
Sheila from inner city Sydney asks: 'Why are you taking those awful smelling tablets?'

Bloke: 'They keep the flamin' crocs away'

Sheila: 'But there aren't any crocs between here and flamin' Noosa'

Bloke: Tablets must be bloody working then.

(I originally heard this joke as being about a Punjabi in New York and an elephant, but I thought this version was more PC). [I first heard it on the *Goon Show* in the 60s and it was tigers. **Ed**]

Now, you'd have to agree that the bloke is a bit (flamin') irrational — finding evidence a little too easily — but think about the 'Car Effect'. I don't drive a car, but I've noticed that whichever car I'm in, I notice more of the same cars. It's amazing! If I'm in a big white manly ute — there's big white manly utes everywhere! And I live in the CBD! And if I'm cruising around in a Kombi — the streets are suddenly full of hip-

pies just back from Byron! It's a matter of perception of the world around you.

Degrees of irrationality

OK, there are degrees of irrationality, of selective evidence, maybe even self-deception. The point is, people are constantly interpreting the world around them; and often in a way that suits their own perceptions. Beliefs are not simply a matter of 'believing the wrong thing'. It's much more complex than that. People construct their beliefs, themselves and their worlds bit by bit. It's a process that involves creativity, imagination, and attachment. They are committed, which is why showing them exactly physically how the spoon is bent when Uri leans on it is instructive, but not going far enough.

People will always get angry if you try to bring down their entire world. So I think Skeptics need to understand more about why people believe what they do. Beliefs are amazing! There are scientists who go home and practice Wicca — they can compartmentalise their beliefs and

hold opposing beliefs at the same time! There is a plenitude of academic theories; this is an exciting area of research. And pseudo-science is an amazing sociological phenomenon — it works both within and against the dominant ideology — it is a fabulous indicator of the world it emerges from. So this column is going to be about how to make sure Skepticism never stagnates into cynicism, how to look keep looking out at the world — and the people around us.

To conclude, after having written 1500 words on the subject, I found that Phillip Adams put it more gracefully than I ever could, in *The Weekend Australian*, November 8-9 2003:

Scepticism is healthy. Far more than jogging, meditating or bran eating, it is conducive to mental, political, scientific and religious wellbeing. Whereas cynicism – something frequently confused with scepticism – is not simply unhealthy but frequently malignant.



Another day, another 'Psychic'

Psychic Encounters – Margaret Birkin, hosted by Mark Kirstain, 22 Oct 2003; Canterbury-Hurlstone Park RSL Club.

It's like some sort of weird torture, like being trapped in a time-loop. I keep going to see these stage 'psychics' only to find the same thing over and over. Bad cold reading. I will not bore readers with all the details of Margaret Birkin's act, it was the same shtick Skeptics have seen many times and I was able to dissect every routine she pulled.

However there were a few disturbing moments with unsuspecting au-

dience members reduced to tears when convinced they were getting messages from the dear departed.

Birkin also went out on some very strange and disturbing tangents, at one point explaining that cot-death is nothing more than a soul using up the left over years from a previous life that also ended too early. (You figure it out.) Margaret Birkin is also known as a channeler, channelling an entity called "Maitreya" although on the day she stuck to cold reading. A pity as I have yet to see channeling in action. I wonder if Maitreya knows Carlos?

The question that always remains

unanswered with these stage 'psychics' is, do they actually believe in this drivel themselves? I can only guess. One thing was certain, at no time was any psychic, clairvoyant or paranormal ability displayed.

I end with a plea to all stage 'psychics'. Please, PLEASE improve your acts. For heaven's sake, buy Ian Rowland's *Full Facts of Cold Reading* book. At least try to give us some entertainment. And a plea to any real psychics out there. Please do something about all these bad cold readers muscling in on your turf!

Richard Saunders

