



## Q&A with Department of English Alumnus Joe Nickell (BA, 1967; PhD, 1987)

Story by Rebekah Tilley

The life of a paranormal investigator is never dull. “Last summer I was in Budapest briefly locked in a gypsy’s apartment while she tried to extort more money from me, and had a great time,” said **Joe Nickell, senior research fellow of the committee for skeptical inquiry** and **investigative columnist** for **Skeptical Inquirer Magazine**. In this role Nickell has traveled all over the world and, unlike many who dabble in the mystical, believes mysteries should be studied with the expectation of deciphering them. Over the years he has delved into the mysteries of Toronto’s Mackenzie House haunting, the Shroud of Turin, and the authorship of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*.

Nickell is also a historical documents consultant, author, co-author or editor of more than 30 books, and a poet. Now based in Amherst, N.Y., the West Liberty, Ky., native remains connected to his roots writing a monthly article for the Licking Valley Courier – “Historical Sketches” – and through his historical research helped place two West Liberty sites on the National Register of Historic Places. He is a man of diverse interests, talents and guises yet he identifies himself simply as: writer.

**You’ve made a career out of investigating historical, paranormal, and forensic mysteries, myths and hoaxes. What is the root of your interest in what is “real” or “true”?**

As a child I was just very, very curious. Looking back that was the continuing trait that I just always wanted to know things. Secrets are meant to be revealed and mysteries are meant to be solved. Really any kind of secret or mystery was an attraction to me whether it was a secret code or invisible evidence like a fingerprint or a mystery like a murder or a questioned manuscript. That is the one thing that you could say characterized all my work. I knew I was a detective at the age of 8. Most of my actual paid work is as a paranormal investigator for a science magazine, but I honestly don’t much care whether the mystery is historical or paranormal or forensic or what. If it’s an intriguing mystery and if there is some chance I might be able to bring something to it, I’m interested in it no matter how cold the case is.

**You are a man of many interests – you list 316 different personas on your website including fire-academy instructor, balloon sculptor and procrastinator – yet you identify yourself simply as a writer. Why?**

Writer seemed the one thing that complimented my insatiable curiosity. I can’t really separate the two very well. If I’m curious about something, I’m probably going to want to write about it as a way of sharing what it is that I find. The investigator who cannot write up his investigations is severely limited. “Writer” for me as been a kind of bedrock persona. The reason through so many interests and activities that I’ve held it all together, I attribute that to being a writer. Being a writer is the thing that’s central to my being and all roles that I play and all the things that I do are really extensions of that. Seeing it that way has been useful to me and prevented me from having an identity crisis.



**You attended UK as an undergrad and received a degree in English. What made you decide to come back for a Ph.D.?**

I came back to school after a long hiatus. I had lived in Canada because of my opposition to the Vietnam War and had a fun time working as a private detective and blackjack dealer. After I was pardoned by President Carter I attended stuntman school in California and was making a living as a paranormal investigator. But my resume was looking a bit ridiculous and I decided I needed to reinvent myself. Returning to UK was the obvious place to do that because my family was there and it was where I earned my bachelor of arts. I decided to reinvent myself as a scholar. I was beginning to think seriously about writing and writing books and continuing my paranormal investigations. I wanted to become a better writer, more of a scholar. I wanted to be taken seriously.

**What did your Ph.D. give you?**

It raised my investigative work to a higher level. I began applying linguistic studies to questions of spirit and automatic writing. I became able to take a questioned document and look at it not only at the forensic level under a microscope, but also look at a text with the techniques and approach of a scholar. 'Here are words in the text that were not in the language at that time. Or this is not the writing style of this person. This is sort of an overblown imitation of his style, but not his style.' That is a more scholarly pursuit. Scholarship to me never meant something that was stuffy or pretentiously learned, but something that was thoroughly looked at and in pursuit of the truth and well documented. I began to be interested in more complex, historical, literary cases and to bring to bare more scholarly approaches.

**Which you did with *The Bondswoman's Narrative*?**

Yes, I increasingly began to do document work and ended up writing books on that subject. Then Henry Lewis Gates Jr. asked me to examine what could be the first slave-written novel: *The Bondswoman's Narrative*. The manuscript was hand-delivered and I took custody of it for six weeks at my office in Amherst [N.Y.]. I focused primarily on the manuscript. Some of the pages had what looked like suture marks caused by the belt of an early paper machine. I could see it was written with a quill pen and show where she had stopped and sharpened her quill. Also corrections were made by cutting out little slips of paper and pasting them over the unwanted text with paste wafers that were common in that era.

Was it an original manuscript? Yes, it was a genuine manuscript of the period. Was it written by a slave? Because if it was it

would have been the first slave-written novel in America and would have been incredibly important. Initial findings were it could be consistent with that, I couldn't disprove it. But I showed it was written by someone with rather good vocabulary and writing skills for an escaped slave, and I've been more skeptical, particularly because we couldn't identify the author under the name. I'm more inclined to think this was written by someone who simply adopted the persona of an escaped slave. It does sound very true and believable in places, but that's why we have the word verisimilitude. &

**If your curiosity has been peaked, you can find more information about Joe Nickell and his work at [joenickell.com](http://joenickell.com).**

