

Magicians on the Paranormal: An Essay with a Review of Three Books

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ABSTRACT: Conjurors have written books on the paranormal since the 1500s. A number of these books are listed and briefly discussed herein, including those of both skeptics and proponents. Lists of magicians on both sides of the psi controversy are provided. Although many people perceive conjurors to be skeptics and debunkers, some of the most prominent magicians in history have endorsed the reality of psychic phenomena. The reader is warned that conjurors' public statements asserting the reality of psi are sometimes difficult to evaluate. Some mentalists publicly claim psychic abilities but privately admit that they do not believe in them; others privately acknowledge their own psychic experiences. Three current books are fully reviewed: *ExtraSensory Deception* by Henry Gordon (1987), *Forbidden Knowledge* by Bob Couttie (1988), and *Secrets of the Supernatural* by Joe Nickell (with Fischer, 1988). The books by Gordon and Couttie contain serious errors and are of little value, but the work by Nickell is a worthwhile contribution, though only partially concerned with psi.

Magicians have been involved with paranormal controversies for centuries, and their participation has been far more complex and multifaceted than the usual stereotype of magicians as skeptical debunkers. In this paper, I review three fairly recent skeptical books by magicians, but before these are discussed, some remarks are in order concerning conjurors' involvement with psi and psi research because there has been little useful discussion of the topic in the parapsychology literature.² It is important to understand this background because several magicians have had an impact on scientists' and the general public's perception of psychical research, and some have played a major role in the modern-day skeptical movement (Hansen, 1992). Conjurors have been consulted regarding government

¹ I would like to thank Marcello Truzzi, Eberhard Bauer, Clark Evans, and the staff of Hickory Corner Library for help with reference material. I also wish to thank Arthur Hastings, James G. Matlock, and Ben Robinson for comments and especially Max Maven for insightful suggestions. Special thanks is due to William V. Rauscher for help and access to his extensive library on magic and psychical research; without his assistance this paper would not have been possible.

² Hansen (1985, 1990a) has provided brief reviews, and Marcello Truzzi (1983) has a more extensive work in progress. Earlier accounts of magicians' involvement in psychical research can be found in Bayless (1972, pp. 208-228; 1975), Christopher (1970, 1975), Cox (1972, 1984), Fodor (1933, pp. 211-214), Gaddis (1967a), Price (1932a, 1932b, 1932c), Spraggett with Rauscher (1973), Tigner (1979, pp. 100-109), and Webb (1976).

funding of psi research (McRae, 1984, p. 82),³ and the recent workshop on parapsychology by the Office of Technology Assessment (1989) of the U.S. Congress included nine outside panelists, three of whom were scientist-magicians. Also, conjurors have special expertise in evaluating certain types of psi research.

THE BACKGROUND OF MAGICIANS

To understand a magician's perspective, two factors must be brought into focus. First, the experienced magician is personally aware of how easily people can be deceived by fake effects. Second, a commercial magician's livelihood depends heavily upon self-promotion. In order to make a living, the magician *must* actively market himself or herself.

To appreciate the first factor, one should realize that the average magician, who attends club meetings and magic conventions, has witnessed hundreds of presentations that could be interpreted mistakenly as genuinely paranormal events. This experience strongly shapes the magician's perspective. Furthermore, many conjurors are personally acquainted with people who present fakery as genuine psychic phenomena. Some of these fakers attend magicians' conventions and read the "insider" works of magic. The books published on mentalism (the art of simulating psychic effects) number in the hundreds (at least). Potter and Hades' (1967-1975) *Master Index to Magic in Print*⁴ contains 38 pages of listings of just *slate* tricks (used in phony séances)! Currently five periodicals are devoted exclusively to the simulation of psi phenomena: *Krypts Quarterly Crier*,⁵ *Magick*,⁶ *The New Invocation*,⁷ *Snake-Oil Almanack*,⁸ and *Vibrations*.⁹ The extent of this realm has not been appreciated by many researchers within parapsychology.

A second factor in understanding magician's involvement with the paranormal is that their financial survival depends upon getting bookings; this requires self-promotion on a continuous basis. Magic is a difficult occupation, and not many conjurors fulfill their dreams of becoming full-time professionals (Stebbins, 1983). Success demands that the magician get and keep his or her name in front of the public. As such, some of the books

³ Ronald McRae admitted to me that he made up some of the events in his book (personal communication, December 15, 1991), but Marcello Truzzi assured me that he and other magicians were consulted by the military (personal communication, January 12, 1992).

⁴ The Potter *Index* can give one an appreciation of the extent of the literature on conjuring. This *Index* is contained in 14 volumes with nearly 7,000 pages. No trick methods are described; it is only an index.

⁵ Address: Sorceries Limited, P.O. Box 4169, Bethlehem, PA 18018.

⁶ Address: Magick, 7107 Weldon Ave., Bakersfield, CA 93308.

⁷ Address: The New Invocation, P.O. Box 17163, Phoenix, AZ 85011.

⁸ Address: Snake-Oil Almanack, P.O. Box 609117, Cleveland, OH 44109.

⁹ *Vibrations* is available only to members of Psychic Entertainers Association.

written by magicians are blatantly self-promotional, and a few have capitalized on the paranormal in this regard. For instance, one performer has written a book titled *Cashing in on Past Lives*; another writes for a "new age" periodical, and still another advertises himself as a Voodoo priest in a popular occult magazine. Sociologist Harry Collins (1983) noted that the norms of the magicians' subculture are not those of science and that as a group they value "secretiveness and financial self-interest above the quest for truth" (p. 931). Thus, conjurors' statements on the paranormal must be carefully considered if one is to appropriately interpret them.

Although this review focuses on controversies involving *psychic* phenomena, it should be realized that performers have taken advantage of a variety of other scientifically controversial areas. Conjurors have simulated hypnosis (Burlingame 1891/1971; Hart, 1893/1980; Karlyn, n.d.; Meeker & Barber, 1971; McGill, 1975; Nelmar, 1933; Wells, 1946), poisons and antidotes (Jay, 1987; Karson, 1934), and effects of medical treatments (Dawes, 1979). A few mentalists have tried to capitalize on UFOs and cryptozoology.

Magic and the Occult

In this review, I will use the terms "magic" and "conjuring" synonymously with trickery and not in the anthropological or occult senses.¹⁰ The terms are often confusingly used, but this should not be surprising. Magical literature has had a long association with the occult. The first magazine devoted to magic was *The Conjuror's Magazine, or, Magical and Physiognomical Mirror*, which began publication in 1791. It included astrology, palmistry, and alchemy as well as material on conjuring tricks (Smith, 1940/1989).¹¹ This relationship goes back much further; Hero of Alexandria (62/1592) described the "temple tricks" of the Greeks (see also Hopkins, 1897/1977; Woodcroft, 1851/1971). Dawes (1979) presented material that suggests that Albertus Magnus (1193-1280) was familiar with conjuring methods and devices. Another example can be found in the writings of the occultist John Dee, who wrote about his design of an illusion (Tigner, 1980). Magic's association with the occult is found not only in Western civilization but all over the world. The following references each provide citations to reports of shamans engaging in trickery: Christopher (1973, pp. 69-81), Kirby (1974), Lantis (1947/1971, pp. 88-

¹⁰ Also, the term "mentalists" will be used for one who simulates psi; it will not be used in the philosophical sense.

¹¹ Today magic magazines frequently make references to the paranormal, but usually these are only brief, passing comments. However *The Magic Magazine*, published 1974-1977, carried long, positive articles on topics such as tea leaf reading and witchcraft by authors such as Sybil Leek, Jane Roberts, and Hans Holzer. Ironically, Milbourne Christopher, Martin Gardner, and Randi were Contributing Editors.

90), Reichbart (1978), Rose (1952), Webster (1948/1973, pp. 474–496), and Weyer (1932/1969, pp. 437–442).

The relationship of conjuring to the occult and the paranormal is complex and confusing. Psychic phenomena have been intertwined with fraud for thousands of years; they will continue to be. We have little understanding of why this is so. This unsavory association deserves to be studied from a variety of perspectives, including those of anthropology, history, sociology, and psychology.

The numerous reports of deception by shamans are a vexing problem for anthropologists. Given its ubiquity, trickery must serve some function. Yet Morton Smith (1968) noted that anthropologists and religious scholars have largely ignored the importance of sham in shamanism.

The history of magic also presents puzzles. How and when did conjurers become viewed as entertainers rather than occultists? Some have suggested that it was only in the last few hundred years that magicians began to publicly acknowledge their use of trickery, and that the general public previously was highly superstitious and believed that conjurers relied upon supernatural forces. Yet Roy (1980) argued that the populace during the Middle Ages was more astute than some have assumed.

Various subcultures hold widely disparate views of magic; this warrants attention of sociologists. Highly skeptical groups perceive all magic performances as trickery or fraud. However, a large percentage of the general public is uncertain about mentalists, and a smaller segment believes that conjurers display supernatural powers. Today, magicians (even those who perform at children's parties) are sometimes accused of doing the devil's work, and this is more common than some might suppose (e.g., see Rauscher, 1983, p. 29).

Regarding psychology, it is of interest that most people seem to enjoy well-presented magic shows and perceive no link to the supernatural. The appeal of simulated paranormal and supernatural events has yet to be adequately explained, though Gloye (1967) and Taylor (1985) have begun to address the matter. The archetype of the trickster also deserves further attention. The discussions of Combs and Holland (1990) and Müller (1981/1991) suggest that there may be some fundamental linkage between deception and psi.

There are reasons that academics have largely neglected the study of conjuring. One reason is that many accounts of magic and magicians are not recorded by writers especially concerned with accuracy. As Robinson noted: "Because of the nature of the profession, one may be sure when something is finally printed about a magician, it generally is a fabrication or an exaggeration" (Robinson with White, 1986, p. 172). For researchers, not only are writings especially difficult to evaluate, but source material can be hard to obtain. Even large university libraries usually carry little on conjuring or its history. Detailed historical material is often found only in private collections of wealthy individuals; access to these holdings is restricted. However, more accessible collections can be found at the

U.S. Library of Congress—Houdini and McManus-Young Collections (Beck, 1974; Young, 1957), Brown University—Smith Collection (Wilmeth & Stanley, 1989), and the University of London—Harry Price Library. Researchers considering study might collect a few important works. Christopher's (1973) *The Illustrated History of Magic* is widely regarded as the best general history of conjuring. Clarke's (1924–28/1983) *The Annals of Conjuring* is older and well regarded. Dawes' (1979) *The Great Illusionists* is a more focused work and superbly documented. Jay's (1987) *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women* is well documented but restricted to unusual and bizarre performers, including an excellent section on early mentalists. The short-lived *Journal of Magic History* also contains valuable material. In addition, the recently compiled essays of H. Adrian Smith (Wilmeth & Stanley, 1989) provide a superb overview of major books in the history of conjuring, and Hall's (1973) bibliographical study is also useful in this regard.

WRITINGS OF MAGICIANS

Magicians' extensive interest in the paranormal can be seen by examining the books they have written on the subject. Many volumes on conjuring make passing reference to psychic phenomena, but for the most part, only those with a primary focus on the paranormal will be discussed here. My comments will be essentially restricted to their books and booklets; magicians' other writings on psi are far too numerous to cover. Two notable bibliographies are found in Keene with Spraggett (1976) and Price and Dingwall (1922). Most of this literature is rarely cited in parapsychology journals and thus is largely unknown to this readership.

Several investigators involved in psychical research have been well versed in magic. The books on psychical research by Hereward Carrington, Eric Dingwall, Trevor Hall, Harry Price, and Walter Franklin Prince are well known within the field, thus in general they are not covered in this review. Price, Dingwall, and Hall were members of the Magic Circle; Price and Prince were members of the Society of American Magicians. Carrington wrote a number of magic books (e.g., Carrington, 1913a, 1913b, 1913c, 1920/1943). Hall produced important conjuring bibliographies (Hall, 1957, 1973) and was an Honorary Vice-President of the Magic Circle. Price compiled a major conjuring library (Price 1929, 1935). Carl Graf von Klinckowstroem was a historian of magic (Whaley, 1990) and contributed articles on parapsychology to magic magazines (see Müller, 1980, p. 246),¹² and Max Dessoir made contributions to the psychology of deception (Whaley, 1990; e.g., Dessoir, 1893).¹³ Also, Robert

¹² For an English-language review of Müller, see Hoebens (1980).

¹³ Dessoir's contributions to psychical research are perhaps less well known than the others mentioned in the above paragraph. For a summary of his work, see Hövelmann (1986).

Tocquet (1952, 1961) often included information on conjurors in his books on the paranormal, and he wrote two books on magic (Whaley, 1990). It is fair to say that these authors' knowledge of magic shaped their opinions on the paranormal.

Magicians as Skeptics

In the public mind, persons knowledgeable on conjuring have long been associated with the debunking of charlatans who claim paranormal abilities. One of the earliest examples is Reginald Scot (1584/1973), who wrote *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. The book was a broad attack on beliefs in witchcraft, divination, the Catholic Church, alchemy, astrology, exorcism, and precognitive dreams. Scot also explained a number of tricks and laid bare the pretensions of conjurors who claimed supernatural power.¹⁴ The book was ordered burned as heretical by King James I.

A number of later books on magic also contributed to the battle against witch hunting (Hall, 1973); one of those was Thomas Ady's (1655/1656) *A Candle in the Dark*. In his chapter on conjurors, Ady drew heavily on Scot. Much of the rest of the book dealt with arguments based on scripture, and the book is filled with passages from the Bible. Ady apparently did not wish to contradict totally all religious teaching of his day, for he stated:

I intreat all to take notice, that many do falsly report of Mr. Scot, that he held an opinion, that witches are not, for it was neither his tenent [*sic*], neither is it mine; but that witches are not such as are commonly executed for witches (first page after the title page)

There is a long tradition of similar works. Some of the attacks on spiritualism quoted religious scripture as well as included information on legerdemain. Books are published today that continue this mix of topics (e.g., Kole with Janssen, 1984; Korem & Meier, 1980).

In 1784, Henri Decremps started to publish a series of books explaining methods used by conjurors. The Dean of the Society of American Magicians, H. Adrian Smith (1980/1989, pp. 135–136), concluded that Decremps's works were the most important since Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, which was published 200 years earlier. Decremps's books were aimed at exposing Pinetti, a prominent magician in Paris who performed a second-sight act (among other effects). In his first work, *La Magie Blanche Dévoilée*,¹⁵ Decremps described tricks with a divining rod, gave recommendations on where to indicate water, and even gave suggestions for

¹⁴ Scot apparently was assisted by sleight-of-hand expert John Cautares (Hall, 1973).

¹⁵ The English translation, titled *The Conjuror Unmasked*, was by Thomas Denton (1788), who gave no credit to Decremps after the first edition (Hall, 1957, p. 39).

excuses if no water was found. In another of the volumes he gave detailed descriptions of methods of fraudulent fortune tellers (Decremps, 1793).

William Pinchbeck (1805a) authored the first original book to be published on conjuring in the United States (Dawes, 1979; Jay, 1990). At the beginning of the volume Pinchbeck noted:

The intention of this work was . . . to shew [*sic*] the disadvantages arising to society from a vague as well as irrational belief of man's intimacy with familiar spirits,—to oppose the idea of supernatural agency in any production of man,—and lastly, how dangerous such a belief is to society, how destructive to the improvement of the human capacity, and how totally ruinous to the common interests of mankind (p. 5)

A second book, *Witchcraft: Or the Art of Fortunetelling Unveiled*, contained a similar statement of purpose (Pinchbeck, 1805b). Similar notions are touted today by members of Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) (see Hansen, 1992).

Magicians were not the only ones to reveal trick methods in order to combat "irrational" beliefs. The civil engineer Eusèbe Salverte (1829/1855) published a book explaining many puzzling phenomena in scientific terms and included material on conjuring techniques. Inglis (1986) described Salverte's work as "the skeptics' bible, in those days" (p. 7). Sir David Brewster's (1832/1842) *Letters on Natural Magic* was a similar book. Price (1926) briefly covered several other early works that exposed methods of charlatans.

The controversy surrounding the spiritualist movement, which began in 1848, brought some of the most prominent magicians into conflict with mediums. Several debates were held, and a number of conjurors published books on mediumistic fraud and psychic simulation (e.g., Anderson, n.d.; Baldwin, 1879, 1895; Bishop, 1880; Cumberland, 1888; Dobler, 1869; Evans, 1897a, 1897b; Maskelyne, 1876; "Maskelyne & Cooke," n.d.; Robinson, 1898; Weatherly & Maskelyne, 1891). In fact, Maskelyne and Baldwin began their rise to fame by performing exposés of the Davenport brothers, who gave stage demonstrations of spiritualistic effects. Webb (1976) briefly reviewed some of the conflicts, and his volume reprinted a few of the magicians' attacks on mediums.

The magicians' exposés did not stop with the end of the 19th century or the decline of spiritualism. A number of conjurors continued to write on fraudulent mediumship, psychic trickery, and other paranormal topics (e.g., Abbott, 1907, 1913; Alexander, 1921; Christopher, 1970; Cumberland, 1905, 1918, 1919; Driver, 1916; Dr. X., 1922; Dunninger, 1935, 1936, 1974; Evans, 1906; Frikell, 1930; Gardner, 1952; Gibson, 1927a; Heredia, 1922; Houdini, 1920, 1924a, 1924b; "Houdini's Spirit World," 1925/1968; MacDougall, 1940; Maskelyne, 1912; Mulholland, 1938; Pinetti, 1905; Prendergast, 1926; Proskauer, 1928, 1946; Rinn, 1950; Vogt & Hyman, 1959; Wicks, 1907).

Since 1975—with the rise of CSICOP and the contemporaneous skept-

tical movement—there has been an increase in the number of books by magicians (e.g., Booth, 1984; Christopher, 1975, 1979; Fuller, 1975, 1980; Gardner, 1981, 1986, 1988, 1989; Gordon, 1988; Harris, 1985; Hull, 1977; Hyman, 1989; Kole with Janssen, 1984; Korem, 1988; Korem & Meier, 1980; MacDougall, 1983; Premanand, 1976, 1986; Randi, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1987, 1990; Steiner, 1989). Table 1 provides a list of modern-day magicians who have written critical books or have been official members of CSICOP.

Table 1
MAGICIANS WHO HAVE BEEN OFFICIAL MEMBERS OF CSICOP AND/OR PUBLISHED
CRITICAL BOOKS BETWEEN 1975 AND 1990

John Booth ^a	Burling Hull ^a
Richard Busch	Ray Hyman
Shawn Carlson	André Kole ^a
Milbourne Christopher ^a	Danny Korem
Bob Couttie	Curtis MacDougall
Persi Diaconis ^a	Joe Nickell
Eric Dingwall	Mark Plummer
Martin Gardner ^a	B. Premanand
Henry Gordon	James Randi ^a
Trevor Hall ^a	Robert Steiner
Ben Harris	Marcello Truzzi

^a Indicates sufficient prominence to be included in *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Magicians* (Waters, 1988).

Magicians as Proponents

A number of magicians have made positive statements regarding the reality of psychic phenomena. However in some cases, such statements cannot be relied upon to express the true opinion of those who make them. In the mentalist literature, performers are frequently urged to claim genuine abilities even if they do not believe in them. Many magicians are ambivalent about exposing those who fake psychic effects (for a discussion, see Rauscher, 1984). These practices have led some to doubt any endorsements magicians make regarding psi. Nevertheless, there exist written accounts by a surprising number of magicians that seem to reflect honest, favorable opinions (Hansen, 1990b, 1990c).

Mentalists. Positive statements by mentalists are some of the most controversial and dubious. In a few cases one can be quite confident that statements made by some performers and their publicists do not reflect true beliefs. In other instances one cannot be so certain. Not all positive statements by mentalists can be dismissed as deceptive.

There is a long history of mentalists claiming psychic abilities while engaging in trickery. Some of the most colorful were the Davenport brothers (Christopher, 1962; Clarke, 1924–1928/1983) and Anna Eva Fay (Dingwall, 1966; Wiley, 1983). Mentalist Alexander (1923) wrote a book

promoting astrology and crystal gazing, but published another, a seemingly more candid book, expressing a neutral attitude regarding the existence of psi (Alexander, 1921). Even magician-skeptic Martin Gardner wrote an article (under a pseudonym) implying that magician Stanley Jaks had genuine paranormal abilities (Groth, 1952) (personal communication June 7, 1989).

A number of performers have strongly implied that they had paranormal powers. These include the Davenports (Abbott, 1864; Cooper, 1867; Nichols, 1864, 1865; Rand, 1859; Randolph, 1869),¹⁶ Joseph Dunninger (1944), Anna Eva Fay (1900), David Hoy (Godwin,¹⁷ 1974), Richard Ireland (1970), Kreskin (1973), the Piddingtons (Braddon,¹⁸ 1950), Jacques Romano (Schwarz,¹⁷ 1968), the Zancigs (1907, 1934), and the Zomahs (Scatcherd,¹⁷ n.d.). Several have written books purporting to teach psychic methods (e.g., Dunninger, 1962; Hoy, 1965, 1971; Koran, 1965; Kreskin, 1977, 1984; Zancig, 1902, Zancigs, 1901, 1920). Shiels (1974/1980, p. 93) claimed to have psychically bent keys in some of his performances. DePrince (1986) produced a book giving instructions for occult practices. Cannon (1934, 1935) reported his observations of paranormal events in the Orient as well as the use of psychic abilities (Cannon, 1937, 1939). One of his books gives accounts of his own mentalist performances (Cannon, 1950).¹⁹ Uri Geller might be included here because he has admitted using trickery in some of his early performances (Geller, 1975, p. 199), yet like many earlier entertainers, a number of books suggest that Geller has genuine abilities (e.g., Collins, 1977; Ebon, 1975; Geller & Playfair, 1986; Panati, 1976; Puharich, 1974; Wilson, 1976).²⁰ Reviews of various stage telepathists have been provided by Harry Price (1936/1974, pp. 253–277) and David Price (1985, pp. 439–493), and a number of those telepathists claimed genuine psychic abilities. I have known magicians who insisted that Dunninger and Hoy truly believed themselves psychically gifted. I have also known equally qualified conjurers who emphatically denied that assertion. Some of the books cited in this paragraph were ghost-written or had substantial work done by others. Several people have concluded that a number of these were produced solely to further the public image of the performer and thus cannot be relied upon for candid opinions.

On the other hand, a few modern-day members of the mentalist fraternity have written similar works for their fellow performers. Such volumes

¹⁶ These writers were not magicians and implied that the Davenports were genuine mediums.

¹⁷ This writer was apparently not a magician and implied that the performer was genuinely psychic.

¹⁸ Publicist for the Piddingtons.

¹⁹ For short accounts of the enigmatic psychiatrist-magician Alexander Cannon, see Fodor (1959, pp. 186–192), Grossman (1988), Lead (1989), and Parrish (1988).

²⁰ The authors and/or editors were not magicians.

have the usual high prices and are advertised only where magicians and mentalists are likely to find them. Presumably such books express more honest views; although even in these, one occasionally suspects self-serving statements. Myriam Ruthchild's (1978) *Cashing in on the Psychic* is a surprisingly detailed business manual for the mentalist; however, her *Psychotechnics* (Ruthchild, 1981) does not cover the usual methods of trickery but is more of a primer on the development of psychic abilities. Ruthchild (1983) admitted in the *New Invocation* that she believes that part of what she does is genuinely psychic. Ruthchild is not the only performer to instruct mentalists in psi functioning. McGill's (n.d.) six-volume *Psychic Magic* includes typical mentalist methods but also describes how to develop clairvoyant abilities through crystal gazing. Thomas (1989) gives instructions on how to learn psychometry and even advises cold readers²¹ to do Tarot readings before their clients arrive so as to know what to tell them! Shiels (1989) suggested that trickery seems to elicit genuine paranormal phenomena,²² thus echoing the views of Reichbart (1978) and Batchelder (1984). However, Tony "Doc" Shiels is a most unusual character, and few magicians express views similar to his. In the older mentalist literature, one can also find positive opinions on psi (e.g., Albertus, n.d.; Jones, 1911; Leonidas, 1901, p. 95; Newmann, 1923).

Ormond McGill is both a mentalist and a magician who has written much on the paranormal (e.g., McGill, 1973, 1977; McGill & Ormond, 1976; Ormond & McGill, 1959). McGill has traveled extensively to investigate psychic, mystical, and religious phenomena. His writings display a true sympathy for much of what he observed and a belief in the existence of some psychic phenomena.

There are other mentalists who have written on paranormal topics but seem to have a neutral attitude. Carl Herron has published a number of mentalist effects and also produced a newsletter called *The Path*. This newsletter covered witchcraft and other esoteric subjects, including a column by mentalist Richard Webster on how to develop psychic abilities. *The Path*, like David Hoy's *ESP News According to Hoy*, may have been produced mainly to promote the business interests of their editors. Herron can be considered open-minded regarding psi phenomena and is neither a strong skeptic nor proponent. He has briefly described his involvement in (apparently informal) testing at the Psychical Research Foundation (Herron, 1981). Marcello Truzzi, a sociologist and mentalist who edited *Zetetic Scholar*, is known for his neutral stand on parapsychology.

There is an aspect of mentalism in which no outright deception is in-

²¹ Cold reading is the term used to describe personal "readings" done by mentalists without benefit of previously obtained information. The mentalist makes use of clues gleaned from personal appearance, speech patterns, bodily responses, etc.

²² Shiels' comments may be nothing more than a magician's patter line; nevertheless, I highly recommend his *The Shiels Effect* (O'Siaghail, 1976) for a discussion of paranormal trickery.

involved. Some performers have developed an exceptional ability to interpret subtle cues in order to find hidden objects or perform actions thought of by spectators. This is referred to as contact mind-reading when there is physical contact between the performer and another individual; noncontact mind-reading is done without physical touching. Seeming examples are given in the accounts of Cumberland (1888, 1905), Marion (1950),²³ Messing (Lungin, 1989),²⁴ Newmann (1923; Alfredson, 1989), and Polgar with Singer (1951). This is not to say that such performers never utilize trickery to accomplish their goals. Jay (1987) has provided a summary and listed a number of scientific reports on such performers. Near the turn of the century, some writers promoting psychic development suggested that in order to develop psi sensitivity, students first learn contact mind-reading before trying telepathic experiments (e.g., Atkinson, 1908,²⁵ Carrington, 1920; "A Complete Course," 1899).

Magicians. Like the history of some magicians expressing skeptical views, there is also a tradition of positive statements. The first English-language book on magic was Thomas Hill's (1581) *A briefe and pleasaunt treatise, entituled, Naturall and Artificiall conclusions*²⁶ (Hall, 1973). In an earlier work, Hill (1576) expressed positive views regarding precognitive dreams.

Hocus Pocus Junior (1634/1635), an anonymously written work, was the next original book on conjuring after Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*. On the next to the last page of the book, the author stated:

There is not a tricke that any jugler in the world can shew thee, but thou shalt bee able to conceive after what manner it is performed, if he do it by slight of hand, and not by an unlawfull and detested means. That there are such it is not to be doubted of, that do worke by unlawfull meanes, and have besides their owne natural endowments the assistance of some familiar, whereby they many times effect such miraculous things as may well be admired by whom soever shall either behold or heare tell of them.

The author apparently believed in occult powers.

It is not just a few early magicians who believed in paranormal events, but as will be shown, some of the most prominent magicians in history have endorsed the reality of psi phenomena. A number of conjurers have

²³ Marion's claims caused some controversy within the Society for Psychical Research (e.g., Soal, 1936, 1950a, 1950b; Thouless, 1950; Wiesner, 1950).

²⁴ For a good review, see Eisenbud (1990).

²⁵ A direct comparison of Atkinson (1908, pp. 28-29) with Newmann (1923, pp. 276-277) shows that a number of passages are almost identical. Despite publication dates, perhaps one should do a bit more research before drawing conclusions regarding who borrowed from whom.

²⁶ Many of Hill's "explanations" were not feasible methods for performing, and a number of magic historians credit Scot as author of the first practical English-language work on conjuring.

written popular books promoting the paranormal. A few of these may have been produced just to sell at performances, but others are more serious works. Alexander Herrmann (1890)²⁷ wrote a book explaining how to form a spiritualist circle and "How to Make Persons at a Distance Think of You." Howard Thurston (n.d.) wrote one on dream interpretation and spoke favorably of precognitive dreams. He wrote another promoting palmistry and fortune telling as well as advertising his own course in magic (Thurston, 1930). Black Herman (1938) and Max Stein (1928, 1940, 1941) produced similar books. Will Goldston (1906) wrote one promoting crystal gazing. Yet Goldston (1933) and Thurston (1910) expressed positive opinions on aspects of the paranormal, and we have every reason to believe them to be honest views. Fortean²⁸ investigators John Keel and Vincent Gaddis are also magicians and have written on many Fortean and paranormal topics (e.g., Bradley & Gaddis, 1990; Gaddis, 1967b; Gaddis & Gaddis, 1970, 1972; Keel, 1957, 1970, 1971, 1975a, 1975b, 1976, 1984, 1988). Some books by magicians have taken a neutral stance regarding the existence of psi. Truzzi's work on psychic detectives (Lyons & Truzzi, 1991) is an example, as is the book on the occult written by magic historian Geoffrey Lamb (1977). Balance is also seen in magician Bernard Ernst's collaboration with Carrington on a book about Houdini and Conan Doyle (Ernst & Carrington, 1932).

One of the most prolific authors of all time, magical or otherwise, was Walter Gibson (Cox, 1988; Rauscher, 1986). He created the character "The Shadow" and wrote hundreds of novels under the pen name of Maxwell Grant. Gibson served as ghost writer for magic books of Blackstone, Dunninger, Thurston, and others. He was also the ghost writer for Dunninger's *Inside the Medium's Cabinet* (1935), *How to Make a Ghost Walk* (1936), and *What's On Your Mind?* (1944), Hoy's *Psychic and Other ESP Party Games* (1965), and *Kreskin's Mind Power Book* (1977), as well as Proskauer's scathing *The Dead Do Not Talk* (1946). Gibson also produced a number of works on the psychic arts (e.g., Gibson, 1927b, 1927c, 1959, 1969, 1973; Gibson & Gibson, 1966, 1973). In several of the books, he suggested that the readers make up their own minds about the reliability of the divinatory techniques presented, but in others, he expressed favorable opinions. In a book cowritten with his wife Litzka, they described some of their own personal psychic experiences (Gibson & Gibson, 1969).

In recent years, there have been several works by magicians with a positive orientation to the paranormal. Notable are those of Auerbach (1986), Burkan with Rosin (1984), Hastings (1991), Rauscher with Spraggett (1975), and Spraggett with Rauscher (1973). Katlyn Miller has written

²⁷ This should not be confused with his similarly titled work, *Herrmann's Book of Magic: Black Art Fully Exposed* (1903), which includes a section on antispiritualistic tricks.

²⁸ The term "Fortean" is derived from Charles Fort, an author during the first few decades of this century who collected thousands of accounts of anomalous events.

a number of small works for occult practitioners on topics such as scrying, charms, and enchantments (Katlyn, 1982, 1989a, 1989b). She appears to be quite involved with the occult herself. There are a couple of editors who are magicians and who write favorably on the paranormal. Mark Chorvinsky edits *Strange*, a magazine devoted to Fortean, and Donald Michael Kraig serves as editor of *Fate* (three regular columnists for *Fate* are also conjurers). Magician Alan Cleaver formerly edited the British periodical *Anomaly*, and some years ago John Keel edited a newsletter of the same name.

A couple of children's authors have written books on magic as well as on the paranormal (e.g., Edmonds, 1977, 1978, 1979a, 1979b; Kettelkamp, 1969, 1970, 1977, 1980). The skeptic Joe Nickell (1989) has also written for children.

Although the public tends to view magicians as debunkers, the opposite is more the case. Birdsell (1989) polled a group of magicians and found that 82% gave a positive response to a question of belief in ESP. Truzzi (1983) noted a poll of German magicians that found that 72.3% thought psi was probably real. Many prominent magicians have expressed a belief in psychic phenomena. Table 2 provides a list and documentation. I see no reason to doubt that these references give the honest opinions of those stating them. A comparison with my earlier citations will reveal that many of these conjurers also wrote books exposing psychic fraud. It is simply a myth that magicians have been predominantly skeptical about the existence of psi.

Books written by magicians range from the scholarly to the self-promotional. Some have become standard references, whereas others deserve their obscurity. The three books under full review here also span the gamut, and we now turn to them.

HENRY GORDON'S (1987) *EXTRASENSORY DECEPTION*

Henry Gordon is a member of CSICOP, a newspaper columnist for the *Toronto Star*, and has also been a broadcaster. His book is based on a series of weekly newspaper columns debunking paranormal phenomena. The volume is divided into eight sections, each consisting of a series of essays of about a page long. The topics range over most areas of the paranormal and related topics and include ESP, dowsing, reincarnation, Shirley MacLaine, healing, UFOs, and graphology. The final few pages of the book are devoted to promoting CSICOP. Portions are written with biting sarcasm, and the author shows a sneering disdain for many of those who do not agree with him. The Introduction contains a self-congratulatory description of one of his magic performances.

In the Foreword, we are told that Gordon proclaims: "Every psychic I know or have heard of is an absolute fraud" (p. ix). This belief seems to have led to a number of errors. For example, he asserts that Leonora Piper was exposed as a fraud (p. 53), but to my knowledge, there is no evidence

Table 2

CONJURORS WHO HAVE ENDORSED THE REALITY OF PSYCHIC PHENOMENA^a

Magician ^b	Reference ^c
Abbott, David P.	Abbott (1908) Hyslop, Guthrie, Abbott, Clawson, & Clawson (1913)
Baldwin, Samri S.	Baldwin (1895, p. 104)
Bellachini, Samuel	Zöllner (1881, pp. 213–214)
Dickson, Abb	Zorka (1976)
Evans, Henry Ridgely	Evans (1897a, pp. 12, 32)
Gibson, Walter B.	Gibson & Gibson (1969)
Goldston, Will	Goldston (1933)
Kellar, Harry	Kellar (1886, pp. 168–173; 1893) ^d Rinn (1950, p. 387)
Lewis, Angelo (Professor Hoffmann)	Lewis (1886)
Maskelyne, John Nevil	A Spiritualistic Exposé—II (1885) Maskelyne (1885, 1910)
McGill, Ormond	McGill (1977)
Miller, Katlyn (Katlyn)	Katlyn (1982, 1989a)
Oursler, Fulton (Samri Frikell)	Prince (1928, pp. 216–219) Mulholland (1938, pp. 326–329) Oursler (1964)
Parsons, E. A. (Henry Hardin)	Hyslop et al. (1913)
Price, Harry	Price (1930, 1925/1973) ^e
Robert-Houdin, Jean Eugene	Lee (1866, pp. 162–163) Goldston (1906, p. 22) Osty (1935)
Thurston, Howard	Thurston (1910, 1954)

Notes: ^a All of the above individuals were of sufficient prominence to be included in *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Magicians* (Waters, 1988).

^b Names in parentheses are stage or pen names.

^c All references give first-person accounts.

^d Hodgson (1894) raised questions about the reliability of Kellar's early accounts.

^e A number of researchers have raised questions about the honesty of Harry Price (e.g., Dingwall, Goldney, & Hall, 1956; Dingwall & Hall, 1958; Gregory, 1985; Hall, 1978), but there seems little doubt that Price believed in the genuineness of some paranormal phenomena.

supporting his claim. I sent Gordon several letters on this matter, but he did not reply (the publisher assured me that he did indeed receive them).

There is no reference list, bibliography, or index; the text almost never gives information for the reader to pursue a topic further. In short, there is nothing in the book of any scientific interest. Of all the books by magicians cited in this paper, Gordon's is one of the least valuable. It presents the views of one of the more extreme, vocal, uninformed, yet official members of CSICOP (Gordon is a Fellow of CSICOP).

Not long ago, Paul Kurtz (1988), president of Prometheus Books, complained that a certain publisher had "abandoned its standards of editorial

responsibility in its quest for profits" (p. 5). It would be wise for Kurtz to put his own house in order in this regard.

BOB COUTTIE'S (1988) *FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE*

Forbidden Knowledge is another attempt by a magician-journalist to address the paranormal. Of the three books reviewed here, it has the most information directly related to parapsychology. Bob Couttie hosted a radio program with the same title as his book, and the book seems largely based upon that radio series. He has also made a presentation at one of the conferences of the Society for Psychical Research.

Couttie's book is written in a popular, lively style and contains none of the biting cynicism so frequently found in books of this type. Instead, the book is moderate in tone, and the author projects the demeanor of a disappointed "seeker." In fact, the Introduction is titled "The Reluctant Sceptic." This tone might be a bit deceptive for some readers, however. They might mistakenly assume that the work is not marred by excessive bias and thus is largely accurate. This is not the case.

The book is divided into four sections, with a total of 17 chapters. Each chapter is usually 5 to 10 pages long. The chapters are typically only loosely related to others in the section, and within a chapter, the author skips from topic to topic. No subheadings are included to assist the reader. The book contains over 200 reference notes, far above average for a book of this type. However, these notes rely heavily on secondary, popular sources, and many of the citations are inaccurate or incomplete. There is no index.

The first section is entitled "The Miracle Workers" and is devoted to such topics as Uri Geller, D. D. Home, psychic detectives, mediums, and séances. Although he appears to have tried to be fair, Couttie's biases led him to make some serious mistakes and major distortions. This is ironic because throughout the book Couttie berates psi proponents for errors and for presenting a one-sided case. On page 2 he complains that Brian Inglis failed to discuss a supposed confession of Eva C., yet in that very same paragraph, Couttie cites Blackburn's confession of trickery but does not even mention Smith's denial! This is by no means an isolated instance.

The first two chapters are devoted to Uri Geller. In the first, Couttie describes his own meeting with Geller, and this is worth reading for Couttie's perspective as a magician. In the second chapter, he reviews published reports by scientists. Only one of the cited experimental reports appeared in a refereed parapsychology journal, a fact that Couttie fails to mention. He cites Randi's criticism of the Stanford Research Institute work, but following his usual pattern, he does not acknowledge the reply (Targ & Puthoff, 1977, pp. 182–186).

Several chapters are devoted to mediumship. Couttie relies heavily on books by magicians such as Houdini and Dunninger and other secondary

sources, some of which are highly inaccurate. To his credit, he cites the Hodgson and Davey reports on malobservation as well as a directly witnessed account of D. D. Home that indicates possible trickery.

Three chapters are devoted to astrology and related topics and two are on dowsing. Much of the discussion is based on items from the *Skeptical Inquirer* and other popular sources. Although the "sTARBABY" affair (Rawlins, 1981) is given over a page of comment, there are no citations to the extensive coverage in the *Zetetic Scholar* or to Pinch and Collins' (1984) article in *Social Studies of Science*.

The longest chapter, entitled "The Scientist's Quadrille," is a hodgepodge discussion of parapsychology research. Couttie repeats the allegation that Nobel laureate Charles Richet helped Eva C. cheat, yet provides no evidence or citation. I have twice written to Couttie requesting evidence for his charges of fraud by Richet, but I have not received a reply. Couttie claims that Soal's work "is still highly regarded by the less intellectually honest" (p. 104). Couttie does not say who he means, but one might naturally assume he is referring to researchers. Over a page of discussion is given to the issue of failure to report negative outcomes in statistical research. This has been referred to as the "file drawer problem" by Rosenthal (1979) (reflecting the idea that journals are filled only with the successful [i.e., statistically significant] studies, whereas the unsuccessful ones languish in the experimenters' file drawers). This issue has been extensively addressed in the meta-analyses of psi research (e.g., Haraldsson, Houtkooper, & Hoeltje, 1987; Honorton, 1985; Johnson & Haraldsson, 1984; Radin, May & Thomson, 1986). Couttie ignores this and seems to suggest that the file drawer problem can account for all statistically based psi results (the cited studies demonstrate this to be completely wrong). Couttie gives a brief and inaccurate description of the Ganzfeld procedure and a longer paragraph discussing Hyman's (1985) criticisms, including his claim of a correlation between flaws and significance. Yet Couttie does not mention that Saunders (1985) demonstrated Hyman's analysis to be meaningless (Saunders' article appeared in the same journal issue as Hyman's original critique). Further, Hyman now acknowledges that he could "not support any firm conclusion about the relationship between flaws and study outcome" (Hyman & Honorton, 1986, p. 353). There are numerous other misrepresentations.

Couttie suggests that the amateur can still make a scientific contribution to psychical research, and I believe that he wishes to do so himself. Unfortunately, he seems to have minimal training in any of the sciences, and this has led to a number of errors (e.g., faulty assumptions regarding his own probability calculations [p. 37], misstatements about gravitational attraction [p. 70], and suggestions that exploratory data analysis is completely invalid [p. 104]). For the scientific reader unfamiliar with parapsychology, these errors may serve as a warning that Couttie's work is not always reliable and that there are misrepresentations in his discussions of psi research. The book also contains numerous spelling and typographical

errors; these too might alert the astute reader that the work was not put together with great care.

Compared to the other books written by magicians cited in this paper, one would rank Couttie's book below average in quality. It simply cannot be recommended because it contains too many misrepresentations and errors of fact. It is possibly worth reading by those somewhat knowledgeable in the field in order to obtain an understanding of a magician's perspective; however, Booth's (1984) book would be much better for that purpose (see Hansen, 1986).

JOE NICKELL'S *SECRETS OF THE SUPERNATURAL*

Finally, I am pleased to say that Joe Nickell's *Secrets of the Supernatural* is a book I can recommend (Nickell with Fischer, 1988). Nickell has been a professional magician and a private investigator; he now teaches technical writing at the University of Kentucky. He is perhaps best known for his critical works on the Shroud of Turin (Nickell, 1983).

There are 12 chapters. Ten of these each describe an odd case or cases investigated by Nickell (and sometimes with his colleague John Fischer, a crime investigator). Many of the chapters have appeared previously in other publications in somewhat different forms. The range of these is surprising and includes *Fate*, *Skeptical Inquirer*, *Indiana Folklore*, and the *Fire and Arson Investigator*. Nickell's background as a private investigator is evident in the thoroughness of the reports. All cases are well documented, and a good set of notes is included at the end of the book (a total of over 400) as well as references at the end of each chapter. The book is indexed and nicely illustrated.

Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the mysterious crystal skull, which continues to receive considerable popular coverage. A more detailed treatment of the topic was recently published (Chorvinsky, 1987; Chorvinsky with Chapman, 1988).

The chapter entitled "Vanished!" focuses on several frequently mentioned, unexplained disappearances of people that are recounted in some of the popular books on the paranormal. These cases are quite old. Nickell describes his effort in tracing the cases with the information given in the reports and found them to be hoaxes or without real evidence for the existence of the supposed persons.

The chapter on the "Image of Guadalupe" is far better than the popular treatments by Rogo (1982), Smith (1983), or Tribbe (1983, Chapter 18). Nickell's is the best overview that I am aware of on the topic; however, there is some anti-religious bias apparent in his writing.

There is also a section on purported spirit photographs. Unfortunately, the first part of the chapter relies heavily on secondary sources. The last part describes their own investigation of spirit images precipitated on cloth during recent (1985) séances. John Fischer is a forensic analyst and made

use of his talents in this study, a useful contribution on this largely forgotten phenomenon.

The section on dowsing also relies heavily on secondary sources. Although several experimental studies are cited, those that support the efficacy of dowsing are not listed (for a review, see Hansen, 1982). Nickell did report a very short experiment of his own here; it was clearly an amateur attempt, but better than most of similar type.

The chapter on spontaneous human combustion (SHC) provides a more skeptical approach than that of Harrison (1976/1978) or Gaddis (1967b). It is an abbreviated version of an article in the *Fire and Arson Investigator*, which is perhaps the most important article on the topic.

The remaining chapters discuss Nickell's investigation of a haunting, a case of identical twins who were not identified as such, an odd "bleeding door," and the restless coffins of Barbados.

This is one of the best books written on the paranormal by a magician, although it focuses more on Fortean than parapsychology. It will be a useful reference for researchers; however, given the topics, its value is clearly limited for parapsychologists. It might be of most use to teachers who need recommended reading for students on topics related to parapsychology.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Magicians have had a long tradition of writing about the paranormal; it certainly did not start with the emergence of the recent skeptical movement. In the past, such books have ranged from the serious and scholarly to those that are blatantly self-promotional and with casual regard for facts. The books reviewed here display a similar range. Nickell's book belongs in every good reference library on the paranormal. The other two one can do without.

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²⁹ I have tried to give the original name of the author (of record) in brackets. Books on magic are notoriously unreliable regarding original names. Performers and writers frequently assume stage names and pen names. I have used both Waters (1988) and Whaley (1990) for information and tried to verify the reported names with other sources. Both Waters' and Whaley's works are in their first editions and contain errors.

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