

BOOK REVIEWS

UNBELIEVABLE: INVESTIGATIONS INTO GHOSTS, POLTERGEISTS, TELEPATHY, AND OTHER UNSEEN PHENOMENA, FROM THE DUKE PARAPSYCHOLOGY LABORATORY by Stacy Horn 2009. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. Pp. 289. \$24.99 (hardback). ISBN978-0-06-111685-8.

"Freaky and terrifying" is the description of the current box-office film hit "Paranormal Activity" by Owne Gliberman in *Entertainment Weekly* (<http://www.paranormalactivity-movie.com>). The public, apparently, will never tire of hauntings, poltergeists, séances and the like. It was out of such nineteenth-century "paranormal activity" and the associated spiritualist movement—and partly in reaction against it—that psychical research and, later, parapsychology came into being. Stacy Horn's eminently readable book is, basically, a narrative of the life and career of the founder of parapsychology, J. B. Rhine. However, his name does not appear in the book's title, and the subjects listed in the subtitle go far beyond the research foci of Rhine's Parapsychology Laboratory, despite Horn's linkage of that institution to them in her title. What this book does effectively is to contextualize Rhine's vision of parapsychology as an experimental science in the broader, more emotionally intense, less scientifically controllable paranormal activities in which the general public was (and is) really interested.

In the first four chapters, Horn sketches Rhine's life and career down through World War II. This covers familiar territory in the history of parapsychology: how the Rhines became interested in parapsychology, their move to Boston and J. B.'s investigation of the medium "Margery" (an omission here is the name of Walter Franklin Prince), their move to Duke University and the work on psychical abilities carried out in the 1930s. As her relating of the Margery incident and of the efforts of John Thomas to prove that he had received contact from his deceased wife show, Horn factors into her narrative the spiritualist contexts of the inception of parapsychology. But Rhine, trained as a scientist and located by the early 1930s in the psychology department of Duke University, was bent on transforming these paranormal activities into a legitimate experimental science by testing for psychical abilities such as telepathy and clairvoyance and evaluating the results by quantitative statistical methods. This, too, is sketched out by Horn.

The remainder of the book is a kind of dialectic between accounts of sensational poltergeists and reincarnations, and moves of parapsychology toward the goal of scientific legitimacy. The connection between the two accounts lies in a number of factors: The celebrity of the parapsychology laboratory at Duke made it the natural place for perplexed or alarmed observers of paranormal activities to seek elucidation and help; Rhine's

major financial backers were more interested in the demonstration of post-mortem survival than in experimental ESP; finally, the extension of study at Duke to spontaneous cases brought some of the work of the laboratory into liaison with paranormal activities. Moreover, cultural luminaries such as Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary sought out Rhine for reasons other than the statistical success of his ESP experiments.

But Horn also uses this dialectic to exhibit the disjunction between Rhine's science-based caution and the sensationalist but immensely interesting claims of poltergeist or mediumistic activities, etc. Rhine's reaction to the "Seaford Case," involving poltergeist phenomena, is characteristic: "The spectacle of seeing us make too much of cases that cannot be firmly identified as justifying scientific interest is not one we want to encourage and extend" (pp. 154–155).

However, as manifested in her summary of the state of the Parapsychology Laboratory in mid-twentieth century, Horn seems to feel that Rhine's scientific rectitude ended up constraining the development of parapsychology:

In many ways, Rhine's determination to stick to the ESP plan brought them to a virtual standstill, going over the same ground repeatedly. They had yet to develop a theory for ESP. In 1950, they prepared an article based on material from 1938. . . . How many young scientists wanted to recheck twelve-year-old columns of ESP test results when there were things like poltergeists to investigate? (p. 98)

At the end of the book, she is even bleaker about end-of-the-twentieth-century parapsychology: "The story of the Parapsychology Laboratory begins and ends in stalemate. Their experiments confirmed telepathy and were never generally accepted. They looked for evidence of life after death, but the evidence was inconclusive" (p. 241). I leave it to the readers of this journal to evaluate Horn's delineation of the state of modern parapsychology.

As I noted early in this review, Horn's book is a pleasure to read and it does provide good popular cultural context for the development of parapsychology. I will say that I learned at lot from reading *Unbelievable*. Although the book lacks scholarly footnotes, Horn has provided a list of references for each chapter at the end of the book, and it is clear that she has certainly done her scholarly homework. The book is less noteworthy for its systematic historical analysis of parapsychology as a nascent or would-be scientific specialty. Other than the Duke Parapsychology Laboratory, we learn virtually nothing about the psychical research/parapsychology community either in the United States or abroad. One egregious casualty is Gardner Murphy, who appears to get only one mention (p. 44) and then without identification.

And Horn eschews any deep discussion of issues critical to the debates over parapsychological claims, such as the methods of statistical evaluation or experimental safeguards against chicanery. She does mention statistical critics William Feller and Persi Diaconis in her Epilogue, but her very brief comments on their critiques will no doubt mystify anyone not already familiar with the statistical controversy over ESP results.

Nevertheless, the book is a genuine addition to the historical literature on parapsychology and can be recommended as a good overview of one of the most interesting episodes in the history of American science—an episode that may yet be more ongoing than Horn suggests.

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