



Selected articles from
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Noreen Renier, co-author, publisher sued over *A Mind for Murder*

By [Gary P. Posner](#)

[Our Summer 2005 issue](#) featured my review of *A Mind for Murder*, the lively memoir of former-Floridian "psychic detective" [Noreen Renier](#). In my paragraph commenting upon the book's two chapters about her prior litigation with skeptic John Merrell, I noted, "I [had previously] inferred that their settlement forbids either of speaking ill of the other again. If so, I sense that someone may have violated those terms -- big-time."

Indeed. On December 13, in the Superior Court of Washington (State) for Snohomish County, Merrell filed suit against Renier, co-author Naomi Lucks, editor/agent Samantha Mandor, and Berkley Publishing (and its parent company Penguin Group). As alleged in the suit, "The defendants have knowingly breached . . . [Renier's 1992] settlement agreement [with Merrell]. This breach has damaged [Merrell] in both reputation and mental distress."

Though their March 6, 1992, settlement had been sealed to keep its terms confidential, now that it has been breached, public court filings in this lawsuit include a copy of that agreement. It reveals that Renier, who in 1986 had won a \$25,000 libel judgment against Merrell (which was sustained in a 1989 bankruptcy proceeding) but had never collected, would receive the sum of \$23,800, and both parties would end all mutual interaction "directly or indirectly . . . which attempts in any way to diminish and/or disparage the other's reputation . . . including but not limited to contacts with . . . any news organization or media of any type."

Merrell's lawsuit references pages 195-219 of *A Mind for Murder*, contending:

Among other things, the 24-page detailing of the 1986 libel trial in Oregon accuses the plaintiff of lying under oath during the trial. To wit: ". . . It was hell to sit there and listen

to Merrell lie about me to a judge and jury. . . . The hard part was sitting there listening to Merrell lie about me. . . . My stomach hurt when I had to listen to the kinds of lies Merrell had told about me, and the way he had twisted the facts to his own purposes. . . . Merrell was trying to destroy my career and psychic reputation -- my life -- with his lies."

In an exclusive February 3 interview with *TBS Report*, Merrell said that his attorney first notified the defendants in October 2005 that the book "breaches the settlement agreement in a number of ways" and that, specifically, its depiction of the Oregon trial constituted a "clear violation" of the agreement not to diminish and/or disparage Merrell's reputation. The letter also demanded that Berkley cease publication of the book. When no response was received after two months from any of the parties, Merrell filed his suit, which requested that the defendants be enjoined from selling any further copies of *A Mind for Murder* and be required to turn over all profits thus far from its sale, as well as all future profits. Additionally, the suit requested a judgment for damages and coverage of his attorney's fees.

Merrell further informed *TBS Report* that given the "unknown agreement structures between the multiple defendants," he began a discovery phase by mailing an initial series of interrogatories/questions to the defendants on February 3, with responses due in 30 days. These included a request for sales and profit figures as well as all documents that "control, [establish], or in any way regulate" all/any of the parties involved in the book's publication.

The recent Oprah-related scandal over James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, regarding a publisher's dereliction of duty by not fact-checking seemingly far-fetched claims in a non-fiction memoir, has not gone unnoticed by Merrell, who initiated his lawsuit before that uproar. Merrell cited the February 8 issue of *Newsweek*, which states that one of Frey's editors left Doubleday in 2003 "taking the author with him to Penguin's Riverhead." The Penguin Group is a defendant in Merrell's lawsuit.

With regard to the 1986 trial that resulted in Renier's original libel judgment against Merrell, about which I have previously written extensively in these pages (Winter 1989-90) as well as in [my chapter](#) in *Psychic Sleuths* (Prometheus Books, 1994), Merrell had charged in his 1989 bankruptcy litigation that the \$25,000 verdict against him, which he wanted vacated, had been "based in part on fraud, misrepresentation and other misconduct. . . . Renier used a false name and tricked [Merrell] into investigating her claims of psychic ability." Specifically, Renier had pretended to be her own sister-in-law "Nancy Uzdavinis" and, in a letter to Merrell, had requested information about Noreen Renier (i.e., herself), saying, "I'm confused about her abilities and need to know if she is real or not. She's planning a workshop in July and I need to make a decision." Merrell thus tried to assist "Uzdavinis" by finding out what he could about Renier, and was sued for disseminating his findings.

Additionally, as I reported in *Psychic Sleuths*, during the 1986 trial the jury was moved to tears, and seemingly (to Merrell) convinced of Renier's "psychic" ability, by a woman's testimony about Renier having helped locate a missing airplane containing the body of the woman's brother, and how (according to testimony) the brother had heroically carried his female companion from the wreckage before dying of his injuries.

Renier's testimony included the statement that she had told Merrell, "I was instrumental in helping to find an airplane that had crashed in Massachusetts." She retold the story in *A Mind for Murder*, but it is not credible for at least two reasons: the female passenger had been "psychically" envisioned by

Renier as "headless" and thus already dead, and the National Transportation Safety Board determined that all occupants, including the young man, had "died immediately" upon impact. The jury had been made aware of these facts, but nonetheless seemed to believe the psychic vision, perhaps in part because the woman testifying was the ex-wife of an FBI agent who also testified in Renier's favor.

During our interview, Merrell stated:

I testified that during my phone conversation with Renier, she had placed the plane crash in three different states. What I didn't make clear was that Renier told me a woman aboard the plane was alive and was carried out of the plane by her fiancé before both died. Yet the local newspapers reported that the crash and explosion had been heard by witnesses and the plane was ultimately located by volunteers independent of Noreen Renier. . . . *A Million Little Pieces* is not unique in its avoidance of fact-checking, nor in its opportunity to sell readers a book with page after page of embellishments and distortions.

Update: During a February 23 hearing on a motion for dismissal, after Penguin told the court that it had ceased publication of the book, the judge did dismiss all defendants other than Renier, "without prejudice," meaning that Merrell can still sue them for something other than breach of settlement, such as libel, should he so decide. The breach case against Renier continues.

TBS Report will follow this case closely.

TBS "\$1,000 Challenge" candidate from Belarus makes predictions

By Gary P. Posner

[As reported](#) in our Winter 2004-05 issue, a correspondent from the still-repressed former Soviet republic of Belarus had contacted TBS, both in handwritten and e-mail messages, expressing a desire to be tested for the TBS [\\$1,000 Challenge](#). He has identified himself as Igor N. Simchanko in his recent e-mails, though a copy of his passport that he mailed to us in 2004 lists his name as Ihar Simchanka.

Despite the profound language barrier, Simchanko had initially agreed to predict one number between 1 and 53 for an upcoming Florida Lotto drawing. And, should that number turn out to be one of the six winning numbers that night, he would continue to do this for seven drawings, which would be a feat with approximately a 1:1,000,000 probability of success by chance alone.

However, as we reported, Simchanko then 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?"

Slightly more than a year has since transpired, with several disjointed and irrelevant e-mails received

in the interim. But on the morning of February 19 we received a specific prediction by e-mail, though not for "Lotto": "Let's try Florida Fantasy 5. In one day there will be a sphere number eleven. 11 will be on the twentieth of February. I begin. Observe of me. In the current nearest two months. Please." (Some grammar corrected.)

Unlike Florida's Lotto drawings, which consist of six numbers from 1 to 53, Fantasy 5 involves five numbers from 1 to 36. So, the probability of correctly predicting one of the five numbers would be $1/36 \times 5$ or 13.9%. To achieve a 1-in-a-million winning result, Simchanko would need to successfully make seven such predictions in a row.

As it turns out, the five winning Fantasy 5 numbers on February 20 did include 11. Mr. Simchanko's next prediction, received by us on Feb. 25 for the Feb. 26 drawing, was twenty (20). However, the winning numbers on the night of Feb. 26 were 4-5-14-27-30. Therefore, having failed to accomplish seven correct predictions in a row, Mr. Simchanko was informed that he had lost the TBS "\$1,000 Challenge."

Snippets



Mystic Gems, a new store in The Villages (an adult golf-course community 55 miles northwest of Orlando), offers jewelry for much more than mere adornment. The shop's wares are arranged according to chakra colors and yoga traditions, and for good reason. Co-owner Margaret Morgan explains: "I am a graduate gemologist . . . and have always been interested in gems, their healing vibrations, and I love yoga. . . . The body has different energy centers, and they are also associated with the color, with the sound, with vibration and healing aspects of that, and so [the store] is an exploration of a whole other realm of consciousness. . . . [For example, these Navaratna gemstones] are associated with each planet, and when we are born there is a configuration of the planets. Some people are more affected by different aspects of the planets, and by wearing all of the planetary gemstones, then you are attracting positive influences from all of them. . . . I see Mystical Gems as sort of a resource center, educational, and I hope down the road we will be able to hook people up with people that can do tarot readings, psychic readings, and with astrologers."

(*The Villages Daily Sun* online, Feb. 9)

Not to be outdone, Tampa feng shui consultant Kathy Mann will go so far as to meet a ghost -- bringing along treats such as uncooked rice, herbs and libations -- hoping to coax its unwanted presence from a client's home. But mostly her clients just need their homes' chi (energy) adjusted, for which she charges \$300 to \$600. The remedies generally involve rearranging furniture, eliminating clutter, adding plants and artwork, changing color schemes, and making sure the floorplans subscribe to feng shui principles. And the results are indisputable: Michelle Deemer had Mann feng shui her office eight years ago, and presto! "Within three weeks, I made the largest sale [we] had made in five years. Magic or not, something happened there, and it gave me confidence."

(*St. Petersburg Times*, [North Tampa edition], Feb. 10)

It turns out that Noreen Renier (see lead article above) had been called upon to assist in a high-profile Idaho kidnapping and murder investigation last summer. The case involved a break-in and fatal bludgeoning of McKenzie and Brenda Groene and their 13-year-old son Slade, and the kidnapping of their two younger children. Eight-year-old daughter Shasta was subsequently recognized at a Denny's restaurant with the assailant, Joseph Edward Duncan III, and was saved as Duncan was arrested. He had already killed her nine-year-old brother Dylan. The lead investigator on the case had interviewed Renier by phone on June 30 after mailing her some toys belonging to both children, from which she obtained "psychic" vibrations. He described Renier's reading as very general, though some of the information, he said, was similar to what was learned after Duncan's arrest. However, Shasta was rescued before Renier's information was acted upon.

(A.P. via *The Olympian* (Washington) online, Dec. 6)

Letter to the Editor

Editor: I hope you can help me. I saw John Monti on the TV show *Psychic Detectives* (see our Fall 2005 [lead story](#)). I have looked on the web for an address on him. I didn't find anything, but I did come across yours. I see you know him. My daughter has been missing for 12 years. The detective here believes she was murdered. I just need to know what happened to her. I think about her every day. So I just want to see if a psychic could help solve this case.

--[Name withheld]
Petal, Mississippi

Editor's note: In my reply, I expressed my sympathy for the mother's plight, and told her that I would have given her Monti's address or phone number if I had either. But I also told her that she is better

off that I didn't, since research indicates that employing a so-called "psychic detective" is just an expensive and heartbreaking road to nowhere. I also enclosed a copy of our Fall 2005 newsletter containing my article on the Monti episode of Psychic Detectives.

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