

# *THE SKEPTICAL* *INTELLIGENCER*

The Quarterly Magazine of ASKE  
THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY  
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*Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter*

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**Edited by Michael Heap**

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## CONTENTS

### Regular features

<a href="#">From the ASKE Chairman</a>	1	<a href="#">The European Scene</a>	14
<a href="#">Logic and Intuition</a>	2	<a href="#">Of Interest</a>	14
<a href="#">Medicine on the Fringe</a>	2	<a href="#">Upcoming Events</a>	17
<a href="#">Language on the Fringe</a>	3	<a href="#">Logic and Intuition: Answers</a>	18

### Articles

<a href="#">Was a Neanderthal shot dead by a time traveller? No</a> by 'Swiftsure'	7
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### Book reviews and commentaries

An honest liar: 'Exposed - Magicians, Psychics and Frauds'	
<a href="#">Review</a> by Richard Rawlins	8
<a href="#">Review</a> by Ray Ward	10
<a href="#">Alphabetical: How Every Letter Tells a Story</a> by Mark Newbrook	10
<a href="#">Language Myths, Mysteries and Magic</a> by Mark Newbrook	11
<a href="#">Fair challenge? Psychic claimants and mendacious subjects</a> by Mark Newbrook	13

## GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

The *Skeptical Intelligencer* welcomes formal and informal contributions on any subject within the ambit of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry (ASKE).

Formal articles should be aimed at the intelligent layperson, and authors should take particular care to define or explain unusual terms or concepts. Equations, statistics or other numerical and symbolic tools may be employed whenever required. Articles should be as succinct as possible, but may be of any length.

Authors of contributions to the *Skeptical Intelligencer* should take care to ensure that texts are temperate in tone and free of vituperation. They should also ensure that arguments are either supported by express evidence/arguments or identified as speculative. 'Do not pretend conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable.' (T.H. Huxley).

Before being accepted for publication, submitted texts will be reviewed by the Editor and any appropriate advisors. Where improvements or changes are desirable, the editorial team will work with authors and make constructive suggestions as to amendments.

Authors should submit an electronic, double-spaced copy of their article or letter.

When referring to another work, authors should:

- Cite only the surname, year, and (where appropriate) page number within the main text: e.g. '...according to Hyman (1985: p. 123), the

results of this test were not convincing...' or '...according to Bruton (1886; cited in Ross, 1996)...'

- List multiple references in date order: e.g. '...a number of studies have thrown doubt on this claim (Zack, 1986; Al-Issa, 1989; Erikson, 1997)...'
- In the case of electronic material, give the author and the date the material was accessed on line
- Place Internet addresses URLs in angle brackets: e.g. <<http://www.nothing.org>>

A complete list of references in alphabetical order of authors' surnames should be given at the end of the article. The list should be compiled using the following conventions:

- Articles: Smith, L.J. (1990) An examination of astrology. *Astrological Journal*, 13, 132-196.
- Books: Naranjo, X. (1902) *The End of the Road*. London: University of London.
- Chapters: Griff, P. (1978) *Creationism*. In D. Greengage (ed.) *Pseudoscience*. Boston: Chapman Publishers.
- Electronic material: Driscoe, E. Another look at Uri Geller. <<http://www.etc.org>>. Accessed 21 April 1997.

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### THE 16<sup>TH</sup> EUROPEAN SKEPTICS CONGRESS

<http://euroscepticscon.org/>

**Friday Sept 11<sup>th</sup> to Sunday Sept 13<sup>th</sup> 2015**

(probably with a pre-congress event on the Thursday)

**At Goldsmiths College, London**

The congress is organised by ASKE and the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths College. It promises to be a great event with many well-known speakers. The call for participants is now on the congress website.

## FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

### Sighting of big cats (part 94)

Mon Dieu! On a vu un tigre près de Paris!

On November 13<sup>th</sup> this year a tiger was reported to be roaming the area around the Disneyland theme park on the outskirts of Paris. Local residents spotted the big cat near Montevrain, prompting authorities to dispatch a helicopter and some 60 police armed with stun guns to set up a security perimeter. Parents were alerted and told to fetch their children from school in their cars. Experts analysed paw prints and said they were definitely made by a large feline, probably a young tiger, weighing 80kg. A convincing video of the beast was later released. A spokeswoman for Disneyland was reported to advise that there was no chance that people could confuse Tigger (who is one of their staff members in a costume) from a tiger roaming wild.

After a couple of days the hunt was scaled down, as was the status of the creature (firstly to 'a big cat' such as a lynx and finally to 'a European wildcat or a large domestic cat'). The video of the tiger was declared to have made in Mumbai (and to be of a dog and a leopard). And the people Montevrain resumed their peaceful existence.

There is a good timeline of these events by *Mirror Online* (*note 1*).

### Big cat sightings in the UK

As many skeptics will know, for years now there have been regular reports that large cats such as lynxes, pumas, panthers, leopards and even lions have been spotted in the British countryside, occasionally making excursions into towns and cities. There are a number of websites dedicated to this phenomenon set up by people who are in no doubt that 'they are all out there'. Simply Googling 'big cat sighting' at any time will reveal several local and national newspaper articles on the topic within the previous few months.

I wrote a piece on this topic for the Autumn 2008 issue of *Skeptical*

*Adversaria*. At that time my interest was piqued by a story running in the *Rosendale Free Press* about the 'Huttock Top Beast', supposedly a leopard or similar creature sighted in Bacup, Lancashire, along with paw-prints. As with most other sightings, the people making the claim expressed absolute certainty that what they saw was a big cat and not, say, a domestic animal or fox. Even when confronted with evidence suggesting otherwise claimants still seem incapable of entertaining a more likely explanation for their sighting. Contrast this with the attitude of the open-minded skeptic: 'It *could* be a panther (leopard, etc.) but it is *extremely unlikely*.

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*'Whatever it was, it's definitely still out there'.*

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This is well illustrated by the case of the 'Essex Lion'. In August 2012 a couple photographed a cat in a field in St Osyth near Clacton-on-Sea, insisting that what they saw playing there (for up to 30 minutes) was not a domestic specimen but looked more like a lion. Another witness reported hearing something that sounded like 'the roar of a lion' in the evening. There was a serious alert and Essex Police mustered a force of around 25 officers, including specialist firearms officers, who were accompanied by experts from Colchester Zoo. Two police helicopters, one with thermal imaging equipment, were also deployed. The hunt was called off when a local woman announced that the 'lion' in the photograph was actually her pet Maine Coon cat 'Teddy Bear' who regularly plays and hunts in the field in question. Indeed Teddy Bear has a striking resemblance to the animal photographed (*note 2*). So the couple who reported that a big cat was on the loose could now breathe a sigh of relief, Yes? Oh no! 'I don't think it was a domestic cat', the wife declared when

told the news; 'Whatever it was, it's definitely still out there'.

In my 2008 piece on the Bacup sighting, I concluded: 'I am prepared to bet that the authenticity of this animal will always remain unconfirmed and that the Huttock Top Beast will forever remain "a mystery"'. Sure enough, no such creature, alive or dead, was ever found and all went quiet. Then predictably, six years later (this October), the *Free Press* and other newspapers announced, 'Is this the Huttock Top Beast?' A woman living on a farm in nearby Norden, made a video of an animal chasing one of her chickens (*note 3*). I offer no comments and leave it to readers to make up their minds from the YouTube footage (*I wouldn't bother – Ed.*).

### Notes

1. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/paris-tiger-recap-updates-armed-4626081>

2. <http://www.signal1.co.uk/on-air/blogs/chris-bovaird-258147/entry/484/>

3. <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/watch-huttock-top-beast-caught-7891850>

### More on Boris Johnson and pollution

In the previous 'From the Chairman' a news item was reported concerning the Mayor of London, Mr Boris Johnson, and his refusal to agree (his response being 'Bollocks') with the findings of a scientific study by Kings College London about record levels of pollution in London, notably Oxford Street W1, due to traffic emissions. Now Mr Johnson appears to have recanted and he is reported to have accepted the results of the study. He also denies making a veiled threat to the researchers to withdraw funding for their work (*note 1*).

### Note

1. <http://www.airqualitynews.com/2014/11/14/boris-not-disputing-kings-college-london-data/>

## REGULAR FEATURES

### LOGIC AND INTUITION

#### More on ‘How much has Albert lost?’

The puzzle in the previous issue of the *Intelligencer* provoked one reader to write in some disbelief about the correctness of the answer provided. Recall that a stranger gives the shopkeeper, Albert, a £10 note to purchase £6 of chocolate. Having no change, Albert goes to the florist’s next door and exchanges the note for £10 in coins, and gives the stranger £4 change. Later the florist announces to Albert that the £10 note is a forgery and Albert has to then give her an authentic £10 note. So how much has Albert lost? The answer is £10, although many people will say £14 (to include the £4 change), or £20 (to further include the loss of the

chocolate), or £18 (if the cost price to Albert for the chocolate was only £4).

In addition to the reasoning given last time for the answer’s being £10, consider the following:

- Suppose the stranger had given Albert a genuine £10 note. Albert would still have had to give him the chocolate plus £4.
- Suppose that Albert himself discovered that the £10 note was a forgery when he was cashing up at the end of the day and, being an honest man, he destroyed it. Does it make any difference which customer had given him the note – the stranger or someone else? Not at all. Whoever it was who gave him the note and whatever they bought, Albert is always £10 out of pocket.

#### The finger in the water

Here’s an ancient little puzzle that will take you back to your early physics lessons at school. And you can check the answer for yourself.

A glass of water rests on some weighing scales. You carefully lower your finger into the water without spilling any and without touching the sides or bottom of the glass. What happens to the reading on the scale?

To solve this puzzle does require some basic knowledge of physics. Indeed you might experience a Eureka moment when you recall a certain Law (number three to be exact). But before any of this, what does your intuition or your experience of the world tell you?

Answer on [the back cover](#).

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### MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

#### Michael Heap

##### Paracetamol is ineffective for acute low-back pain

Recently a double-blind randomised controlled trial (RCT) was completed on 1,650 patients in Australia, which investigated the effectiveness of paracetamol compared to placebo in improving recovery time from acute low back pain. Paracetamol is universally recommend as a first-line treatment along with advice (such as keeping active) and reassurance, despite the lack of any high-quality evidence in support. The only other relevant RCT the authors could find studied just 46 patients.

The study is reported in *The Lancet* (note 1). The results showed a median time to recovery of 17 days in the regular-dose group, 17 days in the as-needed group, and 16 days in the placebo group (no significant

differences). The proportions of participants reporting adverse events were 18.5% in the regular group, 18.7% in the as-needed group, and 18.5% in the placebo group (no significant differences).

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*This is what one would expect to happen on occasions within any applied science.*

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I for one am always impressed and reassured when mainstream medical journals report that a treatment that doctors regularly prescribe for a certain condition has been shown in a controlled trial to be ineffective. This is what one would expect to happen on occasions within any applied science. Contrast this with the absence of any such announcements from the alternative medicine industry.

#### Note

1. Williams, C.M., et al. (2014) Efficacy of paracetamol for acute low-back pain: a double-blind, randomised controlled trial. *The Lancet* **384**, (Issue 9954), 1586-1596:  
[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(14\)60805-9/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(14)60805-9/abstract)

#### MP recommends astrology in medical treatment

The Conservative MP for Bosworth Mr David Tredinnick (*not him again – Ed.*), has called for astrological forecasting to be used in medical practice (*note 1*). Mr Tredinnick is a member of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee and the Health Select Committee and is a vocal advocate of alternative medicine. In July, he told his fellow MPs in the House of

Commons: 'I am absolutely convinced that those who look at the map of the sky for the day that they were born and receive some professional guidance will find out a lot about themselves and it will make their lives easier'. And in an interview with BBC News, he said that herbal remedies and healing were now becoming accepted in parts of the NHS, and he now wanted to promote astrology, which he claimed was not just about predicting the future, but gaining an understanding of personal problems. He said he was not deterred by his critics whom he labelled 'bullies'. 'There is no logic in attacking something that has a proven track record', he said. He also revealed that he has compiled astrological charts for fellow MPs and that it 'had certainly made their lives easier'. He declined to give their names.

More recently, Professor Robert Winston described Mr Tredinnick's views as 'lunatic' (note 2) and said that his membership of the Health Select Committee is 'barmy'.

#### Notes

1.<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/astrologyloving-mp-david->

[tredinnick-convinced-practise-can-reduce-strain-on-nhs-9629150.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/astrologyloving-mp-david-tredinnick-convinced-practise-can-reduce-strain-on-nhs-9629150.html)  
2.[http://www.westerntelegraph.co.uk/news/national/11650976.Winston\\_slams\\_lunatic\\_Tory\\_MP/](http://www.westerntelegraph.co.uk/news/national/11650976.Winston_slams_lunatic_Tory_MP/)

#### The Medical Innovations Bill

This controversial Bill, promoted by Lord Saatchi, passed at the Committee Stage (House of Lords, first sitting) on 24.10.14 (note 1) and the amended report (28.10.14) is available for viewing online (note 2). See note 3 for a presentation of the arguments for and against the Bill.

#### Notes

1.<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2014-15/medicalinnovation.html>

2.<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/lbill/2014-2015/0048/15048.pdf>

3.<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/saatchi-bill/>

#### Shock horror! 'The elderly' are becoming healthier!

Here's an antidote to all the doom and gloom stories about the nation's health (note 1). Older people are actually becoming healthier, according to a study that suggests an ageing

population is putting less pressure on hospital emergency departments than commonly thought. The study by researchers at the University of Oxford, entitled *Understanding Emergency Hospital Admissions of Older People*, found that people born in each year from 1912 were increasingly less likely to need emergency treatment, and spent shorter periods in hospital once they were admitted. Likely reasons are reductions in smoking, healthier diets, vaccination programmes earlier in life, and preventive drugs such as statins. The researchers warn, however, that high levels of obesity among the young and excessive drinking in middle age mean that the trend may not continue.

#### Note

1.<http://nhsreality.wordpress.com/2014/12/15/elderly-nhs-burden-smaller-than-thought/>

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## LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

### Mark Newbrook

#### Grammar versus vocabulary: linguists, amateurs, learners and nutters

Language-teaching books often treat grammar as the most difficult general aspect of a language for young or adult second-/foreign-language learners. Some introductory books, such as one on Gaelic that circulated in Scotland for many years, avoid grammatical terminology altogether and try to present all phenomena in non-grammatical terms or by term-free exemplification. An innovative introductory Latin course run by the Cambridge Schools Classics Project, which began in 1967 (yours truly was among the first to take it), replaced the

traditional names for the 'cases' of nouns (*nominative*, *accusative*, etc.) with the supposedly easier *Form A*, *Form B* and so forth, and (confusingly) soft-pedalled the crucial division of Latin nouns into 'declensions'. The course-writers were less decisive in respect of the verbs, avoiding the term *conjugation* but preserving the names of tenses etc. And, since there were no comparable courses for other languages, those of us who became Hellenists two years later, and indeed those who took German instead, had to learn the traditional terminology anyway! Still later, traditional methods involving heavy reference to grammar were swept away on a broad front by

the 'communicative' movement, in which the learning of a new language resembled studying and practising the contents of a comprehensive phrase-book and many 'successful' students ended up unable to construct any sentence which differed more than marginally in respect of its grammar from those specific sentences which had already been mastered.

In fact, a knowledge of grammar is (of course) of great use in working in a new language. But, while fears about the learnability of grammar may be somewhat exaggerated, it does seem to be the case that many people struggle to acquire the ability to analyse the grammatical structures of foreign

languages – or indeed of their own (see below). Some otherwise bright linguistics students have no ‘feel’ for grammar and no helpful intuitions, and seem largely unable to make up for this in analysis by applying transparent algorithmic tests.

Many of one large group of British first-year university language students who were being tested on their ‘metalinguistic awareness’ (conscious grasp of grammatical and other such notions) declared themselves altogether unable to describe the grammars of languages which they had been studying for up to eight years. Indeed, some of these students wrote comments such as ‘I don’t understand what is meant by the word *grammar*’. In another study, conducted in New Zealand, only 4% of a cohort of secondary school students achieved a 50% pass in a test of their explicit knowledge of English grammar after five years of instruction. This occurred despite the fact that many of them had also been confronted with the grammars of other languages. Unless links and contrasts are very explicitly emphasised in teaching, learning the grammar of a second language, even if successful in itself, may not always help much with understanding the grammar of one’s own.

Still worse, some students find it very difficult to distinguish matters of grammar from matters of meaning or pragmatics. When explicitly asked to comment (descriptively, not by way of condemnation) on the **grammar** of blatantly grammatically-non-standard sentences such as *She a boy*, most of one Singaporean cohort focused on semantic anomalies (‘Someone referred to as *she* cannot be a boy’, etc.) and completely ignored the obvious genuinely grammatical issues (here, no verb *is*).

Successful linguists, including linguistics teachers, become linguists precisely because they are not only very interested in language but also unusually adept at conceptualisation involving language and at exercises of this kind; they typically cannot

understand why students have such major problems in this area. Frustration on both sides often ensues.

In fact, many non-linguists fail to grasp that their native languages (as opposed to other languages which they try to learn later) possess grammar at all, especially if they are grammatically unlike their second languages (e.g. as Chinese is unlike English). Many Singapore Chinese people imagine that their (locally denigrated) Chinese ‘dialects’ such as Hokkien, in particular, have no grammar (and some also believe that even native speakers of ‘real languages’ such as English have to learn the grammars of these languages through explicit instruction). Even in Hong Kong, more than one bilingual local told me that Cantonese (the main spoken language there) was ‘very easy; no grammar’. The linguist Robert Lord met an educated native speaker of Russian who had no idea that Russian had grammar and wondered why foreigners found it difficult.

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*Many non-linguists fail to grasp that their native languages .... possess grammar at all.*

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Very many linguists are especially interested in grammar, and in other highly structured aspects of languages such as phonology (sound-systems). The vocabulary of a language, on the other hand, is the **least** heavily-structured major aspect of that language, much less highly organised than the grammar or the phonology. And, because vocabulary is so lacking in structure by comparison with grammar or phonology, and thus is so ‘open-ended’, a language’s vocabulary can change much more rapidly than its grammar or its phonology. These changes involve the loss or gain of words and the development of new senses of words as culture and technology change and linguistic requirements change accordingly. Understanding such changes and other matters involving vocabulary requires

relatively little understanding of linguistic theory or of the techniques needed for describing and explaining linguistic systems. In fact, most of what non-linguists know (or think they know) about a given language involves vocabulary.

Specifically, the vast bulk of the argumentation associated with non-mainstream amateur claims about language origins and diversification (as discussed in Chapter 1 of my book *Strange Linguistics*) involves vocabulary, which is replete with superficial (mostly accidental) similarities and which, as noted, requires much less understanding of linguistics. Grammar and phonology are largely ignored, apparently out of ignorance.

Much the same applies to some discussion by non-linguists about e.g. possible communication with extraterrestrials; see for example Fernando J. Ballesteros’ 2010 book *E.T. Talk: How Will We Communicate with Intelligent Life on Other Worlds?* The grammars and phonologies of the languages invented by science-fiction and fantasy writers (with the exception of those few who have been trained in linguistics, such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Suzette Haden Elgin) are also scantily described and often misconceptualised; almost all of the clearly described features of such languages involve vocabulary.

In contrast, unless they are specifically lexicographers of one kind or another (historical, semantic, dialectological, etc.) with a particular focus on vocabulary, linguists of all kinds and persuasions tend to have only a limited interest in issues involving vocabulary (to the extent that many linguists are less than fluent even in their languages of specialisation; they are very competent in the grammar and speak with a good accent, but because they are bored by vocabulary they do not learn enough words to speak fluently). Most historical linguists are much less interested in the etymologies of words than are amateur historical

dialectologists (such as the authors of popular books on the dialects of various regions). *Qua* linguists, at least, they are interested in an etymology **if** it is important in respect of some structural issue of more general significance, for example if it helps to resolve a puzzle involving the development of a sound-system. If the etymology is **not** specifically revealing in this way, it may be of great interest to local authors and their readers, possibly in part through its links with local culture – but not of especial concern to a linguist.

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*Some non-mainstream authors actually deny that grammar exists!*

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Amateur dialectologists with an interest in vocabulary are in fact very useful to professional linguists in the same way that amateur comet-spotters or sunspot-mappers are useful to professional astronomers. They provide huge amounts of raw pre-theoretical data (albeit often needing to be checked and/or reformulated) which the professionals, too busy and insufficiently motivated to do such work themselves, can treat as input to their broader-brush investigations of fact and to their considerations of theory. But the amateurs may not be aware of how much they are valued – especially if disparaging terms such as *butterfly-collector* (implying a lack of interest in or knowledge of theory) are used of them, as still occasionally happens. And (with their typically limited awareness of linguistic structure and its significance) they may also be surprised, perplexed or frustrated at the lack of interest shown by linguists in the bulk of their work.

Like non-mainstream authors as discussed above, most amateur dialectologists and non-linguists commenting on dialect display too little awareness of the centrality of grammar (and of phonology) in respect of matters of linguistic differentiation. For instance, it is often said that

‘broad’ Cumbrian dialect is still close to Norse, and indeed intelligible to modern Icelanders or even Scandinavians; but the surviving similarities (other than general features common to **all** Germanic languages) involve only certain **words** and a few short phrases made up of these words, not grammar – and mutual intelligibility is **very** limited. And in the 1960s the linguist William Labov was told by elderly natives of Martha’s Vineyard (Massachusetts) that the traditional speech of the island was ‘almost a separate language’, whereas in fact its peculiarities consisted merely of a strong Eastern Massachusetts accent exemplified especially in certain locally salient words.

Some non-mainstream authors actually deny that grammar exists! I will discuss these people next time.

#### **Pick a Vic...**

The events in my story last time about the young Manchester City soccer fan at Ipswich with the unexpected accent could not have occurred in Australia, where (owing to the relatively recent British settlement) regional accents vary very little. The most distinctive state is South Australia, where words like *castle* tend to display a very ‘English-sounding’ long vowel, in contrast with a short A (as in the North of England) in Eastern Australia (especially in Melbourne) or sometimes a more ‘fronted’ Australian-sounding long vowel (notably in Sydney). Listen to the Adelaide-raised singer Paul Kelly, still clearly a ‘Croweater’ (South Australian) despite years in Sydney and Melbourne. But such differences are few and typically marginal or variable.

Australians therefore cannot normally decide quickly, as English people can, how to react to a newly-met person on the strength of accent-based evidence of where they come from. They have to wait for (or try to prompt!) one of the distinctive **words** which do identify people as coming from specific states. I once ordered a half-pint of beer in a Sydney pub, using the Victorian (Melbourne) term

*pot*. As I should have remembered, the Sydney term is *middy*. The barman jovially said: ‘Mexican bastard!’. (Sydneyiders call Victorians ‘Mexicans’ because they live ‘south of the border’!) I pointed out that my accent clearly identified me as a Pom, but apparently saying *pot* made me a Mexican bastard anyway. (In Alice Springs I learned to order a *ten*, i.e. 10 fluid ounces.)

My Melbourne friend stated that she for her part could easily tell if someone was from Perth. I was surprised, and asked how. She replied: ‘I’d say: Where are you from? And they’d say: Perth!’

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*One group whom Australians can normally identify by accent are New Zealanders, who are often misidentified as Australians by Brits.*

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There is in fact considerable (albeit usually low-key) antagonism between the states of Australia. I have seen signs held up in sports crowds in Perth and Adelaide reading ‘Hit The Vics For Six’ at the cricket and ‘Kick A Vic’ at the football. Once a Sydneyider was seen celebrating the early loss of two Australian test wickets on the grounds that both dismissed batsmen were Victorians (‘the bloody Vics are 2 for 10’)! Older Victorians derisively call rugby league (associated mainly with Sydney and Brisbane) ‘outdoor wrestling’, and New South Wales people respond by calling Australian Rules Football ‘aerial ping-pong’. And if a Victorian cricketer comes out to bat or comes on to bowl for Australia at the MCG, the crowd chants ‘We love you cos you’re a Victorian’.

One group whom Australians **can** normally identify by accent are New Zealanders, who are often misidentified as Australians by Brits (Brits hear the shared features which distinguish Australasian speech from that of England; Australasians themselves naturally hear the

differences). Australians are mocked in NZ for saying ‘a chence to ween’, and NZers are mocked in Oz for saying ‘tin past tin’ or ‘sux munuts to sux’.

A Hong Kong friend met a young Japanese man who had learned his English in NZ; as they were eating ice-creams, he asked her if they could ‘have six’. She asked why they couldn’t have seven – but then realised what he meant, kicked sand at him and fled.

Because of the large distances between their big cities, most Australians seldom find themselves in another state, and they talk of people being or going *interstate* (‘in/to another state’). One of my Melbourne students once misread *intestate* as *interstate*, and asked me in alarm if the government would intervene and dispose of her assets if she happened to die (say in an accident) in New South Wales!

### **...Or a brick**

James Churchward and his followers – see *The Lost Continent of Mu* (London, 1959); *The Children of Mu* (London, 1959); etc. – believed in the lost Pacific continent of Mu. They found surviving ‘evidence’ of Mu all around the world – including linguistic and epigraphic evidence. One piece of evidence was the supposed Muvian logographic symbol for the name *Mu* itself: a rectangle with its longer side

lying horizontal. Now what shape is a brick?

### **More fun things**

One of my Hong Kong students was often very shrill and argumentative in class, over-rating his own knowledge of English. His favourite opening line was: ‘Dr Newbrook, I believe that you are wrong!’ Once he told me that I was mistaken in identifying a pig as a type of mammal (in a semantics class): ‘It is not a mammal, it is a cattle!’

Educated native speakers of English can also evince (surprising) ignorance. A poll was conducted at an Oxford college to determine whether or not a summer ball should be staged. A second question asked: Do you think that such a ball would be socially **devicive**?!

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*When American General Douglas MacArthur was considering running for the Presidency after World War II, a banner in a Tokyo street proclaimed: ‘We play for MacArthur’s erection’!*

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Some learner errors are simply amusing. Once, a friend was teaching English to ethnically Hmong refugees from Laos at Phanat Nikhom in eastern Thailand. She was teaching them the word *tired*, running around the room and then announcing ‘I am tired’. Since

my friend herself was Thai, one learner thought that this word was *Thai-ed*, and accordingly said that she herself was *Hmong-ed*!

I was once sitting waiting for a prescription at a busy hospital pharmacy in Singapore. The ethnically Chinese assistant announced: ‘Tsa Lien Sing’! After a long pause a Sikh man stood up: ‘Charan Singh?’. Next she called ‘Mr Dolawasthaswamy!’, and three Indian men all stood up. Finally it was my turn. ‘Mr Mok!’ Pause. ‘Mok New Book!’ (In Chinese the surname comes first.) I still have the little bottle with MOK NEW BOOK typed on the label.

Japanese, like Chinese, does not distinguish the sounds represented in English by the letters L and R. When American General Douglas MacArthur was considering running for the Presidency after World War II, a banner in a Tokyo street proclaimed: ‘We play for MacArthur’s erection’!

A more complex error involved confusion regarding orthodox Judaism. An enquiry addressed to a prospective Chinese supplier regarding the acceptability of certain foodstuffs received the helpful reply ‘This product contains no kosher’!

More next time!

## ***Editor’s Announcement***

ASKE’s *Skeptical Intelligencer* is a quarterly magazine. Paper editions are available on request (see front page). The magazine is widely circulated electronically to skeptical groups and individuals across the globe. Formal and informal articles of interest to skeptics are welcome from people of all disciplines and backgrounds, especially news of activities involving sceptical groups around the world. Would you like to contribute a regular column in your specialty or area of interest – e.g. an ‘On the Fringe’ feature? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features? Please get in touch with the Editor if you wish to make a contribution to skepticism in this way.



## CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

### WAS A NEANDERTHAL SHOT DEAD BY A TIME TRAVELLER? NO

#### ‘Swiftsure’

This article, reprinted by the author’s kind permission, was posted on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014 by ‘Swiftsure’ at: <https://badthinking.wordpress.com/2014/08/17/was-a-neanderthal-shot-dead-by-a-time-traveller-no/>

This week’s Wraithscape (*note 1*) column in the Shields Gazette seems to be a record-breaker for cramming so much nonsense into such a small space. The claim made is that in 1922 a Neanderthal skull was found in South Africa, but that it had a bullet hole in the left side of the skull, and that the opposite side of this skull had been ‘blown away’. As Mike Hallowell puts it:

*In short, whatever had hit the Broken Hill Neanderthal on the left side of his head had passed through it with such force that it had caused the right side to explode.*

That sounds like the type of wound that would be caused by a high powered rifle. And, of course, some unnamed forensic experts have concluded:

*The cranial damage to Rhodesian Man’s skull could not have been caused by anything but a bullet.*

The same article also makes a similar claim about an ancient aurochs – an ancestor of modern cattle, but I’ll not bother with that bit of claptrap; the Neanderthal ‘shooting’ is more interesting.

The whole article is full of factual inaccuracies. First of all, the skull referred to was found in 1921, not 1922. It’s a relatively minor point, but still a factual error.

More important, however, is Mike Hallowell’s claim that the skull in question is that of a Neanderthal. He says:

*It was, in fact, a Neanderthal skull, and Neanderthal bones did not exactly come ten-a-penny.* [Emphasis added.]

In fact, **Neanderthals were never in Africa.** The skull is now identified as *Homo heidelbergensis*, with the evidence suggesting that it is an ancestor of both Neanderthals and modern humans. Neanderthals are on a different branch of our evolutionary tree and their remains have only ever been found in Europe. Not Africa.

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*The ‘bullet hole’ shows signs of healing, and was most likely caused by an infection in the overlying tissue; it certainly did not kill this individual.*

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But what about the bullet hole and the large exit wound? The ‘bullet hole’ shows signs of healing, and was most likely caused by an infection in the overlying tissue; it certainly did not kill this individual. As for the other side of the skull that supposedly exploded as a bullet passed through, that is simply wrong. **The opposite side of the skull is intact.** There’s an interesting article about this particular skull at the Bad Archaeology blog (*note 2*).

Mike Hallowell thinks he has ‘forceful evidence’ that thousands of years ago a Neanderthal was shot with a modern firearm, when in fact there is no evidence of the sort. And there is even less evidence for his other conjecture – that...

*...someone from the future, carrying a firearm, travelled back into the past and engaged in some sort of trans-temporal hunting expedition.*

Then Mike finishes his article with this declaration:

*Like it or not, the fact is that someone or something seemed to be*

*using high-velocity bullets thousands of years ago. We don’t know who, we don’t know why and we don’t know how – but it happened.* [Emphasis added.]

I have to say, I don’t mind a mystery, but a genuine mystery has to have a factual basis to make it worthy of examination. The only mystery here is how this drivel got into print.

For a brief, but scientific, account of the skull, there is a good article here at the Natural History Museum (*note 3*). For some reason, the scientists there just don’t seem to have recognised the ‘bullet hole’, the (non-existent) ‘exploded’ exit wound, or any evidence of time-travelling hunting parties. What are they doing all day long? Don’t they read the Shields Gazette? (*note 4*)

#### Notes

1. <http://www.shieldsgazette.com/opinion/columnists/wraithscape/was-neanderthal-shot-by-a-time-traveller-1-6786186>
2. [http://www.badarchaeology.com/?page\\_id=148](http://www.badarchaeology.com/?page_id=148)
3. <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/collections-at-the-museum/museum-treasures/broken-hill-skull/index.html>
4. Mr Hallowell has written a rejoinder to this and other criticisms of his ideas at: <http://www.shieldsgazette.com/opinion/columnists/wraithscape/some-can-t-handle-truth-about-the-unexplained-1-6809936>

## REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES

### AN HONEST LIAR: TWO REVIEWS OF 'EXPOSED - MAGICIANS, PSYCHICS AND FRAUDS'

This programme was shown on Sunday November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014 on BBC4

#### Richard Rawlins

This film, like its subject matter and the subject of the film, is not all it seems...

Magicians and medicine men were undistinguishable for centuries. Initially magi claimed to conjure spirits to cure ills, but today virtually all magicians are honest. We say we are going to fool you, and then we do! Other folks have taken the tools and tricks of the magician's arts - misdirection, lying, sleight of hand and mind control - to deceive and defraud the gullible and vulnerable. They are crooks and con artists. Those in the field of healthcare are quacks and charlatans. All might be frauds. Some healthcare practitioners claim they can release beneficial 'innate intelligence', 'vital forces' and 'healing energy' by spinal manipulation, hand waving, needling the skin, unrefined plant preparations and similar esoteric extravaganzas. Whether they are acting with integrity and honesty or are quacks and frauds has to be considered on a case-by-case basis and is for you to judge. Bear in mind both the profit motive ('thar's gold in them thar ills') and the self importance an aura of medical mystery can invoke - the prophet motive.

In the late eighteenth century, the advent of the marketing age moved health care commerce from simple swindles at fairs, where 'nostra remedia' were hawked by 'quack bills', to mass promotion through newspapers. Thomas Holloway's extensively advertised pills proved so popular that by 1885 he was able to endow the Sanatorium in Virginia Water and then the Royal Holloway College. There is no plausible evidence his concoctions had any useful clinical

effect - save that many patients thought they did.

New York State of 1848 saw the advent of a particularly perverse development when the young Fox sisters tricked their mother into believing strange noises and bumps heard in their home were caused by the spirit of a pedlar murdered there some years earlier. Before long, many other 'psychics' got in on the act and claimed they could contact those who had passed to 'the other side'. 'Spiritualism' became popular and continued even when, years later, the sisters admitted they had created the noise by bobbing an apple on a string. Many magicians were offended. It is one thing to create an illusion to entertain an audience, another to defraud the vulnerable. The American Davenport Brothers demonstrated their psychical abilities sitting inside their closed 'Spirit Cabinet'. When they performed in Cheltenham in 1865, local watchmaker John Nevil Maskelyne showed he could reproduce the brother's effects with straightforward magicians' tricks - no spirits were necessary. The Davenports returned to America a month later. Maskelyne went on to become Britain's premier magician. He also invented the penny-in-the-slot machine for public toilets, exposed the methods of gambling cheats in his bestselling book *Sharps and Flats* and offered the first prize to be awarded to anyone who could convincingly demonstrate the existence of the spirit world. In 1870 he explained to the Prince of Wales in a private show that he was performing illusions and was not in harmony with vital spirits. The Prince appreciated the explanation. More recently Darren

Brown has reproduced the Davenport's spirit cabinet effects for television, though Tommy Cooper only lasted a few moments in the cabinet before lurching out complaining 'Oo, it's dark in there!'

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*It is one thing to create an illusion to entertain an audience, another to defraud the vulnerable.*

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Harry Houdini famously debunked psychics, faith healers and spirit mediums. His shows involved not only magical illusions and the escapology for which he was legendary but also demonstrations showing that 'spiritualist' effects could be achieved without resort to the supernatural. He was not amused that his friend Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, trained as a doctor and noted for an analytical approach, was a spiritualist and believed in fairies.

Randall James Zwinge started his career as a magician at the age of nine. Later, as 'The Amazing Randi' he had an outstanding career as a stage and TV illusionist, escapologist and magical entertainer, before concentrating on debunking liars, cheats and frauds who claimed supernatural powers. Randi's annual 'Amazing Meeting' in Las Vegas is a must for sceptics, critical thinkers, debunkers and those concerned about honesty and integrity in science, medicine and the media.

In 1996 Randi founded an Educational Foundation to promote critical thinking, expose paranormal and pseudoscientific frauds and hold

media organizations accountable for promoting dangerous nonsense. The JREF also offer a \$1,000,000 prize to anyone who can show evidence of any paranormal, supernatural, or occult power or event. No 'psychic' currently presenting shows in the UK has applied. Patients continue to part with hard earned money to be told their dead loved ones are sending messages to them, though the medium of the psychic. 'Patients': for that is what many members of the audience are, as they are suffering from bereavement (*pateo*, I suffer). There can be no proof psychics cannot contact the dead - though why psychics would sue for £100,000 when they could presumably win the JREF million dollar prize remains unexplained (*note 1*).

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*Geller no longer styles himself as having psychical, paranormal and supernatural gifts but as a 'mystifier' with 'special abilities'.*

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With that background, this film - in BBC's Storyville series of the best international documentaries - offers both a mini-biopic of Randi's 84 year life to date and a stimulating account of how he exposed faith healers and psychics.

In his 1982 book *The Truth about Uri Geller*, Randi stated he 'is convinced that Geller is a clever magician, nothing more and certainly nothing less'. Threatened law suits for libel did not materialise and Geller no longer styles himself as having psychical, paranormal and supernatural gifts but as a 'mystifier' with 'special abilities'. True enough.'

Faith healer Peter Popoff's career nose-dived when Randi showed on TV that his wife was cueing him via a hidden radio and earpiece. Remarkably, Popoff's career has now recovered. Folks do not believe simply because they want to but because they need to - and the need continues.

At Randi's behest, magician Steve Shaw acted as a 'psychic' to dupe

Stanford University researchers, demonstrating that even reputable scientists can be gullible and have little understanding of the magic arts. Shaw has gone on to an excellent career as the mentalist Banachek.

Randi's own demonstration of the effects of overdose of homeopathic remedies (none) has been a stimulus to the widening appreciation of the futility of those products and the opportunity costs of needless spending on them.

The list of magicians who have applied their intuition, knowledge and insights to help the public and warn of trickery and fraud is lengthening, but have to be wary. In 2011 magician Paul Zenon and the *Daily Mail* suggested a psychic was using a radio and earpiece to hear details about the 'dear departed' of members of the audience who attended her shows. The information was given in 'love letters' handed to stage staff - the method Randi showed had been used by Popoff. Zenon and the Mail could not comply with libel legislation which requires that allegations are proved and they were obliged to pay damages. The efforts of HealthWatch-UK 2014 Award winner Simon Singh in helping reform of libel laws is appreciated by debunkers and doctors alike. Ultimately it is patients who benefit from the exposure of chicanery - their desperation is no reason to tolerate deception, which should be deprecated.

The title the BBC has used for this programme is itself misleading. The programme is about Randi - the accounts of his efforts to expose frauds are a means to that end. The film offers little new material or analysis but the account is a fascinating and valuable contribution to widening public scepticism about crooked psychics and healthcare scams. In fact I can expose the film is actually titled *An Honest Liar* and was crowd funded by Flim Flam Films for Randi through Kickstarter. Presumably the BBC thought the exposure of frauds and cons presented—a more attractive title for a British audience than the story of

an aged magician. Was this change of title deceptive? You must be the judge!

The BBC's website article on the programme and some reviewers have suggested that, 'in a twist, Randi himself has been gullible and vulnerable to deception'. I think not. The film's 'exposure' about his partner being an illegal immigrant (and guilty of identity theft) was itself a deception - Randi has always known perfectly well what was going on in his life. As the film's own website itself hints: 'When a shocking revelation in Randi's personal life is discovered, it isn't clear whether Randi is still the deceiver - or the deceived' (*note 2*). And the name of Randi's assistant was reported in the Toronto Star soon after they met in 1986 (*note 3*).

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*Sceptics will appreciate being kept abreast of the never-ending struggle for intellectual integrity in those who care for others.*

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Randi, and this stimulating film, have amply demonstrated the importance of evidence, critical thinking, and the value of magical insight when assessing implausible claims. Sceptics will appreciate being kept abreast of the never-ending struggle for intellectual integrity in those who care for others. As to the possibility of deception in this story of Randi's life, you must be the judge.

#### Notes

1. [www.randi.org](http://www.randi.org)
2. <http://anonestliar.com/wp/>
3. [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/magazine/the-unbelievable-skepticism-of-the-amazing-randi.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/magazine/the-unbelievable-skepticism-of-the-amazing-randi.html?_r=0)

*Richard Rawlins is 'a Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon and Member of the Magic Circle, Aka: Professor Riccardo Consultant Charlatan, Specialist in the Care of the Gullible'.*

## Ray Ward

I thought this an excellent programme giving a comprehensive summary of the life and career of perhaps the most prominent living paranormal investigator, a man whom I have had the great honour and pleasure of meeting several times (he once accused me of being a groupie!).

It covered, in the most comprehensive way I have ever seen on television, his involvement with the exposure of the cheating faith healer Peter Popoff (his wife fed him information via an earpiece), the marvellous Project Alpha (when he showed how easy it is to fool scientists

by teaching two young men some conjuring tricks and then sending them to be tested - the testers were completely convinced they had paranormal powers), Uri Geller (sometimes portrayed as a harmless scamp, but he once sued Randi with no justification, causing him much concern), etc.

Early in the programme someone said Randi had something to hide himself, though it turned out to be no more than that he was gay (he actually 'came out' when he was 81') which would certainly have been disadvantageous for most of his life but

is of course nowadays totally unremarkable, and there was rather too much about his partner, who adopted someone else's identity because where he came from to be gay was very dangerous. Randi was questioned, rather too aggressively I thought, on the matter and showed some distress; it was said those parts wouldn't be included in the film, but a caption at the end said he gave permission for all to be shown. The matter was eventually settled, and when same-sex marriage was legalised Randi and his partner were married.

May Randi's work long continue!

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## **Alphabetical: How Every Letter Tells a Story by Michael Rosen. London: John Murray, 2013, pp. xv + 431. ISBN 978-1-84854-887-9**

### Mark Newbrook

Michael Rosen read English at Oxford, and while he is not a professional linguist (he is a writer of fiction and poetry) he is very well-informed and thoughtful where language is concerned. He states that this is the book he has always wanted to write, and he can be more than satisfied with his achievement; it is a very good book of its type (popular and non-technical but reliable). It would have benefitted in places from the admixture of professional linguistic expertise, and for more committed readers it needs to be supplemented by more technical works (some of which are listed in the bibliography); but it would be an excellent choice as a first book on this topic for a non-linguist to read.

There is a brief but helpful introduction, dealing with flexibility/variation and historical change in spelling, established versus 'creative' spelling (such as *Jaysen* for *Jason*, or a child's *krokodial*), the multiple sources of spelled forms (some of them transliterated from other scripts) and of associated general spelling principles in languages such as English which are

used in multilingual communities (especially as this applies to personal names), handwriting, relevant sociolinguistic issues, etc. (Only a few issues need to be raised here: most linguistic changes are not deliberate as is suggested on p. xi; none of the examples of English noun plurals in *-en* given on p. xii is in fact an *-en* plural; etc.)

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*He can be more than satisfied with his achievement; it is a very good book of its type.*

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After his introduction, Rosen goes through the twenty-six letters of the English version of the Roman Alphabet in the established order, introducing discussion of diacritics (accents etc.) as appropriate. He acknowledges on p. xv that the alphabet exists in other forms – with more or fewer letters, non-English uses of diacritics, etc. – as used to write Latin itself and many other languages; but understandably he does not deal with all this complexity. Nor does he have much to say about non-

alphabetic scripts: syllabaries, logographies, etc. (He **does** discuss some especially interesting non-English scripts, such as Korean 'Hangul' on pp. 164-167.)

For each letter, Rosen examines:

(a) the origin of its upper- and lower-case forms in earlier scripts (essentially, in Phoenician and Greek) and their historical development within English;

(b) the pronunciation of the name of the letter (these names are seldom written out, of course; and some letters, notably Z, have different names in different countries);

(c) the 'pronunciation of the letter' (a linguist would treat the pronunciation/phonology as basic and the spelling as derived, and would thus phrase this differently), allowing for regional (accent) differences, distributional factors (different pronunciations – or non-pronunciations as in 'silent' letters – of the same letter in different positions in a word), different pronunciations in different individual words or groups of words

(for example in Germanic versus Latinate words), etc.;

(d) international variation in spelling *per se* (American versus British, etc.);

(e) changes in respect of (b), (c) and (d) over the centuries;

(f) sundry other (often fascinating) facts and quirks involving each letter (some of which will surprise many readers).

The book ends with an entertaining ‘Oulipo Olympics’ and a bibliography.

The book is openly ‘popular’ in style. It does not deal in linguistic complexities, and it handles some issues in ways which might appear naïve or even misleading to the linguistically-trained. For example, on pp. 3-4 Rosen deals with the ‘morphophonological’ issue of the word-forms *a* versus *an* (*a grape, an apple*) as if this issue concerned the **letter** A (or the phonemes which it represents) as such (it does not). And he does not use established linguistic conventions (italics for forms, single quotes for meanings, etc.). In context,

however, the effects of such decisions are minor. The more committed reader will move on to more advanced material which will remedy these ‘faults’.

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*Like many non-linguists working in this area, Rosen is sometimes too forthright in his judgements on controversial issues.*

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There is no continuous general account of the origin and development of the alphabet, the ordering of the letters, associated basic points of pure or applied linguistic theory, etc. Such matters are instead dealt with under specific letters which are salient (initial, etc.) in relevant words (thus spelling reform proposals are discussed in several places but notably on pp. 231-250 under P ‘for Pitman’; the Greek Alphabet is discussed on pp. 113-119 under G) or which prompt such discussion in other ways (thus phoneme theory is introduced on pp. 9-20 under A, ‘phonics’ as a technique

for teaching reading on pp. 32-40 under B, language- and script-invention on pp. 163-172 under K, etc.). Given that most such general issues, by definition, potentially involve **all** the letters, I am not at all convinced that this policy was the best, and some of the specific decisions appear contrived.

Like many non-linguists working in this area, Rosen is sometimes too forthright in his judgements on controversial issues. For example, when discussing the Voynich Manuscript (pp. 172-174) he is too ready to dismiss the text as a hoax. And in a radio interview soon after publication he appeared to endorse what is surely only a legend attributing to the hero Cadmus the introduction of alphabetical spelling to Greece. However, the overall effect of such features is again minor. The book can be recommended strongly to anyone with an interest in the English language.

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**Language Myths, Mysteries and Magic by Karen Stollznow. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2014, pp. vii + 269. ISBN 978-1-137-40484-8.**

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### Mark Newbrook

Hot on the tail of the first ever linguistically-informed skeptical survey work on the non-mainstream (‘fringe’) claims and theories about language and languages presented by non-linguists<sup>1</sup> – my own *Strange Linguistics* (Munich, 2013) – comes the second such book! Karen Stollznow is a young Australian scholar long resident in the United States; she is a professional linguist and a committed skeptic, and indeed a talented skeptical linguist. Following earlier book-length works on other matters of skeptical interest and a long series of articles and reviews (mainly on language matters) in the skeptical press, Stollznow has now brought out this invaluable and fascinating treatise

on her most focal area of intellectual concern.

When Stollznow completed her MS my book had not yet appeared, and it is probably fair to say that her work would have included more references to mine and also some additional points had *Strange Linguistics* been available as a source – just as *Strange Linguistics* would certainly have drawn very extensively on Stollznow’s book had **that** appeared first.<sup>2</sup> But, as things are, she naturally refers to my earlier work as appropriate, and indeed to that of other members of our select band of skeptical linguists, notably Sarah Thomason.

Stollznow’s book omits some of my own main broad topic-areas such as

non-mainstream philology and historical epigraphics; but it also ranges more widely than mine in the sense that it deals not only with ‘linguistic nuttury’ *per se* but also with various other less blatantly non-mainstream aspects of ‘weird language’ such as curses, linguistic taboo and body language. On the general topic-areas which we do both discuss, Stollznow generally deals with rather fewer examples but often treats them in more detail and includes numerous specific points and references which I had to exclude for reasons of space – or of which, in some cases, I was hitherto unaware (her diligence as a researcher is outstanding).

After a short Introduction, the book consists of five ‘parts’, each consisting of five chapters on related issues; each part has a bibliography. At the end there is a brief ‘Conclusion’ and an index (no general bibliography; but none is really needed). The five parts are entitled: ‘Magical Language’ (curses, prediction, taboo, etc.), ‘Possessed Language’ (glossolalia, channelling, etc.), ‘Hidden Language’ (voices of the dead, reversals, codes embedded in literature, etc.), ‘Non-human Language’ (animals, aliens, etc.) and ‘Therapeutic Language’ (graphology, sound therapies, Neurolinguistic Programming, etc.).

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*As a skeptic, Stollznow is evidently and openly a ‘modernist’.*

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Stollznow’s tone is ‘lighter’ than mine, and in places her style is more informal and less technical (without any concomitant loss of intellectual authority). And she makes more reference to her personal experiences (for instance in ‘bibliomancy’; see p. 32). In consequence of all this, the book may well be found more ‘user-friendly’ by non-linguists.

On pp 260-261, Stollznow notes that, although all adults know at least one language, the authority to speak about language which many ordinary non-linguists therefore claim is in fact largely illusory. Most of the mental processes involved in using and understanding language are not available to the conscious minds of native speakers untutored in linguistics, and much of what non-linguists believe about language (‘folk-linguistics’) is confused or simply wrong; as she states, in many cases the beliefs in question are grounded in biases and desires rather than in fact. This is highly relevant here, since it is, in fact, possible to regard non-mainstream amateur theories such as those which Stollznow and I discuss in our books as extreme manifestations of folk-linguistics which the unwary can often

be induced to accept as valid. (These points could arguably have been made earlier in the book to good effect.) In the same passage, Stollznow points out (in a manner reminiscent of the late Carl Sagan speaking about the universe as a whole) that language is a truly wonderful phenomenon replete with interest, and that one does not have to adopt misguided ideas about its supposedly mysterious and magical properties to be fascinated by it – or committed to using it effectively and creatively, and to celebrating it. One can also avoid the befuddlement and the anxieties which often accompany ‘fringe’ beliefs, in this domain as in others.

Stollznow’s intention here is not to educate her readers in the technicalities of linguistics; but she does occasionally correct a popular error or a naively folk-linguistic interpretation, as on p. 108 where she reformulates a statement by fellow skeptic Joe Nickell (while endorsing the gist of his comment).

As a skeptic, Stollznow is evidently and openly a ‘modernist’, confident that some accounts of the world will prove preferable to others, and concerned with coherence and plausibility. She displays concern for those taken in by nonsense or fraud, and attacks inadequately supported empirical claims, poor logic, inconsistency, etc. Indeed, in her choice of words Stollznow is sometimes less reserved than I in proclaiming highly skeptical, negative verdicts on dubious claims – and she allows herself, here and there, a touch of wry humour.

In this book, Stollznow is overtly neutral with respect to linguistic theory – reasonably, given that there is as little overlap as there is between the topics discussed by the non-mainstream writers with whom she is dealing here and those on which professional linguists disagree among themselves. For example: on p. 173, in dealing with the issue of ‘wild’ children and language, she does not commit herself either to a ‘nativist’ or

to a ‘non-nativist’ account of language acquisition, and she acknowledges the possibility of explanations of various kinds for the observed phenomena. Both nativist and non-nativist linguists would find themselves able to agree, in general terms, with her skeptical comments at this point.

Many of the belief-systems which Stollznow surveys here, like their counterparts in other disciplines, are characterised by conflict between, on the one hand, rejection of mainstream science (and of mainstream linguistics, in the relatively few cases where a non-mainstream writer on language actually knows something of the subject) and, on the other, the desire to invoke science or at least the vocabulary of science. This point is well illustrated (p. 130) by Frank Sumption’s pseudo-scientific invoking of the term *quantum* with, as he admits, no understanding of its technical scientific meaning.

Occasionally Stollznow’s negative verdicts might possibly be judged **excessively** forthright. On p. 177 her assessment of Irene Pepperberg’s claims regarding the verbal intelligence of African grey parrots might appear unduly dismissive; and I find myself unable to agree fully with her verdict (p. 111) on John Dee’s ‘angelic’ language Enochian (or indeed with her ‘strong’ interpretation of the main skeptical source on this matter). But such cases are few, and in any event Stollznow is fully entitled to her own views on such issues; total agreement between different skeptical commentators is not to be expected.

In dealing with animals on pp. 173-177 and with aliens on pp. 204-205, it is arguable that Stollznow could have made more overt reference to the ‘design features’ of human language (which some linguists believe are **exclusive** to human language). These considerations are rather technical and it is not easy to discuss them in a manner accessible to non-specialists. On the other hand, she appears more accepting than are some linguists/skeptics of some claims regarding the learning of aspects of

human language by primates and other intelligent animals, and in the specific context of this debate the design features are potentially crucial.

Some linguists would analyse American English as having 38 or 40 phonemes rather than 36 (p. 196); but this is in part a matter of competing theoretical stances.

Now and again Stollznow (who is herself something of a polymath) makes an arguably unwarranted assumption as to readers' knowledge, for instance on p. 15 where she refers

to the fantasy writer H.P. Lovecraft by name alone.

I would obviously recommend Stollznow's book unreservedly to anyone with an interest in either language or skepticism – and I would definitely use the book alongside my own as an essential textbook for any relevant course.

#### Notes

1. One must, however, note the existence of *La Linguistique Fantastique*, eds. Sylvain Auroux, Jean-Claude Chevalier, Nicole  
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Jacques-Chaquin and Christiane Marchello-Nizia (Paris, 1985); but this is a collection of articles (all fascinating to those who read French!) rather than a unitary work.

2. Stollznow might also have made use of some of my more recent articles and reviews, for instance on 'Bigfoot Talk'.

## Fair challenge? Psychic claimants and mendacious subjects

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### Mark Newbrook

In November the online *New York Times Magazine* reported that at the TAM meeting in Las Vegas last July, Fei Wang, a 32-year-old Chinese salesman, attempted JREF's Million Dollar Challenge (*note 1*). Wang claims the ability to transmit from his right hand a mysterious force or energy, unhindered by wood, metal, plastic or cardboard and experienced by others up to a yard away as heat, pressure, magnetism, etc.

On this occasion, at least, Wang was deemed by the judges to have failed to demonstrate this ability. The first two of nine blindfold subjects, successively placing their hands inside a cardboard box, reported themselves unable to feel anything when Wang tried (from behind a curtain) to exert his power. With the 'pass mark' set at eight out of nine, this constituted sufficient evidence to disallow his claim.

Obviously it would be of interest to a careful skeptic to know more about the design of the test. For example, did Wang 'transmit' his energy some but not all of the time when a subject's hands were in the box, thus furnishing the possibility of a degree of 'control'? Given the results of this specific experiment, this particular issue might not be judged too important here. But others might be. In particular, there is the possibility that, for whatever

reason, some of the subjects might not have co-operated. There was nothing to prevent subjects (maybe especially those with skeptical axes to grind) from pretending **not** to be experiencing anything even if they actually were, and thus causing Wang to appear to fail the test when in fact he was succeeding and really had paranormal abilities which at least some subjects could detect.

In other words, it seems that this test was in this respect biased against the supposed psychic. But it is obviously crucial for skeptics to be scrupulously honest and fair to claimants in carrying out such tests. It is not entirely clear how this problem could be **solved**; but in the absence of a solution Wang should not have agreed to the protocol.

The same point arose on an earlier occasion, when I was a member of Victorian Skeptics in Melbourne. We were approached by a locally-based individual called Jason Worthing, who claimed (among many other things) that that he could psychically send a specific impression to a subject two rooms away and out of sight; he would choose from an array of stylised pictures, and the subjects would be confronted with the same array and asked to state which picture Worthing was sending to their minds on each occasion. We agreed to test this claim,

with ourselves as subjects. As we were planning the test, I raised with Worthing this very point: what would prevent us from lying? He declared that his psychic powers were so great that he could force a distant subject to respond in accordance with the impression he had transmitted. It was, he claimed, impossible to lie and say that one had received no impression (or indeed that one had received some different impression). In fact he required us all to sign indemnities covering him in case we suffered as a result of receiving a 'psychic blast' from his powerful mind. We duly conducted the test. Somewhat ironically but predictably, Worthing's 'hits' were in fact at chance levels of frequency or lower. His own excuses for failure were wholly unpersuasive, and by making such extreme claims he had forfeited the right to invoke the explanation which Wang might reasonably have adduced in the recent case.

#### Note

1. [http://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/magazine/the-unbelievable-skepticism-of-the-amazing-randi.html?\\_r=1&referrer](http://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/magazine/the-unbelievable-skepticism-of-the-amazing-randi.html?_r=1&referrer)

#### Acknowledgment

I thank Michael Heap for his invaluable observations on this matter.

# ANNOUNCEMENTS

## THE EUROPEAN SCENE

**A**SKE is a member of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations. It has an Internet Forum on which you can read comments on sceptical issues from contributors and post your own. To access this, log on to the ECSO website (below).

### Contact details for ECSO are:

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

Tel.: +49 6154/695021

Fax: +49 6154/695022

Website: <http://www.ecso.org/>

Via the website you can access articles, news, and commentary on a range of topics of interest to sceptics.

### Alternative medicine in Belgium

Belgian's new Minister of Health Dr Maggie De Block has said in an interview that she can only support evidence-based treatments. If there is scientific evidence for an alternative treatment, she will be the first to recognize it and even to refund it. Extracts from the interview (in Dutch) can be read at:

[http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20141102\\_01354274](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20141102_01354274)

### Post of EU's Chief Scientific Advisor has 'expired'

Professor Anne Glover has been ousted from her post as EU's Chief Scientific Advisor (CSA) to which she was appointed in 2012 (note 1). Professor Glover has made clear her agreement with scientific evidence supporting the benefits and safety of genetically modified crops. This follows a letter by a number of 'green' organisations to

Jean-Claude Juncker, then President-elect of the European Commission, in July 2014 (note 2). According to the letter's signatories:

*To the media, the current CSA presented one-sided, partial opinions in the debate on the use of genetically modified organisms in agriculture, repeatedly claiming that there was a scientific consensus about their safety<sup>3</sup> whereas this claim is contradicted by an international statement of scientists (currently 297 signatories) saying that it 'misrepresents the currently available scientific evidence and the broad diversity of opinion among scientists on this issue'.*

*We hope that you as the incoming Commission President will decide not to nominate a chief scientific adviser and that instead the Commission will take its advice from a variety of independent, multi-disciplinary sources, with a focus on the public interest.*

Scientists have expressed dismay at Mr. Juncker's decision, including Sir Paul Nurse, of the Royal Society:

*Scientific advice must be central to EU policy making, otherwise you run the risk of having important decisions*

*being unduly influenced by those with mixed motives.*

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-30037531>

2. <http://corporateeurope.org/power-lobbies/2014/07/position-chief-scientific-advisor-president-european-commission>

### Slovak Society of Skeptics

Marián Kukan of the Slovak Society of Skeptics, has alerted us to their online journal *The Skeptik*. While the full-length papers are in Slovakian, there are good English summaries. The journal is very strong on medical topics. Well worth a regular visit.

<http://www.spolocnostskeptikov.sk/en/issue/4>

### The 16th European Skeptics Congress

See the announcement on the inside cover of this issue and keep an eye on the congress website:

<http://euroscepticscon.org/>

For comments and suggestions use the European Skeptics Congress Facebook page at:

<https://www.facebook.com/skeptics.eu>

## OF INTEREST

### SCEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

#### Sense About Science

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/>

Amongst the many activities of this sterling organisation it's good to see

that their 'Ask for Evidence' campaign is 'alive and kicking':

<http://www.askforevidence.org/index>

There is also a new project entitled 'Can we get the energy we need without the emissions we don't want?':

[http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/can-we-get-the-energy-we-need-](http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/can-we-get-the-energy-we-need-without-the-emissions-we-dont-want.html)

[without-the-emissions-we-dont-want.html](http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/can-we-get-the-energy-we-need-without-the-emissions-we-dont-want.html)

#### James Randi

See the *New York Times* article 'The Unbelievable Skepticism of the Amazing Randi' at:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/magazine/the-unbelievable-skepticism-of-the-amazing-randi.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/magazine/the-unbelievable-skepticism-of-the-amazing-randi.html?_r=1)



## Retraction Watch

'After more than four years, 2,000 posts, and incredible responses from the scientific community, we are thrilled to announce that The Center For Scientific Integrity, a not-for-profit corporation we've established, has been awarded a \$400,000 grant from the MacArthur Foundation to expand the work of Retraction Watch.' At: <http://retractionwatch.com/2014/12/15/retraction-watch-growing-thanks-400000-grant-macarthur-foundation/>

## 'Internet memes'

'The menace of memes: how pictures can paint a thousand lies.' Article in the *Spectator* showing images of the House of Commons with many or few MPs in attendance and describing their misuse.

<http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/isabel-hardman/2014/11/the-menace-of-memes-how-pictures-can-paint-a-thousand-lies/>

## 'Deniers are not Skeptics'

'Public discussion of scientific topics such as global warming is confused by misuse of the term "skeptic".' See the public statement on this matter by Fellows of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry on 6.12.14 at:

[http://www.csicop.org/news/show/deniers\\_are\\_not\\_skeptics](http://www.csicop.org/news/show/deniers_are_not_skeptics)

Also see a blog (in German) by Amardeo Sarma of the German Skeptics (GWUP) on this statement and climate change generally at:

<http://blog.gwup.net/2014/12/12/global-e-erwarming-leugner-sind-keine-skeptiker/>

Likewise a piece by Lawrence Krauss at:

[http://www.slate.com/blogs/future\\_tense/2014/12/16/climate\\_change\\_deniers\\_are\\_not\\_skeptics.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2014/12/16/climate_change_deniers_are_not_skeptics.html)

## What is skepticism for?

Controversies such as 'the war on drugs' should be among the issues that skeptics should be applying their critical thinking. Shane Greenup has recently posted a message to this effect on the European Skeptics Congress Facebook page at:

<https://www.facebook.com/skeptics.eu>

He also alerts us to his 'rant' on this theme at 'Shane's Soapbox':

<http://shanegreenup.com/2014/04/what-is-skepticism-for-the-case-for-skeptic-activism-against-the-war-on-drugs/>

## SCIENTIFIC TOPICS

### Memory of water

'The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is potentially wading into hot water when it hosts a meeting set up by Nobelist Luc Montagnier to discuss his controversial research on what has become known as "the memory of water". The afternoon at the agency's Paris headquarters will feature talks about the virologist's widely ridiculed idea that water can carry information via an electromagnetic imprint from DNA and other molecules. Full story:

<http://news.sciencemag.org/people-events/2014/09/unesco-host-meeting-controversial-memory-water-research>

## MEDICINE (GENERAL)

### The Nightingale Collaboration

Please visit the Nightingale Collaboration website for an update on the numerous successful complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and other regulators. There is a running summary of complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and their outcomes at:

[http://www.nightingale-collaboration.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=158&Itemid=17](http://www.nightingale-collaboration.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=158&Itemid=17)

If you do not already do so, why not sign up for free delivery of their electronic newsletter? Recent topics include a review of claims for **chiropractic**; concerns about the Professional Standards Authority's recognition of the **Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council** ('OfQuack'), and a review of a report by NHS Lanarkshire of a range of therapeutic practices, one outcome being that they will stop making

referrals to the **Glasgow Homeopathic Hospital** after next March!

<http://www.nightingale-collaboration.org/>

### Evidence-based practice

As well as the Nightingale Collaboration, there is plenty on recent developments on the Sense About Science and Ask for Evidence website plus the 'All Trials Registered' campaign at:

<http://www.alltrials.net/news/patients-and-doctors-campaign-welcomes-plans-to-tackle-unjust-and-dangerous-problem-of-hidden-clinical-trials/>

### Medical Innovations Bill

'Oasis of Hope, a Mexican hospital that offers unproven and controversial treatments for advanced cancers, has been drumming up business in the UK through a series of public seminars.' See the article below entitled 'Expect clinics offering "integrative therapy" for cancer if Saatchi bill passes'.

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2014/dec/03/clinics-integrative-therapy-cancer-saatchi-medical-innovations-bill>

### 'Health news hype'

'If a study found a correlation between eating biscuits and cancer but a subsequent news story reported that biscuits cause cancer, could the university press release be to blame?':

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2014/dec/10/science-health-news-hype-press-releases-universities>

### Organic food

The French chef Raymond Blanc has condemned organic food for being 'elitist' and 'expensive'.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/raymond-blanc-forget-organic-food-mcdonalds-is-the-way-forward-9646545.html>

### Alternative medicine practitioner charged

Robert Oldham Young is an American entrepreneur who has a ranch in Valley Center, California and is the author of alternative medicine books promoting an alkaline diet (see *Wikipedia* article). He has now been accused of 'selling an

intravenous treatment to terminally ill people, knowing that it wouldn't be effective' and has been ordered to stand trial on six charges, including treating the sick without a certificate and grand theft. Deputy District Attorney Gina Darvas alleged that Young 'went beyond advocating dietary changes and used intravenous "treatments" on people he housed at his avocado ranch and health centre', a number of whom died. See:

<http://fox5sandiego.com/2014/11/05/100408/>

### Veterinary homeopathy

The British Association of Homeopathic Veterinary Surgeons is claiming that a dog with bone cancer was cured by homeopathic treatment.

<http://www.bahvs.com/successful-case/>

## PSYCHIATRY AND PSYCHOLOGY

### Mental health services for veterans

Professor Sir Simon Wessely, who heads the country's main military health research unit at King's College London, has said that veterans encounter a 'bewildering' range of charities, NHS and social care organisations and that it was crucial they knew which could offer an effective service. Good services would have to meet a range of criteria and show that they provided mental health assessments carried out by professionals who understand the issues that can affect former military personnel.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/campaigns/homeless-veterans/homeless-veterans-campaign-expert-calls-for-military-mental-health-quality-mark-9926735.html>

### Free will

Chemistry makes us what we are. 'But does that mean we do or don't have free will? And what happens if our chemistry changes – through illness, injury or the side effects of drugs?' At: <http://jondanzig.blogspot.co.uk/2014/11/we-are-chemistry.html>

### Dissociative identity disorder

An article and a video on the controversial diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder (formerly known as 'multiple personality disorder') at:

[http://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/11/24/us/debate-persists-over-diagnosing-mental-health-disorders-long-after-sybil.html?\\_r=0&referrer](http://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/11/24/us/debate-persists-over-diagnosing-mental-health-disorders-long-after-sybil.html?_r=0&referrer)

### Hypnosis

Another reporting of someone being 'hypnotised' and robbed. But in the opinion of the police, the thief 'was actually using an elaborate, well-practised "parlour trick"'.

<http://home.bt.com/news/uk-news/theft-victim-duped-by-party-trick-113639482383571>

## RELIGION

### Science and religion

'God in the lab: The science of religious belief'

A panel discussion chaired by Stephen Law with Glen Carrigan, Chris French and Jonathan Lanman.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3IrcACy4-oY>

### Non-religious weddings

'Thousands of couples planning non-religious humanist weddings (*outside of a register office*) could have their hopes dashed after a row between the Tories and Liberal Democrats saw Number 10 veto proposals to give such marriages legal status.... It has been reported that 'Lynton Crosby, David Cameron's election strategist, sees it as a "fringe" issue that could muddy the Government's key messages ahead of May's general election'. See:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/humanist-weddings-could-stay-illegal-because-of-coalition-row-between-tories-and-liberal-democrats-9924521.html>

### An unusual religious conversion

A Catholic priest has reportedly awakened from coma after 17 months and has converted to Islam

<http://worldnewsdailyreport.com/catholic-priest-wakes-up-from-coma-after-17-months-converts-to-islam/>

### Claims of satanic abuse in Scotland

Chris French has written a piece in the *Guardian*, commenting on the recent claims of that satanic abuse is rife in Scotland:

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/nov/18/satanic-child-abuse-false-memories-scotland>

### UKIP and creationism

Several UK Independence Party MEPs have close links to an extreme right-wing group in the US, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). ALEC is already known for its strong campaigning in favour of oil producers and the teaching of creationism in schools.

<http://tompride.wordpress.com/2014/11/22/ukips-shocking-links-to-ban-on-teaching-of-evolution-in-schools/>

At least three UKIP MEPs – Janice Atkinson, Bill Etheridge and Roger Helmer – have very close links to ALEC. Here you can see an official letter from ALEC which includes the three MEPs' signatures at the bottom:

<http://www.alec.org/wp-content/uploads/Letter-to-Google.pdf>

## RESEARCH

From Chris French,

I have been contacted by Stephen Mitchell, a second year Radio Production student at the University of Westminster. He is working on an audio feature about sleep paralysis (SP) and I have already done an interview for him on this subject. He is keen to include some first-hand accounts of SP. If you are a sufferer living in or near London and are willing to give up a little time to be interviewed by Stephen for his project, please contact him directly:

[stephen.mitchell@my.westminster.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.mitchell@my.westminster.ac.uk)

## FREEDOM

### Sally Morgan

Earlier this year Mark Tilbrook of the Greater Manchester Skeptics Society prepared a leaflet 'Look After Yourself' which listed indications that might distinguish a person with

## MORE UNUSUAL CLAIMS

### Halloween special

'Why are we obsessed with ghosts, werewolves, witches and voices from the other side?' Deborah Hyde and Chris French provide answers to these questions in a podcast for the *Guardian Science Weekly* entitled 'Halloween special: the science of scary apparitions'.

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/audiod/2014/oct/20/halloween-special-science-scary-apparitions-podcast>

### The Loch Ness Monster (again)

'The English plot to kidnap Nessie. Papers from 1933 show how Scots feared the monster would be taken to London and its carcass put on display.'

[http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2808926/Revealed-English-plot-kidnap-Nessie-Papers-1933-Scots-feared-monster-taken-London-carcass-display.html?ITO=1490&ns\\_mchannel=rss&ns\\_campaign=1490](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2808926/Revealed-English-plot-kidnap-Nessie-Papers-1933-Scots-feared-monster-taken-London-carcass-display.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490)

supernatural powers from someone who just appears to have them. He began distributing these to people entering theatres at which mediums were appearing, amongst them the celebrity 'psychic' Sally Morgan. On the three occasions he did this he was accosted by Sally Morgan's team and subjected to verbal abuse and intimidation. On the third occasion, on April 30<sup>th</sup>, he had a hidden camera. Thanks to Mark we are all now witness to what kind of people her husband John Morgan (then her personal manager) and her son-in-law Daren Wiltshire (then her tour manager) are (see links below). On camera Mark is verbally abused and sworn at, and repeatedly threatened with violence (including being told that he would be 'lifted' and would 'disappear'). His assailants also made vile homophobic remarks. Mark was then contacted by Sally Morgan's legal team with the threat of legal proceedings for libel and

harassment. It seems that this action has now been dropped. In October Sally Morgan announced that she had sacked her husband and son-in-law from their respective positions and the pair would now be having nothing more to do with the business. See:

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2014/oct/07/campaign-psychic-sally-morgan>

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/letter-on-behalf-of-mark-tilbrook-to-sally-morgan/>

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/projects/psychic-awareness-month/>

[http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2014/10/1/watch-psychic-sally-morgans-husband-spouts-homophobic-abuse-at-show-skeptic/#at\\_pco=smlwn-1.0&at\\_si=543a98072f3b6cf2&at\\_ab=per-2&at\\_pos=0&at\\_tot=1](http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2014/10/1/watch-psychic-sally-morgans-husband-spouts-homophobic-abuse-at-show-skeptic/#at_pco=smlwn-1.0&at_si=543a98072f3b6cf2&at_ab=per-2&at_pos=0&at_tot=1)

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/psychic-sally-morgan-sacks-husband-after-film-catches-antigay-attack-on-critic-9792274.html>

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/speakers.php>

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/events/goldsmiths>

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in Room LGO1 in the Professor Stuart Hall Building (formerly the New Academic Building), Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. Talks are open to staff, students and members of the public. Attendance is free and there is no need to book.

You are strongly recommended to register (at no cost) with the APRU's 'Psychology of the Paranormal' email list to ensure that you are informed of any changes to the programme. Visit:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/email-network/>

<http://www.twitter.com/ChrisCFrench>  
or

<http://feeds.feedburner.com/apru>

For videos of some of the previous talks visit:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/lectures/>

### SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Choose the venue you are looking for to access the upcoming events.

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub/>

<https://twitter.com/SITP?refsrc=email>

### CONWAY HALL LECTURES LONDON

For details of talks and symposia on philosophical, ethical and skeptical topics keep up to date with the programme:

<http://conwayhall.org.uk/talks-lectures>

### CENTRE FOR INQUIRY UK

For details of talks and symposia keep up to date with the programme at:

<http://centreforinquiry.org.uk/>

### LONDON FORTEAN SOCIETY

The society meets on the last Thursday of each month, except July and December, at The Bell, 50 Middlesex Street, London E1 7EX.

<http://forteanlondon.blogspot.co.uk/>

### QUAD

Market Place, Cathedral Quarter,  
Derby DE1 3AS

'Quad is a cinema, gallery, café bar and workshop that anyone can use.' Keep an eye on their website for meetings of skeptical interest.

<http://www.derbyquad.co.uk/whats-on-listing/event>

## LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWER

### **The finger in the water**

The answer is that the weight recorded on the scale will go up. It's all to do with Archimedes Principle (or Law of Buoyancy) and Newton's third Law. When you place your finger in the water there will be an upward force on the finger (which equals the weight of water displaced). For every action

there is an equal and opposite reaction, so your finger will exert an equivalent force which is transferred to the glass and the scale.

This answer is rather technical. Can anyone provide an answer that uses more logical reasoning or everyday experience? My own attempt at this is as follows:

It is easier to lift someone when they are in a swimming pool – i.e. partially immersed in water. Their loss in weight should show up as a gain in weight somewhere else. In the puzzle you are partially immersed in the glass of water. You weigh less, so your loss in weight must be offset by the gain in weight of the glass and its contents.

## THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY (ASKE)

- ASKE is committed to the application of rational, objective and scientific methods to the investigation and understanding of ideas, claims, and practices, especially those of an extraordinary and paranormal nature.
- ASKE is committed to challenging the uncritical promotion of beliefs and claims which are unsupported or contradicted by existing objective and scientific knowledge.
- ASKE opposes the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of science for purposes which deceive the public.
- ASKE supports the objective evaluation of all medical or psychological techniques offered to the public and opposes the uncritical promotion of techniques which are unsupported or contradicted by existing scientific knowledge.
- ASKE supports all efforts to promote the public awareness of the rational and scientific understanding of extraordinary and paranormal claims.
- ASKE is committed to a rational understanding of the reasons and motives which underlie the promotion and acceptance of irrational and paranormal claims and beliefs.
- ASKE accepts the rights of individuals to choose for themselves their beliefs about the world.

### **About ASKE**

Founded in 1997, ASKE is an association of people from all walks of life who wish to promote rational thinking and enquiry, particularly concerning unusual phenomena, and who are opposed to the proliferation and misuse of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. This is our quarterly magazine and newsletter. To find out more, visit our website (address below).

If you share our ideas and concerns why not join ASKE for just £10 a year? You can subscribe on our website, write to us at the address below, or email:

[m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk)

email: [aske1@talktalk.net](mailto:aske1@talktalk.net);

website: <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>>