

## The Case behind *The Exorcist* Revisited<sup>1</sup>

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A review of *Diabolical Possession and the Case Behind the Exorcist*, by Sergio A. Rueda. McFarland, 2018. pp. x + 255 (paperback).  
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Very often when I am giving an introductory lecture on spirit mediumship and possession I will ask my students what they already know about the subject. Many students will have encountered popular culture depictions of possession by spirits and demons - most notably through the imagery associated with the 1973 movie *The Exorcist*, directed by William Friedkin and based on the 1971 novel of the same name by William Peter Blatty (1928-2017): levitating bodies, projectile vomiting, weird and extreme physical contortions, blasphemous utterances, objects flying around rooms, and so on. In response to this, I often make the explicit point that most possession traditions are not like this. Above all, most possession traditions understand the incorporation of spirits as a desirable state that is deliberately induced (Hunter & Luke, 2014). Involuntary, or pathogenic possession, requiring some form of exorcism is - of course - also a feature of these traditions, but is relatively rare compared to institutionalized forms of possession. That is not to say, however, that it never happens.

To borrow a phrase from ufology, Sergio Rueda's *Diabolical Possession* is an analysis of a "high strangeness" spirit possession case<sup>2</sup> - specifically the case of a 14-year old boy called Ronald, which took place in Mount Rainier, Maryland in 1949. The incident was meticulously documented by the Jesuits, who compiled a report on the events surrounding Ronald. The report contained witness testimony for a dizzying array of anomalous phenomena including: unexplained seizures, demonic voices, xenoglossy, superhuman strength, demonography (where words and images appear on the skin), poltergeist phenomena, and various other paranormal manifestations. Rueda documents in detail the gradual build-up of paranormal phenomena around Raymond over a period of months, eventually culminating with a successful performance of the Roman Catholic rite of exorcism, during which the Devil was ostensibly banished from the boy's body. Cases such as this represent the exception, rather than the rule in the broader context of spirit possession practice and beliefs. Nevertheless, as philosopher Stephen Braude

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<sup>2</sup> A term coined by J. Allen Hynek (1910-1986) - 'High Strangeness' cases are those that feature 'a number of separate very strange items, each of which outrages common sense' (Hynek, 1974, p. 42).

has suggested, it is often from the most extraordinary cases - large-scale psychokinesis, for example (Braude, 1997) - that we stand to learn the most.

Sergio A. Rueda is the director of the Institute of Medicine and Advanced Behavioral Technologies at Hospital Poliplaza Médica in México and is a trained Biblical scholar. This combination of specialisms - between the medical and the religious - gives Rueda a unique perspective on this extraordinary account. Throughout the book Rueda presents a range of different explanatory frameworks for understanding the events of the 1949 exorcism. He explores the possibilities of fraud and deception, gives an overview of “natural scientific’ possibilities,” surveys parapsychological perspectives on ESP, PK, RSPK, and so on, and finally addresses the possibility that there might be genuine demonic forces underlying such manifestations. This leaves me with the feeling that the truth is probably somewhere in between all of the above explanatory frameworks.

The book is enhanced by a foreword from long-time parapsychological researcher Stanley Krippner, who provides an interesting insight into his conversations with William Friedkin, the director of *The Exorcist*. In Krippner’s words, Rueda’s book “is an engrossing account...of a child whose reported experiences present challenges to established ways of viewing the world and its inhabitants” (p. 3). Credit is due to Rueda, then, for collating this body of information, which makes a useful contribution to the wider literature on mediumship and possession by highlighting some of the evidence for the most extraordinary forms of possession. The book also makes a very useful contribution to historical work on the paranormal by drawing together different strands of the paper-trail surrounding the case, in particular the commentary of parapsychology pioneers J. B. and Louisa Rhine (1895-1980 and 1891-1983 respectively), and the testimony contained in the Jesuit report. As a fan of the movie it was also interesting to see the parallels and deviations between the fiction and the real-life events that inspired it. Overall, then, this book will be of interest to those intrigued by the more extreme end of the paranormal spectrum, who enjoy exploring multiple perspectives on extraordinary phenomena, and to those who are fans of *The Exorcist*.

## References

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