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Cover: Forty high school seniors—winners of the 50th annual Westinghouse Science Talent Search—will gather in Washington, D.C., next week to exhibit their research projects, visit with noted scientists and compete for \$205,000 in scholarship money. Each of the 40 students receives at least \$1,000; the top three winners share a total of \$90,000. (Photo: Westinghouse Electric Corp.)
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Letters

Truth in doubt

Being both a student and an educator, I read with keen interest "True Believers" (SN: 1/5/91, p.14). Any new research that can shed light on how we learn is a top priority in my world. Therefore, when I began to reflect on what I had read, I found myself entangled in confusion.

If I believed the article, then—because I had been interrupted twice while reading it—I should doubt its truth. But if I doubted its truth, then maybe I should *not* doubt its truth.

Now you've done it! Will I ever be able to go back to being a naive Cartesian again?

Seriously, these researchers have hit upon a truth that is sobering in its implications. Evidently, we may *be* simply what we see, hear or read. Given the content of today's media, the thought is jolting.

D. LaBarbera
Nacogdoches, Texas

What is "seemingly preposterous" about

Spinoza's contention that a proposition must be accepted at least provisionally before it can be rationally analyzed?

This statement reflects the true believers who see scientific objectivity as a permanent stance of skepticism and critical analysis. They do not admit that they have, by necessity, accepted on faith the proposition that the information presented by our senses is in some measure "true," and that its nature is independent of the mind that seeks to analyze it.

Rhoda R. Gilman
Member, Minnesota Independent
Scholars Forum
St. Paul, Minn.

"True Believers" is an interesting piece on cognitive processes. However, I am perplexed by psychologist Daniel T. Gilbert's assertion that "healthy people immediately believe what they see," if this implies that "nonhealthy" minds would be more inclined to be skeptical.

Where would that leave scientists, who are presumed to possess large doses of critical

thinking and doubting in their belief systems?

Robert Meier
Bloomington, Ind.

The phrase you cite refers to physically healthy adults with normal vision. The skepticism of "nonhealthy" minds (whatever that means) remains unclear. But Gilbert's findings indeed serve up some humble pie for scientists and echo Thomas Kuhn's notion that scientists often uncritically accept "paradigms" that guide their research. (See Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1970, University of Chicago.)

—B. Bower

Mixing lit and lab

"Poetry Lessons" (SN: 12/22&29/90, p.396) took me back to my undergraduate days at MIT, where all students were required to take at least eight humanities courses. Although the requirement was the subject of much grumbling, many of us took great pleasure in it—and

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