

## Taking a Conservative Approach to the Paranormal

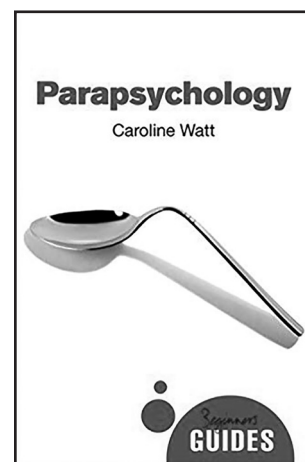
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A Review of  
*Parapsychology: A Beginner's Guide*,  
by Caroline Watt.

London, UK: Oneworld, 2016, Pp. 226 USD \$14.99; GBP £9.99. ISBN: 978-1-78074-887-0 (paperback).

*Parapsychology*, by Caroline Watt of the Koestler Parapsychology Unit (KPU) in Edinburgh, is, as the title indicates, a beginner's guide to the vast field of parapsychology. Watt's account of this fringe science, so widely unaccepted by the mainstream, should convince even the most hard-line skeptic that psi phenomena deserve more than the casual dismissal its pundits have come to expect. Eminently readable, Watt describes the humble origins, the evidence, and the intriguing phenomena itself, to a readership that will largely be new to the field. Having said that, this reviewer came across a considerable amount of new material, and for that reason alone, Watt's latest contribution to parapsychology should be well-received by seasoned experts in the field.



Watt starts *Parapsychology* with a brief account of the North American Fox sisters of the mid-1800s, whose reputation as mediums is still tarnished to this day due to the controversial claims made about (and by) the sisters and their alleged deceptions. A number of other historical events are described, followed by some background on J. B. Rhine and his work on card-guessing and dice-throwing. This material is par for the course in introductory books on parapsychology, but Watt's treatment is refreshing. To be noted is Watt's unique approach that does not entirely follow a rigid chronology of parapsychological developments, but instead is divided into main themes and topics.

One learns, as one moves through the chapters on macro-PK, psychic reading, mediumship, metal bending, psychic detection, materialization, and so on, featuring psychic claimants like Ted Serios, Uri Geller, Nina Kulagina, Sai Baba, and others, that Watt takes a myth-busting approach to the phenomena that is thorough-going and thought-provoking. It is fair to say that the revealed shenanigans of some

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psychic claimants will surely try the patience of serious truth-seekers. However, Watt's approach, including her selectivity and particular focus on cases by which she illustrates the various topics, often takes attention away from more intriguing facts and findings associated with those cases—Rupert Sheldrake's work with psychic pets, and even Nostradamus's prophecies are prime examples. I find myself in agreement with Mörck (2007): "Emphasis in the book is on normal causes for psychic experiences" (p. 96). Thus, Watt seems to imply, for example, that Geller's effects (e.g., spoon-bending, watch-starting) have largely been exposed as fraudulent because the likes of The Amazing Randi, David Marks, and Richard Kammann *showed how it was done!* But mimicry does not prove actuality. Although evidence may point to the likelihood that Geller is a trickster and a showman, as Randi and his ilk would have the world believe, Geller's is a peculiar case and other claims are made that he is also one *who happens to have some genuine psychic ability*, if investigators like Andrija Puharich, Harold Puthoff, Guy Lyon Playfair, and others are to be believed. Equally, Hasted (1981), author of *The Metal-Benders*, is not so dismissive of psychokinetic metal bending for good reason; many findings are still unexplained. These and other omissions may give newcomers to parapsychology the wrong take-home message. Similarly, although Watt's presentation of mediumship cases like Indridi Indridason (p. 59) are intriguing, the related topics of possession and xenoglossy receive little or no evaluation, and there are even more compelling and relevant cases not covered in *Parapsychology* (e.g., Iris Farczády—see Barrington, Mulacz, & Rivas, 2005) that are, as yet, beyond explanation in normal terms. Without a fuller treatment of cases like this that includes discussions about their overwhelming complexity, and to what degree science is baffled by them, those readers new to the field cannot arrive at an informed opinion as to just how challenging the psi hypothesis really is.

Watt's coverage of remote viewing (RV) is well-rounded, but the claim of "subjective validation" (p. 51) leaves a lot unexplained. And one wonders why major players, Harold Puthoff, Russell Targ, and Stephan Schwartz, do not rate a mention for their pioneering work. The chapters on out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and near-death experiences (NDEs) are illuminating. Watt's presentation of the current mainstream theories that normal (e.g., neuro-psychological) factors explain OBEs and NDEs undermines the parapsychological claims that these rare phenomena indicate survival.

Watt raises issues that many may not have expected. The coverage of questionable research practices (QRPs) came as a welcome surprise. QRPs have only been of relatively recent interest to parapsychologists to the degree that formal testing of hypothetical scenarios is now underway. It remains to be seen how far-reaching QRP investigation will be, and what it will uncover. Another issue Watt mentions is the option for researchers to pre-register their planned psi studies at various institutions including the KPU, which will be the way of the future, and none too soon.

I regard Section 3 as the best part of the book, and newcomers wishing to find out what really goes on in parapsychological laboratories can go straight there without missing a beat. For parapsychology books these days, sections or chapters on meta-analyses are mandatory—even in a beginner's guide—and *Parapsychology* measures up. I note that Watt refers to a "considerable debate" over interpretations of the findings in the various ganzfeld meta-analyses (p. 154). Ganzfeld was a hot topic up until about 2002, but the intensity of the debate has eased up somewhat; only after a lengthy decade-long hiatus was the debate resurrected (in *Psychological Bulletin* as it happens) by Jeffrey Rouder and his colleagues

(Rouder, Morey, & Province, 2013) in the form of a critique over how Storm, Tressoldi, and Di Risio (2010) prepared and analyzed their data. Unfortunately, Watt does not mention that the same issue of *Psychological Bulletin* that featured Rouder et al. also presented a study by Storm, Tressoldi, and Utts (2013), showing that Rouder et al. had erred in their analysis, to the degree that the ganzfeld effects were still significant in a corrected re-analysis.<sup>13</sup> The debate appears to have tapered off from 2013 to 2016 (the publication year of Watt's *Parapsychology*), although a few researchers in that time have unearthed some useful findings, and raised some new issues that contribute to the debate (e.g., Baptista, Derakhshani, & Tressoldi, 2015; Williams, 2014).

Generally speaking, criticisms can be made concerning omissions in all chapters, although one does realize that authors have to make harsh decisions when space is limited. Nevertheless, and as I already hinted, newcomers could sometimes be misled by Watt's conservative evaluations which get a little discouraging at times, even though Watt does say there is "sufficient evidence to justify further work..." (p. 2). It may be necessary to apply a noncommittal approach to all types of psi phenomena—not just those types that are dimly formed or poorly understood (or empirically illusive and/or difficult to investigate)—but many parapsychologists who are convinced of a handful of heavily-investigated (even time-honored) psi faculties, and are confident in the methodologies that tested them, would argue that we have moved beyond the proof stage (i.e., the need for further evidence), and should be investigating the underlying processes, or even working on applications. Watt barely touches on these issues, earlier claiming there is "not enough [evidence] to conclude that paranormal abilities exist" (p. 2). As a result, the closing chapter hails parapsychology for its rigorous approach, and its contribution to scientific methodology, with nothing more optimistic than that the "ramifications would be immense" if "parapsychologists can convince the scientific community of the reality of paranormal phenomena" (p. 185). For that and other reasons, *Parapsychology* is an exposé that is both *pragmatic* and *austere* in its purview. But gains can be expected if Watt's message gets through: for one thing, *would-be* parapsychologists may have to rein in their expectations (at least temporarily) about how they want the world to be. And it does not stop there: many who are *not so new* to the game may find themselves revising a few of their long-held conceptions about psi, as did this reviewer. In all truth, psi is shaping up to be over-rated with far too much claimed on its behalf. Having said that, there may come a day when we will have a distilled psi that is unassailable.

*Parapsychology* is rounded out with a section "How to test for ESP and PK" in the Appendix for first-time experimenters. The sections that follow—"Further reading," along with a Glossary (albeit scanty; there's no entry on Remote Viewing!) and a just-adequate Index—are, of course, quite appropriate; indeed, one would expect it of such a book.

In closing, Watt's *Parapsychology*, humbly presented as a beginner's guide, should not be underestimated. It deserves to find its way into the hands of not only new-comers, but also specialists and long-time researchers of the paranormal because the book is rich in content, and satisfactorily representative of the field; not to forget well-structured, thereby making the desired content easy to find. More importantly, the subject matter itself is expressed in a conservative, matter-of-fact, "the-buck-stops-here" manner that gets straight to the point. Most parapsychological material, especially the dense theories

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<sup>13</sup> One notes the same omission in the treatment of the ganzfeld meta-analysis by Wikipedia. They give the last word to Rouder et al. (2013) and fail to mention the Storm et al. (2013) study (see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parapsychology>).

and models presented in technical journals (as well as the ground-breaking ideas, and often convoluted and/or inconclusive findings), would leave the majority of novices reeling. Watt's *Parapsychology* helpfully clears up all this kind of clutter and more, and in a cautionary way—it bridges the gap between the often-times indecipherable and the more mundane aspects of a field so often undermined and misunderstood. Indeed, it is a book for those willing to learn.

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