

books

THE MAGIC OF URI GELLER

by The Amazing Randi
Ballantine, paper, \$1.75

THE GELLER PAPERS: SCIENTIFIC OBSERVATIONS ON THE PARANORMAL POWERS OF URI GELLER

Edited by Charles Panati
Houghton Mifflin Co., \$10.00

URI GELLER: MY STORY

by Uri Geller
Praeger, \$8.95; Warner Books,
paper, \$1.95

Reviewed by Charles T. Tart

Uri Geller is a young Israeli who bends things, mainly keys, silverware, and people's belief systems. The bends in belief systems come about because he doesn't appear to need his muscles to twist the keys and silverware. He uses, he reports, only the force of his mind.

Bending a house key is no easy feat: I have just tried it with a bunch of old keys and, despite considerable strain, I can't bend them with my hands. Geller often seems to do it by gently stroking the key or silverware with a finger or two while you hold the other end in your own hand. There's obviously no great mechanical force involved, and his fingers don't show the skin discoloration that occurs with strong effort.

Since in our straight, scientific belief system bending strong metal objects requires strong physical force, what Geller seems to do can't happen. If you can believe what you see, you have to adjust your belief system.

The Amazing Randi (the stage name of magician James Zvinge), author of *The Magic of Uri Geller*, insists that Geller bends no physical laws. He maintains that Uri is just a clever trickster who uses deception, distraction, and quick pushes of keys against chair frames and other objects.

Randi is a zealot defending scientific orthodoxy. He regards Geller's claims of paranormal abilities as a threat: "Geller brings disgrace to the craft I practice. Worse than that, he warps the thinking of



Photo by Richard Waldrep

a young generation of forming minds. And that is unforgivable." Speaking of Geller's work with scientists, Randi says, "I am angered at Geller and his ilk, who have wasted the valuable time and talents of these men—not to mention huge amounts of money—by leading them to believe in supposed miracles." Randi takes his mission of exposing and discrediting Geller seriously. Talking of the magician's role, he declares, "For we are the only element that stands between the faker and his victim. Men of science and other great intellects are without that peculiar expertise that qualifies us to detect chicanery when it is practiced on a high level. We are needed, and we must respond when called . . . Tomorrow may be too late. The charlatans are upon us."

The other side of the story appears in a more sober, scientific book, *The Geller Papers*, a collection of 23 papers put together by Charles Panati, a science editor of *Newsweek*. These papers, many previously unpublished, generally conclude that solid evidence exists for Geller's having occasionally demonstrated paranormal abilities under stringent conditions that seem not to permit

fraud. Most of the papers are by scientists. A few are by magicians who aver that they saw things they can't duplicate by trickery. Randi automatically classifies any magician with such an opinion as an incompetent amateur.

Paranormal power? One convincing example of Geller's power is described by Eldon Byrd, a physical scientist at the Naval Surface Weapons Center. Byrd held a five-inch length of wire made of a special alloy called nitinol stretched between his hands while Geller gently stroked the middle of it. Nitinol is an exotic alloy that, at the time of Geller's visit, was available in only a few laboratories. The alloy has a memory. If bent, it stays that way until heated in boiling water, at which point it almost instantly springs back to its original shape. Geller's stroking bent the nitinol; when the wire was dropped in boiling water, instead of springing back to its original shape, it bent even further. Byrd cannot explain this. Nitinol will not take on a new shape unless it is heated to 932° F; Geller would have needed a Bunsen burner and a pair of pliers to accomplish his feat by natural means.

Another impressive set of observations was reported by William E. Cox, a semi-professional magician and parapsychological researcher. Geller bent a steel safe-deposit-box key that was lying in clear view on a glass-topped table while Cox held one end of it and Geller lightly stroked the other. Cox also gave Geller a pocket watch that was not running. Just before the session, Cox had set the watch's regulator to the fast position and, without Geller's knowledge, had wedged adhesive foil through the balance wheel spokes to jam it. Geller held the watch in plain view for half a minute and it began to run. Cox pried open the watch case and found that the regulator was now set all the way to the slow position, and the foil was severed and out of the works.

Is Geller a fraud, or does he have genuine paranormal abilities?

Randi clearly divides the world into the good guys and the bad guys, and Geller is one of the latter. If you're caught cheating once, he's convinced that you've always cheated. Randi certainly believes Geller has been caught cheating. Many Geller fans believe he never cheats, but

this position seems as extreme as Randi's.

Fooling physicists. Suppose you had some genuine paranormal abilities, but they didn't always work. The temptation to move things along with a little conjuring might be overwhelming. But Geller's stage shows don't prove or disprove anything; they're purely entertainment. Only the controlled laboratory tests count, and many of the experiments in *The Geller Papers* provide strong evidence that sometimes Geller does something paranormal. On the other hand, as Randi emphasizes, many scientists are unskilled at detecting trickery, and not all the reported laboratory work is foolproof. For example, parapsychologists find work like that of the English physicist John G. Taylor unacceptable because his experiments lack proper controls. Panati's book would have been better had he omitted Taylor's work.

Both *The Geller Papers* and *The Magic of Uri Geller* are required reading for anyone who wants to understand Geller, especially for those who plan to research paranormal phenomena. Geller's autobiography, *My Story*, is mildly interesting reading, but is irrelevant for deciding whether he possesses genuine paranormal abilities. If he is a total fraud, then the book is only a collection of self-serving lies. If he does occasionally manifest paranormal abilities, his book casts no light on them.

I must qualify my recommendation of Randi's book. In his zeal to defend scientific orthodoxy, Randi himself bends the truth repeatedly. For instance, Geller was investigated at Stanford Research Institute (SRI) by two physicists, Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff. Geller usually creates an atmosphere of chaos in a lab by flitting unpredictably from one task to another, so Targ and Puthoff report only two studies which they think were well controlled. In an ESP study meant to demonstrate either clairvoyance or telepathy, Geller was put first into a double steel-wall-shielded room, then, during a later stage of the experiment, into a copper-screen-shielded room called a Faraday Cage. An experimenter team in another room selected an object by opening a dictionary at random, then drawing a picture that represented the first drawable noun on the page. The picture was posted on the outer wall of the steel-walled room or, during the parts of the experiment in the Faraday Cage, in another, distant room. Geller then drew what he thought was the target. Two judges who

had not taken part in the experiment later compared the actual targets and Geller's drawings by matching them. Both judges separately and correctly matched all 10 drawings, an event that could happen by chance only three times in 10 million attempts.

Randi criticizes this experiment, making a tremendous fuss because the steel-walled room was not completely solid: "In order to get cables in there for the electroencephalograph (EEG) tests, a square hole was cut in the STEEL WALL AND THE SPACE AROUND IT WAS STUFFED WITH GAUZE!" (Randi's capitalizations). As for the screened room, Randi says: "You have probably made the assumption that Geller could not see out of the Faraday Cage in which he found himself for those last three experiments. BUT HE COULD SEE. EASILY! HE COULD EVEN REACH HIS ARM OUT OF THE CAGE!" Randi combines these apparently damning statements with assertions that Geller's assistant, Shipi Shtrang, was constantly underfoot during the experiments, so that he either signaled Geller with gestures that revealed the target drawings or actually passed Geller copies of the drawings. The SRI scientists sound like fools.

Visiting the scene. Since I live near SRI, I contacted Targ and Puthoff and visited the labs used for the experiments with Geller. Yes, there is a small hole in the double-walled steel room, stuffed with packing materials, through which EEG cables run. But the hole leads into the room where the experimenters, not Shipi, stood. The experimenters never spoke a word about the target drawing, and posted it on the same wall the cable duct was in. Even if Geller had stuck a microphone or viewing device through the cable duct, and the experimenters who were watching the duct were too blind to see it, the device would have done him no good. As for the Faraday Cage, Geller could indeed see through the screening but all he could see were Shipi and one of the experimenters, neither of whom knew the target, for it was selected and kept in a distant, guarded room. Incidentally, Geller couldn't thrust an arm out of the cage unless he opened the door, which was in plain view of an experimenter. In both experiments, Randi's supposed confederate had no knowledge that would have helped Geller.

Randi's descriptions of these experiments grossly distort what actually went on. In Randi's book, he refers to the correspondence in *New Scientist* magazine about the SRI experiment. In one of those

letters, published in the November 7, 1974 issue, Targ and Puthoff clearly state that only the experimenters were allowed in the target areas.

Randi repeatedly makes the excellent point that if you want to believe in the paranormal, you will distort your observations and memories of an event in a way that supports your beliefs. Any psychologist would agree with this. However, Randi never sees the other side of the coin: you can also distort things to hang onto your disbelief in the paranormal.

An endless game. The implications of paranormal phenomena are too important to serve only as an occasion for bitter arguments between irrational believers and irrational disbelievers. Geller will go on entertaining the masses; he wants to be rich and famous, and he's succeeding marvelously. Randi will go on trying to debunk Geller. Since Geller can perform faster than Randi can duplicate his tricks, this game could go on forever.

Whether Geller is "pure," as some believe, or whether he uses conjuring sometimes but occasionally shows paranormal abilities, as many parapsychologists now believe, is of little consequence. More than 500 methodologically light, experimental studies that show various paranormal effects already exist; none of them depends on the ability of Geller, who is probably only a passing fad. The known physical laws indeed appear to bend sometimes, and the implications of such paranormal effects for our understanding of ourselves and the universe may be enormous. Geller has drawn enough attention to the paranormal to get some very bright scientists interested. If it takes key- and spoon-bending to get us started on a large-scale scientific investigation of the paranormal, the career of Uri Geller will have served a useful purpose.

Charles T. Tart is a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis. His application of learning theory to ESP was reported in "Telepathy Could Be Real," *pt.*, February 1976. His latest book is *States of Consciousness* (E.P. Dutton).

HERESIES

by Thomas Szasz
Anchor Press/Doubleday, paper,
\$2.95
Reviewed by Daniel Rosenblatt

Psychoanalyst Thomas Szasz resembles a fiery Old Testament prophet; he frequently describes our society's evil ways in some detail. He has won some honor