



The Case of the 'Psychic Detectives'

Although mainstream science has never validated any psychic ability, self-styled clairvoyants, diviners, spirit mediums, and soothsayers continue to sell their fantasies—and in some cases to shrewdly purvey their cons—to a credulous public. Particu-

claimants. (Another, Phil Jordan, was featured in an earlier SI [Nickell 2004].)

Allison DuBois

Allison DuBois is the “real-life” Phoenix-area clairvoyant/spiritualist whose alleged assistance to law enforce-

Medium/) boasts that “DuBois has consulted on a variety of murders or missing persons cases while working with various law enforcement agencies including the Glendale Arizona Police Department, the Texas Rangers, and a County Attorney’s office in the Homicide Bureau.” In fact, however, both the Glendale police and the Texas Rangers deny DuBois worked with them. Glendale police spokesperson Michael Pena told SI managing editor Benjamin Radford that the detective who investigates missing persons cases “does not recall using DuBois at all in [one specific] case, or in any other cases.” And Texas Rangers spokesperson Tom Vinger stated flatly to Radford, “The Texas Rangers have not worked with Allison DuBois or any other psychics” (Radford 2005, 7).

It is curious in any event that the show’s Web site claims only that DuBois “consulted” on cases—not that she solved a single one. The site mentions that DuBois is “the youngest member of the elite medium ‘Dream Team’ studied by Dr. Gary Schwartz at the University of Arizona in Tucson.” That isn’t much to boast of: Schwartz, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at Arizona, is credulous about the paranormal, and his book *The Afterlife Experiments* (2002) claims he has provided scientific evidence for the survival of consciousness and the reality of spirit communication. However, noted parapsychology critic Ray Hyman (2003, 22) observes that

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Joe Nickell, a former investigator with a world-famous detective agency, is CSICOP’s Senior Research Fellow. His books include Crime Science and Psychic Sleuths.

ment is the basis for NBC’s drama series *Medium* (featuring Patricia Arquette as DuBois). Executive producer Glen Gordon Caron (creator of *Moonlighting*) says of DuBois: “I was amazed by her tale. She has this radio in her head that she has no control over. Wherever she looked, she saw dead people. It was a tremendous albatross in terms of having a family life. And I thought, ‘I’ve never heard that story before, certainly not from the point of view of a soccer mom’” (Hiltbrand 2005).

But Caron has been snookered. The *Medium* Web site (www.nbc.com/

Schwartz is "badly mistaken," adding: "The research he presents is flawed. Probably no other extended program in psychical research deviates so much from accepted norms of scientific methodology as this one does."

Nevertheless, the publicity DuBois receives "appears to have been good for business," according to one reporter (Hiltbrand 2005) who notes that DuBois now has a "backlog of murder cases," for which she does not charge, and years of bookings for personal readings, for which she does. She also acts as a jury consultant for prosecutors (Bloom 2005). DuBois thus follows the approach of the late Illinois psychic Greta Alexander who worked free with police at every opportunity, which brought her publicity, thus aiding her business of offering palm readings, operating a 900-number telephone inspiration line, selling astrology and numerology charts, and other endeavors (Nickell 1994, 12; Lucas 1994, 134).

Noreen Renier

High-profile "psychic" Noreen Renier employs an old divination technique called psychometry, by which she claims to get psychic impressions and visions from objects connected with a particular person. Actually the claim of psychometric power is testable, but Renier does not seem willing to accept the challenge of psychic investigator James Randi, who offers a million dollars to anyone who can exhibit such a power under scientifically controlled conditions. (See Randi's article in this issue.)

Indeed, like many alleged psychics, Renier prefers to avoid skeptics, instead offering her alleged paranormal abilities to the credulous.

For example she claims to have had a vision of President Reagan's attempted assassination. Actually, there are varying accounts of just what Renier actually said. When asked under oath about having predicted Reagan would be shot, she answered: "Some of those predictions were not mine. The newspaper put in three or four jazzy ones without my—I didn't do two or three of those predictions" (Posner 1994, 65). Renier is reported to have a history of such pre-

dictions, forecasting that after his reelection in 1980 President Jimmy Carter would be assassinated on the lawn of the White House; she also saw Vice President Walter Mondale committing suicide (Posner 1994, 66).

Regarding Reagan, on various occasions Renier apparently referred to chest "problems," possibly a heart attack or at least some chest pains. Then she converted that to a gunshot, finally stating, according to FBI agent Robert Ressler (1986, 12, 13), that Reagan "would be killed in a machine gun assault on a parade stand by many in foreign uniforms. . . ." Renier was then in a position

divers soon located Lewis truck with his skeletal remains. Or so the case is typically presented in the media, citing Renier and Williston police. Court TV (September 22, 2004) featured a slanted treatment of the case that omitted crucial information and offered a highly dubious recreation of events. Like so many psychic sleuth success tales, this one seems to get better with each retelling.

However, the Williston case was thoroughly investigated by Dr. Gary Posner (1997, 2005) with revealing results. Williston police actually knew that Lewis was "despondent" and had

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to use a technique called *retrofitting* (after-the-fact matching). She could score if Reagan had a coronary or other chest pains or problems, or if there was an attack on his life, with or without a bullet to his chest, whether he survived or not—or he could die in a hail of gunfire. In fact, Renier's error regarding the machine-gunning was later shifted to claim successful prediction of the assassination of Anwar Sadat of Egypt. Renier shrewdly observed that she hadn't said "which president" (Posner 1994, 64).

One of Renier's most celebrated "cases" is that of a missing Williston, Florida, resident, 76-year-old Norman Lewis, who vanished on March 24, 1994, and remained missing for two years. The police supposedly had no leads or suspects, but when Renier was consulted she immediately "saw" Lewis in his red truck. She also visualized the numbers "45" and "21" and other "clues," including a cliff wall, loose bricks, a bridge, and railroad tracks. This led police to a rock quarry, and Navy

confided to a friend that if his situation deteriorated "he would find a river or pit"—that is, one in which to end his life—and "made some reference to knowing every rock pit in the county." Significantly, Lewis had left behind both his wallet and his respiratory inhaler (he had emphysema), clues suggesting he did not intend to return.

Renier had been informed that Lewis's truck had not been found, despite intensive searching. If it was in the vicinity, notes Posner (1997, 3), it must surely have been "submerged in a body of water." If Renier had looked at a map—something she appears often to do (e.g., Voyles 1999)—she would have observed that the Williston area is dotted with limestone quarries and crisscrossed with railroad tracks, as well as highways 45 and 121. In fact, the police had looked "into several bodies of water," notes Posner (1997, 2), prior to searching the Whitehurst pit, where Lewis's truck and remains were finally found.

Actually, a different pit was nearer Lewis's home, and Posner (1997, 2, 6–7) observes that it best matched the psychic's so-called clues. However, the lead detective on the case, Brian Hewitt, admitted he had "walked around probably 30 quarries" before finally determining to search the Whitehurst pit. If Lewis had traveled north instead of south on the main road from his home (Route 45), the first large quarry he would reach was the Whitehurst pit.

The "clues" Renier provided were either obvious for the area or were the result of retrofitting. After the fact, for example, abandoned railroad tracks that were belatedly uncovered, and an old truck scale that resembled a "bridge," were interpreted by obviously credulous police to fit Renier's statements.

Carla Baron

Yet another would-be clairvoyant is "psychic profiler" Carla Baron of Los Angeles. She makes grand claims—such as having solved fifty cases during the last two decades—but there is little to substantiate them. That is the conclusion of the Independent Investigations Group (IIG), which examines paranormal claims, especially in Baron's bailiwick. The group looked into fourteen cases Baron has claimed involvement with, concluding that "every case we investigated was either solved without Baron's involvement or remains unsolved" (IIG 2004).

For example, her publicity materials assert that she worked on the "O.J. Simpson case." She has also claimed to have done "some channeling work" on that case, specifically with the Brown family. The IIG, however contacted Nicole's sister, Denise Brown, who was primary spokesperson for the family during the Simpson trials, and is now an advocate for victims of violent crime. She responded, "I've never heard of this person," adding that none of her family members has ever heard of Baron either. Concludes the IIG (2004), "It seems clear that Baron's claim that she worked on the 'O.J. Simpson case' is baseless."

As another instance, Carla Baron claimed on a Los Angeles radio program that she had predicted correctly that

Elizabeth Smart would be found alive. (Alive or dead is a fifty-fifty proposition.) The kidnapped fourteen-year-old was found alive, a hostage of a cult leader calling himself "Emmanuel." Baron further claimed that she provided information to Ed Smart, Elizabeth's father, through a tip hotline operator named "Melinda," and the psychic's publicity materials list the Smart case among those she has allegedly worked on; however Ed Smart was quoted as saying that "the family didn't get any valuable information from psychics" (IIG 2004).

Baron has reportedly stated: "I don't think it's about the accuracy. I think it's about the assistance that I give." The IIG (2005) report responds:

But how can you assist people with inaccurate information? Doesn't providing the missing piece of the puzzle, or insight and information, connecting the dots usually lead to a solution? Implicit in the claim of being a "psychic detective" is the claim that you provide accurate information that leads to the successful resolution of a mystery. Imagine if a police detective said, "police detectives don't actually solve the case, they just come up with ideas and hope for the best." Such a statement would not generate much confidence in police procedure, and rightly so.

Carol Pate

We hear a lot about psychics' alleged successes, but less about their much more frequent and notable failures. Take two "cases" of Little Rock, Arkansas, psychic Carol Pate, for example. The first is claimed a success.

Pate appeared on Court TV's *Psychic Detectives* and *Larry King Live* regarding her alleged assistance in the case of a missing Arkansas teenager. Although it was claimed that Pate "helped find" the boy ("Psychics" 2004), she did nothing of the sort. He was released after being repeatedly raped by his kidnapper. So when the announcer for *Larry King Live* asked, before a commercial break, "Can detectives use a psychic's vision to catch a kidnapper?" ("Psychics" 2004), the answer is, no. Pate could only try to match up her stated "clues" by using the police psychic's stock-in-trade, retrofitting. For instance the word *ridge*, says Pate, "came into my

head," and Ridge Road was the name of the main route leading away from the kidnap site ("Psychics" 2004). Pate could easily have learned this fact when she visited the location or consulted a map.

Another case involving Carol Pate concerned Dr. Xu "Sue" Wang of Darien, Illinois, who disappeared in 1999 after she left for work at a medical center. Just over a year later, Carol Pate claimed that, from photos mailed to her by the Darien police, she had a psychic vision. She said she visualized the scene where Wang had been buried in a previously dug grave (Zorn 2000a). Subsequently, the police, acting on Pate's advice, announced plans to conduct an aerial search as well as use dogs to look for the missing physician's burial site ("Police" 2000).

Reporting on Pate's claims, *Chicago Tribune* columnist Eric Zorn was skeptical. He quoted me as stating, "They count their lucky guesses and ignore all their misses," and "I have just one question for all of them: Where's Jimmy Hoffa?" Zorn (2000a) gave odds that the police would not "find anything," and concluded that Pate was merely "guessing."

Subsequently Zorn sent an e-mail to SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, quoting Darien's deputy police chief Ron Campo. Campo said of Pate's psychic input, "It didn't pan out." Concluded Zorn (2000b): "Turns out the woman was just guessing, like every other phony who claims to have such powers—exactly, eerily as I predicted. Hey, d'ya suppose. . . ?"

Etta Louise Smith

One of the most unusual "psychic" cases I ever investigated was that of Etta Louise Smith. Actually Smith never claimed to be a psychic sleuth, but she allegedly had a one-time "vision" of a murder victim's body. This was so accurate that it led to her arrest by Los Angeles police, although she was subsequently "vindicated" by a Los Angeles Superior Court jury. The case occurred in 1980, but was featured on a *Larry King Live* program in 2004, hosted by Nancy Grace.

Smith's alleged vision was of the location of the body of a missing nurse, Melanie Uribe, at an area in rural Lopez

Canyon. Indeed, after Smith had gone to the police and pinpointed the location on a map, she decided to drive to the site with two of her children. They had located the body and were en route to a telephone when she met the arriving police!

She was later questioned about her precise knowledge and was given a lie detector test, which she failed. According to a detective's sworn testimony, "the polygraphist indicated that she was being deceptive," even "trying to control her breathing" (Guarino 1987, 5, 10). She was jailed for four days on suspicion of having some connection with the crime or criminals.

Smith subsequently sued the police for the trauma she had suffered, asking \$750,000 in damages. She won her case, but the jury, some of whom were apparently suspicious of Smith's "psychic" vision, awarded her a mere \$26,184—sufficient to reimburse her for lost wages and attorney's fees, but providing little for pain and suffering (Varenchik 1987).

Forensic analyst John F. Fischer and I looked into the intriguing case, obtaining court transcripts and other materials, and concluded that it was possible to be skeptical of Smith's psychic powers without suspecting her of being an accessory (Nickell 1994, 161–162). We recalled an earlier case in which police concealed an informant's identity by means of a cover story attributing the information to a psychic. Is it not possible that an acquaintance of Smith, privy to information about the crime, sought her help in revealing the information? Could Smith not merely have been protecting her source? The possibility gains credibility from the fact that the killers were uncovered because one of them had boasted of the crime to people in his Pacoima neighborhood and, at the time, Smith lived in Pacoima! Interestingly, as Smith went searching for the nurse's body, her psychic powers seemed to wane, and it was one of her children who actually spied the white-clad corpse (Klunder 1987; Varenchik 1987, 44–45).

That Smith could locate the canyon site on a map is revealing. She was clearly not employing a technique of divination

(such as map dowsing, which usually involves the use of a pendulum) to locate something hidden (Guiley 1991; Nickell 1994, 163–164). Instead, she seemed already to know the location and was merely seeking to identify it on a map for police. Smith appears to have given conflicting accounts of her "vision." She said on a television program, "It was as if someone had put a picture right in front of me" (*Sightings* 1992). Yet the book *Psychic Murder Hunters* assures us, "Strangely Etta didn't have a vision of any kind—she described it as a feeling rather than a vision" (Boot 1994, 348).

That her alleged vision was a one-time occurrence would appear to support police suspicions, as would the failed polygraph test, especially the allegation that she was trying to control her breathing. Revealingly, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children cautions against completely ignoring such "psychic" tips, since the purported visions may be a cover for someone who is afraid or otherwise unwilling to become directly involved (Henetz 2002).

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As these cases and profiles indicate, psychics do not solve crimes or locate missing persons—unless they employ the same non-mystical techniques as real detectives: obtaining and assessing factual information, receiving tips, and so on, even sometimes getting lucky. In addition to the technique of "retrofitting," psychics may shrewdly study local newspaper files and area maps, glean information from family members or others associated with a tragedy, and even impersonate police and reportedly attempt to bribe detectives (Nickell 1994). It is bad enough that they are often able to fool members of the media; detectives, if they do not know better, as most do, should learn better. They should, well, *investigate* their alleged psychic counterparts.

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