PROFILE: JAMES RANDI

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A Skeptically Inquiring Mind

You communist pervert creep. Breakfast at the San Jose Holiday Inn restaurant has continued for more than three hours now, and it becomes clear why such letter salutations are common for James "The Amazing" Randi. Despite a kindly appearance—he resembles a trimmer and shorter Santa Claus—sacks full of hate mail arrive at his door routinely. "Really vitriolic stuff," he comments, "and then they're signed, 'Yours in Christ.'"

Threats of death only make him testy, though. He invited one such letter writer to a lecture and punched him in the mouth. "I don't take crap from people. I did for a long time in my life. I'm not the nice little boy anymore."

The 66-year-old Randi is an expert on crap. "I lecture on bullshit," he explains by way of indicating his main source of income. The former professional magician has become perhaps the world's leading investigator of pseudoscientific and paranormal claims. His targets have included faith healers, psychics, dowsers and other charlatans. He has been drafted to explore homeopathic results and perpetual motion machines. Along the way he helped to found the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), a skeptics organization based in Amherst, N.Y., which publishes the bimonthly *Skeptical Inquirer.*

Years of performing magic—he has accumulated innumerable television appearances, including more than 30 on the *Tonight Show*—have equipped Randi with a useful skill: "I have a peculiar expertise that enables me to do two things very well. I know how people are deceived, and I know how people deceive themselves." Unlike scientists, Randi points out, magicians are taught methods of trickery. Scientists think logically, but the swindler does not, and like a magician, "he gives you lots of very good evidence that's false. A magician doesn't say, 'This is an empty box.' He drops the box on the stage, and it sounds like an empty box."

Because Randi understands such misdirection, he can devise countermeasures. To expose a fellow who claimed to turn the pages of a telephone book by mind alone, Randi sprinkled bits of Styrofoam around the book, figuring that the trickster was actually flipping the pages by exhaling discreetly. A breath would disturb the Styrofoam. Sure enough, the man balked. "You can't slip a trick by Randi," observes Barry Karr, the executive director of CSICOP.

Despite exposing charlatans, Randi does not hesitate to practice some flummery. In explaining the art of deception, he is all too ready to bend a couple of spoons and to make sugar packets and crumpled paper napkins disappear.

BERND AUERS

THE AMAZING RANDI exposes all manner of pseudoscience and the paranormal.

"I'd take that as proof of divinity myself," he deadpans and suggests I pocket the damaged utensils, in case the dutiful waiter who keeps hovering about notices.

Not that scientists should be taught magic tricks. "But what they should know," Randi insists, "is that there are things beyond their expertise." Too many academics think they are too smart to be fooled. "Physicists are most easily deceived, because they deal in a real world of objects," Randi says, noting that their natural inclination is to take anomalies as discoveries rather than as hoaxes.

Of course, scientists fall prey to self-delusion as readily as anyone else. Jacques Benveniste of the University of Paris-South claimed that water could "remember" the molecular structure of antibodies. Then there are Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann's pronouncements about cold fusion and John E. Mack of Harvard University, who concludes that some adolescents really were abducted by UFOs.

Some suspicious assertions, though, cannot be debunked easily. Physicist Robert Jahn of Princeton University has found that people seem to be able to influence the outcomes of a random-number generator by mere thought. Randi suggests that the key to this telekinetic claim may lie with Brenda Dunne, Jahn's chief investigator, who is well known in the parapsychology field. "She's not very cooperative. She won't let people see the program or allow them to interfere with the protocol. I think it raises certain doubts whether these experiments will ever be replicated," Randi opines. "It is such a big experiment. Nobody in the skeptics field can afford to do it."

Such practical limits might only exacerbate the current resurgence of belief in the paranormal. "The communications media have made it available to everyone," Randi observes. He cites a self-proclaimed psychic who calls himself "The Great Samaritan." Advertising on Spanish-language television, he asks viewers to dial a 900 number for psychic advice. With caller-identification technology and banks of networked computers at their disposal, operators can obtain financial and health records, convincing their unsuspecting callers of their astrological prowess.

The economic cost of such exploitation is difficult to ascertain, but Randi believes it amounts to hundreds of millions of dollars in faith healing alone. In rooting through nearby dumpsters after one such show, he found many $5 checks—apparently too small a sum to bother depositing, given the suitcases full of cash that had just been loaded into the limousine.

So profitable is the field and so powerful is the allure of the paranormal that exposed psychics can easily set up shop again. A case in point is the faith healer Reverend Peter Popoff, whom Randi defrocked in 1986. Randi intercepted and taped radio transmissions from Popoff's wife to her husband as he worked the audience and "read" their minds. His wife had previously interviewed these people and was directing her husband, who wore a concealed earphone. Obscenities, insults and jokes fill the tape. "A guy showed up with tes-

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ticular cancer, and he's there dying, and they're laughing at him," Randi exclaims. After the California Attorney General's Office declined to shut down the ministry (citing the separation of church and state), Randi appealed to a higher authority: Johnny Carson. Public exposure of the tape eventually forced Popoff into bankruptcy.

"But now Popoff is back in business," Randi laments. "There's no continuing agency or law that will stop him from doing the same thing all over again." A change in the name of the ministry and a new location are all that is needed.

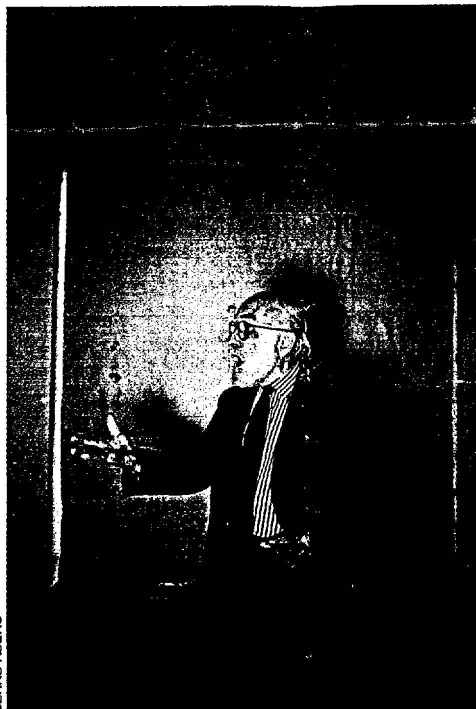
Many people reject scientific thinking because science deals with probabilities, not black-and-white answers. Randi finds that devotees of faith healers mostly watch soap operas and professional "wrestling" because those programs provide definitive outcomes. "You will be amused at your own expense if in the long run you don't take them seriously," he warns. "These are facts of life for very many people." A case in point is his own brother. "He believes in cuckoo stuff," Randi remarks of the sibling with whom he has largely lost touch.

Randi developed his skepticism early in life. A child prodigy, Randall James Hamilton Zwinge was given permission at age 12 to study independently out of the classroom. He used the opportunity to his advantage, wandering the streets of his native Toronto and venturing into a theater where he witnessed magician Harry Blackstone, Sr., levitating a woman. "I remember categorizing it," Randi states. "Either it was some sort of misperception, or some sort of mechanical or physical trick." Trips to the library and mentoring by Blackstone enabled Randi to develop his own conjuring abilities.

Those skills served him well. "I didn't find much point in graduating, because I had met several people ahead of me at the University of Toronto, and they didn't seem to know how to think, how to originate material," Randi explains. "That was not my idea of an education." Instead a 17-year-old Randi joined a traveling carnival, in part to overcome his acute shyness: "The most difficult thing to do," he reasoned, "would be to face an audience."

He became known as Prince Ibis, a mentalist who wore "a funny black turban," Randi recalls. "I just about died. It was a terrible experience, having to walk out in front of a really savage crowd." Nevertheless, he stuck with it and soon graduated to the nightclub circuit, eventually adopting his stage name and legally becoming James Randi.

Moving from magic to debunking was a small step. "They're both part of the same thing," Randi says. Even so, his first investigation, at age 15, got mixed results. An evangelist at a local church was apparently answering sealed requests from his congregation by mentally reading the contents. "He was doing the one-ahead method," deduced Randi, who stormed to the pulpit and fished out the last opened envelope to show that the preacher was answering the previous question, not the one in the sealed envelope. For his troubles, he was roundly booed and escorted to the police station. "At that moment, I became determined that I was going to spend some time doing this. One of these days, they will listen," Randi vowed. "And by golly, they are listening."



BERND AUERS

MAGIC AND DEBUNKING are essentially the same thing, notes Randi as he levitates some dice—at least momentarily.

Debunking occupies most of Randi's time. "Nature abhors a vacuum; Randi abhors free time," he sums up. "I've got a busy life ahead and so many projects under way. The minute before I die, I want to be exceedingly annoyed over the fact that I've got a lot of unfinished projects. That's going to be a happy time for me."

For Randi, the rewards for a hectic schedule come in the appreciation he feels from young people, many of whom beat a path to his Florida home in the hopes of following in his footsteps. But the skeptic has not found any suitable protégés. "You have to be a little nuts to fly in the face of what is popularly accepted," he concludes. "You have to be totally dedicated and be a little obsessed."

And being such an outspoken critic does have its drawbacks. He has been sued several times for allegedly defamatory comments, the most notorious about spoon-bender Uri Geller. In an newspaper interview, Randi claimed that Geller's abilities derived from the kinds of tricks printed on cereal boxes. Geller sued both Randi and CSICOP. "In my opinion, he was getting desperate for funds," Randi remarks. "He thought he would always be able to make a living by bending spoons. A dumb profession if I ever heard of it." The courts ruled in favor of the skeptics and ordered Geller to pay $150,000 in sanctions. This past March, CSICOP announced that it had settled with Geller for somewhat less than that amount.

The legal action, however, has had some negative impact. "These lawsuits from psychics have wiped me out financially," Randi complains. That includes the $272,000 MacArthur fellowship he received in 1986. The lawsuits have also made Randi more circumspect in his declarations. "I am being more careful about what I say," he concedes. "I have a right to an opinion—it just depends on how it's phrased." Others seem equally cautious: CSICOP relies on prepared statements rather than any verbal comment.

Perhaps more disconcerting for Randi are his sour feelings for CSICOP. "They got wimpy on me," Randi groans. "They essentially forced me to resign. They were afraid of my continuing to make statements about Geller." The official policy of the organization is that individual members do not speak for the group. As a result, CSICOP's insurance company has been balking at recouping Randi's losses, although he is currently trying to recover some cash.

Randi is unsure if he wants to rejoin CSICOP. "I never heard any kind of admission that they had cut me adrift, deserted me when I needed them." Randi becomes somewhat philosophical. "Hey, I'm not complaining, believe me," he says. "I consider CSICOP my baby. I'm happy it's in good hands, and I'll always do anything for the committee to promote it."

It is almost noon. Feeling a bit guilty about the damaged flatware, I leave a larger than usual tip. I wonder what to say to airport security if the bent spoons set off the metal detector. "Do what I do," Randi advises. "Tell them it's a hobby." —*Philip Yam*

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