

Further Books of Note

Qué es Sensibilidad Psíquica? [What Is Psychic Sensibility?] by Alejandro Parra. Buenos Aires: Deva's, 2011. 190 pp. US\$12. ISBN 9789875821088.

Alejandro Parra is an Argentine researcher and writer in the field of parapsychology. He has written a series of popular books on this topic over the years, each of which is a model of clarity and accuracy. This book, written in Spanish, *What is Psychic Sensibility?*, is no exception.

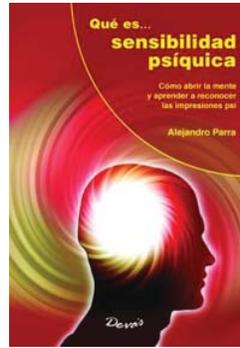
Parra begins by introducing his readers to the concept of psychic phenomena, providing a brief history and some vignettes from his file of case histories. Early in the book, he answers the question posed by the title. For Parra, “psychic sensibility” is the ability to interpret certain events in a way that allows the extension of one’s senses to incorporate information in a form that cannot be explained by mainstream science.

Parra also gives brief but accurate descriptions of laboratory experiments such as the dream telepathy studies conducted at Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York, the remote viewing research conducted by Edwin May and others, and the “presentiment” investigations of Dean Radin and Dick Bierman, during which participants displayed discernible physiological reactions just before an erotic image was quickly flashed on a screen (non-erotic images evoked no physiological change). Parra also provides examples of when psychic sensibility appeared to have life-saving qualities, citing cases collected by Louisa Rhine (during which both realistic and symbolic dreams stimulated dreamers to change behaviors that would have been disastrous) and Ian Stevenson (regarding the remarkable number of ticket cancellations prior to the *Titanic*’s doomed voyage).

Parra tackles the issue of how psychic sensibility can be differentiated from psychopathology on the one hand and from fantasy on the other. He regrets that the American Psychiatric Association includes such characteristics as “hearing voices” and “magical thinking” as symptoms of mental illness without giving at least a footnote to possible exceptions. He could have added that these and other psychiatric “symptoms” are commonly reported by many members of indigenous groups around the world.

To utilize psychic sensibility, Parra urges his readers to find periods of time free from distracting stimuli, occasions that do not demand logical thinking, and mood states free of anxiety and depression. He discusses

the role that psychic sensibility can play in creative inspiration, imagination, and intuition. To stimulate psychic sensibility, Parra provides sensible exercises in visualization, relaxation, free association, sensory deprivation, and psychometry. In the latter procedure, people attempt to obtain information about the owner of a common object, simply by seeing, touching, or holding the object. All of a person's response can then be checked out for accuracy.



To his credit, Parra advocates skepticism when using psychic sensibility. He cautions his readers not to accept claims as evidence and to keep written records of “hunches” that can be followed up with reality checks. It is only too common for advocates of psi phenomena to conveniently forget the dozens of dreams that did not foretell future events in favor of the one that did. One could add that scoffers might have a dream that forecast an actual event only to insist they probably had numerous dreams that did not come true. Alan Vaughan was a well-known psychic claimant who kept meticulous records of his dreams. Toward the end of his life, at the request of James Spottiswoode, he selected 61 dreams characterized by at least three correspondences between the dream and the event it apparently foreshadowed. The dates on which these dreams had occurred were found by Spottiswoode to have occurred on nights of remarkably low geomagnetic activity (in comparison to other nights of the week). This association was found in other dream studies as well (e.g., Persinger & Krippner, 1989) and could become a “marker” that might be put to practical use by future dreamers because geomagnetic activity is a matter of public record.

However, Parra does not limit psychic sensibility to glimpsing the future. He also suggests that it can help his readers see overall patterns when faced with complex phenomena. Whether his readers will take the time to keep records or not, Parra urges them not to abandon analytical thinking and logical problem-solving. Instead, he suggests that psychic sensitivity can guide analytical thinking rather than working against it. This is one example of the balance that characterizes this book, a perspective that keeps Parra's readers interested rather than being bored by a pedantic presentation of this type of material. At the same time, Parra refrains from the sensationalism that characterizes too many books on psychic phenomena. In this way, he becomes a model of the very approach to psychic sensibility that he recommends his readers employ.

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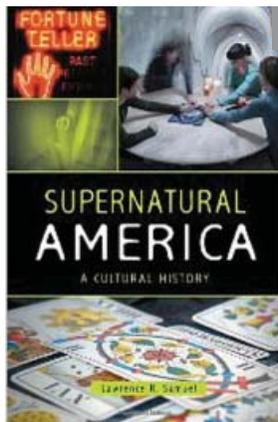
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Supernatural America: A Cultural History by Laurence R. Samuel.
Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011. 217 pp. \$49.95. ISBN 9780313398995.

Laurence R. Samuel, a Fellow of the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum of Natural History, has written a sprightly book, *Supernatural America: A Cultural History*. The word *supernatural* is generally connected with deities or spirits, and Samuels could have avoided this connotation by using “occult” or “paranormal.” Samuel’s position is that “there is not a shred of definitive evidence” that any such phenomenon has ever occurred,



yet belief in the supernatural is as high as it has ever been over the last century. He further asserts that “It was a mistake for researchers to try to turn the supernatural into a science,” referring to parapsychologists whose work Samuels sometimes describes accurately and sometimes misrepresents; his paragraph describing Maimonides Medical Center’s laboratory investigation of dream telepathy contains no fewer than five blatant errors. Most of Samuel’s book deals with topics bypassed by most parapsychologists, namely astrology, auras, fire walking, fortune telling, Ouija boards, UFOs, and witchcraft. This portion of the book,

an historic panorama filled with colorful characters and dramatic (and often humorous) anecdotes, is well-written and entertaining. He points out how these topics can be explained by what anthropologists and cognitive scientists have discovered about human nature and the human brain. Finally, the book might have been titled *Supernatural White America* as there is no mention of Chinese astrology, Hispanic Spiritism, Mexican–American curanderismo, New Orleans voodoo, or African–American cults.

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