

National Capital Area

# SKEPTICAL EYE

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## Miracles and Magic of the God-Men of India

By Gary Stone

Thanks to the close contact that NCAS maintains with CSICOP, we tumbled to a serendipitous opportunity to invite Indian researcher B. Premanand to speak to us on February 11. He was wrapping up a cross-country lecture tour on the unethical uses of magic by the so-called "God-Men of India." When we sent out the flyers announcing his appearance, what we thought we were offering was an interesting lecture. What we got was a fascinating show!

There, at the front of the cozy meeting room of the Tysons Pimmit Regional Library, was a grey-bearded Indian gentleman of 62, dressed in a simple suit of coarsely woven cloth. The 40 people in the room strained slightly to catch his soft, accented voice. The founder of the 100,000-strong Indian Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal was modestly relating the story of his life, and how he came to oppose the many God-Men who exploit the masses and corrupt state officials to become rich and entrenched in their traditional niche in Indian culture and society.

As a very young boy, Premanand quite naturally believed in miracles and even studied with gurus and yogis, who had much to interest an inquiring mind. But the boy found too many inconsistencies. Why was it that the teachers who claimed to cure sickness by "elevating the sexual powers" were themselves sick? One said he "wanted to be sick, to work out past Karma." Why did a guru famous for pouring "unlimited" amounts of water from a palm-sized bottle have to have water brought to his ashram when the well ran dry? And why do men who can make miracles keep asking for money instead of creating it themselves? By the age of 12, Premanand had become a self-made skeptic.

By his twenties, he had demystified fire, by holding a torch to his arm. Unexpectedly, he repeated the experiment for us, showing that it takes about three seconds before skin begins to burn from a lightly soaked kerosene torch burning at 800 degrees; no spiritual elevation is required! (He smiled as he watched us cautiously eye the sprinklers in the

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## Swiss's Magic "Evening With an Honest Liar"

By Julie Stern

"I'm the wizard. I'm the conjurer. I am sorcerer, sage, psychic, seer. I can move mountains. I can change the flow of mighty oceans, alter the course of the planets. But first, a card trick."

So began Jamy Ian Swiss's January 27 show, "An Evening with an Honest Liar," held at the University of Maryland at College Park. Swiss, an NCAS board member and founding member, professional magician, and self-described "skeptical activist," dazzled a sold-out house of NCAS members, university students, and others with the broad repertoire of his magic comedy nightclub act, which featured tricks involving cards, coins, coat hangers, and handkerchiefs. He even played the harmonica.

Among Swiss's first tricks was a demonstration of "genuine mindreading" by volunteers from the audience. He then went on to conduct a "test" of ESP. As he told a member of the audience, chosen to play the researcher and "skeptical in residence" for this trick, "Scientists have been searching for ESP for over 130 years, and so far all they've been able to bump into is a lot of ESD: expert sensory

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## National Capital Area Skeptics

### Statement of Purpose

NCAS encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and disseminates factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public.

NCAS does not reject claims on *a priori* grounds, antecedent to inquiry, but rather examines them objectively and carefully.

Signed articles represent the opinions of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of NCAS. Unsigned articles are the responsibility of the NCAS Newsletter Committee. Only articles clearly marked as such represent positions of the NCAS Board of Directors.

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## Blinks of the Skeptical Eye

☞ The current (Spring 1989) issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer* features an analysis of Bigfoot footprints co-authored by NCAS board member Walter Rowe. The same issue also contains a letter on health quackery by NCAS member Stephen Brinich of Arlington.

☞ The Winter 1989 issue of *SI* included a letter from member Jeffrey Mueller of Finksburg, MD, who also had a letter published in the December 19 issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, in response to the magazine's "Twilight Zone in Washington" article.

☞ This summer, the Smithsonian Resident Associate Program will offer a six-week course entitled "Science and Pseudoscience: A Critical Inquiry," taught by NCAS President Chip Denman. Next fall, Denman will teach a similar course at the University of Maryland as part of the university's General Honors Program.

☞ This June, comedy-magicians and hip-skeptics Penn and Teller are bringing their hit Broadway stage show to the National Theater in Washington. Penn and Teller's performance was the highlight of the CSICOP conference in Pasadena two years ago. Look for special NCAS events this summer during their stay in town, including a NCAS night at the theater with discounted tickets to members and a post-show discussion. (See the box on page 11.)

☞ Hats off to Channel 26 for its broadcast of NOVA on March 17. The show covered Easter Island and presented a serious look at the people who used to live there and how and why they built the huge stone faces there. Unfortunately, 26 won't be re-broadcasting this show for at least another eight months. If you'd like to borrow a videotaped copy, contact Demetrios Tsipitsis at (703) 931-7717.

☞ CSICOP Fellow James ("The Amazing") Randi was in the DC area on April 4, when he spoke to an almost packed house at the University of Maryland physics auditorium. Randi told the university audience, "You too can be fooled, and you don't have to be stupid...to be fooled. They [paranormals] want you to go back into the caves. I want to go on to the stars. I have made my choice. I invite you to join me." Randi will host a June 7 syndicated television special, "Exploring Psychic Powers Live," which will feature a \$100,000 psychic challenge as well as magicians Penn and Teller. Check your local tv listings for the time and station. ☐

### CSICOP Coming to DC

As announced in the previous issue of the *Skeptical Eye*, the next CSICOP Annual Conference will be held here in the Capital area. One year from now, March 28-April 2, 1990, NCAS members will have an opportunity to meet speakers, CSICOP Fellows, and other critical thinkers from around the world. The meeting will be held in Crystal City, Virginia, at the Hyatt Regency, convenient to National Airport and Metro. As we all know, Washington in the spring is an attractive place for tourists, so this conference promises to be well attended. NCAS members have a special responsibility to help make this conference the best that it can be.

Included in this issue is a survey form from CSICOP. Please take a moment and let CSICOP know what kind of programs, speakers, and entertainment you are most interested in. Your prompt response is imperative—CSICOP's Executive Council will be meeting in just a few weeks to review proposals. As local hosts, the opinions of NCAS members will carry particular weight.

NCAS volunteers will also be able to assist behind the scenes. In the coming months we will be calling for members to work at the conference in return for a reduced registration fee. Stay tuned.

## CSICOP Fellow Carl Sagan Visits Washington

By Neil L. Inglis

No, he didn't tell us we were all made of *starstuff*. Nor did he use the phrase "*billions and billions* of stars." (Although he did tell us the Earth was 4.6 *billion* years old.) Yet Carl Sagan's whimsical and pragmatic sides were both on display at the single public session of the International Cooperation Conference, sponsored by the Pasadena-based Planetary Society (of which Sagan is president) and the George Washington University Space Policy Institute, and held at GWU last December 8 and 9.

For example, asked Sagan, following a successful international manned mission to Mars, should an astronaut or a cosmonaut be the first to take that all-important first footstep onto the Martian surface? Sagan's view was that the American and the Soviet should have their ankles bound together with a stout length of rope and leap out into the ether arm in arm. As he put it, what a wonderful thing it would be "if the planet named after the god of war could help to increase the peacefulness of the inhabitants of Earth." Yet such an arrangement would hardly be fair, countered guest panelist Roger Bonnet, director of scientific programs at the European Space Agency. Wouldn't it be better to fasten together the ankles of a Soviet, an American, and a European, and have them all prance out of the spacecraft together in a grand gesture of transnational friendship? And if a long enough piece of rope were unforthcoming, Bonnet argued that the European should be allowed to jump out first. As I listened to all of this painful guff from my seat in the audience, it occurred to me that any European astronaut trying to preempt his colleagues in this way would probably end up with the nearest length of rope wrapped around his gullet!

*The Space Program, Past and Future*

All joking aside, Sagan began his keynote address with a sobering portrait of NASA's history. The launch of Sputnik and Gagarin's circuit of the globe, with all their attendant cold-war implications, had jolted U.S. policymakers into a frenzy of activity. While NASA's goal was "to land an American on the Moon by the end of the 1960s, and return him home safely," scientists had to take a back seat, and it is no accident that the very last man to step off the ladder on Apollo 17 was also the first scientist to have gone to the Moon. As Sagan commented, the mentality at that time seemed to have been "those folks at NASA have gone too far—they're sending up *scientists!*" Approval dates for such "recent" projects as Viking (1968) and Voyager (1972) stretch back to the Apollo era; deprived of coherent objectives since the Apollo program ended, NASA has been allowed to drift along like a piece of space junk.

Sagan and his colleagues have conceded the importance of justifying the space program in terms that politicians and the general public can appreciate. Ergo, no more chit-chat about Voyager plaques and interstellar flight. Sagan hammered this point home in his response to a spectator who lengthily expounded on the importance of colonizing the cosmos in order to ease population pressures at home: Sagan frostily advised his questioner that as we lack the requisite lift and carriage capabilities, not to

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## Astrology Debunked

By Herb Federhen

*Synopsis: NCAS board member Dr. Lee Rickard spoke recently about astrology.*

*He is against it.*

Astronomer Lee Rickard titled his recent talk "Trying to Think About Astrology" because, as he said, it's not an easy subject to think about: the more you try to think about it, the more contradictions you find, and the less you get out of it. A small but enthusiastic group heard Rickard speak at the Tysons Pimmit Library on April 2.

Rickard is uniquely qualified to speak on this topic, with a Ph.D. in astronomy and astrophysics from the University of Chicago, and experience teaching astronomy at Howard University. He has been forced to look into astrology by questions from people who assumed that astronomy and astrology are the same thing. Clearly, they are not: astronomy is a recognized scientific discipline, while astrology doesn't even have enough of a basis to be a decent pseudoscience.

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## President's Message TOP SCIENTISTS REVEAL: NUCLEAR FUSION IN BOTTLE OF WATER, POWERED BY CAR BATTERY!

By D. W. "Chip" Denman

You've seen this sort of thing in the tabloids before: an absolutely extraordinary claim, promising to revolutionize modern science. No results are published in the scientific journals, but a press announcement makes astonishing assertions, offering a simple, low-tech method for accomplishing a goal that has eluded the world's best researchers for decades. Virtually pollution-free energy produced from water, a couple of electrodes, and a car battery.

But this time the story is in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, and on the BBC. One of the "top scientists" is in fact the chair of his department at the University of Utah. The startling news is released at an official press conference held by the university. A handful of scientists at other institutions are vouching for the work, and full scientific papers are promised very soon.

Allegedly, take a tank of deuterium oxide (heavy water), dissolve a solution of lithium as an electrolyte, add two electrodes (one platinum and one palladium), apply electrical current from a simple battery—and Yow! Eight hours later, pairs of deuterium atoms fuse into helium, releasing heat energy in excess of the electrical energy applied. Or maybe the deuterium fuses with the lithium. Use the heat to make steam, turn a generator, and, hey, you solve the energy crisis. In a breach of scientific custom, the University of Utah and Professors Fleishman and Pons held a demonstration for the media without going through the usual peer-reviewed journals. To add confusion, Professors Jones and Palmer at Brigham Young University say that they have independently done just about the same thing.

And most of the scientific community remains skeptical.

As I write, this startling controversy of modern science is playing out in the

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## *Premanand: Indian God-Men, from p. 1*

low ceiling.) Next, he taught a volunteer from the front row how to eat fire. "Just close your mouth quickly," he said, placing a flaming disk of camphor on the young man's tongue. He also provided an explanation of fire walking, familiar to readers of *The Skeptical Inquirer*: Prepare the fire carefully to eliminate hot spots, keep your feet damp (or even muddy), and walk quickly!

Premanand recounted the many miracles performed over the ages by the God-Men to demonstrate their spiritual credentials. None required any elaborate apparatus. Most relied on slight-of-hand, simple chemical/mechanical effects, and the audience's naivete about basic physics and physiology. Magic, he explained, lies just beyond the familiarity of common daily experience.

Self-mutilation without bleeding is a common theme. The epidermal layers of the skin can be pierced by a needle without producing blood, and if enough surface area is involved, a thread through one layer of skin can carry up to 500 grams—three layers for up to 80 kilograms. For us, he pierced his own tongue with a sharp pointed metal rod. His face in anguish, he opened his mouth wide to reveal the bloodless impalement. The trick? Don't you remember those bent arrows you put over your head as a kid? In yet another demonstration, Premanand showed how a piece of paper soaked in clarified butter will burst into a bright and impressively spiritual flame when sprinkled covertly with potassium permanganate dust.

Glass eating came next. Much of it involves sleight of hand, palming the sharp shard for a more palatable sugar crystal. But Premanand claimed that anyone can actually eat glass. And so he did! With a hammer he carefully smashed a refrigerator bulb provided by NCAS's vice president, Randy Lockwood. Another volunteer examined the shards and placed a large one directly in Premanand's mouth. It was during the next several

minutes of thorough and noisy crunching that the technique was explained to us: Grind the glass into the tiniest of granules before swallowing with water. (At this point, some yogis surreptitiously spit the glass into the water.) Beginners were encouraged to eat a banana beforehand.

Premanand also explained that the Indian Rope Trick has fallen on hard times. In pre-electric India, the rope would rise of its own power up into the waning evening twilight, and a small boy would climb up it, only to disappear from view at the top. But there are few places left now where the harsh and persistent glare of artificial light would not reveal a second rope strung overhead between the two trees that traditionally flanked the performance.

Premanand's own debunking activities have ranged from physical to judicial confrontation of charlatans. He offers a \$10,000 prize to anyone who can demonstrate psychic powers under monitored conditions. On one occasion, his "mission skeptical" team abducted a God-Man's hidden assistant during a performance and put one of their own under the stage. The magical cornucopia (with a hole in its bottom) no longer produced the various fruits wished for by members of the audience: an apple appeared when a banana was commanded, then a pomegranate for a pear. Finally, the skeptic emerged from beneath the cornucopia, and pandemonium broke out.

Recently, Premanand filed a case against a God-Man who ingratiated himself with the daughter of a prominent national political figure by creating a gold necklace for her out of thin air. One way or another, that act is in violation of India's very strict Gold Control Act, though this technique probably was not envisioned by the nation's lawmakers. In fact, India's constitution has a section specifically admonishing its citizens to "cultivate a scientific temperament!"

We were privileged to have Premanand as the first skeptic from a foreign country to address our group. □

## *Sagan, from p. 3*

mention habitable planets within hailing distance of Earth; for now, at least, the human race had better sort out its problems at home.

High on this new "geocentric" agenda for space is "Mission to Planet Earth," an international project now in the pipeline that will consist of four polar-orbiting platforms (two from the United States, one from the European Space Agency, and one from Japan) together with geosynchronous satellites, designed to monitor climatic and environmental trends on Earth, the depletion of Earth's ozone layer, and the "Greenhouse Effect" on our home planet.

While the greenhouse effect on Venus may not have been caused by "little Venusians going into the automobile industry," as Sagan jested, the cauldron conditions prevailing there can serve as an object lesson for the improvident inhabitants of planet Earth. According to Sagan, it is easy to see why it should be relevant to Earth to study other planets like Venus, "even if we didn't have one ounce of adventuresome spirit in us." Less easy for Sagan et al. to appreciate is that doom-mongering won't grab much public interest until the greenhouse effect and

ozone-layer depletion have actually begun to bite—even though ordinary citizens will show their gratitude for the other more tangible benefits of space research, including satellite telephony and television, advance warning of floods and other climatic upheavals, and so on.

To Mars or the Moon?

Much to my relief, the symposium panelists didn't leave out the topic of planetary exploration altogether, and Sagan and guest speaker Harlan Smith of the University of Texas, Austin, argued over the competing claims of manned missions to the Moon and Mars. Sagan's view was that Mars is inherently much more interesting than the Moon, thanks to its enigmatic landforms, polar caps, and signs of dynamic change in bygone ages. He criticized the United States' decision to put all its launch eggs in the shuttle basket, claiming that it's left NASA with a pastiche of unrelated projects, a group of causes waiting their turn in line for a launch, rather than a clear set of objectives. Without overarching goals to capture mankind's imagination, basic earthbound research is doomed to wither when so many other pressing social problems are at hand.

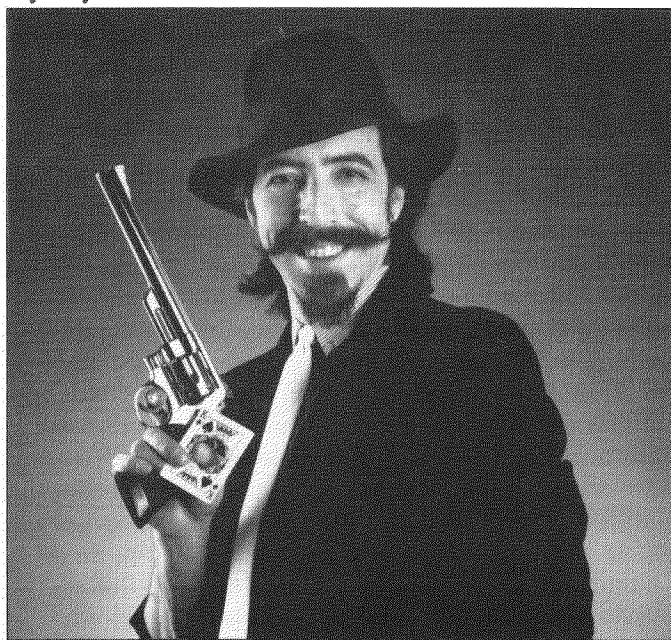
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## Swiss: An Honest Liar Performs, from p. 1

deception." He used this opportunity to tell us how scientists get in trouble when they try to study so-called psychics in the lab: "They're not trained to study things that cheat—ever hear of a sneaky amoeba?" The volunteer then selected from the audience several experimental subjects, who were instructed to pick a card from a standard deck he held. Swiss, changing the names of the subjects "to protect the innocent," dubbed them Shirley MacLaine, Uri Geller, Doug Henning, and Tammy Fay Baker, a maneuver that gave him a chance to poke fun at these New Age superstars. Magically, Swiss was able to call out the names of the cards chosen by each subject.

One of Swiss's most impressive and enjoyable performances let the entire audience, with the exception of a single volunteer, in on the method behind the magic. While everyone else could see exactly how Swiss was performing a trick involving several large wire coat hangers, the volunteer, deprived of her sense of sight, was truly mystified. As she descended from the stage, a look of wonder and confusion still on her face, Swiss cautioned the audience, "Don't tell it to her, sell it to her." Swiss noted that skeptics, in particular, often have a passion for knowing how things work, but this demonstration proved that sometimes it is more fun to be kept in the dark and thus preserve a sense of mystery.



Jamy Ian Swiss

Swiss then used a different type of magic to present a very different kind of illusion, by weaving a series of handkerchief knot tricks into a poignant and personal story of one man's illusions about love, marriage, promises, and dreams.

Following his magic act, Swiss returned to the stage to discuss his thoughts on magic, magicians, the paranormal, and skepticism. He reviewed the long history of magicians' interest in the study of parapsychology, and explained why scientists exploring parapsychological phenomena need magicians in the lab when they are actually conducting their experiments. He

described how magic works, emphasizing that the difference between a magician's act or a mentalist's routine and the work of a psychic reader or a spoonbender like Uri Geller is primarily one of settings and expectations: in a theatrical setting, one expects to be fooled.

He also addressed the difference in ethical constructs between those who use magic to entertain and those who claim to have paranormal powers.

Any true skeptic loves a mystery. Jamy showed us quite a few in his performance, and spoke about many others. As he mentioned in his discussion, a skeptic is someone who doesn't want to invent answers to the world's mysteries, but to discover the true answers—primarily through science, but also through art and literature. He closed by quoting H.L. Mencken: "'The most costly of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably not true'—and that's why I'm a skeptical activist."

Swiss has indicated his willingness to repeat this show for NCAS in the future—an occasion those who missed his January performance should look forward to. □

## Clouded Vision: Frequency Moderation

By Jon Slobins

Why does anyone buy *TV Guide* these days? For the astrology column, of course! This past January, the magazine placed all of its features at the front, instead of dividing them in half with the television listings. Perhaps as an incentive for readers to turn to the back of the book, *TV Guide* added an astrology column on its last page, summing up the entire week in one paragraph per sign.

Many professional astrologers say that daily newspaper astrology columns are worthless because they don't take into account the exact date and time of birth for each person. (Obviously, their comments are not motivated by a desire to sell individualized horoscopes; remember, these are professionals!)

Thus, *TV Guide* may be on to something. Perhaps its editors have reasoned that the less often a horoscope is read, the more effective the prediction.

But if a weekly horoscope is more effective than a daily one, then a monthly horoscope must be even more valuable. Perhaps we could prevail upon *People* or *Us* magazine to print a column summing up the entire month in one paragraph per sign.

Even more effective would be a once-a-year horoscope. It could be printed in *Time's* Person of the Year issue, or *Sports Illustrated's* annual swimsuit edition. Or, better yet, the president could read it as part of his State of the Union address. (This would have been especially appropriate during the previous administration.)

But why stop there? If less is more, then horoscopes should be limited to magazines doing their decennial reviews. Better yet, they could be printed only as an appendix for each new edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

For the ultimate astrological precision, let's eliminate horoscopes entirely. After all, as all NCAS members realize, *nothing* is as effective as astrology! □

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# HELP PLAN CSICOP's 1990 CONFERENCE

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CSICOP's next North American Conference will be held in Washington D.C. on the weekend of March 30 to April 1, 1990. It will be jointly hosted by the National Capital Area Skeptics.

The planning committee has decided to call for suggestions on speakers, topics, themes, and events for the conference. We would greatly appreciate your suggestions. Simply send your ideas to: Dr. Lee Nisbet, Special Projects Director, CSICOP, Box 229, Buffalo, NY 14215 By June 5

Preliminary suggested themes include:

- 1.) What Is Skepticism? Its Theory and Methodology
- 2.) ESP: The current status of psychical research and where do we go from here?
- 3.) Astronomy and the Paranormal - Failure of the public to realize what astronomy is and how it is impinged upon by pseudoscience.
- 4.) Animal Rights and Scientific Research - Anti-abuse or Anti-science? Is the animal rights movement the best organized, best financed, most dangerous anti-science movement yet. Should animals be used in experimentation and to what extent and with what restrictions?

YOUR SUGGESTED THEME/S:

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YOUR SUGGESTED TOPIC/S:

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YOUR SUGGESTED SPEAKER/S: (Please don't contact the speakers yourself.) You may nominate yourself provided you send us your curricular vita and suggested topic.

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YOUR IDEA/S FOR SPECIAL FUNCTIONS: Magic Show/Demonstration/Visit to Smithsonian/  
Something Different?

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## UFOs at the NASM

By Guy W. Moore

In the forty-odd year history of humanity's "UFO experience," not a single physical artifact nor a single photographic representation "will stand up to rigorous scrutiny," NCAS board member Philip Klass told an overflow crowd at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum Einstein Planetarium on a cold, rainy Saturday morning in March.

The only evidence, Klass told the assembly during the course of his talk, "UFOs—Are They Really Out There?" rests on sightings. This evidence, however, is far from conclusive. To illustrate his point, he noted two reports (one on March 3, 1968, and the other on June 5, 1969) that seemingly had all the prerequisites for hard evidence short of a verifiable photograph or piece of a flying saucer: multiple witnesses, both credible and experienced; effects upon humans and animals; and radar "confirmation." He then methodically showed prosaic explanations for these sightings despite the seeming evidence of extra-terrestrial travel.

Because announcements of Klass's talk were carried in the "Weekend" section of the *Washington Post* as well as in such newsletters as the National Capital Astronomers' *Star Dust*, the audience—a full house of more than 300 people—was a good cross section of the general public.

The first questioner, who identified himself as having been a student with Allen Hynek in the late 1960s, quoted the UFO researcher as having said that while many sightings were "bogus" there were also many that were "inexplicable." Klass agreed that in a conversation he had with Hynek (now deceased) in 1984, Hynek had said to him that there was a "hard core of cases that can't be explained in prosaic terms." Klass suggested that Hynek select a small number of such cases and take them to the National Academy of Sciences for an opinion, but Hynek never did.

Another questioner observed that in the late 1960s, UFOs "were the rage" and asked Klass to bring the audience up to date on UFO sightings. Klass observed that sightings tend to be cyclic and that they are often stimulated by the news media. The most recent cycle involves alleged abductions, symbolized by books such as Whitley Strieber's *Communion* or Budd Hopkins's *Intruders*.

Another member of the audience related that he had been to the National Archives' fourth floor, where he had been shown many UFO photographs. He asked if these photos were authentic. Klass said that he had not seen the pictures in question, but pointed out that the *National Enquirer* was offering \$1 million for an authentic UFO photo, so if the photos were authentic somebody was missing a good bet to become a millionaire.

To the question whether the U.S. government is still pursuing UFO leads, Klass suggested that anyone wanting to report a UFO sighting should call the Department of Defense or the nearest Air Force base and see how much interest that aroused.

Another question concerned Barry Goldwater's reference to UFO artifacts at Wright Patterson Air Force Base; Klass pointed out that, in this case, Goldwater's memory was evidently faulty.

Yet another questioner referred to the "9,000 pages" of UFO documents that the CIA had refused to release. Klass responded by telling of Peter Gersten's Freedom of Information request to the CIA, and how 3,000 pages were released and only 57 denied.

Further questions concerned the Fortean Society, the Eduard Meier photographs (which were rejected by MUFON, the Mutual UFO Network), and the Condon Report, which Klass said he thought was "mismanaged" but with whose conclusion he agreed.

Klass ended by declaring that the public is free to believe or disbelieve in UFOs, but that people look to science to provide answers. In his many years as a UFO investigator, that is what he has tried to do. □

## Sagan, from p. 4

A manned mission to Mars, Sagan argued, is one such overarching objective, with its capacity to cement international relations and to play a moderating role between the United States and the Soviet Union. Besides, the difficulties involved in the Mars launch (timeframes, distance, supplies) will goad international exertions and stretch our capabilities. More to the point, the Soviets would go without us, and other nations would follow them, so the United States should decide now whether or not it wants to get on board. While the objectives of a Mars mission could be met far more cheaply with robots than with people, in Sagan's opinion political and historical considerations dictate that humans must be brought along.

Conversely, to justify developing a Moon base in advance of the onward march to Mars, Harlan Smith argued that only through a well-established space infrastructure will we be able to guarantee the regular flow of supplies the Marsnauts will need if they are to avoid being marooned far from home. Smith further pointed out that a Moon base will provide a solid and atmosphereless environment ideal for astronomical observation. In addition, Smith argued that we need to "cut our teeth on the Moon" if we are to journey to Mars successfully.

Needless to say, many of the ideas discussed at the International Cooperation Conference presuppose an unprecedented degree of collaboration between the United States and the Soviet Union, those two nations that, according to Sagan, have "boobytrapped our planet." How Sagan and his colleagues deal with the challenges of U.S./USSR space cooperation is one thing; how the Bush administration deals with them is another. Effusive support for the space program is a cheap way for presidential candidates to sound idealistic, but I'm sure symposium attendees would have liked to pin down the new administration to some specifics. Alas, guest-of-honor Dan Quayle pulled out of the public symposium at the last minute; apparently the transition office was not yet ready to adopt a public posture on space-related issues.

## No Support for "Star Wars"

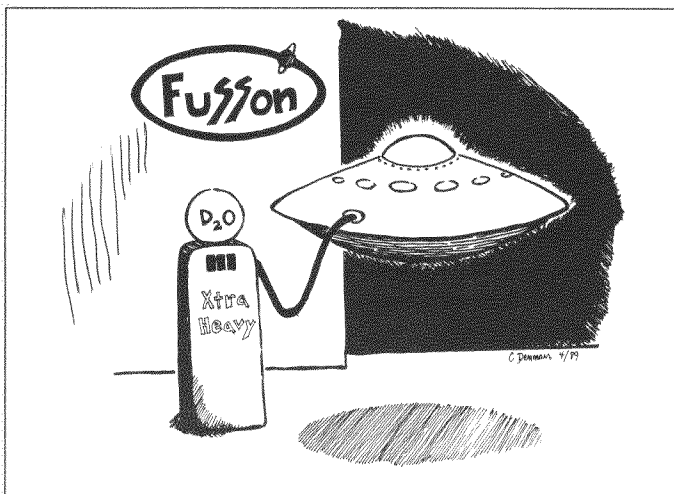
If conservatives are looking for support for that other "space program," the Strategic Defense Initiative, they won't find it from Sagan, who reported that he regards the initial formulation of SDI as "a tragic, ruinously expensive mistake." While the symposium provided a forum for Sagan's well-known pacifist

(Continued on page 8.)

## President's Message, from p. 3

media, the journals of science, and computer bulletin boards everywhere. As the drama unfolds, we have a chance to see science at work, dealing with a claim *almost* as fantastic as UFOs. Perhaps by the time the *Skeptical Eye* reaches you, the story will have been refuted, consigned to the same dustheap as last year's "water with a memory" debunked by James Randi et al. Or perhaps, like "warm superconductors," the developers of this "cold fusion" will be in line for the Nobel Prize.

As a proponent of skeptical thinking, I am often confronted by advocates of all manner of beliefs who take science to task for ignoring revolutionary ideas. The persecution of Galileo, the denial of the extraterrestrial origin of meteors, and the



putative hoax of the duckbill platypus are all cited as examples of a conservative scientific community too ready to dismiss anything that does not fit into the established world view. Surely ESP, Bigfoot, crystal power—take your pick—is the *next* revolution waiting to happen.

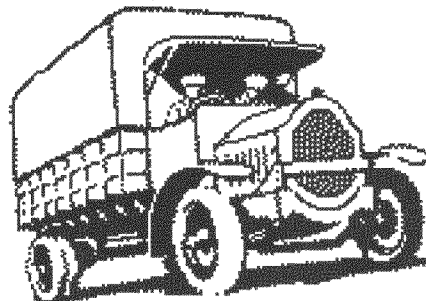
The strength of the scientific method is that it is self-correcting. Mistakes are made, observations are twisted to fit theories, but eventually the process does tend to get it right. After all, the Copernican revolution was eventually won.

Looking at the fusion controversy, we see that the scientific community is *not* suppressing ideas. The computer networks—the modern equivalent of a party line—are filled with discussion, both pro and con. A sampling of conversations between

scientists is peppered with phrases such as, "I have to remain skeptical, but I sure hope this stuff is real." Scientists apparently are champing at the bit to see the details published so that attempts at replication can be made. Messages include speculation on the possible physics, the impossible physics, the economic repercussions, and the scientific background of the principal characters. Whatever the eventual outcome, healthy, open-minded skepticism looks like it will win this round. □

## Sagan, from p. 8

sympathies, he is by no means the fanciful flower child of popular imagination. He urged the Soviets to open up their nation to full two-way telephone traffic, and reiterated President Lyndon Johnson's observation that military reconnaissance satellites justify by themselves the entire cost of the space program, not least because they cool the whims of hotheads and allow for prudent judgments and treaty verification. It would appear that while Carl Sagan's head may be in the stars, his feet are firmly planted on planet Earth. And that the same hard-headed approach enjoys considerable currency among international space scientists today. □



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## The Skeptics' Bookshelf

*The Day That Lightning Chased the Housewife... and Other Mysteries of Science*, edited by Julia Leigh and David Savold. Madison Books, Lanham, Maryland, 1988. 227 pages, \$17.98.

Reviewed by Guy W. Moore

Thanks to two editors at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, these 51 articles, originally appearing in the late, lamented *Science* 80-86, were resuscitated and reissued in book form.

The book is divided into several parts, covering the mind, biology, health, the Earth, the universe, mathematics and physics, and unexplained natural phenomena. Posed as answers to questions—"Why Do We Dream?" "What Was That Noise?"—these articles avoid the cop-out of an appeal to some supernatural or mystical force. If no clear answer was known to science at the time the article was written, that is where the particular author left the question.

The tone of this book is light without trivializing the subject matter. Its scope is surprisingly broad, and it succeeds in conveying the excitement and the challenge of the unknown.

For NCAS members this book is an excellent gift for friends who are being solicited to subscribe to the irresponsible Time-Life series, *Mysteries of the Unknown*. Here, in clear, crisp language, are discussions of mysteries as varied as ball lightning (the title piece), the "missing mass" puzzle, and the reversals of the Earth's magnetic field. And here our friends will find that each question "is an invitation to ponder a mystery in nature" with an open mind.

*UFO Abductions: A Dangerous Game*, by Philip J. Klass.

Prometheus Books, Buffalo, New York, 1988. 200 pages, \$18.95

Reviewed by Guy W. Moore

This book should be made required reading for the thousands who purchased Budd Hopkins's *Intruders* or Whitley Strieber's *Communion*, those sensationalistic best-sellers that alleged an alien conspiracy to abduct and interfere with humans.

"Imagine that your young son was abducted from your home by a foreign terrorist group, such as Hezbollah, and was returned with a leg wound whose scar he would bear forever," writes Klass, an NCAS board member and CSICOP fellow. "And the same day you learned that a neighbor's 13-year-old

daughter also had been abducted by the same terrorist group and impregnated with the sperm from one of its members. Further, you also learned that still another neighbor, a pregnant woman, also had been abducted one night by the same terrorist group and that her unborn child had been removed from her womb without her permission. And suppose that you discovered that similar incidents, involving the same... group, were occurring around the nation. What would you do?

"Surely you would report the incidents to local law enforcement officials, and more probably—because they occurred nationwide—you would report them to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. government agency responsible for bringing kidnappers to justice. These are serious crimes and if a foreign terrorist group were responsible the resources of the nation would be mobilized promptly to assure the safety of our citizens."

Yet when Klass asked Hopkins if he had reported his alleged UFO abductions to the FBI, Hopkins replied: "That is the most absurd thing I've ever heard in my life." When Klass persisted, Hopkins dismissed the question as "patently absurd" and refused to discuss the idea.

Surely, to any mind not already mesmerized by UFO-abduction fantasies, this exchange is illuminating. It makes evident the sole difference between the kidnappings reported by the "victims" of UFOs and earthly terrorists—reality. In the world of UFO abductions it would be dangerous to call upon the FBI because anyone who knowingly reports a false kidnapping is liable to a \$10,000 fine and up to five years in prison.

Another benefit, almost incidental to reading *A Dangerous Game*, is the way in which it becomes abundantly clear that no effort has been made to subject any of the abduction proponents' claims to scrutiny—although they have made every effort to increase the number of claims. The Hopkins/Strieber approach is always the same: Here is the claim; you disprove it. This method—the appeal ad ignoratiam, as logicians put it, or the appeal to ignorance—allows Hopkins and Strieber to skip proving their claims by positive evidence because they can say that no opponent has disproved them. Obviously, this is at variance with normal scientific—or criminal justice—procedure.

Klass is concerned about possible psychological scars that may be suffered by those who believe—or are led to believe—that they have been abducted by some alien force and experi-

(Continued on page 10.)

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### *The Skeptics' Bookshelf, from p. 9*

mented upon. He advises that they get themselves into the hands of a psychotherapist, not an abductionist.

In sorting out the most dangerous of current illusions, one might place psychic surgery and faith healing at the top of the list, astrology near the bottom. With its potential for real harm, UFO abductions would have to fall just below the top. Thus, persons genuinely concerned about "missing time" or other aspects of supposed UFO abductions can benefit greatly from this book. Klass offers a real cure for these kidnappings, as he cannot be beaten at letting the Hopkins/Strieber mentality expose itself.

*Bare-Faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard*, Russell Miller, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1987. 390 pp.

*Reviewed by Walter F. Rowe*

Science fiction writer Norman Spinrad once published a sword-and-sorcery epic founded on an interesting conceit. Suppose Adolf Hitler had left Germany after World War I and immigrated to the United States, where he became a popular pulp science fiction writer. Hitler's *Lords of the Swastika* (filled with his paranoid rantings and power fantasies) becomes a science fiction best-seller and wins the coveted Hugo award. Now, suppose Spinrad turned his plot around. Let's have a pulp science fiction writer set out to found a worldwide movement dedicated to building a race of supermen. We'll even give him a name: let's call him Lafayette Ronald Hubbard.

British journalist Russell Miller has produced the definitive biography of L. Ron Hubbard, the creator of Dianetics and the Church of Scientology. What emerges in his account of Hubbard's life is a story of remarkable duplicity. Even in an age in which the fraudulent and second-rate are exalted, L. Ron Hubbard is an astonishing phenomenon: never has a man with so little in the way of positive accomplishments gone so far. Miller, in writing this book, had access to a mass of Hubbard's personal papers, obtained from ex-Scientologist Gerry Armstrong. He is thus able to juxtapose the "official" version of the saint's life with the real facts. Each chapter begins with the canonical version, which Miller then proceeds to eviscerate with a detailed narrative of that period of L. Ron's life.

Several examples of the new information that this biography provides will suffice. The Church of Scientology has proudly proclaimed Hubbard's valiant service in the U.S. Navy in the South Pacific, where it claims Hubbard commanded a combat vessel, was severely wounded in action, and received numerous decorations for valor. At the end of World War II, L. Ron was a blind and crippled derelict in a Navy hospital. Miller reveals that Hubbard, during his war service, never got closer to the South Pacific than San Diego. After a brief tenure as the captain of a patrol boat, the Navy relieved Hubbard of his command because he had stupidly involved the United States in an international incident with Mexico. The remainder of his service consisted of dodging combat and malingering in hospital. According to Miller, Hubbard, ever the patriot, later attempted to defraud the U. S. government through false disability claims.

An official biography credits Hubbard with breaking up a Satanic cult in California shortly after his discharge from the Navy. Miller's research reveals that L. Ron was an active and

avid participant in Satanic rites at the home of his friend and business associate, Jack Parsons. Parsons was a member of Ordo Templi Orientis, the cult founded by Aleister Crowley. Parsons was a close friend of Crowley's and, in his correspondence with Crowley, mentioned his and L. Ron's abortive attempt to create the Moonchild—the Satanic Anti-Christ. Perhaps the official biography is correct in its claim that Hubbard broke up this Satanic cult—if by breaking up one means running off with and bigamously marrying Parson's mistress and attempting to defraud Parsons in the bargain! □

*Have you recently read a good (or not so good) "skeptical" book? Would you like to review it for the Skeptical Eye? If so, please contact Julie Stern at 2214 Tulip Drive, Falls Church, VA 22046.*

#### **CORRECTION**

No, NCAS's treasurer, Grace Denman, is not psychic! Because of a typographical error, her report of NCAS's 1988 expenses appeared as "1989 Expenses" in the last issue of this publication.

### *Rickard's Astrology, from p. 3*

Noting that astrology has been thoroughly debunked by such historical figures as Lucretius and St. Thomas Aquinas, as well as by many contemporary scientists, Rickard reviewed the three main objections to astrology that have been raised over the years:

■ **Philosophical:** Astrology presupposes that our destinies are determined by the stars and can be read from them. This implies predestination and denies the concept of free will, which is inherent not only in the Judeo-Christian religion but also in most of the world's major philosophies.

■ **Empirical:** Many carefully controlled studies have compared astrological predictions with events as they actually happened, but no positive correlation has ever been found. Even in cases of twins separated at birth, the subsequent similarities in their lives have been shown to be due to genetic effects rather than to the coincidence of their birth signs.

■ **Physical:** The well-known fact that the precession of the earth's axis has caused the constellations to change their apparent position in the sky is recognized by some astrologers but not by others. This shift, which should have a profound effect on astrological predictions, instead has no noticeable effect—all predictions are equally poor.

A more serious objection to astrology is the lack of any known physical mechanism by which the stars could affect our lives. The two known long-range forces, electromagnetism and gravity, are both too weak to have appreciable influence. Rickard noted that the attending obstetrician exerts more of a gravitational pull on a newborn baby than do all the stars and planets combined. Indeed, the car in which the mother is driven to the hospital has even more of a gravitational effect than the obstetrician. Perhaps the National Science Foundation should fund a study to determine whether lifetime success and happiness can be correlated by prenatal transportation via Ford, Chevrolet, or Chrysler!

*(Continued on page 11.)*

## *Rickard's Astrology, from p. 10*

Why, then, do so many basically intelligent people continue to believe in astrology, even to the point of scheduling their lives according to their astrological signs? Rickard suggested several possible reasons:

- A need for romance in an otherwise dull and uneventful life.
- Therapy: the need for a friendly person to talk to and help in making decisions.
- The fact that science, which should provide a much better basis for understanding the world around us than astrology, is often so obscure as to be incomprehensible.

As skeptics, said Rickard, we should concentrate our efforts on working to overcome the last of these three reasons. We have found that science works quite well in explaining the things that we observe, and are surprised that others don't feel the same way. Unfortunately, as physical science (for example) has moved from the basics of gravity and electromagnetism to black holes, quantum chromodynamics, and superconductivity, it has become more complicated and less accessible to the average person. The easy part is over, and science is now "looking for patterns in the noise," noted Rickard—a situation, he pointed out, not too different from the classic definition of paranoia. But skeptics can help by pointing out the rational, scientific explanations for various unusual events, and by aiding others in understanding these events. Explaining, rather than decrying, stated Rickard, is the key to the successful promotion of skepticism.

Now, let's see: the sun is in Taurus (the bull, of course), and the moon is descending in the House of Chan, which means...absolutely nothing! □

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## *Ye Olde New Age Shoppe*

*By Demetrios Tsipsis*

If you happen to be in Georgetown and have a couple of extra hours on your hands, I recommend that you visit a relatively new shop selling some very old objects—Crystals, located on M Street at 31st. It is easy to spot, especially at night, because of the large blue neon sign in the window depicting a rock formation.

Upon entering Crystals, I was greeted by a woman artfully arranging stones in a glass centerpiece. I told her I had back pains for the longest time, that I went to a chiropractor but, having no luck there, decided to take the advice of a friend who had been through the same thing and was only able to stop the pain when he meditated while holding a crystal. She showed me a piece of amethyst and said that it should help. I told her I felt bothered by the color, so she showed me a different crystal, but said that I would have to meditate harder with that one, or maybe buy two.

The first section of the store has a lot of baskets holding crystals all lined up like the nail rack at Hechinger's. Each little basket has a file card on it that tells what the crystal is and what it is used for, such as healing, trances, sex, and so forth. Another case contains little pewter figurines, each accented by a piece of quartz arranged as the wizard's magic staff, the unicorn's horn, or the dragon's eye.

The store also has a rack of greeting cards with pictures of crystals on them. Each has a cheap rhinestone glued to it, and inside sayings like "My love for you is crystal clear."

The part of the store that makes Crystals actually worth a visit is the extensive book section. Here are numerous titles, divided into sections such as astrology, alchemy, philosophy, Egyptology, healing, and "magick." One section contained nothing but books on Atlantis, describing where it was located, who the inhabitants were, the language they spoke, and why it disappeared.

As I was leaving, I noticed the shopkeeper was playing with a silver ball that made a very pleasant, melodious jingle when she rolled it around in the palm of her hand. It was so appealing that I was almost ready to buy it, but reconsidered when I found the price was \$80! That there is a profit to be made in the New Age is one thing that is crystal clear. □

### *Penn & Teller Special Notice*

Comic magicians and outspoken skeptics Penn & Teller bring their hit Broadway show to the National Theater on June 1. Any day now, NCAS members will receive a special mailing offering discount tickets courtesy of Penn & Teller, plus the opportunity to engage in a question-and-answer session with them following the performance, only for NCAS members and their guests!

We anticipate a Sunday evening performance late in June, and orders *must be returned promptly* upon receipt of the form. Stay tuned to your mailbox for further details!

## NAPHTHA SPEAKS

"Naphtha," as regular readers of the *NCAS Skeptical Eye* know, is the spiritual channel guide to the cosmic unconscious of NCAS board member Jany Ian Swiss. The 39,000-year-old Naphtha has deigned to provide us with words of wisdom on a regular basis. Swiss encourages readers to submit questions for Naphtha on any issues of concern to them, whether they seek commentary on current news affairs, scientific, or skeptical issues, or personal advice. Swiss's sessions with Naphtha usually begin with the following incantation:

SWISS: Eenie Meenie, Chili Beenie, the spirits are about to speak.

NAPHTHA: Keep it down, you could wake the dead!

SWISS: Are they friendly spirits?

NAPHTHA: Friendly? Just listen!

S: Do you have any general thoughts about the New Age movement?

N: It seems to me that New Agers are overqualified for Old Age: they've all been overcome by senility.

S: Did you see the news stories several months ago about the reported sightings of "Chessie," the Chesapeake Bay monster?

N: More people have seen Elvis lately, for crying out loud!

S: Well then, what about Bigfoot?

N: Go tell your problems to Thom McAn—what am I, a shoe store?

S: No, I mean THE Bigfoot: Sasquatch, Yeti; you know the guy. Here's another question: Does a Bigfoot's—t in the woods?

N: I recently read the claim (seriously!) that the reason we can't find Bigfeet is that they live in the fourth dimension, so the answer to your question is "No, they do it there." So here's a tip for all you travellers: Hip boots are critical

equipment in the next dimension—and make sure you wipe your feet on the way back!

S: Perhaps you can explain the truly unexplainable: in light of the fact that the movie *Friday the 13th, Part 7* was released last winter, how can Jason continue to survive?

N: Apparently he's homeopathic—you gotta better answer? □

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NAPHTHA'S BIRTHDAY HOROSCOPE:  
(For all persons born under the sign of Gemini):  
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FROM THE CROWD. THIS IS BECAUSE  
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