

When Seeing Is Disbelieving

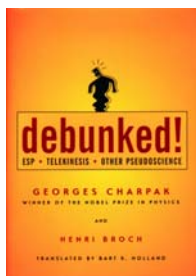
Debunked! ESP, Telekinesis, and Other Pseudoscience

Georges Charpak and Henri Broch
(translated from French by
Bart K. Holland)

Johns Hopkins U. Press,
Baltimore, MD, 2004. \$25.00
(136 pp.). ISBN 0-8018-7867-5

Reviewed by James Randi

With the media so full of glowing accounts that deal with nonsense such as children with x-ray vision, we need



to be better armed and informed. Knowledge helps filter out whatever truth might be contained in an attractive story about a spoon being bent by staring at it or about some new guru who has the secret to eternal life or can communicate with the next "UFO" that darts across the sky.

Debunked! ESP, Telekinesis, and Other Pseudoscience by Georges Charpak and Henri Broch is one of those books I wish I'd written. Charpak is a physicist at CERN who won the 1992 Nobel Prize in Physics for his invention of several particle detectors, and Henri Broch is a physics professor at the University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis in France who also teaches zetetics, the scientific investigation of paranormal phenomena. The authors approach the subjects as dedicated and qualified scientists. I, on the other hand, have to do it from a different direction. My expertise lies in the art of deception. I come from the conjuring profession, and I apply my knowledge of trickery to unravel the deceptions that cunning fakers use to deceive and swindle their victims. Charpak and Broch use their academic training to examine the logic

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and rationality of each case they dissect. I'm pleased to see the excellent book they've written.

Debunked! was originally published as *Devenez sorciers, devenez savants* in 2002. I particularly appreciate the authors' prologue, "Sorcerers and Scientists," which prepares the reader to assess their analyses. To become properly informed about a wide spectrum of paranormal and supernatural claims, one needs to be primed on the difference between real science and pseudoscience, and on the general characteristics and history of nonsense and myth.

The chapters are respectively titled "The First Steps in the Initiation," "Amazing Coincidences," "Let's Play Detective," "The Right to Dreams and Clarity," and "A New Millennium Dawns." At the end of the book is an appendix on how to calculate probabilities. Every subject, from fire walking—which needs only a rational explanation—to other matters that call for a better understanding of natural phenomena and interpretation, is handled in such a manner that one can understand and further pursue the true nature of claims made. My only regret with *Debunked!* is that it lacks an index. But perhaps the publishers intended readers to leaf through more pages to discover what they are looking for.

Local libraries, which no doubt have a full assortment of pro-paranormal books, need to have *Debunked!* as well. Consider donating a copy to your nearest public library.

The Book Nobody Read: Chasing the Revolutions of Nicolaus Copernicus

Owen Gingerich
Walker, New York, 2004. \$25.00
(306 pp.). ISBN 0-8027-1415-3

The following is how Owen Gingerich's *The Book Nobody Read: Chasing the Revolutions of Nicolaus Copernicus* might begin if the subject had been written by Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code* (Doubleday, 2003):

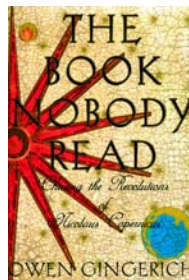
Professor Owen Gingerich was awakened by the phone. "I'm

sorry to disturb you in the middle of the night," said the heavily accented voice of the police inspector in the small town of Wolfenbüttel, home to one of the world's great libraries. "Our curator of rare books was just found murdered in his office. We found him in front of a copy of Copernicus's book, the one you were examining a few hours ago. In his last moments he penciled a line around a passage, which we hope is a clue. Can you help us?"

Although lacking the murder, mayhem, and mysticism of such best-sellers as *The Da Vinci Code* or *Rule of Four* (Dial Press, 2004) by Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason, Gingerich's book inadvertently echoes their exciting prose with historical tales of intrigue, heresy, and great discovery. However, his work surpasses these novels by giving us actual history and real-world puzzles in place of the pseudoscholarship of the potboilers.

The Book Nobody Read is really a book about a book about a book. Gingerich is one of the most energetic and prominent scholars of the Copernican revolution. His *An Annotated Census of Copernicus' De Revolutionibus* (Brill Academic, 2002) catalogs copies of that epochal work and traces their provenance, annotations, and other interesting features.

Gingerich's latest book is essentially an account of the conception and the making of the census. His extensive travels to find and inspect copies of *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* provide grist for seemingly countless anecdotes and side-lights. But his first-person account is far from a strict narrative. The author draws on his three decades of work to form chapters that



are roughly thematic. Some of those chapters treat historical questions, such as the intellectual relationships between Copernican scholars as traced through the annotations found in copies of *De Rev.* Other chapters reflect on books as objects—for example, how the craft of printing shaped