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Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife by Mary Roach. W. W. Norton, 2005. 288 pp. \$24.95 (hardcover). ISBN 0-393-05962-6.

Mary Roach is a funny writer. While reading *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife*, I often found myself laughing out loud. The book is chock full of zingers and hilarious footnotes. Her sharp, witty, humor-column style of writing makes the complex scientific and philosophical debate regarding survival of consciousness both entertaining and enjoyable. That's the good news.

The bad news? She seems to have selected much of the material presented in her book for its humor potential rather than its ability to seriously address the question she promises to examine. She dedicates one chapter to a misguided search for the soul in human cadavers, sperm and brains; a second full chapter to the history of various obsessed oddballs who attempted to weigh the soul; a third to long-discredited but grin-provoking notions of soul-as-ether or capable of being captured on X-rays; and a fourth chapter describes her three-day stay at the Arthur Findlay College of mediumship, learning how to become a psychic. Throughout the book, she plays it for laughs and they come fast and furious. Like all good magazine writers, she's not about to let the reader get bored or lost in a complex argument. Instead of offering a careful, detailed (and potentially yawn-producing) analysis of one of Dr. Ian Stevenson's strongest reincarnation cases, she opts for a four-day travelogue trip to India to accompany a researcher investigating a random case that's landed on his desk. She avoids any serious discussion of death bed visions, possession cases and several other intriguing phenomena which might have bearing on the survival question (though she does do a good job on the famous Chaffin ghost case). The result is not so much "science tackles the afterlife," but more accurately "Mary Roach tackles the afterlife."

Coincidentally, the day I received my review copy of *Spook*, I was in the middle of plowing through David Fontana's new—and infinitely drier—500-page tome on the same subject, entitled *Is There an Afterlife?* Fontana is a professor of psychology and Chair of the Survival Research Committee for England's venerable Society for Psychic Research (SPR). The contrast is stark. His knowledge of the field and his scholarship puts *Spook* to shame.

Their different takes on two famous mediums illustrate the point. Roach's short, 14-page dismissal of early 20th century mediums Margery (Mina)

Crandon and Helen Duncan is one of the funniest pieces of writing I've read in a long time. That chapter alone is worth the price of the book. Both women claimed to produce "ectoplasm"—a visible, semi-fluid substance that reportedly emanated from the medium's body which took the shape of spirits or ghostly body parts—an irresistible subject for a satire writer as accomplished as Roach. Roach introduces the portly, 250-pound Duncan with a wink to the audience: "Her séances were high drama. She tended to swoon and fall off her chair and occasionally wet herself in a frenzy of spiritual possession. She once emerged from the séance cabinet naked under a floor-length 'ectoplasmic veil.' For those whose interest in spiritualism was purely voyeuristic, Helen Duncan was the hottest ticket in town." Roach makes a visit to Cambridge University library where she examines from the archives a pound of stinky ectoplasm (cheese-cloth?) reportedly extruded by Duncan. Roach cites arguments to support the theory that Helen Duncan was swallowing and regurgitating sizeable rolls of cheesecloth. "To demonstrate the convenient compactability of the fabric, [famous English psychic researcher Harry] Price once bought a six-foot by thirty-inch swath, rolled it up tight, and photographed his secretary Ethel with the fabric sticking from her mouth like a Mafia gag." Roach also highlights some of the Groucho Marx moments surrounding the controversy over Crandon's mediumship "The debate deteriorated into name-calling and threats . . . Margery threatens Houdini with a 'good beating,' Even the discarnate Walter joins the fray, calling Dr. Code 'a boob.'" Fun done, Roach pronounces her verdicts. "Crandon managed to fool the best and the brightest." As for Duncan, it was "more likely a case of masterful regurgitation."

Fontana's take on both mediums isn't half as funny. But his serious, meticulous, 18-page examination of the two mediums (in eye-straining, ten-point type that would run twice as long if printed in Spook type) makes Roach's scholarship look superficial and her conclusions premature. Fontana is not a wide-eyed believer. He titles the section, "The Question of Fraud in Physical Mediumship: Mina Crandon and Helen Duncan." But he also covers the multiple scientific tests conducted on both mediums over several decades in significant enough detail to allow the reader to understand, examine and decide for himself what to accept or reject. Where appropriate, Fontana points out absurdities in skeptics' arguments. Example: One scientist suggested that a piano stool moved about during a Crandon séance was accomplished by a string attached to the stool and threaded down a hot air conduit to an accomplice hidden on a floor below—quite a trick when the string in question was only eight inches long. He digs deeper, providing evidence Roach fails to find—or fails to report for space or style reasons. Example: Roach tells us that the great magician Houdini, who sat in on some of Crandon's séances, noticed the more constrained Crandon's hands and feet were, the less likely she was to produce ectoplasm. So Houdini "... built a special cabinet-box for her, similar in appearance to those 1960s steam cabinets in which villains would lock James Bond and spin the temperature dial to max." At this point, Roach leaves the story—and us—

laughing. The innuendo? Constrain Crandon and she can't produce. It takes Fontana to inform us that "Mina apparently produced phenomena while enclosed in the special fraud-proof box designed by Houdini in which she sat for three other sittings, and which only left her head and hands free. Houdini remained silent about this . . . He also remained silent about those séances with Mina when impressive phenomena had been produced and when, along with the other members of the *Scientific American* committee, he had signed a statement affirming that the controls were perfect." Fontana's take on Duncan is equally more balanced and informative than Roach's. After looking carefully at the evidence, Fontana suggests both mediums may have resorted to trickery at times, but he concludes that genuine phenomena also took place. It's not the neat, easy answer the lazy reader may want, but it's what the evidence suggests. Fontana isn't fishing for laughs; he's fishing for the truth.

In fairness, Roach isn't competing with Fontana. Her book targets the average reader with a layman's curiosity about the afterlife question, and she delivers a decidedly delightful evening's read. If you're in the mood to skip the broccoli and proceed directly to dessert, *Spook* is a tasty treat.

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Evolution in Four Dimensions by Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb.
MIT Press Books, 2005. 472 pp. \$34.95 (paper). ISBN 0-262-10107-6.

This engaging book takes the reader through a tour of evolution—the process by which novelty appears in the bodies and behavior of living things. The main claim here is that evolution is best understood when considered more widely, and not restricted to traditional changes in gene sequences. Using evidence from molecular biology and a wide range of species, the authors discuss four elements of heredity: genetic, epigenetic, learning, and symbolic communication. The first two of these "dimensions" concern processes that build the organism. The genetic view concerns the evolutionary effects of changes within gene sequences, and the authors rightly point out that even this basic level contains ample opportunity for enlarging our perspective, such as by focusing on population frequencies of gene interaction networks rather than of specific alleles (p. 7). The second dimension describes a number of interesting biological mechanisms by which cells with identical gene content are able to become different and pass on these characteristics to offspring cells. The third dimension concerns the modification of species' evolutionary trajectories by individuals' behaviors and preferences, as modified by learning. The final dimension concerns the effects of symbolic communication and culture on shaping evolutionary paths. These are truly "dimen-