

New book examines science of the paranormal

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Stories about paranormal experiences don't surprise Deborah Blum, a professor of journalism and mass communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Blum recently published the book "Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death" (Penguin Press, August 2006).

"I'd tell people I was doing the book and they'd respond by telling me their own personal encounters with the supernatural. I'd never had anything like that happen before as a mainstream science writer. It adds up to a fascinating pattern," she says.

However, Blum adds that she is a complete neophyte to the paranormal.

"I've never seen a ghost, had a premonition or had any psychic insights," she says. "I figured when I started the project I would be a perfect person to do the book."

That book chronicles "the best ghost hunt in the history of science," she says, the efforts of a coterie of early 20th century intellectuals to quantify the paranormal and render the perception of ghosts in scientific terms. She says that their methods persist to this day in the infrared sensors and magnetic resonance detectors used by latter-day spiritualists.

Blum says that now as in the original Victorian day, at issue is and was the tension between empirical science and religious faith.

"The book covers the years between 1880 and 1910, the post-Darwinian era when many people were trying to resolve their doubts and fears about our moral future," she says.

The originals found a leader in American psychologist William James, whose brother Henry, the novelist, scored quite a supernatural coup of his own with his novella "The Turn of the Screw" (1898). William James' Society for the Psychical Research in America threatened to compromise his reputation. "I hadn't realized before this book how much time and energy James put into his psychical research. As you get into it, you begin to see how much he risked in doing it, and how much he lost in professional respect," Blum says. "I really learned to appreciate how much courage and determination it took on his part."

Initially, in the 1880s, James predicted that by the turn of that century science would resolve whether the dead could communicate with the living. He also was fairly confident that the much-awaited answer would be yes. However, the researchers mostly found wanton fraud, although they did conclude that about 5 percent of reported incidents were legitimate.

Blum spent about three years on her project, doing research primarily at the Harvard's Houghton Library, which houses James' papers, and the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR), which holds the correspondence of many of his colleagues.

She also spent a lot of time at the Memorial Library at UW-Madison.

"It has a wonderful collection of books from that period because Joseph Jastrow, who helped found the psychology department here, was an early member of the ASPR and then rejected its work and went on to crusade against it. Jastrow became convinced that only gullible people believed in the supernatural — he even engaged in a very public debate on the

subject with Mark Twain," she says.

To date, science has failed to establish evidence on its own terms of life after death; nevertheless, scores of people remain convinced that it is a fact.

Blum thinks this belief is perfectly reasonable, in perhaps a paradoxical way.

"Science sets limits on the world. It's a very defined system of measuring what's real. I think many people tend to feel trapped within those limits. They want the world to be larger, more interesting, more unexpected. And that's not unreasonable.

"And it may not be wrong, either. After all, what is reality, and who holds the power to define it?"

This fall Blum will teach a graduate reporting seminar and a mixed graduate/undergraduate science-writing course. She will assign the new book in the latter class.

"I am using it along with Robert Park's 'Voodoo Science,' which is all about debunking pseudo-science. I thought it would be interesting to explore the different perspectives — I've always been fascinated by the intersection between science and society," she says.

Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison, by Barbara Wolff

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