

### 3rd April 2007 Star Psychic?

On Friday night (30th April 2007) we saw the launch of [‘Sally Morgan - Star Psychic’](#) on ITV2. We were told that she will be followed for 5 weeks, “*in order to test her extraordinary claims*”. Sally confidently tells us, “*I’m very happy to be tested because I’m the real deal.*” I’m sure James Randi is eagerly standing by.

If you're like me and haven't previously heard of Sally Morgan a bit of background might be helpful. According to her website, “*Sally Morgan, with the ability to see and hear psychically, since she was a child, practices as a psychic medium internationally, and at her office based near London, United Kingdom*”. It also informs us that, “*Being psychic means having the ability to see, hear and communicate with those who passed over to the spirit world.*” Hmm, I'm not sure where that leaves you if all you can do is bend spoons.

Chatting with the dead has obvious advantages such as helping solve murders, etc. and Sally claims to have helped with, “*police and other investigations*”. Apart from claiming to assist with the theft of [sunglasses](#) (no really!) she also claims to have helped pinpoint the location of the body of a girl [murdered 8 years earlier](#). The only downside to this undoubtedly useful information is that the body is still missing. Apart from that minor detail I'm sure the police found her insights invaluable. Enough background, let's look at the programme.

During the first programme, when giving readings to various celebrities, Sally made some very impressive hits. She not only came up with names but combined them with relationships (e.g. ‘an Aunt in spirit called Ann’). She also identified people's occupations whilst blindfolded and even revealed that one of them had once been raped. She told singer/actor Kym Ryder that her Granddad was “*around her*” something that before the reading Kym said she was hoping to hear.

So, presented with strikingly accurate information like this surely any sceptic would have to be closed minded to the point of obstinacy to deny that Sally is indeed, “*the real deal*”? Alas no. Not this one anyway.

Those with a propensity to believe this sort of thing will immediately chastise me for my stubborn refusal to accept the inevitable truth. To the believer it seems on the one hand I bemoan the fact that psychics apparently use the technique of cold reading and simply spew out vague waffle mixed with calculated guesswork, whilst on the other, when presented with pinpoint accuracy, I still cry foul. I mean, just what do they have to do to convince me?

Well for a start when a psychic is supposed to be undergoing testing you might expect to have some sceptical input. This programme had none. Was the final programme a true reflection of what actually occurred? We'll never know.

If the ‘tests’ were meant to determine if her “*extraordinary claims*” were true then they were very poorly designed indeed. For a start no one in the programme who received a reading appeared to know the first thing about how cold/pseudo psychic readings work. Of course if the true purpose of the programme was to give the superficial appearance of testing then they have probably succeeded with most of their target audience. As a side observation it's a shame the dead make such poor conversationalists don't you think?

So let's look at some of the tests. Before Sally arrived to give a reading to a celebrity she was shown a photograph and told who it was. Why? This did nothing at all to help the process, all it did was give her the opportunity to dig for information. Whether she did or not I haven't a clue but to provide her with the opportunity is just plain stupid. In fact having someone fairly well known as the sitter is also stupid, but then after all they are in the business of entertainment – not truth.

In one test Sally was expected to guess, sorry I meant psychically determine, what someone's profession was simply by touching their hand. Before explaining how they when about this let me describe what I would consider a more suitable protocol i.e. not one as watertight as a colander with extra holes drilled in it.

You could begin by having about 10 people from which 5 will randomly be selected. Their order also determined by the random throw of a dice (10 sided obviously). Each person would put their hand through a small opening so that Sally is unable to see them at all. Their hands should in no way offer a clue about the job they do (e.g. rough skin/brick layer). Their dress should in no way give a clue as to their occupation. Sally should then proceed to tell us their jobs and she would only be told how many she got correct when the test was completed. Even this doesn't offer definitive proof of course but it's still practical to be used for television and a good deal better than what actually happened.

In the actual test 5 subjects were dressed in the outfit they worked in, e.g. nurse uniform, cook, fireman, etc. and Sally had a scarf tied around her eyes to act as a blindfold. As any magician will tell you this is entirely useless, just a peek down her nose and Sally would have easily seen the lower half of the person's body along with their uniform. Once during a lecture I had my eyes covered with half dollars, black gaffer tape wrapped around my head several times so as to completely cover my eyes, on top of which I had a metal blindfold (checked by the audience) and a black hood – and yes I could have told them what their profession was too.

Never the less Sally did tell the belly dancer that she had once been raped. How she knew this exactly I couldn't say but I find it quite bizarre that someone is invited to take part in a psychic test and ends up with the fact that they had once been raped announced on a television programme. It was also a bit strange that the belly dancer didn't seem very surprised. Was this information passed on to a researcher before the reading took place? Perhaps she gave prior permission for this information to be used? Again we'll never know.

I guess the thing that annoyed me most about this programme was that it tried to pretend that it was carrying out genuine testing when in reality it was doing nothing of the kind. The programme was not about testing Sally Morgan, it was about promoting Sally Morgan and showing her in the best of all possible lights. Television producers know that there is a readymade audience keen to lap up this particular type of bilge. Belief in the paranormal seems to grow from the symbiotic relationship between a gullible public eager for more and television companies equally eager supply it. Supply driving demand and vice versa. The phrase 'dumbing down' doesn't really do it justice. I believe Uri Geller appears in a later episode - I can hardly wait.

On a general point I am more and more convinced that out of all the various forms of media, television in particular doesn't care much for sceptics. Psychics are so much more interesting. Well all I can say is that it's a good thing other forms of media cater for our needs such as books published by [Prometheus](#), podcasts like [The Skeptic's Guide to the Universe](#), [Point of Inquiry](#) and [Skepticity](#) along with an ever increasing number of skeptical websites.