



Selected articles from
VOL. 18 NO. 2 FALL 2005

Police chief misleads viewers about John Monti on *Psychic Detectives*

By [Gary P. Posner](#)

The May 11 episode of Court TV's [Psychic Detectives](#) series, titled "Dressed to Kill," recreated "psychic" [John Monti](#)'s role in a 1988 murder case (see [here](#)). Among those prominently featured were two police chiefs involved in the search for the killer: James Basile (Buckland, Massachusetts) and Steve LeTour (Charlemont, Mass.).

Basile had commented critically about Monti's value in that case when he called Kathy Fountain's show (WTVT-TV 13, Tampa) on January 27, 1992, during a discussion about Monti's failure in the Tiffany Sessions disappearance case (see [here](#) and related "Snippet" in this issue). On the recent Court TV show, Basile used language similar to 1992 in explaining Monti's role in the Massachusetts investigation:

My first impression was maybe, just maybe. . . . And then it became sort of like a wild goose chase. . . . We spent between four and five days with John Monti, and we pretty much covered a lot of places with him in that period of time. And towards the end it became very frustrating, and at that point we told John we no longer need his services, and we parted our ways.

In contrast, viewers saw Chief LeTour say this: "If we [Monti, Basile and himself] would have kept going for probably 200 more yards, we would have ran [*sic*] into [the dead, hanging body of] Mark Branch [the killer]." According to Le Tour, the only reason they turned back just yards short of pay dirt was that "it was getting extremely icy, and I just felt that it was getting too dangerous, so we had to terminate the search." He later added, "When we first had John Monti help us on this investigation, I was very skeptical. But in hindsight, after the investigation was over, just unbelievable, it was just

unbelievable."

Chief LeTour's endorsement led the show's narrator to conclude, "The police solved the crime. But all along, John Monti's visions were leading them directly to the body of the killer." Hardly Chief Basile's "wild goose chase" scenario.

In an effort to reconcile these two differing accounts, I wrote to the Charlemont Police Department on August 1. Four days later, I received a phone call from Mark L. DeJackome, who has been the chief there since 1997 in addition to what he called his "full-time job" as chief of nearby Shelburne for the past 26 years. DeJackome was intimately involved with Basile and LeTour in the 1988 murder investigation and had been approached by *Psychic Detectives* to be taped for the show, but declined. DeJackome told me:

What Basile said on the show was extremely accurate. Monti sent us on more friggin' wild goose chases. One night he was going, "I can feel him! I can feel him! He was here! He was here!" But [Branch] turned out to be already dead, five miles away, hanging in a tree. . . . Monti said we would find him behind a white farmhouse with a dog. That describes half the houses in town.

As for Monti having led police to within yards of discovering the killer's body, DeJackome said:

That's not true. That's not true. I was involved in that whole search from start to finish, except on that particular day I didn't go out on that one search [during the sleet storm] -- I probably was out on another call. But I just talked to Basile again about half an hour ago. It did get icy that night, but he said Monti never led them closer than about a mile and a half from where they ultimately found him [Branch].

The Court TV documentary was so inaccurate, according to DeJackome, that, "While I was watching it, I was going, 'Are we talking about the same incident?'" When I asked him to speculate as to why LeTour would make such misleading comments on national TV, DeJackome answered, "Well, maybe that's how he remembers it. I don't know. But when the show asked me if I wanted to participate, I said absolutely not. I didn't want anything to do with it. John Monti did not do anything [useful] to find this guy."

Noreen Renier follow-up

By Gary P. Posner

The *Daytona Beach News-Journal* on May 19 carried a story, "Family seeks psychic's help to find brother," about how a missing man's sister "is trying to arrange a meeting between police and psychic investigator [Noreen Renier](#), who was involved in the Laci Peterson case in California and has appeared on many news-style television shows."

The June 2 *South Bend* [Indiana] *Tribune* contained an article, "Police, family still looking for

Bowen," about the search for a missing 56-year-old woman from the town of Buchanan. Says reporter David Salisbury:

The most recent avenue for information was Noreen Renier, a psychic investigator who Bowen's family requested and paid for during April. Renier, who was reportedly consulted during the Laci Peterson search in California, offered possible clues that have since been investigated. "We searched the different areas (Renier) mentioned along the St. Joseph River several times but found nothing," [Buchanan patrolman Dave] Capron said.

But Bowen's body was ultimately found in the St. Joseph River. From the July 24 *South Bend Tribune* article, "Psychics a tool for detectives: Some police impressed, but skeptics disgusted":

"I was skeptical and optimistic at the same time," [Capron] said. "You see this stuff on TV and you wonder if this can really happen." During two phone sessions, Renier said she saw a snake, an S, and a series of numbers, Capron said. Police searched but didn't find the woman from Renier's description. Months later, Bowen's body was found in the St. Joseph River. "We saw a lot of features that Noreen could have been describing," Capron said. "You just take what you want." The police officer still has mixed feelings on the use of psychics in investigations, he says.

Later in that article, [Skeptical Inquirer](#) columnist Joe Nickell and [Skeptic magazine](#) editor/publisher Michael Shermer are quoted. The reporter cites Nickell's July/August column, "The Case of the 'Psychic Detectives'" and its discussion of Noreen Renier, which relies heavily upon my previous writings. To Nickell's cited examples of "retrofitting" can be added patrolman Capron's sage observation that, regarding "psychic" clues, after the fact you can look back and "just take what you want."

On June 19, Renier's now-hometown paper, the Charlottesville, Virginia, *Daily Progress*, contained an article by Reed Williams about Renier's new book, *A Mind for Murder* (see [my review](#) in our last issue -- a condensed version of that review appears in the September/October issue of *Skeptical Inquirer*). Williams also included the following:

One of [her detractors] is Gary P. Posner, founder of the Tampa Bay Skeptics, a nonprofit group that casts a critical eye on paranormal claims. Posner wrote a review of Renier's book that compliments the writing and calls it an "entertaining adventure." But he adds: [he then quoted, almost correctly, my concluding paragraph].

And the July 31 *News & Advance* (Lynchburg, Va.) contained an article titled, "Psychic Noreen Renier: 'It's very draining, what I do.'" This positive portrait of Renier also contained at least an effort at balance:

As might be expected, not everyone accepts the idea that Renier can enter the mind of a missing person, victim or murderer merely by handling an object hundreds of miles away. Skeptics abound, chief among them Gary Posner of Tampa, Fla., who has repeatedly offered Renier \$1,000 if she can prove her psychic ability. Renier told Reed Williams of the Charlottesville *Daily Progress* that she has so far refused to take Posner's test because she was told that trickery would be involved.

Renier had told that to Williams for his April 25, 2004, article about her move back to Virginia from Florida in January of that year. And this was my response in my Letter to the Editor, which went unpublished:

Noreen's reported reason for declining to be tested by Tampa Bay Skeptics conflicts with what she told us at the time. She had telephoned me on March 15, 1990, for two reasons: to thank me for my "fairness" in printing her recent letter in the TBS newsletter, and to decline our testing offer not because 'someone warned her that the group meant to trick her' but because, in her own words, she was "working on too many police cases and with too many scientists to have the time."

The August 6 Williston, Florida, *Pioneer Sun News* featured two entirely non-skeptical articles about Renier, one on her book and the other on the [Norman Lewis missing-person case](#), which took place in Williston. Shortly after her efforts in that case were rewarded with praise from the local police, Renier moved from the Orlando area to Williston, where she lived until moving to Virginia last year. I have pointed the paper to the Web pages containing my review of Renier's book and my analysis of the Lewis case.

CHAIRMAN'S CORNER:

Heisenberg's Principle of Tolerance

By [Terry A. Smiljanich](#)

Back in the early 1970s, broadcast television reached a triumphal peak of eloquence and sanity in the running of the thirteen-part BBC series, *The Ascent of Man*, narrated by Jacob Bronowski. A Cambridge mathematician who helped plan and analyze British bombing campaigns during World War II, Bronowski was assigned to the first group of scientists examining the effects of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki. This experience transformed his life, which he devoted thereafter to questions concerning the ethics of science and its relationship to the humanities.

A man of broad cultural knowledge, Bronowski argued in the many books he wrote thereafter that the supposed separation between the scientific and the humanistic aspirations of humans was non-existent. Bronowski did not believe that there were "two cultures," one of science and one of the humanities. Rather, both are expressions of the human mind, each seeking unity amid the chaos, each implicitly believing in underlying truths that escape the full knowledge of humans.

In 1972, in response to the hit television series on art history called *Civilization*, narrated by Sir Kenneth Clark, Bronowski produced *The Ascent of Man*, which explored technological and scientific progress and argued that such efforts go hand in hand with the arts in explaining the arch of human history toward better understandings of our universe. "All that I have written, though it has seemed to me so different from year to year, turns to the same centre: the uniqueness of man that grows out of his struggle (and his gift) to understand both nature and himself."

Although *The Ascent of Man* (which fortunately I videotaped during a rebroadcast in the early '80s) explores everything from the birth of agriculture to the birth of genetics, for me the supreme moment in this fascinating series was the episode he called "Knowledge and Certainty." In it, he explored the birth of quantum physics in Germany and the implications of Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty. Any attempt to examine atomic events with exact precision runs into an area of tolerance or uncertainty. As Bronowski explained it, however, our knowledge is not uncertain -- it is confined within a certain tolerance. The supreme irony of our times, says Bronowski, is that while this principle of tolerance was being formulated by the best minds in Europe, Germany was in the grip of monstrous certainty -- people convinced that their racial and geopolitical beliefs were true beyond all doubt, and who acted accordingly.

In perhaps television's finest moment, Bronowski concluded this episode by standing in a stagnant pond at Auschwitz. He argued that the popular notion that secular science will dehumanize us is "tragically false." Rather, what dehumanizes us, he said, is the triumph of dogma over the tolerance and awe that science inspires. With passion that can still stir the soul, Bronowski squatted into the pond in which the ashes of millions of humans were flushed, and gripped a handful of mud. "When people believe they have absolute knowledge, with no test in reality, this is how they behave."

Today we can see the same mentality at work. When people think they know exactly what God wants, they blow up innocent people taking the subway to work. These are not the acts of persons who accept the limitations of our all-too-human knowledge. "Science is a tribute to what we can know although we are fallible." No one has said it better.

Snippets



Excerpted from Jeff Elder's "Glad You Asked" column:

Q: Can you really find water using a forked stick?

A: The [James Randi Educational Foundation](http://www.jamesrandi.org/), a Florida not-for-profit organization that

scrutinizes supernatural claims, identifies dowsing as one of the world's most common -- and bogus -- "mystical" practices. Foundation experts say dowsing happens because of "ideomotor" activity -- basically unconsciously willing your hands to move. Like kids with a Ouija board. Randi, who offers \$1-million to anyone who can demonstrate supernatural powers in a controlled scientific test, writes this on his Web site:

The dowser is unknowingly moving the device of choice, exerting a small shaking, tilt or pressure to it, enough to disturb its state of balance. This has been shown any number of times to be true, but the demonstration has meant nothing to the dowsers, who will persist in their delusion no matter how many times it is shown to them that dowsing does not work.

(Charlotte Observer online, June 24)

As we briefly alluded to in our lead article, John Monti did not fare well in [his search for Tiffany Sessions](#), the student whose 1989 disappearance from the University of Florida's Gainesville campus remains unsolved. Nor did the more than 100 other "psychics" who have offered their assistance over the years to her mother Hillary. Mrs. Sessions eventually heard about the Brandon-based Missing Children Help Center, which has since reorganized as Child Protection Education of America. Mrs. Sessions, who began volunteering there by stuffing envelopes and counseling other parents, last summer assumed the position of executive director.

(St. Petersburg Times, July 16)

Letter to the Editor

Editor: I respect both sides of the argument about psychics and their abilities. However, it is obvious to me that your investigations are clearly biased rather than open-minded, and that you have little idea what you are talking about.

I have seen and talked to many psychics and have found that many of them are fakes or only think they have this ability. But there are forces at work in the universe that we have little or no understanding of, and why can't we believe in them if they make themselves available through people like Noreen Renier?

In the case of Noreen and a few others, especially those known for their work with prominent law enforcement agencies, I have found that many of these detectives, etc., were very skeptical themselves and had spent many years solving cases the traditional way without ever thinking of hiring a psychic. But in a particular case or two, where there were only dead ends, they felt that hiring a psychic would be a last resort and maintained their skepticism until the psychic's clues did, indeed, provide directions or closure to solving the case. They are usually down-to-earth people who,

following the psychic's assistance, no longer have reason to doubt the psychic's abilities.

Your skepticism is healthy, but in your zealous effort to discredit psychics completely, you have presented often laughable evidence of your own investigations. You keep suggesting that the psychics did their own research or found out about a case before they were asked to consult on it, yet you have no verifiable evidence whatsoever that this is true. Nearly everything you say in your articles is aimed at discrediting not only the psychics, but also the police or investigators who more often than not have distinguished themselves for years as honest, hard-working people.

[Noreen's website](#) contains a series of quotations from prominent law-enforcement personnel endorsing her abilities and assistance. I did a little research of my own and was able to verify most of these quotes (I could not obtain verification on some but suspect they are also accurate).

You're making a fool out of yourself. Do yourself a favor and investigate getting a good shrink.

--[Name withheld at writer's request]

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Editor Gary Posner's partial reply:

I am biased toward "science" but my mind is "open" to being shown that, for example, "psychometry" is as genuine a force as gravity. All I -- and the rest of the scientific community -- demand is verifiable scientific evidence. I suspect, however, that you are absolutely convinced -- beyond the ability to be dissuaded by contrary scientific evidence -- that "psychometry" is as genuine a force as gravity. If I am correct, wouldn't that make you "biased" and "close-minded"?

[TBS offered Noreen](#) our "\$1,000 Challenge" to perform the simplest "psychometry" demonstration imaginable, and she refused, as she has refused [James Randi's similar challenge](#) worth \$1,000,000. What could be more bizarre than "black holes"? But I now "believe" in them, based on the nature of the evidence that has been collected and independently verified. I could similarly believe in "psychometry," but testimonials from satisfied customers -- even FBI agents -- do not constitute verifiable scientific evidence. I have never disputed the authenticity of their quotes. In fact, although I wrote [my chapter about Noreen](#) in *Psychic Sleuths* long before she had a website, I began it with a series of such quotes from her promotional material.

And I have never suggested that "psychic detectives" such as Noreen might research cases "before" they are asked to consult. I do not believe that they possess such precognition.

As for some of your other general accusations, such as my not knowing what I am talking about, and my "often laughable evidence," can you please provide some specific examples that I might be able to then address?

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