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(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

**July
SORT Meeting
Wednesday,
July 31, 2002
7:00 P.M.**

Sierra One Room
La Sierra Community Center
5325 Engle, Carmichael

The *SORTified* NEWS

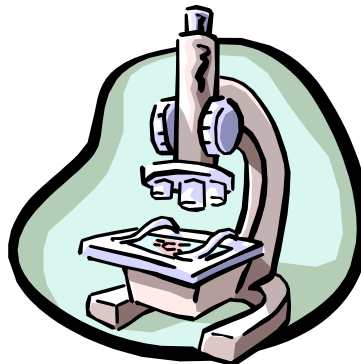
“Doubt is the beginning of wisdom.”

—Clarence Darrow

July 31, 2002 SORT Meeting **THE DISILLUSIONMENT WITH SCIENCE**

How did science get to be seen as the bad guy in the late twentieth century—and on into the twenty-first, as well?

Many of today’s scholars, thinkers and educators even question the value of the “Enlightenment.” How did we get in this position? What went wrong? Can we blame the rise of postmodernist thinking? The rise of the “new spirituality,” the power of the fundamentalist right, the public’s lack of understanding of science—or science itself?



Bring your views and join us in our open round-table discussion at this month’s meeting of SORT. We are back in our regular air-conditioned room, Sierra One, this month, the conversation will be sparkling and the free cookies, soft drinks and coffee refreshing. What better way to spend a hot July evening than engaged in a good old-fashioned session of

bright conversation?

Remember, all SORT meetings are free and open to anyone who wishes to attend—last Wednesday of the month (July 31 this month), 7:00 p.m, Sierra One Room, La Sierra Community Center, 5325 Engle Road, in Carmichael.

THANKS, EVERYONE!

Speaking of good old-fashioned July traditions, our thanks to everyone who made this year's annual SORT picnic a success. The picnic spot was beautiful, with trees, shade, and a stream to help us forget the 100-degree July heat (great choice, Pat), so we will probably shoot for the same spot next year. A good turnout (about 24, all told) offered plenty of fun and conversation, and even gave many of us our first introduction to the relaxed delights of bocce ball (thanks to Jack Throne). Special thanks to Darrell Fronczek, who heroically took charge of the hot BBQ, and to Pauline Fredrickson, who grilled the hamburgers, and helped keep watch over the hot dogs, grilled chicken, and roasted corn on the cob that helped fuel the energy of the day. Everyone pitched in with great food from gourmet to classic, and just the right amount of planning. Diane Fronczek even went to the farmers' market Saturday morning to pick out corn fresh off the stalk.

AROUND THE BOOK BEAT

Looking for some good summer reading? *Drake's Fortune: The Fabulous True Story of the World's Greatest Confidence Artist*, by Richard Rayner, is the fascinating story of the big con of the 1920s and 30s that suckered in over 80,000 people, mostly in the Midwest. By the time the con ran out its play, it had made millions of dollars for Oscar Hartzell, one of the most intriguing con artists in American history. Rayner does a great job of describing all the ins and outs of the con, which promised to make thousands of small-town Americans rich. For their contributions, they would share (Hartzell promised) in the legal recovery of the fabulous fortune of Sir Francis Drake, which the con artist claimed actually belonged to long-lost American heirs. Faked genealogies, bizarrely convoluted and twisting narratives, forged parchment papers and even faked tombstones added flavor to the story. It was an old con—tried by others before him—but one that Hartzell took over as a master.

As intriguing as the con itself, though, is con man Hartzell. A small-town Midwesterner himself and not terribly bright in some things, Hartzell was a master at his chosen trade, managing to keep thousands of people convinced that he and he alone was the key to unraveling the legal entanglements that would bring Sir Francis Drake's fabulous fortune to American citizens. Living the life of a millionaire in London on the money sent to him by thousands of hopeful small-town Americans, Hartzell managed to keep those hopes alive, and the

money pouring in for over twenty years as he claimed to be untangling British hands from a fortune so great that, when turned over to its rightful American heirs, it would bankrupt the bank of England, and legally turn over entire parts of the city of London to American ownership. It was a wild and fantastic story, and one that only became wilder and more fantastic as Hartzell strung it out over the years to include his explanation that even the great depression hitting America in the 1930s was the direct result of manipulations by those in power to keep the Drake fortune from those who had legal title to it.

Even after his eventual arrest and deportation to America, Hartzell remained a hero to the thousands of people he had taken in. Rioting crowds demanded his freedom so he could continue his fight to bring the Drake fortune to America. So convinced were his suckers that even after his confinement to prison, many believed that his sentencing was a sham and that, aided by the American government, he was actually back in England continuing to wrest the Drake money from English hands. It's great reading with a deliciously ironic twist at its end. We recommend it heartily.

And on the fiction front, if you are a mystery buff and looking for a fun read with some interesting inside information on the world of magic and séances, you might want to pick up *The Houdini Specter* by Daniel Stashower. This is Stashower's third book in the Harry Houdini Mystery series published by Avon Books. This one has the ever-energetic Houdini and his brother Dash investi-

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.

gating a murder that appears to have been perpetrated by a spirit called up at a séance that Houdini was attending. Stashower has a good take on the overly self-confident but always resourceful young Houdini and his quieter and more sophisticated and worldly brother Dash that makes the Houdini mysteries as amusing as they are clever. If you are a Houdini buff, you'll pick up the many amusing references to the real Houdini's true-life career and acquaintances, but even if you know little about this fascinating escape artist and magician, the book is a delightful read.

OH, BILL!

Reading the papers has been depressing enough lately, so we don't know whether to laugh or cry about this one. From the *Sacramento Bee*, July 2, 2002, comes a story by Gar Joseph of the Knight Ridder newspapers that reports, "Amid allegations of witchcraft, Hollywood star Bill Cosby has evicted a long-time friend, the ex-wife of basketball star Guy Rodgers, from his Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, estate, which she has overseen for 19 years." According to the Joseph article, "Gladys Rodgers said Cosby and his 'spiritual advisor' accused her of using blood, sparkles and other items in bizarre witch rituals to gain control over the Philadelphia-bred comedian. Rodgers says that she is a Methodist." It seems from the article that "an Englishman" named David Kirby became "part of the Cosbys' inner circle after the murder of their only son Ennis, in 1997." Cosby and his wife, it

seems, refer to Kirby as their "lama," who is reported to have "used fire, dice, seeds and heads" to do so-called "readings" and advised Cosby that Rodgers was using witchcraft to "gain control over the house and over Cosby." So it was goodbye, Gladys. "I was stunned," the article quotes Rodgers as saying. "After all these years, for it to happen like this." About Kirby's accusations of witchcraft, Rodgers said she told Cosby, "Bill, I don't believe this, but if you believe this, then I'm lost." The article reports that Cosby did not answer.

STOP CLONING AROUND YOU GUYS!

Here's a bizarre update to the discussion on cloning that we had a few meetings ago. It seems that the Raelian Movement (you remember them—they are well-financed cult that believes humans are all clones of god-like aliens who previously visited Earth and are due back any time now in flying saucers) claims to have implanted a cloned embryo in a woman. According to the Raelian belief, all life on Earth is a product of the aliens' genetic engineering and Jesus was a product of super-advanced cloning techniques. According to the *Boston Globe*, Dr. Brigitte Boisselier, the director of Clonaid, the so-called "scientific wing" of the Raelians, is quoted as saying, "The only thing that I can tell you is that, yes, we have done implantations and the next announcement will be the birth of a baby." The operation was apparently carried out somewhere outside South Korea

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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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under the supervision of BioFusion, a South Korean firm owned by the Raelians. BioFusion spokesperson Kwak Gi-Hwa is quoted in the *Globe* as saying, "The operation was carried out outside South Korea and therefore, the government has no right to meddle with it. She would leave the country if the authorities continue harassing us." Human cloning remains legal in Korea, but a bill is presently in the works to outlaw it. Most scientists outside the Raelian movement question the validity of the report, and point out that even if the Raelians have attempted reproductive cloning of a human, they are

operating in highly dangerous and unknown waters and face little chance of success. The sensational report, however, will probably only make it more difficult for serious scientists to press their case for legalization of “therapeutic cloning” which promises to make major breakthrough developments in the field of human health.

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THE RATIONAL COMMUNITY

CALENDAR

July 31: *SORT Meeting*

Topic: “The Disillusionment with Science”

SORT’s regular monthly meeting, at 7:00 p.m. on the last Wednesday evening of the month. *Location:* Room Sierra One, La Sierra Community Center, 5325 Engle Road, Carmichael. Everyone is welcome and all meetings are free.

Other Groups

August 11: *AOF Meeting*

Summer Sizzler: Salad and Dessert Potluck and Speech Contest. Bring a salad or dessert and enjoy hearing 2-minute speeches by members of the AOF (Atheists and Other Freethinkers).

Date & Time: Sunday, August 11, 2002, 12:00 noon. *Location:* Sierra II Community Center, 2791 24th Street, Room 10. (South of Broadway). Visitors welcome. *Cost:* Free.



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*Educating Ourselves
and Educating Others*

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