# The Psychic Scams of Slyvia Browne

You couldn't change the channel in the late 90s without running into a Miss Cleo advertisement. Virtually every commercial on daytime TV featured a failed playwright from Los Angeles who affected an absurd Caribbean accent and invited you to call her. Miss Cleo was one of countless charge-by-the-minute 1-900 numbers usually reserved for adult chat lines. She was also wildly successful in her day, but nowhere near the hit that Sylvia Browne was.

America has always been interested in ghosts, psychics, and the supernatural, but there was a groundswell in the late 90s. Browne would show up on Montel Williams and Larry King, proclaiming to channel the spirits of loved ones that had passed on. She provided hope of an afterlife and comfort in the knowledge our dead relatives were proud of us. If they met an untimely end shrouded in mystery, Browne was there to shed light on that, too.

But it couldn't last, because it wasn't real. General public opinion began to shift, and though she retained a following until her death, most of the country saw her as a charlatan.

## She Was a Felon Before She Rose to Fame

Browne's career as a psychic started in the 1970s, but it was all phone and in-person meetings. It wasn't until 1990, with the publication of her book 'Adventures of a Psychic,' that she got name recognition. She immediately began appearing on The Montel Williams Show the following year. But no one was told of her past crimes.

It seems in the late 1980s, the FBI began investigating Browne for investment fraud. Several major banks that she had taken loans out of had caused "sustained losses" at the banks. Browne and her then-husband Kenzil Dalzel Browne were indicted for selling securities in a gold-mining venture under false pretenses. At least $20,000 of the money stolen from an investor for mining equipment was used instead to fund Browne's Nirvana Foundation for Psychic Research.

The couple pleaded guilty and got a suspended sentence, but Browne was also sentenced to 200 hours of community service.

## She Was Wrong Constantly, Starting with Shawn Hornbeck

There's no way of telling how many people Browne misled with her predictions before her television appearances, and her audience cold reads were never followed upon.

The first case in which it was obvious Browne was wrong was the disappearance of Shawn Hornbeck. Hornbeck, 11, had disappeared without a trace in 2002 while riding his bike outside his house in Richwoods, Missouri.

Browne spoke to Hornbeck's parents, telling them that a Hispanic man with dreadlocks took him and that Shawn was now deceased.

Five years later, in 2007, Shawn was found alive. His kidnapper, a white man with short hair, was arrested.

## "She's Not Alive, Honey": She Sent a Mother to Her Grave Thinking Her Daughter Was Murdered

It happened again two years after Hornbeck. Amanda Berry, a kidnapping victim, had been missing for nineteen months in 2004. "She's not alive, honey," Browne told Berry's mother. Her flippant prediction was nonsense, as was the idea that her corpse was "in water" or that her jacket "had DNA on it."

Nevertheless, Berry's mother died two years later, believing her daughter had been murdered. Berry turned up in 2013.

## Doubts Boil Over

Despite her massive ratings popularity whenever she appeared, it was becoming clear that her false predictions had started to damage the lives of families already going through hell. In 2010, the Skeptical Inquirer published a three-year study of Browne's predictions regarding missing people.

Though Browne claimed to be right a whopping 85% of the time, the study revealed that "Browne has not even been mostly correct in a single case."

Of the predictions incorrect was a six-year-old boy she claimed had been sold into slavery in Japan, who turned out just to have been kidnapped by a local. Another involved a young woman she claimed was working in Hollywood as an exotic dancer whose corpse was later identified by dental records.

A follow-up to the piece showed that she was completely wrong in 33 separate cases and mostly correct in none.

## She Changed Her Story About the Sago Mine Along With the News Reports

The Sago Mine disaster was one of the worst in America. An explosion in a West Virginia coal mine trapped thirteen miners below, with little hope of retrieval. The day after the explosion,

June 3, 2006, Browne appeared on Coast to Coast AM, a popular radio show that focuses on the supernatural and conspiracy theories, and told host George Noory that she was sure the miners were alive, despite no sound coming from beneath the debris. "No," she said, "I knew they were going to be found."

At the time, the news reports from West Virginia concurred; there was hope. Later in the program, however, the news from the mine took a turn for the worse. Browne tried to cover her tracks, changing her tune along with the news. "I don't think there's anybody alive, maybe one."

She was right. There was indeed one survivor. But this was likely luck combined with insight drawn directly from news reports.

## She Had A Chance to Prove Herself And Didn't Take It

Perhaps Browne's most ardent critic was James Randi, the Amazing Randi, a former magician and a skeptic investigator of the paranormal. Randi said that Browne was no better than a skilled, educated guesser and offered a prize of one million dollars to demonstrate supernatural ability under controlled scientific testing. Browne went on Larry King that she accepted.

Two years went by, and Browne never made the arrangements for the test. Browne claimed she had not taken the test when pressed because Randi would not put the money in escrow. Randi mailed her proof of the account, which Browne refused to accept.

By 2007, Browne's business manager told CNN's Anderson Cooper that she had "nothing to prove to Randi."

## She Was Even Wrong About Her Death

Browne died in 2013, at the age of 77, from natural causes. After her passing, several of her predictions would continue to be disproven, and families who had suffered believing their kids were dead or sold into sex slavery or whatever popped into Browne's head that day sometimes saw relief. But sometimes they did not.

Her passing wasn't without some poetic justice for those she tormented with her cons. She had told Larry King in 2003 she'd die at 88.

## Criticisms Continue Coming From Beyond The Grave

Browne's dead, but critics are still talking. She's often used as a derisive example whenever critics of those claiming psychic abilities speak about the issue. In 2019, John Oliver did a segment about so-called psychics who prey on grieving families.

Oliver laid out cold reading, a medium's go-to. This is when a psychic claims they sense a letter or color and pretend to intuit, which is correct based on facial reactions. Browne did this often, once claiming a woman who vanished was taken by a man with the initials "M.J." It turned out her son-in-law, a D.P., murdered her.

## There Are Still Believers

Despite numerous instances of inaccuracy and her status as a felon before entering the public sphere, people are still taking Browne's claims seriously. Social media began posting excerpts from her 2008 book *End of Days that* appeared to resemble the Covid-19 pandemic. "A severe, pneumonia-like virus" would spread around 2020, she wrote.

Kim Kardashian was one of the posters. A broken clock is right twice a day, and there's plenty of evidence that Covid wasn't all that much of a surprise to anyone. The Obama administration had set up a task force for just such an event.

## Her Final Prediction

Before she died, Browne made a video to calm people who believed the world would end on December 21, 2012, according to some beliefs about the Mayan calendar.

In it, she claimed the world would "be here after about 95 years." She was at least half-right, but according to NASA, the Mayan connection was "a misconception from the very beginning." There was never a Mayan prophecy claiming that 2012 would be the world's final year.