slaughter says on the program, "We had to . . . determine if Norman had any enemies . . . gambling debts . . . [problems with] drugs, alcohol, the whole gamut." They found no such evidence. And after a year of fruitless investigation, Detective E.

Brian Hewitt (though not mentioned by name), who had recently attended a police seminar in Orlando at which Renier had presented, recommended her for assistance. The Williston police file (case #94-015181), obtained by TBS in 1996 with the assistance of an attorney, contains Hewitt's jotted notes from Renier's reading of July 17, 1995.

Unmentioned on the program was that Hewitt had learned, as documented in his official report dated May 12, 1995 -- *two months before Renier's reading* -- that three weeks prior to his disappearance, Lewis had confided to a handyman friend that if his life deteriorated sufficiently "he would find a river or pit," i.e., commit suicide in one of the many quarry pits in the area. [Hewitt's interview with that friend](#) further reveals that "Norman seemed agitated and dissatisfied with . . . his life," had told his friend "not to get old," and had "made some reference to knowing every rock pit in the county." In fact, Det. Hewitt's name is mentioned nowhere in the show (since he is now deceased, this might be excusable for "production value" reasons in a docudrama, but not in a Court TV documentary).

In any event, the show's narrator says that Slaughter instructed Sgt. Bill Baxter to send Renier some items belonging to Lewis, given her ability to "tune into a person by handling objects that belong to them." Some unspecified time thereafter (approximately three weeks, per my timeline, after calling her to set up the appointment), "Renier conducts a reading over the phone. All they've told her about the case is that a man is missing, nothing more." Miraculously, in this TV re-creation of her reading, she divines an "older" man and "a truck . . . red. . . . He's with his truck. If you find his truck, you'll find him." She sees the numbers "45" and "21." The police are said to be "stunned at how dead-on" Renier's reading was. But she had time, if she wished, to research the local newspaper coverage of the disappearance and search, and to obtain maps of the area, as I did. And the most prominent feature on the Williston roadmap is the quarry located at the junction of State Routes 45 and 121. Indeed, during my investigation in Williston, someone familiar with the case (but who requested anonymity) told me on videotape that this quarry was initially "the prime target for the investigation after the [Renier reading]." But his body was not found there.



Though the police file's paperwork references only a single July 17, 1995, session with Renier, according to the TV show the police conduct a second session at her Orlando home, during which she sees new clues including "a bridge," a pile of "bricks," a "railroad track," the number "22," and the fact that Lewis is dead. And during a third session sometime thereafter in Lewis' Williston home, Renier feels him going "down . . . deep into the water." Renier then asks for a map and "points investigators to an abandoned quarry just north of town" where, when the police arrive, "everything is as Renier described it in her vision -- railroad tracks, bricks. But an old abandoned truck scale [which from a certain angle looks just like a bridge] finally convinces them that they are in the right place."

But Tampa newsman Dave Monsees, in his April 19, 1996, WTVT-TV 13 story about the case, reported the following: "Another clue that amazed Slaughter was that the psychic saw a bridge nearby. Turned out he'd passed it countless times and never saw it -- on the access road to the quarry,

an old, wooden truck scale that smacks for all the world of a bridge, if you take the time to stare at it." If true, that clue was actually credited as a "hit" after the fact. The "railroad tracks" clue was also "retrofitted," if the Gainesville Sun article of April 4, 1996, is accurate: "While waiting for the divers, workers near the pit uncovered *something they didn't know was there* -- abandoned railroad tracks, completing the image Renier had of the location." (Emphasis added.) This article also references only the single July 17, 1995, session.

Toward the show's conclusion, Slaughter retrofits Renier's "21" clue to coincide with Lewis' body being found "2.1 miles from his front door" (a stretch, especially since, in the session audiotape obtained from the police, we hear Renier say "45 miles . . . 4.5 miles"). And he retrofits her "22" clue thusly: "We noticed that [his recovered wristwatch's date indicator] stopped on the 22nd. . . . That's when the hair stood up on the back of my neck."

The narrator says that forensic experts have attributed Lewis' plunge to a "freak accident," oddly ignoring the suicide plan alluded to in Hewitt's interview notes. But, probably of even more importance to this readership, were Noreen Renier's "psychic" clues truly instrumental in pointing the police to the correct watery grave? Though Chief Slaughter swears they were, I remain highly skeptical.

More about Noreen Renier:

The following [Cincinnati Enquirer article](#) about Noreen Renier was posted on its website on October 23:

Psychic to help in Oxford case

By Matt Leingang, Enquirer staff writer

OXFORD -- Information from a "psychic detective" will help Oxford police search Sunday for a retired Miami University professor who's been missing more than five months.

Noreen Renier, 67, a Virginia woman who assisted in the hunt for Laci Peterson and claims to have participated in 400 police investigations over 25 years, told Oxford police this month that she believes Charles E. Capel is within eight walking-minutes of his house.

Capel, an 81-year-old retired mathematics professor who has Alzheimer's disease, left his house sometime before 8 a.m. May 21.

Oxford police are stymied by the lack of clues in the case. They hired Renier several weeks ago with permission from the Capel family, said Sgt. Jim Squance.

Police mailed Renier a map of Ohio and some of Capel's personal items, including a pair of white sneakers and several toothbrushes.

Speaking from her home near Charlottesville, Va., Renier said her methods involve "reading" objects that missing people leave behind.

Turning to a psychic is unconventional but worth a shot, Oxford police said.

With or without Renier's help, Oxford police had intended to resume searching for Capel this fall, once the leaves had fallen from trees and field brush had dried up, increasing visibility.

Previous searches in May and June covering a 10-mile radius around the Capel house turned up nothing.

[The article continued for several more paragraphs, seeking volunteers to assist in the search.]

Your humble editor, after being made aware of the article, spent a few minutes doing an Internet search for a bit more information about the case. I quickly found a June 9 *Cincinnati Post* article mentioning Capel's height to be six feet, and that his "running shoes were missing from his home at the time of his disappearance." A May 25 *Cincinnati Enquirer* article added that his weight was 185 pounds, and that "he could be wearing pajamas or boxer shorts with running shoes." It also pointed out that Oxford "is surrounded by farmland and is within a few miles of Hueston Woods State Park." Armed with the results of my own "investigation," I sent the following e-mail (unanswered) to Matt Leingang:

Hello, Matt:

A friend in Tampa happened to somehow come across your article on the Web this morning and informed me.

You may be interested (or not) in my many articles about Noreen Renier, two of which constitute book chapters (see http://www.gpposner.com/Renier_list.html).

My own non-psyhic power tells me the following about Mr. Capel's disappearance:

From your article and accompanying photo, I know he is bald and white-bearded, and that he has Alzheimer's. But I see a tall, sturdy man, maybe 6'1" -- at least 5'11." And I see a man who is not emaciated. He may even be close to 200 pounds, probably a little less -- maybe 180. I see him in his night clothes, maybe pajamas or just underwear, but definitely not dressed in normal clothes. I know from your article that the police have sent Noreen his sneakers, but when they find his body (I sense that he is now deceased), I see him wearing his sneakers. Isn't that odd? But I see that so clearly. I also sense he will be found within walking distance of his home, in a heavily wooded area near water. I see the number 3 and the letter S.

Please feel free to forward these clues to the police. I am certain that they are at least as accurate and valuable as Noreen's, plus they have the advantage of being free of charge.

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TBS "\$1,000 Challenge" candidate inquires from Belarus, then stalls

By [Gary P. Posner](#)

In early August, TBS received a handwritten message superimposed upon a photocopy of a passport. Postmarked July 24 in the former Soviet republic of Belarus, the letter consisted of but a few brief sentences in broken English: "I shall show a miracle. My name is Simchanko Igor. . . . Answer me, it is necessary for me to state details." This was followed by his e-mail address.

I responded by e-mail on August 3, requesting details. Though our language barrier posed a problem, and I wasn't even certain of his name (the passport lists it as "Ihar Simchanka"), it seemed that he claimed the ability to correctly predict lottery numbers. He pointed me to a web page of a Finland lottery, but I told him that if he wished to prove this ability to TBS, we would need to use the Florida Lotto, and I referred him to that website.

After numerous backs and forths, our claimant stated that he could perform the following feat: He would offer, in advance, one number between 1 and 53 for an upcoming Florida Lotto drawing (date to be specified), and that number would turn out to be one of the six winning numbers selected in that drawing. He would continue to do this for seven consecutive drawings, which would be a feat with a probability of success of approximately 1:1,000,000 by luck alone. We agreed, and also guaranteed him that if he won [our "\\$1,000 Challenge."](#) James Randi would test him for [his foundation's \\$1,000,000 prize.](#)

But when push came to shove, our claimant decided to stall: "I accept your requirements and circumstances. But I ask to wait with demonstration. . . . negotiations . . . with other sceptics. . . . You agree to accept demonstration in one year? In a case if I shall make 6 correct against 1 erroneous?" I let him know that we would be content to wait a year, but that success would requires that he be correct all seven times. If the test ever takes place, we'll let you know.

Snippets



A 10-year-old grilled cheese sandwich is certainly worth \$100,000 if it bears an image resembling the Virgin Mary, right? Apparently so, to at least one eBay bidder. That's how much Diana Duyser of Hollywood, Florida, stands to profit from her foresight of a decade ago to preserve, rather than consume, her unevenly scorched lunch du jour. But that's only the half of it. She says her miracle cheese breadwinner has also brought her good fortune in gambling over the years, to the tune of \$70,000 in casino profits. [Update: The \$100,000 bid was apparently a joke, but the tidbit did wind up fetching \$28,000 from GoldenPalace.com, an online casino.]

(A.P. via *St. Pete. Times*, Nov. 17 & Nov. 26)

Years ago your humble editor [drew great criticism](#) from some quarters for hypothesizing, in a magazine [letter to the editor](#), that the irrational intellectual behavior of some paranormalists, such as one published parapsychologist who believed that he was communicating with the dead using a Venus flytrap as the medium, might perhaps be an indication of something akin to mild schizophrenia as opposed to simple naiveté. I wonder if Marilyn vos Savant has incurred similar wrath for these comments from her October 31 column in response to a reader's question: "I'm sorry to say that I . . . have never successfully convinced a conspiracy theorist. Just when I think I have an irrefutable point, he or she will reply, 'That's just what they want you to think!' I've begun to consider this a minor psychiatric condition -- a sort of mild paranoia -- rather than an intellectual weakness, so I've stopped trying to help. A psychiatrist I'm not."

("Ask Marilyn" via *Parade Magazine*, Oct. 31)

Newspaper's "psychic experts" wash out with hurricane predictions

By [Gary P. Posner](#)

Like Frances did just three weeks earlier, Hurricane Jeanne cut a swath of destruction across central Florida, striking the east coast at about midnight on the morning of September 26. But if the coastal residents were prepared for Jeanne's wrath, it was no thanks to the coast's Florida Today newspaper, headquartered in Melbourne. Or at least not to what the paper refers to as its three "psychic experts."

A September 20 story entitled "Local psychics predict the weather: Will more storms batter Brevard?" carried the following predictions of its telepathetic trio, who "for the past three years . . . have participated in New Year's forecasts on politics, celebrities, weather, etc." None foresaw Florida's historic run of four major hurricanes, or the role Jeanne would play.

According to staff writer Billy Cox, Shiraa Roccelle "was certain [Jeanne] wouldn't splatter into Florida." Roccelle is quoted as saying (or seering), "My sense is that it will come much closer to Georgia or South Carolina, and it'll miss us."

Next, Elizabeth Cooper came to the plate: "It's going to dissipate -- I don't think it'll be a hurricane."

Batting third, and also playing way out in left field, Chris Jones: "Georgia is the first word that comes to mind with Jeanne," Jones said. "Jeanne is full of steam, but she'll hit land and blow out rather quickly." Jones was instead more concerned about Hurricane Karl, which, alas, never approached the U.S.

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