

The Scope of Skepticism

Kylie Sturgess

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Token Skeptic Catology

CAPRICORN
January 20 – February 16
See Taurus


AQUARIUS
February 16 – March 11
See Gemini


PISCES
March 11 – April 18
See Cancer


ARIES
April 18 – May 13
See Leo


TAURUS
May 13 – June 21
See Virgo


GEMINI
June 21 – July 20
See Libra


CANCER
July 20 – August 10
See Scorpio


LEO
August 10 – September 16
See Ophiuchus


VIRGO
September 16 – October 30
See Sagittarius


LIBRA
October 30 – November 23
See Capricorn


SCORPIO
November 23 – November 29
See Aquarius


OPHIUCHUS
November 29 – December 17
See Pisces


SAGITTARIUS
December 17 – January 20
See Aries

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The Scope of Skepticism
Interviews, Essays and Observations
From the Token Skeptic Podcast

Kylie Sturgess

PodBlack Books

First printing June, 2012.

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Portions of this work appeared, sometimes in different form, in “*Spreading the Skeptical Word through Music and Comedy: Interview with Tim Minchin*,” CSICOP website, copyright @ 2011 by Kylie Sturgess; “*On Codes of Conduct, Part II – Sexism, Skepticism and Civility Online: an Interview with Jennifer Ouellette*,” CSICOP website, copyright @ 2011 by Kylie Sturgess; “*Speaking of Skeptical Activism: Interview with Desiree Schell of Skeptically Speaking*,” CSICOP website, copyright @ 2011 by Kylie Sturgess; “*Science Fiction and Skepticism: Interview with Scott Sigler*,” CSICOP website, copyright @ 2010 by Kylie Sturgess; “*Looking for the Gorillas in Our Midst: Interview with Professor Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris*,” CSICOP website, copyright @ 2010 by Kylie Sturgess; “*The ‘Token Skeptic’ at the Rise of Atheism – Global Atheist Convention, Melbourne, Australia*,” CSICOP website, copyright @ 2010 by Kylie Sturgess; “*Interview with Bruce M. Hood*,” CSICOP website, copyright @ 2010 by Kylie Sturgess.

Set in Sabon and Trade Gothic Bold No.2.

Cover Design by Catherine L. Donaldson of Faster Pussycat Productions.

Acknowledgements:

Barry Karr of CSICOP, Gold, Michael McRae, Derek Colanduno, Robynn McCarthy, Mark Ditzler of Abrupt Media, Catherine L. Donaldson of Faster Pussycat Productions, Dr Chris French, Derek K. Miller, Milton Mermikides, The Atheist Foundation of Australia, The Young Australian Skeptics and Warren Bonett.

Not only everyone I’ve interviewed... but also the assorted agents, minders, various convention organisers and partners of everyone I’ve interviewed, for being so gracious with their time.

TokenSkeptic.org

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Dedicated to the Digital Cuttlefish.

Many thanks to Derek and Swoopy of *Skepticality*, who first encouraged me to try podcasting.

“Only connect...”

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Foreword – Michael McRae

When I'm told there are two sides to every story, my response is to tell people they either can't count, or simply haven't looked hard enough. Every story is a mirror-ball of perceptions and distortions, with every new telling contributing a new facet. Somewhere in the midst of the sparkle and shadows is the truth.

Kylie is a collector of mirror-balls. In the years I've known her, I've found it impossible not to admire her tenacity for hunting down myriad of opinions, scientific papers, perspectives and connections... not to arrive at a single truth, but to find a perspective on the world that might lead to useful answers.

Such compound vision of human behaviour is a curious thing. Kylie is an atheist who has taught in religious educational institutions and a skeptic who has argued for the rights of believers to stand on common ground and express their views. These dichotomies are hard fought, attracting both supporters and detractors, yet the results are hard to ignore. In a world where the words 'critical thinking' are frequently heard but seldom understood, Kylie has contributed more than most in promoting the benefits of such an analytical philosophy.

Critical thinking is hard, and nobody knows that more than Ms. Sturgess. Yet with practice, some knowledge about the world and a bit of self-reflection, it gets a little easier. And it all starts with knowing that there are more than two sides to any story.



Introduction

DJ Grothe: *What I think is... one of the weaknesses of the skeptical movement is really what we've been talking about during the panel discussion today. It is, for many skeptics, that "Skepticism is a weapon you bludgeon other people's nonsense beliefs with," as opposed to "Skepticism is something best self-applied". And so my question is... what is an example of a belief you once had, and was it debunked out of you or did you do it to yourself because you were skeptical? Did someone jostle it out of you?*

Kylie Sturgess: *Well, I fell in love.*

– *Skepticality*, Episode #165.

The best interviews I've ever done? They're the two I didn't do.

One is the first I ever helped conduct: Dr Mark Henn with Mark "Gravy" Roberts, in a beautiful hotel room on the edge of New York's Times Square, in 2008. Dr Henn started asking questions from the sidelines and the entire interview unfolded from there: about "Gravy's" activism against 9-11 "Truthers" on the site of Ground Zero itself. Milton Mermikides produced the other, after I insisted that he was the best-qualified person to delve into the musical and personal history of a newly released album by George Hrab. I was right.

My being on the sidelines rather than centre-stage is not unusual; at skeptical events I'm often found helping behind the scenes or cheering in the crowd – very much like other skeptics who also constitute the "Long Tail of Skepticism", as Reed Esau puts it. My outsider status has partially led to the "Token Skeptic" title of the podcast. For example: in 2011 I attended Dragon*Con (which I initiated as a quasi-Australian

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Interview – Tim Minchin

When I got a closer look at the local Australian actor, comedian, and musician Tim Minchin's eyes, I discovered that his "kooky contact lenses" turn his irises a cybernetic shade of turquoise.

*At the time, I was helping him check his teeth for any residue after his breakfast of toast at the Blue Waters cafe on Cottesloe Beach in Perth, Western Australia. It's not exactly typical of my interviews, but it did lead to a conversation on how branding and appearance matter when building a reputation as a polished performer – even if you do play piano with bare feet and have scarecrow-style straightened hair. Before we started, he confessed that he'd been asked to appear in a book by Paul Provenza – unfortunately, if you get a copy of *Satiristas: Comedians, Contrarians, Raconteurs and Vulgarians*, you'll discover that Minchin's interview didn't make the cut.*

*The "local boy makes good" attitude is something Perth is particularly proud to adopt. Minchin's endorsement of a new theater named after Heath Ledger was reported in the local paper, along with voice-over work for the Academy Award winning short animated film *The Lost Thing* (by fellow West Australian artist Shaun Tan).*

Over the past two years, Minchin has been on an international tour, featuring U.K. and Australian orchestras in various cities. Songs with titles like "Rock 'N' Roll Nerd" and "The Pope Song" with lyrics about sex, religion, and cheese aren't the usual fare for fifty-five-piece orchestras, but they're turned out to be massively popular. At the time of this writing, all of Minchin's tour dates have sold out and a live broadcast from the Sydney Opera House aired on Australia's ABC television station – a tour he's repeating in 2012. In addition, he

produced the music and score for the Royal Shakespeare Company's musical version of Roald Dahl's Matilda, which will now head to London's West End.

What Tim Minchin doesn't often discuss in interviews is his atheism and skeptically-minded attitude toward paranormal and pseudoscientific claims, despite expressing these views in his songs. I've always thought that it might not best serve Minchin's multitude of talents to pigeonhole himself as a spokesperson on certain issues, such as atheism.

I began the interview by asking about the audience for his kind of comedy.

Tim Minchin: I don't know. It's kind of a disclaimer to say that my work appeals to certain people; it's kind of a defensive position. Not everyone's going to like my work, even if you desperately want everyone to like it.

I think my stuff has quite a broad appeal; last night I had a twelve-year-old and a seventy-eight-year-old in the queue to get autographs and stuff – and I love that. I think that people who love the show, it probably goes without saying, are people who think much like me? The people who see their own ideas and sense of humor reflected on the stage are the people who are most attached to it. But I don't know what people like me are. I suppose they are people who have a kind of a dark sense of humor and get off on some of the ideas I get across.

Kylie Sturgess: So, how funny is skepticism?

Minchin: It can be *very* funny watching people respond with absolute clarity and skepticism to strange ideas that are so

Interview – Joey Haban

An accomplished writer, educator and activist like Joey Haban is a very rare find – and I'm very glad that I did find her. It's not often that I (or many skeptics, for that matter) step out of the comfort zone and talk to someone who experiences the challenges of having “a limited number of spoons for the day” – as Christine Miserandio says with her excellent analogy for explaining what it's like to have a chronic illness. In 2011, a worldwide team of scientists developed innovative new criteria for ME. The International Consensus Criteria are being hotly debated ahead of print publication – and if it wasn't for Joey, I doubt I would have known about this at all.

Joey's website “Newly Nerfed”, at Newly-Nerfed.net, features blog entries and reflections on being a “geeky gal living in Irvine, near Los Angeles, California” – including two gaming cats called Zen and Satori.

Kylie Sturgess: So what does “Nerfed” actually mean?

Joey Haban: Well, “Nerfed” is a gaming term, actually. You know Nerf toys? Soft Nerf bats and things. When in a game, say World of Warcraft, if powers or characters are made less powerful by the developers for whatever reason, it's referred to as “*Getting hit with the Nerf bat*” or “*Getting Nerfed*”. So, when my health began to fail or failed sort of suddenly, I just appropriated the term as I thought was funny. I guess that's how the blog was born.

Sturgess: You often write about chronic illness on your blog...

Haban: The one that really has disabled me is chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), also known as myalgic encephalopathy (ME). I went

through Graves' disease, which is mostly in remission. But it's CFS that is mostly keeping me down these days. I also have some other chronic strangeness, like with my blood cell count and other stuff that doesn't quite match? We're actually still putting the pieces together, when it comes down to it!

Sturgess: You've written in your blog that chronic fatigue syndrome is a "God of the Gaps" disease. Does that make it additionally difficult for people with this condition, regarding pseudo-scientific claims about it?

Haban: Very much so. It definitely does; there's a lot of different terms for it. I just call it CFS – so apologies to anyone who doesn't like that name, because there's some acrimony about that! CFS is what is known as a "garbage diagnosis". There are specific criteria, although there's about four or five different sets of these criteria. But there's some pretty generally agreed upon criteria about what makes it up.

Beyond that, there's only so much doctors can do to treat it. You can get treated with sleep meds to improve your sleep. And then, after that, there's the gap: you're ill and you feel sick and there's really nothing that can be done. Into that gap can come any number of people: legitimate doctors, if you're lucky like I am – I have a very good doctor with a lot of clinical experience, and so even though there is still a gap, and even though he may have theories about it, he's still a qualified scientist.

And then there's all the quacks, scammers, loonies... people who claim that it's because of *electromagnetism*... everything you can possibly imagine! Because CFS is so poorly understood by the general public, that there's this notion that it's *just something that happens to you*. Most people don't even know much about it, and it's actually one of the

Interview – Daniel Loxton

Daniel Loxton is one of those people who, interestingly enough, walks a challenging line – and he does so with grace and good humor. He is the editor of the “Junior Skeptic” insert in Skeptic magazine; author of Evolution: How We and All Living Things Came to Be and Ankylosaur Attack (Tales of Prehistoric Life).

Loxton has also published major essays on skeptical activism, such as “Where Do We Go From Here?” in 2007, dealing with the focus and direction of the new generation of skepticism. In 2009 he collated ideas and suggestions from a number of writers to create “What Do I Do Next? 105 Ways to Promote Skeptical Activism”. Loxton’s next book is an adult non-fiction for Columbia University Press, co-authored with established best-selling science writer Don Prothero.

Evolution: How We and All Living Things Came to Be won the Lane Anderson Award as the best science book for young readers in Canada, but was not picked up by American publishers (it is produced by Kids Can Press in Canada). His work has also prompted controversy amongst people you would usually expect to be avid supporters of non-fiction books for children – which became the topic of this interview, conducted very soon after I noticed divisive comments online about the book.

Kylie Sturgess: Daniel, you've had some fascinating times with people's response to your book *Evolution!*

Daniel Loxton: There are at least three different things that are at issue, which hundreds of comments are addressing separately or altogether. One is the exact phrasing of a single sentence in my book.

Another is, whether or not a tiny section on my book should have been included. And the third one, the biggest one, is “*What is the relationship between skepticism and atheism*”. And as part of that, “*Can science address metaphysical questions, ethical questions, or is it more limited than that?*”

So that's where the blow-up has been and to some extent it's been exaggerated just by people talking across purposes about those multiple questions.

Sturgess: One of the things that I think has really caught people's attention is the line in the book: “*Your family, friends and community leaders are the best people to ask about religious questions.*”

Loxton: It's interesting that that particular statement has become so controversial. The other controversial sentence, that “*Science has nothing to say about religion,*” I knew that would be controversial partly because it is a simplification and I needed that. This one about the friends and family took me completely off-guard. I had no idea that people would take that the way that they have. For me, the statement in the book is so mild.

My intention was just to say, “*Look, these are not scientific questions. Science is not going to be able to give you the answers you're looking for. Why don't you go and talk to anybody else, except me?*”

These are questions of metaphysics and ethics. These are not questions that you're going to be able to find the answer in a book. These are questions that you're going to have to bring your own conscience and your own ideals and values to and you're going to have to hash it out somehow. The best I can recommend as a science writer is just to talk to

Interview – Benjamin Radford

*This interview was inspired by a passing comment made during the Dragon*Con 2010 Scientific Investigation Workshop that Benjamin Radford was running. I'd been following Ben's work for a long time: he's the deputy editor of the Skeptical Inquirer, a research fellow at the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and the author or co-author of five books and hundreds of articles on skepticism, critical thinking, and science literacy. He is also a columnist for Discovery News and LiveScience.com, with articles that inspired a later interview for my podcast about women, media myths and whether scientists or journalists contribute more to the miscommunication of science.*

As a presenter, his engaging style reflects his keen research methodology and enthusiasm for investigating an astonishing range of myths, legends and misconceptions. His newest book is Tracking the Chupacabra: The Vampire Beast in Fact, Fiction, and Folklore.

Kylie Sturgess: What was your favourite monster when you were young?

Benjamin Radford: I would have to say that my favourite monster was probably the Loch Ness Monster. It was one of the first ones that I had heard of. Obviously, I had heard of Bigfoot and Nessie, but Nessie was this obscure place in Scotland. Where is that? I had no idea. I knew it was somewhere over by England, but just the idea that there was monster that had been around and was known around the world just intrigued me. In my teenage brain, or I guess my adolescent brain I assumed that there must be some correlation between how many people believe in it and its reality. So I figured, if *everyone knows about it, then it's got to be there, right?*

Sturgess: I remember first learning about Nessie because of a Police song called “*Synchronicity II*”. That led me to think that it must be real, because there was Sting singing about an ordinary world – it's dull, it's boring, it's dissatisfying... but *somewhere* there's a shadow on a door in Scotland, because a beast has just crawled out of a loch... I thought, ooh, that sounds *much* more exciting than everyday life! So, why isn't Sting heading off to investigate monsters instead of just singing about it?

Radford: Exactly, exactly!

Sturgess: Mine was the unicorn. And I've noticed that the legend persists as a toy, as a popular film subject, as wallpaper... You just can't escape unicorns as a young person! So I can understand why someone might get an emotional attachment to a monster. Did you feel emotionally attached to the Loch Ness Monster?

Radford: I didn't. I know a lot of people who did. Not necessarily Nessie specifically, but just monsters in general. They would have little plush dolls of Bigfoot or whatever else. I never really saw them as being my personal Nessie or my personal Sasquatch. It was just like, hey, here's this creature that's out there.

Again, going back to when I was maybe 10, 11, 12 years old, I kept waiting to hear on the nightly news or read in the newspaper that the monster had eaten somebody. That was my assumption was that, any day now, Walter Cronkite is going to be saying, “*In other news, a man lost his leg to the Loch Ness Monster...*” But it never happened. It was very odd to me.

Sturgess: You have come across people who have been emotionally

Interview – Petra Boynton

When I first submitted this interview to a podcast, I got a very unenthusiastic response of “...Well, okay...” – after all, how could sex and skepticism intersect (unless it involved ghost stories and dodgy mediumship)? What on earth was a “sexologist” anyway? But I was very enthusiastic to speak to Dr Boynton, as her regular Internet posting of news items, endorsements and criticisms were remarkable and as far-ranging as her networking abilities, when it came to issues of importance to health and science communication. This has since become one of my favourite interviews I’ve done for a podcast.

Dr Petra Boynton is a lecturer in International Health Services Research the University College London, and regularly presents at conferences in the UK and internationally, and completes research and training within the area of sex and relationships health. Her research has covered topics within the area of sexual health, including the effects of pornography, women involved in street prostitution, policy and practice in sex education, evaluating advice giving in the media, sexual functioning, and modernising sexual health services. For more information on the field of Sexology, Dr Boynton recommends checking out the Kinsey Institute at www.kinseyinstitute.org.

Kylie Sturgess: What is sexology?

Petra Boynton: Well, most people, if you ask them what they think sexology is, usually don't have any idea. They don't know what the term means, it's not familiar to them. But I think for anyone who doesn't know what a sexologist or sex researcher is – it's the study of sex and it could include a whole variety of areas. So it could be through, say, sociology or psychology, or medicine. It could be through history

or anthropology. It can be very biomedical in nature; it can be applied in zoology, biology. Sometimes, I've even been told, they've been doing sex research in physics? I'm not quite sure what that involves! But it's in most disciplines – most disciplines that study sex would come under an umbrella of sexology.

Sturgess: I noticed you're very active on your website and on Twitter, with a number of links to media releases on sex and sexuality – the “*Facebook Will Give You Syphilis*” story, for example.

Boynton: Yes, I think it's one of those things that when you start looking at it, you just find more awful things!

I started off blogging to try, I suppose, to have a platform to share more accurate information and to challenge initially stuff that I'd been misquoted on. But it quickly spread to actually not really being a lot to do with what I'd been misquoted on, but a lot more about poor media coverage, generally. I mean, I could spend pretty much all my time criticizing, because there's lots of stuff that's not very good. But I think I try to limit myself to things that are really awful. So the “*Facebook Will Give You Syphilis*” story was just such a bad piece of reporting, but also bad practice from people involved in health care in the UK.

They'd claimed that Facebook – well, they didn't say Facebook *exactly*; they said that “*Social Networking Sites Give You Syphilis*,” or were related to it. It's things like that – where I see it going global that will lead me to try and write something, because a lot of stuff is very localised. My worry is, if I write about it and it gets a lot of attention, what if I've made it worse? I've given it more credit than it needs! So most of the stuff I do tends to focus around really large-scale pieces of research or things that have become very popular in the media