Sylvia Browne's Latest: Ghost-Written?

JOE NICKELL

Secrets & Mysteries of the World. By Sylvia Browne. Hay House, Carlsbad, California. 2005, ISBN 1-4019-0085-2. 237 pp. Hardcover, $19.95.

Self-proclaimed psychic Sylvia Browne—*who once failed to foresee* her own criminal conviction (in the wake of a gold-mining venture that her strong psychic "feelings" indicated would be successful [SI, Nov./Dec. 2004])—has a new book on the market. As it happens, quite inadvertently on my part, I helped to write it.

Titled *Secrets & Mysteries of the World*, it is an exception to Browne's usual practice of collaborating on a book "with" so-and-so. This time the cover simply reads, "Sylvia Browne." (She added the *e* following her 1992 felony conviction and divorce from Kenzil Dalzelle Brown.)

In producing this book, she says, she *augmented her "intense research" with* her "psychic abilities." (Or alleged abilities, because she continues to refuse to allow her powers to be tested by psychic investigator James Randi, who offers a million dollars to anyone who can genuinely demonstrate extrasensory phenomena.) Browne also claims assistance from "Francine," the imaginary playmate of her childhood who is now the aging Browne's "spirit guide" (11).

Browne says she used psychometry (psychic object-reading) at Stonehenge and got "images of people—hundreds of individuals dragging huge monoliths across a plain" (5–6). However, although she consulted a couple of Web sites *regarding the Bermuda Triangle, she says* it "still remains an enigma to this day" (26, 27). She had better luck with fairies, having seen one—"with wings and all!"—in Ireland (62). However, she can only say she *believes* in the reality of the chupacabra (a blood-sucking entity), being convinced that "it's actually a creature from another planet that was put here for research purposes and sometimes runs amok" (90).

Regarding extraterrestrials, Browne *mentions that her great-uncle, "who was* psychic and worked in the old Spiritualist camps in Florida," was "rabid about UFOs" but had never seen one. However, her Grandmother Ada once encountered an alien being, "a man dressed in all-silver clothing" and with whom she communicated telepathically. The man was tall, but otherwise looked normal. Francine points out that she and other guides have only seen aliens that are humanlike and so go undetected among us (94–96). (So much for the little big-eyed, big-headed "greys" reported by abductees.)

Browne claims that she herself has seen and talked with a tall extraterrestrial *from planet* "PX41," *located* "beyond the Andromeda galaxy" (99). And why not? She also allegedly sees apparitions, talks to ghosts, has visions, divines past lives, makes psychic medical diagnoses, and solves crimes clairvoyantly. She has even formed her own religion, Novus Spiritus ("New Spirit"). Browne makes others with fantasy-prone personalities seem creatively challenged.

Browne quickly dispenses with spontaneous human combustion. It is a reality, she maintains, citing Francine: "She said that SHC is caused by a buildup of phosphorous, which is highly flammable—that's what causes the body to implode upon itself and start burning from the inside out" (164).

However, if readers will stop laughing, it is Browne's ideas on the Shroud of Turin (the reputed burial cloth of Jesus) that interest me most. She shows some admirable skepticism, concluding: "I believe that the Shroud is a representation and not a true relic—but I don't think that should put a dent in our Christian belief" (199). Citing a fourteenth-century bishop's report that the image was painted, Browne writes (196):

> If the Shroud were in fact painted, it would explain some image flaws that have always raised questions. For example, the hair hangs as for a standing rather than a reclining figure; the physique is unnaturally elongated (like figures in Gothic art); and the "blood" flows are unrealistically neat (instead of matting the hair, for instance, they run in rivulets on the outside of the locks). You see, real blood soaks into cloth and spreads in all directions rather than leaving picturelike images.

I found that passage intriguing since I had written (in the July/August 1998 SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, p. 21):

> That the Shroud is indeed the work of a medieval artist would explain numerous image flaws. For example, the physique is unnaturally elongated (like figures in Gothic art!). Also, the hair hangs as for a standing rather than recumbent figure. . . . Everywhere the "blood" flows are unrealistically neat. Instead of matting the hair, for instance, they run in rivulets on the outside of the locks. . . . In addition, *real blood soaks into cloth* and spreads in all directions, rather than leaving picturelike images.

Now, the shared phrasing between Browne's passage and mine may give new meaning to the term *ghost-written.* Considering the book's lack of any reference to my article, one may wonder: Has Francine stooped to plagiarism? What does Browne know about this? Was she in a trance when she wrote it? Are there other *Secrets & Mysteries of the World* yet to be revealed? □

Joe Nickell is CSICOP's Senior Research Fellow.

Listing does not preclude future review.

Galileo's Children: Tales of Science vs. Superstition. Edited and with introduction by Garnier Dozois. Prometheus Books, 2005. 343 pp. $25, hardcover. Thirteen science fiction tales each depicting the battle of science versus superstition by a noted SF author, many of them Hugo and Nebula winners (Arthur C. Clarke, Ursula K. Le Guin, Robert Silverberg, George R.R. Martin, James Tiptree, and others). The stories all deal in various ways with the struggle to make progress against the wall of superstition and fear in spite of opposition from religious and political forces. Celebrated SF editor Dozois notes that the battles of science versus superstition continue today "as the battle to not have to think only what someone else thinks is okay for you to think." Says he: "Enjoy and ponder."

A Treasury of Deception: Liars, Misleaders, Hoodwinkers and Extraordinary True Stories of History's Greatest Hoaxes, Fakes and Frauds. Michael Farquhar. Penguin Books, New York, 2005. 284 pp. $14.95, softcover. Farquhar tells numerous tales of history's most mischievous human behavior, gathered into ten sections, with headings such as "The deadliest lies ever told," and "All the news that's lipped to print." There are stories of: tricksters, escape artists, forgeries, frauds, and scientific hoaxes, as well as stolen identities and literary liars. This cleverly written guide makes more for entertaining reference (each entry is between one and four pages), than in-depth study. Farquhar's engaging, witty tone "celebrates the infinite forms—whether noble or amusing, absurd or grim—that deception can take."

Perfectly Reasonable Deviations from the Beaten Path: The Letters of Richard P. Feynman. Edited by Michelle Feynman. Basic Books, 2005. 320 pp. $26, hardcover. A delightful compilation of letters by the iconoclastic Nobel laureate physicist over a forty-year span, assembled and introduced by his daughter. Some are moving (letters to his wife who died of tuberculosis in New Mexico during the Manhattan project), some are irritable (Feynmann, who hated self-praise and found it distasteful to judge "merit" and said he also enjoyed being peculiar, adamantly and repeatedly turning down his election to the National Academy of Sciences), and some are downright surprising. Among the latter are his numerous patient letters to young people who wrote for encouragement about going into science.

Truth: A Guide. Simon Blackburn. Oxford University Press, New York, 2005. 238 pp. $28, hardcover. The author of the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* explores the hard fact-based scientific route to truth, as well as the philosophical opponents of this method. He tracks philosophical history from the sophists of ancient Athens to the philosophies of Foucault, Hume, and more. Granting each side a partial ownership of truth, Blackburn implores, "whichever side we embrace, we should know where we stand and what is to be said for our opponents."

Mortal Minds: The Biology of Near Death Experiences. Dr. G.M. Woerlee. Prometheus Books, Amherst, New York. 282 pp. $25, hardcover. Dr. G.M. Woerlee, an anesthesiologist, investigates the history of near death experience lore, and the nature of death itself, as he attempts to unravel the mystery of what really happens when we die. Through his medical research, he stumbles upon the enigmatic theories behind "nocturnal demonic attacks," and grapples with his own philosophical hurdles. The book is largely based in biology, as Woerlee explains the normal sensations our body produces while dying. In the process he provides a better understanding of what happens to our bodies, as well as our minds, as we die.

—Kendrick Frazier and Kathryn Landon

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