



The North Texas

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The North Texas Skeptic Travel Section

Nostradamus slept here

by John Blanton

St. Rémy de Provence, France: Not only did he sleep here, Nostradamus was born here.

Hailed today by the unwashed, and many of the well-groomed, as well, as a seer for all ages, Michel de Notredame began life inauspiciously. His parents were Jews, who were forced by the Inquisition to convert to Catholicism, and he was born on 14 December, 1503, about 501 years ago.

Growing up here, he studied languages, mathematics, astronomy, *and astrology* under his grandfather's tutelage. He eventually attended medical school at the University of Montpellier and became a successful physician.

Then his life turned downward as his first wife and two of his children succumbed to the plague. He subsequently traveled throughout Italy and France to escape further inquiries from the Inquisition, and he finally settled down in Salon, France, remarried, and raised six children.

At the age of 52 he started writing his Centuries, collections of 100 four-line verses called quatrains. He ultimately wrote ten of these Centuries.

His quatrains are notably obscure. It's best to illustrate with an example, first the French, then the English translation. This is quatrain 24 from Century number 2:

Bestes farouches de faim fleuves tranner;
Plus part du champ encontre Hister sera,
En cage de fer le grand fera treisner,
Quand rien enfant de Germain obseruera.

Beasts ferocious from hunger will swim across rivers:
The greater part of the region will be against the Hister,

EVENTS CALENDAR

December Program

NTS End of Year Party

Saturday, 11 November 2004, at 2 p.m., Center for Community Cooperation, 2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas (corner of Live Oak Street and Liberty Street)

Bring food and drink (no alcohol) and your favorite skeptical video. Be prepared for fun, games, and exchange of skeptical gifts.

NTS Board Meeting

Saturday, 8 January at 2 p.m.— Center for Community Cooperation, 2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas.

We will elect board members and officers. NTS members can vote and stand for office.

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 members receive the NTS newsletter and may attend
 NTS functions at which admission is charged at no or
 reduced cost. In addition, members will receive mailings
 on topics of current interest or social events.

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The great one will cause it to be dragged in an iron cage,
 When the German child will observe nothing.

If you don't understand all this, don't feel alone. The obscurity of the
 quatrains has lent them the immense power to predict. Since some inter-
 pretation by the reader is required, almost any interpretation will do, and
 many interpretations have done. They have done quite well at predicting
 future events, after the events have happened. The Web site of *The Mys-
 terious & Unexplained* provides an explanation:¹

The rhymed quatrains of Nostradamus were written mainly in
 French with a bit of Italian, Greek, and Latin thrown in. He inten-
 tionally obscured the quatrains through the use of symbolism
 and metaphor, as well as by making changes to proper names by
 swapping, adding or removing letters. The obscuration is
 claimed to have been done to avoid his being tried as a magician.
 Of course a skeptic might say it was done so the quatrains could
 be interpreted to fit numerous situations.

So does Hister actually refer to Hitler? An instance of
 Nostradamus changing letters around? Is this a reference to Ger-
 many during WWII?

Whatever it is, this illustrates the powerful draw of Nostradamus.
The Mysterious & Unexplained Web site concludes the biography of
 Nostradamus:



Nostradamus looks down as tourists pose in front of his famous fountain in St.
 Rémy.

Photo by John Blanton

In 1564 Nostradamus was appointed Royal Physician to King Charles IX.

On July 1, 1566 Nostradamus offered his final prediction to his priest. In response to the priest's farewell of "Until tomorrow," Nostradamus is said to have answered: "You will not find me alive at sunrise."

Nostradamus died that night.

But we forget St. Rémy de Provence. Such is the draw of its famous son, that no fewer than three NTS members have dropped by in recent years to check out this picturesque town. Other visitors will not be disappointed, either. The center of town is a delightful collection of shops, vegetable stands, and places to eat. Just a nice hike from the town center is the Glanum archeological site, with the remains of an ancient Greek and Roman city. Also among St. Rémy's featured attractions is

the Nostradamus Fountain on Rue Carnot, inaugurated in 1814, although we doubt Nostradamus already knew about all of this in advance.

We can't mention Nostradamus without calling attention to James Randi's well-researched book *The Mask of Nostradamus*. You can order your own copy through the NTS Web site. Just go to the books pages and click on the Amazon link. We get a commission.²



References

1 <http://www.activemind.com/Mysterious/Topics/Nostradamus/biography.html>

2 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/books/randi.htm>

What's new

By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the *What's New* column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

"The god gene": new book says faith is hardwired in our genes.

Psychology, like just about everything else, has been transformed by the genetics revolution. Dean Hamer, a behavioral geneticist at NCI, has now examined the genetic basis of spirituality in an important book that explains why we're predisposed to believe in God. Evangelicals hate the idea that they are motivated by a trick of brain chemistry. As near as WN can tell "the God gene" is just "the belief gene," in Park's 2000 book, *Voodoo Science*. The power of the God gene was demonstrated this week when Diana Duyser put a 10-year old grilled cheese sandwich bearing an image of the Virgin Mary up for sale on eBay. It sold for \$5,100.

Shell game: industry plays its part in the hydrogen circus.

They installed the nation's first public hydrogen pump in the Shell station at 525 Benning Road in Washington, DC, just 5.2 miles from the U.S. Capitol Building. We thought you'd like to know just in case you're in town driving your hydrogen powered car. Oh! I forgot — you can't buy one, can you? GM has six hydrogen prototype minivans in Washington, parked by the

Capital for what a GM executive calls "educational outreach." Parked, because a round trip to the Shell station will use a third of a tank of hydrogen. No matter, GM isn't trying to sell hydrogen cars. here's a WN educational outreach: the Bush administration points to the hydrogen car to show that while other countries sign treaties, we do something about the environment. Here's more education: even if they solve all the problems with the hydrogen car, it won't do squat for the environment. Pollution comes from making the hydrogen. GM will turn out a handful of hydrogen concept-cars with government subsidies while selling thousands of profitable SUVs, and Shell's gasoline sales will climb filling up those SUVs, at the cost of putting up with a few little-used hydrogen pumps, paid for with government subsidies.

Moral values: Darwinism continues to stir up the faithful.

In Cobb County Georgia, a sticker on science textbooks warns that evolution is "a theory, not a fact." It's being challenged in court. The Grantsburg School District in Wisconsin wants "Various theories of origins" (read "intelligent design") taught. The move is overwhelmingly opposed by higher education groups in the state. In Charles County, Maryland, several school board members want creationism on the curriculum and American History to stress our roots as "a Christian nation." They are also considering inviting Gideons to provide each students with a bible. The Washington Post says one board member is a member of Gideons. Another hosts a conservative

Continued on page 6

Web news

The World Wide Web is a wonderful source of information and news. Some of it is true, and some of it is not.

Sticker Shock

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-11-24.htm#shock>

Colin Purrington's Sticker Shock page is so timely that about the best way to honor it is to reprint it entirely. His sticker page is a hoot, as well. Clip your own stickers from this copy of The North Texas Skeptic or else get Colin's printable document and make your own using some Avery labels. Use the URL above or go to Colin's Web page to get the links not shown here —

Wording for the first disclaimer is taken verbatim from the sticker designed by the Cobb County School District in Georgia (see original). To print the above disclaimers onto a sticker page, download the PDF version and shrink it to fit a normal page. To print a full page of a single sticker, crop the PDF version and duplicate the desired image within a word processing program. If you really want to get other parents' attention, transfer the stickers onto a t-shirt with an inkjet iron-on kit and wear it to school board meetings, especially if they are filmed — school boards just hate national scrutiny. If you want to give somebody a t-shirt for Christmas (if you're into that holiday), but just hate to iron, talk to Jim at CafePress (and see their related stock). However, do not wear your t-shirt if your school board members tend to wear blaze orange regularly. If your school district is considering anti-evolution stickers or other such silliness, alert your local branch of the American Civil Liberties Union, which is always interested in reseparating church and state.

If your children don't come home saying, "Evolution is totally cool!" then they are probably receiving science instruction from a teacher who doesn't think evolution is totally cool. Even if their teacher believes (as almost half of

Americans do) that humans were created by a god within the last 10,000 years, his or her job is to teach evolution enthusiastically and without even a hint of tentativeness. Talk to your kids, and encourage them to ask questions during class. You might even ask your kid to record a few lectures on the iPod you foolishly bought for them. And at parent-teacher conferences, ask your kid's teacher to show you the lesson plans that specifically teach evolution (modules on descent with modification, natural selection, speciation, origin of life, human origins, etc.). Also, all teachers will have a copy of the state science standards on or near their desks, and you can certainly ask to look at the "Life Sciences" section to see what material might show up on state achievement tests. Lesson plans teaching evolution can be found easily on the internet:

National Biology Teachers Association

National Center for Science Education

National Science Teachers Association

If you don't have time for any of the above, but are not opposed to being horrified and entertained at the same time (for free!), go get yourself a really stiff drink and check out some of the slick web sites where anti-evolution school board members, teachers, and fellow

parents get their strategies, lesson plans, and Darwin jokes:

<http://www.intelligentdesignnetwork.org/>

<http://www.discovery.org/esc/>

<http://www.icr.org/>

<http://home.comcast.net/~vanandel1/donations.htm>

This page's URL is

<http://www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/cpurrin1/textbookdisclaimers/index.htm>

Please send it to any parents you know who might be concerned that their children are receiving weak or religion-infused science instruction.

If you have questions, comments, or non-exploding hate mail, please feel free to contact me: Colin Purrington.

Disclaimer stickers for science textbooks

This textbook contains material on **evolution**. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.

This textbook states that **the earth is over 4 billion years old**. Because some people strongly believe that the earth cannot be this old, the material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.

This book promotes the theory of **plate tectonics**, the gradual movement of the major land masses. Because nobody observed this process, this material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.

This textbook suggests that **the earth is spherical**. The shape of the earth is a controversial topic, and not all people accept the theory. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.

This textbook contains material on **gravity**. Gravity is a theory, not a fact, regarding a force that cannot be directly seen. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.

This book discusses **heliocentrism**, that the Earth orbits around a centrally located Sun. Because astronomers still disagree over the details of the heliocentric model, this material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.

This textbook contains material about **special relativity**. Special relativity is a scientific theory, and very few scientists fully understand it. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.

This textbook claims that **evolution** is not fully accepted by scientists because it is just a theory. The author hopes to confuse you into equating "scientific theory" with "cockamamie theory." To read a short blurb on what a scientific theory is, go to, <http://wilstar.com/theories.htm>.

This book does not contain the word **evolution**, the unifying principle in biology and an important component of the National Science Standards and the Scholastic Achievement Test. For an overview of what your class is missing, go to: <http://evolution.berkeley.edu/>

This book was anonymously donated to your school library to discreetly promote religious alternatives to the theory of evolution. When you are finished with it, please refile the book in the fiction section.

This book mentions **Creationism, New Creationism, Scientific Creationism, or Intelligent Design**. All of these beliefs rely on the action of a supernatural entity to explain life on earth. Scientists rejected supernatural explanations for life in the 1800s, and still do today.

This book discusses **gods**. The existence of entities with supernatural powers is controversial, and many believe that myths, especially other people's myths, are fictional. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.

This book contains an **evolution disclaimer sticker** mandated by your local school board. For fun, submit an article to a local paper that probes the motivations of board members and analyzes the impact of weakened science instruction on the success of students' college applications.

This sticker covers a pre-existing sticker designed to subtly undermine the teaching of evolution in your class. To see the full text of the original sticker, examine the books of children of school board members, who mandated the sticking.

This book discusses **evolution**. President George W. Bush said, "On the issue of evolution, the verdict is still out on how God created the Earth." Therefore, until 2008 this material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.

What's New continued from page 3

religious radio talk show. The Raelians (WN 27 Dec 02) note that, "The Theory of Intelligent Design does not lead to a supernatural designer but to an extraterrestrial human-civilization designer."

Dietary supplements: FDA vows to crack down on mislabeling.

Don't count on it. Passage of the 1994 Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act largely freed the industry from government oversight. A couple of celebrity deaths has turned up the heat on the FDA (WN 09 Apr 04), but this is a powerful industry, and it will change when the law changes.

Supercolliders: are particle accelerators a threat to life?

The Raelians have been pretty quiet since they announced that baby Eve had been cloned (WN 27 Dec 02). That was two years ago. Now the Raelian Scientists Association is urging that "supercolliders" be turned off "to protect life at every level of existence in the universe." The Raelians believe all life on Earth is the result of intelligent design, and so do a lot of fundamentalist Christians, but that's where similarities end. Raelians think our creators were scientific space aliens. (Have you ever noticed how silly everyone else's religion is?) Raelians also believe the universe is fractal, with an infinite number of fractal levels of life. Thus, supercolliders might be destroying life in infinitely small worlds. WN does not believe there is much supporting evidence, but we'll watch where we step.

Exotic weapons: What's New establishes the "Excalibur Prize."

The \$10 million X-Prize for the first civilian sort-of space ship capable of offering affordable space sickness to the public got front-page coverage around the world. The WN editorial board was inspired to offer a prize of our own. We put our head together and came up with the Excalibur Prize for the weapon based on the most speculative physics. "Excalibur" was the code name of the fearsome X-ray laser that Edward Teller promised could wipe out the entire Soviet missile fleet simultaneously. They chose the name of another mythical weapon. Candidates abound, such as the hafnium bomb (WN 16 Apr 04), but lest you think the prize is wired for Carl Collins, there's the awesome anti-matter bomb, which comes up so often it's now called the "doesn't-matter bomb." The Air Farce slapped a se-

crecy lid on the "positron bomb" after the *San Francisco Chronicle* carried a story on it. No word on how many positrons the Air Farce has. The Excalibur Prize consists of a free subscription to WN.

The Excalibur Prize: distinguished selection panel is named.

Ranging from a hand-held worm-hole projector that zaps opponents to the other side of the galaxy, to an exotic payload delivery system, about which little is known except a mysterious acronym ups. nominations for a weapon based on the most speculative physics have been pouring in since last week's announcement. The deadline for nominations is Thursday, Oct 28. A diverse group of experts, familiar to regular readers of What's New, has agreed to assist in the final selection:

| | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Puff Panegyric | Pentagon News Office |
| General Persiflage | Missile Defense Agency |
| Elie Mosinari | Congressional Budget Expert |
| Professor Basilisk | Renowned Ornithologist |
| Ann Thropojinic | Veteran Astronaut |
| Hi Rodomontade | NASA Scheduler |

Creationism: the bull about Earth being young is getting old.

You may recall that back in January, WN related that bookstores in Grand Canyon National Park carried "Grand Canyon: A Different View," a creationist account that contends the canyon can at most be a few thousand years old, since that's how old the Earth is. A federal review of whether the book should be sold in the Park has been delayed "over issues of church and state." What issues? Geology is a science. Meanwhile the book has been moved from Natural Science to Inspirational. That inspired me to complain. As Eugenie Scott of the National Center for Science Education put it, "Nobody is saying this book should be burned, but it should not be sold at this bookstore."

Acupuncture: you don't have to know where the rabbit came from.

On TV's "Sex and the City" Charlotte, who was unable to conceive, turned to acupuncture. I read that in the *Wall Street Journal*, but it didn't say whether it helped. So I turned to the experts on the WN staff. Charlotte, they assured me, ended up adopting. I'm not surprised. Of course, even if she had become pregnant it wouldn't mean that acupuncture helped. You need a randomized, placebo-controlled, double-blind study with good

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2004.
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statistics to find out what works and what doesn't. And double-blind is hard to do with needles. But it wouldn't matter, I still wouldn't believe it. The trouble is it's silly. Acupuncture, complete with "meridians" that connect acupuncture points, and moxibustion (WN 13 Nov 98), which applies heat to the acupuncture points, predate vivisection by thousands of years. Well by 2004 they've looked: no features of our anatomy correspond to any of this stuff. They discovered acupuncture before it was known that blood circulates, or that germs cause disease.

But is there anything acupuncture doesn't treat? The Wednesday *New York Times* reported that "acupuncture is moving toward the mainstream." Mainstream what? When a stage magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat, I may not know where the rabbit came from, but I know it's not magic. It's not science either.

The vote is in: it's now time to unite behind the winner.

The winner of the Excalibur Prize, was the Black Hole Weapon or BHW, nominated by George Wallerstein. Too dangerous to use on Earth, it's designed for use against any alien planet suspected of harboring weapons of mass destruction. If we're wrong, who's to complain? George will now receive WN without charge for an entire year.

The Excalibur Prize (WN 15 Oct 04) was inspired by bold "outside-the-box" pioneers at the Pentagon, NASA and CIA, who gave us the Excalibur X-ray laser, the Podkletnov gravity shield, and remote-viewing. Other brilliant ideas in past years included the neutrino bomb, which had an acoustic device to let victims know they'd been zapped by trillions of neutrinos.

Our panel of experts faced an ethical crisis when former WN intern Paul Gresser, who is not exactly svelte, nominated the Atkins bomb. When detonated, the A-bomb coats the target area with bacon grease, reducing everyone to skin-and-bones with high blood pressure. The countermeasure is carbs, applied with a device called a carburetor. Would picking Paul's idea be viewed as conflict-of-interest? One panelist, General Persiflage, scoffed: "At the Pentagon we always award contracts to friends; you gonna do favors for your enemies?"

Another idea was nano voodoo dolls; trillions of them on a single chip. Jim Dukarm explained, "It amplifies Murphy's law based on quantum theory or something. In tests it dropped a tree on a troublemaker with at least partial effectiveness."

Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal

encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminates factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community, the media, and the public. It also promotes science and scientific inquiry, critical thinking, science education, and the use of reason in examining important issues.

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