



LITERARY CRITICISM

Raymond A Moody. *The last laugh: A New Philosophy of Near Death Experiences, Apparitions and the Paranormal*, Hampton Roads, 1999. £9.99

Accused by “scientific” parapsychologists of becoming an entertainer, for his vision room, Moody accepts that he is just that, and that indeed the paranormal is essentially part of the realm of entertainment. To contrast with what he sees as the literalness of the parapsychologists and their sceptical and fundamentalist critics, he coins the phrase “playful paranormalist”, by which it appears that he means those who bracket out the question as to whether any of these claims are “really true” and runs with the stories as human experiences.

There is much of interest in this often very perceptive book. The central thesis looks very appealing, and from our own experience in ufology, a lot rings true there too. This is that stories of the paranormal and “paranormal experiences”, like literature and the performing arts, transport us to “other worlds”. The central appeal of this material is precisely its ambiguous “unknown” quality, its reminder that the world is finally ungraspable. One reason why so little progress occurs in the fields of the paranormal is that no one really wants it. If any of these mysteries were “solved” the “believers” and “sceptics” alike would be out of a job.

The connection with showbiz is obvious; there is often a grey area between the two. Uri Geller is a prime example of the paranormalist showbiz star, and who can doubt that Daniel Douglas Home was a showbiz star of the Victorian era. We can also recall the stage appearances of the Davenport brothers or the Fox sisters, or Lulu Hurst the electric girl. Moody reminds us of the role of fasting girls, fire walkers, magicians and others in the history of vaudeville. Much of what he writes here has resonances with the ideas of the anthropologist of ritual, drama and play, Victor Turner; and with Rogan Taylor’s much neglected *Death and Resurrection Show* (London, 1985). The latter argued that the showbiz superstar was a descendant of the shaman, as of course is the psychic virtuoso. There are also distinct

echoes of the writings of Colin Brookes-Smith and his seance parties in the 1960s. Of course the Victorian seance was entertainment also; a dark place where the laws of physics and sexual propriety alike could be transgressed.

Moody argues for the comic potential of the paranormal; taken literally it is nonsense, absurd, because it transports us outside the boundaries of the world of daylight reason and common sense. This clearly has echoes within ufology, where stories have been called “a festival of absurdity”. Ufology has great entertainment value, and Moody is surely right in saying we are in the game because it is fun. It also illuminates a point made earlier by George Hansen: the play-like nature of much of the abduction business. It involves a willing suspension of disbelief for a scary thrill, and for playing a variety of roles. It also, of course, makes it clear why Phil Klass’s demand that the FBI be brought in to investigate Linda Napolitano’s kidnapping by her two stalkers is absurd. It would be like bringing in real police officers to investigate the murder in a soap opera. It isn’t really real, and Budd Hopkins knows that as much as the rest of us.

There is a clear likeness between drama and dreams. Both involve journeys to “other realms”, where astounding things can happen. They can be both places of extraordinary joy and terror, but we know that when the curtain falls and the lights come back on, the daylight and its mundane common sense return. Or at least we hope they do. One fault of Moody’s presentation is an over-indulgent view of play and entertainment. He acknowledges in places the dark nature of much entertainment in the past and notes, as part of his polemic against Christian fundamentalists, that one of the early Christian visions of heaven was as a giant amphitheatre, a super celestial Coliseum, from which they could look down with pleasure on the torments of the damned in Hell. But he never really incorporates this in his general vision. As I am writing this the papers are full of the agonised debate over the fate of the killers of James Bulger. His killing, the high school massacres, the kids throwing rocks at soldiers using live ammunition in Palestine, remind us how dark

and dangerous and utterly out of control play can become.

Another interesting line of Moody’s argument is that we need to get beyond the trapped literalness of taking everything at face value. Rather he argues that we should see these narratives as seeking to express, within our culture-bound language, some sense of the encounter with . . . and here he notes all the language that is used, the paranormal, the occult, the uncanny, weird, awesome, outlandish, supernatural, fey, spooky, enchanted, strange, unknown, beyond and, we might add, cryptic, and alien. All words hinting at something beyond the bounds of the socially constructed given world. Perhaps the anthropologists’ notion of wilderness or wildness, or the theologians’ use of words such as “other” come in here, as might Turner’s ideas of *communitas* and liminality.

In Moody’s own idiom he has a fine sense of the comic, but I suspect, being a nice person, he has a less fine sense of the tragic. That being said, this is a provocative and interesting book, which while no doubt likely to give rise to cries of “English Literature” in certain quarters, is definitely worth reading. Not easy in places but worth the effort.

Peter Rogerson

LETTERS

I wish to make the following comments about Martin Kottmeyer’s review of *God and the Sun at Fatima* (1999), by Stanley L. Jacky.

I wish to inform Martin of these new data in the cause of scientific truth. The book cited is a too belated critical version on the Fatima events: as a Portuguese historian with my colleague Fina d’Armada we published in 1982 a first 460-pag volume - *The Fatima Apparitions and the UFO Phenomenon* - with the first non-apologetic analysis of the phenomena which occurred in 1917. At least, you would accept that we have a better knowledge of our sources and language and, during six years of intensive research, we did not conduct a distant study of foreign documents but a profound and systematic reading of the ORIGINAL and official records at the Sanctuary, the only true sources we can

trust to reconstruct the full picture. The book by Jacky is based on the religious documents edited in 1992 and 1999 by a Catholic commission committed to it. Based on what? The original documents among those we can trust and others produced over the years by Lucia dos Santos after her monastic seclusion: that was how the so exciting "Third Secret" was born as result of a long period of advice and influence by . . . the Jesuits. Who else?

Its a pity that the Portuguese language could not until now be used by the researchers and critics. In the Fatima case we found dozens of "essays" repeating "ad nauseam" third-hand reports full of errors, misinterpretations and exaggerations. As Martin noted and we agree. All these sold like solid and original research!

I think you agree also that we are in a better position to tell the Fatima story. There are here, without any doubt some elements that can be very usefully compared with the UFO-like phenomena of our urban and spatial cultures. Certainly it's true. But we are in a position to discuss and observe some ideas and hypotheses presented by Martin which not fit with physical data and minimal aspects obtained from our filed research: we went to the living witnesses themselves and also the personal literature where we dug out interesting material concerning the "solar phenomenon" 13 October 1917.

We verify the following new data:

1. The witnesses who reported physical sensations and psychophysiological effects were all within a frame of a area near the "contact spot" at Cova da Iria, which was some 70 metres wide by 100 metres long. We were able to select 100 first-hand witness reports and among these a lot of people who described the "solar" phenomenon were WITHIN that area. At the precise moment of the "solar object" fall - STRAIGHT DOWN TO THE HEIGHT OF A TREE - the cited witnesses on the spot noticed:

a) intense and sudden heat; b) sudden drying of their clothes which were made very wet by the previous rain; c) a few reports of healing of people in the cited area.

2. The "solar phenomenon" was observed by independent witnesses NOT included in the crowd at Cova da Iria, but at four distant spots of the region, far enough, 15, 20 and 30 km away, not to know what was going on at that very moment at Cova da Iria.

We have some reports which denied that was the Sun falling from the sky, but another body or object, since those people insisted that the Sun never came down!

3. The "halo hypothesis" proposed by Menzel perhaps could be evaluated by authorised witnesses among the crowd. Could it explain all the three kinds of effects cited

above? Could a halo spin down and return up the same way showing different features in its dimensions? Where is the scientific literature which could verify these complex paths? I would very much like to get this information.

I guess we are all honest and sincere seeking the truth. But the truth can not be so simple and sure.

I advise that we are not UFO fanatics or ET militants. We are following strictly historical and scientific methods. We have recognised work here in Portugal and what we need is new ideas from foreign scientists and thinkers, not easy speculations constructed with distorted and manipulated data or biased interpretations based on Catholic dogmas and background.

I hope these remarks will contribute to a new perspective on these extraordinary events under specific sociological and cultural conditions from time to time.

Thank you very much and my best regards to Martin Kottmeyer.

Joaquim Fernandes, Center for Transdisciplinary Study on Consciousness, University Fernando Pessoa, Porto, Portugal

In a review on the Internet last year Georgina Bruni said she had found over 50 factual errors in the chapter on Rendlesham in the book *The UFOs That Never Were* by Randles, Clarke and Roberts. The Rendlesham chapter was written by Jenny Randles. We now hear from *UFO Magazine* that Larry Warren has told the magazine that he identified 197 factual errors in Georgina Bruni's recent book on the case *You Can't Tell the People!* To complete the triangle, as it were, perhaps Jenny Randles can tell us how many errors she discovered in the Warren/Robbins book *Left at East Gate*, a book that was sent to several leading MPs and even the Prime Minister son after publication in 1997.

Why is the Rendlesham case so littered with errors? Why can't people get their facts right? It must be those cover-up guys again, spreading disinformation. We need a definitive book to end all definitive books!

Christopher D. Allan, Stoke-on-Trent

In *Magonia 72* it is noted that streams of audio tape with curses on them have been found outside churches and at road junctions. This reminded me of the story of a UFO witness called Peggy, who not long after her sighting in 1967, saw two men with expressionless faces string silver tape over the telephone lines near her home. They did not seem to have an official vehicle, so she called the police. They were not much help, and all they could say was: "Oh, the silver tape again." (*Beyond Condon*, FSR Special Issue No. 2, June 1969, p. 37.)

The same edition of *Magonia* mentions Cooper and his involvement with the

Zapruder film of the assassination of President Kennedy. *Fortean Times* numbers 121 and 122 provide background information showing how this came about, though I wonder what will happen next?

I really felt that I had entered a Ufological Ground Hog day when I saw the latest *Fortean Times* (No. 142) emblazoned with the "Ghost Squadron" cover. Inside there is an article by Roy Bainton, titled "Spirits in the Sky". Could this be a slightly altered version of "Spirits in the Sky" by Roy Bainton published in Uri Geller's *Encounters Magazine* (No. 9, June 1997)? Are things so bad at FT that they have to use such blatantly recycled material?

Nigel Watson, Plympton, Devon

EDITORIAL

With this issue we are dropping the Monthly from our title and this newsletter will now be published whenever we have sufficient material for it, as the input has become too irregular for us to maintain our monthly schedule. Unfortunately, when people react to controversial items they tend to argue about them elsewhere rather than sending their comments to us. We are very grateful to those of you who have sent us articles, letters and other items, and hope that you will continue to do so.

MAGONIA Readers' Meetings

First Sunday of each month from 1915 to 2230 at the Railway, Putney, opposite Putney Station (South West Trains) and about 10 minutes walk from East Putney station (District Line). Food available until 2200. There is also a good selection of real ales, and we bet they've got nothing like them in Canby, Minnesota

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