

Book Review
The Science of Ghost Hunting

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GHOSTED! Exploring The Haunting Reality of Paranormal Encounters
by Brian Laythe, James Houran, Neil Dagnall, Keneth Drinkwater and Ciarán O’Keeffe, 2022. (Softcover).
\$34. ISBN (print) 978-1-4766-8577-9 ISBN (ebook \$17.99) 978-1-4766-4480-6

This book is the result of a five-year research program and it shows. Overall, *Ghosted!* is an excellent representation of what a scientific approach to ghost hunting looks like. The introduction makes it clear that “Our team takes these anomalous experiences seriously, but not necessarily at face value.” The book covers so much territory that I felt it best to describe it by chapter.

Chapter one begins with the results of a survey that the “Ghost Gang” conducted where they list a “Haunt Hierarchy” and divide experiences into objective and subjective noting that the differentiation can be blurred. By including controls where they had people imagine haunt-type experiences, they were able to note differences between how the two groups reported events which, in turn, allowed them to differentiate real spontaneous experiences from the rest. They list some examples such as “Mass Psychogenic Illness, “Imaginary Friends that Come Alive” and “Group (Gang)-Stalking.”

Chapter two logically progresses to examining the types of people who experience hauntings noting that transliminal, or “haunted” people, whose characteristics are outlined in the book, are the most likely to have a haunting experience. They discuss other psychological layers of ghost experiences in which a belief of some sort is the most common secondary factor. They also note that place and time can affect whether these experiences take place particularly if heightened emotions are involved.

In chapter three, having set the stage, they look at social factors that can bias people’s perceptions of these experiences noting that paranormal stories, either real or made up, can increase the number of reported hauntings while other social factors can have the opposite influence and create an environment of debunking. They explain that your ideological camp can dictate the nature of your experience.

In chapter four, the authors look at haunted settings which they explain are more likely to be the results of the experiences of haunted people than the locations themselves. Variables are discussed, such as “embedded cues” like a historical battlefield, which can cue people to have certain types of experiences. Also discussed are the effects of light levels, air quality, temperature, infrasound and EM fields. The discus-

sion then proceeds to highlight how people's personal memories, the atmosphere, and risk assessments can affect their experience.

Chapter five takes a deep dive into the psyche of the people who most commonly experience hauntings. The proneness is on a continuum and those people experience a wide range of haunting experiences which, the authors are careful to point out, occur to such a large portion of the general population that they can't be considered disorders. Threat detection, in which people are on guard for possible paranormal threats, such as a ghost appearing or objects moving, appears to also be related to people having haunting experiences. The authors make an important distinction between "mechanisms that produce strange perceptions" and "mechanisms that guide interpretations of those strange perceptions."

They provide three interesting examples: An experiment where participants used flashlights for signaling something paranormal in an isolated wildlife preserve; a scientifically controlled séance, and spirit cleaning rituals.

Chapter six looks at what we mean by "paranormal" by looking at several definitions, most of which come with too many assumptions, which the authors choose to simplify to: "anomalous" or "unexplained." There is a brief overview of what we know and don't know in science, and a quick mention of the observer effect in physics. This is a set up for when to label something as parapsychological using one of three classifications. Class 1 is unlikely to be regarded as paranormal. Class 2 is defined as "creepy but unprovable." Class 3 is defined as "likely to be anomalous." They take a look at some conventional explanations that fall flat in the face of evidence such as hallucinations, contagion effects, or hoaxes then discuss psi-based theories, which lean toward apparitions being telepathically induced. They also explain the "Stone Tape" theory which is that hauntings are energetic impressions that sensitive people pick up on. There is also a discussion on neurological causes for haunting experiences.

Chapter seven is an overview for citizen scientists. Readers are invited to explore what their expectations are for their own ghost hunting expeditions. Are they more interested in just having the experience or in contributing to science? They point out that science is "about valid measurement, reliable data, logical interpretations, and testable predictions." They describe what the usual fieldwork experience is like, saying that the location or interlopers are more dangerous to investigators than anything paranormal. Considerable effort is taken to convey the theory behind scientific investigations of hauntings, which includes a non-technical discussion of probability.

Chapter eight takes the citizen scientist through the meticulous process of investigating hauntings and apparitions and the layperson is encouraged to disregard any evidence that isn't recorded. Case documentation is thoroughly explored: Interviewing experiencers, history of the place, and documenting the specific target location properly as well as the recent history of the phenomena. The book then explains the exploratory inspections including the hotspot method, the importance of a layout plan, that the perimeter must be accounted for and it's best to have control locations. They talk about setting an investigator schedule and put special emphasis on timestamping and equipment placement. Once it is compiled, they discuss putting data in its proper context then submitting it for hypothesis testing which the authors feel is the realm of scientists.

Chapter nine invites citizen scientists to help gather evidence for various theoretical models and chapter ten has recommendations for ongoing education.

Before reading this book, I knew almost nothing about the science of ghost hunting and upon finishing, I felt like I had very firm grasp of what the field is, how a scientific investigation of hauntings is conducted, and what researchers are focused on. *Ghosted!* does an excellent job of giving the reader a very in depth understanding of this field of research.

Though the authors make a point of addressing the ghost hunting crowd in this book, my one criticism is that this, combined with the title and appearance, lends the impression that this book is written for a lay audience. As a non-scientist myself, I think that this book is written much more like a college level textbook both in writing style and content. It has a heavy emphasis on psychology, so a reader's basic understanding of the field beforehand would be helpful. A layperson, without that background, attempting to read this book casually may find themselves overwhelmed by this nuanced, complex, and information dense book.

Those who do invest the extra time and effort required will be richly rewarded. *Ghosted!* is a very valuable resource and is a must read for anyone involved in paranormal investigations.