

# The real mysteries of the world are in people's heads

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## THE TRUTH ABOUT URI GELLER

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by James Randi

Prometheus Books £11.50, 234pp paperback ISBN: 0 87975 199 0

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## THE FAITH HEALERS

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by James Randi

Prometheus Books £11.50, 318pp paperback ISBN: 0 87975 535 0

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## EXTRA-SENSORY DECEPTION

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by Henry Gordon

Prometheus Books £14.95, 227pp hardback ISBN: 0 87975 407 9

Walk into any reasonably large bookshop, or store which specialises in 'natural', 'New Age' or 'spiritual' products and you will find books on psychic powers, astrology, life beyond the grave, UFOs: The Great Unexplained. Almost all these books have three things in common: as documents they are poorly, often shabbily researched, relying heavily on speculation and hearsay; as far as their often sensationalist revelations and 'proofs' are concerned they promise much but deliver little or nothing; and they show little or no appreciation of scientific method.

A few of these books are written by con men and con women; others are written by people who, while not necessarily dishonest are more concerned with making money or a name for themselves than with solving mysteries; but most are written by men and women who are simply weak on facts and strong on imagination.

There is an old Japanese proverb: If you believe everything you read, best not read. Most of us have been taken in at some time or other; the present writer is not ashamed to admit that he once believed in Uri Geller, telepathy and ESP, and still half believes in UFOs. Why? Because I read dozens, hundreds of testimonials in the press and in books to the realities of spoon bending, mind out of time and other weird and wonderful phenomena.

But, unfortunately, there often is smoke without fire, rumours can be totally unfounded, and fifty million people can be wrong. If a stranger swore he'd just seen a ghost, you might believe him. But if he asked you to lend him £5 and promised that he'd

pay you back £10 on Friday, you probably wouldn't. Well at least you'd be sceptical. There is a growing literature that adopts this approach to the claims of mystics, faith-healers, spoon benders and so on. Probably the major publisher in this field is Prometheus Books.

Prometheus stole fire from the gods; Prometheus Books carry the flame to lighten the darkness created by psychic hoaxers. Founded by atheist philosopher Paul Kurtz, and now based in Buffalo, New York State, the company publishes an extensive list of sceptical, atheistic and humanistic books, and has a turnover of around \$4 million a year. Three Prometheus titles are discussed here.

Uri Geller bends spoons. But so can James Randi. Randi is a professional conjurer and claims that anything Geller

can do, he can do also. Randi's claims, unlike Geller's, can be tested any time, and he has chased the charismatic Israeli expatriate half way round the world proving them. In his book *The Truth About Uri Geller*, he explains methodically, scientifically the tricks and stunts Geller has performed, how on many occasions his methods involve little more than outright cheating and on others how his successes are proof of nothing more than the willingness of some people to believe whatever pseudo-scientific nonsense he and others like him espouse.

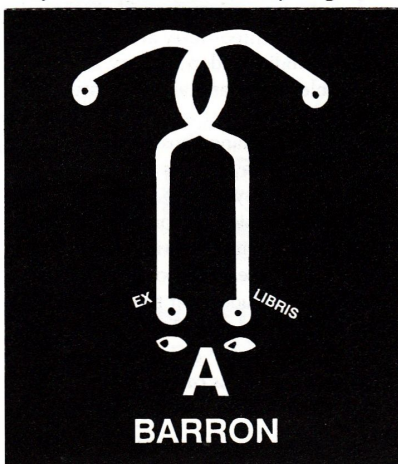
Geller is exposed as a master conjurer, a brilliant psychologist, an adept pencil reader and, at times a man whose ability to con the public is surpassed only by his ability to deceive himself.

Randi reveals how Geller failed to manifest any psychic powers on America's Johnny Carson Show, and explains why; how he hoodwinked the boys at SRI; how he uses accomplices and plants; and how even his failures are lauded as successes.

Recently Geller appeared on a (supposedly) sceptical TV programme in Britain, and was candid enough to admit that his 'psychic powers' were reluctant to manifest themselves in laboratory conditions. This is nothing new to those who are aware of the Psychic's Law of chutzpah:

The ability of a psychic to produce psychic phenomena under laboratory conditions is inversely proportional to the strength of the experimental controls and directly proportional to the willingness of the tester to believe in said powers.

*The Truth About Uri Geller* should be mandatory reading in all our schools; it is a



masterly exposé of one of man's ability to grow rich at the expense of publicly nurtured ignorance.

In *The Faith Healers*, Randi turns his attention to bigger fish than Geller, men who, unlike him, are consciously evil. It can be argued that Geller is primarily an entertainer. One top conjurer I met at a recent London Exhibition had nothing but praise for him, describing him as the best magician in the business, and doing a lot of good for the magic industry. No such defence can be adduced for the quacks, con men and outright crooks of the American faith healing circuit.

In this book, Randi outlines the origins of, and historical background to, faith healing. He examines both the claims and the hard evidence for the Lourdes 'miracles' then turns his attention to a number of individuals and their entourages who peddle their wares to the American public.

Believers can argue (and do) that these gentlemen really perform miracles. Testing someone's credibility on the spiritual plane is never easy, but in matters purely terrestrial there can be little doubt that a great deal of chiselling, fraud and blatantly criminal activity goes on.

Take "Reverend" Leroy Jenkins, for example. In his ministry's official journal he claimed to have endorsements from, among others, the late Liberace and former president Jimmy Carter. Both celebrities denied making any such endorsements. "Reverend" Jenkins was the proud owner of a cathedral. In 1978 it was dynamited; three weeks later fire destroyed his home. Did somebody have it in for him? Yes, his insurance company apparently, because he was arrested in April 1979 on two counts of conspiracy to commit arson and one of assault. He was later sentenced to twelve years imprisonment; undeterred, he continued preaching his ministry from behind bars.

Another faith healer, Peter Popoff was caught out by Randi and his team using a radio transmitter. At his 'crusades' he would send his wife into the audience to gather information about people: names, illnesses and other details. This information would then be relayed to Popoff, who would call out these people by name. Miraculous! According to Henry Gordon in *Extra Sensory Deception*, (of which more anon) Popoff's dirty tricks were exposed on The Johnny Carson show. Did this deter the true believers? Apparently not, according to Popoff there's no such thing as bad publicity.

Randi also exposed a ploy which is so simple one wonders why anyone would fall for it, but fall for it they did (and do), in droves. Early arrivals at a faith healer's crusade were told to sit in wheelchairs. Later, their names were called out and they were told to get up and walk. Which they

did. Hey Presto! Another miracle!

Another disturbing revelation of Randi's is that 'spiritual healing' was, and probably still is, available in Britain (on the National Health) to AIDS patients at two London hospitals. He quotes consultant psychiatrist Dr Farrukh Hashmi: "No healer has a cure for AIDS, and anyone who claims to is bogus. I am concerned that spiritual healers who build up false hopes are doing serious damage."

In the concluding chapters, Randi asks such questions as: "Where is the evidence?" Where indeed. "For something so popular, faith healing has a remarkably undocumented success rate."

He compares the frauds and charlatans he has exposed with the flim-flam of get-rich-quick hoaxers and real estate sharks, and draws the conclusion that these men are at best social parasites, at worst a menace to often desperate people who will clutch at any straw, often neglecting medical advice, in futile attempts to seek miraculous cures for conditions they would be better learning to come to terms with.

One final quote from Randi: "It is a common aspect of all religious groups that they simply do not wish to know the truth..." except, he adds, on their own terms.

So the believers continue to believe, and the charlatans continue to grow fat off their belief. Is this really parasitism, one is forced to ask, or some kind of weird symbiosis?

Like James Randi, the Canadian writer Henry Gordon is a conjurer as well as a psychic debunker. *Extra Sensory Deception* takes a wider look at the paranormal, including the origins of spiritualism, personality readings, psychic detectives and UFOs. If it makes a mistake, it is in the slightly mocking tone of the later chapters.

The major strengths of the book are, first, that it traces many modern myths back to their roots, and, secondly, it applies the test of empiricism. For all the tomes that have been written on flying saucers, no one has yet put the debris of a crashed craft on public display; for all the tales about mediums reading the future, not one will give you the winner of the three-thirty at Newmarket.

Like Randi, Gordon is angry at the way vulnerable people are taken in, parted from their money and, just as importantly, given bad, sometimes dangerous advice. Also like Randi, Gordon says he has nothing to prove: it is up to the psychics to prove their case. He has been waiting a long time for such proof, and presumes he will have to wait a long while yet. He deals too with the placebo effect and concludes that the real mysteries of this world are in people's heads.

*Prometheus Books can be difficult to find, but your local bookshop should be able to order them for you.*

#### Why not try your own magic?

Amaze children of all ages (even mine) with the help of Paul Daniels' *Adult Magic* book. Tricks with telepathy, magic numbers, cards, even one called "Gelleresque". Watch the way you impress people by the mysterious power of your predictions. Suddenly you will understand why it takes a magician to catch one. It's all so simple when you know how!

Published by Michael O'Mara Books £10.95, 160pp hardback ISBN: 0 948397 68 3.

## Freedom of information

All magic depends on secrecy, and Britain is probably the most obsessively secret nation on Earth. *The Freedom Of Information Handbook* aims to help you unlock some of these secrets by telling you how to find who's got what on you and where, as well as how to trace company directors, the membership of the local lodge and even where to find designs for nuclear warheads.

Written in a free though not irreverent style, the book is a mine of information for the private detective, the concerned citizen or anyone who needs to research history, government (national and local), finance or a zillion and one other subjects, for business, educational purposes, recreation or bureaucratic self-defence.

Its numerous lists include 90 laws which make it a criminal offence to disclose information prejudicial to the security of the state, including the Slaughterhouses Act, the Highways Act or the Fair Trading Act.

All major public reference libraries in the UK are listed, together with numerous journals, directories and yearbooks, some so abstruse one wonders who compiles them, how they are compiled and who (if anyone) uses them.

In 1988, Military Police investigated a break-in at the Farnborough Air Show. Under cover of darkness a spy had managed to get into one of the displays and examined and presumably photographed a sophisticated piece of equipment. However, had this man previously read this book, he would have known that a far less risky way to get the same information would have been to visit the British Library (Science Reference section) and inspect the patent!

**The Freedom Of Information Handbook** by David Northmore is published by Bloomsbury at £9.99 in paperback, 256pp ISBN: 0 7475 0570 5

### Alexander Barron

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