

# REMEMBERING RANDI 1928–2020



Image Credit: Brian Engler

## The Amazing Life and Legacy of James ‘The Amazing’ Randi

KENDRICK FRAZIER

Perhaps it is fitting that the bad news would come during this already dreary year of a pandemic and a partially shut-down world. Our dear colleague James (“The Amazing”) Randi, one of the giants of skepticism and a fierce force for reason and rationality, died October 20, 2020, of age-related causes. He lived to the age of ninety-two and was active until near the end.

Randi was a founding member of CSICOP, now our Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, and an original member of its Executive Council. Through that route and his own indefatigable activities all over the world, he could be considered a founder of the modern skeptical movement worldwide. He was certainly its most visible figure. He had tremendous cour-

age, a vast range of knowledge and skills, and intense determination—qualities all virtually unparalleled in any other single individual—in fighting for science and reason and against frauds and charlatans and pretenders.

The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, and the Center for Inquiry mourn his death and celebrate his legacy. A CFI statement (see text on next page) said it perfectly: “To the skeptical movement he was a hero. To us, he was family.”

Originally a stage-performing magician and escape artist in the tradition of Harry Houdini, an earlier great magician who also exposed psychic frauds, Randi became a scourge to paranormalists, charlatans, and gullible pretenders every-

## CFI Statement on the Death of James Randi: 'To Us, He Was Family'

*The Center for Inquiry issued this statement October 21, 2020.*

We at the Center for Inquiry are heartbroken over the death of James Randi, who died on October 20 at the age of ninety-two.

Randi helped found the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), the organization that would one day become the Center for Inquiry, in 1976, alongside legends such as Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, B.F. Skinner, and Paul Kurtz. Together, this group of luminaries from the fields of science, literature, philosophy, and entertainment dedicated themselves to a project that has only grown in its necessity and urgency: the promotion of scientific inquiry, critical investigation, and the use of reason in examining controversial and extraordinary claims.

In other words, these were the founding fathers of the reality-based community.

"James Randi was a founder of CFI's forerunner organization. To the skeptical movement, he was a hero. To us, he was family," said Robyn E. Blumner, president and CEO of the Center for Inquiry. "Damn! And when the world needs him now as never before."

"He had tremendous courage and skill, almost unparalleled, in fighting for science and reason and against frauds

and charlatans and pretenders," said Kendrick Frazier, editor of *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* magazine. "Despite his ferocity in challenging all forms of nonsense, in person he was a kind and gentle man. It is a sad day indeed!"

Well before his association with CSICOP, Randi was the public face of skeptical inquiry, bringing a sense of fun and mischievousness to a serious mission. Whether exposing fraudulent psychics and faith-healers or revealing the false promises of alternative medicine, his showmanship and expertise in illusion made him an extraordinarily effective messenger for the promotion of critical thinking over magical thinking.

Beyond his own groundbreaking work, Randi is responsible for inspiring several generations of skeptics and science communicators who are pushing back against the false claims of pseudoscience, the paranormal, and the supernatural, as well as those who profit from them. What began as a committee of intellectuals and a magazine has now expanded into a universe of activists, scholars, entertainers, media platforms, and institutions, such as CFI, who share Randi's mission and his passion.

The Center for Inquiry is a proud part of the legacy of James Randi. He truly was amazing.

where. He investigated their claims, set up clever traps to see what they were up to, and then publicly exposed them on national TV talk shows, in newspaper reports, in magazine articles, and in a series of memorable books such as *The Magic of Uri Geller* (republished as *The Truth about Uri Geller*), *Flim-Flam!*, *The Faith Healers*, and *The Mask of Nostradamus*. He later compiled some of his accumulated knowledge into a handy and very readable *Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural*. His large-format book *Conjuring* was called "a definitive history" of the art. It is beautifully illustrated with color posters, including one of his own showing him defiantly standing with broken handcuffs and untied rope. It proclaims: "The Amazing RANDI The Man No Jail Can Hold!"

In his frequent lectures and other personal appearances all over the world he used his sharp wit and showmanship to gain levels of public and media attention that few if any other critics of the paranormal and defenders of science and reason have ever achieved.

For five decades, he was tireless in that role, seemingly ready to go anywhere and do anything to reveal to the public and the media the methods psychic claimants and others were

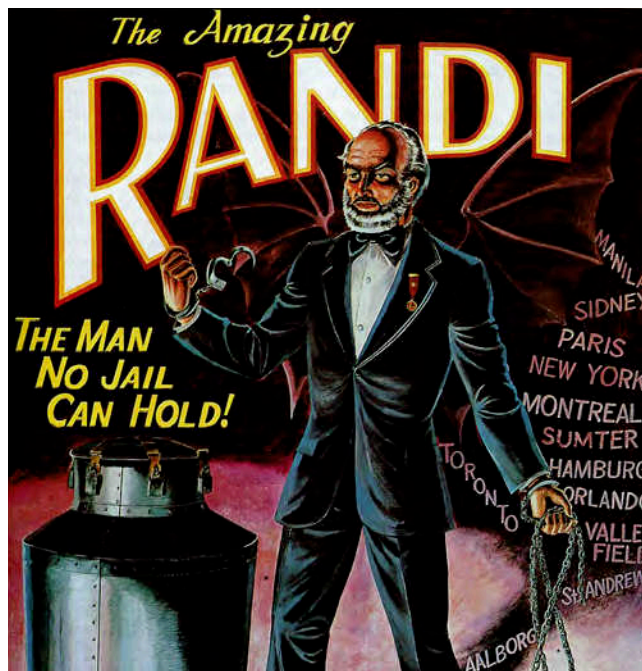


Image Credit: Randi personal collection





Randi and Ken Frazier clasp hands after their on-stage conversation at CSICon 2016. (Credit: Ruth Frazier)

using to deceive people into believing their claimed powers were real. His impact in educating the media and the public to be more circumspect about psychics and all other paranormal claimants is immeasurable.

He was respected by communities of scientists and scholars worldwide who gave him awards and invited him to their universities and laboratories to lecture and teach and demonstrate to them and others how easily all of us can be deceived. Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke all wrote forewords or introductions to his books—another measure of the respect he commanded.

Randi urged everyone to be skeptical of all extraordinary claims and to demand evidence from the claimant—rarely if ever provided—before proceeding any further.

A brilliant, curious, self-educated genius (indeed, in 1986 he received a MacArthur Foundation fellowship, often called the Genius Award), he was able to show that PhD scientists are among the easiest people to deceive, a painful lesson to some who mistakenly thought their own intelligence was sufficient to catch deception. But he always extolled science and scientific thinking and critical thinking and became a darling of scientists and science-minded skeptics everywhere.

For all his ferocious focus on exposing flim-flam and fraudsters, those who knew him experienced a warm and generous personality. He engendered deep loyalty and love. He had an uncanny ability to make each person he met feel a unique personal bond. Thus he was a personal friend to me, Ruth (my

wife), and our family; he had stayed in our home on several occasions, and a few years back we visited him at his home he shared with husband Deyvi Peña in Plantation, Florida. But I know he meant the same for thousands upon thousands of other members of the worldwide skeptical community who loved him. A special and dear human being indeed.

At his popular TAM (The Amazing Meeting) conferences, hosted by his James Randi Educational Foundation, and later at most of our CSICon conferences (as recently as October 2019), Randi would hold court in the hallways and entertain and delight attendees with magic demonstrations, lively conversation, and impromptu photo sessions. He was a celebrity, and he didn't disappoint.

In early December 2014, Randi made a weeklong tour throughout Australia promoting a candid documentary film made about his life and work titled *An Honest Liar* (highly recommended). Randi was particularly well known and beloved in Australia because he had conducted several epic investigations there (one of water dowers and another of a self-proclaimed—but Randi-planted hoax—"psychic" named Carlos) that gained widespread public attention. At his last appearance at a sold-out theater in Sydney, which I was fortunate to attend, he recalled some of those investigations on stage with Dick Smith, a noted Australian entrepreneur and skeptic who had facilitated Randi's early visits. Near the end, an audience member asked Randi a question about a situation most skeptics experience: How do you respond to a friend who ardently believes in ideas and claims that scientists and skeptics know is nonsense? Randi paused thoughtfully for a long time. He then softly whispered, "Be kind. Be kind." He explained that they *need* to believe. Be compassionate, he said. Randi, at the time eighty-six, then noted that this appearance might well be his last ever in Australia. "Goodbye, Australia," he said. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.



Image Credit: *An Honest Liar*

At another time several decades earlier, in London, Randi and the rest of the CSICOP Executive Council were having lunch at a London hotel dining room during a conference with British skeptics. Randi was bending spoons and forks and doing all the other tricks he loved to do in such settings, while proclaiming about the malfeasance of supposed psychics. My wife and I, and soon Randi, noticed the waiter standing nearby becoming very agitated. It soon became clear the waiter's concern wasn't over the bent cutlery; it had something to do with his deep-seated beliefs he saw being challenged. He was shaken. Randi got up, went over to the man, put an arm around him, and spoke quietly to him, privately. We never quite knew what he told the man, but it was a moment of deep compassion I will never forget.

Yet Randi was iron-willed and innovative in his cleverly devised investigations and stings. After aviation pioneer James McDonnell funded the establishment of the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research at Washington University in St. Louis, a well-respected university, Randi saw it as an opportunity to test two major hypotheses. One was that no amount of funding to parapsychological researchers would make them able to conduct proper research, because the problem lay in their pro-psyhic bias. The second was that parapsychologists would resist accepting expert conjuring assistance in designing their experiments and therefore would fail to detect various kinds of simple magic tricks.

Thus was created Randi's soon-to-be-famous Project Alpha.

Randi arranged to have two young conjurors, Steve Shaw (now Banachek, a CSI fellow) and Michael Edwards, write the lab and proclaim psychic powers. The director, physicist Peter R. Phillips, accepted them even though they were still teenagers. Randi sent Phillips a list of eleven caveats, things to watch for in such tests. He also established a series of ethical protocols, including the proviso that if they were ever asked if they were using tricks, they would immediately admit to it.

From the very beginning, the researchers ignored the rules Randi had suggested. The two "gifted subjects" started running the experiments themselves and of course achieved remarkable results. When all this was eventually exposed by Randi, it was a tremendous embarrassment to the lab, the university, and to psychical research generally. And a lesson for all. (See Randi's two reports on "Project Alpha: Magicians in the Psi Lab" in the Summer and Fall 1983 *SKEPTICAL INQUIRERS*.)

In 1988, CSICOP decided to send a small delegation of its Executive Council to China to test qigong masters, various psychic claimants, and especially a group of so-called "psychic" children who were then gaining international acclaim. Our invitation came from Lin Zixin, then editor of *Science and Technology Daily*, a daily science newspaper in Beijing, who had become greatly concerned about how these reports were being credulously accepted. Our founder, Paul Kurtz, led the delegation with James Alcock, Philip J. Klass, Barry Karr, and me, but Randi was clearly the star.

Wherever we went, Randi helped quickly devise controlled



Randi cuts open a test matchbox as Paul Kurtz assists and one of the Chinese "psychic" girls watches, in Xian, China, 1988. (Credit: Ken Frazier)

tests so we could see what was going on. The qigong master's powers seemingly to influence the movements of a nearby woman worked at first, when she could see him. When we placed her in another room where she couldn't see him and kept careful records in both locations, their motions went totally out of phase. She had been responding only to what she saw him do; when she couldn't see him any longer, it didn't work. There was no transmission of "qigong" energy.

A policewoman who said she could see inside people's bodies like an X-ray and determine what was wrong couldn't do it (surprise!). When we invoked the simplest control, she was befuddled.

But the psychic children were a marvel. We visited them in the city of Xian in China's interior. The young children, girls and boys, were charming, appealing, and energetic. Among other things, they could supposedly change the colors of match heads inside sealed matchboxes using only the powers of their minds. Randi let them do their thing on their own at first. Their mentor, Mr. Ding, smiled but exerted no controls. They took the match boxes and, to our utter amazement, ran down the stairs and out of the building and disappeared! They apparently gathered in a park somewhere. When they returned forty-five minutes later, the matches had changed as promised. Wow! But it was clear to us that the boxes had been tampered with, and we could even see blades of grass beneath the tape we'd applied. Once Randi instigated controls, such as carefully taping the boxes so that removal of the tape would be obvious and not letting them leave our sight, no more miracles happened. It was clear that their naive mentor, Mr. Ding, had no idea how to conduct a controlled experiment and was merely facilitating their playful chicanery.

Randi carried out all these demonstrations with his usual skill and flair. And, as Barry Karr also recalls, it was a mar-



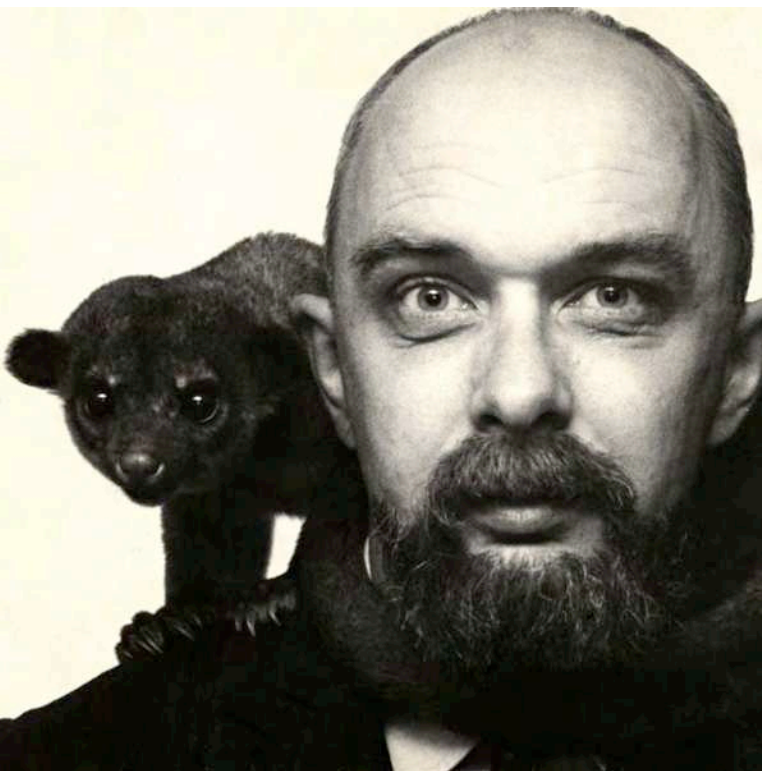


Image Credit: An Honest Liar

vel for us to watch the reactions of people on the streets of Beijing and elsewhere as they would see the dramatic, long-bearded, dark-hatted, smallish visage of Randi walking along next to the extra-tall Jim Alcock. The whole trip was exciting and revelatory to us, and it was such a pleasure to see and be with Randi in action, over nearly two weeks of testing paranormal pretenders.

It has been like that for four-plus decades. Randi was such an extraordinary character, a dynamo, so full of energy ... and so determined to not let paranormal pranksters go unrevealed. Executive Council meetings could be exasperating for chairman Paul Kurtz because Randi, with no interest in financial spread sheets or administrative concerns, could not sit still long without entertaining us in some way. All lunches and dinners were the same. No one who ever met Randi would forget him; that's just the way he was. Now only in our memories.

His legacy to science and reason, to rationality and common sense, to questioning our own perceptions is on the same level with those of great scientists who teach us something new and important about the world. Randi did that regularly in his own unique, often wildly entertaining, and, yes, amazing way. ■



Randi at NECSS in 2017. (Credit: Brian Engler)

*We have invited a few noted skeptics and magicians to briefly share their thoughts and tributes. Those not included in these pages may appear in our next issue. In addition, we invite others to share their reminiscences as well. Randi meant so much to so many people all across the world.*

Kendrick Frazier is editor of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER and a longtime member of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry Executive Council.



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