

Reader's Guide

LOUIS LASAGNA

Let Magic Cast Its Spell



GRANDONAT, HESULICE

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Conjuror*, 1475-80

WHY DO PEOPLE all over the world, and at all times, want marvels that defy all verifiable facts? And are the marvels brought into being by their desire, or is their desire an assurance rising from some deep knowledge . . . that the marvellous is indeed an aspect of the real?"

The speaker is Dunstan Ramsay, schoolmaster, scholar, onetime conjurer, and a central character in three provocative novels by Robertson Davies, a former actor who is now master of Massey College, in Toronto. In *Fifth Business*, *The Manticore*, and *World of Wonders*, Davies treats of the relationship between the professional magician and his audience, describing performer and spectators as "partners in deception." To Davies, the deception is harmless. Ramsay speaks of the world of magic and miracles as "a splendid extension of life" that hurts no one. Another central character, master magician Magnus Eisengrim, shares that view: "What we offer is innocent—just an entertainment in which a hungry part of the spirit is fed." And yet, while "people want to marvel at something," Eisengrim observes, "the

Louis Lasagna is a professor of pharmacology and medicine at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry.

whole spirit of our time is not to let them do it."

Along with Eisengrim, I resent that spirit, for I am one of those who love to be fooled by magicians. Since childhood, I have also been fascinated by fables, myths, and science fiction—despite a professional dedication to rigorous science and an antipathy toward frauds, whether their intent is rape of the mind or abuse of the pocketbook.

But is there room in science not just for the unexplained but for the seemingly inexplicable? In the past month, I have read a number of books and articles that deal, in one way or another, with the darker territories of experience—those realms typically thought above, or below, the reach of experimental science. At one end of this terrain lies Davies's Deptford trilogy (so-called from the fictional Canadian town where Ramsay and Eisengrim grew up). At the other end is *The Skeptical Inquirer*, a journal devoted to debunking the paranormal, including such "psi"—that is, psychic—phenomena as telepathy, clairvoyance, and UFOs. The *Inquirer*, at least in the few issues I have seen, is often as hostile to credulous believers as to outright perpetrators of fraud. In its pages, magicians play quite another role than the one Davies assigns them: they use their knowl-

edge of sleight of hand to expose false claims of parapsychological powers and events. Spearheading the journal's crusade, along with an array of respected scientists and science writers, are men whose livelihoods depend upon illusion. Professional magicians James ("The Amazing") Randi and Milbourne Christopher serve on the board of the *Inquirer's* publisher, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, or CSICOP.

Randi, one of the hardest-hitting antipsi spokesmen, made headlines last year with his "Project Alpha" caper, a virtuoso performance of pressmanship. Two young magicians—Randi's confederates—were able to infiltrate the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychic Research, at Washington University, in St. Louis. Presenting themselves as psychics who could bend spoons and other metal objects by their powers of mind over matter, the magicians managed to hoodwink the researchers, who subsequently published their findings. Randi then revealed the ruse at a news conference. "The worst we can say" about the McDonnell researchers, Randi said, "is that they were far too confident of their abilities to detect fraud, and refused outside assistance because those who offered it lacked academic credentials."

Even the director of the laboratory,

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physicist Peter R. Phillips, admitted in an interview with *The New York Times*, "We were taken in at the beginning." But beyond that, he and Randi differ as to what actually happened. Phillips said that his group in fact accepted Randi's offer of help, by sending him videotapes for analysis, and used Randi's critique to make the experiments more rigorous.

Opinion about Randi's hoax is divided. William Broad, the respected science writer, calls it "at best, a masterful triumph of the scientific method—as exercised by a magician—over the crude dabbling of scientists who should be more adept at what they do." At worst, Broad says, it was "an example of science victimized by showmanship." Ray Hyman, a Stanford University psychologist and a member of CSICOP, goes further; he argues that throughout history, the "hit men" of science have done more harm than good. The reason, he explains, is that efforts to make scientists look ridiculous render them so defensive that they close their minds to criticism even when it is legitimate.

NO ONE IS SAFE from the *Inquirer's* skepticism, not even Margaret Mead. Last fall, Martin Gardner, another CSICOP board member, expressed scorn for Mead's interest in the paranormal. His piece leaves one with the feeling that the revered anthropologist was unscientific about lots of things—including a great-great-aunt who was said to float through the air. Mead once wrote that her aunt could read people's minds. She also asserted, "Dowsing is a fact," and expressed belief in UFOs and (horrors!) God.

Gardner's cameo somehow does not jibe with my own encounters with Mead. A fairer portrait, it seems to me, emerges from an article by Patricia Hunt-Perry, of Ramapo College, in Mahwah, New Jersey, in the *Phoenix Journal of Transpersonal Anthropology*. According to Hunt-Perry, Mead was a member of the board of trustees of the American Society for Psychical Research as early as 1943, and was the person primarily responsible for getting the parapsychologists into the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in 1969, after a strong address that has come to be known as her "Galileo speech." But Mead's intent, it seems, was to move parapsychology within the tent of science, for the benefit of believers and skeptics alike. "The point," she once said, "is whether we can find ways of studying these phenomena which will make them as accessible as the stars or chromosomes."

Of course, Mead's fascination with the occult may not have been grounded only in curiosity. She loved to shock the bourgeois and to set the beasts roaring in their

cages, and some of her more outrageous statements may have been so motivated. But anyone who knew her realized that she was not only open to new possibilities but also ready to drop an idea when it proved untenable. Although she continued to defend studies of the esoteric, Mead said only a few years before her death that she had never found a single incident that she could verify as a psi phenomenon.

The *Inquirer's* attack on Mead disturbs me less than a proposal to punish the credulous, also discussed in the journal's fall issue. John W. Patterson, a professor of materials science and engineering at Iowa State University, lashes out at teachers and students who espouse pseudoscience, arguing that a university owes it to society not to further unfounded notions. Patterson deplores the fact that students in the sciences sometimes get passing grades even if they deny the fact of evolution or claim, as creationists do, that the universe is only ten thousand years old.

"I suggest," says Patterson, "that every professor should reserve the right to fail any student in his class, no matter what the grade record indicates, whenever basic misunderstandings of a certain magnitude are discovered. Moreover, I would propose retracting grades and possibly even degrees if such gross misunderstandings are publicly espoused after passing the course or after being graduated." One can almost smell the fiery autos-da-fé of Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition.

Nor am I alone in objecting to the *Inquirer's* militancy; some of its own readers do too. One wrote to complain of a letters column filled with self-righteous communications "from authors patting themselves on the back for another incident of pseudoscience debunked, generally written in a tone of such intellectual snobbery my spine crawled." And he added, "Believe me, I'm no offended true believer; I'm an offended skeptic." Another correspondent, calling himself an "open-minded rationalist," warned the journal that closed-minded skepticism can be as dogmatic as the things it opposes, and went on, "True, the canons [of modern science] square with the normal world we are familiar with, but so did Newtonian physics before Einstein and Ptolemaic astronomy before Galileo."

When I was young, accepting the inexplicable came with less effort. Like many other children of my generation, I not only adored the characters in the "Buck Rogers" and "Flash Gordon" comic strips but believed in them, and in the spaceships and backpack power units that propelled them across the sky. Many adults sneered at such make-believe, preferring more "realistic" cartoons like "Bringing Up Father" and "Gasoline Alley." But time has proved the

kids right. We *do* travel in spaceships. We *do* visit other worlds.

Consider the prescience of the greatest science fiction writer of all time, Jules Verne. A century before NASA's first *Apollo* mission, Verne described a moon shot in *From the Earth to the Moon*. Like *Apollo 2*, Verne's space capsule was made of aluminum. Its dimensions were fifteen by nine feet; the *Apollo* command module was thirteen by ten and a half. Verne's capsule blasted off from a spot 140 miles south of Cape Canaveral, with an initial velocity of 36,000 feet per second; after the firing of *Apollo's* second-stage engine, its velocity was 35,533 feet per second. Verne's capsule was scheduled to reach the moon in 97 hours and 13 minutes; *Apollo's* time was 103 hours and 30 minutes. Both capsules orbited the moon, and both crews photographed the lunar surface. Verne's heroes charted the Sea of Tranquility, where Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin later walked. And both space capsules later splashed down in the Pacific.

Was Verne's uncanny prediction an example of precognition? Hardly; no doubt a patient skeptic could find a reasonable explanation for every congruence between the fiction and the subsequent fact. The story remains, however, a particularly amusing example of how our fantasies often run but a few steps ahead of reality. Verne himself believed that "anything that one man is able to imagine, some other man is able to accomplish."

What, then, is the proper stance toward claims that seem unbelievable? We must at the very least resist the sin of intolerance. Scientists should aim, I believe, at a golden mean between credulity and blind scorn, a position of interested inquisitiveness, of expectant agnosticism. They may hope that some astonishing claim is true, while demanding proof. To believe without questioning or to dismiss without investigating is to comport oneself nonscientifically. It is *not* inspiring to read that the audience hissed when the great neurologist Sir John Eccles ended a Harvard lecture by admitting that evolution could account for the brain but not for the mind, and that only something transcendent could explain consciousness and thought. Why should a Harvard audience listen with less respect when a scientist with the highest credentials raises the possibility of God's existence than when Jane Fonda, let us say, discusses world disarmament?

To quote from the Deptford trilogy once more: "We have educated ourselves into a world from which wonder, and the fear and dread and splendour and freedom of wonder, have been banished."

I'd rather err occasionally than miss a real live miracle. □

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