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A matter of life and reincarnation

Astonishing – and well documented – modern cases of reincarnation and communicating with the dead may push against your boggle threshold, but the debunkers don't have all the best tunes

Surviving Death

A Journalist Investigates Evidence for an Afterlife

Leslie Kean

Crown Archetype 2017

Hb, 407pp, illus, bib, ind, S27, ISBN 9780553419610

Surviving Death has the distinction of being the only nonfiction book I have read in which somebody I knew in life speaks from beyond the grave – twice: once through a Long Island medium, the other time through an Irish one. Neither knew the individual, who had been a firm materialist and sceptic of such matters. Leslie Kean (rhymes with 'cane') goes to some length to argue for the psychics' demonstrated honesty and credibility. She cites items they could not have been gleaned from any public record, including the contents of a private conversation Kean (who was romantically involved with him) had with the dying man.

The alleged communicator speaks and behaves in the way true to his uniquely oversized, egocentric personality, so much so that I put the book down with feelings both rattled and ambivalent. What if my old friend is more than just a fond memory? The thought rendered the concept of "afterlife" disconcertingly immediate. It also undermined the singular comfort we experience in grief. Could it be that, really, we want the dead to stay dead?

Though my usual reading interests don't run to parapsychology and psychological research, life circumstances (e.g., as onetime *Fate* editor) have led me to a certain familiarity with the literature. Thus, inevitably some, albeit not a whole lot, of *Surviving Death*, particularly

the historical material, visits territory already trodden by those who have followed the path. Even before I read it, I had a good idea of how I'd respond: as a philosophical (and theological) agnostic, I hover between a reflexive scepticism about survival and a gnawing, uneasy sense that some of the data culled over more than a century of empirical inquiry are indeed confounding, even as the counter-explanations marketed by the debunking industry are often numbingly unconvincing.

Surviving Death, which will give any thoughtful reader much to mull over, is surely the finest popular book on the subject since Deborah Blum's *Ghost Hunters* (2006). Since Blum's focus is on William James and the early decades of the Society for Psychical Research, *Surviving* functions as something like a sequel, taking the story up to the present and extending the coverage beyond apparitions and mediums to near-death experiences and ostensible past-life memories. The bulk of the book reviews the contemporary efforts of medical and psychological professionals to document relevant evidence. Elsewhere, Kean imparts her own interactions with experiencers, witnesses, and psychics.

To all of this, she brings a commendable level-headedness, and an awareness of what it takes to make the case. For reasons she argues clearly though she never expresses it quite this way, only an ultimately self-defeating rejection on principle, specifics be damned, will stop the reader from conceding that, whatever their ultimate meaning, these experiences almost certainly defy current knowledge. For the only imaginable alternative,

"Anomalies often turn out to be slippery things, their true nature concealed"

Kean sometimes drags in the hoary notion of "super psi," if not necessarily to endorse it, simply to advance it as the only conceivable alternative. Still, super psi is a shakily hypothetical construct on its best days.

For all I know, there may be another alternative to the survivalist reading. After all, many extraordinary anomalies seem not to be what they appear, which doesn't mean they are not actually fantastic phenomena. Anomalies often turn out to be slippery things, their true nature concealed by an impenetrable mask. Who knows if that's the case here? If one needs something in place of survival, perhaps we ought to consider only that it may be unknown, and possibly unimaginable, at this cultural moment.

As one reads the book, one reflects that studies of consciousness and ostensible afterlife occurrences have received more concentrated, sophisticated scientific scrutiny than just about any other category of anomalous experience. At the forefront of such research are physicians, medical scientists, and psychologists who have tested and apparently eliminated the standard prosaic claims – prominently that the experiencers are not "really" dead and their brains are still functioning – about the

neurological causes of deathbed visions.

Surviving opens with jaw-dropping yet impressively documented modern reincarnation cases. One concerns a boy's apparently inexplicable memories of combat death as an American pilot in World War II, another a child's recall of the career of a highly obscure early Hollywood figure. Other chapters survey evidence from mediumship, including wave monitoring which (according the Tucson-based Windbridge Institute) finds that "the experience of communicating with the deceased may be a distinct mental state that is not consistent with brain activity during ordinary thinking or imagination." A later chapter relates an especially astonishing experience of Kean's, akin to a very hard-to-believe 19th-century account of a materialisation engineered by a physical medium. More than any other moment in a book full of spectacular marvels, here I found myself pressing up against the boggle threshold. Other readers will have their own.

Though Kean is responsible for most of the book's content, occasional chapters are given over to scientifically trained specialists who outline their own methodologies and conclusions. These include University of Virginia psychiatrist Jim Tucker (who took charge of past-life studies after his pioneering colleague Ian Stevenson died in 2007), cardiologist Pim van Lommel, pharmacologist Julie Beischel, and others. None will come across to any fair-minded person as a flake or a fool, even

Continued on page 56

UFO dystopia

Cold War anxieties are still being worked out, as this study of ufological 'fake news' shows

The UFO Dossier

100 Years of Government Secrets, Conspiracies & Cover-Ups

Kevin D Randle

Visible Ink 2016

Pb, 413pp, illus, notes, bib, ind, \$19.95, ISBN 9781578595648

The idea that some national governments have taken an interest in what we might call UFO-like phenomena is old hat. It may have begun in the simple but ancient prerogative of guarding our territory against unlawful intrusion, but then two things happened in the mid-1940s to complicate matters: science fiction introduced into popular culture the idea of invasion by technologically superior extraterrestrials; then the era of the Cold War between Russia and the Western Allies ramped up the general paranoia, creating a fertile compost in which such tropes as mind control and other 'black ops', reverse engineering of crashed saucers, covert surveillance and the 'silencing' of witnesses, and the whole alien hybrid and abduction canon, could flourish.

In this perfect storm of suspicion and bewilderment, 'official sources' (which might normally be relied upon for facts and truth) deliberately, or as some suspect 'by design', lost their reliability and transparency, by resorting to redacting, suppressing, or ridiculing any mention of such things. On their side, whatever confidence and trust the military, intelligence and security establishment ever had in the general public was quickly eroded. It was as if the public had become an 'enemy', or at least something that could not be trusted. If America were a person, we'd be talking about a psychological fragmentation;

you only have to consider the proliferation of literature and movies about dystopias and conspiracy theories to realise that the effects of this general anxiety are still working out.

Who can we turn to for reliable insight into this chaotic (but very modern) mythology? You could do much worse than trust Kevin Randle. With his US Army and Air Force experience, and with degrees in psychology and military science, and more than half his life spent in detailed investigation of UFO incidents and interviewing key witnesses and colleagues, he is an ideal guide. He sets out the issues clearly, homing in on verifiable facts as he hacks through seven decades' worth of 'fake news' (the surfeit of lies, rumours, disinformation and misinterpretation).

He opens with a valuable critical essay on the history of 'official' UFO investigations in the USA; the remaining nine detailed sections include astronomical objects perceived as UFOs; photographic evidence; five major incidents in November 1957; injuries 'caused by' UFOs; groups of lights in the sky; the role of scientists in investigations and reports; official reports from other countries; an analysis of the official French COMETA Report of 1999; and a survey of how the UFO phenomenon has changed as it continues into the 21st century. This latter section includes a careful analysis of the many 'unofficial' catalogues of sightings and humanoid encounters compiled by veteran ufologists for their colleagues.

Recommended as an up-to-date overview of a very convoluted subject.

Bob Rickard



Continued from previous page

as the implications of their work could hardly be more profound for all of us, for whom the questions will be answered one day.

Jerome Clark



The Phoenix

An Unnatural Biography of a Mythical Beast

Joseph Nigg

University of Chicago 2016

Pb, 416pp, illus, notes, bib, ind, \$35.00, ISBN 9780226195490

In *The Phoenix: An Unnatural Biography of a Mythical Beast*, Joseph Nigg provides an ambitious and painstakingly researched volume that maps the indeterminate sources of the mythological bird that first appeared in ancient times and whose symbolism remains prevalent to this day, charting the development of the phoenix as symbol from its roots in ancient Egyptian myth to its eventual accumulation of characteristics from vastly different cultures, regions, and historical epochs.

As promulgated by a cult at Heliopolis, the world began when Ra assumed the appearance of the Bennu, a solar bird, a possible inspiration for the phoenix, whose initial cry initiated time. The bird later reappears as the phoenix in ancient Greek texts, most notably Hesiod and Herodotus, and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is reworked into a pagan symbol of regeneration. During the early Christian era, the phoenix frequently appears in various bestiaries, and in *De ave phoenice*, the "Christian Cicero" Lactantius's startlingly beautiful Latin 170-line poem, is delicately transmuted into a Christian symbol of death's transcendence through divine intervention.

Regrettably, Nigg stumbles in his rather injudicious discussions of the use of the phoenix in literary works from Lactantius to Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* to the metaphysical poets of the 17th century and more modern literary practitioners such as American poet Robert Pinsky and *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling, the limitations of which betray Nigg's negligible gifts for literary analysis.

Of greater interest to fortians is, thankfully, an altogether illuminating analysis of the often

overlooked use of the phoenix as a descriptive symbol in the final, spiritual stage of the alchemical process, namely the transmutation of the soul.

While Nigg, a retired professor and author of the immaculately illustrated *Sea Monsters* (University of Chicago 2013), an exploration of Olaus Magnus's mysterious 16th century map the Carta Marina, is to be commended for bringing to popular attention many wonderfully obscure texts, some familiar only to scholars, *The Phoenix*, like his earlier *Sea Monsters*, is more compilation than in-depth study. Textual analysis and critical insight are decidedly not Nigg's métier; frequent errors in dates and translation further frustrate Nigg's work as a credible resource for scholars. Moreover, Nigg has no central story to tell, further diminishing the text's readability. However, if comprehensiveness is a sole criterion for excellence, than Nigg more than makes up for these rather unfortunate limitations; one suspects that deep analysis of the many entries, however articulate or well-researched, in a book that covers the expanse of pre-history to modern times, would require many thousands more pages.

As it stands, *The Phoenix* is an enlightening yet ultimately flawed compendium of knowledge concerning this fascinating, often mystical, mythological symbol.

Eric Hoffman



Hitler's Monsters

A Supernatural History of the Third Reich

Eric Kurlander

Yale University Press 2017

Pb, 406pp, ind, bib, £25.00/\$35.00, ISBN 9780300189452

No regime in history invites as many connections to the occult and paranormal as Nazi Germany. In general, though, academic histories tend to give the Nazi relationship with the supernatural relatively little attention. Non-academic historians enthusiastically propound Nazi connections to the occult or "border science," while most academic historians tend to treat the supernatural