

BOOK REVIEW

Conversations with Ghosts by Alex Tanous with Callum E. Cooper. Hove, United Kingdom: White Crow Books, 2013. 138 pp. \$15.99 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-908733-55-9.

I was invited to review this book because of my association with Alex Tanous. For more than a decade, beginning in 1975, I worked as a researcher at the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR) alongside Karlis Osis, the ASPR's Research Director and Chester F. Carlson Research Fellow. During those years, Osis and I conducted a variety of experimental studies and field investigations; Alex Tanous participated as an unpaid subject in much of that research. Sadly, I am the sole survivor of our little team¹ and, therefore, the last insider who could provide firsthand insight about the people and research activities of the ASPR during that era, and who could critically examine this book's treatment of the same.

The authorship of this book is credited to the psychic Alex Tanous, who died in 1990, approximately 23 years prior to the book's publication. Using the designation of "with" (often employed by "ghostwriters,"² no pun intended), co-authorship was credited to Callum Cooper who, at the time the book was written, was a doctoral candidate at the University of Northampton's Centre for the Study of Anomalous Psychological Processes, Department of Psychology.

On p. xi of the 16-page Introduction, Cooper describes this book as "a collection of investigation accounts written by the late Dr Alex Tanous." He goes on to explain that "it was an unpublished manuscript consisting of only three chapters.³ It was intended to be completed as a collection of case reports by Dr Tanous and Dr Karlis Osis of the American Society for Psychical Research."^{4,5} Cooper then states: "However, Dr Tanous never finished this insightful and valuable addition to parapsychological literature. Therefore, I felt it was time for the book to be completed by bringing together a number of Dr Tanous' unpublished notes and personal thoughts on hauntings and apparitions, to fill in the missing gaps in the manuscript" (p. xii). In addition to Tanous' "notes and personal thoughts," it seems apparent that other resources were used to help provide the "filler" for the book (which, in addition to the original three chapters attributed to Tanous, contains three more chapters and four appendices); those sources appear to include previously published accounts, interviews, and the recollections of those

acquainted with Tanous, audio recordings made by Tanous while working on investigations, and other material from the archives of the Alex Tanous Foundation for Scientific Research. Although Cooper is too young to have known Tanous during his lifetime, judging from his tone he nevertheless appears to be an enthusiastic supporter of Tanous and his work.

On p. xvi of the Introduction, Cooper describes Tanous' participation in out-of-body experiments at the ASPR. Certain statements need to be addressed. Cooper's interpretation of the purpose of those studies is a bit off the mark; he states "Its aim was not only to see if Dr Tanous could project his mind beyond the body and view target images at a distance, but also to measure whatever was supposedly leaving the body during this process (i.e., human consciousness, the mind, the spirit, etc.)" (p. xvi). While the working hypothesis included the prediction that the subject would use a combination of extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK) to correctly identify the optical target while simultaneously affecting the strain gauges in the location from which the optical target could be perceived, there was no possible way through that experiment "to measure whatever was supposedly leaving the body during this process." Moreover, I was surprised to read that Tanous produced "on average, a ninety per cent hit rate" (p. xvi) during those trials! I am puzzled by that error since, on p. 93 of *Conversations*, Cooper himself cites the published results of the experiment (Osis & McCormick 1980): "In all, 197 trials taken, of which 114 were hits and 83 were misses" on the optical targets; that works out to a hit rate of 57.87% not 90%.

On a more affirmative note, an incident Cooper described on p. xvii does ring a bell. Although I cannot recall all of the details, I can confirm that during an OBE session Tanous claimed he could not see the target image, and upon investigation I discovered that one of the bulbs in the optical apparatus had burned out.

In the nine pages of the first chapter, *Ghosts and the Hunters*, there is a description of Tanous' association with Osis and the ASPR. Tanous supposedly credits himself as being "one of the foremost ghost hunters in the country" (p. 1). There is a brief, rather subjective discourse on varieties of apparitional phenomena and how "true manifestations" (p. 2) differ from such other phenomena as poltergeist activity, along with a description of the typical protocol Tanous witnessed when investigating a haunting⁶ with Osis.⁷ While the description of the investigative protocol is mostly accurate, the description of the equipment, its use in field investigations, and the analysis of data that were collected is less than perfect; this is not surprising since Tanous' role in such investigations was to provide his impressions as a psychic, he was not involved in the other aspects of the investigative

process. I was also rather surprised to read the claim about Tanous having “solved” ASPR cases and that “The majority of cases in the ASPR files are closed” (p. 5); I can recall no member of the research team ever having indicated that they construed an investigation that way and I remember no cases that were definitively “solved” by Tanous or any other psychic.

Throughout the book, discussions about the phenomena and related theories are often presented in an assertive tone that is usually reserved for that which has been scientifically substantiated, rather than merely reflecting the author’s own observations and opinions. While this may be understandable given the nature of the book, I find it somewhat disturbing as it could have a misleading effect on laypersons.

In Chapter 1, several pages are spent listing reasons—which seem based on conjecture or belief—why ghosts exist, e.g., “the entity can create an apparition (or related phenomena: movements, bangs, and raps, etc.) whose aim it is to restore the universe to harmony, including his or her own individuality within the wholeness of the universe” (p. 6). That explanation seems to fall under the category of “unfinished business,” that is, the popular belief that the deceased personality persists in order to seek closure regarding unresolved life matters; with that, the chapter is concluded by saying that Tanous’ job as “ghost psychologist” is to help the entity do just that (p. 9). I cannot speak about Tanous’ skill as a therapist to the deceased, but I can say that I was repeatedly impressed by the calming influence Tanous’ charm and compassion had on the living experiencers of the phenomena.

Chapter 2, *Houses with Multiple Manifestations*, is a 25-page treatment that begins with an explanation (attributed to Tanous) about why certain houses are haunted: “Spiralling effects occur when multiple manifestations converge on a site, drawing to the house people with similar character weaknesses as the original inhabitants who had begun the cycle with a specific psychic event to which they are eternally attached” (p. 11). Two investigations (conducted by Osis and in which Tanous served as a psychic) are presented in an effort to support this hypothesis. The first case, Cedar Rapids, is described as an investigation that was done remotely, that is neither Tanous nor Osis visited the location; the investigation is described as having been handled via phone interviews, as well as sessions in the ASPR laboratory where Tanous gave his impressions about the case. The second example, Hawk Mountain, was an onsite investigation.

While it is not stated as such, given the amount of quoted dialog that appears in this (and other) sections of the book, I am inclined to believe that this chapter largely consists of transcribed audio recordings made by Tanous, who frequently made his own tapes of field investigations and

experimental sessions. Interspersed with the quoted text is background material, which is presented as the facts of the case (e.g., information about the location, the experiments, and their circumstances), as well as descriptions of the behavior of individuals heard in the recordings. Throughout the book, the case “facts” and claims are usually sketchy, which may reflect (1) the minimal amount of information Tanous was given about a case prior to his participation in it, (2) that the manuscript was in draft form, that is at a stage prior to Tanous having obtained all the information necessary to present the cases objectively and in full detail, and/or (3) that errors crept in during the posthumous edit. Regardless of the reason, it is difficult to evaluate the accuracy of Tanous’ impressions from the information presented.

I also suspect that a degree of narrative license may have been taken with the dialog tags and descriptive material which, most likely, were added, when preparing the original three-chapter draft (or perhaps when preparing the manuscript for this book). I question the validity of some of this material as it often deviates from my own knowledge and recollections, e.g., “Dr Osis nodded and made notes on the pad in front of him in his small, precise handwriting” (p. 22; Osis’ handwriting was neither particularly small nor precise especially when he was note-taking); “The three of us sat in the silence of the dining-room. Donna started to shiver” (p. 23; I’m not inclined to shiver, moreover I suggest that the person identified as me in parts of the transcript was actually a female volunteer who accompanied us on this investigation). Such descriptions sometimes include references to the output of physiological monitoring and other equipment during investigations, e.g., “‘What is it?’ Dr Osis was staring at the instruments. . . . They were giving out unusual readings, at increasing rates” (p. 16). While Tanous did make many audio recordings, he was not an incessant note-taker, especially not while he was giving his case impressions during field investigations, so it strikes me that details about behavior or comments about data were probably added later purely for the sake of readability.

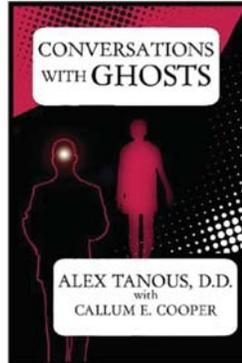
Chapter 2 also includes a description of Tanous’ participation in out-of-body research at the ASPR. One thing that puzzles me is the reference to a “black box” (p. 13) in which Tanous was situated during experiments. While I don’t recall anyone ever calling it a “black box” (although Tanous did refer to it as his “Cape Kennedy,” Osis and I referred to it as a “sound lock,” and others called it “the meat locker” because of its resemblance to a walk-in refrigerator), the chamber in which experimental subjects were located was actually an electrically shielded, sound-attenuating booth; to my knowledge, it was not “built” or acquired specifically for Tanous as is claimed on p. 13. Subjects were placed in the booth during experimental sessions in order to isolate them from the researchers and equipment, as

well as from environmental influences and stimuli. For their comfort, subjects were either seated on a reclining chair or rested on cushions. Given that Tanous spent a great deal of time over the years in that booth, it is odd that the location would be described as “in the next room” (p. 13), that is next door to the monitoring lab, when, during all my years at the ASPR, it was actually situated at the opposite end of the building, three rooms and a long corridor away; the statement about the location is even more perplexing because it is inconsistent with the more accurate description on p. xvii of the Introduction. Perhaps I should also point out that, in the footnote on page 13, Cooper states that “The black box allowed Tanous to go out of his body and travel anywhere he desired”; for the record, the booth itself did not contribute to the psychic ability of Tanous (or any of the other subjects) except insofar as it provided a comfortable location where sensory input was minimized, thus allowing subjects to focus on the task at hand.

Continued Bonds is the title of Chapter 3. In these 14 pages, two investigations are described; they are grouped together because of the assertion that they both involved romantic relationships that persisted after death. Overall, the cases read like stories, which indeed they are: stories created largely from Tanous’ impressions of the history of the house and its deceased inhabitants; those impressions were not substantiated in the book. The second case contains excerpts transcribed from what I assume were Tanous’ audio recordings while on site; those excerpts include anecdotal accounts of the experients, as well as Tanous’ own impressions. Unlike the cases in the previous chapter, there is no reference as to whether Tanous investigated these cases on his own: no mention was made of Osis or the ASPR in the first case; the second case just makes a passing reference to the residents calling the ASPR (pp. 40–41).⁸ However, in the reports throughout the book, there was little or no mention made of efforts to investigate and, by so doing, to attempt to substantiate Tanous’ impressions; such efforts were a routine part of ASPR investigations.

Chapter 3 is followed by five pages of photographs of Tanous and one full-page photo of Osis.

If I am correct that the first three chapters comprise Tanous’ unfinished manuscript, then I can only assume the next three chapters were those written by Cooper and based on Tanous’ notes, transcripts, etc. Each of Chapters 4 through 6 is prefaced by Cooper. The content ranges from reports of Tanous’ impressions while on two additional haunting investigations,



i.e. Dandy House and Frolic House; to Ghosts, Souls and Spirits?, which contains excerpts from a December 11, 1981, interview with Tanous (interviewer unknown); to The Search and Research of Survival, which consists of multiple subsections relating to survival issues (e.g., Tanous' distinction between "spirit" and "soul"; an account of his first out-of-body experience and a later one resulting from an operation), including additional mention of Tanous' participation in the ASPR's research on the out-of-body experience.⁹ None of these chapters are very long (8, 20, and 12 pages, respectively), so there is little room for more than cursory treatment of the subject matter. However, in their entirety, they do help provide a glimpse into Tanous, his work, and his beliefs.

In addition to a four-page index, the remainder of the book consists of appendices.

Appendix 1 contains another interview: Loyd Auerbach Interviews Dr. Alex Tanous, which has been reprinted (with permission) from Auerbach's 1986 book, *ESP, Hauntings and Poltergeists*.¹⁰ The discussion focuses largely on Tanous' beliefs about apparitions and haunting phenomena.

Appendix 2, The Truth Behind Amityville, is a nine-page section that presumably was written by Cooper about the house that was the subject of the book and later the film, *The Amityville Horror*. Essentially, Cooper describes how a number of parapsychologists, including Osis (and Tanous), were invited by members of the Lutz family and their associates to investigate the Amityville house, but those researchers quickly became suspicious of the family's intent and abandoned any thought of pursuing an investigation. Cooper was correct in his presentation of the reactions of Osis and Tanous, both of whom told me they disengaged from the Amityville case as soon as they realized that those involved were seeking publicity and requested that investigators sign a blanket release document. Cooper also states that Tanous refuted media stories that falsely described his involvement; I assume that this Appendix was included in the book to carry on Tanous' efforts to discredit false claims made by the media and others about his involvement as a psychic investigator and as an experient of phenomena at the Amityville house.

In Appendix 3, Jennifer Allen's Memories, someone whom Cooper identifies as "a great friend of Dr Tanous for around twenty years" (p. 113) provides several personal anecdotes involving Tanous.

Finally, Appendix 4, Alex Tanous—Ghostbuster, is a "summarised and edited" (p. 124) version of an article in the *Casco Bay Weekly*, "Alex Tanous, Ghostbuster," written by Thomas Verde in 1988.

I can only imagine how difficult the task of writing a book with a deceased co-author must be and so I acknowledge Cooper's efforts in

Conversations. One of the difficulties he faced was the need to rely on Tanous' "unpublished notes and personal thoughts" (p. xii) as filler throughout the book. Another difficulty was the apparent need to edit the chapters credited to Tanous, chapters that were, in all likelihood, in a draft stage that had not been subjected to elaboration or scrupulous review by the senior author himself (i.e. Tanous), which might explain some of the inaccuracies (described above) and why the material that was necessary to substantiate Tanous' case impressions was lacking. Because of this, readers do need to be mindful that this is not a critical, scientific treatise on ghosts, hauntings, or other paranormal phenomena, the investigation thereof, or scientifically derived theories of the same. However, *Conversations with Ghosts* can be regarded as a resource that reflects the personality behind the pen and sheds some light on the work of Alex Tanous, a gifted individual who had a passionate desire to help achieve a scientific understanding of the paranormal.

Notes

- ¹ It should be noted that this book mostly concerns cases and experiments that took place during my era; my predecessor, Dr. Janet Lee Mitchell, worked with Osis and Tanous prior to that time.
- ² It was not unusual for Tanous to use professional writers, and to credit them as co-authors, when he intended a book for publication.
- ³ We are not told which three chapters out of the six constitute the unpublished manuscript; I assume they are the first three, given that those chapters have no prefacing remarks by Cooper.
- ⁴ While some have interpreted this line to mean that Tanous and Osis were co-authoring a book together, given what I know of both men I suggest that a more likely scenario is that Tanous intended to himself author a book that would recount, from his own perspective, the investigations which Osis invited him to participate in as a psychic.
- ⁵ On p. xi of the Introduction, Cooper states that the ASPR was founded in 1884 by William James; it should be noted that, according to most accounts, including the historical information presented on the About the Society page of the ASPR's website, 1885 is the year attributed to the founding of the ASPR with William James listed as one among several founding fathers.
- ⁶ Please note that my use of the (sometimes popular) jargon of the field is for convenience only; I am not imposing judgment as to whether the phenomena referred to exist or have been scientifically substantiated since questioning such matters is not within the purview of this book.

- ⁷ While Tanous investigated cases independently, his work as a regular (psychic) subject in formal research under the auspices of a scientific psychical research institute was, to the best of my knowledge, done almost exclusively with staff researchers at the ASPR.
- ⁸ I personally have no recollection of these cases, nor do I recall callers and their cases being turned over to Tanous without ASPR researchers being directly involved in the investigations.
- ⁹ The descriptions of the equipment used in the experiments are largely accurate. However, no information is given to justify the statistical results claimed on p. 92: “A series of three (two with the Optical Image and one with the colour wheel) gives these results: The average score of the three tests calculated on the law of probability is one out of a hundred. In the third series, independently, the law of probability would be one of a thousand.” The validity of the claims should be questioned if for no other reason than because the two sets of experimental series (one that involved the color wheel and the other set of two series involving the OID and strain gauges) are not directly comparable.
- ¹⁰ Loyd Auerbach did indeed work in the Education Department of the ASPR for several years during which time he got to know Tanous.

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Reference Cited

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