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# *Hungry Ghosts*

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the dark side
of the PARANORMAL

by *Michael Prescott*

CYears ago, on a whim, a friend led me into a New Age bookstore in Los Angeles. At the time I was a committed rationalist and knew nothing about paranormal phenomena except what I'd read in skeptical, debunking books. Unlike my friend, who found the bookstore's atmosphere amusing, and who enjoyed pointing out the bizarre titles and covers, I felt distinctly ill at ease. There was something disturbing about being immersed in all that occult literature. I felt as if I'd ventured into unknown territory – dangerous territory. And I was glad to leave.

Later, as I became interested in the paranormal and began to grasp the extent of the evidence for such phenomena, I chalked up my earlier reaction to a form of culture shock. There I was, a rather

repressed rationalist, coming into close contact with ideas I found threatening to my worldview. After all, there was nothing actually dangerous about that little bookstore – was there?

Maybe there was. Over the years, as I've studied this subject, I've encountered a fair number of cautionary tales. People who become unduly interested in psychic phenomena – interested to the point of obsession – can find their mental health deteriorating, their relationships fragmenting, and their social status undermined. Of course, obsession is a bad thing regardless of its focus, but I suspect that it's easier to become obsessed with the paranormal than with, say, stamp collecting. Something about this field of inquiry tends to draw people in and make them vulnerable to harm.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Since I'm a writer, I take particular interest in the case of Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle was one of the most popular writers of his day, and his Sherlock Holmes stories are still widely read and dramatized. Fairly late in life he became convinced that it was possible to communicate with the dead through mediums. As his interest grew, he neglected his fiction writing and spent most of his time traveling the world to attend séances and deliver lectures on spiritualism. His reputation suffered, and he was the target of ridicule from some quarters. He had a widely publicized feud with the debunking magician Houdini. Editors began to dread getting Doyle's manuscripts in the mail, for fear that his latest contribution would be yet another essay on the talkative dead. Doyle's fame was such that his essays were invariably published, but his editors weren't always happy about that fact.

With the passage of time, Doyle's critical faculties suffered. He became more credulous, more willing to vouch for even the most dubious phenomena. Many of the mediums he endorsed were later

exposed as fakes. Doyle refused to accept some of these exposures. Famously, he even accused Houdini himself of using psychic powers, since – he felt – there was no way the escape artist could have carried out some of his stunts without paranormal gifts.

Most embarrassing was the often retold affair of the Cottingley fairies. Two girls, ages 16 and 10, shot some photos of “fairies” they'd allegedly found in their garden. The fairies were paper cut-outs, and the photos were obvious fakes. Nevertheless, Doyle endorsed the photos as genuine, even publishing an article in *The Strand Magazine* with the regrettable title “Fairies photographed – an epoch-making event.” Later he put out an entire book devoted to the subject, *The Coming of the Fairies*. Skeptics have enjoyed skewering him for his gullibility and foolishness ever since. James Randi devotes a chapter of his debunking book *Flim-Flam* to a detailed dissection of the Cottingley case. And yes, there is something funny about a presumably worldly and sophisticated man, rich and internationally famous, falling for a rather inept hoax perpetrated by two young girls. At the same time, there is something about it that's both sad and troubling.



The Cottingley 'Fairies'

How could Doyle's rational faculty deteriorate so badly? Critics suggest that he was never much of a thinker, but I've read a great deal of his work, as well as Daniel Stashower's excellent biography, and my impression is that Doyle had a more penetrating intellect than his detractors admit. Trained in medicine, he traveled around the world as a ship's doctor, acquiring a range of knowledge and experiences that made him far more intellectually interesting than his closed-minded Victorian colleagues. He resisted prejudices – women and minorities are generally treated with respect in his work – and had an appreciation of exotic cultures and variant points of view. In short, Doyle was a sensible, astute observer of the world around him – until he got caught up in his obsession with mediums. At that point his mental and emotional stability began to suffer, and he became increasingly fanatical, blind to any interpretation of the evidence but his own.

THE HUNGRY GHOSTS

If this were an isolated case, it would not be very important, but it is far from isolated. Some cases, in fact, have much worse consequences. One of these is described in anguished, agonizing detail in Joe Fisher's *Hungry Ghosts*. Fisher joined an amateur circle that met regularly to “channel” information from spirits. Initially skeptical, Fisher was soon won over by the information that came through. He and his friends became increasingly obsessed with the meetings, while the woman who ran the circle began to exercise an unhealthy degree of control over some group members, exploiting them and attempting to coerce them into sexual liaisons. As Fisher became convinced that he was in contact with a female spirit guide who'd been his lover in a previous lifetime, he lost interest in his real-life relationships, an attitude that led to the break-up of his marriage. Eventually he went to Europe, intending to verify the information

he'd been given. Instead, to his shock, he discovered that much of it was false. Shattered, he returned to America and shared his findings with the group – only to be met with hostility and denial. The group members were so caught up in their shared fantasy that they could not tolerate the intrusion of facts and evidence. Fisher left the group and eventually concluded that he had been victimized by what the Tibetan Book of the Dead calls *pretas*, or ‘hungry ghosts’ – malign spirits who deceive and corrupt their human interlocutors. He warns his readers to be wary of involvement in the supernatural, and on this note of caution the book ends.

But this was not the end of Joe Fisher's story. He continued to obsess on his experience. Eleven years after the publication of *Hungry Ghosts*, he confided to a friend that he believed the spirits were out to get him for publicizing their activities. They would not leave him alone. In 2001, at age 53, he made his escape. He threw himself off a cliff, ending his life.

There are at least two ways of interpreting this bizarre story. Either Fisher became unhinged as a result of his participation in the séances, and eventually fell victim to his own paranoia; or he actually did come into contact with malevolent spirit entities, against which he had no protection.

Fisher wasn't the only person in the medium's circle to suffer psychological damage. Everyone in the group was affected to some extent. This is not uncommon. Immersion in the occult can have unpredictable effects on the dynamics and psychology of a group. An example that comes to mind are the ITC experiments described by Mark Macy in *Miracles in the Storm*.

ITC is an acronym for Instrumental Transcommunication. This activity, which has gained a surprising number of adherents, involves using technology to contact the dead. It evolved out of EVP, or Electronic Voice Phenomena, a field of amateur research in which “spirit voices” are supposedly picked up on tape recorders. ITC is more high-tech, employing video cameras, TV sets, fax machines,

and computers. Enthusiasts claim they have received images and messages from another dimension, and that they are in regular contact with like-minded “experimenters” from beyond.

Macy’s book details a group effort to establish and maintain contact with these forces. Such contact is said to require harmony among members of the experimenting groups on both sides of the veil. Unfortunately, harmony proved difficult to come by, at least on the earthly side, and much of *Miracles in the Storm* concerns the in-fighting and mutual suspicion that led to the group’s downfall. Organizational chaos is remarkably common among those who explore the paranormal, and the fate of Macy’s group is unsurprising.

Although the experiments documented in Macy’s book have ended, Macy and some of his colleagues have attempted to renew their work. He reports that his team has made contact with a group of spirits who live on the extradimensional planet Marduk. According to these spirits, “Marduk is watered by only one large stream flowing with many bends across a great part of the planet,” a watercourse called the River of Eternity. “We live here together with other forms of life,” they explain, “with men [who had] lived on other planets before their bodily death, with dwarfs, giants and gnomes, and with bodiless entities, too.”¹ The spirits have what seem to be physical bodies, all in the prime of youth and health.

Among the spirits inhabiting Marduk is Sir Richard Francis Burton, the 19th century explorer and linguist. Burton and his spirit colleagues, calling themselves the Timestream group, established a transmission station on Marduk, by means of which they were able to send video images and text messages to their earthly counterparts. At one point, a rival group of spirits with evil intentions seized control of the transmission station, but the Timestream faction mounted a daring counterattack and regained control.

If all this sounds like science-fiction, there’s a good reason. It *is* science-fiction, or at least it was – in Philip Jose Farmer’s Riverworld series. Beginning with *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* in 1971, the

Riverworld books feature an intriguing premise: When we die, we are resurrected on an earthlike planet bisected by a single vast river. Both good and evil individuals – human, prehuman, and nonhuman – abide in this land, restored to youth and vigor. As we make our way along the river, we must form alliances and ward off enemies, sometimes in physical combat. And our hero in this adventure? None other than Sir Richard Francis Burton!

I will admit that there are differences between the ITC messages and Riverworld. Farmer’s story provided a technological, rather than supernatural, explanation for humanity’s resurrection, and dealt extensively with a super-advanced race of humans dubbed the Ethicals who were controlling this vast experiment. None of this relates to the ITC communiqués. And other famous figures who appear in Farmer’s saga – Mark Twain, Hermann Goering, and King John of England, among others – have not made any appearance in the messages from Marduk, as far as I know. Nevertheless, the vast river, the physical resurrection in youthful form, the rival alliances and mortal combats, and the presence of Burton himself all combine to create the strong suspicion that the ITC messages are only fiction. Indeed, the whole situation seems reminiscent of role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, in which the players submerge themselves in a virtual world based on science-fiction archetypes – a world that can begin to seem very real.

A couple of years ago I emailed Mark Macy to ask him about the parallels between Riverworld and his group’s findings. I received brief replies from both Macy and one of his colleagues. Neither of them was interested in pursuing the issue, and neither saw any problem in the similarities I’d mentioned.

No problem? Suppose I were to tell you that, by paranormal means, I’d established contact with the crew of an interstellar starship in the 23rd century. Excitedly I report that the ship’s captain is James Tiberius Kirk, his first mate is an alien named Spock, and the ship’s doctor is McCoy. You point out to me that these characters are all

found in the 1960s TV series *Star Trek*. “So what?” I say. “I don’t see a problem with that.” I’ll bet you’d decide that my critical faculties are not quite what they should be.

How can presumably serious people be willing to overlook such an obvious difficulty? I suggest that wholesale immersion in the paranormal can gradually erode one’s capacity for appropriate skepticism. Arthur Conan Doyle came to believe in fairies; Joe Fisher’s marriage collapsed because he fell in love with his “spirit guide”; Macy and his co-workers are caught up in what appears to be a replay of a science-fiction saga from the 1970s.

ENTER THE TRICKSTER

A wealth of similar cases can be found in George P. Hansen’s authoritative study *The Trickster and the Paranormal*, which takes a highly original interdisciplinary approach to the question of why psychic phenomena – and people associated with such things – tend to be marginalized in society. Hansen’s book is too complex and densely argued to be summarized in its entirety, but one of his major themes is that long-term, active involvement in the paranormal often produces personal or collective dissociation from reality.

Hansen identifies a constellation of attributes that folklorists call “the trickster” – a mythical figure found in most ethnic traditions, whether as Coyote in Native American lore or the god Hermes in Greek mythology. The trickster is deceitful, playful, disruptive, irrational, unpredictable, often sexually adventurous or perverse, sometimes malevolent, and always to be approached with caution. He is a marginal figure among the other deities, and those humans who are associated with him – shamans, mediums – typically occupy a marginal place in society. He resists institutionalization. He hovers outside the establishment, functioning as both an escape valve and a threat.

While not going so far as to say that the trickster actually exists, Hansen uses the archetype to stand for a collection of disparate qualities. And he makes the point that paranormal phenomena not only exhibit these same qualities but often induce them in persons who immerse themselves in the field.



Like the trickster, psychic phenomena are playful and maddeningly elusive. They are irrational, in the sense that they fall outside the purview of rationalist thinking. They are disruptive – sometimes overtly so, as in the case of poltergeist outbreaks. They are unpredictable, a fact that has led many a legitimate psychic to supplement his talents with trickery. They are sometimes malevolent – as with Fisher’s hungry ghosts, not to mention the rich tradition of malign spirits in every culture, including the devils of Judeo-Christian theology. They are sometimes associated with bizarre or coercive sexual practices, as witnessed in many rituals and in the strange private lives of many mediums and psychics. They resist institutionalization; despite widespread public interest in psychic phenomena, no large institutions exist to study the field, and the only major institutional studies of psychic powers were undertaken by spy agencies, which are themselves immersed in a culture of ambiguity and deceit.

Hansen observes that people who directly engage the paranormal, or try to, sometimes fall into the role-playing trap mentioned above. A role-playing game, he writes...

“can become a shared fantasy, wherein the players voluntarily suspend normal, rational considerations...The games give more direct contact with supernatural ideas than does literature alone.

Live people are involved; they participate in a drama; props may be used, and some physical action is required...Cheating is frequent despite there being no winners or losers in the game...Players can identify with their characters, and sometimes they prefer not to separate themselves from those roles...[O]ccasionally the 'game' becomes obsessive and interferes with real-world pursuits.²

Reading these words, I find it hard not to think of the purported messages from Marduk.

There is, then, a dark side to the paranormal. It is not all benevolent angels and comforting words from deceased relatives. There can be obsession, deterioration of rational thought, shared fantasy, even a descent into madness. There can be hungry ghosts. There can be channelers who sexually exploit their followers. There is always the risk that inquiring too deeply into these matters will lead to one's own marginalization – a fate that has befallen even prominent researchers in the field, who have seen their reputations suffer and their prestige stripped away.

Much in the paranormal is worthy of study. But if you choose to examine it, proceed with caution. And if you run into trouble, don't hesitate to turn back. After all, I felt a lot better when I'd left that bookstore...

Michael Prescott is a fiction writer with approximately three million books in print worldwide under various pen names. He has authored nine thrillers, the most recent of which is *Final Sins*. More information about Michael and his books can be found at his website (www.michaelprescott.net). He writes often on the topics of survival research and the paranormal at his blog (michaelprescott.typepad.com).