

BOOK REVIEW

The Poltergeist by William G. Roll. Foreword by J. B. Rhine. Paraview Special Editions, 2004. 264 pp. \$16.99 (paper). ISBN 1-931044694.

What makes a book written about poltergeists in the early 1970s relevant today? There have been numerous books published since then dedicated to analysis of this spontaneous, physical phenomena. Notable are those by Alan Gauld and Tony Cornell (1979), D. Scott Rogo (1979, 1986), Colin Wilson (1981), John and Anne Spencer (1997), and most recently Claude Lecouteux (in French 2007, English translation 2012), P. G. Maxwell-Stuart (2012), and Geoff Holder (2012, 2013). Preceded by earlier, key book-length examinations by Sacheverell Sitwell, Harry Price, Herbert Thurston, Hereward Carrington, Nandor Fodor, and A. R. G. Owen, what distinguishes William Roll's *The Poltergeist* from all of these works is that it is based on a sustained, systematic series of ongoing poltergeist investigations conducted by Roll himself that further developed his hypothesis that this phenomenon emanated from living people. Alongside longstanding propositions that the poltergeist is a spirit of the dead or a product of human deception, Roll's recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis (RSPK) remains among the most discussed ideas about this strange phenomenon. Through six detailed investigative summaries and a brief historical review, Roll clearly outlined the problems of the poltergeist and the methodologies that through more than a dozen years of investigation he felt could advance the study. Today, *The Poltergeist* vitally continues to refresh analytical viewpoints, essential reading for anyone venturing into field investigations of continuing anomalous phenomena.

After co-investigating events that unfolded in a 1958 on-site investigation in Seaford, Long Island, with J. Gaither Pratt in his early days with J. B. Rhine's Parapsychology Laboratory, Roll coined RSPK to more precisely consider the mechanisms of the poltergeist phenomenon. Roll left Rhine's lab a few years later to lead the Psychical Research Foundation (PRF) which to this day continues to study the possibility that consciousness and personality survives death. As the "heart and soul of the PRF" (Williams 2012:2), Roll sustained poltergeist research, applying the RSPK hypothesis to on-site case studies across the United States. While Roll was indeed keenly interested in research on survival after death, he rethought how anomalous phenomena such as poltergeists, hauntings, and extra-sensory perception could signify an energetic relationship between living people and their environments. In *The Poltergeist*, he concluded that the

psi field may be no other than the complex interrelations of forces and fields which present-day physicists are already probing. The exciting prospect which parapsychology has introduced is that this outer physical world and the inner psychical world may be one and the same. (p. 198)

This conviction was further developed through Roll's research and life, and continues to impact studies of anomalous phenomena. Through his field work, Roll demonstrated the importance of interdisciplinary expertise in systematic parapsychological investigations; for example, he relied on the technical knowledge of engineers to conduct physical examinations of households, and psychologists and psychiatrists to assist experiencers through the emotional distress that often accompanied the unwelcomed manifestations. As Loyd Auerbach pointed out in his obituary of Roll in *JSE* 26(2),

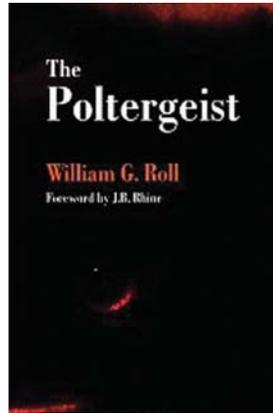
the RSPK model as delineated by Roll and others has shown itself to be a practical working model not just for how the phenomena run their course in cases, but as a way to achieve resolution for the people who experience the phenomena. (Auerbach 2012)

In the Foreword to the book, J. B. Rhine accurately called *The Poltergeist* a "progress report" (p. ix). Indeed, this was an initial benchmark in Roll's continuing work. The book is divided into four major themes: a review of past and contemporary cases around the world; an overview of six of Roll's key investigations from 1958 to 1968 (Seaford, Newark, Indianapolis, Clayton, Miami, and Olive Hill); Roll's major theories on the mechanisms of the poltergeist; and an Appendix that includes methodology and questions that can be asked of experiencers. The questions he asks are still pertinent to collecting essential data in the investigative process, and are general enough that they could easily be expanded according to individual case studies.

This book represents a turning point in field investigations and thinking on the contextual aspects that may influence the occurrence of the phenomenon. Through his Miami investigation, Roll considers four significant possibilities in the workings of the poltergeist to develop the RSPK hypothesis. In his concept of the psi field, Roll connects a living person at the center of poltergeist manifestations (the agent) to some form of energy—described as psychokinesis (PK). He argued that RSPK made more sense in poltergeist cases than the idea that a mischievous incorporeal entity was responsible for mysterious rappings and movement of objects. He posited that there was an energetic field, like magnetic or gravitational fields, involved in PK. This was evidence, for example, in how incidents tended to diminish the farther away the agent was from the object. Yet, Roll also noted that objects could sometimes move without a person present,

which he thought could be caused by a residual field. Secondly, Roll reviewed psychological and physiological data collected from people at the center of poltergeist cases, pointing to a common persona that involved evidence of tension often with family that was not outwardly expressed for example through anger. Thirdly, he considered how poltergeist agents scored on parapsychological tests and ways to test their psychokinetic ability by attempting to incite object movements. Lastly, if RSPK is a symptom of deeper, unconscious tensions, Roll concludes that the recognition among therapists that “the human organism extends into the space beyond the skin” (p. 194) would help resolve the phenomenon and associated psychological issues. He wondered if such a physical force could be “controlled or directed into positive channels” (p. 193), and posed the possibility that techniques such as meditation could enhance psi.

While I did not have the pleasure of meeting Dr. Roll in person, I have heard much of his incredible sense of humor, his supportive demeanor toward those who were interested in psychical studies, and of course many who are interested in exploring the frontiers of science know his written works very well. In these works, his dedication to the study of people and their anomalous experiences shines. Along with his study of a 1984 case (Roll & Storey 2004) and a reflection on his career (Roll & Persinger 2001), *The Poltergeist* is part of a published triad that solidly considers this strange phenomenon that continues to evade easy explanation.



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