

UK-Skeptics newsletter

Welcome to the first UK-Skeptics newsletter. We will use these newsletters to keep everyone up to date with what is happening at UK-Skeptics and elsewhere.

We will produce newsletters as and when needed so they will appear perhaps every two to three months rather than to a schedule.

Content will include articles, features, book reviews and interviews as well as news of upcoming events.

Meet the team

UK-Skeptics formally consists of founder and director John Jackson and non-executive directors Dr. Jason Braithwaite and Dr. Wendy Cousins who organise events and decide policy as well as do the day to day running such as maintaining a website and providing the popular user forum.

Skepticism

Before we get underway it is worth pointing out what we mean by skepticism at UK-Skeptics.

In everyday language to be sceptical means to be doubtful of something or it can be used to indicate disbelief. Also, whenever opposition or denialist groups are referred to, particularly in the media, they are often labelled 'skeptics'. So we hear of groups like 'global warming skeptics', 'vaccination skeptics', 'evolution skeptics', etc. However, in the immortal words of Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven*, "sometimes words have two meanings"...

Modern scientific skepticism, often called skeptical inquiry, which is what UK-Skeptics advocates, is actually a *methodology of inquiry* and not a position on matters. The method, in simple terms, is one of doubt and inquiry. That is to always have a questioning attitude towards claims and issues, particularly those that don't have good evidence supporting them, whilst being prepared to continually research such claims in order to increase knowledge.

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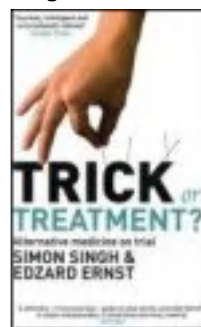
Skepticism doesn't preclude any theory about any topic; however, it does require a high standard of evidence before any theory is accepted.

Although, often for convenience, the 'believer versus skeptic' dichotomy is often made in debate, this usage of the word skeptic refers to a position on matters (disbelief) and it is not strictly what being a skeptic actually means.

For further information on skepticism see:
http://ukskeptics.com/what_is_skepticism.php

COMPETITION

We're offering the prize of a copy of "Trick or Treatment? Alternative Medicine on Trial" By Simon Singh and Edzard Ernst.



In order to enter the draw, simply answer the following question:

What was the title of the cinematic sequel to "Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure"?

Place your answer here:
<http://ukskeptics.com/comp.php>

The competition closes on July 14th 2009. A winner will be drawn at random on July 15th.

The UK-Skeptics conference 2009 will take place at Muncaster Castle in Cumbria during the weekend 18th - 20th September. Muncaster Castle is a fabulous location on the west coast where a lot of research has been done into haunting experiences and so serves as an excellent backdrop for a conference examining the topics of paranormal and anomalous experiences.

The aim of the conference is to take a balanced view of parapsychological issues and we will be getting talks from all perspectives (not only from skeptics) in the hope of increasing understanding of the issues and generating healthy debate in a friendly manner with those on all sides of the Paranormal debate.

In order to achieve this, an excellent selection of internationally renowned speakers from several disciplines including neuroscience, social psychology, parapsychology, cinema studies and sociology have been invited to give their perspectives on anomalous experience.

As is clear from the location chosen and the invited speakers, we have decided to make the conference a quality event rather than go for minimum cost; however,

the price per head will still only be £65 as an Early Bird booking discount (£75 if booked after July 1st).

This price includes, access to both days of the conference (10 talks, 5 per-day); access to the Friday night welcoming wine reception (meet the speakers) to be held in the castle; tea, coffee and biscuits each morning and afternoon session; a two course hot fork buffet style lunch on Saturday and Sunday, full access to the castle and grounds for the duration of the conference (note castle is open Friday and Sunday - grounds open all the time).

In addition, an optional 3-course dinner for speakers and delegates is available on Saturday evening in the castle (priced separately £45 per head).

This conference is not just another 'skepticism for skeptics' event. It will appeal to those who are interested in engaging with topics and considering them from more than one angle. It will prove to be educational, stimulating, and even challenging, no matter where you currently stand on the issues.

Speakers and topics include:

- **Professor Chris French** – The psychology of anomalous experiences.
- **Dr. Jason Braithwaite** – The Haunted Brain: Towards a Cognitive Neuroscience of Anomalous Cognition.
- **Nick Pope** – The ministry of Defence X-files.
- **David Wilde** - Interpreting the anomalous: finding meaning in out-of-body and near-death experiences.
- **Dr. Karen Douglas** - The social psychology of conspiracy beliefs.
- **Dr. Chris Roe** - Psi as Unconscious: A review of some recent research developments in parapsychology.
- **Xavier Mendik** - The Lure of the Dark side: Sex, death and the paranormal in cult movies.
- **Emma-Louise Rhodes** - A Matter of Life and Death: A Sceptical Look at Spiritualism.
- **Dr. Christine Mohr** - A Neuroscientist looks at the Paranormal.
- **Dr. John Walliss** - Between the Worlds: Mediumship in the 21st Century.

Further information on the talks can be found on our website here: <http://www.ukskeptics.com/conference-2009.php>

Booking details

For more information on the castle, its surroundings, accommodation details (early bookers may be able to get accommodation in the castle itself), and how to order your booking pack see: <http://www.muncaster.co.uk/muncaster-castle-paranormal-conference>

The booking form is available here: <http://tinyurl.com/mewz7l> (PDF)

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=71593479781>

Muncaster Castle

Venue for the UK-Skeptics conference 2009

Muncaster castle is built on Roman foundations, which date back to 79AD. Although the ancestors of the present owners were granted the land in 1208, the first building that became a part of the castle, the pele tower, was not completed until around 1325. Pele towers were primarily built around the border areas with Scotland



and were used as homes as well as strongly defended areas that could also be used as a part of a warning system against attack. Over the centuries, the pele tower was added to and with more building work increasing the size of the building it grew into the castle we have today.

The centre of the home was the great hall. All areas of the castle were linked to the great hall, which for centuries was the centre of activity. In 1870, the great hall was converted into an opulent dining room. People who attend the UK-Skeptics conference in September and who opt to attend the Saturday evening meal will be dining in this room.

The last major building work was carried out in the 1830s when the north tower was added to add symmetry to the original pele tower.

There is also a 12th century church in the castle grounds and although some work was done on it in the 19th century, much of the original building is preserved.

The estate is not only about the castle itself however. There is also 77 acres of managed woodland that contains a wide variety of trees and plants; and which also has several walks available including scenic routes offering views of Eskdale Valley and the Lakeland fells.

■ The Owl Centre

Muncaster is also the home of the World Owl Trust, and houses around 48 species of owl at any one time from the tiny pigmy and scoop owls, to Europe's largest, the European Eagle Owl.

The World Owl Trust is involved in scientific research regarding owls including education programs, habitat management and restoration, research, captive breeding programs, as well as providing facilities for the treatment and rehabilitation of sick and injured owls and other wildlife. The owls display daily at 2.30PM and some will also give a flying display (provided it isn't raining!).

The grounds, walks and the owl centre may be of interest to those coming to the conference and who have decided to stay on for a few extra days.

■ Ghosts

As with just about any building with an extensive history, Muncaster Castle also has ghosts associated with it. The main culprit is Thomas Skelton, a court jester known as Tom Fool (or Tom the Fool). Legend has it that Tom, whilst being a jester, had a sadistic side. He would sit under a chestnut tree (still there today) and when travellers would stop and ask for directions to London, he would direct them to the local quick sands instead if he took a dislike to them. Many travellers are said to have disappeared this way! The ghost of Tom gets the credit for most of the ghostly pranks that occur at the castle.

It also reported that Tom murdered a carpenter at the castle on the orders of Sir Ferdinand Pennington whose daughter had been involved with the carpenter.

Legends are one thing; however, there is also a wealth of data from haunting reports given by guests who have stayed at the castle and much scientific study into these reports has been done - notably by our very own Dr. Jason Braithwaite.

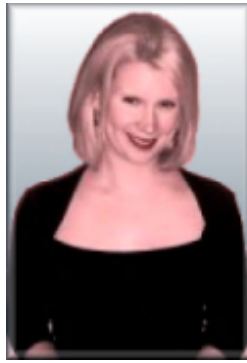
The castle is an ideal building to study many aspects that may contribute to haunting experiences including contextual and environmental factors and how they affect psychological and neurological differences in individuals.

Research data at Muncaster is by no means exhausted and research is likely to continue for many years.

AN INTERVIEW WITH UKS CONFERENCE SPEAKER EMMA-LOUISE RHODES

What first got you interested in investigating Spiritualism and the paranormal?

Just before my grandmother died, when I was seven, she told me that she would return to me after her death. As soon as I was old enough, I went to a Spiritualist church, full of expectation, but was very badly disappointed. I continued to attend the church regularly, along with going to paying mediums, but never received a message. It was then that I realised just how deluded Spiritualism was, and how easy it is to get sucked into such a belief.



Why do you think people become interested in the paranormal sub-culture? (Joining ghost-hunter groups, taking "awareness classes" etc.)

I feel that today's society promotes the paranormal sub-culture tremendously in the form of TV programmes, books and groups. Whereas, twenty years ago, it was practically unheard of to turn on the TV and find a medium conducting a séance, now it is the norm. People see themselves as more 'in touch' with the spiritual side of things when, actually, they are simply buying into a concept. I do think that one of the reasons for the interest is because, in today's throwaway society, we need to believe in something. Also, the paranormal has become very much legitimised by certain programmes aired on Living TV, and people no longer feel that it is something to fear.

Do you think that "paranormal culture" has different kinds of appeal for men and women?

In general, more women attend psychic readings, Spiritualist churches and clairvoyant evenings than men. It would be interesting to take a survey and find out exactly why this is so. Do men feel that Spiritualism is too effeminate for them, due to its association with angels, crystals and spirit guides? Certainly there are plenty of men who are themselves mediums, yet commonly the majority of Spiritualist supporters at a gathering at any given time will be female.

Do you think attitudes towards the paranormal in the UK have changed over the years? If so, how?

The advent of Doris Stokes in the 1970s and 80s gave the psychic industry a huge boom. The fact that she was the first medium to perform at the London Palladium really laid the way for the celebrity mediums of today.

Now, the paranormal is seen as an acceptable commodity. Whereas before people might have thought a terrible disaster might befall them if they played with a Ouija board, now they can be bought on eBay for under five pounds and no one thinks anything of it. In fact, eBay presents a whole range of spiritual delights, ranging from one question readings, to in-depth past life dossiers, all done never having never even met their 'clients' or touched or seen anything belonging to them or their dearly departed loved ones.

Why do you think people continue to believe in paranormal claims that have been confirmed beyond all reasonable doubt to be false?

I feel that a lot of this has to do with, what is known as True Believer Syndrome.

The term true believer (as related by M. Lamar Keene in his 1976 book *The Psychic Mafia*) relates to an individual who maintains belief in a (usually mystical) conviction, regardless of the fact that it has been one hundred percent proven to be fake or fraudulent. For many, the belief that there is life after death and that loved ones live on in Heaven is a necessary part of their day-to-day existence. To doubt this would mean reconsidering and questioning the entire nature of our existence on this earth, something which many people feel incredibly uncomfortable about. Spiritualism takes this basic Christian belief to another level in a very tactile sense and fulfils expectations of the afterlife, along with offering what seems to be a 'quick fix' to bereavement. Instead of having to wait for heavenly reunion, the Spiritualist faith presents its followers with earthly contact with the dead; which, regardless of its credulity, is highly addictive. It is this very factor that, despite the countless exposures and revelations, will always stoke the fire of Spiritualism and, sadly, line the pockets of fraudulent mediums for years to come.

Further reading: <http://www.emmalouiserhodes.com/articles/psychics-on-ebay.php>

The Psychic Mafia by M. Lamar Keene Prometheus Books (Re-publication of the 1976 edition by St. Martin's Press.)

Folie à Deux

a contagious madness

DR. WENDY COUSINS

In 1877 French psychiatrists Ernest-Charles Lasègue and Jean-Pierre Falret proposed a totally new phenomenon to their fellows in the psychiatric profession. They called it *Folie à Deux* translated as "a madness shared by two". *Folie à deux* is a delusional disorder in which a submissive non-psychotic person assumes the delusions of a dominant psychotic person which with whom he or she has a close relationship. These may involve delusions of persecution or fantasies of having special powers and abilities. The principal feature of shared psychotic disorder is an unwavering belief by the secondary partner in the dominant partner's delusion.

Strangely, *folie à deux* can sometimes strike more than two people and there are reports of cases of multiple individuals being involved in shared delusions; there is even a case in which twelve family members were affected, a variation known as *folie à famille*. Some commentators believe that *folie à famille* may be an operative factor in the behaviour of members of cults such as the People's Temple (Jonestown Massacre), the Branch Davidians (Waco) and Aum Shinrikyo (Tokyo subway gas attack). *Folie à famille* was also invoked by defence lawyers in the infamous case of the Manson family murders. The American Journal of Psychiatry even published a case of *folie à deux* involving a dog! (Howard, 1992)

Folie à deux is a delusional disorder in which a submissive non-psychotic person assumes the delusions of a dominant psychotic person which with whom he or she has a close relationship.

An 83-year-old widow who had lived alone for 15 years with only her dog for company, complained that the occupant of an upstairs flat was excessively noisy and that he moved furniture around late at night purely to disturb her. Over a period of 6 months, she began to develop delusions of persecution involving this man. She believed that he wanted to frighten her from her home and had started to transmit 'violet rays' through the ceiling to harm her and her dog. She attributed a sprained back and chest pains to the effect of the evil rays and had become concerned that her dog had started scratching at night when the ray activity was at its greatest. She placed her mattress under the kitchen table for protection and slept there at night. To protect

her dog she constructed what she called an 'air raid shelter' for the pooch made from a small table and a pile of suitcases and insisted that the dog sleep in it. When a doctor visited the widow at her home he noticed that the dog's behaviour had become so conditioned by that of its owner that upon hearing any sound from the flat upstairs, it would immediately make a dash for its shelter and he concluded that as the dog was apparently also sharing the delusions of its owner, this was a case of *Folie à deux*! (Or maybe *Folie à Dog*...?)

The precise mechanisms that cause the previously "normal" person to lose his or her control of reality are a continuing source of interest for mental health professionals.

Until the discovery of *folie à deux*, mental illness was associated with a single person who suffered from the disorder. This was the first time the definition of an illness included the context of a specific social group and one of the few instances of a mental illness that was initiated solely by communication. It is in many ways a psychiatric curiosity in that the most commonly used diagnostic manual (DSM IV) states that a person cannot be diagnosed as being delusional if the belief in question is one "ordinarily accepted by other members of the person's culture or subculture". The existence of a multitude of cultural belief systems can make distinguishing cultural beliefs from delusions a difficult task.

A culturally held belief may be misidentified by a mental health professional as a delusion due to the strangeness of the belief and the clinician's lack of knowledge about that particular culture or subculture. We all might hold views which others might consider delusional. Furthermore, it is not clear at what point a belief considered to be delusional becomes legitimate because of the number of people holding it. However, while there are no set criteria to distinguish cultural beliefs from delusional beliefs, by definition a delusion is different from a strongly held cultural belief because it is both fixed and false and will continue to be believed regardless of evidence to the contrary. Details concerning the treatment of *folie à deux* are sparse, but most authors consider that the separation of the two subjects has to be the starting point of any intervention.

Reference: Howard, Robert; "Folie a Deux Involving a Dog," American Journal of Psychiatry, 149:414, 1992

An interesting Edwardian case of Folie à deux:
<http://ukskeptics.com/r.php?r=fd1>

The Psychic Tourist

The Curious World of Predicting the Future

Richard Dawkins meets Louis Theroux in William Little's new book, *The Psychic Tourist*, which pits the author against both the rising tide of belief in psychics and astrology.

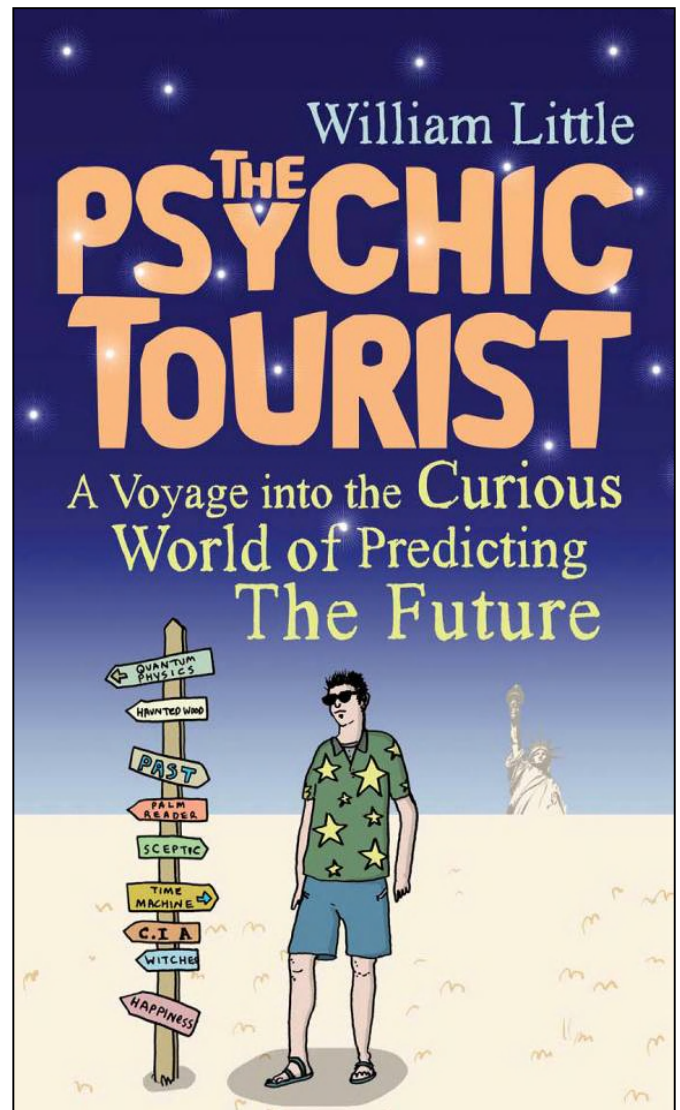
William Little's deceptively light book, *The Psychic Tourist*, draws in believers, effectively challenging their beliefs and undermining the 'science' behind astrology.

Little argues that belief in Britain today is not encouraged at the pulpit, witnessed by decreasing congregation sizes, but in the psychic booth, where ordinary people believe they are creating a direct communication with the dead and their future. The priests of belief are not preaching on Sunday mornings, but every day of the week in psychic shops and on premium rate telephone lines. Belief has been decentralised and contracted out to the psychic sector.

The Psychic Tourist – A Voyage into the Curious World of Predicting the Future is a deceptive tale of one man's attempts to question his belief in psychics and astrologers following a prediction of his sister's death. The book is also cleverly pitched at the same time at readers who enjoy Jon Ronson and Louis Theroux-style journalism.

The end result is a slow chipping away at the fundamentals of belief in psychics and astrology. By using story telling techniques, *The Psychic Tourist* converts and informs while it entertains.

In a book that answers the unanswerable about what science, psychics, and crystal balls can reveal about tomorrow, William Little lifts the lid on the most sought-after destination of them all – the future. Through a roller coaster ride of mystics, mishaps and mayhem, Little even discovers uncomfortable facts that make him reassess his own beliefs. In the vein of Jon Ronson and Louis Theroux, *THE PSYCHIC TOURIST* will appeal both to believers and non-believers in the way it offers an unparalleled insight into an endlessly fascinating subject.



WILLIAM LITTLE

William Little is a freelance journalist for the Saturday Telegraph magazine, the Daily Mail, Guardian, The Times, and Financial Times. He has also worked for Arena, Esquire and Cosmopolitan, and contributed articles to the Independent, the Daily Express and the Big Issue, among many others.

This book is available via the UK-Skeptics Amazon Store: <http://www.ukskeptics.com/bookstore.php>

Or directly from here: <http://ukskeptics.com/r.php?r=ab1>

THE COST OF NHS HOMEOPATHY

It has never been quite clear how much taxpayers' money is spent on providing homeopathy on the NHS. Now, More4 News has used the freedom of information act to request the information. It seems that the figure is around £4,000,000 a year.

"Over the three years, there were 68,647 treatment "episodes" – each episode is treatment for one patient but some patients may have been treated more than once. The average cost per episode was £173, which breaks down to £151 for each outpatient treated and £3,066 for each inpatient."

When you consider that many patients probably have been treated more than once, the figures only get worse.

See: <http://tinyurl.com/nggxwb>

KEEP LIBEL LAWS OUT OF SCIENCE

After the decision by the British Chiropractic Association to sue science writer Simon Singh for libel, Sense about Science has started a campaign to have the English libel law reviewed.



The campaign is outlined here: <http://tinyurl.com/pky9ot> and supporters can add their signature to the list of names.

A most excellent discussion of the background to this case can be found at Jack of Kent's totally non-bogus blog:

<http://jackofkent.blogspot.com/>

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

The Skeptics in the Pub talks have become very popular in the last year or two with meetings taking place in various parts of the UK.

Keep up to date on the latest scheduled talks at the Skeptics in the Pub website:

<http://skeptic.org.uk/events/skeptics-in-the-pub>

THE DANA CENTRE

Another venue offering talks and events on a regular basis is the Dana Centre. Keep up to date with their scheduled events here:

<http://www.danacentre.org.uk/events>

There is also an impressive list of previous webcasts of many excellent talks and discussions from leading scientists that are available to watch online here:

<http://www.danacentre.org.uk/events/webcasts>

THE APRU

There are also free talks given at Professor Chris French's Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit based at Goldsmiths, University of London.

The schedule and speaker list is available here:

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/speakers.php>

LESSONS FROM VACCINE-AUTISM WARS

"Researchers long ago rejected the theory that vaccines cause autism, yet many parents don't believe them. Can scientists bridge the gap between evidence and doubt?"

A long but excellent article examining the reasons for the discrepancy between scientific knowledge and public perception of the risk.

<http://ukskeptics.com/r.php?r=pm1>

John Jackson, Jason Braithwaite & Wendy Cousins.

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