

The Arizona Skeptic

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Oh No — Spooks in a Skeptic's Home

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It was the end of the summer of 1992. I had just returned from Europe, where I was continuing archival research into the witch-trials of the 16th and 17th centuries.¹ This had been my annual searching for witches — a pursuit exposing the pursuer to powerful occult beliefs and, as true believers might have it, rendering the researcher vulnerable to dire supernatural consequences.

My house had been unoccupied for the entire summer, save for occasional visits by a friend checking to see whether things were all right. Even before I returned home, the man had reported haunting experiences whenever he visited the house, experiences that initially didn't make sense to me and became clear only after I got home.

Now savor your empathy of what I encountered upon entering my abode, suitcase in one hand, house key in the other: I hardly had taken a step inside, when there was a loud, ghostly beep. I took a few more steps — more mysterious beeps. They seemed to squeak right out of the carpet. Aha, I concluded, there must have been an invasion of insects, perhaps crickets — according to the volume of the sound, crickets of horror-movie dimensions. I had never heard any type of insect sounding this shrill, almost metallic. I checked under carpeting — nothing. I checked under pillows and in closets — nothing again. Then a book beeped when I pulled it off the shelf; kitchen cabinets beeped when shoved; my bed beeped when I lay down; my suit beeped when I lifted it out of the suitcase. I never knew what would beep next. It was unnerving.

But the most puzzling aspect was the fact that the beeps didn't always come from the

spot where an object was being moved. The beeps came from all nooks and crannies of the house, sometimes seemingly hanging in the air. When I went to bed that night (and following nights) and lay still, I could hear intermittent beeps and pops from various parts of the house without, as far as I could tell, anything stirring or being stirred.

There was something else that attacked my senses. It was an acrid odor — sulfuric, chloride, or something of the sort. It reminded me of the stories that vividly described the alleged stink left by Satan after a visitation. The olfactory puzzle was, however, soon solved: the stagnant air in the house was saturated with the vapors emanating from two open mothball packages I had left in closets to ward off insects for whom sweaters are pork chops. I immediately removed the moth balls from the house and almost instantly the air improved.

Back to the beeps and pops — they began to grind on my nerves. As a brave skeptic I limited the realms of causative explanation to one (or a combination) of three qualities: biological, mechanical, electronic. The first realm I was able to disqualify early on. There simply weren't any insects around. The second realm equally failed to bear out, because the location of motion and the location of sound didn't always correspond. In fact, about half of the beeps sounded without any provocation by motion or friction. That left the area of electronics.

I phoned a friend, an expert in electronic matters, who suggested I perform a test by throwing the main breaker and see whether a powerless house still beeps. I threw the switch — stopping all and every electronic device that might have been on in the house, including refrigerator, alarm clock, and timers.

¹ Hans Sebald, *Witchcraft — The Heritage of a Heresy*, New York, Elsevier, 1978.

In the quiet house, the beeps sounded all the more distinctly.

Upon my second — somewhat more frantic — call, the expert suggested that I inquire with the neighbors whether perchance any one of them had installed some powerful electronic gadget, perhaps a saucer catching satellite waves and deflecting them into my house. I decided, however, to put this idea on hold and chose first to explore other possible causes.

Here I must insert that my main worry concerned my home computer. I didn't dare operate it out of fear that whatever weird electronic spiders had cursed the house might wreak havoc with files and codes. Mostly because of this concern I consulted a computer expert at Arizona State University. Yes, he put it bluntly, static electricity in a house can screw up your files for good. He suggested a remedy that seemed commonplace to the connoisseur: Get a bottle of *Downy* (a fabric softener that somehow neutralizes static electricity), mix it with water and spray the mess over carpet, sofa, and love seat. I did. The beeps persisted mercilessly.

By now I had been under the bombardment of beeps for about ten days. I almost had gotten used to the sound and was about to resign myself to a rather squeaky lifestyle — but what about my computer.

Once more I thought carefully: is there any electronic device in the house working independently of the power sold to me by the public power company? I thought of a most mundane battery-operated clock in the kitchen and removed its battery — the beeps continued undiminished. Then I removed the batteries from the two smoke detectors, one in the living room and the other in the hallway.

Bingo! The beeps abruptly stopped. (Since that discovery I have retested the effect, reinserted the batteries, and witnessed the resumption of beeps.)

Now I know *what* caused the beeps. But I still don't know *why* or *how* they were caused. *The remarkable thing is that they never once came directly from the smoke detectors.* Back to the experts I went. They were surprised. And they were as perplexed as I: no technical explanation; never heard of such a phenomenon. They offered the guess that there was a relation between the mothball

vapors and the radiation emanating from the smoke detectors. The beeps indeed sounded like little explosions. But there is a catch: as I said, I had removed the mothballs early on and the vapors seemed to have disappeared, but the moment I reinsert the batteries in the smoke detectors, the beeps stubbornly resume.

If any of you readers has a more technical explanation of the phenomenon, I wish you would send it to the editor for publication. Who knows — somewhere, some day there might be a similar or identical case in need of scientific explanation. [*Editor's Note: some smoke detectors, when the batteries need to be changed, make a beeping sound. If new batteries don't clear up the problem, another explanation is needed.*]

And here is the main point I mean to make: I could well imagine that person for whom a fourth realm of potential causative explanation is acceptable — the occult one, dealing with the belief in the existence of spirits, even demons, for example — might seriously consider fetching an anointed exorcist in lieu of a bonded electrician. Considering the sizable proportion of the American population believing in supernatural phenomena, there are good chances that many persons would be tempted to ascribe a supernatural quality when facing this type of inexplicable event; in fact, the episode might be welcome “evidence” for the existence of spiritual “entities” and would nicely confirm occult biases. 1990 Gallup-Poll statistics show that 55% of Americans believe in Satan, 25% in ghosts, and 14% in witches. Specifically, 25% believe “in ghosts, or that spirits of dead people can come back in certain places and situations.”² These believers might resort to explanations dealing with “ghosts,” “spirits,” “demons,” “poltergeists,” and other “supernatural entities.” It might never occur to them that a little round electronic device was playing a prank on them and was responsible for the “ghosts.” The end result might be another

² George H. Gallup, Jr. and Frank Newport, “Belief in Paranormal Phenomena Among Adult Americans,” *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 15, Winter 1991, pp. 138-139.

“haunted house,” and another piece of real estate on the market for a surprisingly low price. I wonder whether this misunderstanding has happened in the past or indeed is happening somewhere right now. While I almost got beeped out of my mind, I finally solved the problem by scientific reasoning.

In any case, the world is in need of better insight into smoke-detectorism and its symptomatology of beepism. It is time to form a new subcommittee of CSICOP: a Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Popping Phenomena, or, for short, CSIPOP.

Skeptics Predictions for 1994

On 6 November 1994, the Phoenix Skeptics held their annual Predictions meeting in which the membership produced the following list of 54 predictions for the next fourteen months. Over the past four years the Phoenix Skeptics have maintained an accuracy rating of over 59%, including things such as Margaret Thatcher's leaving office and the collapse of the Romanian government.

It is our thesis that a group of a dozen or more reasonably intelligent and informed individuals can successfully predict events and developments in the near future, without recourse to any “special” powers. Each year we publish this list of predictions and invite comparison of our results to those of any professional psychic in the world.

Crime and Punishment

- ◇ 1) Crime rate and prison population increase in 1994.
- ◇ 2) Death penalties for juveniles become a hot topic in 1994.
- ◇ 3) No teenager will be executed in 1994.
- ◇ 4) The Bolles who-dun-it goes unsolved in 1994.

Economics

- ◇ 5) The Prime Lending rate drops in 1994.
- ◇ 6) National debt rises despite Clinton policies.
- ◇ 7) The Dow reaches 4200 before suffering a major adjustment.

Environment and Sciences

- ◇ 8) A 6.5 earthquake shakes Southern California.
- ◇ 9) Mudslides wash away parts of Southern California.
- ◇ 10) Seasonal adjustments for temperature prove there is no summer in Phoenix.
- ◇ 11) El Niño fades in 1994.
- ◇ 12) Genetically engineered products are a big hit in 1994.
- ◇ 13) Incidence of Tay-Sachs disease drops off radically.
- ◇ 14) Vaccine for AIDS starts testing in 1994.
- ◇ 15) Next generation nuclear power plant is licensed in 1994.

Personalities

- ◇ 16) A major Asian political leader dies.

◇ 17) Bob Packwood resigns and goes into the ministry, specializing in the Biblical laying on of hands.

◇ 18) Crown Princess of Japan announces her pregnancy. It will be a son.

◇ 19) Charles and Diana dissolve their marriage.

◇ 20) Dr. Kevorkian is appointed team doctor for the New York Mets.

◇ 21) Oral Roberts is not called to God this year.

◇ 22) Tammy Faye racks up divorce #2 in 1994.

◇ 23) Terrorist wins the Nobel Peace Prize.

◇ 24) Ronald Reagan will remember something.

◇ 25) Bush wins an election in 1994.

◇ 26) Hillary Rodham Clinton is Time's Woman of the Year.

◇ 27) Barney bashing continues unabated in 1994.

◇ 28) Arnold is box office gold in 1994.

◇ 29) Rush Limbaugh's popularity begins its slide in 1994.

Politics

◇ 30) A sex scandal rocks Congress.

◇ 31) California does not split into multiple states.

◇ 32) With bipartisan support, the Immigration Service increases its personnel.

◇ 33) The Health Care bill passes, but is watered down in debates.

- ◇ 34) Fifty US soldiers are killed in Haiti in 1994.
- ◇ 35) Russia and Ukraine form mutual defense alliance in 1994.
- ◇ 36) North Korea does not initiate a war with South Korea.
- ◇ 37) Australia leaves the Commonwealth.
- ◇ 38) Democrats suffer losses in Congressional elections.
- ◇ 39) A Clinton/Dole alliance is defeated on a domestic program.
- ◇ 40) Evan Mecham proves he has a sense of humor by running for office in 1994.
- ◇ 41) A movie star enters the political arena in 1994.
- ◇ 42) Gov. Symington crashes and burns in 1994.
- ◇ 43) Dick Mahoney changes jobs in 1994.
- ◇ 44) Conservative Christians continue to make inroads into politics at the local level.
- ◇ 45) Arizona Republicans disown Barry Goldwater.
- ◇ 46) Haiti's Aristide does not survive 1994.
- ◇ 47) Pat Robertson continues to modify his stance on abortion.
- ◇ 48) Soviet nuclear missile is sold in 1994.
- ◇ 49) The US normalizes relations with Viet Nam.
- ◇ 50) Ross Perot spends \$1 billion and buys a clue.

Sports

- ◇ 51) The Phoenix Cardinals have a winning season in '93-'94.
- ◇ 52) The University of Texas has an improved football team in 1994.
- ◇ 53) The Phoenix Suns perform extraordinarily in 1994.

Tragedy

- ◇ 54) An international airline flight goes down with the loss of all on board.

Meeting Schedule for 1994

Our meetings take place on the first Saturday of the month, unless that Saturday is on a holiday weekend. In that event the meeting is moved to the following Saturday.

The schedule for the meetings through the rest of the year is presented below:

June 4, July 9, August 6, September 10, October 1, November 5 (our annual predictions meeting), and December 3

Meetings take place at the Jerry's Restaurant on the east side of Scottsdale Road, halfway between McDowell and the river bottom. We meet at 12:30 for lunch and the program begins some time after 1 pm. All are welcome, the program varies wildly, and all suggestions for guest speakers are welcome. (If we have no speakers, we will continue to show cheesy new age videos. You have been warned.)

Where Have We Been?

We'd like to assume the absence of The Arizona Skeptic has been noticed, but taking things for granted has never been part of being a skeptic. The following explanation is not offered as an excuse for the absence of issues. Instead it is hoped that you'll understand why things have been so late and will continue to be as patient as you have been.

Jim Lippard did an excellent job as the editor of The Arizona Skeptic for Volume 6. His issues were filled with articles and book reviews. More importantly, Jim's issues were delivered on time. Punctuality is always important in working on a periodical.

About this time last year Jim had to give up being editor. Without any volunteers to replace him (he *is* a hard act to follow) that

duty fell to me. Given that I write for a living, filling up a newsletter shouldn't be that difficult.

The problem with writing for a living is that one becomes disinclined to spend more time in front of a word processor than is absolutely necessary, and writing and recreation do not often occur in the same thought. This is not to say that I don't enjoy what I do — if I didn't, I wouldn't do it. The fact is, however, that writing is exhausting.

In 1993, for example, I turned out approximately 386,000 finished words. Your average novel runs between 85,000 and 100,000 words, though I tend to run long. The first novel I finished in 1993 (a fantasy titled *Once A Hero*) started on sale in April and by the 14th had been sent back to press for more copies, so the effort was well worth

it, but that still doesn't make it any less tiring.

This newsletter actually would have been out earlier but I made a false start by trying a new software package to lay it out. That didn't work as well as I liked, so I went back to Microsoft Word, which was used to compile this issue.

Newsletters need articles. We need accounts of your experiences, your researches and your opinions of new books in the field. With your submissions (in card copy or on a 3.5 inch disk, IBM or Macintosh), I'll have to spend less time working on the newsletter, which means it ought to be more regular. — Mike Stackpole

What Harm Superstition?

by Michael A. Stackpole

With the coming of a Friday the 13th (this year in May and December) people often compare notes about the superstitions they hold dear, the superstitions they remember from childhood and even the "stupid" superstition someone else clings to. Skeptics are often asked to offer their opinions about superstitions, primarily because this is precisely the sort of nonsense we're supposed to castigate. In fact, dismissing superstition is so much of a no-brainer that we tend to put very little thought into it at all.

Superstition can be defined as an irrational belief in a causal relationship existing between two unrelated phenomena. Often this relationship is explained by metaphysical means — something beyond definition by normal science. And the superstition is often believed despite evidence to the contrary.

About five years ago, in KFYI, I did a Friday the 13th radio show with morning host Barry Young. At the culmination of the show I smashed a mirror with a hammer, flaunting my disdain for a possible seven years of bad luck. I must report that I've not had bad luck since then — in fact I think I've been rather lucky, knock wood, in the years that have followed that incident.

Then again, I don't know how much *luckier* I would have been *if* I had not smashed that mirror!

Dr. Ray Hyman has pointed out that irrational beliefs originate in mankind's facility for seeing patterns and thereby determining causal relationships. For example, if you hit your head into a wall and notice pain, you won't have to hit your head all that many more times before you notice 1) that it feels better when you stop and 2) that hitting your head against things which are

denser than it is tends to have a negative effect on your physical well being.

Here you've made a correct analysis of act and consequence: hit your head and it hurts. However, timing is not always a good indication of causality. *Post hoc, ergo prompster hoc*, is the Latin phrase describing the fallacy through which many superstitions are born: X happened after Y, therefore Y caused X.

A story is told of a passenger on the Lusitania who entered her stateroom and turned on a light at the precise moment a German torpedo struck the ship. For her what had happened was this: she turned on the light, an explosion shook the ship. She subsequently ran around screaming, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," while the ship sank. In her mind she had caused the disaster, while nothing was further from the truth.

Man's ability to form patterns allows us to master (or attempt to master) all manner of difficult tasks. My father took me out to play golf for the first time in twenty years and he coached me through the basics of a drive from the tee. It took me a good twelve humiliating holes to get things right, but then I started hitting the ball solidly and, oddly enough, my father's drives started to deteriorate badly.

My drives got good because I settled myself into a ritual, a pattern of four practice swings. On the first I got my feet set and my grip firmed up. On the second I brought my backswing up about a third of the way and came down through easily, resisting the temptation to really smash the ball. On the third my backswing went back further — I could all but feel the driver against my left shoulderblade, and I could see the shadow of the head over shoulder. Then I stepped up to the ball, repeated the last full swing and the ball was off like a rocket.

(I still can't chip worth a damn, though.)

I created for myself a ritual that reminded me of all the things I needed to do to drive the ball. It allowed me to screen out distractions and concentrate. I became confident that if I followed through on my little ritual I would have everything put together and I'd hit wonderful drives. Not only did that little ritual work, *but* it was repeatable!

Of course, I stopped short of thinking that my phantom drives were what powered the real drive, but how far is that from the truth? How many tasks do we perform on automatic, after lots of practice? While we would not say the practice *causes* the subsequent success, simply having practiced *does* enhance our chances of success.

I could, were I of a magical mindset, have created a further link between my four swing ritual and another event that happened on the course: my father's driving game's deterioration. After all, I was using his old clubs and as I got better, he got worse. There is enough mystical symbolism tied up in all that to lead some people to believe my ritual had become a magick spell that transferred my father's skill to me.

Now if that sort of thing *did* work I'd be looking for a set of Arnold Palmer's old clubs and a round or two with him as well. It doesn't work that way, of course, and I imagine any proposed study of such an effect would be met with ridicule in the academic world (though it probably *could* get a Federal grant.)

It is possible, though, that my ritual could have affected my father's play. Three practice swings is kind of a lot of practice so the delay could have annoyed him. He could have also been surprised by how well I started hitting the ball and even a little upset because I was out-driving him. That might have put his concentration off enough that he stopped driving well.

It would be easy to dismiss this example as not really being superstition. It could be suggested that the practice swings loosen up muscles that have tightened since the previous drive, and that could even be true. The problem is that now, having created a link between my ritual and success, I'm never going to be quite comfortable stepping up to tee-off without running through it.

Superstitions are supposed to be irrational beliefs, and my belief about my ritual is quite rational. I've tested it and it works. It could be that for someone else, wearing socks inside out when playing basketball works to guarantee a good game. It may, if for no other reason than a placebo effect on the player, making him more comfortable and able to function.

The problem here with these sorts of superstitions — and this can be applied generally to *all* superstitions — is that the explanation offered by the *believer* may have nothing to do with what is really going on. I would drive just as well after completing my ritual if I thought it was warm-up for muscles or was a way to sap golfing skill from my father. It would still work, but I would be wrong about the cause.

And another person, doing what I do to prepare for teeing off, might have the same success I do — all the while believing it's magick when it's not. He could do the correct thing for incorrect reasons and reap the benefit of his actions, all the while being clueless about what's really going on. Ignorance is not a bar to success — as is proved by millions of folks who are able to drive a car without having a clue as to how it works.

What, then, is the harm of believing in superstitions? They fall into two areas which can be more or less harmful depending upon how strongly these beliefs are held.

The first area of harm comes when an individual obsesses about superstitions and is hobbled by them. This could be as simple and harmless as taking a personal day from work every time a Friday falls on the 13th, or refusing to stay on a hotel's 13th floor, to more pernicious problems, like refusing medical care for yourself or a loved one because it will offend some godling or other.

The second area is broader and more dangerous. Belief in superstitions promotes imprecise and cloudy thinking. In its benign stage it produces little nonsensical rituals. At its worst it prevents the believer from finding true solutions to problems because spurious explanations offer themselves and must be investigated. A believer will end up discovering and disproving a legion of

explanations for things without finding a workable solution.

The field of Ufology provides a snapshot of this cloudy thinking in action. Believers will go over case after case, researching each one in great detail before rendering a judgment in that one case. Skeptics will generalize from the evidence in two or three cases to dismiss a whole category of sighting. Believers accuse

us of kneejerk responses and we think they're missing the forest for the trees.

So, will civilization as we know it collapse if you press a four leaf clover between the pages of a book or play hookey on Friday the 13th? Nope. As long as we recognize our ability to make connections where none exist, and are willing to examine those connections for their veracity, no harm is done.

Cross my heart, hope to die.

Skeptically Entertaining

by Michael A. Stackpole

There are, occasionally, works of fiction or television presentations that can prove entertaining and even educational for those of us with a skeptical view of the world. The term *educational* is used rather broadly above, and I mean it in the sense of presenting information (perhaps of dubious value) with which we should be familiar.

The first works of fiction any skeptic should read for both entertainment and enlightenment are the Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Ignore for the moment that Doyle believed faeries existed and that folks could come back from the dead. The Sherlock Holmes stories present in a clear and concise manner the workings of a scientific mind — albeit in a fictional setting and applied to peculiar problems. Learning how to use the deductive method through reading Holmes stories is not a foolproof way to sharpen your mind, but it is fun and can be of use when looking into claims of the paranormal.

Jacques Futrelle was an American contemporary of Doyle and wrote similar stories about Professor S. F. X. Van Dusen, aka The Thinking Machine. The Van Dusen stories are not as well known as the Holmes stories, and probably were not as well written over all, but Dover Books has two collections of Van Dusen stories that present this deductive genius at his best. I actually discovered Van Dusen before I ever read Holmes and someday perhaps I'll write a novel where the two of them meet.

In a more contemporary vein, Patrick A. Kelley has produced a series of mysteries about a magician/skeptic named Harry

Colderwood. All of the books have the word *sleightly* in the title: *Sleightly Deceived*, *Sleightly Invisible*, *Sleightly Lethal*, *Sleightly Murder* and *Sleightly Guilty*. The books are bit difficult to find, but are well worth the search. Harry Colderwood is about as close to James Randi as one could get without writing a biography and the stories are very entertaining.

Less skeptical, but of interest nonetheless, is Garfield Reeve-Stevens novel *Nighteyes*. It is the story of Sarah Gilmour ordeal caused by being kidnapped by a UFO. An entertaining read, the book is significant because Budd Hopkins' "Queen of Abductees" apparently took her entire adventure from this book.

Perhaps the weirdest entertainment offering that might interest skeptics is Fox Television's *The X Files* (Friday, 8-9 pm MST, Channel 15 in Phoenix.) The series revolves around the adventures of FBI Agents Dana Scully and Fox Mulder as they investigate cases of paranormal phenomena, from the FBI's X Files. Scully is the team's die hard skeptic — she is almost constantly trying to ground Mulder in reality. Mulder, on the other hand, managed to link all sorts of thin evidence into paranormal explanations that just seem to fit the case.

There is no question that *The X Files* comes from a wholly un-skeptical viewpoint because prosaic explanations seldom suffice — on this show Occam's Razor couldn't cut jello. On the other hand the show is not just one spookhunt after another. While Mulder might be finding paranormal explanations to these various cases, he does apply cold and clear logic. In the universe of *The X Files* some truly weird stuff exists and leaves the

tangible evidence behind that seems to be lacking in the real world.

The show also doesn't rely on characters always sticking in their molds. When Scully has a paranormal experience, Mulder becomes the skeptic, pointing out where other mundane explanations suffice for what's been going on. Also, unlike most episodic television, events that have happened in a previous show do get reflected in subsequent scripts. That's not to say there's a novel's worth of change in each character each week, but there is some development and that's rare on TV.

The X Files has tackled all sorts of different paranormal phenomena, from UFO's and government conspiracies to mutants and

pyrokinesis. Each show tends to have a quick overview of the general phenomena as a background for the individual case driving that episode's story. In presenting this background material the show does tend to ignore the solid debunking done in some cases, but the introductions are good primers for skeptics on how believers tend to see these things.

So, if you want some entertainment and just don't want to pony up the bucks for those calls to Psychic Friends Network, rest assured there are other choices for you. High science they aren't, but all work and no play will make skeptics as dull as our critics believe we are.

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1. To subject claims of the Paranormal, occult, and fringe sciences to the test of science, logic and common sense.
2. To act as a clearinghouse for factual and scientific information on the paranormal.
3. To promote critical thinking and the scientific method.

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