



*Can the mind communicate
with other minds?*

The Phantom Eavesdropper

By Roger Ebert

illustration by Roy Kutsunai

THEY DO NOT—cannot—know how it feels to lie quite still in bed in the dark brooding hours of the night and hear the noises. For this reason, they say that I am mad. But do I appear mad, speak gibberish, rush about with foam bubbling at my lips? Of course not; and yet I realize it is futile for me to patiently explain that *they* will never learn to listen for the noises. They've already shown that they wouldn't believe me anyway. But let me begin three months ago . . .

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Every tavern has its clan of steady customers who inhabit the darkest corner of the stale beer-smelling room and stare out suspiciously at newcomers. In our group were myself, Dirk Wilson, and the engineering

major Fred Potter, who built tiny transistor radios and sold them to the bartender while we hunched over our beer. It was at these meetings that I first began to speak of my courses in parapsychology, the study of the uncharted abilities of the human mind. The others seemed interested in my opinions, and soon I found myself explaining Dr. Rhine's telepathy experiments at Duke to a group of perhaps 15 listeners.

For perhaps an hour, Potter did not join in the discussion. But as we talked of subjects at Duke who could call the turn of a card almost every time, transmit wrong spellings of everyday words, and produce the answer to a problem worked in someone else's mind, Potter's hands moved

less surely among the transistorized components before him. He finally dropped three tiny screws into his beer mug, swore, and looked up with a grunt that let us know he was officially in on the discussion.

"It's insane to claim that the mind can communicate with other minds, no matter what Dr. Rhine says," Potter asserted, fishing in the beer with a long index finger for the screws. "Sure, a few freaks might be able to call a card, but this talk about mind-reading is a lot of bull, if you ask me." He apparently found a screw in the mug, and caught it in his fingernail for easy transfer to the radio.

"You can't argue with facts, Potter," Dirk Wilson told him as I signaled the bartender for two more

pitchers. "They got proof."

"Proof, hell. I say the human mind and this radio receiver both boil down to the same idea: they're simple receiving sets."

"Sure, we know our mind can transmit; they measure brain waves over at McKinley Hospital every time they get a psycho. But we've always relied on sounds to communicate, and so our ears act as receivers instead of our brains. It may be indirect, but that's the way it works. The receiving apparatus in our minds is just not powerful enough to pick up thoughts anywhere—if it ever was."

The beer arrived and I gestured disarmingly for Potter to help himself. "What are you driving at, Fred?" I asked softly.

"Just this." He paused to refill his mug, remembering that two screws remained in its bottom. "If we ever want to train our minds to pick up thought-waves, we're going to have to start with more simple, direct transmitters. Human brain waves are most likely too complex for us to pick up—but maybe we can zero in on a dog or a parakeet, or something."

He looked around at the group defensively, "It's possible."

Wilson and several of the other listeners seemed to agree tentatively that Potter might have stumbled across something, and although I argued from Dr. Rhine's point of view the rest of the evening, I could not help thinking as I prepared for bed that Potter's theory might be sound. I was determined to give it a test, anyway. A dog was out of the question in the residence hall, and so I bought a green and yellow parakeet named Mickey at the Bill and Co and installed him next to my bed.

I told the others nothing of my

purchase the following evening, and the conversation soon drifted to a solution for the Algerian solution. I forgot what Wilson proposed; I excused myself early and hurried home.

The bird was still somewhat restless in his new cage, and I imagine he was lonesome for the chattering company of the hundreds of other parakeets in the pet shop. This fit into my planning—perhaps—if he had brain waves of any sort—they would be more disturbed and stronger tonight. I quickly turned out the light and lay on the bed, fully dressed, listening for I knew not what. I recalled after five minutes or so an old Army trick of making the mind a complete blank—shutting out everything—and I tried to imagine a big blackboard inside my head, with an eraser wiping it spotless.

I picked up nothing on my "blackboard" the first night, although there may have been a background suggestion of something at least fumbling for the chalk before I fell asleep. The second night I was ready with my mind-clearing tactic, and was concentrating on the clean blackboard before the bird had an opportunity to get sleepy on me. Tense, half holding my breath, I lay there in the dark as the parakeet testily snapped at a bell in his cage, fluffed his feathers, and trimmed his toenails with his beak. A few sleepy chirps chased one another into the darkness, and then something began fumbling with the chalk again. I waited—perhaps an hour, perhaps five minutes—until I heard-saw-felt within my mind the hesitant, altogether alien scratchings of another mind inside my head. The actual experience was very strange, and yet somehow vaguely familiar—as if sometime long ago I had felt

similar scratchings and had not recognized them.

It was only after the third night that I determined it was the bird, after all, who was doing the transmitting. By moving the cage across the room after midnight, I made the signals weaker.

I continued my experiments with the bird for perhaps another three weeks, noting that it seemingly became more confident each night and sent progressively stronger messages to my mind-blackboard. I told the group at the tavern nothing of my progress, but found myself agreeing with Potter more readily when he repeated his earlier opinion. They remarked once or twice on my habit of leaving by nine-thirty each night, but I mumbled something unconvincing about having to study and left anyway.

On the first night of the fourth week—a Thursday—something went wrong and blew up the whole works.

Perhaps I make it sound too drastic; I suppose the interference with the signals from the parakeet was comparatively subtle, but my mind had been honed to a razor-edge by the nightly sessions, and the mental static rasped on raw thought-endings.

I recall that Thursday very clearly; it was the night that the bartender at last refused to buy Potter's newest transistor radio and demanded payment in Potter's own cash for the beer. Potter became very upset—he stormed out of the tavern. I excused myself a few minutes later and hurried in the opposite direction, impatient to begin the night's experiments.

I went through the preliminaries rapidly and clicked off the light shortly after nine. In a few minutes the bird was transmitting and I receiving in our accustomed pattern, if reading a bird's mind can be said to have a pattern. Then *something*—call it intruder, alien, interloper, or uninvited visitor—began to materialize between myself and the bird as a form of static. At first, it was not very clear. You've heard the short, fuzzy bursts of Mexican Spanish-speaking radio stations on your dial late at night as you tune in Franklin McCormack? It was something like that.

But it became clearer and clearer, until its brooding presence disrupted the communication between bird and myself, tearing, ripping into our subtle patterns!

They tell me I am mad. But I tell you, an infinitely more complex, more wise, altogether alien and hostile receiver was stooping down to eavesdrop on me that night! And I believe it was Potter.

