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Hauntings and Poltergeists: Multidisciplinary Perspectives, edited by James Houran and Rense Lange. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001. 336 pp. \$85.00 ISBN 0786409843.

Don't let the large format of this book fool you. It is not a coffee table collection of ghost stories. Editors James Houran and Rense Lange have drawn together today's leading experts to offer a variety of thoroughly academic perspectives on those perennials of anomaly research, hauntings and poltergeists. For those with a serious interest in the topic, this book will be required reading, and it should be the bibliographic tool of choice for those contemplating field research. For those with only a casual interest, the price alone will probably warn them off.

Historically the basic data for both hauntings and poltergeists has always had very different levels of quality. The high quality cases typically have multiple independent reliable witnesses who report reasonably unambiguous events over extended periods of careful observation. For hauntings, cases like the Cheltenham Ghost fall into this class, and for poltergeists examples would be Bender's Rosenheim poltergeist or Roll's Miami poltergeist. As John Beloff points out in the Foreword to this book, such high caliber cases are very rare indeed. Far more common are what we might call "low grade" cases, in which one or more individuals may report strange sounds, unusual smells, perhaps fleeting observations of amorphous forms (or even more realistic images). These might include unusual body sensations and even feelings of paralysis. Some might include a few unusual object movements or, at least, unexplained placements of objects. These become "cases" when the person or persons who are noticing them decide that the event or collection of events cannot be explained by normal causes.

Over the past few decades considerable advances have been made in understanding the roots and the developmental processes of the low grade cases, but the high grade cases remain as puzzling as ever. This book provides an extremely useful update on the state of the science with regard to the former, but leaves the latter relatively unchanged (despite what some of the more skeptical contributors may have thought they were doing).

The book contains 14 chapters in three sections: Sociocultural Perspectives, Physical and Physiological Perspectives, and Psychological Perspectives. The contributors are representatively drawn from among those who believe the phenomena still require explanation, those who think they have been explained as much as they need to be, and those who really do not have a strong stake in the matter but nonetheless have something interesting to say about them. The editors, who place themselves clearly in the second category, caution that debates about the reality of hauntings and poltergeists are almost always fruitless. So, rather than encourage a debate, they have provided their contributors with the opportunity to share their latest and best understandings of the phenomena under discussion. "We invite the reader to contemplate the strengths and weaknesses of all the views presented here," say the editors in the preface. The result is an excellent compendium of progress in this area and, more importantly, of the various issues with which poltergeists and haunting researchers of any persuasion must contend.

Before embarking upon my contemplations, perhaps I should admit to my biases. Having worked in parapsychology for nearly three decades, much of that at very prominent institutions, I have had a good many haunting and poltergeist reports come my way. I have seen plenty of "anomalous" photographs and done some field investigations. Although this is not my primary interest, I have always regarded hauntings and poltergeists as some of the more challenging phenomena that parapsychology tries to understand, and, as I have often kidded media people, I would love to find a case that "really scared the pants off of me." Alas, pants firmly in place, I must note that everything I have investigated has admitted to mundane explanations that were uncovered without much effort.

In the first section, Sociocultural Perspectives, Ronald C. Finucane opens with an historical account of hauntings and poltergeists in England from around the early 17th century to the early 20th century. This chapter is useful to get a quick overview of the historical context for contemporary investigations and, more interestingly, the social context and function that early belief in these phenomena served. Unfortunately, the chapter falls somewhat short of being a scholarly treatment of the topic, as it is marred by a decided lack of objectivity and very obvious bias. For example, D. D. Home—perhaps the most famous and most thoroughly investigated medium of the Victorian age—is dealt with in the single sentence: "When the medium D.D. Home refused to allow anyone to look under the table at which his wonderful powers were manifested, interest in him waned." Such a claim is flatly contradicted by the histor-

ical record, and, when coupled with other examples, this carelessness serves to undermine the confidence a reader would like to have in the accuracy of Finucane's observations.

David J. Hufford's chapter brings a folklorist's perspective to the phenomena, illustrating his "experience-centered" theory of how supernatural beliefs can arise from experiences (rather than, for example, preconceptions or a particular psychological disposition), through a very detailed analysis of a haunting case that he investigated. The case is not what I would call a "high quality" one, but the ultimate reality of the phenomena is not essential to Hufford's points. Using the tools of the folklorist, Hufford shows how the family's basic experiences—the stories—are developed into the ramified beliefs that something supernatural was occurring to the family. While Hufford's ultimate interpretation—that the situation was a case of sleep paralysis on the part of one family member, with accretions—is probably what an experienced parapsychologist would have concluded on first hearing; it is not his point to provide an explanation of the case. Hufford's main interest is to show how a limited number of very real experiences can become elaborated into a minor supernatural belief system (with associated disbelief, which he regards as a type of belief) within a small social group. Obviously, such a process can be extended to other experiences and to larger societies, as Hufford has done in several publications cited in this book's reference list. I was delighted to encounter this chapter because recently I was arguing much the same position (with admittedly less in the way of supporting scholarship). In response to the frequent charge from critics that parapsychologists are simply grasping for scientific support to prop up pre-existing religious notions, I raised the "chicken or the egg" question, "Which came first?" Suppose we allow that such experiences as near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, and even extrasensory perception have been happening since humans evolved consciousness; how would our ancient forbears have made sense of them? What beliefs would evolve to "explain" these experiences (Broughton, 2000)?

Not too long ago, if a parapsychologist were collecting testimony on a haunting, and the informant began talking about encountering aliens, the parapsychologist would probably sigh, thinking to him or herself, "This person is nuts. I'll have to toss the case." Similarly, a ufologist might have the same reaction if an informant followed the details of an alien encounter with the remark, "I've also seen a ghost." Fortunately the forums and publications of the SSE have gone a long way to bridging the gulf between these two anomalistic sciences, and Hilary Evans' chapter "The Ghost Experience in a Wider Context" should complete the job. Evans provides a good review of the various kinds of entity-encounter experiences that are the typical fare of psychical research and parapsychology, along with some consideration of the psychological processes thought to underlie them. Then he shows how there are close parallels in other types of entity encounters, ranging from those that occupy the UFO community to those found in religious traditions (demons, saints) and

folklore. He argues that not only do we need to look at these experiences with a broad, interdisciplinary approach, but that we should begin by considering the ghost experience as a “purpose-serving” event, and then consider who benefits from it.

Continuing in the sociological vein, James McClenon’s chapter begins with a brief review of the competing interpretations of anomalous experiences offered by sociologists of religion. The dominant interpretation, according to McClenon, is the cultural source theory, which holds that religion is totally a product of culture. Challenging that is the experiential source theory, to which we were introduced in Hufford’s chapter, and which McClenon extends to ritual healing practices that may have emerged in Paleolithic cultures. With that context, and after a review of various methods of sociological investigation, McClenon walks us through several of his sociological case studies, including several minor hauntings and the somewhat notorious SORRAT group, which he has followed for some years. He concludes that these studies largely support an experiential source perspective on religious belief and suggests a number of hypotheses that could be tested.

The final contribution to the sociocultural perspectives section is Emily D. Edwards’ examination of ghostly themes in popular film and television. She organizes Hollywood’s prodigious output on the topic into general categories to illustrate different consistent themes that have proven to be successful in the media. While this chapter may not advance our understanding of the mechanisms behind hauntings and poltergeists (apart from those emanating from the silver screen), the extensive filmography that Edwards provides should certainly make it easier for ghostbusters to fill the time between haunts.

As may be deduced from the title, *Physical and Physiological Perspectives*, the second section of the book, deals with the “nuts and bolts” of the hauntings and poltergeists. The first chapter in this section, by William G. Roll and Michael A. Persinger, is one of the more important in the book because it provides good summaries of a wide range of poltergeist and haunting cases that have been investigated in recent years and which, in many cases, have merited publication. Although they are not of equal quality, among the collection the reader will find some of the most challenging cases (mostly poltergeist cases). Sometimes even parapsychologists have to be reminded that it is these that set the standard for explanation, not the odd bump in the night, the cold breeze, the misplaced hairbrush, or sudden feeling of dread. Roll and Persinger offer what is standard parapsychological interpretation, that these are recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis (RSPK), and then add some of the recent observations suggesting that RSPK might be modulated by geomagnetic variation. Hauntings are all represented by very recent investigations that cannot be considered very strong cases. In virtually all of the cases, technology is brought to bear, revealing, in many instances, rather unusual geomagnetic, electromagnetic, or other physical conditions that are thought to be the source of the reported experiences. Much of what constitute haunting phenomena, the authors

conclude, is probably explainable by normal, but perhaps uncommon, physical factors. The stronger aspects of RSPK cases, however, remain unexplained, but the authors suggest even these may ultimately have a physical explanation, though one not yet within the current understanding of physics.

In Chapter Seven, Dean I. Radin reports an experimental study of the psychomanteum, a mirror-gazing apparatus devised by Raymond Moody, which reportedly facilitates apparitional experiences. Radin constructed an elaborately instrumented psychomanteum that was designed to measure a wide range of environmental variables as well as possibly record the “presence” of an apparition. Seven volunteers, themselves wired for physiological monitoring, each had a session in the psychomanteum. Unfortunately, for most of the participants the device produced not much more than a feeling of a presence. One saw brief apparitions of animals and the other a partial apparition. No apparitions were recorded, and the analyses, presented in excruciating detail, reveal, essentially, an interaction of environmental variables probably affecting the body, and vice versa. Radin himself writes, “At this point, some readers may be thinking that this study discovered the obvious: the environment affects the human body and mind, which in turn affect the environment.” I am one of those readers, and the fact that there was a slight deviation in a nearby true random number generator does not dispel that thought for me. Much as I respect Radin’s work, this chapter probably could have been omitted.

Persinger returns with Stanley A. Koren to expand upon one aspect of the earlier chapter with Roll—how haunting experiences can be induced, at least for some people with a suitable brain sensitivity, by geomagnetic and electromagnetic fields. Drawing on the extensive work from Persinger’s lab as well as other neurophysiological research, Persinger and Koren identify specific areas of the brain, particularly the limbic system, which may be influenced by such fields, with the result being a haunting type experience. A couple of field investigations illustrate the geomagnetic/electromagnetic influences quite nicely. Further support comes from a summary of Persinger’s experimental research applying weak, complex electromagnetic fields to the brains of volunteers. The use of different patterns of stimulation and aiming it at different areas of the brain can generate various aspects of the “sensed presence” phenomenon.

Peter Brugger’s chapter begins with an extended critique of “facilitated communication,” a technique that allegedly makes it possible for persons with severe communication disorders to communicate. Though the critique may be justified, it is not immediately clear why it is in this book. Once past that, Brugger reviews his work, and that of others, which associates parapsychological beliefs with various cognitive tendencies—some might say weaknesses—that could contribute to mistaken interpretations of normal occurrences. An example is Brugger’s finding that believers of ESP, when asked to generate random numbers, suppress repetitions more than disbelievers. Brugger suggests that, at least for him, the observations from neuroscience that he sets

forth explain the haunting/poltergeist phenomena reported by the German scientist Ludwig Staudenmaier. Well they might, but nothing that Brugger adduces explains cases like Bender's Rosenheim case or Roll's Miami case. To think the facts of these cases, and the others of similar quality, can be explained by inadequate appreciation of normal processes compounded with shared delusions is itself delusional. Explanatory theories have to account for all the observations, not just the ones that fit conveniently. Only then shall we see scientific explanations of the phenomena.

Joe Nickell opens his chapter with a brief critique of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's psychological beliefs, commenting, "Doyle's approach is unfortunately all too typical of those who begin with a belief and work backward to the evidence, selecting that which fits the preconceived notion and explaining away all else." Hear, hear, Mr. Nickell, but coming from a representative of CSICOP it is certainly an example of the pot calling the kettle black. Apart from a rocky start, where he ridicules "self-styled parapsychologists" who bring infrared cameras and magnetometers to haunting sites, obviously not realizing that (as we have seen in preceding chapters) these guys are on his side, most of the chapter is a collection of salutary examples of how the application of basic investigatory skills, along with a measure of common sense, can remove the mystery from all sorts of poltergeist and haunting claims, both innocent and fraudulent. I must admit, my own ghost hunting experiences are very much like Nickell's, but, also like Nickell, I have never encountered a particularly challenging case. I would also be the first to admit that far too many would-be ghost hunters routinely fail to apply the basic standards of investigation that Nickell outlines. But, again, experienced parapsychologists are well aware of the pitfalls that Nickell illustrates, and they simply do not account for the observations in the best of the cases.

The final section, *Psychological Perspectives*, begins with a chapter by Fátima Regina Machado advocating a semiotic approach to haunting and poltergeist investigations. Machado introduces the basic concepts of Peircean semiotics and then proceeds to apply a semiotic analysis to a selection of poltergeists and haunting cases from her native country, Brazil. When all is said and done, however, the semiotic analysis did not seem result in an explanation of the case that would be any different than what would be given by psychologically informed ordinary investigation. Machado acknowledges this apparently common complaint in her concluding paragraphs and attempts to address it—unsuccessfully in my case, however.

Recent decades have seen considerable growth in the number of studies and theories that purport to explain on psychological grounds why people believe in the paranormal. Tony R. Lawrence's chapter helps us get that research into perspective. Drawing upon the extensive work of Harvey Irwin (Irwin, 1993), Lawrence adds his own insight and occasional wit to produce a very useful survey of the current literature. He groups the various efforts into three main approaches to the problem: the Social Marginality perspective, the World View

Hypothesis, and the Cognitive Deficits/Correlates interpretation, which gets the most attention. Lawrence concludes that, for a variety of reasons, the psychology of paranormal belief and experience as it exists today is “largely irrelevant to the understanding of apparitional beliefs and experiences.” Lest this seem unexpected, one should note that he is specifically referring to the apparitional experience—not the broad range of weird experiences that much of the paranormal belief research generally includes—and he does offer some suggestions on how the situation could be improved.

In the following chapter, V. K. Kumar and Ronald J. Pekala stay with the topic of paranormal beliefs and experiences, but narrow the focus to hypnosis-specific factors. Termed a “technical review,” the authors provide a very technical survey of the considerable, mostly experimental literature that shows relationships between such factors as hypnotizability, capacity for absorption, imagery, fantasy proneness, and dissociation, on the one hand, and the tendency to hold paranormal beliefs or have paranormal experiences on the other. Particularly interesting is the summary of their own research using their “Anomalous Experiences Inventory,” which is conveniently reproduced in an Appendix. The authors conclude that there is a small but significant correlation between hypnotizability and paranormal belief, and a slightly higher correlation with paranormal experience. In varying degrees, the related phenomena also show generally positive correlations. While the findings aren’t new for researchers in this field, the chapter is certainly a handy summary of the work to date.

The last chapter is contributed by the editors themselves, Rense Lange and James Houran. They report a number of studies to support their contention that poltergeist and haunting experiences are simply misinterpretations (perhaps shaped by the many psychological and physical factors discussed in the foregoing chapters) of ambiguous natural events. Where more than one observer is involved, the process may be augmented by a form of delusion known as “contagious psychogenic illness.” The first factor they consider is the role of contextual variables, which, they find, play a large role in shaping the type of paranormal experience people report. The role of attention effects is introduced with a curious study involving a month in the life of a single married couple who were asked to note unusual occurrences in their residence. On the basis of this $n = 1$ study, which they suggest could explain haunting effects, they embark on a study of attention effects in the Seaford poltergeist case. Using the chronology of the case in the original report, Lange and Houran use a number of complex analyses to show that the reports of anomalous events fluctuates with the percipients’ efforts to observe such events. As I understand this, the authors claim that the pattern of observations by the observers in the Seaford case conforms to what would be expected in the normal course of several different people deploying their attention to changing stimuli in the environment. Somehow this leads the authors to imply, at least, if not to overtly conclude that the events themselves must not be paranormal, which would be a

complete non sequitur. Presumably such an analysis can be applied to several birdwatchers in the woods, but would the results tell us what causes the activities of the birds that attract the attention of the birders? No, it only describes the way individuals react to changing sources of information in the environment. Next Lange and Houran explore how fear of the paranormal interacts with experiences and belief in one's attempts to make sense of ambiguous stimuli. This leads to some interesting insights as to the role of gender differences in the process. Finally the authors conclude that hauntings and poltergeists, though valid experiences, are nonetheless delusions—the misinterpretations of ambiguous events caused by the cognitive processes they have just illustrated. They are no doubt correct, or at least on the right track, where ambiguous stimuli are concerned. In fact, the process is often embarrassingly obvious to those of us who have been on field investigations. One doesn't need the mathematical models to see what is happening in many situations. However, given the data that they used, the conclusion is almost a foregone one. Apart from the curious exercise regarding the Seaford case, much of their primary poltergeist and haunting data is from questionnaires given mostly to students—not exactly what one would consider high quality data for poltergeist or haunting studies. Ultimately their model says nothing about those high quality cases where the stimuli were anything but ambiguous. Copious amounts of water cascading down the stairs from an unoccupied upper floor with no plumbing is not exactly an ambiguous stimulus. Numerous fluorescent tubes disconnecting themselves in an office full of people along with the electrician who is there to fix them is not an ambiguous stimulus. I am convinced that science will ultimately come to an understanding of what we now call poltergeist phenomena, but as long as scientists tailor their models to explain only the lowest grade observations, while ignoring the truly challenging observations, getting to that understanding will be a slow process.

The book ends with an afterword by Gertrude R. Schmeidler, who adds her thoughtful perspective to the “non-debate” of the preceding chapters. As a parapsychologist, she expresses some of the same misgivings I have had, though with greater eloquence.

So what is my take on the state of the evidence for hauntings and poltergeists? I think there is no question that the combined efforts of parapsychologists and skeptics have elucidated many normal physical, physiological, and psychological factors that probably explain the vast bulk of haunting experiences as well as the weak poltergeist cases. That was my opinion before reading this book, but now it is a much more informed opinion. There remain, of course, a number of haunting cases that I believe an unbiased observer would have to say are not explained by the models and theories offered by either camp in this book. They remain anomalous observations awaiting a more convincing explanation. Oddly enough, the one explanation that is no longer seriously considered even by many parapsychologists is that disembodied spirits are behind hauntings (see, for example, Irwin, 1999). Poltergeist cases are in a

similar, but more sharply defined, situation to hauntings. There remain a greater number of poltergeist cases very carefully investigated in relatively recent times that, pure and simple, defy explanation by any combination of physical fields or psychological processes. At the same time, calling them RSPK is only renaming the observations, not explaining them. For me they remain anomalies in search of an explanation, and pretending we have explained *all* poltergeist phenomena now only delays our eventual understanding.

Despite some misgivings here and there, let me reiterate that this is an important book for anyone seriously interested in the topic. Like me, you probably will not agree with all the contributors, but where you don't agree you will certainly learn the state of the art for the counterarguments to your position.

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The Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits (Revised Ed.), by Rosemary Ellen Guiley. New Haven, CT: Facts on File, 2000, 413 pp., \$55.00, ISBN 0-300-05588-9

Some reference books are boring creations, while others effortlessly invoke fascination in the subject matter. When I was nine years old my parents bought me *The Golden Book of the Mysterious* (Watson & Chaneles, 1978)—this book captured my interest in anomalous phenomena. The most memorable section of that book for me concerned apparitions and poltergeists. In particular, on page 52 was a striking illustration of a ghost standing in a cemetery. That image, to which I was first exposed twenty-three years ago, remains just as vivid in my mind today. The desire to pursue my own research on haunts and poltergeists was sparked to a large degree by that book.

Nowadays, there is a wealth of books on the subject of ghosts and spirits by amateur historians, folklorists, and “ghost-hunters.” These works vary tremendously in quality, as there is disparity in the expertise and credibility of the respective authors. Moreover, these types of books do not seem to attempt to convey what science and scholars have come to understand about haunt and poltergeist experiences. Instead, most general books promote sensationalism