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**THE ART OF THE
HOAX**

CROP CIRCLES

**HARRY POTTER'S
ALCHEMIST**

PIRATES' TREASURE

AND LOTS MORE!



Spiral formation in wheat field,
Wiltshire, England, July 1999

Gotcha!

Strange but true:
This is the golden
age of hoaxes

BY THOMAS HAYDEN

She strolls onto the stage as if into her own living room, casually elegant in a twinkling, black tunic top and matching trousers. "I love you, Sylvia!" cries an exuberant young woman, her enthusiasm rising above the applause of 2,400 paying audience members. Sylvia Browne—psychic, medium, prolific author—accepts the affirmation gracefully and takes the podium. "I want to talk to you about angels, about spirit guides, and about how to become more psychic."

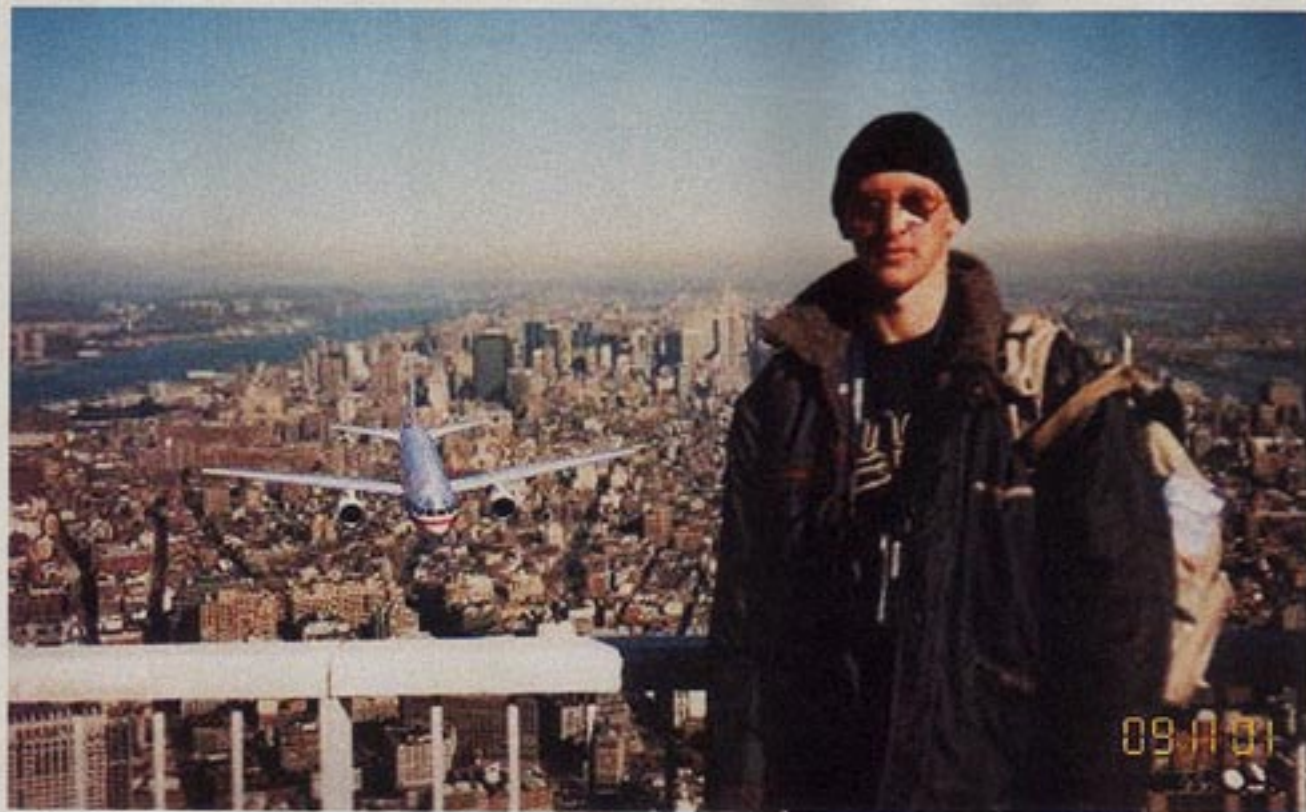
Shudder. This is precisely the conversation I've spent most of my life avoiding. But I was trapped in a sea of believers, and having paid \$78.50 of *U.S. News's* money for my seat in the Atlantic City Convention Center auditorium, I didn't dare attempt an escape.

What is a hoax, exactly? When does a good deal become too good to be true, and where does belief end and credulity begin? In the stories that follow, we present elaborate swindles, outrageous gags, and insidious disinformation campaigns. They're all hoaxes—proof there's a sap for every scam artist, an easy mark for every mountebank, a chump for every charlatan. The notion that the Eskimos have 100 words for "snow" isn't true—more urban legend than hoax—but English certainly has a telling number of *mots juste*





hoax: a sensational lie that catches the attention of the public



for stretchers of the truth and the suckers who believe them. And it is a collaboration; history shows that a successful hoax often depends not so much on the guile of the hoaxer as on the gullibility of the hoaxed.

Life is full of decisions to believe or not to believe. When it comes to psychics, I'm quick to adopt a skeptical stance. Yet despite any number of analyses exposing the psychic's art as, at best, a clever party trick, many people—perhaps even you, dear reader?—clearly believe this stuff. *Sylvia Browne's Book of Dreams* (Dutton, \$25.95), about connecting with loved ones on "the other side," is on the *New York Times* bestseller list. John Edward, who also offers a link to the dead, has a hit with his

At first glance, it looks so real. But the jet and the World Trade Center tourist are part of a 9/11 photo hoax.

television show *Crossing Over*, and other dabblers in divination and necromancy are perennial favorites on TV talk shows. I went to see Browne not so much to test her psychic powers as to test my own ability to resist the temptation to believe in them, real or not. Sadly, my status as a hardened skeptic did not survive unblemished, but more on that later.

Scale o' lies. The word hoax is thought to derive from the old magician's incantation "hocus pocus." Nailing down a precise definition is no easy task, but on the spectrum of mendacity, most hoaxes fall somewhere between a scam on one side and a practical joke on the other. Unlike urban legends, notes Alex Boese, who maintains the Web site museumofhoaxes.com, a hoax should be traceable back to a perpetrator who's knowingly trying to deceive the public. (Boese, a Ph.D. student at the University of California-San Diego, has a book coming out this fall based on his hoax research. By coincidence—or is it!—he shares Browne's publishers.) When tall tales, such as those spun by the infamous Charles Ponzi (story, Page 57) are used to trick the unsuspecting out of their money, they also become fraud. But while some recent business dealings—Enron's accounting practices, that whole "new economy" thing—can certainly feel like hoaxes, they rarely rise above the level of dirty tricks or mass wishful thinking.

Whatever else can be said about hoaxes, they do have a



PAGE 42. LET THE PARADE OF HOAXES BEGIN: 20 GREAT SCHEMES, SCAMS, AND SHAMS

wonderfully democratizing effect. Doctors, lawyers, scientists, even (who are we kidding; *especially*) the media, are all just as susceptible to polished patter and an appealing story as the rawest Victorian rube shelling out his wages for a barker's snake oil cure-all medicine. The "hook," as it's known in the trade, is often a plausible story, tailored to fit the victim's prejudices, or to play on greed, vanity, or desperation. In the early 20th century, a crudely faked fossil skull tricked anthropologists into believing that modern humans originated in England—an appealing thought to European

scientists (story, Page 69). And in 1983, *Newsweek* and the German magazine *Der Stern* paid millions to print excerpts from a bogus diary, purportedly the private musings of Adolf Hitler (story, Page 62). "People saw great big headlines and pats on the back, and perhaps something more substantive as well," says one former *Newsweek*er. "It was just too tempting to pass up." Sometimes, it turns out, believing is really just seeing what you want to be true.

Are we more vulnerable to hoaxes in the information age, or less so? With modern communications, hoaxes can be de-

urban legend: a widely known, often lurid story based on hearsay



bunked as rapidly as they are created. Several Web sites track electronic hoaxes (hoaxbusters.ciac.org is a good one), but if the number of phony virus alert E-mails I receive is any indication, the Internet's power is more readily harnessed to proliferate hoaxes than to quash them. For the record, Bill Gates will not give you a thousand dollars for testing an E-mail tracking application, and you shouldn't trust that dude in Nigeria who swears he needs your help to transfer millions out of the country. With E-mail, notes Boese, "anybody can potentially have access to millions of people." When that anybody happens to be a hoaxer, the results can spread for years.

The events of September 11 have proved to be particularly

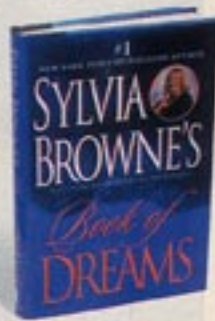
The press fell for Joey Stagg's pedal-powered "portofess." Right: Psychic Sylvia Browne is a bestseller.

rich fodder for Internet hoaxes. The most famous features a photo of a tourist on a World Trade Center observation deck, a mere instant before an airliner slams into the building. Even if the film could have survived the horrific fires that day, the image is an obvious fabrication. The airplane is approaching from the wrong direction, the WTC observation deck was closed when the attacks took place, and the tourist is wearing winter clothes on a warm day. The photo, phony as it was, worked as a hoax not because it was believable but because it captured the public mood perfectly; the hapless tourist stood in for all of us, sucker-punched out of the blue on a perfect late-summer morning.

Fertile ground. Other 9/11 hoaxes were more sinister. False claims of lost relatives, designed to elicit sympathy or claim undeserved compensation, were the most tawdry. A series of anthrax hoaxes, following the all too real postal attacks, exploited people's justifiable fear. And 21st-century spins on the notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion hoax (story, Page 45) abounded. That Israel was behind the attacks and that Jewish employees were warned to stay home that day are patently ridiculous claims. When lies are planted in a field of ugly prejudice, even the most insidious hoaxes can take root.

Other, more benign deceptions are designed to argue a point. In 1996, physicist Alan Sokal used a classic hoaxer's tool—impeccable credentials—to dupe the editors of *Social Text*, a respected academic journal of cultural studies. Any number of observers—not all of them cranky and conservative—maintain that the entire field of postmodern, post-structuralist theory belongs to another class of hoax, namely highfalutin flimflam. But Sokal went them one better. In his paper *Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*, Sokal argued that recent advances in quantum physics support the idea that physical reality is nothing more than a social construct. The editors

didn't follow much of the science, they later admitted, but were pleased to publish a contribution from an established scientist. Too bad the article was a sham. In revealing his hoax, Sokal invited those who believe the laws of physics are cultural conventions to test them from his 21st-floor window. Sokal became a media darling—it's hard to resist a story



rumor: an unsubstantiated report in general circulation

with the punch line "take that, smarty-pants!"—and used his exposure to call for greater intellectual rigor in academia.

In the hands of an expert, perpetrating a hoax can even become an art form. New York artist Joey Skaggs has convinced reporters that, among other things, he was a roving priest offering "religion for people on the go" with his tricycle-mounted "portofess" confessional and a Korean entrepreneur soliciting live dogs from animal shelters for his soup business. Skaggs is a hoaxing purist; he constructs his stories with a moral—usually a variation on the themes of questioning assumptions and revealing prejudice—and deconstructs his efforts at his Web site, joeyskaggs.com. "Revelation is the most important aspect of the process," he says. "That's the point where consciousness can change." You'd think the resulting embarrassment would sharpen reporters' skepticism, but ask Skaggs if he has ever fooled anyone twice and he laughs. "Twice is nothing," he says. "The media's job is to question a premise, but information overload and the strain to get a story first gets in the way of getting it right." For the record, he has fooled *U.S. News* only once—something about the Japanese snapping up geoduck clams—and that was way back in 1987.

Twain's tales. The media have perpetrated their share of hoaxes, too. No less an icon than Mark Twain was famous for passing off tall tales (a gruesome massacre, a "petrified shah" found in the hills of Nevada) as reported fact in his newspapering days. But in the late 1990s, the novelist was outdone by an audacious young staff writer at the *New Republic*. Stephen Glass, the magazine said, invented all or part of some 27 separate stories he wrote for that magazine. A Vegas casino offering odds on a space shuttle malfunction? A New York bond trader so committed to watching the market tickers that he kept a portable urinal at his desk? A 15-year-old hacker extorting fast cars and pornography from a software firm? Fabrications all, but Glass's stories were so appealing that editors simply couldn't resist them—until an enterprising tech reporter, feeling

scooped, blew the lid off Glass's hacker yarn. Twain parlayed his creative flair into one of the greatest literary careers of all time; the disgraced Glass dedicated himself to law school.

Many hoaxes seem obvious in retrospect. But surely reasonable people can disagree about whether Sylvia Browne and other high-profile psychics qualify as a hoax? Millions of people do seem to believe the improbable notion that these self-proclaimed seers can divine the future and speak with the dead. I caught up with Browne on a lecture tour to see if I could figure out why.

All sorts of deceit is on offer in Atlantic City—I passed up a come-on, several hustles, and a scam on the way to the convention center—but Browne claims to offer the real deal. She's a gracious woman, with a gravelly voice and a knowing, world-weary air, and generously invited me backstage. I introduced myself as a journalist but didn't reveal that my magazine was working on an issue about hoaxes. (This was not in itself a hoax on my part, just a cheap deception.) A few minutes into the interview, Browne started "reading" me. "Watch out for your right ear," she warned. "You could be getting an infection." (Plausible enough—a good, safe opener.) "You've got a problem with your neck and shoulder." (Often true, but what ill-postured reporter, frantically scribbling all this into a notebook, *wouldn't* have neck and shoulder problems?) She moved on to specifics: "There's a problem with the disk between the fourth and fifth vertebrae in your lower back." *Shriker.* I had spent the entire preceding week flat on my back with lower-back pain—could she be on to something? Well, maybe statistics. "About 80 percent of herniated disks occur between those vertebrae" or the next disk down, says Scott Boden, a professor of orthopedic surgery at the Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta. Given the prevalence of disk problems, he says, Browne's diagnosis "would be statistically safe."

The reading continued; I'm a perfectionist (my editors would be pleased), and I'll soon move. I confess, I felt another chill, even

SKEPTICISM 101

Distrust and verify



Hoaxes and bad science can't beat the forces of facts and logic. These resources offer a bountiful supply.

Bigfoot bashers. *Skeptical Inquirer* (six issues yearly, \$35, 800-634-1610) and *Skeptic* (quarterly, \$30, 626-794-3119 or www.skeptic.com). Alternative medicine, Bigfoot, creationism, recovered memories—name the claim and these journals have looked into it. The tone of the former can wander into curled-lip territory and some articles in the latter are dryly academic, but their positions are solidly researched.

Clone zone. *The Borderlands of Science: Where Sense Meets Nonsense* (2001, Oxford University Press). Michael Shermer uses real issues like human cloning to show how to dissect arguments that may be less reasonable than they sound.

Carl's light. *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (1997, Ballantine). The late Carl Sagan makes a plea for rational thinking and explains why the irrational has such a hold on us.

Shades of truth. MadSci Network (www.madsci.org) posts replies from scientists to questions from anyone on subjects from astronomy to zoology (the answer to a post about why people see ghosts: active imagination, chemical imbalance, dreamlike state of consciousness, or brain injury).
—Avery Comarow



The robot is fake. Fake, fake, fake. Yet folks want to believe, says artist Paul Guinan (in uniform).

as she raised a knowing eyebrow. I am moving this month, and given the lousy housing options in Washington D.C., I'll probably keep leapfrogging. The parting shot: "Oh, and your love life sucks." *Sheesh*. Strictly speaking, my love life doesn't suck, it simply doesn't exist, but close enough. She conjured vague notions of someone short and blond though, with big greenish eyes. (Yowza—finally we get to the "tell 'em what they want to hear" part!) But I don't get out enough, she chided, and can't just sit around waiting for something good to happen.

This final chastisement is central to Browne's appeal—safe predictions and comforting messages combined with tough love. "I don't care if you feel miserable," she tells the audience later that night. "Smile anyway . . . Get over it." Sound advice, and it comes with full theological backing. Think your life is tough? It should be—we're in hell! But don't worry, this life is just a way to test our strength and fortify our spirits before returning to heaven. This is liberation theology for the daytime-TV crowd—the hard times will soon be over and your deceased loved ones are happy, so stop whining, get off the couch, and go help someone.

Good show. Despite the tingles of recognition I felt during her reading, I didn't leave feeling convinced of Browne's powers. But neither did I feel ripped off—she puts on a good show. (I might have felt differently if I'd paid the \$700 fee for a private telephone consultation, but with the waiting list

full until 2005, I didn't have a chance to find out.) One woman, whose husband died in the World Trade Center attacks, told me that despite her family's misgivings, Browne's message gave her a sense of peace and closure, noting, "If you don't need it, you won't come looking for it."

And that—whether Browne is for real or not—points to the first law of constructing a hoax; find a need and fill it with a good story, and the world will beat a path to your 1-900 number.

Given the current spate of "accounting irregularities," you might think we'd learn to be a little more skeptical. And yet, pulling off a hoax is sometimes so simple, it can even happen by accident. Just ask Paul Guinan, a Portland, Ore., artist whose Web site (www.bigredhair.com/boilerplate) features a "mechanical man" named Boilerplate, supposedly created in the 1880s. The site, a joke from start to finish, includes photos of the charming robot meeting Pancho Villa and journeying to Antarctica. Guinan was shocked—and a little chastened—to find his innocent site duped many visitors, including historians. "I felt both pride and embarrassment that I fooled all these people," he says. "If I can do it, I guess anyone can." A sucker born every minute? Shoot, if you believe that lowball estimate, I'd like to talk with you about buying the Eiffel Tower. ●

With Theodore Blern in Saskabush, Mother Shipton in medieval Yorkshire, and Lemony Snicket in the village of V.F.D.