

truthfulness can threaten, block, or ruin the truth-teller's career."

Is the disease model of alcoholism scientific? No. Simply calling behavior a disease process does not make it one, even if doing so assists in creating sobriety. Is treatment policy based on

bad science? Yes. Is there any chance that this attitude will change in the near future? Not really.



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## Who Says Literature Isn't Lucrative?

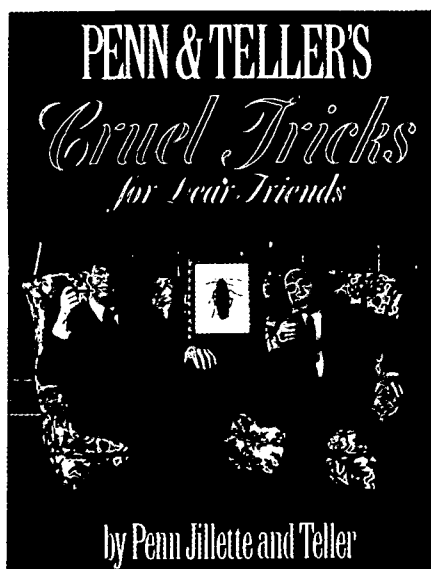
*Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends*. By Penn Jillette and Teller. Villard Books, New York, 1989. 203 pp. Paper, \$15.95.

M. B. Gehrman

I know a lot of you people out there are skeptical. I'm skeptical too—some might even go out on a limb and say *cynical*—so when I called Villard Books and asked them to send me a review copy of Penn and Teller's *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends*, I thought: What a great scam. I'll get this free book, and not even have to do any work.

But I have to admit that when the book arrived and I started playing with it, I got pretty jazzed about it. I decided to give it some free publicity after all, and the editors of *SI* thoughtfully provided me with a forum.

You may have noticed that I did not say, "When the book arrived and I started reading it." That's because Penn and Teller and the nice folks at Villard have tried to make this book impossible to read, by using "trick printing, special binding, and . . . neat, secret gimmicks." Part of the reason for this is that if the book were *easy* to read, you would not be able to use it in the manner the authors intended: against the people who trust you. Yes, Penn and Teller actually want you to "take that trust and twist it so you can steal



the dignity (and in some cases real cash money) from these poor saps."

But the reader is also reminded that this "is more than just cheesy magic tricks in book form to make a quick couple/three bucks for a pair of two-bit swindlers. It is also real literature." This should be immediately apparent to anyone who went to high school and learned that real literature is hard

to read. I vaguely remember high school, and because of this, I considered it to be my scholarly obligation to read this book in addition to playing with it.

I also read *Would Could Should*, "the little book that comes packaged right with the big book." In it are nine of the "true and semi-true (false) stories about TV stars, con men, Indians, strippers, mad scientists, carnies, monsters, and existential novelists" that Penn and Teller give you as a sort of bonus for wading through their cruel tricks and nauseating photos. They call these stories "filler," for those "solitary moments, when there's no one to humiliate." A skeptic with a sense of humor will like these stories; a skeptic with a warped, twisted, *sick* sense of humor will love them. Anyone who has ever suffered through a torturous long-distance "relationship" will chuckle knowingly, if painfully, at "A Slightly Different Reality to Ponder." Anyone who hated being teased by the "cool" kids in grammar school will identify with "Alva Boyle," if only in a secret, put-it-out-of-your-mind, *guilt*-inducing way. And for *SI* readers, "Snapshots of a Monster" alone may make the price of this package worthwhile (though I can't say for certain, since I got mine for free).

As for the big book, *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends*, it is just chock-full of pertinent information for those who wish to prove, with Penn and Teller's help, that they are superior to the "latent chumps" they call their pals. The authors give thanks for modern science, muse over the "random, godless universe," and try to make sense of their "pointless, obscure lives." They trash Jesus freaks, psychic surgeons, backward masking, televangelism, the New Age, cryptozoologists, and more. All of this should make skeptics very happy.

Some skeptics, however, say they are *not* happy that Penn and Teller actually tell you how to pull the wool even farther over the eyes of the gullible. (A typical example: "Use [the Psi TV Scam] to punish 'enlightened' believers in the occult—you know, the ones who scoff at demonic possession but read up on trance channeling; laugh at astrology but schedule their lives around biorhythm charts; sneer at fairies but spend their vacations watching the skies for the UFOs that built the Pyramids.")

But Penn and Teller are straightforward. They are honest. And when they're not being honest, they tell you. They don't mind showing you how to reshape the future of other people's money, as long as you do it in the name of reason. This is the way they have chosen to pay homage to the Enlightenment. Consider this passage, attributed to "Kamus, King of Cards":

There have always been men to defend the rights of the irrational. The tradition of what may be called humiliated thought has never ceased to exist. The criticism of rationalism has been made so often that it seems unnecessary to begin again. Yet our epoch is marked by the rebirth of those paradoxical systems that strive to trip up the reason as if truly it had always forged ahead. But that is not such much a proof of the efficacy of the reason as of the intensity of its hopes.

For illusionists, these guys are pretty realistic.

Penn and Teller are not for everyone. Many will furrow their brows and tsk tsk and consider them just another example of whatever it is that this world is coming to. And that's okay with them. In fact, they go out of their way to keep people from liking them, just as they go out of their way to keep people from reading their

book—the book in which they insult not only each other but your “dear friends”—and you—freely. They know how to make people hate them, and they love it. By their own description, they are “snotty, condescending, self-righteous, and holier than thou.” This is part of their charm. Another part of their charm is that every now and then they slip and let their warm and fuzzy side show through. For instance, “The Best Magic Trick I Ever Saw” and “The Creation of Life” chapters show that, in the true spirit of modern cynicism, although Penn and Teller may be cruel to people (who, after all, often deserve it), they are kind to animals.

Still, these guys are on the cutting edge of cutting, practicing metacon- descension at its best: If you are in on the joke, you’re part of the joke. Now that celebrities feel snubbed when their names do not appear in the scandal sheets, and black-clad city

dwellers stand on line in the middle of blustery nights just for the privilege of being rejected, metacondescension is good. It’s hip. It’s where it’s at.

Knowing that, of course, may make you unhip again, kind of like a double negative. It’s hard to say, and contemplating it could fling you unsuspecting into hipster hell. Next thing you know you’ll be wandering around gallery openings muttering about giant silver bunnies.

But I liked the book anyway. I even read it—even the pages with itty-bitty tiny irritating psycho-print with patterns printed over it. *That* was tough going. But it was worth it, especially since “only people who have paid the price of this book deserve to be able to take advantage of it.”



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