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## News and Comment

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### Mysteries and Millions: Time-Life Books Launches 20-volume Series on the Paranormal

**T**IME-LIFE Books' new series on the paranormal, *Mysteries of the Unknown*, "won't be sensational," says series editor Russell Adams. Adams, who describes himself as a regular reader of both the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* and *Fate* magazine, explains that the series will present the paranormal as "social-historical phenomena." "We're not setting out to debunk, although if something is patently wacky we won't suggest that we believe it or tell our readers they should believe it," he says.

The first book in the series will be published in August. Entitled *Mystic Places*, it will cover such topics as Stonehenge, the Pyramids, and the Bermuda Triangle. Future volumes will appear about every other month, Adams says. The series is expected to include 20 volumes, but that figure is still subject to revision.

When the project was proposed, the editorial board at Time-Life expressed some concern about how the subject would be handled. Promotional packages for the series, which appeared in 1985 and again in early 1987, seem to justify that concern: The promotional copy is openly pro-paranormal. For example, a

"Dear reader" letter, signed by Time-Life Books President Chris Linen, in the most recent package begins:

A psychic describes what is happening hundreds of miles away. . . . A pet dog makes its way from Vancouver to Tokyo to find its master. . . . Dogon Africans map the star-system Sirius with staggering accuracy. . . . Ancient artifacts hint at a knowledge of electricity. . . . Tibetan lamas create solid objects by a form of thought projection. . . .

Is some unknown force allowing these things to happen? And have you yourself ever had the feeling that you lived another life in the remote past . . . that you once saw a UFO . . . and you simply can't dispel the idea that there is more to the world than can be explained by conventional science, then . . .

Come explore the mysteries of unexplained phenomena through the pages of Time-Life Books' unprecedented new series.

The blurb for *Mystic Places* invites subscribers to learn "where experts now place" the location of Atlantis and to "enjoy a vivid reconstruction of what life may have been like in its glittering capital." Adams points out, however, that the



Part of glossy four-color fold-out touting Time-Life Books series.



Front of the promo package.

promotional copy for the series is advertising hype that shouldn't be taken too seriously. In reality, he says, "the books will not be sensational at all, at least in our opinion."

General consultant for the series is sociologist Marcello Truzzi. Although he was associated with CSICOP in 1976 and

1977, Truzzi generally takes a less critical view of paranormal claims and their proponents. He has worked with the Time-Life staff reviewing book outlines and reading manuscripts. In addition, Time-Life has hired "individual experts" to review material that relates to their specialty. Information for the books has been gathered by freelance researchers; as an example, Adams cites the section on the Pyramids from *Mystic Places*, which was researched by a graduate student in Egyptology.

The series will take a lighter approach than that of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Adams says. "The books are intended as entertainment, presenting vivid stories about interesting incidents." If hoaxes are covered, they'll be presented as "a story, not a matter of belief," he says.

Where will Time-Life draw the line in deciding what to include? Adams gives the example of J. Z. Knight, the channeler, who supposedly speaks in the voice of a prehistoric warrior. "If this had happened years ago, it would be a quaint story, but since it's current, we won't go into what is obviously, at least to my

mind, a hoax.”

Time-Life Books expects to sign up 100,000 subscribers to the series. Figuring a 20-volume series at a cost of \$14.99 for each book (the price of the first volume), that could put a total of nearly \$30 million in the Time-Life coffers.

Adams describes the typical subscriber to the series as someone who is curious about the paranormal, whether he or she is a believer or doubter. His goal, he says, is to provide readers with a product “that won’t insult the believers with skepticism and won’t insult the skeptics with its credulity.”

—Lys Ann Shore

*Lys Ann Shore is a writer and editor in Socorro, New Mexico.*

### **Mainlining of Mysticism: Poll Shows New Popularity**

**A**CCORDING to a new national poll, two-thirds of all adults (67 percent) report having had a psychic experience. Nearly half (42 percent) believe they have been in contact with someone who has died. Nearly a third (31 percent) say they have experienced clairvoyance, and 29 percent have had visions.

These are among the results of a national survey done by priest-sociologist-novelist Andrew Greeley and his colleagues at the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Council (NORC) and reported in the January-February *American Health*.

The figures are all considerably higher than in a similar 1973 poll. In the article “Mysticism Goes Mainstream,” Greeley says he thinks the increase is not because the incidence of such experiences is rising but because people are now more willing to admit having such experiences.

Shirley MacLaine’s recent books may have contributed. “Partly because of her

and others, millions are less afraid to talk about the experiences,” writes Greeley. He contends he has no vested interest, religious or sociological, in the metaphysical reality of these experiences and says he, like the Roman Catholic church of this era, is profoundly skeptical of paranormal phenomena.

“But even though I’ve never had a psychic or mystical experience myself, most Americans have. We saw this in our first study in 1973 and in data from a repeat survey we have just analyzed. . . . More people than ever say they’ve had such experiences.” The poll of a national sample of 1,473 adults was carried out in 1984. Greeley did not explain the delay in publishing the results except to note that he had only recently finished work with the data.

“If these experiences are signs of mental illness, our numbers would show the country is going nuts. What was paranormal is now normal. . . . Our studies show that people who’ve tasted the paranormal, whether they accept it intellectually or not, are anything but religious nuts or psychiatric cases.”

Greeley notes that many, particularly in academia and the media, “find it unthinkable that a sizable proportion of the people they see every day believe they have experiences outside the accepted limits of science. . . .” But they do.

Despite his protestations of personal disbelief, Greeley says the experiences reported in these surveys have led him to include such themes in his novels. “To pretend that such perceptions do not occur to ordinary people in everyday life is like a Victorian novelist pretending that sexual intercourse does not occur.”

Here and elsewhere Greeley makes little effort to differentiate between people’s culturally influenced interpretations of their “mystical experiences” and any external physical reality.

For those who consider acceptance of the paranormal a disturbing trend indicative of public credulity and wide-

spread misunderstanding of science and psychology, Greeley has an even more troubling and controversial conclusion: "Our work confirms . . . that these experiences are common, benign and often helpful. What has been 'paranormal' is not only becoming normal in our time—it may also be health-giving."

As if Greeley's survey results aren't enough, his article in *American Health* is followed by one about Shirley MacLaine that hops willingly on the New Age bandwagon. It treats her as a pioneer. "One woman, more than anyone else, has had the audacity to break the silence and bring the forbidden subject into the limelight. Actress Shirley MacLaine believes that her pals in the spirit world have selected her to 'channel' the word of a new/old enlightenment to a skeptical age."

These articles appeared just before the showing of ABC-TV's miniseries based on MacLaine's books, *Out on a Limb* and *Dancing in the Light*. Although dumped on by critics and the goat of jokes by Johnny Carson and others, MacLaine, it appears, has helped spread and popularize the gospel of mushy "New Age thought" (however it may be defined) about as widely as any fringe science or pseudoscience of recent decades.

—K.F.

### **The Curious Case of Omni's Column Criticizing CSICOP**

**T**HE FEBRUARY 1987 *Omni* carried a curious "Continuum" column making a number of strong criticisms of CSICOP and implying that it censors the paranormal. The column was written by Jerome Clark, a UFO journalist and devotee of what he calls "anomalies," "things . . . that don't fit." Clark is associate editor of *Fate* magazine, which is devoted almost entirely to paranormal and occult matters.

Several of the incidents Clark recounted had in fact only a marginal relationship to CSICOP as an organization. For instance, in 1985 CSICOP immediately severed any association with a Philadelphia resident mentioned in the column whose tactics and approach to combatting the paranormal it considered inappropriate. Clark knew that, but did not mention it. Clark's column gave similarly distorted and misleading accounts of several other incidents.

Mark Plummer, CSICOP executive director, and Executive Council members Martin Gardner, Kendrick Frazier, and Philip J. Klass all sent letters of protest to *Omni*, pointing out numerous errors in fact and interpretation. Plummer noted that CSICOP invites opponents to present their cases at its conferences, where many controversial issues are discussed and debated. "We are opposed to censorship in any form whatsoever, and are committed to free and open scientific inquiry," Plummer concluded.

In his letter, Frazier said that, contrary to the caricature presented in Clark's column, CSICOP and the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER strive to ensure that the scientific view is represented. "We want to ensure that the actual results of responsible scientific inquiries and well-planned critical investigations get to the public along with all the misinformation and nonsense that is so readily published. We promote the values of scientific inquiry and critical thinking."

Klass said several statements and implications in the column about his involvement in a controversy over a UFO conference were malicious and known by Clark to be false.

Judging from copies of letters sent to us, several readers of *SI* also wrote to *Omni* to protest the distortions in the column.

It was not clear what, if anything, would result.

Ironically, the column appears in the same issue with strongly pro-science arti-

cles on science and creationism and the science-textbook controversies. Editor-at-large Dick Teresi told Frazier in a phone conversation that *Omni* had needed something involving censorship by science to lead off and contrast with the rest of the section. He did not make clear how CSICOP's efforts to evaluate already published and broadcast paranormal claims constitute censorship.

Teresi also suggested the possibility of *Omni* giving CSICOP and "the other side" (representatives unspecified) equal amounts of space in a future issue and "let you have at each other." This didn't seem a fair offer, as CSICOP's complaints concerned a column *Omni* had already given space to. Furthermore, CSICOP is not a homogenous institution with an "official" point of view.

CSICOP Chairman Paul Kurtz said he was concerned about the distortions but considered the column an anomaly. He pointed out that the abundant worldwide news and feature coverage of CSICOP and its activities has been accurate and overwhelmingly positive.

—Kendrick Frazier

### Psychics' Imagined Year Fizzles (Again)

**S**AN FRANCISCO was not struck by a severe earthquake in March 1986. Madonna and Princess Diana did not have babies in 1986. There was no assassination attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev, New York City was not blacked out for 16 days, and, alas, there was no vaccine or cure developed for AIDS.

These were just a few of the specific predictions made by well-known psychics for the year 1986 that failed to happen, compiled by the Bay Area Skeptics in their annual look-back at the predictions self-proclaimed psychics made for the previous year.



The results suggest that, in their eagerness to make attention-catching predictions, the "professional psychics" did significantly worse in foreseeing the events of 1986 than a seasoned news reporter or an educated person following the news would have done.

Perhaps more significantly, no "psychic" succeeded in predicting the genuinely surprising news stories of 1986, for example, the Challenger disaster, the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos, the Daniloff affair, or the secret arms deal with Iran and the funneling of funds to the Contras.

Out of the hundreds of predictions the "psychics" make every year, many are so vaguely worded they are impossible to judge true or false. Others simply involve phenomena that happen every year, such as hurricanes in Florida and continued terrorist activity.

Still other prognostications were not predictions at all, but actually disclosures of movie productions, business ventures, and celebrity activities already under way before 1986 began. While some "psychic" predictions did of course come true (especially those that were not very specific or hard to guess), not one prediction that

was both specific and surprising came true for 1986.

The famous Washington, D.C., "psychic" Jeane Dixon, who claims to have a "gift of prophecy," predicted that famine in Ethiopia and other African nations would be relieved in 1986 when space shuttle astronauts located water beneath barren deserts. She also predicted that shuttle flights would lead to the creation of artificial gems. Her "gift" failed to tell her of the January 1986 Challenger disaster; no shuttles were launched the rest of the year. Dixon also predicted that Princess Diana would announce another pregnancy, that Tom Selleck would lose a valuable automobile when it sank into water, and Madonna would have a baby.

Chicago "psychic" Irene Hughes predicted that severe earthquakes would strike San Francisco in March and Missouri in May, killing hundreds. Princess Diana was to give birth to twins, and an assailant would fire a shot at the pope, but a crucifix around the pontiff's neck would deflect the bullet.

Miami "psychic" Micki Dahne predicted that health problems would force President Reagan to turn over the presidency to George Bush and that vaccines for AIDS and herpes would be developed and distributed to everyone nationwide.

Clarissa Bernhardt, who claims to make accurate predictions of earthquakes, predicted that Old Faithful would dry up. She also foresaw that scientists would accidentally shoot down a UFO with a laser beam and that John McEnroe

would retire from tennis to play baseball for the San Francisco Giants.

San Francisco Bay Area "psychics" fared no better. Sylvia Brown predicted that President Reagan would have another bout with cancer around April. The popular TV show "Dynasty" would be canceled, the pope would contract pneumonia, Princess Diana would become pregnant, and the Los Angeles Raiders would face the Bears in the 1986 Superbowl. A power blackout in New York City would last for 16 days, and a strange flu virus causing paralysis of the face would become widespread in February.

Barbara Mousalam, who has in recent years been prognosticating for San Francisco's prestigious Commonwealth Club, predicted that the hostages in Lebanon would be released in 1986 and the Republicans would retain control of the Senate in the November elections.

The Bay Area Skeptics includes scientists, educators, magicians, and others concerned about uncritical public acceptance of paranormal claims.

## No Comment Department

**P**SYCHIC NEWS, a London spiritualist weekly newspaper, recently published a curious report. Their offices had been burglarized, and this was causing problems, the psychics' newspaper said. "A day's mail was stolen—and we have no idea what it contained."