

SURVIVING DEATH: A JOURNALIST INVESTIGATES EVIDENCE FOR AN AFTERLIFE, by Leslie Kean. New York: Crown Archetype, 2017. Pp. viii + 408. \$27.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-553-41961-0

Whether, and if so in what form, humans (and other sentient beings, see James, 1897/1956) may survive death would be at the top of the questions that many people would like parapsychology to answer. Even during more religious times, Mozart's desperate reminder to God about the promise to have everlasting life in his *Requiem* expressed what so many people have craved to know. How could it be otherwise? We are the existential center of our experiential universe (although some take this experience more literally than others) and it may seem incredible to us, despite evidence to the contrary, that the world will go on its merry way without our existence. And what a solace it would be to know that our dear departed in some or other way have not disappeared forever.

With the waning of religion in the West, science became the purveyor of answers, although it has recently steered away from any issue with even a whiff of the metaphysical, despite continued reports of unusual experiences, from children suddenly recollecting a previous life to individuals claiming to communicate with the deceased and, every so often, coming up with specific information that they should not be privy to. A main motivation for the foundation of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1882 was to investigate such events, without a preconception as to their nature, and through the tools of the scientific method. As any reader of the classical papers of SPR members on mediumship knows, some of these researchers were extremely thorough, intelligent, and often initially agnostic about claims of "paranormal" phenomena until the data persuaded them to change their minds (e.g., Sidgwick, 1915). They were also cognizant that the issue could not be easily resolved, if at all, because even the data from the best mediums left open other interpretations than contact with the deceased, such as outstanding psi abilities by the medium who might obtain that information without the mediation of a deceased person (i. e., the living agent "super-psi" hypothesis).

In our times, journalist Leslie Kean has written/compiled a volume presenting various strands of relevant evidence on the question of possible survival. Her book is quite comprehensive and covers research on "cases of the reincarnation type or CORT"; near-death experiences, in particular the aspects relevant to possible survival such as veridical perceptions while having an out-of-body experience and unusual end-of-life phenomena; mental mediumship providing suggestive evidence of survival; apparitions and hauntings; and physical mediumship as it may pertain to potential survival. She does not cover "electronic voice phenomena," but this is probably the weakest source of evidence for survival (cf. Leary & Butler, 2015).

Surviving Death, winner of a 2017 Parapsychological Association Book Award, has two features that I greatly appreciate, and one that I do not. Let me start with the former two. Kean values the knowledge that expert sources can bring to a book purporting to provide a "state-of-the-art" view

of the subject. She commissioned synthetic chapters from some of the foremost experts in the study of survival, including Jim Tucker on investigating children with past-life memories, Pim van Lommel on near-death-experiences (NDE), Peter Fenwick on end-of-life experiences, Julie Beischel on mental mediumship, Alan Gauld on trance mediumship and drop-in communicators (not a new chapter but an excerpt of his magisterial book on mediumship and survival (Gauld, 1982); Lloyd Auerbach on apparitions and hauntings, and Erlendur Haraldsson on mediumship evidence of survival. In addition she consulted with other experts with somewhat divergent opinions, including Stephen Braude and Michael Sudduth. For any newcomer to the vast and complex serious literature on possible survival, having one volume with all of these experts summarizing their work is well worth the admission fee, but the reader should discern between publications in peer-reviewed reputable journals, and those that have not been subjected to such process (e.g., pp. 186-187 on mediums' EEG).

The second feature I liked, and a treat for those of us who are familiar with the literature, are previously unpublished transcripts and first-person accounts of people directly involved with these phenomena. They include chapters by Cyndi Hammons, the mother of an American child who had a "resolved" (i. e., identified) reincarnation case; and by Kimberly Clark Sharpe, the nurse of the famous case in which a patient saw a very specific shoe outside of the hospital ledge of a hospital while having an experience of being outside of her body and which she should not have been able to see through ordinary means. There are also extensive quotations of Pamela Reynolds, perhaps the most famous NDE case in the literature, who provided specific descriptions of what happened during her surgery involving hypothermic cardiac arrest with consequent ceasing of brain activity, as well as the comments by her attending neurosurgeon, Robert Spetzler. He stated in an interview that "Her EEG was completely flat... I believe that Pam recalled things that were remarkably accurate. I do not understand from a physiological perspective how that could possibly have happened! (p. 108). Second-hand reports of these cases do not do justice to the level of specificity found in them, which argues against superficial debunking explanations. There are also first-person accounts by Kean of mediumship readings she got, and her reasoning as to why she found them very impressive and evidential. And just before the conclusion of the book there is a chapter by physical medium Stewart Alexander describing the development of his purported abilities. Kean also adds links or references to accessible youtube and other materials that explore further various areas, and maintains a webpage with supplemental and updated articles and recordings (<http://www.survivingdeathkean.com/>).

The various areas of research covered in the book have a cumulative effect, and provide enough basis for a reasonable person to argue that his/her belief does have empirical backing, or for an earnest skeptic to look at the primary evidence closely. Kean does not go into depth on how these various suggestive supports for survival could be integrated, but that task is elusive even for those who have devoted a big chunk of their life to the task, which explains my lack of patience with not only those who refuse to look at the evidence for possible survival, but also those who state that they know how it all fits together and produce rather trite answers that cannot even remotely explain the various contradictions in the data (e.g., some of the great mediums with very precise information that apparently only a deceased could know simultaneously exhibiting ignorance of some basic facts of the ostensibly communicating deceased personality). I did not expect that Kean would provide a synthesis (i. e., "a coherent set of concepts and principles which cover satisfactorily all the regions of fact," Broad, 1953, p. 8) of the

evidence for and against survival. But the one thing she could -and should- have done better is to be more critical of some of her sources and self-critical of her own assumptions.

In many ways *Surviving Death* provides more comprehensive and primary-sourced information than the typical non-specialist book on survival, but my one big objection also carries weight. I was initially impressed that in the first section, on CORT, she mentioned that the fact that the researcher who presented some photos for identification by a boy claiming a previous life knew the correct one was problematic as he might have conveyed some information even if unconsciously or unwillingly (p. 63; and of course “masking” in parapsychology research is a standard requirement, see Palmer, 2015). But later on, she does not exhibit the same prudence. For instance, when commenting on one of her own mediumship readings, which she found very convincing, she states that “the correct information *far* outweighed the inaccurate” (p. 160), but took no precautions to safeguard against her potential bias to emphasize confirming information. Or she overstates the case as when a medium tells that beside the grave of someone dead lies an “Albert... Albertone... or Alberone.” Beside that grave a private Albone was buried, close to the names mentioned, but Keane changes it to a perfect hit by writing that “Buried there was Private G. W. Albone, just as Sandy has said.” Or she fails to challenge a physical medium’s (Stewart Alexander) rationale not to allow a filming of one of his séances with a low red light because such exposure would bring a destructive “turmoil,” yet he was willing to write a book about his mediumship and wrote a chapter for this book, which describes what ostensibly happens in his séances.

Kean also makes the naive assumption that the controls for physical mediums she came up with would preclude the possibility of fraud, but an expert with the motivation to deceive her would very likely come up with tricks that an intelligent person would not even think about. Case in point, Kean reports positively on her séances with Kai Mügge (or Muegge), communicating about them as late as January 2016 with Stephen Braude, yet that same year a damning and credible report about Mügge probably being fraudulent about at least some aspects of his séances came out (Nahm, 2016). As I write this review (February 9, 2018), Kean had not brought this issue in her webpage. *Surviving Death* will give the interested reader a plethora of information on most relevant areas of survival research, but it is a pity that by failing to be more circumspect and critical in some sections Kean actually weakens her argument for those who approach this literature without any dogmatic preconceptions.

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