



Selected articles from  
VOL. 18 NO. 1 SUMMER 2005

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**Book Review of Noreen Renier's memoir,  
*A Mind for Murder: The Real-Life Files  
of a Psychic Investigator***

[\(Posted here\)](#)

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**Skeptical Inquiry:  
Method, Principles, and Quotes**

**By Jack Robinson**

The guest speaker at our March quarterly meeting was TBS member Bill Hall, who teaches at the Clearwater Campus of St. Petersburg College. His topic was "The New Skepticism." Though we generally like to limit guest speakers to no longer than an hour, the people present, 22 in number, were so interested that the questions and discussion went on for an additional hour.

"The New Skepticism" was fathered by the great Scottish philosopher David Hume and refined by [Center for Inquiry](#) leader Paul Kurtz. Hall elucidated, "There were other skeptics before Hume, but Hume's brand of skepticism was a watershed because it was rooted in the nature of evidence rather than rhetoric or logic. Hume focused on how humans formed their beliefs, to what extent those beliefs were justified, and how such justification should be determined."

Hall studied philosophy at the University of South Florida, specializing in the philosophy of religion and philosophy of science. His recommended Skeptical Method of Inquiry involves four necessary

procedures:

- Require that the claim be stated clearly and completely.
- Examine the evidence for and against the claim.
- Consider alternative hypotheses.
- Rate each hypothesis according to the criteria of adequacy, which include testability, fruitfulness, scope, conservatism, and simplicity. (The principle of simplicity requires applying "Ockham's razor" -- see below.)

Hall also presented eight key principles:

- **Open Mind Principle:** All knowledge is tentative.
- **Dogma Reduction Dictum:** Proportion your belief to the evidence.
- **Negative Evidence Clause:** Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.
- **Subjective Experience Caveat:** Anecdotes are not evidence.
- **Believability Threshold:** Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.
- **Ockham's Razor:** Do not add unnecessary hypotheses.
- **Burden of Proof:** The burden is always on the claimant, never on the skeptic.
- **What's the Harm?:** Truth matters -- ignorance is often harmful.

Hall's presentation also included several fascinating and helpful quotations, including:

- "Credophile: A person who gets pleasure from belief and pain from doubt. Once having embraced a belief, it takes something more than mere disproof to make him [or her] let go."  
--*L. Sprague de Camp*
- "I have steadily endeavored to keep my mind free so as to give up any hypothesis, however much beloved, . . . as soon as facts are shown to be opposed to it."  
--*Charles Darwin*
- "Too many people enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought."  
--*John F. Kennedy*
- "It is error only, and not truth, that shrinks from inquiry."  
--*Thomas Paine*

Hall explained his philosophical interests and methods in these words:

I have spent most of my life pestering people (and myself) with questions. Unfortunately

for them, I have spent the last 15 years pestering students at St. Petersburg College, where I have tried, with some success, to teach the three Rs: reading, 'riting, and reasoning. When I am not pestering students, I am an amateur mentalist/magician, a chess player, a collector of novelty ballpoint pens and mechanical brain teasers, and a lover of music, art, literature, and cinema.

No wonder this gadfly enthralled his audience!

## Snippets



On a March day in Newark, New Jersey, a Rottweiler named Renaissance was barking due to hunger and thirst. He was approached by a shabbily dressed, heavy-set man sporting a three-day stubble. The man then shouted at the dog, "There! Have your water!" and proceeded to pour boiling liquid over its hind quarters, inflicting third-degree burns. A search ensued for this depraved individual, based on the eyewitness description provided to the law-enforcement arm of the SPCA. The witness was Renaissance the Rottweiler. The professional animal communicator responsible for the gentle interrogation was Colleen Nicholson who, according to the executive director of the local SPCA shelter, "has been very accurate" in similar past readings. Your humble editor is quoted in the article as saying, "There's not a shred of scientific evidence that any sort of psychic power is genuine person-to-person, much less animal-to-person." But I guess you had to be there.

(*North Jersey Record*, Mar. 14)

Not only have the animals taken over the asylum, so to speak, but the aliens have taken over the Southwest Florida Museum of History in Fort Myers. Well, at least one back corner, where since January a sign reads, "Area 51. Warning: Restricted Area. No trespassing beyond this point." Though "The Roswell Exhibit" has nothing to do with Florida, museum manager Matt Johnson has become "more comfortable with it." I suppose it doesn't hurt that the model of an "extraterrestrial biological

entity," based on eyewitness descriptions every bit as reliable as Renaissance's, is now the museum's biggest draw.

(*St. Petersburg Times*, Mar. 20)

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Linda Marks is back in jail, after having reportedly scammed a Boynton Beach woman out of \$38,000 to cleanse her of "evil spirits." Of this "nomadic huckster," already on probation for insurance fraud, Detective Toby Athol offered, "She can't be a very good [psychic], because she had no idea I was coming to get her." He added, "If they're real, they shouldn't have to put an ad in the PennySaver, because they know where you live."

(*Boca Raton News*, Apr. 23)

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David Shealy is the self-appointed world expert on Florida's legendary skunk ape. Claiming to have seen the elusive prey three times, Shealy has made it his life's work to prove the animal's existence. He sells skunk-ape-related paraphernalia (hats, T-shirts, etc.), hosts annual festivals, makes local media appearances, and once convinced the Collier County Tourist Development Council to spend \$44,000 for a skunk-ape hunting expedition (it was later shot down -- the proposal, not the creature -- by the County Commission). Shealy's last sighting a few years ago resulted in a videotape that he sold for \$10,000. But, amazingly, there are still a few nay-sayers, such as local waitress Debbie Hooks: "It's a joke. It's one of them in a monkey suit."

(*Miami Herald*, Apr. 19)

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## **John Monti's "wild goose chase" portrayed as "unbelievable" success**

Court TV's *Psychic Detectives* episode about John Monti and the Massachusetts murder (see the [lead article](#) in our last issue) aired on May 11. As feared, Monti's "wild goose chase" effort was portrayed as an "unbelievable" success.

Yes, this episode, like the others in this weekly series, is indeed "unbelievable," but in a different sense of the word. We expect to have more to report about this in our next issue.

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