

Matter 8

Summary

Spinners

Account by:	Gillian Merry, 48. Professor.
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Report

Dear Editor,

I'm sure that many of your readers will by now be aware that a Mediterranean man was handing out button spinners to children last month as he walked along Broad Way. According to my son, who was in receipt of such a spinner, the man was tall and in his mid-20s; he wore druidic clothing and exhibited no ability to comprehend English.

Each of the spinners that this individual was freely dispensing are made from a disc and a length of twine. The disc has two off-centre holes

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in it, like a two-hole button. The twine is passed through one hole then back through the other, whereupon it is tied to form a closed loop upon which the button dangles.

Traditionally, the toy is played with by taking hold of the twine either side of the disc then rotating the disc manually a little. Pulling the twine causes the disc to spin. By successively pulling the string and relaxing it, the disc can be made to spin increasingly fast, alternating in direction with each well-timed tug. Such toys must have provided countless children with five minutes of amusement for generations.

The particular manufacture of the spinners handed out last month involved a disc of oriental beech (*fagus orientalis*) approximately 5cm (2in) in diameter and a 60cm (2ft) length of twine made of hemp (*cannabis sativa*).

I am not writing to warn parents about the dangers of allowing their offspring to interact with oddly-dressed foreigners handing out toys partly made from the fibres of a plant designated as a controlled drug by the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Rather, as a professional botanist, I have a more directed interest.

The spinners that the man produced were identical. I don't mean that the discs were sections of the same beech branch: I mean that they were the *same* sections of beech branch. I don't mean that the twine was cut to the same length and tied the same way: I mean that the specific piece of

twine used by any one spinner was identical at the microscopic level to that of any other spinner. I conducted the experiments personally: trust me on this.

Furthermore, these details may not be immediately apparent to those readers who have seen or handled one of the spinners; this is because most of the discs have photographs bonded onto one side. It seems that one of the children decided to decorate her spinner, whereupon the man created all subsequent spinners with pictures on them of objects pointed at by the children. These include trees, coins, items of clothing and the faces of the children themselves. Unfortunately, I have yet to find an example of one showing the face of the man who synthesised the spinners.

According to those children I have spoken to who were in receipt of a spinner, the man produced his toys "by magic". He didn't appear to use a camera to capture the images, he merely looked where the children were pointing then opened his hand and the spinner was there.

As a scientist, I don't believe in magic. Neither, however, do I believe that creating literally identical toy spinners then instantaneously binding fine-grained images of randomly-selected objects to them using chemically-complex dyes is possible using today's technology.

If you saw or spoke to this man, I would very much like to hear from you.

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Prof. Gillian Merry
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Notes

Professor Merry, now retired, regrets that she did not receive a response to her appeal for information. Nevertheless, in time she was able to acquire a total of eight spinners from various sources. Three of these spinners were destroyed during analysis. Two were partially damaged but are still largely intact. To the best of her knowledge, the remaining three (which she calls "football", "Jackie" and "clouds") have yet to be the subject of any detailed investigation. All five of the surviving discs are currently in a controlled-environment storage facility operated by Oxford University.

Professor Merry was able to vouch that beneath the pictures, the discs, like the twine, were also identical at the microscopic level.