GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY

The Paranormal Strikes Back

Author

Bridgstock, Martin

Published

2004

Journal Title

The Skeptic

Downloaded from

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Link to published version

skeptics.com.au/the-magazine/

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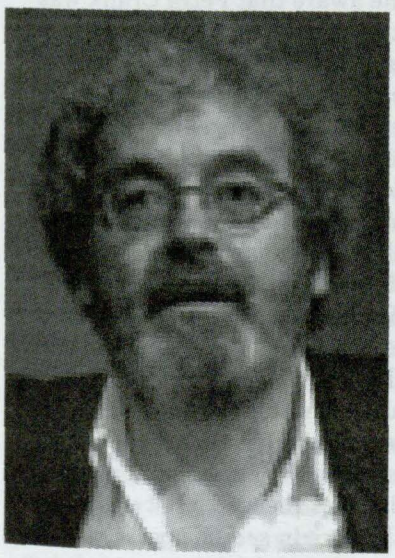
The Paranormal Strikes Back:

how I was sued for being a Psychic Criminal

Recounting a rather scary experience for a Skeptic.



Martin Bridgstock is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Science at Griffith University. He does not encourage his students to throw eggs at critics.

Skepticism is about investigating claims of the paranormal. Skeptics have a range of intellectual and practical tools which, usually, enable them to make sense of the paranormal in natural ways. Sometimes, though, the paranormal can turn and bite. If it does, you may find yourself in a kind of paranoid world, where the truth is turned on its head.

My nightmare began one Friday afternoon in 2004. I was at work, and had been checking references in the University library. When I returned to my office, a small message had appeared by my door. I get these all the time. Usually they are from students seeking special treatment, help or extensions on essay deadlines. This was different, though. It was from a senior constable, inviting me to phone her about the service of a summons.

Being summoned

Summons? What had I done? My knees went rubbery. The worst legal trouble I've ever faced is a speeding fine. Why would the police be issuing me with a summons? I called a friendly solicitor, who advised me to receive the summons and see what it was about. I phoned the policewoman, who told me it was a civil matter. The police were just serving the document. She read bits of the summons to me. I couldn't grasp its meaning. Nor, apparently, could she. "Yadda Yadda Yadda," was her summary of parts of it. So I headed to the police station on the weekend, and collected the document.

Hands trembling, I took the complaint and read it. Then I read it again. It seemed to have no connection with anything in the real world. My name was at the top all right, except that I was named as a Professor. Let's call the complainant Petra Crank. She lived in a nearby city, and I didn't know her. Two women were named as my co-conspirators: I didn't know them, either.

Assorted boxes were ticked, indicating that Petra was frightened that I would assault or do bodily injury to her, destroy or damage her property, or procure other people to do the same. What a terrible person I must be. The detail followed.

The case against

The complaints were, apparently that I had stolen a mass of documents including statutory declarations, police photographs and trade marks. What's more, I had arranged for more thefts to be made. This wasn't all. Apparently I had also

broken and entered her premises and car, and stolen yet more documents. Worst of all, I had arranged an assault. Apparently I had induced students or friends to throw eggs at her from a moving vehicle. She had been hit in the right kidney. All the complaints were jammed together, laced with exclamation marks. Here are a couple of samples, to capture the flavour:

** STOLEN STATUTORY DECLARATIONS & DOCUMENTS, POLICE PHOTOGRAPHS DRAWN DESIGNS, GRAPHICS, RIGHTS UNDER SEAL & TRADE MARKS SERIES!!! ARRANGED TO HAVE OTHER DOCUMENTS UNDER SEAL STOLEN*

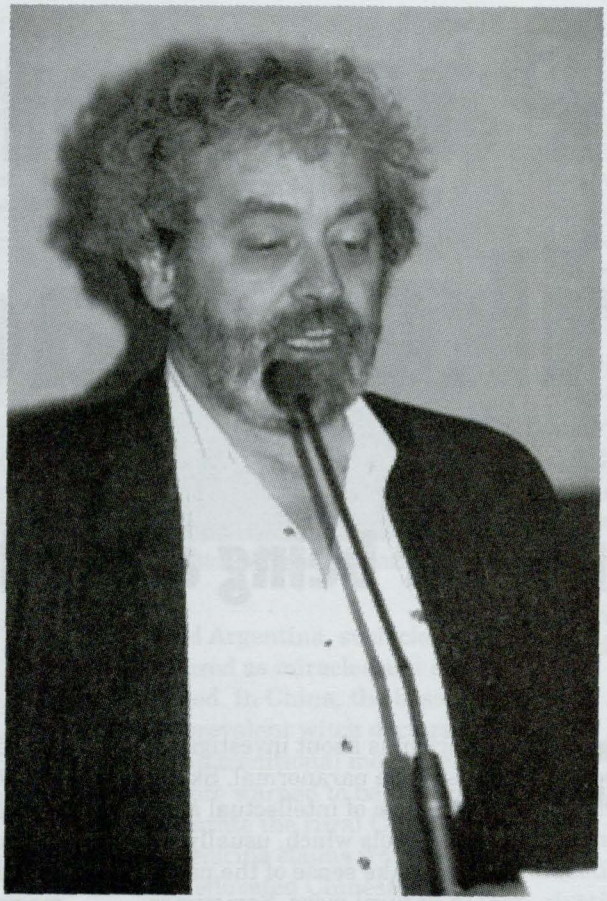
and

**ARANGED ASSAULT — HAD STUDENTS & OR FRIENDS THROW EGGS AT ME FROM A MOVING VEHICLE —HIT IN RIGHT KIDNEY*

Exactly what Petra was doing with police photographs was not at all clear. Nor was it clear how she knew that I had students throw eggs at her: did I give bonus marks for a hit? Universities offer courses in weird subjects, but egg-throwing was one I'd never heard of.

Still shaken, I contemplated my options. This was a civil case, but the content of the complaints was clearly criminal. Either I was a one-man crime wave, or there was something very odd about my accuser. No times or dates were given for these events, so I couldn't check my diary and see where I had been.

What was going on? Why was I being accused of crimes by someone I didn't even know? I felt sick. Luckily, I shared my problem with a friendly manager in the Faculty of Science. She looked thoughtful. "Yes, don't you remember," she said "earlier this year I think it was. She wrote pages of stuff about you. I sent it all to the legal department. Something about aliens and President Bush."



The author speaking at the Skeptics Convention

I made a mental connection. I had been contacted by a bevy of nuts when I had sought publicity for my Skepticism, Science and the Paranormal course the year before[1]. The University had helped me with the publicity, fixing up press and radio interviews across Australia. This sounded like the latest — and nastiest — nutcase surfacing as a result. Well, if I had acquired this problem as part of my legitimate work, maybe the University would help me with legal representation. It was worth a shot.

Legal representation

I trotted down to our legal department. They had just moved offices, and I accosted a bewildered-looking bloke surrounded by cardboard boxes. I explained my problem and he was uncertain: it looked personal, he thought. Still, he'd put a case to the Pro-Vice Chancellor, and see what he would do. It was all a bit out of his league: he was more used to rentals, consultancy contracts and the like.

Unknown to me, wheels were beginning to turn. The faculty manager sent an email supporting my position. The Dean phoned, urging strongly that I be supported. Another administrator, who had talked to Petra, gave the lawyer her opinions. And help came. A reputable firm of Gold Coast solicitors was hired to help me[2]. So when I went for the preliminary hearing — the Meeting, it's called — I was in the company of two tall, very intelligent young women lawyers, an associate and a clerk. If the case actually had to be fought, I was told, a barrister would be brought in to argue my case. We worked through some preliminary questions. I signed papers denying all knowledge of the crimes and allegations and we chatted about what would happen.

In court

We sat for a couple of hours: our court was running late. And I became aware that Petra Crank was sitting just a few metres away. She was alone, armed with bags full of documents and files. Apart from deep-set blazing eyes she looked pretty normal. I took the opportunity to look at the documents Petra had sent earlier. I read them twice, and still couldn't figure them out. As far as I could gather, I was accused of training student mediums to take over her thoughts. "AGAINST MY WILL!!!" Petra emphasised. (Well, it would be, wouldn't it?) Then there was verbiage about the stealing of documents. The Father, Son and Holy Ghost headed a list of people, with Petra in second spot. (I wasn't on that list: I think it was good guys only). Sherry Turkle, a distinguished American academic, was mentioned,

to no purpose I could fathom. Breaches of Contract, Boston University[3] . . . what on earth did it all mean? I was chilled to note that a young woman colleague of mine was mentioned as well. I hoped she wouldn't be dragged into this.

Then we were called to the court, and in we went. I hid behind my solicitor, peeking out while she explained that there was no chance of mediation. The magistrate was a no-nonsense bloke. He heard my solicitor out, then turned his gaze on Petra. He advised her that her action was based on a misconstrual of the law. It was marked on the file that it had only been accepted because she insisted. He told her that if she lost, as she probably would, she would be facing large bills. He advised her to withdraw and seek legal advice.

Petra was not happy. She had evidence she said. Boston University. Professor Bridgstock was a known parapsychologist[4]. But yes, she would seek legal advice and withdraw the case. Apparently on the way out she gave me a glare that would have melted metal. I was unmelted, not being a psychic. And that was that. I shook hands with my lawyers, and headed back to work. Neither I nor my colleague have heard from Petra since.

A result

The obvious point that comes out of all this is that it could have been a great deal worse.

My University stood by me, and the magistrate squashed the ridiculous charges very promptly. Still, it was nerve-wracking, and cost hours of my time that could have been spent doing something useful. And if I hadn't been a member of the University, the cost of the lawyers would have been substantial.

Of course, nut-cases have rights under the law, just like anyone else. On the other hand, it is worrying that their obsessions can be translated into legal action which can require highly expensive lawyers to rebut. I did not pay for my defence, the University did, and that money comes from taxpayers and students. My own losses were minor.

The perils of quackery unrestrained

How much worse could it have been? Well, contemplate the case of Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-discoverer of evolution. In a weak moment, he accepted a challenge from a flat-earther named Hampden, who offered £500 to anyone who could prove the Earth's surface was curved. Wallace and Hampden agreed a test, taking sightings over a long straight canal. Wallace won, and pocketed the £500. Then, for many years he was plagued by Hampden's abuse, denunciations and threats. His wife received letters saying things like:

> *If your infernal thief of a husband is brought home some day on a hurdle with every bone in his head smashed to pulp, you will know the reason. Do you tell him from me he is a lying infernal thief and as sure as his name is Wallace he never dies in his bed.*

Wallace struck back with all the legal means he could, but Hampden leavened craziness with cunning, and the persecution went on for nearly two decades, costing Wallace many times the original sum of money[5]. He regretted he had ever accepted the challenge.

The wash-up

Recently, my case entered what I hope is its final phase. A psychiatrist called from a Gold Coast hospital. He was startled when I mentioned Petra's name immediately — who else could it be? I filled him in on the background, and we talked a little. I gathered she was under medication, and would probably be out of circulation for months. Relief all round: Petra was getting the treatment she needed, and I would not be bothered any more.

What moral should we draw from this? Skepticism is important, and spreading the key ideas is not only valuable, it is usually enjoyable as well. Still, perhaps the Scooby-Doo slogan is appropriate: be afraid, be sort of afraid. Or at least, be a little bit careful. Paranormalists may be simply people with mistaken ideas. I suspect, though, that there is a continuum among believers. Some are fairly normal, some are weird, and some are much worse than that. Although the paranormal is our quarry, it sometimes turns and bites. And its teeth can be rabid, as Wallace found out.

Notes

1. I wrote about some of these earlier (Bridgstock 2004)
2. Short, Punch and Greatorix, they were called. I especially liked the 'Punch' bit.
3. I have never been to Boston University, nor had any contact with anyone there.
4. Obviously, I'd dispute this. How can I be a parapsychologist when I am unconvinced of the very existence of psychic phenomena? And I don't hold the rank of Professor, much as I'd like to.
5. Wallace (1905) has given a good account of this, and Shermer (2001) summarises the main points very well.

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