



SCHOLAR OF
Mystery

A STORY ABOUT WILLIAM V. RAUSCHER

by Jason Goldberg

A casual observer of a unique stained glass window at Christ Episcopal Church in Woodbury, New Jersey, would notice symbols that are both deeply religious and symbolic of the man it honors, the Rector who served there for thirty-six years. In the center, Christ stands by the door of the human soul. At the top, a butterfly signifies resurrection. Unexpectedly, however, the glass also depicts a rabbit in a hat, ESP cards, and a magic wand. Unexpected, that is, unless you know the many roles that the Reverend Canon Bill Rauscher has held over the years: minister, paranormal investigator, and magician!

An Episcopal priest by calling, Bill is also one of magic's most prolific writers, with fourteen books on magic, the supernatural, and religion, as well as numerous monographs and essays. Among his honors, he has received five writing awards from the I.B.M. for articles published in *The Linking Ring*, the Society of American Magicians 1998 Hall of Fame Scholarship Award, and the 1991 and 2007 Milbourne Christopher Foundation Award. He was elected to the SAM Magic Hall of Fame in 1994 and the Inner Magic Circle in 2001.

As a young child, he received a broken microscope set for Christmas. He replaced it at the store for a magic set; you can guess the rest! He performed his first magic show at thirteen and later joined the I.B.M. in 1949. In the 1950s, Bill began writing for *The Linking Ring*, and his original research and series on Servais LeRoy paved the way for the book, *Servais LeRoy: Monarch of Mystery*, many years later.

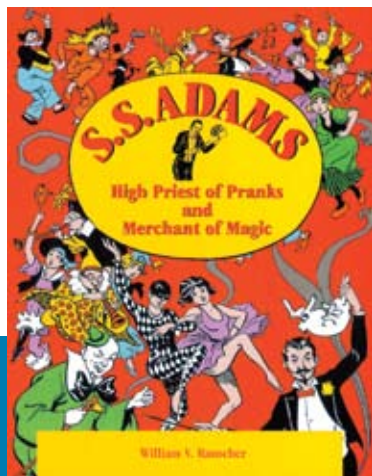
Early on, Bill discovered some excellent mentors. Edd Patterson, an enter-

tainer with over 18,000 school shows to his credit, was one of the first magicians Bill ever saw; they have become close friends over the years. He saw John Calvert's *Magic and Models* show, and over the years they too became friends. Bill also grew up near the S.S. Adams' Company, never dreaming that one day he would write books about both Calvert and Adams. As he notes, "Maybe it's purposeful coincidence." His research for the book, *S.S. Adams: High Priest of Pranks and Merchant of Magic*, was suggested by David Haversat, who was a collector of S.S. Adams' memorabilia when the two met at a Magic Collectors' Association meeting. Due to their work together, David later was inspired to purchase the company and became its president!

The concept of "purposeful coincidence" has been important in Rauscher's life. "I've always left a margin of mystery in my thinking. I wasn't an overly religious kid, but the little mission church I went to made an impression. I always sensed something other than



Left: An Alan Wassilack drawing of the 1989 Rauscher Magic Show. Right: The cover of one of William V. Rauscher's numerous books. Courtesy S.S. Adams.



what we visually see around us. I can't prove it, but it's just something I feel and know. Yet, I'm a realist. You have to do the dishes and cut the grass! I just always liked the mystical side of life." Magic became a childlike way to explore that other side of the world and simply play. "Magic is an oasis. My life as a cleric was about problem-oriented people. I would do a marriage one week, two funerals the next, or visit nursing homes and hospitals. I loved the ministry, but it was a high-pressure environment. Funny thing, I'd get excited knowing *The Linking Ring* was in the mail!"

While magic has remained a hobby, Bill found that over the years he was collecting more and slowly building his performance experience. His shows were traditional in style, hearkening back to earlier performers. A highlight was the Boston SAM Assembly's Fortieth Annual Magicale. "I performed on the same bill as the retired Rockettes. I did the second half and included a levitation, the spirit cabinet, and the Demon Wonder Box. We also vanished a chicken and performed the Haunted Mansion and Cremation."

Bill has also served the magic community as a clergyman, presiding over the funerals of people such as Hardeen, Jr., Milbourne Christopher, Jane Thurston Shepard, Walter and Litzka Gibson, and the sister-in-law of Servais LeRoy. He also rewrote the Broken Wand ceremony for the I.B.M.

Much of his work now focuses on his writing, where he has explored subjects in religion, magic, and the supernatural. The moniker "Scholar of Mystery," was given to Bill by his close friend, John Calvert, in reference to his explorations. "I always thought he was a bit psychic, but in the best possible way." With a touch of humor, and noting Bill's extensive research, John exclaimed, "Just imagine how big a book it would take to accommodate a story Bill could write about the many facets and uses of an elephant?"

Bill's latest project is a book and DVD combination with routines about Edd Patterson, a thank-you to his mentor and friend. He finds writing both a rewarding and difficult task. Another recent book, *Pleasant Nightmares*, is about the inner demons of one of America's best ghost show performers, Dr. Neff.



Bill Rauscher relaxing in his study.

It was particularly stressful. “I saw Bill Neff’s show when I was a kid, and it always stuck in my mind. I knew he was an alcoholic before I started writing. I tried to help generate some compassion for him, as he lived in a time where Alcoholics’ Anonymous was young.” Bill credits Neff’s son, Jim, with making the book possible.

“No one knew Neff’s real story. Most people who had previously contacted Jim were seeking his collection. I just wanted information, and that opened the door. He visited me and we talked for hours. I think the book was a healing process for him.”

The Houdini Code Mystery was also difficult, in part because of its controversial nature. It combined his mutual interests in magic and the paranormal, but Bill notes, “While I believe Houdini was a remarkable man, and I wanted to probe his personality a little more, I also felt Thurston needed his due. I’m glad that Jim Steinmeyer and Rory Feldman are working on books about him; he

epitomizes all our dreams of magician-ship.”

The S.S. Adams Company has published several of Bill’s books. David Haversat notes, “Working with Bill is a pleasure. He gets things accomplished. He’s been able to write a lot in a short time, while still remaining a perfectionist and very detail oriented. He reminds me of Walter Gibson.” In turn, Bill looks to Walter Gibson for inspiration when it comes to writing.

“He was like your old uncle. Once while on a drive and looking at the trees, he quietly folded his arms in his lap and said, ‘You know, this is like the Enchanted Forest.’ Even he didn’t know how much he had written. He would work on two typewriters at once. He was a wizard of words.”

Bill’s writing often touches on the unanswered questions and debates about magic. For example, Bill says, “Mentalism remains very controversial, especially when presented as real rather than trickery.” He has strong personal



An advertisement for one of Bill Rauscher's magic shows.

beliefs on the subject. "I allow for the reality of the mystical experience, but I don't believe people should be making it up and charging people in private readings for it. *The Mind Readers* took some heat because of the views I expressed about people who do those. Everyone has a bit of the trickster in him; it's just how far you take it. In magic, people know they're being fooled. But, many mentalists don't want to give people that impression. There's a difference between enchantment and bizarre magic, which is more primitive. A threatening tiger or big snake has a primitive beauty, but it doesn't enchant. A bunny enchants a child, which is why I always tried to use one. It's such a part of magic history."

The thread that really ties all of Bill's books together is their focus on personality and how we develop. His books feature detailed profiles of curious characters. When asked why he writes about them, Bill responds, "It's strange how things sometimes occur. Divine guid-

Books by Rauscher

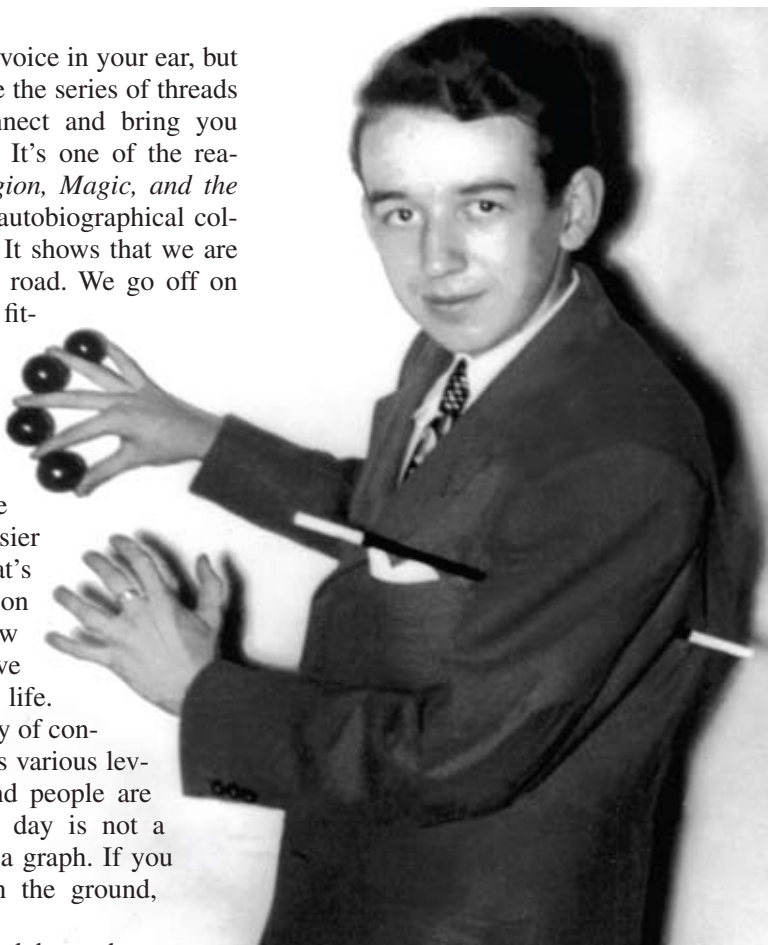
- Arthur Ford: The Man Who Talked with the Dead (co-author) -1973*
The Spiritual Frontier: A Priest Explores the Psychic World -1975
The Psychic Mafia (collaborator) -1976
Church In Frenzy: The Crisis of Christianity Today -1980
John Calvert: Magic and Adventures Around the World-1987
The Great Raymond: Entertainer of Kings - King of Entertainers -1996
Servais LeRoy: Monarch of Mystery (co-author) -1999
To Be or Not To Be: A Pastoral View of Suicide in Today's World -2000
The Houdini code Mystery: A Spirit Secret Solved -2000
S. S. Adams: High Priest of Pranks and Merchant of magic -2002
The Mind Readers: Masters of Deception - 2002
Magic in Rhyme: A Magician's Anthology of Poems, Verses, and Limericks -2003
Religion, Magic, and the Supernatural: The Autobiography, Reflections and Essays of an Episcopal Priest-2006
Pleasant Nightmares: Dr. Neff and His Madhouse of Mystery -2008
Edd Patterson: A Lifetime of Magic and Art -2008

ance may not be a voice in your ear, but it's how you weave the series of threads that suddenly connect and bring you to where you are. It's one of the reasons I wrote *Religion, Magic, and the Supernatural* [his autobiographical collection of essays]. It shows that we are all on a path or a road. We go off on strange byways, fitting things together like a puzzle, and may get lost.

As we get older, the pieces merge and we find the road becomes easier to walk. Maybe that's why I worked on the book, to show that you can have many interests in life.

It is really the study of consciousness in all its various levels. Personality and people are fascinating. Every day is not a crescendo. Life is a graph. If you have your feet on the ground, you're okay."

Bill may be retired, but as he says, "I don't think I shall ever be rid of magic. I sold it all once and then bought it all back. I still buy tricks that I'll never use. I still love the phrase from the old Johnson Smith catalog – Better Experienced Than Described!" Even so, he advises beginners to start with the classics. "The *Tarbell Course in Magic* offers a lot of magic that you can learn. Hoffman's *Modern Magic* was one of my first books. Any person with a serious interest should get those." He also encourages beginners to learn the skills of communication, especially how to work well with your audience and treat them with respect.



Bill began performing magic as a teenager.

Like the stained glass window now displayed in the church he served faithfully for so many years, Bill is a person of many colors and facets whose own form is still being cobbled together. Those who know him might echo John Calvert's thoughts, "To sum it all up, Bill Rauscher is a great talent, a great person, and I am so proud to call him my friend."

Jason Goldberg is an associate editor of The Linking Ring.