

**Subject:** The Consp----- Journal. Part 7.

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This talks about mediums.

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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 G-osts

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 Gh-sts. Fisher joined an amateur circle that met regularly to "c-annel" information from s-irits. 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 s-xual liaisons. As Fisher became convinced that he was in contact with a female spi-it 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 D-ad calls pretas, or 'hungry gho-ts' - malign spir-ts 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 Ghos-s, he confided to a friend that he believed the spir-ts 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 sances, and eventually fell victim to his own paranoia; or he actually did come into contact with malevolent sp-rit 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 *M-racles 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 "s-irit 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 *M-racles 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 p-ranormal, 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 -pirits who live on the extradimensional planet Marduk.

According to these s-irits, "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 de-th, with dwarfs, giants and gnomes, and with bodiless entities, too." The spi-its have what seem to be physical bodies, all in the prime of youth and health.

Among the spir-ts inhabiting Marduk is Sir Richard Francis Burton, the 19th century explorer and linguist. Burton and his spir-t 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 spir-ts with e-il 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 di-, we are resurrected on an earthlike planet bisected by a single vast river. Both good and evi- 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 r-ce 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 [Darklore Volume 1] 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 pa-anormal 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 "s-irit 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 Par-normal*, which takes a highly original interdisciplinary approach to the question of why psy-hic 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.

Part 7.

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