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**Sacramento
Organization for
Rational Thinking
(SORT)**

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For past issues, bibliography, links to other skeptics, and more, check out the SORT Website:

www.quiknet.com/~kitray/index1.html

For more about the co-founders of SORT, see

www.spangenburgandmoser.com

**January 2004
SORT Meeting
Wednesday,
January 28, 2004
7:00 P.M.**

Room 1, Library
Kinney High School
2710 Kilgore Rd., Rancho Cordova
(See driving directions, p. 3)

The *SORTified* NEWS

“Doubt is the beginning of wisdom.”

—Clarence Darrow

January 28 Meeting

ANIMAL RIGHTS: WHEN LASSIE DOESN'T COME HOME

It's another one of those things that most of us don't really like to think about too much. Usually, unless it's one of those days when one or another "animal rights" groups has managed to get media attention, we don't think about it at all. We go about our daily lives choosing our clothes for the day, eating our meals, taking our medications, giving a friendly pat to our pet dog or cat, driving to work or play, maybe wincing a bit if we spot a dead animal of one kind or another on the road. If it's a rat or a squirrel it barely registers on our attention. If it's a dog, a cat or a deer most of us might feel a moment of regret, a twinge of sudden sadness, then silently accuse ourselves of sentimentality and move on to other thoughts.

We don't like to think about it and for the most part most of us don't have to. If forced to, most of us would have to admit to having confused feelings, contradictory thoughts. We love our dogs, cats, and other pets. Chimps are cute on those television specials, elephants are wondrous, lions and tigers majestic, dolphins graceful and intriguing. It isn't easy to see cows in a pasture and the slaugh-

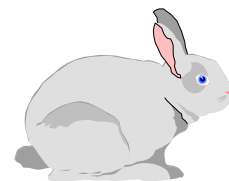
terhouse at the same time; to think about Lassie, emaciated, her brain exposed and wired to strange machines, lapping water gratefully from a dish. We are made uneasy by the horror stories told to us by animal rights groups. At the same time we cringe when hearing about medical laboratories on the verge of major breakthroughs in the fight against cancer or Alzheimer's being trashed by animal rights radicals.

We don't really know what we think. We feel uneasy when thinking about it, and guilty of evasion if we don't. We condemn our feelings as sentimentality and excuse our evasions as pragmatic.

Join us this month around our SORT roundtable as we discuss another difficult problem in the continually challenging attempt to live life rationally, with grace and honor.

As always free, coffee, leaded and unleaded, soft drinks, cookies and other treats will be available.

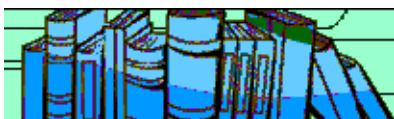
You'll find us at the Kinney High School library in Rancho Cordova. (See driving directions on page 3.) Wednesday January 28 from 7:00–9:00 p.m.



THE “SPIRIT” OF NASA

As we write this, “Spirit,” the newest Mars “rover” has made its way safely down the ramp and sits now on Martian soil awaiting a go-ahead to begin its daring and dramatic explorations of the planet’s surface. A few days ago the nation’s president, George W. Bush, announced a dramatic goal to return to the Moon and to plan a human expedition to Mars. It’s been a terrible year for NASA and the deaths of those aboard the Space Shuttle *Columbia* and the confusions, bureaucratic ineptitude and lack of direction in the space agency have all too obviously revealed the agency’s drastic need for a shake-up and self re-evaluation. The triumph of the “spirit” demonstrates NASA at it’s best and most courageous. Perhaps now, given a new and challenging sense of direction the so-called “manned” space programs of the agency will rediscover some of the pride and glory of the Apollo days. Hopefully the shortsighted politicians in Washington, both Democrats and Republicans, will give NASA this chance. The Universe awaits, beckoning. Perhaps someday, given the challenge and promise of its vastness, the nations on our own small world might at last discover that united we stand and divided we fall.

News Flash: As we go to press, NASA has lost communication with “Spirit”—hopefully a temporary setback.



Book Review

SECRETS OF THE PSYCHICS by MASSIMO POLIDORO

For those of you who were fortunate enough to see the brilliant young Italian skeptic Massimo Polidoro at the special August 2000 SORT meeting, there is a good chance to reacquaint yourself with his work in his new book *Secrets of the Psychics*. And if you have read his earlier book *Final Seance: The Strange Friendship Between Houdini and Conan Doyle* you know that he has a knack for telling a good story. Although *Secrets of the Psychics* includes a look at contemporary miracle mongers, the bulk of the book is given over to tales of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the notorious age of spiritualists, psychics and quacks. And, of course Harry Houdini!

Not too surprisingly Houdini dominates many of Polidoro’s pages. Although most people today, if asked, would identify Houdini as a great magician he was rather far from that. In fact he was a rather poor magician, awkward, clumsy, and completely lacking that sense of physical grace and assurance of style that characterized such truly great magicians as Thurston, David Devant, the Maskelynes and Alexander Herrmann. It was as a master of daring escapes that Houdini earned his fame, and of course later in his career as a fierce debunker of spiritualists and frauds. Here, as in *Final Seance*, Polidoro examines some of Houdini’s great debunkings and adventures among such spiri-

The Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking (SORT). . .

- Is dedicated to the promotion of rational thinking in all areas of life.
- Upholds the superiority of science over the mystical.
- Promotes and supports all efforts of intelligent communication that provide a counterpoint to the strong waves of anti-rationalism, irrationalism, and mysticism sweeping the world today.

Toward these ends we . . .

- Host a monthly discussion group.
- Publish a monthly newsletter.
- Host special events, talks, and presentations.
- Host a web page.

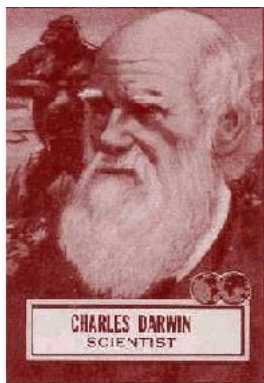
While SORT began with and still continues to be concerned with the promotion of critical thinking in areas dealing with the pseudo-scientific, the paranormal, the mystical, and the fraudulent, we strongly promote critical thinking in *all* areas of human thought and endeavor.

The core of SORT activities is our discussion group. The art of intelligent conversation is not dead. We at SORT believe that rational conversation--the meeting of minds, the free exchange of ideas and the provocative stimulation of critical questions-- is one of the most civilized and enlightening of all human activities.

SORT discussion topics have ranged from UFOs to the Holocaust, from “alternative medicine” to the problems in communicating science to the public, from classic and recent cons and scams to the teaching of critical thinking. Our discussions are hosted by one of the SORT founders, and participants are by no means limited to experts (although they may include experts) but are made up of intelligent and questioning people concerned with the topic of the evening.

tualists as Anna Eva Fay and the fascinating and notorious “Margery.”

Unfortunately spiritualists, psychics and frauds are still with us and Polidoro doesn’t overlook these contemporary charlatans, offering chapters on his own investigations and an intellectual tool box for spotting and debunking modern psychic frauds. The publisher is ever-dependable Prometheus Books, so you should be able to find *Secrets of the Psychic* at most major bookstores. You can also order it through Prometheus on the Net (www.prometheus-books.com) and while you’re at it, if you haven’t visited it in a while, take a look at the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) site (www.csicop.org) and get reacquainted with the great work they continue to do fighting the frauds and miracle mongers of our day.



DARWIN DAY
February 7, 2:15 p.m.

Educational and humanist organizations in the Sacramento area join hands to bring you the Seventh Annual Darwin Day Festival, a celebration of science and

humanity. What better time to hold it than the birth-week of Charles Darwin, cited by *Time Magazine* as runner-up for Man of the Millennium?

This year the keystone speaker will Dr. Taner Edis, assistant professor of physics at Truman State University, author of *The Ghost in the Universe: God in the Light of Modern Science* (Prometheus Books, 2002). His presentation title: “Intelligent Design—Creationism Evolves Again.”

Snacks and birthday cake included, of course. Join the fun. Get your ticket now, and save.

Date: February 7, Saturday, 2:30 - 5:30 p.m. (Doors open 2:15 p.m.)

Location: Curtis Hall of the Sierra II Community Center, 2791 24th Street, Sacramento.

Ticket price: \$7 in advance, \$9 at the door. Half price for students with student ID.

To purchase, make a check payable to “HAGSA” (Humanist Association of the Greater Sacramento Area) and mail to: Darwin 2004 Committee, c/o Instructional Systems, P.O. Box

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About the Founding Members:

Ray Spangenburg and Kit Moser are a husband-and-wife writing team specializing in science and technology. They are co-authors of 52 books and over 100 articles, including publication in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and they are former co-editors of the *Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet (BASIS)*.

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GETTING TO KINNEY HIGH SCHOOL LIBRARY (SORT MEETING PLACE)

Just off Highway 50: Traveling east, Zinfandel Exit to Folsom Boulevard; traveling west, Sunrise exit to Folsom Boulevard. Then:

- (1) Traveling west on Folsom Boulevard, turn left on Kilgore Rd., just past Sunrise. Or, traveling east on Folsom Blvd., turn right on Kilgore.
- (2) Turn right into the Kinney High School parking lot. The library is in the building just south of the parking lot, and the entrance is on the west side of the building.

THE RATIONAL COMMUNITY

CALENDAR

January 28: *SORT Meeting*

Topic: Animal Rights: When Lassie Doesn't Come Home

Time: Wednesday, 7:00–9:00 p.m., Room One (Library),

Place: Kinney High School, 2710 Kilgore Road, Rancho Cordova

Everyone is welcome and all meetings are free.

February 7: *Darwin Day*

Topic: Intelligent Design: Creationism Evolves Again

Speaker: Dr. Taner Edis, asst. professor of physics at Truman State University, author of *The Ghost in the Universe*.

Time: Saturday, 2:30–5:30 p.m. (Doors open at 2:15.)

Place: Curtis Hall of the Sierra II Community Center, 2791 24th Street, Room 10. (South of Broadway).

Cost: \$7.00 in advance (see p. 3), \$9.00 at the door; half price for students with student ID.

February 2004: *Sacramento Skeptics*

Topic, Time, and Place: To be announced

For further details, contact Richard Kowaleski at
kowaleski@earthlink.net

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SORT

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*Educating Ourselves
and Educating Others*

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