

CONVERSATIONS WITH GHOSTS by Alex Tanous with Callum E. Cooper. Guilford, United Kingdom: White Crow Books, 2013. Pp. xxvii + 138. \$15.99 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-908733-55-9.

*Conversations With Ghosts* by Alex Tanous and Callum Cooper is a short compilation of chapters, photos, interviews, and stories all centered around the somewhat legendary figure of Alex Tanous, best known to parapsychologists for his work with Karl Osis at the ASPR in New York during the 1970s and 1980s. It appropriately begins with a brief introduction by Cooper explaining who Tanous was and how the book came about. Those wishing to

know more about Tanous' private life may feel a bit disappointed at the brevity of personal information presented here—readers are referred to Tanous' autobiography for those details. Instead, Cooper focuses on Tanous' qualifications and the types of research in which he participated. This sets the stage for the six chapters that represent the body of the book, which are either transcriptions of Tanous' notes and interviews or were written by him for an unfinished set of case reports.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the idea that not all hauntings are alike. In addition, Tanous shares his thoughts on why hauntings may occur in some cases and not others and describes the manner in which the ASPR would go about choosing and investigating cases. For some of us, this is something of a walk down memory lane. Tanous, as an extremely gifted psychic, played a key role on the team. Data collection was only the first step in a case. After they gathered that information, the team would figure out what was needed to resolve the situation to the mutual satisfaction of both the living and the dead. This varied greatly from case to case but often involved letting spirits tell their stories and providing counseling to all parties as needed.

The next three chapters are arguably the most interesting. They describe Tanous' first-hand experiences at Cedar Rapids, Hawk Mountain, Dandy House, and other haunted locations. This provides intriguing insight into how Tanous worked and the ways in which he made sense of his experiences. For example, the fact that Tanous took on the viewpoints of the spirits who told him their stories could explain why he stated that "There are no truly evil ghosts; any unpleasant effects of the presence are only the results of an unhappy lingering energy resulting from the act of injustice or imbalance itself" (p. 8). After all, every person is the hero of his or her own story! Tanous also discussed what he called a "spiraling effect" where "multiple manifestations converge on a site, drawing to the house people with similar character weaknesses as the original inhabitants who had begun the cycle" (p. 11). We might think of this as a kind of resonance, where the living are (perhaps unconsciously) drawn to a certain energy while others are repelled by it.

The fifth chapter represents a jarring stylistic shift compared to the earlier, more personable ones. This is because it is the edited transcript of an interview Tanous gave on his work in 1981. In it, he touches on everything from ghost ethnicity and types of manifestation to his utter lack of belief in demons and possession to survival research and what part of personality, if any, survives death of the body. Tanous believed every person was comprised of three things: a body, a spirit, and a soul. He refers to the soul as "individuality," whereas the spirit part of us that can leave the body without us dying (i.e., our conscious awareness) he called "personality" or "the apparition" (pp. 72–73). One gets the feeling he is struggling to give us a glimpse of the ineffable but falls short due to the inadequacy of language to capture its complexity and nuances. The reader might be forgiven for wishing for a more comprehensive explanation of what all this meant to Tanous or at the very least a good glossary.

The last chapter returns to the style of the first ones, with a few words about Tanous' and others' beliefs on what part of personality, if any, survives the death of the body. It also gives the book a chance to explain how his philosophy on this came about through his experiences going out-of-body.

The book offers a diverse set of appendices towards the end. These include a previously published interview Loyd Auerbach did with Tanous, a few pages on the Amityville case—which the ASPR quickly recognized as a hoax—including a letter written by Tanous to correct the record on things falsely attributed to him, Jennifer Allen's memories of some experiences she had with Tanous, and an edited article by Thomas Verde on Tanous' investigative exploits on haunting. The end matter consists of brief bios of the authors and an index.

It may be no surprise, given the variety of wide-ranging material cobbled together, that the result is something of a mixed bag. Some topics, such as the overview of Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian beliefs on survival, are oversimplified to the point that they border on being insulting. Other concepts are confusingly presented, such as when the book first discounts adolescent-fueled poltergeist activity as "not representative of true manifestations" (p. 2) and then goes on to note, "Overwrought emotional states can contribute to the manifestation of phenomena with similar effects to those caused by adolescents, with regards to PK and/or poltergeist activity" (p. 2). This sounds as if the book is saying that mind-matter interaction caused by nonadolescents is only comparable to, not the same as, those caused by adolescent poltergeist agents. A notation here could have clarified what was meant and/or made sure readers knew that poltergeist agents can be of any age, that agents need not be individuals but also can include an entire group or family, and that mind-matter interaction can at times be caused by discarnate spirits, whether alone or in combination with the living.

More than once, the book's terminology gets in the way of clarity, whether because of implicit assumptions that we no longer accept as necessarily true or because the meanings shift from one part of the book to another.

For example, the word “apparitions” is used to refer to discarnate entities who can interact with the living. Why does this matter? Because we now know that apparitions can be poltergeist effects and not involve spirits at all. However, at least the word means the same thing throughout the book. The same cannot be said for the term “ghost.” The first chapter notes that ghosts can be in more than one place at the same time and compares this to how the living can be seen in two places at the same time during out-of-body experiences. The idea that ghosts have awareness is reinforced by the comment that “ghosts exist because they must tell their story to someone who can set their lives and actions into balance” (p. 5). Yet, later we are told that ghosts are “a replay of the incident that happened, or someone seeing someone moving, yet there’s really no dialogue” (p. 74). This sounds less like a conscious spirit than what modern parapsychologists would call place memory. Such memories are imprinted on objects and the environment *by the living*. The dead have nothing to do with causing place memories, and one needn’t be dead for them to be seen by others. So, if ghosts can be in two places at the same time, does this mean a conscious spirit is seen in multiple places at the same time? Or is the place memory simultaneously experienced at multiple locations? Which is it? It could make a big difference.

In conclusion, regardless of whether one agrees with Tanous’ sometimes dogmatic beliefs, it is clear that he was ahead of his time in using the same psychological counseling for spirits as he did the living. Some of the case reports are truly gripping and offer an intriguing look at the man’s inner thoughts and techniques. Yet at the same time, the material is also somewhat dated. Our understanding of hauntings and mind-matter interaction has become richer and more complex in the decades since he died. This book should not be taken as an authority on hauntings and the afterlife so much as an interesting way station from the past that allowed us to advance to where we are today. Read in that light, it becomes a useful and interesting contribution to the literature.

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