Although a national survey in 2005 showed that 73 percent of Americans believe in paranormal events, a good many are outspoken in their disbelief. One of them, James Randi, is so confident that the paranormal cannot be proved that he has a standing offer of $1 million to anyone who can prove that the supernatural exists. Dozens of people each year accept Randi’s challenge. None has walked away with the money.

Randi, once a professional magician who went by the name of The Amazing Randi, retired in 1988 and began a second career investigating and exposing people who fraudulently claim psychic powers. He began his challenge with $1,000 of his own money. Donations to his James Randi Educational Foundation have swelled the amount to $1 million.

More than 150 people have claimed to be able to do everything from talking telepathically with animals to projecting 3-D images onto a piece of foil by staring at it. What they have to do to win the money, according to Randi, is easy. “All they have to do is what they say they can do,” he said. “It’s that simple. They have to define what they can do, and it has to match the description of being paranormal, or occult, or supernatural—that’s a problem they all have. They can’t define it. They can’t say what they can do, under what circumstances, so they negotiate literally for years.”

And yet, despite the absence of concrete proof of ghosts, interest in them is high. One reason may be the growing number and popularity of ghost hunting books and television programs. In the 2005 survey, nearly 70 percent of respondents said they watch Ghost Hunters on a regular basis. Indeed, the exploits of Hawes, Wilson, and their associates seem to have spawned numerous imitators. “Ghost hunting groups are proliferating all over the United States,” says Joe Nickell.

Nickell should know. As a senior researcher for the Center for Inquiry, his job is to investigate supernatural claims for the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. And he is one of the skeptics whose numbers have increased along with ghost hunters.

**Skeptics vs. Debunkers**

Skeptics are sometimes called “debunkers,” exposing the bunk, or fraud, behind supernatural claims. But Randi claims they are different. He defines a skeptic as “someone who doubts in the absence of evidence. A debunker is someone who goes into a situation with the attitude that ‘This isn’t so, and I’m going to prove it to be not so.’ That’s why I don’t accept the term ‘debunker’ to define myself.”

Several ghost hunters agree with Randi. Asked if he believes in ghosts, Hans Holzer replied,

I don’t believe in anything. Belief is the un-critical acceptance of something you can’t prove. I work on evidence. I either know or I don’t know. There are three dirty words in my vocabulary: belief, disbelief and supernatural. They don’t exist. There’s no
And Cody Polston of the Southwest Ghost Hunters Association writes that a true skeptic “holds beliefs tentatively and is open to new evidence and rational arguments about those beliefs.”

But all too often, skeptics say, ghost hunter groups are made up of people who have strong beliefs in the existence of ghosts. Such people go into an investigation with a preconceived notion of what they hope to find. But, according to Randi, hoping for a result is not the same as expecting one.

I’m prejudiced against it [the supernatural] from experience—from knowledge of the subject. I can’t possibly claim that I’m not prejudiced against the phenomenon being true because I’ve been with it for many, many years. I’ve seen hundreds of people who tried to prove their claims, and none of them have been able to prove it. That doesn’t prove that there is no such thing, it just shows that I have a prejudice based on experience.

Information, Not Conclusion
The problem with many ghost hunters, in the skeptics’ view, is that they conclude that an event is paranormal if a natural explanation cannot be found. Ghost hunters and skeptics do not just come to different conclusions, states Alison Smith, one of Randi’s associates. “I view the same information [as the ghost hunter] and come to no conclusion at all. There is only information.”

And so, the skeptics say, ghost hunters cannot possibly arrive at a valid conclusion as to whether a person is psychic or a phenomenon has been caused by a ghost.
application is not universal.\textsuperscript{64} Skeptics say that investigations done by many ghost hunters who claim to be scientific do not follow the scientific method—observation, followed by a hypothesis or proposition to explain the observation, experimentation, analysis of data, and conclusion. Such investigations, says Don Riefler, founder of a skeptics group at Purdue University in Indiana, are thus flawed from the very start. “They work from a system of assumptions, none of which have any proof of veracity [truth],” he argues, “and pawns off what they do as ‘scientific’ even though their very ‘science’ presupposed some sort of soul and ‘life after death.’”\textsuperscript{65}

Such ghost hunters also may—consciously or not—eliminate or tend to distrust any findings or data that do not fit in with preconceived notions. At the same time, findings that seem to support those notions may be accepted without rigorous checking. As retired psychology professor Robert Todd Carroll puts it, “If one is selective enough, one can confirm just about any hypothesis.”\textsuperscript{66}

Pseudoscience
Those ghost hunters who rely on mediums or clairvoyants open themselves up to another criticism, says Polston. “You cannot use the paranormal to prove the paranormal,” he writes. “Simply put, this is a circular argument [since] not one single experiment in modern research has ever been able to conclusively prove the psychical talents of these so called mediums.”\textsuperscript{67}

What ghost hunters are frequently practicing, skeptics assert, is pseudoscience, or “false” science. “They typically have no scientists, and while they’re using some scientific equipment, they’re not trained in using the
A medium in central Florida advertises her services. Mediums say they can help people communicate with spirits, but skeptics criticize ghost hunters who rely on mediums for connecting with ghosts.

scientific equipment and they don’t know what they’re doing,” says Nickell.

Polston calls this type of investigative technique “fringe or alternative science” and says that those who practice it are “almost always individuals who are not in contact with mainstream science.” They try to explain phenomena with vague terms. “Phrases such as ‘energy vibrations’ or ‘subtle energy fields’ may sound impressive,” Polston concludes, “but they are essentially meaningless.”

Polston adds that ghost hunters who engage in pseudoscience frequently cite other ghost hunters or groups as the authority for what they present. Riefler calls this a “feedback loop” in which each person’s “faith in the methods is reinforced by the faith of another ghost

A Logical Look
at Ghosts

In addition to the lack of proof that ghosts exist, says Benjamin Radford of Skeptical Inquirer magazine, some of the suppositions about ghosts defy logic. In an article for Live Science magazine he notes that if victims of unsolved murders are likely to become ghosts, many more ghosts would be reported. Citing statistics that only 64 percent of the approximately 30,000 homicides in the United States in 2002 were solved, he asks, “Where are all the ghosts? And why aren’t they helping to bring their killers to justice, with so many crimes unsolved? Why would they hang out in scary mansions instead of directing police to evidence that would avenge their murders?”