

BOOK REVIEW

Zones of Strangeness: An Examination of Paranormal and UFO Hot Spots by Peter A. McCue. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012. 549 pp. \$29.70 (paperback). ISBN 978-1456778422.

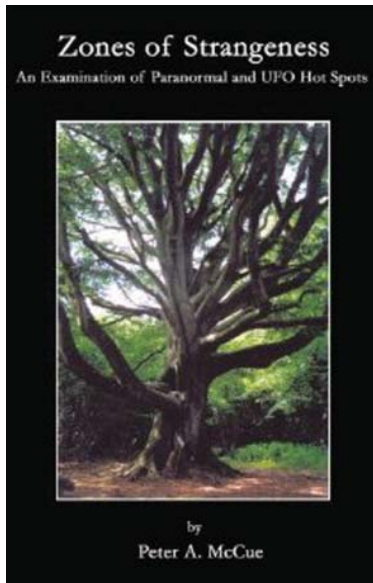
If I may be permitted an autobiographical note, let me to begin by remarking that I read my first UFO book (Edward Ruppelt's *Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*) in 1957. Charles Fort soon followed, and uncountable books ensued, culminating in the full-scale immersion from which my multivolume *UFO Encyclopedia* (1990–1998) eventually emerged.

The more one reads works of mainstream scholarship, the more one is struck by the unprofessional quality of so much writing on anomalies. There are, of course, honorable and happy exceptions, if not nearly so many as there ought to be. Many authors don't seem to know how to develop a logical argument with compelling evidence to match (see, for example, my review in *JSE* 26(3):707–714.) Many book authors give the impression that they have never read a single book of actual history or science. Not a few give every evidence of unfamiliarity with basic English usage, grammar, and punctuation. In the company of such work as this, an intellectually sophisticated consumer is likely to feel more like an anthropologist than a reader.

Over the past month, as it happens, I have read (for review) two anomalies books by well-educated, well-informed writers who, while the content of their thinking and reporting was sound enough, sorely needed competent copyeditors to save them from their worst selves. The second of these is *Zones of Strangeness* by Peter A. McCue, a Scottish psychologist, who is educated, intelligent, and perceptive. He is also a screamer.

In *Zones*, the exclamation points, to quote an old-time blues lyric, fall like the dark-night showers of rain, or—to switch metaphors—spew like the products of a random exclamation-point generator.¹ When one removes end notes, bibliography, and index, one is left with 490 pages of text. Barely one is deprived of an exclamation point, and many boast multiple ones, at times in succeeding sentences.

In any prose in any context, one rarely has reason to use an exclamation point except in dialogue: (“‘Look!’ he shouted”), and if you don't believe me, count the exclamation points in *The New York Times* or *The New Yorker*. Their relentless abuse in *Zones* reduces the book's readability and credibility.



If any book does not need exclamation points, it's a book on anomalies, where a calm, persuasive, reasoned authorial voice is needed as it relates alleged occurrences and phenomena that many readers will judge hard to believe. If anything, understatement and rhetorical sobriety are crucial to communication with understandably skeptical but potentially receptive readers. In the popular stereotype, anomalists already have the reputation of being akin to street-corner shouters. Alas, by its feckless punctuation alone, *Zones* needlessly provides ammunition to those who would have outsiders believe anomalists do not merit the consideration of serious persons.

With an improved prose style (or, anyway, an attentive copyeditor) *Zones* would be a decent book which one might even venture to share with a friend who has expressed a degree of curiosity about anomalous reports. McCue's reading in the UFO/anomalies/parapsychological literature is wide and close. He has read a mass of literature, though inevitably one wishes he were familiar with some key items (Kagan and Summers's (1984) *Mute Evidence*, for one example, and Swords' (1989) seminal essay on the extraterrestrial hypothesis for another). Still, one can only stand in awe of one who possesses the stamina to cull such an overwhelming amount of printed and Internet content, to supplement it in a number of cases with personal inquiries, and to try to make sense of it all.

McCue focuses mostly on UFOs and Fortean reports—the bulk of them from the United Kingdom—of recent decades. Some early chapters take a passing look at poltergeists and apparitions. He readily acknowledges his conviction that such things are a real part of human experience and likely beyond current knowledge. I agree, and I also concur that, because we know as little as we do, speculation about ultimate causes must be cautiously advanced even as it serves as at least a tentative way of framing what we may be confronting. I was pleased in particular by McCue's notion that many extraordinary phenomena may exist only for the duration of a sighting (p. 484). That's why years ago I coined the expression “experience anomalies” to differentiate them from event anomalies. Most high-strangeness encounters leave traces only in memory and testimony, which

may be their true home. That doesn't make them any less mysterious.

I learned a good deal from *Zones* about reports I hadn't read before (or, in some cases, forgotten), and *Zones* will serve as a single-volume repository with measured and reasoned commentary. Still, veteran readers—who surely comprise most or all perusing this review—may buckle before the onslaught of outlandish and often thinly documented stories. To his credit, McCue is merciless on the imperfect reporting by other writers, whose accounts on too-frequent occasions contradict each other and leave crucial questions hanging. Not for the first time, one is forced to reflect on the limitations of anomalies research. With the virtual absence of trained scientists and other professionals, the work is largely in the hands of amateurs. Some, bless them, are sensitive and conscientious, but others aren't, and so anomalies literature becomes treacherous territory into which to tread.

McCue is trained and professional. Unfortunately, he needs to improve his communication skills, also an essential part of the anomalist's job description. Even so, *Zones of Strangeness* ends up yet another squandered opportunity to present anomalies-related questions to a larger, smarter audience.

Note

¹ To anticipate the inevitable: Exclamation marks in other than quoted material, including the title of a book, can be found under my byline. In each case, I was not responsible, and the marks were inserted editorially without my consent.

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References

- Kagan, D., & Summers, I. (1984). *Mute Evidence*. New York: Bantam Books,
Swords, M. D. (1989). Science and the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis in Ufology. *Journal of UFO Studies*, 1(new series), 67–102.