

BOOK REVIEWS

UNLEASHED. OF POLTERGEISTS AND MURDER: THE CURIOUS STORY OF TINA RESCH by William Roll and Valerie Storey. New York: Paraview Pocket Books, 2004. Pp. 309. \$14.00 (paperback). ISBN 0-7434-8294-8.

The long-awaited book describing the Tina Resch poltergeist case was published in 2004, 20 years after the outbreak occurred. Although reports of the case had been presented much earlier at conventions of the Parapsychological Association (e.g., Roll, 1993), to my knowledge no reports have appeared in professional journals. Much of the book consists of detailed accounts of the numerous poltergeist events, which Roll labels as *recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis* (RSPK), including the viability of conventional interpretations of many of them. It thus comes close to providing the level of detail found in journal reports of previous cases Roll has investigated (with the exception of exact measurements of the distances objects traveled, and the like). At the same time the book is obviously intended for a lay audience, and toward this end Roll collaborated with a popular writer, Valerie Storey. The result is a book that is quite readable and entertaining as well as informative, despite several instances, mentioned below, where more information would have been desirable.

The events surrounded one Tina Resch, the 14-year-old adopted daughter of Joan and John Resch, a middle-class couple from Columbus, Ohio. Tina had five adult siblings, who were no longer living regularly at the house, and Joan had taken on four much younger foster children as well. The events began on March 1, 1984, and a few days later Roll was informed of the case by Mike Harden, a news reporter for a major local newspaper. Roll, accompanied by an assistant, began his investigation on March 12. Dates and times of events are given only sporadically and it is sometimes difficult to keep track of the timeline. Particularly difficult to place is a 3-day period during which the family escaped the house to live in a motel. According to the location of this section in the text, one would think the absence occurred sometime toward the end of the 1st week of activity, but reports of disturbances in the house covered more than 3 of these days. The last day of Roll's investigation is also not stated, although the duration of the "turmoil" is given on p. 163 as 2 weeks. If this refers to the turmoil that occurred during Roll's visit, we can estimate the departure date as March 26 and the duration of the outbreak as 25 days. Tina left with Roll for the first of three visits to North Carolina, and when she returned home, there were no further disturbances.

Prior to Roll's arrival, events were witnessed (according to my count) by 17 persons (excluding the foster children), most (at least) of

whom Roll subsequently interviewed. In addition to Joan, John, and Tina, they included three of the older siblings who were visiting the house, Harden and his photographer, an electrician, two preachers, and Tina's caseworker. Events were witnessed by several more persons during two of three visits Tina made to North Carolina, including parapsychologists James Carpenter and Steven Baumann.

The case is similar to previous RSPK cases investigated by Roll in a number of respects, including, of course, the age of the focal person. I also found it strikingly similar to two published cases I investigated myself in my younger years, in both of which the focal person was not living with his or her biological parents (Palmer, 1974; Pratt & Palmer, 1976). Another dimension of similarity was the nature of the disturbances. As was true in both of my cases, movements of objects over a distance were not the first events to occur. In the Resch case, the initial disturbances were what I call "electromechanical" events, such as appliances turning on and off by themselves. The first event was the numbers on a digital clock rapidly changing on their own. There were also a couple of sightings of an apparition, described as a "dark shadow." However, the case was dominated by the usual panoply of object movements, often occurring in clusters with respect to time. Sometimes the objects were large; a particular favorite was a love seat that Tina liked to sit on. As in earlier cases, the object movements conformed to the principles of object and area focusing—the same objects and objects from the same location being repeatedly affected—as well as an inverse relation to the distance from Tina. (This, of course, is part of what defines her as being the focal person.) Roll arrived during the object moving phase and was able to observe a number of events in which Tina's whereabouts were established to be such that she could not have thrown the objects, pulled strings, or the like. In one especially hectic 52-minute period there were, in addition to 5 presumably independent sounds, 15 object movements, 6 of which Roll considered evidential. Before Roll arrived, a photographer from Harden's newspaper, Fred Shannon, accomplished the rare feat of capturing on film an object in motion, in this case a telephone receiver flying in front of Tina's body, with Tina not touching it. This photo, along with several others of Tina and other relevant persons, are included in the book.

Tina claimed that the events occurred when she was inactive but perhaps thinking of relevant things. She often complained of head or stomach aches either before or after events. RSPK did not occur when she was asleep, in locations covered by a video camera, or when she tried to produce them. In support of the latter conclusion, she failed to show significant results in a computer PK test conducted by parapsychologist Richard Broughton during her first trip to North Carolina, and she failed to produce object movements under controlled conditions during her third trip to NC. However, the authors note that this trip occurred long after the RSPK in Ohio had stopped and her motivation was poor. On the

other hand, she seemed to show success influencing the firing rate of an *in vitro* snail neuron in an experiment by Baumann, but the results had to be discounted because of problems with the protocol. However, in the technical report the authors cite, Baumann reports that Tina did succeed in this task during a later visit, sans the protocol problems. I have no idea why the authors do not mention this second experiment in the book.

If Tina were the source of the disturbances, she apparently had a masochistic streak, as solid objects struck her body during one particularly active period prior to Roll's arrival and during two of her trips to North Carolina. One would expect several of these collisions to cause bumps, bruises, cuts, or other bodily injury. However, no such damage was reported. If the contact indeed caused no physical harm, this outcome itself would seem to be anomalous. It is a shame that this matter was not discussed in the book.

More than most investigators of haunts and poltergeists, Roll takes a process-oriented approach to his cases, seeking psychological and physical causes or correlates of the anomalous events. Several chapters in the book are devoted to such discussion and speculation. Roll is known for his position that RSPK is an expression of frustration felt by the focal person regarding circumstances in his or her environment. This case fits the pattern well. Joan and John Resch appear to be anything but model parents, at least with regard to Tina. First and foremost they clearly devoted more affection and attention to the foster children than to Tina. She actively rebelled against restrictions and chore assignments she considered unreasonable, and some clearly were. For example, she was forced to wear clothes to school that evoked merciless teasing and ridicule from schoolmates. Spankings by John were especially harsh and labeled by the authors as "beatings." Tina's anger was also reflected in Rorschach and TAT tests administered by psychologist Carpenter during one of Tina's trips to Durham, although it would have been better if Carpenter could have been blind to the fact that Tina was an RSPK agent.

There are also indications that Tina was dissociative. Such tendencies often result from parental abuse during childhood. In addition to the physical abuse described above, Tina was allegedly sexually abused by an older brother. I have suggested that RSPK events arise from dissociated states in which the agent is in effect a different personality. This allows the agent to create mayhem without having to feel personal responsibility for its consequences. It also helps explain why some cases are mixtures of fraud and genuine RSPK. When in the dissociated state, the agent seeks to produce mayhem by whatever means are available. RSPK is just another weapon in the arsenal, to be used along with more conventional weapons as circumstances dictate.

An EEG taken of Tina in Columbus at the early stage of the disturbances indicated no abnormalities recognizable on the surface of the brain. However, an examination by Baumann during one of Tina's trips

to North Carolina uncovered unusually fast EEG activity emanating from the pons, an area of the brainstem. The authors cite psychologist Michael Persinger's conclusion based on study of the earlier neurological reports that Tina may have suffered from Tourette's syndrome. Like the epileptic symptoms more commonly found in RSPK agents, Tourette's involves excessive spontaneous electrical discharges from the brain, which Roll sees as a cause of RSPK. Based on discussions Roll had with parapsychologist and physicist Hal Puthoff, the authors speculate further that the energy in the external environment used by the RSPK agent is something called "zero point energy," which has been found by physicists to exist in otherwise empty space.

No dramatic poltergeist case would be complete without a media circus. Harden had published a report of the case in his newspaper, followed by Shannon's photograph. At the request of the Resches, the name of the family was not mentioned. However, Harden leaked information that allowed other journalists to deduce their identity, which forced the Resches to hold a news conference in their home. The reporters hung around for several hours hoping to witness some action directly, but to no avail. Finally, Joan mentioned to Tina that the reporters needed to see something happen if they were ever to leave. Tina took the hint and clumsily faked two events, both of which were recognized as such by some of the reporters. One of them, the tipping over of a lamp, was even recorded on video. A similar fiasco occurred in one of my investigations (Pratt & Palmer, 1976). The damage such episodes do to the credibility of a case is hard to exaggerate. Although in both the Resch case and mine the fraud occurred before the investigators arrived, there is a message here for RSPK researchers: discuss with the family and/or local contact person how to handle possible media intervention during the very first phone or (e)mail communication.

Additional spice was added by the appearance of CSICOP's erstwhile debunker of things that go bump in the night, James "The Amazing" Randi. Several days after the news conference, magician Randi held an impromptu press conference of his own in front of the Resch's home, waving the eternally unclaimed \$10,000 check he offers to anyone who can show him a psychic event he considers genuine. He asked to conduct his own investigation of the case, along with two scientists from a local university. Joan was willing to let the scientists in, but Randi's usual abusive rhetoric dissuaded her from having him join them. In fact, such behavior makes one wonder if Randi expected and wanted to be denied an invitation. As the affair actually played out, he was able to make his point and garner the desired publicity without running the risk of seeing something in the house that he might not be able to explain. The scientists declined to go in alone. This is not surprising either, as Randi considers scientists to be particularly poor observers, who might not be able to detect fraud if such occurred. The scientists obviously were brought along solely to add scientific credibility to the escapade.

Randi subsequently appeared on a panel devoted to the case at the 1984 Parapsychological Association Convention, and he later published his conclusions in *Skeptical Inquirer* (Randi, 1985). The latter was essentially a critique of Roll's investigation and Shannon's photographs. Roll and Storey devote several pages in the book to answering Randi's attack, accusing him of misrepresenting or ignoring facts that did not fit his interpretation.

An advantage of the delayed publication of the book is that it allowed for a follow-up of Tina after the disturbances in Ohio had ceased. Indeed, the book is as much a biography of Tina as the report of an RSPK investigation. As such, it resembles at times a Greek tragedy, as Tina's unhappy life got even worse after the disturbances in Ohio ceased. Several short and unhappy marriages, sometimes with abusive spouses, culminated in the murder of her 4-year-old daughter after she had moved to Georgia to be closer to Roll, who had in the meantime moved there from North Carolina. Although the evidence clearly pointed to the father as the sole murderer, Tina was charged as well, and she actually got a longer sentence than the father did. The authors put most of the blame for this apparent gross miscarriage of justice on Tina's defense attorney, who seemed to put little effort into the case and persuaded Tina to accept the plea bargain that resulted in a life sentence rather than present in court what would seem to be a good case for her innocence. In defense of the attorney, he might have believed that the jury would not judge the case rationally, as the murder had gotten much bad publicity and stirred up a great deal of emotion in the local populace. From this standpoint, the book can also be seen as an indictment of certain American institutions that failed Tina at various times (not to mention countless other people). In addition to the well-chronicled abuses of the judicial system in the rural southern United States, one might also cite the failure of the school system in Ohio to protect Tina from the teasing and bullying she received at school. This kind of widely condoned abuse has been implicated as a motivating factor for the mass murders committed by disgruntled students at Columbine High School in Colorado and other high schools in the U.S.

A puzzling feature of the Resch case is a letter she wrote from jail shortly before the plea bargain, which suggests that she thought that if she accepted the deal she would be released in "four plus years." If that were indeed the case, the plea bargain might make sense. I was quite taken aback when I learned a few pages later that she got a life sentence. Were the terms of the plea bargain relayed to Tina before she entered her plea? Was she deliberately misled? This is another matter I wish had been addressed in the book.

However, it is the RSPK investigation that makes *Unleashed* of particular interest to *JP* readers. The evidence from well-investigated RSPK cases like this one tends to get short shrift from many parapsychologists because the events don't occur in a controlled laboratory setting. Personally, I find the evidence from such cases to be superior to that provided by various physical mediums and psychics in more controlled environments,

and on a par with that produced in the lab. This latter conclusion will strike some as surprising, but in the final analysis, the basis of decision about the evidentially of human observations (and lab experiments rely on human observation just like field investigations) is not what controls have been introduced but the likelihood of a conventional explanation of the phenomena in the context of whatever controls exist. I don't find these explanations any more plausible for good RSPK cases than I do for good PK experiments. However, in all these data sources the possibility remains of conventional explanations no one has thought of, and that is why I have taken the position that all these data should be viewed as anomalies—or "unsolved mysteries," to borrow the title of a popular American TV show that did a segment on the Resch case—rather than as decisive evidence for a paranormal process (Palmer, 1987). The latter will come only from a confirmed paranormal theory, a goal toward which Roll has made potentially important contributions.

For its part, the Resch case does not provide a whole lot that is new, but it does confirm previous observations and adds to the pool of genuinely anomalous PK data. Although from a scientific standpoint it would have been better if the report had appeared in a refereed scientific journal (which is still possible), the book is nonetheless a valuable addition to the parapsychological literature and a must read for anyone interested in scientific parapsychology.

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