

**The Psychic . . . and the Skeptic :  
Uri Geller and James Randi have  
fought each other for nearly 20  
years. Now they're at it again.**

Michael J. Ybarra

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*Also run your fingers very smoothly Up and down the object Barely touching the metal Stroking it tenderly While repeating in your mind "Bend . . . Bend."* –Uri Geller song/poem

Caressing the silvery fork, the young Israeli demonstrated his unusual gift. After a few moments the flatware was bent like a dog's leg. Psychic power, said Uri Geller. A gaggle of Time magazine editors, professional skeptics and scandal seekers all, looked on in bewilderment. Then Geller left.

A slight, bearded man, who looked like he had been scribbling notes, arose and repeated the routine, explaining, he said, how Geller had bowed the fork on the tabletop while distracting the onlookers with banter.

That was 1973, the first time James (the Amazing) Randi met Geller, who had exploded into the limelight when Time editors asked for the demonstration of the self-proclaimed psychic's powers.

"A questionable nightclub magician," the magazine labeled Geller after the meeting.

"He'll never go anywhere with that act," said professional magician and devoted skeptic Randi. He would later call it the worst prediction he ever made: "I was wrong. I couldn't believe the American public could be so gullible." At the time, Geller dismissed the incident: "That he can do those things with tricks doesn't mean I do them with tricks." Then Geller went on, in Randi's words, to become the "psychic superstar of the century," a name virtually synonymous with ESP.

For almost 20 years, the skeptic and the psychic have feuded, calling names and tossing mud with childlike glee. Yet, they have lived a strange symbiosis, two exceedingly colorful characters, each a foil to the other. Randi shot to the big time by tripping up Geller; now, Geller gets his name in the media by attacking Randi.

Over the years, Geller has laid claim to all sorts of awesome feats: from stilling Big Ben by looking at a postcard of the clock and thinking "stop, stop, stop" to beaming peace thoughts into the mind of a Soviet arms control negotiator at a dinner in Geneva the night before Mikhail Gorbachev announced a plan to rid Europe of medium-range nuclear missiles.

Randi has launched a few missiles of his own. In 1975, he put out a pocket-sized book, "The Magic of Uri Geller," (reissued in 1982 as "The Truth About Uri Geller") to topple the psychic's claims of paranormal power.

Then, convinced that Geller was debunked, Randi went on to upend assorted clairvoyants, astrologers and spiritualists, helping to found the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, or CSICOP (pronounced Sy-cop), in 1976. More than three dozen slots on "The Tonight Show," free-lance psychic-busting, and a MacArthur "genius award" followed. Since the late '70s, Geller has seemed as out of fashion as lava lamps and bell-bottoms.

Says Randi: "I finished with him a longtime ago."

But Geller wasn't finished with Randi—not by a long shot.

In May, he filed a \$15-million libel action—his third and he says last—in U.S. District Court against him and CSICOP.

For the most part, their paths have crossed mostly in disparaging comments hurled from afar. They have met maybe half dozen times, facing off like linebackers on TV shows, bumping together in airports and, most recently, surrounded by lawyers at depositions.

Geller, now 44 and living in England, says he has always tried to be civil, offered to shake and put aside their vituperative fight.

Randi will have none of it.

“Do you really suppose Churchill and Hitler would shake hands?” he snarls. “We are not compatible personalities.”

The most recent battle-by-proxy occurred in May, the day after Geller filed the lawsuit. Randi, 63, who lives in Plantation, Fla., got hit with it while attending the CSICOP’s annual meeting in Berkeley. He then resigned from the organization.

“If he’s going to sue me, he shouldn’t have the privilege of suing them too,” Randi says. “It’s better that the committee should be spared the expense and spend their money on their purpose.” (CSICOP is still a defendant in the lawsuit.)

It was the third libel suit in as many years—the other two were tossed out by judges in New York. (One of the dismissed suits was refiled in Japan.)

“All these years I really turned away when I got slapped on my face,” says Geller. “Randi’s been attacking me personally, nothing having to do with my power or abilities, that I couldn’t take.

“The only way I can stop him from telling lies about me is to take him to court. Sooner or later one case is going to make it to court.”

No more does Geller slough off the committee’s attacks by calling it a “free publicity department” that’s made him rich and famous. “I gotta put a stop to this,” he says.

Geller says the alleged libel occurred in April, when Randi told a newspaper interviewer that the psychic’s tricks “are the kind that used to be on the back of cereal boxes when I was a kid.”

This and other remarks, the suit says, expose Geller to public scorn, and discourage people from doing business with him.

Randi’s lawyer, William Alden McDaniel Jr., responds that Geller suffered “no damages of any type as a result of the statements of which he complains, because of his previously low reputation.”

Geller is also suing Timex and its ad agency for \$2 million for ripping off his “unique” talents. He says ads produced for the watch company used a look-alike who fails to stop a Timex after bending a fork and a key. Not only did Timex benefit from the ad’s association with the psychic, Geller says, but it may have soured other companies from using him as a spokesman.

Timex’s response, however, hints at how far Geller may have fallen since his ubiquity in the 1970s. The company’s lawyers commissioned a survey of 105 people across the country, finding that only one person thought he knew who the psychic in the ad was. (And it wasn’t Geller.) Moreover, only 17 said they had ever heard of Geller.

Concurs Randi, acerbically: “Now when I do my lectures I have to explain who Mr. Geller was.”

The son of a soldier and a seamstress, Geller was born in Israel. In his autobiography, he recalls his first memory of “strange energy forces” going back to a childhood romp in an Arabic garden in Tel Aviv when he heard a loud high-pitched ringing and a “silvery mass of light” blotted out the sun, the implication being a visit by a UFO.

After that, the young Geller says he was able to know how much his mother had won or lost playing cards as soon as she arrived home. Then one day he was eating mushroom soup when the spoon bent, spilling the contents into his lap, and the handle fell off.

In school, Geller says, he would pick the brightest kid in class and see his work in his mind like a TV screen. Teachers accused him of copying. He was wounded, which he says he foresaw, in the 1967 Six-Day War, and then started performing all over Israel, hoping to save enough money to open a coffee shop.

His career took off in the late 1960s, however, when a radio interviewer asked then-Prime Minister Golda Meir about Israel’s future. “Don’t ask me,” she replied, “ask Uri Geller.”

The next thing he knew, Geller was flying to the United States to be examined at the Stanford Research Institute.

Telepathy, metal bending and instrument influencing were documented by an SRI team and written up in 1973 in the prestigious British science journal *Nature*, although the magazine also ran a skeptical editorial that trashed the SRI team’s research methods.

Later that year, Geller toured Europe, appearing live and taped on radio and TV, asking the audiences to also concentrate on bending silverware and starting broken clocks. In country after country, the broadcasts were followed by scores of reports of people who said they were able to do the same thing.

Weirder things were to happen. In his book, Geller writes about a computer-like voice appearing on a tape recorder that says the energies come from a spacecraft called “Spectra.” After one listen, the tapes either self-erased or dematerialized. A camera then floated in midair in front of Geller one day on an airplane, prompting him to take a picture of the clear sky outside his window; when developed the film showed three UFOs.

“I never made a poll on how many people believe in me,” Geller said recently. “It doesn’t matter.”

That was until the skeptics started setting traps.

Still, with his good looks and amazing feats, Geller was all over TV. He said anyone could tap into their psychic ability; spoon-bending clubs popped up all over the country. Producer Robert Stigwood (“Saturday Night Fever”) even acquired his life story for a movie.

After Randi’s first debunking book, Geller moved to Europe, eventually settling outside of London. In his 1987 book, “The Geller Effect,” he claimed he made a fortune

by dowsing for gold and diamonds, did mind-spying for the CIA, helped find the Son of Sam killer in New York and warped the drive shaft of a cruise ship.

Now Geller says he just wants to spend time with his two children (he says his son may have some telepathy) in the village of Sonning Court.

His profile in America is slight; his latest gig here was an “infomercial” for a 900 psychic hot line. Critics say Geller’s been so thoroughly discredited he can’t get anything better.

“Negative” situations are not conducive to the display of his powers, Geller says, which is why he never replied to a CSICOP offer to perform under controlled circumstances. “Nothing will change their minds,” he says.

Born in Toronto, Randi (Randall James Hamilton Zwingi) never had much interest in school, but excelled at teaching himself everything from higher math to magic.

At 15, he embarked on his career as a debunker when he saw a preacher reading the contents of sealed envelopes in a church. He charged the altar and called the spiritualist a fraud. Hauled into a police station for disrupting a religious service, he had to wait for his father to pick him up.

“That was the worst four hours the so-called psychic world ever spent, though they didn’t know it at the time,” he later told an interviewer.

At 17, he went on the road with a carnival after dropping out of high school. (Years later he spent some time on the road with a different sort of act: he nightly guillotined rock star Alice Cooper on stage.)

Getting out of straitjackets while hanging upside down from helicopters naturally followed, as did setting world’s records for being sealed in a coffin under water and being frozen in a block of ice.

But Randi’s true joy comes from explaining the inexplicable.

“The ability for people to think in a medieval fashion never ceases to amaze me,” he says. Not that he ever tires of it. “Does a doctor get tired of curing people?” he asks.

Recently, Randi paid his way to what used to be East Germany. The new government had spent 400,000 marks on dowzers to run around a government building where they waved sticks to detect E-rays—which the diviners absurdly claimed cause cancer—and tell officials where to relocate desks to avoid them.

For three days, Randi asked the dowzers to divine which of two tubes contained water; the psychics were right about half the time—same as anyone else.

“I feel kind of sad,” he says. “I shouldn’t have to tell people the world isn’t square.”

This kind of work won him a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (\$272,000 over five years) in 1986. The “genius grant” was a pretty aptly named thing to give a guy with an IQ of 168. The money went to finance research on Randi’s latest book, “The Mask of Nostradamus,” released in 1990, as well as a new tome on the history of conjuring.

Even before the influx of cash, however, Randi was willing to put his wallet on the line.

For more than two decades, *Randi's* has had a standing offer to give \$10,000 to anyone who can demonstrate a paranormal happening under controlled circumstances. *Randi's* will keeps the challenge alive for 10 years after his death.

More than 600 people have grabbed for the money, most balking at having to provide proof. Of 75 serious attempts, *Randi* says no one has come close.

He doesn't expect that to change.

"If you're sitting by a chimney for 24 years waiting for a fat guy in a red suit to come down, that doesn't mean he won't come down tomorrow," he says. "But it's not very likely."

Many scientists and fellow magicians—those who admit to being professional illusionists—laud *Randi's* pull-out-the-stops approach to skepticism.

"One of the reasons he's been so hard on the trail (of frauds) is that he feels they're using the good name of magic to sell psychic claims," says Leon Jaroff, organizer of the 1973 Geller demonstration at *Time* and now a contributing editor at the magazine and a good friend of *Randi's*. "He's the pillar of integrity."

But Geller's friends see it differently. They view *Randi* as an unyielding foe, leader of the "witch hunters" who are "out to save society" from the paranormal. They have ranged from former astronaut Edgar Mitchell, who first helped bring Geller to the United States, to the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Clairborne Pell, who took him to arms control talks with the Soviets.

"Uri Geller does things that all of us have the ability to do, but not all of us can do it as well," says Mitchell, founder of the Institute for Noetic Science in Marin, which does psychic research. "*Randi* makes a good living debunking; he doesn't tackle anything real serious. Somewhere in his psyche he knows damn well he's wrong."

*Randi* won't say exactly how much he's dropped in legal fees fending off Geller's lawsuits, but allows that it's well into six figures; friends in San Francisco have started a legal defense fund.

But *Randi* makes no bones about viewing the suits as pure intimidation: "My right to free speech is certainly being interfered with."

Geller paints the current dispute not as yet another blow in a long-running brawl, but as a final effort to stand up for himself against *Randi's* mean and unrelenting attacks.

"This is no feud between a psychic and a skeptic," says Geller. "It is a feud between what is true and what is not. I'm an entertainer and a showman, but my abilities are real."

Both predict victory.

How it will end, perhaps, only *Spectra* knows.

## The Ted K Archive

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