

THE MAGAZINE OF THE OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

WINTER 2016



It's a mystery...



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Oklahoma HUMANITIES

VOLUME 9, ISSUE NO. 1

WINTER 2016

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Oklahoma HUMANITIES is published three times per year: January, May, and September by the Oklahoma Humanities Council, 428 W. California Ave., Ste. 270, Oklahoma City, OK 73102, (405) 235-0280, www.okhumanities.org.

The Oklahoma Humanities Council (OHC) strengthens communities by helping Oklahomans learn about the human experience, understand new perspectives, and participate knowledgeably in civic life. The humanities—disciplines such as history, literature, film studies, ethics, and philosophy—offer a deeper understanding of ourselves and others by confronting us with the questions, values, and meanings of the human experience. As the nonprofit, state partner for the National Endowment for the Humanities, OHC brings people together to explore these ideas through programming and community grants that support book groups, exhibits, film festivals, teacher institutes, and more. OHC engages people in their own communities, providing forums for education, critical thinking, and productive civil discourse.

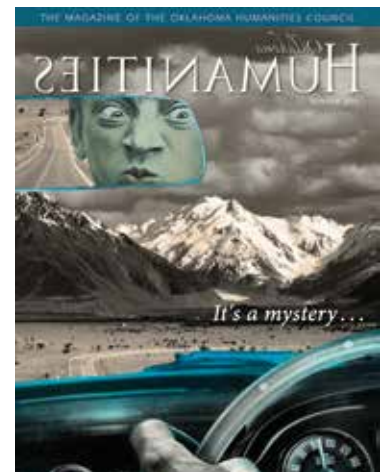
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Reader letters are welcome and may be directed to the editor at: carla@okhumanities.org or by mailing to the above address. Letters are published subject to editorial discretion and may be edited for clarity or space.

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ON THE COVER: Julia Lillard is an Oklahoma artist with an eclectic range of styles, which currently explore the surreal through digital and paper collage. Her imagination is triggered by images, colors, or situations and, as she notes, “I usually have no idea what the end result will be.” [facebook.com/jlillardart](https://www.facebook.com/jlillardart)

EDITOR'S COVER NOTE: The minute we saw Julia's delightfully creepy art, we knew it was an opportunity to break all the rules with a mirror reflection of our masthead that hints at the fun in this issue. With a nod to that disembodied voice of vintage TV: *Do not attempt to adjust the picture. You are about to experience the awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to—The Outer Limits.*





STEEL YOURSELVES, DEAR READERS, as we plumb the murky depths of human imagination. Ghost stories, Bigfoot, and the eerie specter of the Spook Light lurk in these dark pages. Ask Ouija, if you dare, what twisted minds create the tales of crime and conspiracy that haunt our dreams, yet compel us to follow the unknown into the fog-laden night. Take heed, for what lies ahead is . . . a mystery. Don't say we didn't warn you.

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from our **PERSPECTIVE**

In 2015 the Oklahoma Humanities Council (OHC) acknowledged and celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). President Lyndon Johnson signed the legislation that created the two endowments in September 1965 to provide all citizens access to the imagination and inquiry that is central to the humanities and the arts. This exposure to the world's greatest achievements not only improves the quality of our lives but is essential for an informed citizenry, a critical component of a democratic society.

A few years after its formation, NEH sought to establish state-based organizations to help carry out its work. Oklahoma was among six pilot states to test various models of administration for the future state humanities councils. This pilot resulted in the establishment of nonprofit organizations governed by a

volunteer board of trustees—the model we utilize today. The Oklahoma Humanities Council was founded in 1971 and, with an annual general support award from NEH, provides and supports programming that connects the general public with our cultural heritage and the very best in humanities scholarship.

This great public-private experiment has been extremely successful. To illustrate our state's commitment to this work, OHC is required to match federal funds with private contributions. Our community grants program alone leverages \$8 for every \$1 in federal funds.

Thanks to a partnership with our friends at the Oklahoma Arts Council, NEH Chairman Bro Adams and NEA Chairman Jane Chu were part of the 2015 Oklahoma Arts Conference in Tulsa. Appearing on stage together, these distinguished leaders articulated the success of this great national endeavor and how the



ANN THOMPSON
Executive Director



SUSAN MCCARTHY
Chair, Board of Trustees

humanities and the arts continue to be relevant to Americans.

Returning to the fifty-year-old language from Congress, we continue to see the absolute necessity of the mandate given to the NEH and OHC: “The world leadership which has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the nation's high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit.” The Oklahoma Humanities Council is proud to be a participant in this essential endeavor.

HOME RUN DONORS

The sustainable impact of your gifts

When a Smithsonian exhibition visits an Oklahoma community, the impact ripples far and wide. These special OHC-sponsored *Museum on Main Street* programs travel to towns in every corner of the state, like our “Hometown Teams” exhibit that visited Ponca City's Pioneer Woman Museum this summer. “It's amazing what these world-class exhibits do for communities,” said museum director Robbin Davis. “This fantastic exhibit about sports and American life brought so many new people to the museum—including lots of young men. This program gave the community new perspectives on our history and culture and has really changed the way the public thinks about our museum.”

Like all the communities that hosted “Hometown Teams” in 2015, Ponca City hit a home run with its amazing support. The exhibit's opening was celebrated with a pep rally featuring the Ponca City High School band, cheerleaders, booster clubs, and hundreds of community members. Afterwards, one Smithsonian representative said, “A pep rally for a museum exhibit—*why didn't we ever think of that?*”

Each of the six communities that hosted “Hometown Teams”



Wild West show performers, 1923

© Library of Congress

created special programs and exhibits highlighting local sports history, thanks to OHC's support. At the Pioneer Woman Museum, a new “Women of the Wild West Shows” exhibit has drawn impressive crowds and will remain an important part of the museum's collection long after the Smithsonian traveling exhibit has moved on.

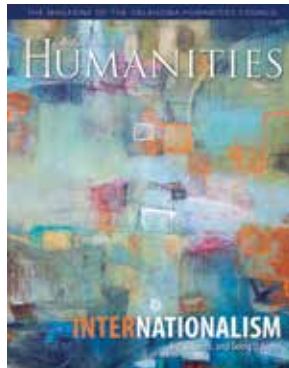
Thanks to the support of donors like you, OHC programs like *Museum on Main Street* connect Oklahomans to ideas that change lives and transform communities. Your donation fuels this lasting impact, bringing people together across different backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives. Your gift provides more great exhibitions, inspires important community conversations, and helps build an Oklahoma with a vibrant culture and rich opportunities for lifelong learning.

LETTERS

BEYOND BORDERS

Each issue I think your publication can't get better, you prove me wrong. Thank you so much for the effort to broaden minds beyond borders ["Internationalism," Fall 2015]. It's so seldom that we see such articles that it is like an oasis in a desert. "The U.S. and the U.N." by Thomas G. Weiss says much about the increasing need to view the entire world in today's decision-making. Surely the time has come for all people to view humanity as one. Thank you for your outstanding choices in publication.

—Joh Gaaney, Sulphur



CLIMATE EXCHANGE

I received your Summer 2015 ["Planet Earth"] issue and found the "Climate Change" article quite interesting. I was impressed that the author, Michael Svoboda, proposed launching a nationwide moral crusade. Over the past twenty years it has been demonstrated time and again that the model (actually, many models linked together) is fatally flawed. The "consensus" temperature rise predictions from computer models are off by an average of about 450%. The same level of failure holds for claims of faster-rising oceans and more severe weather events. And the focus on CO₂ emissions totally misses the point that even doubling its current concentration in the atmosphere will only increase its heat trapping effect by a few percent.

There are big bucks available for those who subscribe to the global climate change orthodoxy, and I can understand people jumping on the bandwagon in order to get a piece of the pie. But a moral crusade in support of a computer model? That is going too far.

—John C. Zink, Ph.D., Tulsa



SUSTAINABLE THOUGHT

Thank you for providing copies of "Planet Earth" [Summer 2015] for students of Sustainable Economic Development in the Master of Public Administration Program, UCO. The arrangement of factual information and deeply insightful essays culminated in an evocative reminder that the planet nourishes all life which includes all people and all growing things. It also proved to my students that the humanities are pivotal to our understanding of what it means to be human and that this consideration is of primary importance in the development of public policy.

Coming to terms with our all too human desecration of the planet is something that philosophers, historians, and other thinkers will chew on well into the future. "Planet Earth" fired the imagination of my students. Thank you for making this opportunity possible.

—Elizabeth S. Overman, Ph.D.
University of Central Oklahoma

THANKS

I wanted to thank you for sharing enough copies of the Summer 2015 ["Planet Earth"] issue of *Oklahoma HUMANITIES* for each of the English, Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences instructors to receive a copy.

—Kim Jameson, Dean
Division of English and Humanities
Oklahoma City Community College

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Mystery. The human race is continually thrust forward in pursuit of the mysterious. As soon as we solve one puzzle we're on to something else—the next problem, the next question, the next discovery. It is a fundamental force in what makes us human.

Mystery is not only an essential directive for human work, it figures prominently in our play. From folklore to popular culture, the stories we tell are filled with mystery: ghost stories, unsolved crimes, UFOs, missing ships in the Bermuda Triangle.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson, surely the greatest detective and sidekick in literary history, debate this work-versus-play aspect of the mystery-deduction-solution process. Which is more important, they argue: Holmes's uncanny deductions based on reason and science or Watson's colorful retelling of their escapades for print? Holmes scoffs at Watson's fiction, accusing him of embellishing the facts and pandering to sensationalism. "Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent," Holmes pontificates. The real workings and strange coincidences of the world, he speculates, "would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable."

Dr. Watson counters: the mere recitation of fact is *his* definition of stale. The extreme realism found in police reports, says Watson, is "neither fascinating nor artistic." Citing bland newspaper accounts of crime, he makes the case for a narrative form that is now the hallmark of classic mysteries: "Its effect is much less striking when set *en bloc* in a single half-column of print than when the facts slowly evolve before your own eyes, and the mystery clears gradually away as each new discovery furnishes a step which leads on to the complete truth."

Through these opinionated characters, we perhaps have insight into the intellectual struggles of Sherlock's creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Would he meet the insatiable public demand for new detective adventures or devote his time to a subject he found infinitely more interesting, the Modern Spiritualism movement? Conan Doyle was absolutely devoted to educating audiences, writing and traveling—to America, Africa, and throughout Europe—to lecture on "psychic matters" and the "spirit life" that fascinated him for more than forty years. Through mediums, séances, table rapping, talking boards, and other psychic phenomena, Spiritualism followers believed that the living could communicate with the dead.

The spectacle of Spiritualism became entertainment for parties and theatre, and talking boards made their way into pop culture, dominated by the now-iconic *Ouija* brand. Mitch Horowitz opens our "Mystery" issue with a tour through *Ouija* history, exploring how the board has been revered, reviled, and, in the case of poet James Merrill, inspired verse *from the beyond*.

M.R. James's interest in mystery took a more malevolent turn than the detective fiction of his contemporary Conan Doyle. Joshua Grasso tells us that James ascribed to the stalwart ghost story form, moving away from Gothic clichés to the realism—and menace—



Sherlock. Joe Ganech is a visual artist living and working in Brussels, Belgium. His style is influenced by graphics, surrealism, abstract art, and vintage 1970s movies. He combines functional illustration with strong colors and emotion to create poetic, mysterious universes. "The feminine" is at the center of his work, along with a drive to discover new artistic horizons and perspectives. joeganech1.wix.com/joeganech

lurking in everyday objects. (Did you *really* think that nick to your chin was simply a dull razor?) His formula called for restraint, only "a modicum of blood," rather than the blatant violence in American writing, which he found "merely nauseating."

Leading up to and following WWII, American readers and moviegoers found an altogether different kind of realism in the evolving pulp mysteries featuring tough-guy private eyes. In this new subgenre, notes Bill Hagen, women took starring roles as novelists and screenplay writers, exploring characters' psyches among the boilerplate plots of whodunits. Adding fog and dark alleys, with leanings toward the bleak and brutal, these ladies elevated mere mysteries to stylized noir.

Mystery narratives seemed an ever expanding source for innovation. Jerry Jerman tells us that, in yet another pass at realism, directors like Alfred Hitchcock and Francis Ford Coppola played on the paranoia of the *audience* and the suspicion of the McCarthy era to bring perilous plots to the big screen. If you can't explain a mystery or solve a crime, a good conspiracy theory is sure to entertain.

Even local folklore walks a fine line between truth and fiction; on which side it falls depends on the bravery of the adventurer—and the embellishment of the storyteller. Before our issue closes, author Marvin Leeper will stalk the Oklahoma backwoods for the man-ape we know as Bigfoot and Allen Rice will rally intrepid explorers to track down the illusive Spook Light.

So pass the popcorn (and lock the door!). The first clues are before us and *the game is afoot*.
—Carla Walker

OUIJA!

By Mitch Horowitz

More than just fun and games

YES ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ NO

Ouija. For some, the rectangular board evokes memories of late-night sleepovers, shrieks of laughter, and toy shelves brimming with Magic Eight Balls, Frisbees, and Barbie dolls. For others, Ouija boards—known more generally as talking boards or spirit boards—have darker associations. Stories abound of fearsome entities making threats, dire predictions, and even physical assaults on innocent users after a night of Ouija experimentation.

Ouija boards have sharply declined in popularity since the 1960s and 70s, when you could find one in nearly every toy-cluttered basement. But they remain one of the most peculiar consumer items in American history. To get a better sense of what Ouija boards are—and where they came from—requires going back to an era in which even an American president dabbled in talking to the dead.

Spiritualism Triumphant

Today it is difficult to imagine the popularity enjoyed by the movement called Spiritualism in the nineteenth century, when table

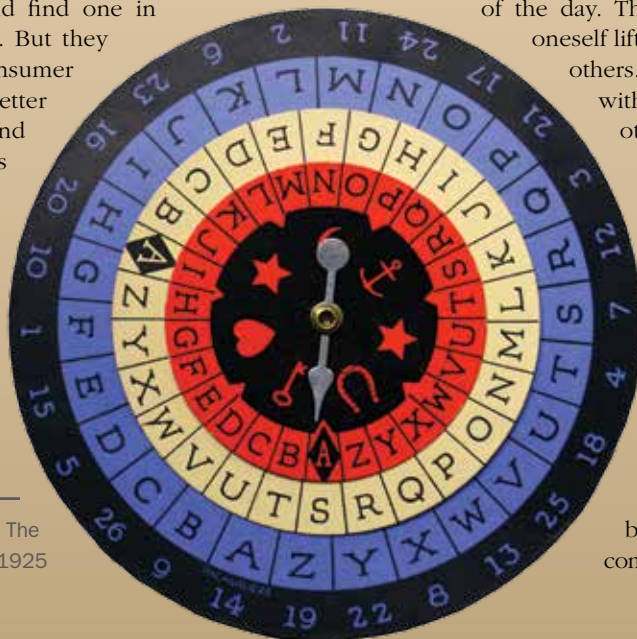
rapping, séances, medium trances, and other forms of contacting the “other side” were practiced by an estimated ten percent of the population. It began in 1848 when teenaged sisters Kate and Margaret Fox introduced “spirit rapping” to a lonely hamlet in upstate New York. While every age and culture had known hauntings, Spiritualism appeared to foster actual communication with the beyond. Within a few years, people from every walk of life took seriously the contention that one could talk to the dead.

Spiritualism seemed to extend the hope of reaching loved ones, perhaps easing the pain of losing a child to the diseases of the day. The allure of immortality or of feeling oneself lifted beyond workaday realities attracted others. Spirit counsels became a way to cope with anxiety about the future, providing otherworldly advice in matters of health, love, or money.

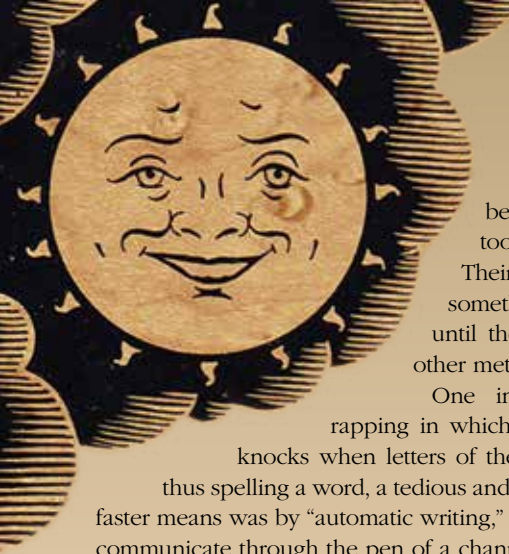
According to newspaper accounts, President Abraham Lincoln hosted a séance in the White House—though more as a good-humored parlor game than as a serious spiritual inquiry.

Making Contact

In this atmosphere of ghostly knocks and earnest pleas to hidden forces, nineteenth-century occultists began looking for easier ways to communicate with the beyond. And in the



IMAGES Museum of Talking Boards. RIGHT The Mystiscope Fortune Teller, F.L. Morgan, 1925



best American fashion, they took a do-it-yourself approach. Their homespun efforts led to something we call Ouija—but not until they worked through several other methods.

One involved a form of table rapping in which questioners solicited spirit knocks when letters of the alphabet were called out, thus spelling a word, a tedious and time-consuming exercise. A faster means was by “automatic writing,” in which spirit beings could communicate through the pen of a channeler; but some complained that this produced pages of unclear or meandering prose.

One invention directly prefigured the heart-shaped pointer that moves around the Ouija board. The planchette (French for “little plank”) was a three-legged writing tool with a hole at the top for insertion of a pencil. The planchette was designed for one person or more to rest their fingers on it and allow it to “glide” across a page, writing out a spirit message. The device originated in Europe in the early 1850s; by 1860, commercially manufactured planchettes were advertised in America.

Two other items from the 1850s are direct forebears to Ouija: “dial plates” and alphabet paste boards. Dial plates came in various forms. Some were rigged to tables to respond to “spirit tilts,” while others were presumably guided—like a planchette—by the hands of questioners. Alphabet boards further simplified matters. In use as early as 1852, these talking-board precursors allowed seekers to point to a letter as a means of prompting a “spirit rap,” thereby quickly spelling a word, perhaps the easiest method yet. And it was only a matter of time until inventors and entrepreneurs began to see the possibilities.

Baltimore Oracles

More than 150 years after the dawn of the Spiritualist era, contention endures over who created Ouija. The conventional history of American toy manufacturing credits a Baltimore businessman named William Fuld. Fuld, we are told, “invented” Ouija around 1890. It is repeated online and in books of trivia, reference works, and “ask me” columns in newspapers. For many decades, the manufacturer itself—first Fuld’s company and later the toy giant Parker Brothers—

insinuated as much by running “William Fuld Talking Board Set” across the top of every board.

The conventional history is wrong.

The patent for a “Ouija or Egyptian luck-board” was filed on May 28, 1890, by Baltimore patent attorney Elijah H. Bond, who assigned the rights to two city businessmen, Charles W. Kennard and William H.A. Maupin. The patent was granted on February 10, 1891, and so was born the Ouija-brand talking board.

The first patent reveals a familiarly oblong board, with the alphabet running in double rows across the top, and numbers in a single row along the bottom. The sun and moon, marked respectively by the words “Yes” and “No,” adorn the upper left and right corners, while the words “Good Bye” appear at the bottom center. Later on, instructions and illustrations prescribed an expressly social—even flirtatious—experience: Two parties, preferably a man and woman, were to balance the board between them on their knees, placing their fingers lightly upon the planchette. (“It draws the two people using it into close companionship and weaves about them a feeling of mysterious isolation,” the box read.) In an age of buttoned-up morals, it was a tempting dalliance.

True Origins

The Kennard Novelty Company of Baltimore employed a teenaged varnisher who helped run shop operations, and this was William Fuld. By 1892, Charles W. Kennard’s partners removed him from the company amid financial disputes, and a new patent—this time for an improved pointer, or planchette—was filed by a 19-year-old Fuld. In years to come, Fuld would take over the company and affix his name to every board.

Talking boards of a homemade variety were already a popular craze among Spiritualists by the mid-1880s. At his online Museum of Talking Boards, Ouija collector and chronicler Eugene Orlando posted an 1886 article from the *New-York Daily Tribune* (as reprinted that year in a Spiritualist monthly, *The Carrier Dove*) describing the breathless excitement around the new-fangled alphabet board and its message indicator. “I know of whole communities that are wild over the ‘talking board,’” says a man in the article. This was a full four years before the first Ouija patent was filed. Obviously Bond, Kennard, and their associates were capitalizing on an invention—not conceiving of one.



Ouija

Kennard Novelty, c. 1890



I-D-O PSY-CHO-I-D-E-O-GRAPH

T.H. White, 1919



Electra

G.H. Leonard, 1921

And what of the name Ouija? Alternately pronounced wee-JA and wee-GEE, its origin may never be known. Kennard at one time claimed it was Egyptian for “good luck” (it’s not). Fuld later said it was simply a marriage of the French and German words for “yes.” One early investor claimed the board spelled out its own name. As with other aspects of Ouija history, the board seems determined to withhold a few secrets of its own.

Ancient Ouija?

Another oft-repeated, but misleading, claim is that Ouija or talking boards have ancient roots. In a wide range of books and articles, everyone from Pythagoras to the Mongols to the Ancient Egyptians is said to have possessed Ouija-like devices. But the claims rarely withstand scrutiny.

Chronicler-curator Orlando points out that the primary reference to Ouija existing in the pre-modern world appears in a passage from Lewis Spence’s 1920 *Encyclopedia of Occultism*—which is repeated in Nandor Fodor’s popular 1934 *Encyclopedia of Psychic Science*. The Fodor passage reads: “As an invention it is very old. It was in use in the days of Pythagoras, about 540 B.C. According to a French historical account of the philosopher’s life, his sect held frequent séances or circles at which ‘a mystic table, moving on wheels, moved towards signs, which the philosopher and his pupil Philolaus, interpreted to the audience.’” It is, Orlando points out, “the one recurring quote found in almost every academic article on the Ouija board.” But the story presents two problems: The “French historical account” is never identified; and the scribe Philolaus lived not in Pythagoras’s time, but in the following century. We know precious little today about Pythagoras and his school. No writings of Pythagoras survive.

Other writers—when they are not repeating claims like the one above—tend to misread ancient historical accounts and mistake other divinatory tools, such as pendulum dishes, for Ouija boards. Oracles were rich and varied from culture to culture—from African cowrie shells to Greek Delphic rites—but the prevailing literature on oracular traditions supports no suggestion that talking boards, as we know them, were in use before the Spiritualist era.

Ouija Boom

After William Fuld took the reins of Ouija manufacturing in America, business was brisk—if not always happy. Fuld formed a

quickly shattered business alliance with his brother Isaac, which landed the two in court battles for nearly twenty years. Isaac was eventually found to have violated an injunction against creating a competing board, called the Oriole, after being forced from the family business in 1901. The two brothers never spoke again. Ouija, and anything that looked directly like it, was firmly in the hands of William Fuld.

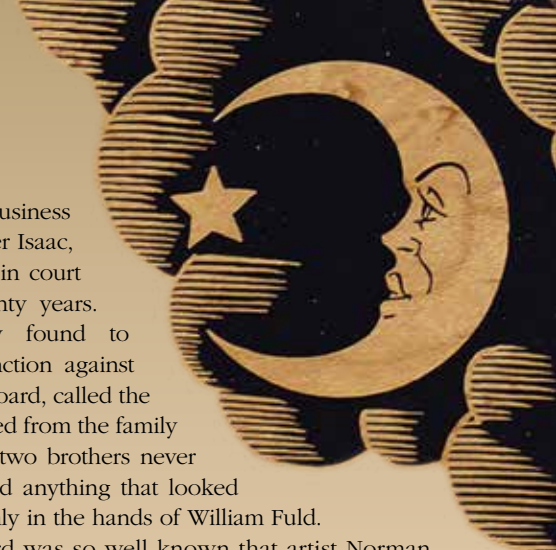
By 1920, the board was so well known that artist Norman Rockwell painted a send-up of a couple using one for a cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*. For Fuld, though, everything was strictly business. “Believe in the Ouija board?” he once told a reporter. “I should say not. I’m no spiritualist. I’m a Presbyterian.” In 1920, the *Baltimore Sun* reported that Fuld, by his own “conservative estimate,” had pocketed an astounding \$1 million from sales.

Whatever satisfaction Fuld’s success may have brought him was soon lost: On February 26, 1927, he fell to his death from the roof of his Baltimore factory. Fuld’s children took over his business—and generally prospered. While sales dipped and rose, and competing boards came and went, only the Ouija brand endured. And by the 1940s, Ouija was experiencing a new surge in popularity.

Spiritualism had seen its last great explosion of interest in the period around World War I, when parents yearned to contact children lost to the battlefield. In World War II, many anxious families turned to Ouija. In a 1944 article, “The Ouija Comes Back,” *The New York Times* reported that one New York City department store alone sold 50,000 Ouija boards in a five-month period.

American toy manufacturers were taking notice. Some attempted knock-off products. But Parker Brothers developed bigger plans. In a move that would place a carryover from the age of Spiritualism into playrooms all across America, the toy giant bought the rights for an undisclosed sum in 1966. The Fuld family was out of the picture, and Ouija was about to achieve its biggest success.

The following year, Parker Brothers is reported to have sold more than two million Ouija boards—topping sales of its most popular game, Monopoly. The occult boom that began in the late



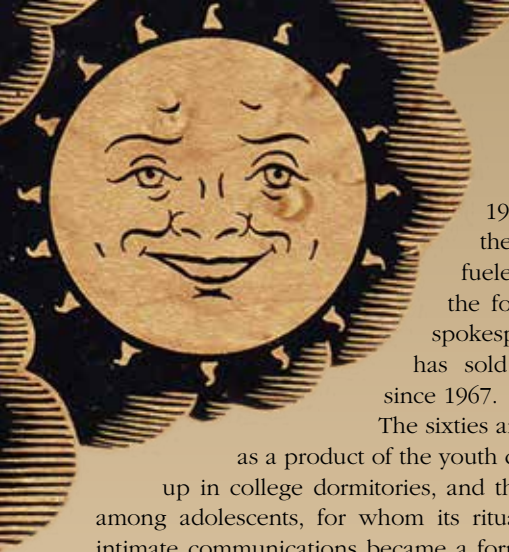
Mystifying Oracle
William Fuld, c. 1940



Mantic Message Mat
Mantic, Inc., 1974



Swami Ouija Talking Board
National Novelties, c. 1944



1960s, as astrologers adorned the cover of *TIME* magazine, fueled the board's sales for the following decades. A Parker spokesperson says the company has sold over ten million boards since 1967.

The sixties and seventies also saw Ouija as a product of the youth culture. Ouija circles sprang up in college dormitories, and the board emerged as a fad among adolescents, for whom its ritual of secret messages and intimate communications became a form of rebellion. Sociologists suggested that Ouija sessions were a way for young people to project, and work through, their own fears. But many Ouija users claimed that the verisimilitude of the communications were reason enough to return to the board.

Ouija Today

In a far remove from the days when Ouija led Parker Brothers' lineup, the product now seems more like a corporate stepchild. The "Ouija Game" merits barely a mention on Hasbro's website. The company posts no official history for Ouija, as it does for its other storied products. And the claims from the original 1960s-era box—"Weird and mysterious. Surpasses, in its unique results, mind reading, clairvoyance and second sight"—have been significantly toned down.

And yet . . . Ouija receives more customer reviews—alternately written in tones of outrage, fear, delight, or ridicule—than any other "toy" for sale on Amazon.com (390 at last count). What other "game" so polarizes opinion among those who dismiss it as a childhood plaything and those who condemn or extol it as a portal to the other side? As it did decades ago in *The Exorcist*, Ouija figures into the recent fright films *What Lies Beneath* (2000), *White Noise* (2005), and *Ouija* (2014). And it sustains an urban mythology that continues to make it a household name in the early twenty-first century.

But what makes this game board and its molded plastic pointer so resilient in our culture, and, some might add, in our nightmares?

Among the first things one notices when looking into Ouija is its vast—and sometimes authentically frightening—history of stories. A typical storyline involves communication that is at first reassuring and even useful (a lost object may be recovered) but eventually gives way to threatening or terrorizing. Hugh Lynn Cayce, son of the eminent

American psychic Edgar Cayce, cautioned that his research found Ouija boards among the most "dangerous doorways to the unconscious."

Ouija enthusiasts note that channeled writings, such as an early twentieth-century series of historical novels and poems by an entity called "Patience Worth" and a posthumous "novel" by Mark Twain (pulled from the shelves after a legal outcry from the writer's estate), have reputedly come through the board. Such works, however, have rarely attracted enduring readerships. Poets Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes wrote haunting passages about their experiences with Ouija; but none attain the level of their best work.

So, can anything of lasting value be attributed to the board—this mysterious object that has, in one form or another, been with us for nearly 125 years? The answer is yes, and it has stared us in the face for so long that we have nearly forgotten it is there.

An Occult Splendor

In 1976, the American poet James Merrill published—and won the Pulitzer Prize for—an epic poem that recounted his experience, with his partner David Jackson, of using a Ouija board from 1955 to 1974. His work *The Book of Ephraim* was later combined with two other Ouija-inspired long poems and published in 1982 as *The Changing Light at Sandover*. "Many readers," wrote critic Judith Moffett in her penetrating study *James Merrill*, "may well feel they have been waiting for this trilogy all their lives."

First using a manufactured board and then a homemade one—with a teacup in place of a planchette—Merrill and Jackson encounter a world of spirit "patrons" who recount to them a sprawling and profoundly involving creation myth. It is poetry steeped in the epic tradition, in which myriad characters—from W.H. Auden, to lost friends and family members, to the Greek muse-interlocutor called Ephraim—walk on and off stage. The voices of Merrill, Jackson, and those that emerge from the teacup and board, alternately offer theories of reincarnation, worldly advice, and painfully poignant reflections on the passing of life and ever-hovering presence of death.

And yet we are never far from the human, grounding voice of Merrill, joking about the selection of new wallpaper in his Stonington, Connecticut, home; or from the moving council of voices from the board, urging: *In life, stand for something*.

Critic Harold Bloom, in a departure from others who sidestep the question of the work's source, calls the first of the *Sandover* poems "an occult splendor." Indeed, it is not difficult to argue that, in literary



Ouija Supernatural

USAopoly (Hasbro), 2014




Talking Board Set

Third Eye Concepts, 1991



Talking Board

ROSS, 2015



What makes this game board and its molded plastic pointer so resilient in our culture?

terms, *The Changing Light at Sandover* is a masterpiece—perhaps the masterpiece—of occult experimentation.

Voices Within?

Of course, the Merrill case begs the question of whether the Ouija board channels something from beyond or merely reflects the ideas found in one's subconscious. After all, who but a poetic genius like James Merrill could have recorded channeled passages of such literary grace and epic dimension? Plainly put, this wasn't Joe Schmoe at the board.

In a 1970 book on psychological phenomena, *ESP, Seers & Psychics*, researcher-skeptic Milbourne Christopher announces—a tad too triumphantly, perhaps—that if you blindfold a board's user and rearrange the order of letters, communication ceases. In 1915, a specialist in abnormal psychology proposed the same test to the channeled entity called Patience Worth, who, through a St. Louis housewife named Pearl Curran, had produced a remarkable range of novels, plays, and poems—some of them hugely ambitious in scale and written in a Middle English dialect that Curran (who didn't finish high school) would have had no means of knowing.

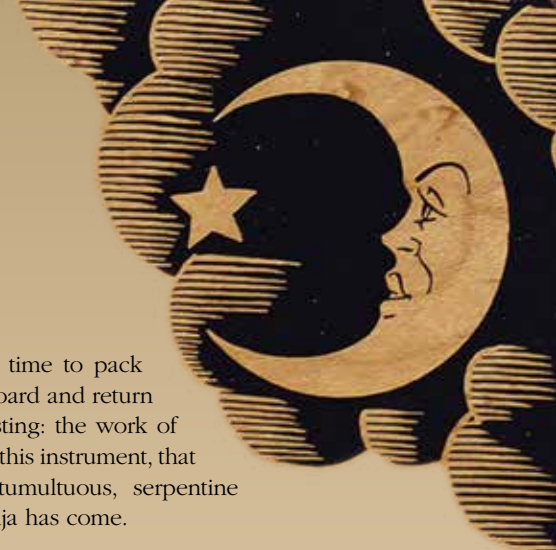
As reported in Irving Litvag's 1972 study, *Singer in the Shadows*, Patience Worth responded to the request that Curran be blindfolded in her typically inimitable fashion: "I be aset athin the throb o' her. Aye, and doth thee to take then the lute awthither that she see not, think ye then she may to set up musics for the hear o' thee?" In other words, how can you remove the instrument and expect music?

Responding to the occult fads of the day, biologist and researcher Louisa Rhine wrote an item on Ouija boards and automatic writing adapted in the winter 1970 newsletter of the American Society for Psychical Research. Whatever messages come through the board, she maintained, are a product of the user's subconscious—not any metaphysical force: "Because [such communications] are unconscious, the person does not get the feeling of his own involvement. Instead, it seems to him that some personality outside of himself is responsible."

For his part, the poet Merrill took a subtler view of the matter. "If it's still *yourself* that you're drawing upon," he said, "then that self is much stranger and freer and more far-seeking than the one you thought you knew." And at another point: "If the spirits aren't external, how astonishing the mediums become!"

To Ouija or Not to Ouija

Ouija is intriguing, interesting, even oddly magnetic. A survey of users in the 2001 *International Journal of Parapsychology* found that one half "felt a compulsion to use it." But, in a culture filled with possibilities, and in a modern life of limited time and energy, is Ouija really the place to search? Clearly, for James Merrill, it was. For me,



the answer is no. It is time to pack up my antique Ouija board and return to what I find most lasting: the work of Merrill, passed through this instrument, that perhaps justifies the tumultuous, serpentine history from which Ouija has come.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The latest news from collector-curator Gene Orlando (see Museum of Talking Boards credit below) is that Ouija is definitely not on the wane. Talking board enthusiasts are interested and active and growing as a community. Hasbro continues to issue new versions of the signature Ouija to capture both youth and adult markets. Etsy and eBay offer a staggering array of boards and the handcrafted gallery on the MoTB website showcases the custom work of individual artists. The Talking Board Historical Society (TBHS.org) held the first ever Ouijacon in 2015 to celebrate Ouija's Baltimore heritage, where the mayor's office declared it "Ouija Day." Gene reports that it was "the largest exhibition of talking boards in history" and "the Ouija board has never been healthier."

MITCH HOROWITZ is a PEN Award-winning historian and the author of *Occult America* (Bantam) and *One Simple Idea: How Positive Thinking Reshaped Modern Life* (Crown). He is vice-president and editor-in-chief at Tarcher/Penguin, the division of Penguin Books dedicated to metaphysical literature. He has written for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Politico*, *Salon*, and *TIME.com*. This article is adapted from the original, which appeared in *Esopus* (Fall 2006, esopusmag.com), a biannual of arts and culture. MitchHorowitz.com

MUSEUM OF TALKING BOARDS generously provided all images for this article. The online gallery is the brain child of super-collector and curator Gene Orlando. Visit the comprehensive website for all things "Ouija" (and other talking boards): history, lore, images of antique boards, links to other resources, how-to tips, and interactive talking boards so you can ask Ouija and "otherworld" authorities your most probing questions online. museumoftalkingboards.com

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- ORIGINS, a 13-part web series, hosted by author Mitch Horowitz, on the history of superstitions. Short 90-second videos include topics such as black cats, the number 13, mirrors, ladders, and death. originstheseries.com
- "Out of this World: James Merrill's Supernatural Muse," Dan Chiasson, *The New Yorker*, April 13, 2015. Discusses Merrill's poetry, which was infused with the poet's experiences of Ouija, opera, heartbreak, and other life experiences. newyorker.com
- "Featured Author: James Merrill." Compilation of news and reviews on Merrill includes audio of the poet and others reading his work. nytimes.com/books/01/03/04/specials/merrill.html
- "Ouija Does It," Robert Berridge, *Saturday Evening Post*, Jan./Feb. 2012. The all-true story behind Norman Rockwell's 1920 cover illustration "Ouija Board." saturdayeveningpost.com

CLOCKWISE FROM CENTER King Donovan, Dana Wynter, Carolyn Jones, and Kevin McCarthy in the 1956 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.



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PERILOUS PLOTS

MYSTERY AND CONSPIRACY IN AMERICAN FILMS

BY JERRY JERMAN



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The paranoid style is an old and recurrent phenomenon in our public life which has been frequently linked with movements of suspicious discontent.

—Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 1964

In a now widely-known essay for *Harper's Magazine*, political scientist Richard Hofstadter analyzed what he termed “paranoid style.” He was intrigued by how political behavior, throughout American history, had been perverted and recast by zealots as secret plots to undermine the nation. Hofstadter cited examples like: Robert Welch, a retired candy manufacturer, who suggested that Eisenhower’s Council of Economic Advisers was just a cover for working with communists; nineteenth-century populists who “constructed a great conspiracy of international bankers” to explain the country’s financial woes; and Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose own brand of dogged accusation—what political cartoonist Herbert Block coined as *McCarthyism*—became synonymous with the paranoid hunt for communist infiltrators who

GETTING A GRIP ON REALITY THROUGH MOVIES AND MAYHEM

threatened American nationalism. Appearing during the rise of the Barry Goldwater presidential campaign, Hofstadter’s essay put the reactionary politics of the day into historical context: no conspiracy, just hype.

But don’t we still want to know—who *really* killed JFK?

Conspiracy 101

It’s best to begin with a definition: *A conspiracy is an organized, orchestrated effort by two or more people to cause an event to happen.* This almost benign statement makes a few important distinctions. A conspiracy requires intentional effort; it is not random, accidental, or happenstance. It is the product of a group, not an individual. And there is a clear end in mind, an intended result.

Some experts tell us we need conspiracy theories, that they help us find order in a world (at least as evidenced in the media) characterized by senseless violence, random occurrences, and simple bad luck. We want answers for the so-called mysteries behind certain events. In laying out a cleverly conceived design or plan, however fanciful, a conspiracy theory explains what our minds often don't want to accept: that sometimes it *is* a lone gunman; that a simple mechanical failure can cause a plane crash; that swamp gas might explain eerie lights in the night sky.

A 2013 PublicMind Poll indicated that sixty-three percent of U.S. voters believe in at least one conspiracy theory. There are more than 60,000 conspiracy websites on the death of Princess Diana. Other recent "conspiracies" include the missing Malaysia Airlines flight, the bugging of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's cell phone, and even that bungled fourth-quarter play by the Seattle Seahawks in Super Bowl XLIX.

The fact is, Americans love conspiracies. We wonder: Did NASA really land astronauts on the moon? What government shenanigans are going on in Area 51? Was water fluoridation just a communist plot to sap the brains of American children? This American penchant for paranoia is nowhere more apparent than in the prevalence of conspiracy themes in our popular culture.

Take for instance the appeal of conspiracy movies, both historical, such as *JFK* (1991) and *All the President's Men* (1976), and fictional, such as *Enemy of the State* (1998) and *The Matrix* (1999). Conspiracies have cropped up in films from cinema's earliest days. Looking at a few examples from the late twentieth century, it is interesting to see how Hollywood has depicted perilous plots and how conspiracies play out in the characters' lives. The challenge is to limit our exploration to just a few. This is where it helps to be the author—I get to choose.

"They're here already! You're next! You're next!"

Few historical phenomena generated greater conspiracy awareness than the McCarthy Era. Senator Joe McCarthy and his minions managed to ruin the professional and personal lives of countless Americans through accusations that they were or knew communists. Attacks hit particularly hard among those in the entertainment industry.

A film long believed to be a veiled critique of McCarthyism appeared in 1956, disguised as a low-budget horror flick. Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* tells the story of Miles Bennell (Kevin McCarthy), family physician in a

small California town, who uncovers an intergalactic plot employing alien seed pods. When placed near a sleeping person, the alien seed transforms him or her into an emotionless, soulless husk. As the story unfolds, Miles discovers colleagues, friends, patients, and eventually even his girlfriend (Dana Wynter) replaced by unfeeling beings.

Miles manages to escape the pod people and ends up in a hospital, raving that he is not insane as he tells his conspiracy story to skeptical doctors. Only when they learn about strange pods spilling from an overturned truck on the highway are they finally convinced Miles isn't crazy and call in the FBI, an implied "all will be well again" frame that the studio forced on the director. Siegel wanted a bleaker close, the scene where Bennell runs into traffic, warning annoyed drivers (and us): "They're here already! You're next! You're next!"

Many critics and moviegoers saw *Body Snatchers* as an expose of the McCarthyism mob marching in mindless lockstep. Another view is that the movie assails communism, where heartless



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Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Allied Arts, 1956). Becky (Dana Wynter) and Miles (Kevin McCarthy) are on the run from alien seed pods. Is it classic horror or veiled McCarthyism?



The Man Who Knew Too Much (Paramount, 1956). Director Alfred Hitchcock opens with a portrait of the modern American family. The McKennas (Doris Day, Christopher Olsen, and James Stewart) expect a relaxing holiday, but are soon blindsided by secrets, kidnapping, and intrigue.

conformity rules. The filmmakers themselves hedged on the issue. Actor Kevin McCarthy (no relation to Joe) regarded the film as a depiction of Madison Avenue (buy our product and join the “in” crowd), while Don Siegel saw his work as a satire of the “pod people” he encountered in the Hollywood front office.

“A man . . . a statesman . . . is to be killed.”

Mention mystery and suspense and director Alfred Hitchcock inevitably springs to mind. In Hitchcock’s 1956 remake of his 1934 feature *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, an American family on holiday in Morocco encounters an international conspiracy. At a Marrakesh marketplace, physician Ben McKenna (James Stewart) is approached by a man in Arab clothing with a knife in his back. As the man collapses, Ben’s fingers rub makeup from his face, revealing not an Arab but a Frenchman the family met on the bus to Marrakesh. The dying man whispers a perilous plot: “A man . . . a statesman . . . is to be killed . . . assassinated in London.”

Once the conspiracy has been revealed, the McKennas must race, not so much to prevent the assassination as to discover where the conspirators have taken their son, Hank, who is kidnapped to ensure the couple’s silence. Here, conspiracy serves a significantly different purpose than in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; it propels the real theme of the film: the deteriorating relationship between Dr. and Mrs. McKenna.

From the beginning we sense tension between the couple: Jo McKenna (Doris Day) is bored by North Africa, where the film begins. We learn they have “monthly fights.” Jo tells Ben that since he has “all the answers,” she wants to know when they’re going to have another baby. We discover, too, that Jo gave up a singing career to marry and raise a family in Indianapolis, something that clearly irks her. She asks why they cannot just live in New York where she could have continued her career. And she is rightly angry when she discovers Ben has kept from her news of Hank’s kidnapping. Ben’s response? He drugs her so he can calmly plan their next steps.

Hitchcock’s opening shot of Jo, Hank, and Ben, seated in that order, in the back of a bus on the way to Marrakesh reveals a modern American family, circa 1956. From that point, this trio is

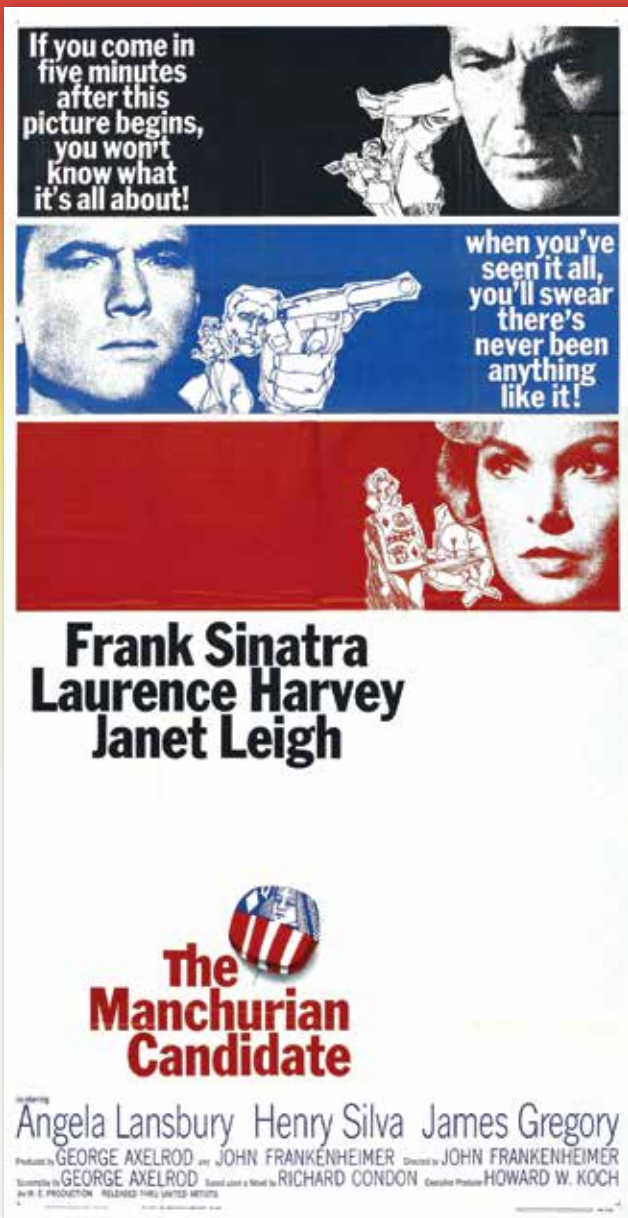


broken apart. It is not until the final moment that Hitchcock unites them again, arranging them in the same order as on the bus.

The mystery Hitchcock uncovers for viewers is not what the conspirators are up to (we never even learn the name or nationality of the intended victim of the assassination plot); it is what has happened to this family. Ben is a man of science who knows too much in perhaps the same way that a know-it-all does. He has wooed the celebrated singer Josephine Conway and trapped her in a domestic life where she is literally muted. In London’s Albert Hall, Jo regains her voice, literally released as a scream. It is through her efforts, not Ben’s, that the assassination plot is foiled. Later, Jo does sing again—the movie’s Academy Award-winning song, “Whatever Will Be, Will Be (Que Sera, Sera).” Her voice leads the couple to their missing son and puts an end to the nightmare in which they have been living. In this way, conspiracy is the impetus for healing a damaged relationship.

“Why don’t you pass the time by playing a little solitaire?”

The McCarthy Era rears its ugly head again in *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), which critic Roger Ebert observes “has entered everyday speech as shorthand for a brainwashed sleeper, a subject who has been hypnotized and instructed to act when his controllers pull the psychological trigger.”



The Manchurian Candidate (United Artists/MGM, 1962). Maj. Bennett Marco (Frank Sinatra) is caught in a web of communist conspiracy and political assassination. The film received little attention at its release during the Cuban Missile Crises, but has since been acclaimed as a Cold War, neo-noir classic.

The communists intend a political assassination that will result in Iselin becoming a presidential candidate. But Eleanor plans something altogether different. Feeling betrayed by the communists who failed to consult with her about the identity of the assassin, she informs her very disturbed son, “When I take power, they will be pulled down and ground into dirt for what they did to you. And what they did in so contemptuously underestimating me.”

By the end of this intense film, the paranoia becomes ours. Could this really happen? It falls to Raymond’s commanding officer (played by Frank Sinatra) to unravel the conspiracy—but resolution comes with considerable carnage.

“He’d kill us if he got the chance.”

What happens when the bugger becomes the bugged? This is the core conspiracy—and mystery—at work in Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974). Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), a San Francisco-based surveillance expert, records a lunch hour conversation between a young couple at the request of “The Director” of an unnamed corporation. Some years earlier, working on the East Coast, Harry’s work brought harm to the people he recorded and the memory haunts him. He begins to worry that the current conversation might be dangerous for the young couple. Harry carries these worries into the Catholic confessional, and Coppola turns *us* into buggers as we are privy to Harry’s conversation with a priest.

The Conversation is Coppola’s homage to Michelangelo Antonioni’s classic *Blow-Up* (1966), in which a self-absorbed photographer gets tangled in a mystery that his technical skills cannot unravel. Similarly, after playing and replaying the conversation in question, Harry finally makes out one previously unintelligible sentence of the recording: “He’d kill us if he got the chance.” Given that no one else seems aware of this conspiracy, we have to question whether Harry has unearthed anything at all. His feeble attempt to stop what he thinks will be the murder of the young couple is his undoing, brilliantly captured in a final shot

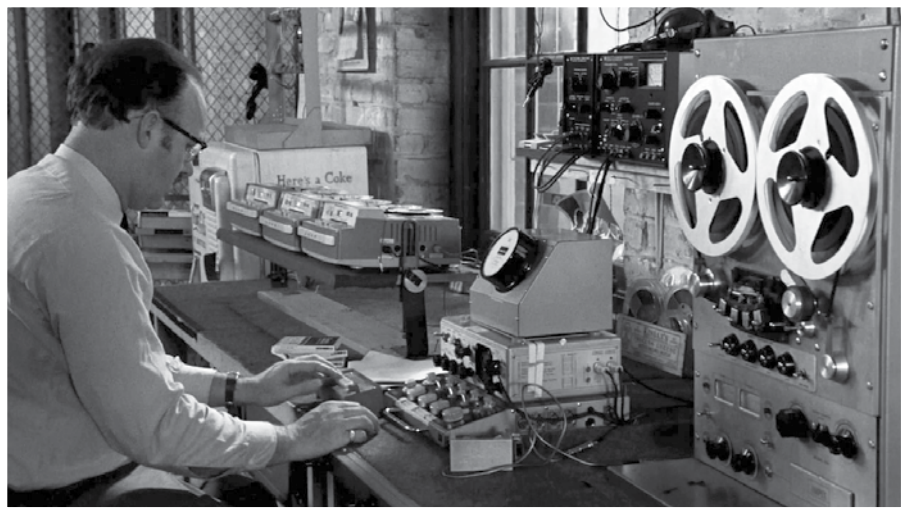
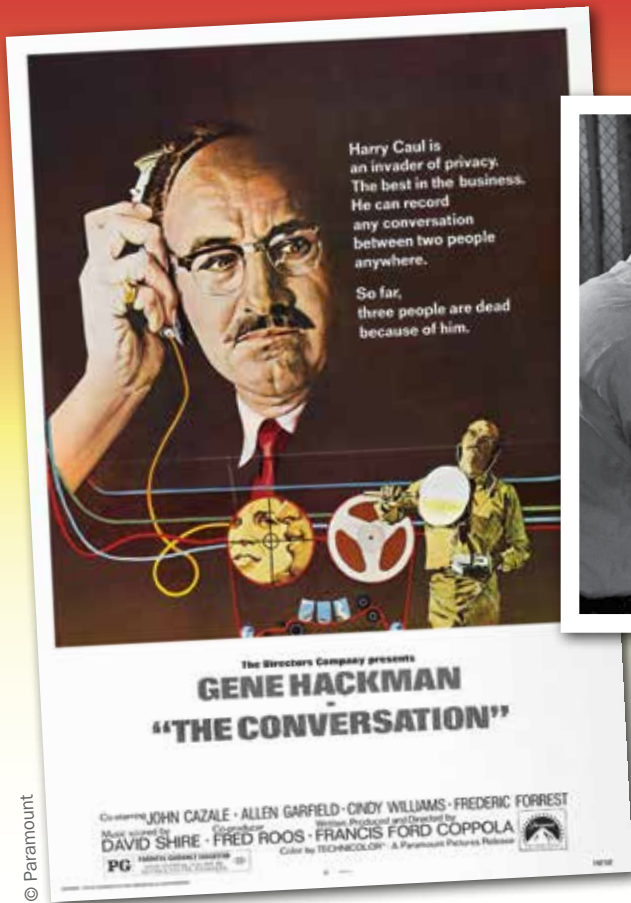
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© United Artists/MGM

Set just after the Korean War, the paranoia of this film comes with heavy doses of cynicism and black humor. Woven into the scheme are Chinese and Soviet conspirators, political assassination, a fanatical and dimwitted U.S. senator, and his controlling wife—all marvelously envisioned by director John Frankenheimer, a genius at depicting conspiracies. (Also worth checking out is his *Seven Days in May*, 1964.)

Frankenheimer’s skillful scene construction is best shown when Senator John Iselin (James Gregory), the Joe McCarthy stand-in, interrupts a press conference with the Secretary of Defense to announce the number of communists working in the Defense Department, a number that varies with each accusation. The chaos of the scene is expertly captured as background as the puppet master, Eleanor Iselin (Angela Lansbury), watches the event on television. Positioned on the left as the largest figure in the frame, she looks down at the monitor like God.

The true pawn is Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey), son of Eleanor and stepson of the senator. He is a victim of brainwashing, as we see in a masterfully-constructed flashback of Chinese and Soviet conspirators observing his platoon. Raymond is controlled by a simple phrase: “Why don’t you pass the time by playing a little solitaire?”



The Conversation (Paramount, 1974). Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is a surveillance expert with a troubled past. Will the secrets he uncovers lead to murder?

but by his fantasies as well.” Sometimes our belief in a conspiracy actually conspires against *us*, sucks us in, and ensnares us—as it did Harry—to the point that we are alienated and lost, no longer certain what is real and what is simply illusion.

JERRY JERMAN is Director of Marketing and Communication for Outreach at the University of Oklahoma. He also teaches humanities and film courses for OU’s College of Liberal Studies and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. [Image note: Movie photos and posters are used here under fair use principles for nonprofit educational, scholarship, and public information purposes. Materials are copyrighted by their respective studios or owners. Images for *The Man Who Knew Too Much* were kindly provided by doctormacro.com (see art credit on p. 28).]

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- Cinephilia & Beyond. Articles, photos, interviews, scripts, and documentaries on movies and the filmmaking process. cinephiliabeyond.org (search: *The Man Who Knew Too Much* for set photos, a digital view of the screenplay, and interviews with Alfred Hitchcock, including how he used sound to frighten audiences)
- National Film Registry, Library of Congress. Includes an essay by Robert Sklar on *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, a film selected for preservation as “culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant.” loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board
- “Going Online in the Age of Conspiracy Theories,” Adrienne Lafrance, *The Atlantic*, Oct. 21, 2015. Quotes Joseph Uscinski, co-author of *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), and discusses “the often bizarre tradition of questioning key moments in history.” theatlantic.com
- “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” Richard Hofstadter, *Harper’s Magazine*, Nov. 1964. Hofstadter’s take on the tenor of “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” in American politics of the 1960s, its historical roots, and the influence of mass media. harpers.org

sweeping the bugger’s apartment, back and forth, like a surveillance camera. This mystery is more existential than the other three films, and only partially resolved. Who really were the conspirators? Did a murder take place or was it something that Harry simply imagined—a victim of his own paranoia?

Enter: Doubt and Uncertainty

If the point of conspiracy theories is to help us make order in a chaotic world, one question we could ask is whether the conspiracy depicted in each film is confronted and defeated. If we accept the frame in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Miles certainly meets the conspiracy head on and helps end it. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, the conspiracy is put down by one scream from Jo McKenna: end of conspiracy, end of family conflict. However bleak we find the end of *The Manchurian Candidate*, Raymond Shaw squares off against the plot his mother helped to spawn and violently eliminates it, becoming a modern-day Hamlet. At the end of Shakespeare’s play, the stage is littered with corpses and the sweet prince manages to restore order. So does Raymond.

It is with *The Conversation* that we run into loose ends. Harry’s recording is stolen and he receives a phone threat: “We’ll be listening to you.” Convinced he is being bugged by others, he destroys his apartment looking for a hidden microphone he never finds. Was it even there? The conspiracy and the culprits, were they real? Perhaps Coppola was touching upon the nature of conspiracy in late-twentieth-century America, which departs from the more concrete fears of the 1950s and 1960s. In our postmodern age, things are not so clear cut. Doubt and uncertainty enter.

In the closing of “Paranoid Style,” Hofstadter notes: “We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us,



BIGFOOT

MYTH OR MONSTER?

By Marvin Leeper

Art by Brian Cundle

Leaves stir. Campers laugh over s'mores and hotdogs roasting in the crisp autumn evening—until the sharp snap of a tree branch breaks the distant quiet. A fetid odor permeates the night air. Padded feet approach, changing the revelry to uneasy dread. In the shadows, glimmering eyes appear. An onslaught of rocks and sticks fly into camp and chairs overturn as people stumble to “safety.” Someone glimpses an animal

Even the most famous man-monster of them all, the Himalayan Yeti (dubbed the Abominable Snowman in 1921 following a British expedition to Mount Everest), is believed by many to be just such a creature. These and many other names are given to the monster universally declared as both real and myth, the subject of serious exploration, debunkers, and farce, depending on the imagination of the (un) or (true) believer.

AMERICAN BEHEMOTH—TALL, DARK, AND LEGENDARY

with matted fur; another swears it is a giant, standing upright at least eight feet tall. A deafening wail pierces the chaos. *What is it?*

Big—By Any Name

Variations of these stories have existed for centuries, tales of a great, hairy, manlike animal that haunts the mountain peaks, forests, and river bottoms of the world. In China, the Yeren (“wild man”) has existed in poetry and folklore since ancient times. In Australia, the Yowie is an apelike creature with roots in Aboriginal oral histories.

On our side of the ocean, fur trappers, Native Americans, and rural residents tell of a foul-smelling, upright animal commonly known as Sasquatch, so named by the Coast Salish Indians of the Pacific Northwest. In nearby British Columbia, the Kwakwaka'wakw people's Bukwus (“wild man of the woods”) is malevolent, tempting lost travelers into the forest. A winter dance ritual includes elaborate carved masks depicting Bukwus, often as a great ape.

Members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma share tales of Shampe, a trickster known for pranks and thefts of wild game. One

of the best comes from LeFlore County and features a tribal elder of the same name. As the story goes, LeFlore was a giant of a man, noted for his bravery and generosity. The family farm was said to produce enough corn to feed half the Nation. LeFlore would often go into his barn and marvel at the cribs filled with golden maize. Then he noticed that his stores of corn were diminishing. He chose to ignore the trivial losses, thinking that the grain was spirited away by those less fortunate. Late one night, the dogs bayed at something in the barn and Leflore sped down in time to see a large man running away, arms brimming with his stolen prize. Leflore was surprised that someone that large could move so swiftly and effortlessly.

The next evening, he took up a position in the shadows, aiming to catch the thief. When he heard the barn door creak, LeFlore jumped out—and gasped. Rather than a starving man, he came face to face with Shampe, the hairy woodland dweller whispered about around the campfires of his youth. Emanating a foul pig-pen smell and towering above LeFlore’s six-and-a-half-foot frame, the hair-covered abomination seemed hardly human. Springing into action, Leflore soundly swatted the top of the intruder’s head with the flat of his hand. Staggering but not disabled, Shampe countered with an equally powerful stroke. Leflore, reeling from the blow, realized that here was a worthy opponent and, summoning all his strength, slapped Shampe atop the head once more. The conflict carried on for hours, each giving as good as he got. Bested in the end by the enormous Choctaw’s endless reserve, Shampe slipped into the shadows, much shorter than before. (No doubt this tale is a bit embellished by the retelling over a century and a half.)

Pop Culture Phenom

Images of Sasquatch have adorned the big screen for decades. *Harry and the Hendersons* (1987) boasts a convincing Bigfoot conjured by a special-effects costume and makeup that won Rick Baker an Academy Award. The Hendersons run over “Harry” with their car and take him home to recover. Hilarious scenes of the eight-foot animal in a suburban home, and heartfelt interactions between Harry and the family make a winning comedy that later became a television series.

In a darker vein, *The Legend of Boggy Creek* (1972), producers assure us, is “based on a true story.” The pseudo-documentary style, colloquial actors, and actual Fouke, Arkansas location add atmosphere and draw viewers into a web of what-ifs that fascinate and thrill. *Legend* was a sleeper hit and is popular on DVD and late night movie channels.

Television, too, has had great influence in popularizing Bigfoot, producing one after another so-called documentaries and reality shows, including Animal Planet’s “Finding Bigfoot,” Destination America’s “Killing Bigfoot,” and the History Channel’s “MonsterQuest” (probably the best of the lot). These mockumentaries fill the public’s insatiable appetite for Sasquatch without posing thought-provoking questions or forwarding *any* solutions. Even TV advertising capitalizes on Bigfoot fame. The poor creature that stars in commercials for Jack Link’s Jerky deserves an Emmy (or Clio) for enduring continual torment from humans in his search for the tasty snack (look for the videos on YouTube).

You can track Bigfoot in books written for young and old alike. Children’s books like *Patty: A Sasquatch Story* portray the hairy giant in all kinds of misadventures. With amusing illustrations by Robert Swain and text by Michael Mayes, *Patty* is presented from



the animal’s perspective (a female Sasquatch allegedly filmed by Roger Patterson and Robert “Bob” Gimlin in 1967), with an opening as magical as any fairytale:

Deep in the old growth forest of Northern California, not far from where the giant redwoods grow, in a place where men are rarely seen, lives a tribe of fantastic beings called sasquatches.

Far across the spectrum from Patty is Lyle Blackburn’s spine-tingling account of the “actual events” chronicled in the *Legend* movie. In *The Beast of Boggy Creek: The True Story of the Fouke Monster* (Anomalist Books, 2012), Blackburn weaves the Bigfoot sightings, alleged livestock kills, and three-toed footprints in a labyrinth of words that creep along the page like creeks across the Arkansas landscape. He spent months researching and visiting sites to accurately evoke a community held in the grip—or paw—of terror while a man-beast rampages through the backwoods. The siege continues today as new reports of monster sightings drift in. Both the *Legend* film and Blackburn’s tome ask us: *Why is the creature drawn to one area over and over again?* It is a question we might expand: *Why are we drawn to these creatures and mysteries that have no explanation?*

All-True Adventures

From the dense forests of the Pacific Northwest to the piney woods of Oklahoma Green Country, the “close encounters” with Sasquatch are generations old and as thick as . . . well, trees. At a construction site in Northern California in 1958, tractor operator Gerald Crew and fellow workers were perplexed by nocturnal events. Though the location was rugged and remote, the men noticed that massive 55-gallon oil drums were being moved at night. After a number of barrels had been displaced, Crew found enormous footprints one morning, trailing around his bulldozer and into the woods. He made plaster casts to document the tracks. The story was picked up by the Associated Press, followed by an article by Ivan Sanderson, “The Strange Story of America’s Abominable Snowman” (*True Magazine*, 1959), which made Bigfoot a nationwide phenomenon.

One reader of the Sanderson article, Roger Patterson, caught Bigfoot fever and went in search of his own encounter with the

elusive creature. He chased supposed sightings, raised funds for expeditions, and dreamed of capturing Sasquatch on film. Following a self-published book in 1966, Patterson enlisted acquaintances, including Bob Gimlin, to begin filming in 1967. As they scouted locations near Bluff Creek, California, Patterson and Gimlin, quite literally, stumbled across one of the creatures, capturing the most iconic image of Bigfoot the world has ever known. The shaky camera footage is testament to Patterson's excitement as he lensed a female creature striding across an expanse of creek bed. The short sixteen-millimeter film has since been the subject of scientific analysis, both validating and invalidating the creature's authenticity, to the never-ending interest of sceptics and believers.

More recently, the tiny mountain hamlet of Honobia, Oklahoma, was the site of mysterious goings on. Mournful wails and howls pierced the night and one family's hard-earned venison began to disappear from an outside freezer. They locked up the meat and rigged high-intensity lights to deter the invaders, but night after night, rocks and sticks battered the roof and someone (or something) was bold enough to mount the porch, slap the cabin walls, and twist the locked door knob. At last, the lights revealed glowing red eyes in the brush. One of the men fired at what he later described as a tall, hairy giant. Rains came and washed away all hope of solving the mystery. Investigators found no body. The frightened family promptly moved away.

Sasquatch Science

In the absence of a body for examination, researchers have largely rejected eyewitness accounts as proof positive of the Sasquatch species; but there exists some physical evidence that science cannot so easily ignore. Jeff Meldrum, professor of anatomy and anthropology at Idaho State University, contends that bipedal locomotion, the distinctive two-legged gait distinctive of humans, may not be confined to our species. After studying hundreds of oversized footprint casts, Meldrum suggests that there may be another bipedal primate on the North American continent—with inherent differences. A peculiar and consistent feature of these giant prints is an area in the arch termed “the mid-tarsal break,” a midfoot hinged joint not present in human anatomy. The deviation, Muldrum posits, is to compensate for the animal's enormous weight.

Centuries-old art bearing Bigfoot images is also the subject of serious inquiry. Anthropologist Kathy Strain has studied the Painted Rock Pictographs on the Tule River Indian Reservation, near Porterville, California. The weathered images, painted on the walls and ceiling of a rockshelter, include a variety of animals and three Bigfoot figures, a male (known as Hairy Man), a female, and a juvenile. Believed to be more than a thousand years old, the red, black, and white image of Hairy Man is over six feet high and nearly three feet wide, with remarkably large hands and—true to all descriptions of the legendary creature—big feet. In “Mayak Datat: The Hairy Man Pictographs,” Strain says that the mysterious figure has contemporary significance:

Hairy Man fills an important cultural role for the Tule River Indians. Be it protector, healer, or spiritual guide to the next world, their belief systems appear to be deeply intertwined with Bigfoot, the pictographs, and their traditional stories. Since physical sightings of the Hairy Man are still occurring

on the reservation today, it seems likely that these beliefs will remain intact. (*The Relict Hominoid Inquiry*, 2012)

Tracking Okie Bigfoot

Could such a man-ape creature exist in twenty-first century Oklahoma? The members of the North American Wood Ape Conservancy think so. Documentation in the monumental “Ouchita Monograph” reveals an unprecedented four-year investigation as members subjected themselves to the hardships of the wild to validate the species. Using high-tech infrared, thermal imaging, and audio recording equipment, the group hiked and camped in the most inhospitable regions of the Ouachita Mountains, for months at a time. Specimens were collected and are pending analysis. Will their efforts meet with success or will the existence of a hairy menacing giant remain firmly rooted in folklore?

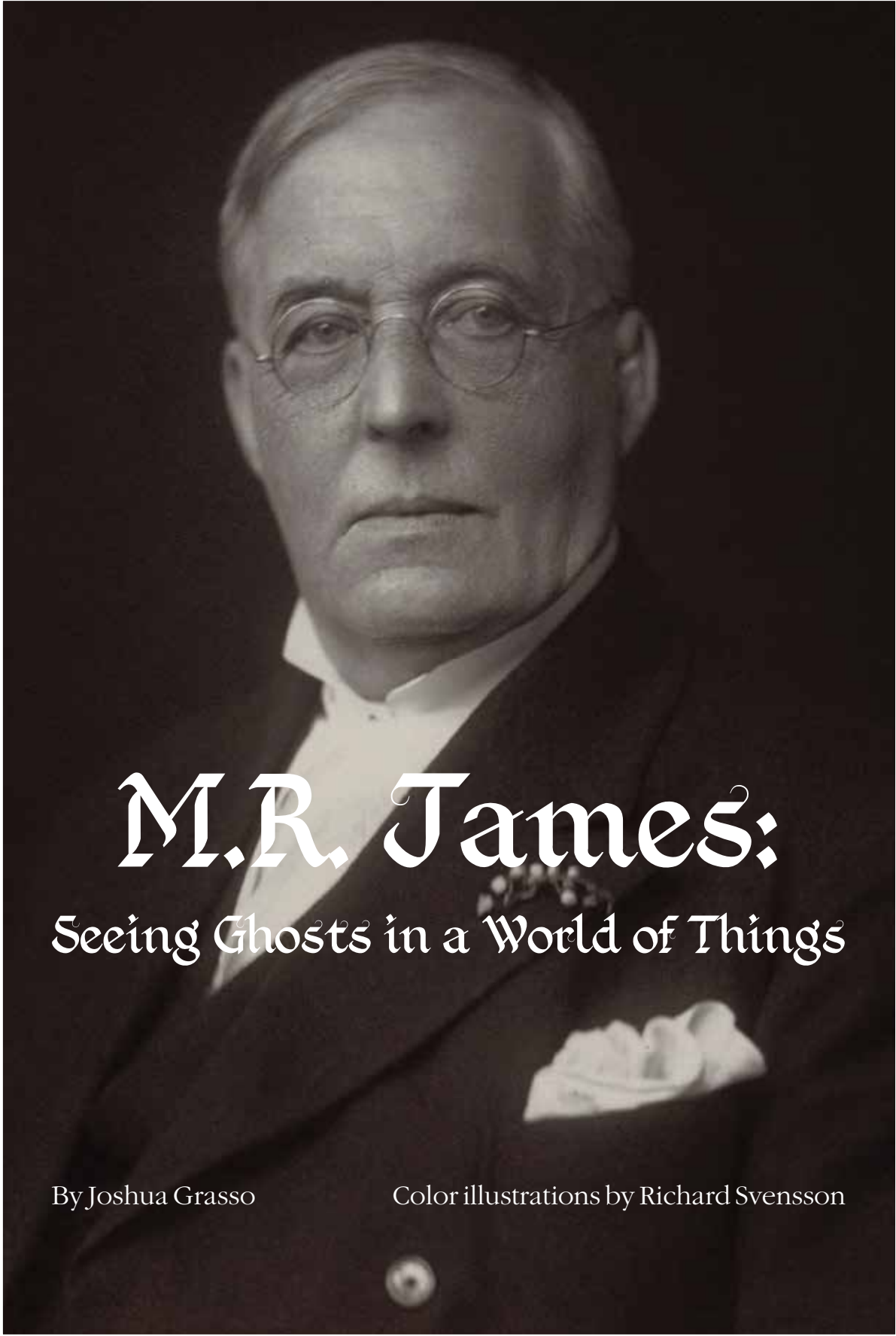
In our effort to understand the unknown, mankind has attempted explanation through art, literature, and—in more modern times—film and science. Sometimes, if the answer is unobtainable, we simply change the question. Instead of “Does Bigfoot exist?” we ask, “When will we catch up with Bigfoot?” The answer is a mystery and maybe it should remain so. As technology spins onward, perhaps we need something to capture the imagination, something that science and reason cannot uproot from our cultural heritage.

MARVIN LEEPER teaches philosophy, folklore, and English Composition at Murray State College in Tishomingo, Oklahoma. He has mentored returning vets in his capacity as a thirty-second degree Masonic scholar. He is a member of the Oklahoma Colleges transfer matrix committee for philosophy courses, and has served two terms on the Chickasaw Regional Library System Board of Trustees.

BRIAN CUNDLE, Ontario, Canada, owns his own graphic design business and has more than 47 years of experience in digital design and illustration for ad agencies and diverse businesses. His artwork is digitally painted and, as subject matter, Bigfoot and its North American habitat are a source of inspiration. Why? “I'm a 100% believer that Sasquatch *really* exists.” Illustration titles: *A Sasquatch Portrait* (p. 17) and *Gifts Exchange* (p. 18). bcdesigndigitalprints.com

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- ▶ “Ouachita Project Monograph,” North American Wood Ape Conservancy, March 2015. Report includes photos, video, audio files from four-year investigation of anthropoid species. WoodApe.org (search: *Our Research - Projects*)
- ▶ “The Science Behind Bigfoot and Other Monsters,” Rachel Hartigan Shea, *National Geographic*, Sept. 9, 2013. Interview with Daniel Loxton and Donald R. Prothero, authors of *Abominable Science! Origins of the Yeti, Nessie, and Other Famous Cryptids*. News.NationalGeographic.com (search: *Bigfoot* for more articles debating the Bigfoot mystery)
- ▶ “Mayak Datat: The Hairy Man Pictographs,” Kathy Moskowitz Strain, *The Relict Hominoid Inquiry*, 2012. Research report on the pictographs; includes photos. Isu.edu/rhi (click on *Research Papers*)
- ▶ More on Bigfoot: PattersonFilm.com
The Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization: Bfro.net
Bigfoot Information Project: BigfootProject.org
Honobia Bigfoot Festival: HonobiaBigfoot.com
SasquatchCanada.com (search: *Chris Murphy*)



M.R. James:

Seeing Ghosts in a World of Things

By Joshua Grasso

Color illustrations by Richard Svensson

Montague Rhodes James © National Portrait Gallery, London

Hidden in the pages of Eton College's fledgling literary magazine, *The Masquerade* (1933), was a tale meant to give one pause, if not considerably troubled sleep. Entitled "The Malice of Inanimate Objects," it exudes a confessional air about the true nature of the mysterious and uncanny:

In the lives of all of us, short or long, there have been days, dreadful days, on which we have had to acknowledge with gloomy resignation that our world has turned against us. I do not mean the human world of our relations and friends. . . . No, it is the world of things that do not speak or work or hold congresses and conferences. It includes such beings as the collar stud, the inkstand, the fire, the razor, and, as age increases, the extra step on the staircase which leads you either to expect or not to expect it.

One can imagine this as the apprehensive musings of a sleep-deprived, over-caffeinated undergraduate, dreaming that he is locked in a mortal melee as his entire room turns against him. (So much for making that eight o'clock lecture.) Surprisingly, the author was none other than Montague Rhodes James, the very provost of Eton College. It was no secret that the staid, respectable provost wrote ghost stories on the side, some of which threatened to eclipse his scholarly renown; but privately his students must have wondered why a lifelong academic would dirty his hands with such undisciplined literature. Unfortunately, James took this secret to the grave, offering only a few scattered clues for his most devoted readers.

One hint occurs in the story "A Vignette" (1936), published shortly after his death. Here he lays bare his belief in the mysterious, tucked tidily away from his lectures and public conversation. The narrator dreams of an old gate in a country rectory he has passed a thousand times before. The gate always struck him as odd and, once he examines it, he finds a hole with something peering back at him, a face "not monstrous, not pale, fleshless, spectral. Malevolent I thought and think it was." At its conclusion, the narrator contemplates the unknown:

Are there here and there sequestered places which some curious creatures still frequent, whom once on a time anybody could see and speak to as they went about on their daily occasions, whereas now only at rare intervals in a series of years does one cross their paths and become aware of them; and perhaps that is just as well for the peace of mind of simple people.

By suppressing this story—for he made no attempt to publish it—was James attempting to hide his private beliefs from the "simple people" of his acquaintance? Or was this merely a tried-and-true formula, borrowed from a long line of macabre writers such as Matthew "Monk" Lewis, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Bram Stoker? What might be a marketing ploy for a casual writer emerges as a lifelong obsession for James. In tale after tale, the fabric of mundane reality rips to reveal a hidden seam, offering a momentary glimpse into

these "sequestered places" where the old world remains. What he wanted us to see is uncertain, though the clues are remarkably consistent, pointing to something just beyond the page. In "Some Remarks on Ghost Stories" he observes:

When the climax is reached, [we should] be just a little in the dark as to the working of [the story's] machinery. We do not want to see the bones of their theory about the supernatural. (*The Bookman*, 1929)

James's machinery is no clumsy Gothic plot twist, but a true "theory," one he dared not admit to in public life. Only in the relative privacy of a ghost story could he indulge his hidden thoughts about the supernatural, notably the terrors that await those whose intellectual curiosity defied the status quo.

This is a curious occupation for the son born to an Evangelical clergyman and his wife in the bucolic surroundings of Goodnestone, Kent, 1862. James's early life was ensconced in the world of the church: a daily regimen of prayers, hymns, and Bible study etched Christian beliefs deep in his psyche. Though his father intended him to take Holy Orders, James ultimately followed a different, but not dissimilar, path. After preparatory studies at Temple Grove, he earned a scholarship to Eton, where he won the coveted Newcastle Scholarship (the highest academic award at Eton), as well as a scholarship to King's College, Cambridge. He completed his D.Litt. degree at King's in 1895 and quickly settled into the life of a scholar (or the "antiquary" of his tales), making comprehensive studies of the apocrypha of the Old and New Testaments, which he published as *The Apocryphal New Testament* in 1924. During his tenure as provost at King's (1905-1918), he undertook the quixotic feat of cataloging the entire Cambridge manuscript collection—some twenty thousand manuscripts, some of which he brought to light for the first time in centuries.

Naturally, there was another side to James besides the antiquary. To his friends and students he was known affectionately as "Monty," a jovial man who loved cats, played the piano, and devoured detective novels and ghost stories. His scholarship often mingled with these interests, prompting him to edit editions of Sheridan Le Fanu's novels and translate the complete fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen. In short, James was no intellectual snob; he found amusement and edification almost anywhere, and no field escaped his scrutiny once it crossed his path.

The ghost stories initially emerged from the "Monty" side of his personality. While still at King's, James presided over the "Chit-Chat Club," where he entertained members with seemingly impromptu yarns of ghosts, curses, and ancient riddles. One of these tales, "Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book" read on October 28, 1893, was so enthusiastically received that he began writing more—eventually with an eye to publication. This story and eight others appeared in November 1904 as *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, and caused a favorable sensation among a public already obsessed by the works of Bram Stoker, H.G. Wells, and Arthur Conan Doyle.

In many ways, "Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book" is the prototypical James story: Dennistoun, a no-nonsense scholar, arrives at a

The master storyteller who found "scary" in the ordinary

picturesque French village in pursuit of an obscure Biblical text. As he reads through the coveted book, he comes across a strange seventeenth-century drawing of King Solomon and four soldiers confronting a hideous creature (which has just killed a fifth soldier):

I entirely despair of conveying by any words the impression which this figure makes upon any one who looks at it. I recollect once showing the photograph of the drawing to a Lecturer in Morphology—a person of, I was going to say, abnormally sane and unimaginative habits of mind. He absolutely refused to be alone for the rest of that evening and he told me afterwards that for many nights he had not dared to put out his light before going to sleep.

Not one to indulge in the foolishness of the imagination, the “abnormally sane and unimaginative” Lecturer is nevertheless startled wide-awake by the reproduction, which defies all taxonomies of civilization. The narrator continues:

Imagine one of the awful bird-catching spiders of South America translated into human form and endowed with intelligence just less than human, and you will have some faint conception of the terror inspired by those to whom I have shown the picture: “It was drawn from the life.”

Ironically, the true horror comes from the creature’s lack of fantasy: it looks *too* normal, too recognizable. Even the statement that it possesses “intelligence just less than human” suggests that it has every aspect of humanity but one, perhaps the very one we cling to ourselves.

Interestingly, James’ terrors fall along the same lines as his contemporary (and fellow academic), J.R.R. Tolkien, whose trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) conjures the ancient and sentient spider, Shelob. There is something uncanny in their obsession with spiders and, in James’s case, a very specific one—the “awful bird-catching spiders of South America.” James seems to invoke the empire’s fear and fascination with the dark corners of the colonial world, much as Joseph Conrad would exploit them in his roughly contemporary novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Though the outside world could be known and classified, it rarely accorded with English (or perhaps even Western) notions of civilization. It remained somewhat monstrous, the setting for feverish nightmares and Gothic romances.

It is no coincidence, then, that James’s narrator—who seems thoroughly English in his tone and values—reaches for this description as the epitome of horror. After all, a seventeenth century artist would hardly know anything about South American spiders, as the continent had been little explored or documented, a narrative anachronism which makes the terror more palpable. Venturing beyond colonial fears, our narrator finds even more darkness: the creature is in “human form,” possessing “intelligence just less than human.” This beast is no longer inferior to man; it possesses “almost” human understanding with supernatural abilities, as its appellation as a “bird-catcher” attests. The horror, then, is not simply monstrous, but a “man-animal” that holds forbidden powers—powers the modern world insists are exclusively the domain of man.



Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book © Richard Svensson



LEFT Detail, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters: Plate 43 of Los Caprichos*, 1799, Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Most of James’s tales evoke a collective nightmare shared by all “civilized” society, which reflects the cultural zeitgeist of the early twentieth century and pioneering works by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. James more likely had in mind Goya’s *Los Caprichos* drawings from 1799; in one (above left), a nobleman sleeps at his desk, surrounded by phantasmagoric visions of owls and bats. The caption reads, “The sleep of reason produces monsters.” At the height of its imperial power in 1904, England was a nation of maps and charts, schedules and station books; in other words: reason and order. Yet, James reminds us, dreams of the Old World are only a slumber away, and even the most rational man needs his rest. A notable example occurs in the story “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad,” when the narrator uses his own dreams to corroborate the tale’s verisimilitude. Just before the professor is attacked by an inanimate object—his bed sheets—the narrator suggests that we have all, at some point, known his fear of being stalked by an invisible world:

There had been a movement, he was sure, in the empty bed on the opposite side of the room. . . . There was a rustling and shaking: surely more than any rat could cause. I can figure to myself something of the Professor’s bewilderment and horror, for I have in a dream thirty years back seen the same thing happen; but the reader will hardly, perhaps, imagine how dreadful it was to him to see a figure suddenly sit up in what he had known was an empty bed.



Though a small narrative moment, it provides another layer of corroboration, not merely of the narrator but of the reader—for surely we have all suspected that sheets move and walls speak, mundane terrors that find fullest expression in our dreams. Perhaps this is the true repository of all the “lost knowledge” of the ages, stored away against time in our unconscious—a collective, if forgotten, Alexandria, the fabled vast library of antiquity.

This leaves no doubt that James’s stories are “real,” not delusions or opium fantasies of the narrator (as was the inspiration for so many of his Gothic predecessors). James wanted his readers to truly see this world and chart its familiar boundaries, which exist not in ancient times or in ruined castles, but in forgettable streets and hotel rooms. As James admitted in his article “Some Remarks on Ghost Stories”:

The setting [of a ghost story] should be familiar and the majority of the characters and their talk such as you may meet or hear any day. A ghost story of which the scene is laid in the twelfth or thirteenth century may succeed in being romantic or poetical: it will never put the reader into the position of saying to himself, “If I’m not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me!”

Our dreams know that the horrors exist here, rather than in some imagined past, daring us to explore the library—and open the books.

Shortly after the publication of *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, James began receiving fan mail from an eager turn-of-the-century readership. One bizarre letter assumes a tone of utmost importance:

Please pardon me for writing to ask you a question. We have been reading your book *Ghost Stories [of] an Antiquary*. I live in Lincolnshire—not so very far from Aswarby Hall [where James’s “Lost Hearts” takes place]—but my question has

nothing to do with that at all. It is—are these stories *real*? [G]athered from antiquarian research, or are they your own manufacture and imagination on antiquarian lines? Please, assure me, if it is possible to you to do so. I have a real reason for asking.

What did the letter-writer hope to discover? The secret to arcane mysteries that glimmer at the very edge of dream and sleep? James never bothered to answer such requests, a silence which added to his mystique. As the years went on, James developed a devoted following among spiritualists and inspired an entire generation of horror-mystery writers such as H.P. Lovecraft, who admired his “intelligent and scientific knowledge of human nerves and feelings.” Lovecraft particularly noted:

The most valuable element in him—as a model—is his way of weaving a horror into the every-day fabric of life and history—having it grow naturally out of the myriad conditions of an ordinary environment.

Indeed, James knew that behind every literary nightmare is a forgotten world staring back at us . . . in contemplation or malice, we can only hope to discover.

JOSHUA GRASSO is an associate professor of English at East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma. His teaching and research interests center around eighteenth and nineteenth-century travel writing, gothic literature, and science fiction. In addition to articles on Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and T.H. White, he has recently published a Gothic-fantasy novel, *The Winged Turban* (2015).

RICHARD SVENSSON was born in rural Sweden. He is a pen and ink artist, stop-motion puppet animator, and prop- and mask-maker for stage and film productions. His art is inspired by the old masters of horror and fantasy, both literary and cinematic. loneanimator.com

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- *MR James: Ghost Writer*, BBC 2013. Mark Gatiss (writer of *Doctor Who* novels and TV episodes, actor and co-creator of the *Sherlock* TV series) discusses James’s life and influences, and visits sites in Suffolk, Eton, Cambridge, and France to explore inspirations for James’s ghost stories. [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/search?q=M.R.+James) (search: *M.R. James* for this documentary and BBC video dramatizations of James ghost stories)
- “Montague Rhodes James, 1862-1936,” The University of Adelaide. Read digital texts of M.R. James stories. ebooks.adelaide.edu.au (click on *Authors* tab and scroll to *M.R. James*)
- Ghosts and Scholars, digital version of the *M.R. James Newsletter*. Though not actively updated, the site has links to bibliographies, commentaries on Jamesian stories, study guides, and lists of film and radio dramatizations of James’s work. www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/GS.html
- “Goya, The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,” Khan Academy. Discussion of Plate 43 from Goya’s *Los Caprichos*, a collection of drawings advertised as commentary on “the follies and blunders common in every civil society.” [khanacademy.org](https://www.khanacademy.org)

LEIGH BRACKETT

ELIZABETH SANXAY HOLDING

First Ladies of Noir

BY W.M. HAGEN

VERA CASPARY

DOROTHY B. HUGHES



Detail, Fallen Sparrow illus. by Giorgio Olivetti © RKO Radio, courtesy DoctorMacro.com

Some loogan and his moll come at you, gats out. You're one hungover shamus, but the pills they push bring more sleep than you need. The bulls, as always, are somewhere else. Naturally, you grab for air.

That's a sample of "hard-boiled" narrative style. Translation? You're a private detective headed home after a bender. A guy and his girl corner you, and they've got guns. No cops in sight, no point in getting shot, so you raise your hands and hope for the best.

The hard-boiled narrative style was fermented in pulp magazines during the Prohibition Twenties and the Depression Thirties, best brewed and bottled by the likes of James Cain, Dashiell Hammett, David Goodis, and Raymond Chandler. Fast-talking lingo and fast-moving plots, set in teeming cities full of energy, hope, collisions—and desperation. Such was the genesis of the genre we call *noir*.

Fiction and film noir of the 1940s emerged out of a chastened view born of economic depression and a second great war in which "civilized" countries targeted soldiers and civilians alike. A rising interest in psychology, especially what drove seemingly decent people to turn on one another, expanded the moral spectrum of protagonists to include losers, criminals, and power bosses, who swam in the same muddy stream as the cops, lawyers, and private investigators of hard-boiled, tough-guy novels.

Why the fancy term? French fans named it. American wartime films—such as *High Sierra*; *The Maltese Falcon*; *This Gun for Hire*; *Shadow of a Doubt*; *Double Indemnity*; *Laura*; *Mildred Pierce*; and *Murder, My Sweet*—were banned during German occupation. When finally released as a group, the films struck French audiences as claustrophobic: gloomy wet alleyways, dark deserted streets,

Four women who put the "style" in noir

flashlights probing abandoned buildings, shafts of light through venetian blinds. The style suited the postwar mood so well that the French began translating American crime novels, publishing them as *serie noir*.

Noir elevated hard-boiled formula fiction into mainstream bestsellers and transformed "B-movie" gangster and detective films into "A-list" big screen attractions. Four women helped make noir respectable. Leigh Brackett, Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, Vera Caspary, and Dorothy B. Hughes enhanced hard-boiled crime fiction with richer atmospheric settings and dramatizations of characters' dark interiors. What was marketed as "psychological suspense" became one of the hallmarks of noir as readers and viewers learned to care for flawed characters, even as they followed their downward paths. Thereafter, noir was never so much about solving a crime, as in the classic mysteries of Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie; nor was it a matter of receiving one's just desserts, as in gangster and hard-boiled fiction and film. On these ladies' pages, as one fan put it, *whydunit* replaced *whodunit* as the main focus.



© Warner Bros.

Leigh Brackett (1915-1978)

Among fans, Leigh Brackett is probably best known as a science fiction writer, with titles such as *The Long Tomorrow* (1955), *The Sword of Rhiannon* (1949), *The Hounds of Skaith* (1974), and, most memorably, as one of the screenwriters of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), the second of the blockbuster *Star Wars* trilogy—a film dedicated to her posthumously. But Brackett began her career

in the mid-1940s in gritty pulp fashion, with lines like these from *No Good From A Corpse*:

Edmond Clive: “From now on I’m carrying a gun. And the next person that tries to feed me boot leather is going to get lead in him before he gets his toe off the ground!” . . . The front door stood open to the night, throwing a hard electric glare across the damp shrubs outside. Men with heavy boots tramped on the wood stairs. Down the road there were lights and voices and men moving around, the white explosions of flash bulbs, a jam of official cars, and the morgue ambulance.

Characters are sketched quickly: the loner, the harassed private eye, the muscle guy, the thin gangster. Next are unique femme fatales who delight in gory murders—and almost get away with them—a definite noir touch. Brackett’s unflinching descriptions of violence and its consequences attracted the attention of director Howard Hawks, who paid her his ultimate compliment: she was a “fresh-looking girl who wrote like a man.” He hired Brackett to team with William Faulkner on the screenplay for what became one of the most renowned noir detective films, *The Big Sleep* (1946). Famous for its pairing of Humphrey Bogart (as detective Philip Marlowe) and Lauren Bacall (as rich girl Vivian Rutledge), the film dropped the novel’s gloomy ending and added a scene (written by Jules Furthman) to heighten their romance.

It’s unclear how much Leigh Brackett had to do with shaping Raymond Chandler’s dark novel into something more hopeful, but one assumes she had a hand in some of the best lines, as in this snappy exchange:

Vivian: So you’re a private detective. I didn’t know they existed except in books, or else they were greasy little men snooping around hotel corridors. My, you’re a mess, aren’t you?

Marlowe: I’m not very tall, either. Next time I’ll come on stilts, wear a white tie, carry a tennis racket.



The Big Sleep (Warner Bros., 1946). Blackmailer and gambler Joe Brody (Louis Jean Heydt), right, gets the drop on detective Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) and rich girl Vivian Rutledge (Lauren Bacall). OPPOSITE Screenwriter Leigh Brackett with director Howard Hawks on the set of *Rio Bravo* (Warner Bros., 1959).

MYSTERY—WHAT’S YOUR TYPE?

By Carla Walker

From well-mannered to decidedly twisted, mystery is a chameleon of tone, era, and place. Following is an *amateur’s* attempt to decode early-twentieth-century mystery styles that are still “at large” and delighting audiences today. Note: These characters (subgenres) are dodgy, often masquerading in more than one category.

CLASSIC DETECTIVE (a.k.a puzzle or English mysteries): Our detective protagonist is *on the case*, ferreting out clues to solve a mysterious murder among a small cast of suspects who have opportunity and motive to kill. Think Sherlock Holmes (Arthur Conan Doyle) and Hercule Poirot (Agatha Christie). Action takes place on a closed set (a country estate, a cruise ship, a darkened theater), and our P.I. will break all the rules to catch the culprit. Hint: It’s rarely the butler.

COZY: As a “light” version of classic mysteries, cozy plots rely on intuition to find whodunit—no private eye needed. Father Brown (G.K. Chesterton) fits the bill, forever exasperating local law enforcement. Characters may include the gentry, the working class, and, of course, one “smart cookie.” Death by cozy is nicer, too: poison, suffocation, or overdose. Much neater for the maid to clean up.

AMATEUR SLEUTHS: Our hapless hero has no formal training for the dilemma at hand, but is adept at navigating the gossip, games, and red herrings that might otherwise trip up a novice. From cake bakers to ace reporters, any average Jane can be the crack investigator, even the aging yet inquisitive Miss Jane Marple (Agatha Christie).

THRILLERS: It’s not just one victim, it’s mayhem on a grand scale. The bad guy may be a serial killer or a team of goons out to destroy world order. Add espionage, as in *The Fallen Sparrow* (Dorothy B. Hughes), and you have spy thrillers; doctors and hospitals, medical thrillers; cops and forensic experts, police procedurals . . . You get the picture. The pace is breathless and may keep you up at night.

HARD-BOILED: Stories turn on the mean streets of the city—tough guys (and girls), muscle men, mob bosses, and stooges. Our often solitary gumshoe is hardened by a corrupt society where crime and politics are ever entwined. Even so, private eyes like Philip Marlowe (Raymond Chandler) and Sam Spade (Dashiell Hammett) fight to set their world to rights. But it’s always curtains for some poor slob.

NOIR: Our protagonist is desperately disillusioned—maybe even dangerous. A brittle exterior masks a psyche pummeled by a broken heart, a double cross, or case gone wrong. Authors like Vera Caspary shatter the “classic” formula with plots that follow the victim, the criminal, the investigator—or everyone—around dark corners and into abandoned buildings. We are privy to characters’ twisted quirks, experiencing action *through their eyes*. Pack a flashlight—it’s going to get dark.

Vivian: I doubt even that would help. Now this business of Dad's, you think you can handle it for him?

Marlowe: It shouldn't be too tough.

Vivian: Really. I would have thought a case like that took a little effort.

Marlowe: Not too much.

Vivian: What will your first step be?

Marlowe: The usual one.

Vivian: I didn't know there was a usual one.

Marlowe: Oh, sure there is. It comes complete with diagrams on page forty-seven of *How to be a Detective in Ten Easy Lessons*, correspondence school textbook—and your father offered me a drink.

Vivian: You must have read another one on how to be a comedian.

Later, the dialogue takes a romantic turn, as in this line following their first kiss:

Vivian: I like that. I'd like more.

And at the end, when Marlow explains that everything will be tied up by the police:

Vivian: You've forgotten one thing—me.

Marlowe: What's wrong with you?

Vivian: Nothing you can't fix.

By the time the film was released, Humphrey Bogart had married young Lauren Bacall.

Brackett did another Chandler adaptation, a hip version of *The Long Goodbye* (1973). Director Robert Altman said at first he didn't want to do another predictable Marlowe film, but when he read Brackett's surprise screenplay ending, he quickly changed his mind and guaranteed the scene's inclusion with a clause in his contract.

Leigh Brackett was a writer's writer. Ray Bradbury credited her critiques with making him a better science fiction writer. Inspired by her screenplay for *The Long Goodbye*, Michael Connelly changed his career aspirations, from building contractor to detective fiction writer. Her solid work on *The Big Sleep* led to screenwriting on other Hawks productions, including two John Wayne westerns, *Rio Bravo* and *El Dorado*. From pulp detective fiction to science fiction, from quick-draw westerns to the nuanced world of film noir, Leigh Brackett was a master of many genres.



Library of America

Elizabeth Sanxay Holding (1889-1955)

If Leigh Brackett developed her noir style from its taproot in hard-boiled crime novels, a sampling of Elizabeth Sanxay Holding's early 1940s work shows a progression from classic puzzle mysteries to darker psychological studies. *The Girl Who Had To Die* (1940) and *Lady Killer* (1942) have the familiar features: a murder, limited locations (onboard a ship, in a mansion), a limited number of suspects (each with something to conceal), a protagonist trying to put it all together, and a resolution. But one notices a key difference: an amateur sleuth with personal problems that hinder and even derail his investigation. In examining these characters,



The Reckless Moment (Columbia, 1949). When her daughter's boyfriend is found dead, housewife Lucia Harper (Joan Bennett) is blackmailed by smooth-talker Martin Donnelly (James Mason).



Holding makes the transition from mystery to noir. John Killian in *The Girl* sets a pattern of the lonely protagonist:

After a time he turned out the light and lay in the dark. I don't know what I want, he thought, filled with melancholy. Nothing much. That's the trouble. I'm negative now. . . . A few months ago he had been positive, definite. Ambitious to get on in the business. Now he didn't care. He felt cold, indifferent; he felt old.

Malcolm Drake, in *Net of Cobwebs* (1945), quite bungles his investigation. Recovering from a wartime trauma involving two days in a lifeboat, Drake finds himself unable to function:

The whole thing was coming back, like a towering wave rushing at him. . . . No! Look here! he said to himself. This is the bad time, early in the morning. Nobody else awake in the house. In the world. . . . He went like a blindfolded man, lifting his feet too high, to the closet; he opened the door and fumbled among the clothes hanging there, and in the back, in the pocket of his winter overcoat, he found his little bottle.

In her best noir fiction, Holding's female characters have problems too. *The Blank Wall* (1947) and the two films adapted from it—*The Reckless Moment* (1949) and *The Deep End* (2001)—show a mother, Lucia, struggling alone to protect her family. While a blackmail threat is avoided, Lucia is conscious of the duplicitous role she will play in the future, given her involvement with murder. The family will "give her love, protection, even a sort of homage, but in return for that she must be what they wanted and needed her to be."

The Innocent Mrs. Duff (1946) trades Holding's earlier weak sleuth for a weak husband who feels trapped by his marriage to a beautiful, loyal, loving wife. He drinks, concocts absurd schemes to compromise her, and makes increasingly bad decisions, committing



Laura (20th Century Fox, 1944). Police detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) studies the portrait of career woman Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney) while investigating her murder, until she suddenly appears, alive and well. So who's the murder victim?



a murder along the way. Raymond Chandler began working on a screenplay of the novel, but Paramount didn't renew his contract. Still, Chandler admired Holding's work, noting that "For my money she's the top suspense writer of them all."

Elizabeth Sanxay Holding expanded noir's exploration of human psychology, and she should be credited for the raw revelations of her characters' inner struggles, showing the deterioration that alcohol, drugs, and stress can create in those seeking a sense of order in a post-war world.



Library of America

Vera Caspary (1899-1987)

Part of what distinguishes noir are fully realized women, neither standard femme fatales nor Girl Fridays for the male detective. Vera Caspary's sympathies, influenced by her own accomplishments, aligned with women who seek (and sometimes achieve) a degree

of independence, even when married. Scholar A.B. Emrys, writing for *The Feminist Press*, particularly notes her strong characterizations of women: "Caspary gave urban noir a Gothic fillip in which women negotiate the mean streets of a male world." *Bedelia* (1945 novel and 1946 film), set in the early twentieth century, has two career women agreeing, "Men aren't our lords and masters." If you're married to a *Bedelia*, such male presumption can be fatal.

Laura (1942 novel and 1944 film) is aptly named for its protagonist, Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney), a powerful career woman with her own design firm. The film is revered as a noir classic. Studio head Darryl Zanuck and composer David Raksin can be credited with lifting *Laura* out of the "B" mystery category into a noir feature after Caspary argued with director Otto Preminger that the novel was really a psychological study. When Preminger was ready to cut the scene where detective Mark McPherson (Dana



Library of America

Dorothy B. Hughes (1904-1993)

The opening chapter of *In A Lonely Place* isolates characters, binding them in a relationship found again and again in the work of Dorothy B. Hughes—a character who stalks or hunts another, and the object of the hunt who becomes aware that he or she is being followed or manipulated for someone else's purposes:

The bus had rumbled away and she was crossing the slant intersection, coming directly toward him. Not to him; she didn't know he was there in the high foggy dark. He saw her face again as she passed under the yellow fog light, saw that she didn't like the darkness and fog and loneliness. She started down the California Incline; he could hear her heels striking hard on the warped pavement as if the sound brought her some reassurance. . . . He didn't follow her at once.

Three Hughes novels published during an intense five-year period, 1942-1947, show a deepening commitment to the moral psychology of pursuer and pursued. All three were developed as

Andrews) wanders through Laura's apartment, opening drawers, smelling her perfume, and gazing at her portrait, Raksin argued that it was crucial to show the detective's growing fascination with the supposed victim. As a composer, he knew he could communicate that feeling through music—hence, the haunting "Laura" theme, a hit in its own right after Johnny Mercer added lyrics. Although the film has atmospheric lighting, it is the music and dramatic elements that infuse it as noir: characters with obsessions, ambiguous morality, and the hook of a beautiful woman, supposed dead, who shows up and becomes the prime murder suspect.

The Blue Gardenia (1953), based on Caspary's short story "Gardenia," has some of her best lines about the tensions between men and women. When playboy Harry Prebble (Raymond Burr) is apparently murdered by a woman, Norah (Ann Baxter) argues that perhaps the man was too aggressive. Her roommate Crystal (Ann Sothorn) replies, "If a girl killed every guy who got fresh with her, how much of the male population do you think would be left?" The third roommate, Sally (Jeff Donnell), a fan of hard-boiled novels, adds a bit of noir humor: "I didn't like Prebble when he was alive. But now that he's been murdered, that always makes a man so romantic."

By 1953, when Fritz Lang directed *The Blue Gardenia*, the shadowy look of noir was set, as shown in the film's effective use of noir imagery: serrated elephant ear plants festoon a room, obscuring the struggle between two figures. Shiny fragments cascade from a broken mirror, a memory which haunts Norah. Swirling fog blends into mental whirlpools that reflect Norah's confusion. As in earlier German expressionism, noir reality is shaped by conscious and unconscious states of mind.

Caspary had signal successes in both fiction and film in an extraordinarily productive career: twenty-two novels, five plays, an autobiography, and writing credits for twenty-seven films and television productions. Through independent women caught in a dark world, and the psychological effects of being so caught, Vera Caspary's work stresses the risks of being self-sufficient, and the rarity of men who have the sense to value such women.



The Fallen Sparrow (RKO Radio, 1943). Intrigue follows John “Kit” McKittrick (John Garfield) as he investigates the suspicious suicide of a friend, then falls for the only witness to the death, Toni Donne (Maureen O’Hara).



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noir films—*The Fallen Sparrow* (1942, filmed in 1943), *Ride the Pink Horse* (1946, filmed in 1947) and *In a Lonely Place* (1947, filmed in 1950). The period coincided with raising her three children. “I used to write anywhere,” Hughes said, “the automat, in the kitchen, while cowboys and Indians were played around me.”

Dorothy Hughes did not participate in adapting her novels. She had tried screenwriting but, by her own admission, “never was any good at it”—though she was well rewarded. She boasted that *The Fallen Sparrow* was optioned for \$12,000, as compared to only \$2,000 received by Raymond Chandler for *The Big Sleep*.

The Fallen Sparrow is a spy thriller, dedicated to the genre’s reigning master, Eric Ambler (“because he has no book this year”), who was serving in the Royal Artillery. Hughes’s emotionally damaged protagonist, Kit McKittrick (John Garfield), escapes from a Spanish prison. After recuperating, he goes to New York to investigate his best friend’s death. Kit has periods of paralyzing panic, especially when he senses that his old prison tormenter, someone he knew only by sound (“Wobblefoot”), is nearby.

Two other features of the novel become trademarks of Hughes’s noir production: class-consciousness and the figure of the morally ambiguous beauty. In *The Fallen Sparrow*, Hughes is critical of the upper class, depicting them as largely weak or susceptible, even to the point of cooperating with fascist agents. On the other hand, lower class Italian immigrants stand with moral integrity; they carry through when Kit’s own class can’t be trusted. This foreshadows the sympathetic Hispanic and Indian characters in *Ride the Pink Horse*, strangers you can trust when your own kind turn you away.

Hughes’s novel *In a Lonely Place* features a serial killer, but director Nicholas Ray and screenwriters transform him into Hollywood writer Dix Steele (Humphrey Bogart), an intellectual who seems cold and temperamental enough to commit murder (supporting the popular suspicion that good crime writers must have criminal impulses). Where Dorothy Hughes chillingly portrays an obsessed man who stalks women, Nicholas Ray shows an arrogant artist: when he can’t control the editing of his work or the actions of others, he flies into a rage. Since Bogart’s Dix is so strong, perhaps Ray saw little need of including

Hughes’s noir settings—twisting roads, crashing surf, and rolling fog—which signify the tangled, hidden impulses of the novel’s killer. Instead, Ray plays off Bogart’s eyes, his road rage, and his confrontations. *In a Lonely Place* became an indisputable classic of film noir. The book and movie succeed in different ways.

In summing up the war years generation of mystery writers for *The New York Times Book Review* in 1945, critic Howard Haycraft put Dorothy Hughes in an elite group, classed with the likes of Dorothy Sayers, Francis Iles, Dashiell Hammett, and S.S. Van Dine. In 1978, Hughes received the Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America, their highest honor.

Through remarkably different career paths, Leigh Brackett, Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, Vera Caspary, and Dorothy B.

Hughes enriched classic mystery, hard-boiled, and spy fiction and helped create the noir style. They added psychological insights that shifted interest from solving mysteries to the wellsprings of criminal motivations, portraying normal people on a slippery slope, often living double lives. In their fiction and screenplays, these First Ladies of Noir helped expand the range of popular genres to appeal to a wider and more discerning audience.

BILL HAGEN retired from the English Department at Oklahoma Baptist University in 2012. He is an active scholar in *Let’s Talk About It*, *Oklahoma* and *Big Read* programs throughout the state. He has published a number of articles on Joseph Conrad, Malcolm Lowry, and film adaptation.

DOCTOR MACRO’S High Quality Movie Scans hosts thousands of 1940s-era movie stills, film summaries, and recordings of radio shows and songs featuring many of Hollywood’s early stars. A majority of movie images and posters in this article are courtesy of the dedicated collectors at doctormacro.com. [Image note: Movie photos and posters are used here under fair use principles for nonprofit educational, scholarship, and public information purposes. Materials are copyrighted by their respective studios or owners.]

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- ▶ *Women Crime Writers of the 1940s and 50s*, Sarah Weinman, ed. (The Library of America, 2015) kindly provided several images for this article. Includes short essays on writers; audio book clips; movie trailers, reviews, posters, and stills; and notes from contemporary writers like Sara Paretsky on their favorites from the era. womenscrime.loa.org
- ▶ *Crimeculture*, an online magazine chock full of reviews, interpretations, and recommendations on crime fiction and film, funded in part by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, UK. crimeculture.com
- ▶ Cinephiliabeyond.org: Audio interview with Leigh Brackett and commentary from Robert Altman on modernizing the Marlowe character (search: *Robert Altman and The Long Goodbye*)



The Spook Light Mystery—Solved! (Sort of.)

By Allen Rice

Photos by Bruno Maestrini
and Elisa Herrmann

On any given summer's night in northeastern Oklahoma, at least a dozen vehicles hug the narrow shoulder of an unremarkable country road nicknamed "Spook Light Road" or "Devil's Promenade," just a mile or two west of the Missouri border. The adventurous spill out into the road, others sit nervously in their cars, and everyone is gazing west down State Road E-50. There are no towns within miles, only dark sky and steep ridges of oak, pine, and hickory forest.

Suddenly, a glowing orb the size of a basketball appears over a hill a few hundred yards away. It hovers momentarily, then creeps

by night in the form of the glowing orb. Another is that a local miner's family was kidnapped and he carries a ghostly lantern, looking for them night after night beyond the grave.

Equally interesting are historical records of various teams that have investigated the phenomenon over the last 130 years. In 1936, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter A.B. MacDonald of *The Kansas City Star* published the first recorded investigation of the Spook Light phenomenon, documenting oral tradition dating from the 1880s when it so frightened homesteaders in Hornet, Missouri, that they fled in terror. Perhaps inspired by MacDonald's article, a band of

Spooktacular adventures on a haunted Oklahoma backroad

toward the spectators. Reactions swing from curiosity to abject terror. It moves closer. And then it's gone.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the phenomenon called the Spook Light, an enduring mystery also known as the Joplin Spook Light, the Hornet Spook Light, or the Tri-State Spook Light. It appears at random (on rare occasions and only on hilltops) as an eerie colored aura, glowing pale as a kerosene lantern or dazzling bright as a motorcycle headlight. Through binoculars it can also appear as a number of lights that split off and go in different directions. And don't bother chasing the light—it will simply vanish.

So what is the Spook Light? Theories range from the rational to the supernatural. Scientific attempts to explain the mystery have used all manner of instruments (light magnetometers, night vision cameras, negative ion detectors, and even Geiger counters) to attribute the light to swamp gas, mineral deposits, will-o'-the-wisps, ball lightning, tectonic strain, or other "logical" sources—to no avail.

The most popular and enduring explanation is more mystical: *ghosts*. One legend says that a young Quapaw Indian couple's forbidden love forced them to leap from a cliff to forever walk their tribal grounds

students from the University of Michigan camped out to solve the mystery in 1942. After two weeks of frustration, the students spent their last night firing high-powered rifles at the light. (Adult beverages may have been involved in that particular experiment.)

Spoiler Alert—The Mystery Revealed

My little ragtag team of investigators call ourselves "the Boomers." Where some guys' weekends involve hunting or fishing, the Boomers are out searching for great unsolved mysteries. Bigfoot in the Ouachita Mountains. Nessie in Scotland. Space aliens in Roswell. That sort of thing. We hunt for history and fish for folklore. On this particular trip, the Boomers were comprised of my friend (ex-student Christopher "Chris" Shaneyfelt) and my family (Michael "Fergie" Ferguson, James Cast, and Keon Canaday).

We began our adventure after midnight on a misty September evening, off to see the Spook Light for ourselves. At first, we saw nothing. We moved positions from the bottom of a hill to the top, and not long afterward the Spook Light suddenly appeared. We couldn't believe our luck. We didn't think we would see the phenomenon on

Seeing is believing.

our first trip. We were so excited that we stayed up until 4:30 a.m. and saw the Spook Light three more times.

Through binoculars I had a vague impression of a flashing yellow light (a caution sign?) seeming to emanate directly in front of the Spook Light. Later, the Spook Light changed from white to bright red to radiant blue (perhaps a police vehicle?). We jumped in the van and gave chase. As in all accounts of trying to chase the light, it disappeared. We drove several miles west and eventually found some flashing yellow lights near a train overpass. Could the car lights from this new road be the source of the Spook Light? Possibly. We were out of time, so further sleuthing would have to wait. In less than a day we spotted the light, speculated on what its source might be, conducted an investigation, and came to a conclusion. We just didn't have proof.

Flash forward to our second expedition a few weeks later on December 13, 2014. We returned, armed with cell phones, flashlights, binoculars, and three video cameras. On that chilly December day, Chris and I did some preliminary scouting. By dusk, Fergie had arrived with James and Keon and we parted ways. I drove my van to the westernmost hill on Spook Light Road. Fergie drove his little subcompact west, around a four-mile square of forest that lay between Spook Light Road and the town of Quapaw. He parked facing east on E-50 West, a road that lined up perfectly with Spook Light Road, and called me on his cell phone. This was our moment of truth. Facing west, we saw the Spook Light in the exact position everyone always sees it: below and to the left of a blinking cell tower. Even at maximum zoom, I could barely pick up the bluish-white image in the camera, but I began filming and narrating ad lib.

"I wish that light were brighter," I directed. The Spook Light grew brighter.

"I wish it were dimmer." The Spook Light dimmed, repeating the brighter-dimmer pattern on my command several more times. When I willed the light to change color, it immediately turned a pinkish red. The Boomers had replicated the Spook Light! How?

Fergie flashed his headlights on and off in direct response to my narration as I asked for the Spook Light to become dimmer or brighter. When I asked for the Spook Light to change color, Keon and James placed red translucent filters over the headlights, bathing the beams pinkish red. We demonstrated that we were controlling the Spook Light. So, against all odds, the Boomers triumphed in solving the Spook Light Mystery!

Chris took our amateurish film footage and my extempore narration and put together a twenty-two minute documentary of how we solved the mystery. On April 3, 2015, The University of Central Oklahoma sponsored a premiere screening of the film at a press conference open to the public. Seventy people attended and the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. Afterwards, we released the video on YouTube, where you can see it for yourself under the heading "Spook Light Mystery Solved!" (The video image of the light is admittedly blurry, but even the best of cameras mounted firmly on a tripod would produce blurry results if recording headlights from a distance of at least six miles away.)

Essentials of Time and Place

Despite its cool moniker, Spook Light Road is pretty ordinary. As Robert Gannon, writing for *Popular Mechanics* in 1965, noted: "The only thing that seems singular about this road is its remarkable straightness and the abundance of beer cans along its edges." But the Spook Light

phenomenon has been researched and investigated dozens of times by award-winning journalists and teams of pedigreed scientists. The folklore travel guide *Weird U.S.* declared it "one of America's greatest mysteries." It seems counter-intuitive that, despite brilliant investigators with highly-calibrated equipment, the amateurish Boomers would be the team to finally solve the mystery. As it turns out, we only *sort of* solved it. Our subsequent research has uncovered that we weren't the first, and there are other "goings on" at Spook Light Road that may yet defy explanation.

As Chris and I worked on our documentary, we accumulated an inch-thick pile of print material on the Spook Light. Unbeknownst to us at the time of our expeditions, the mystery had essentially been solved not once, not twice, but three times in the past. A.B. MacDonald in 1936, George W. Ward in 1945, and William Least Heat-Moon in 2008 all argued that the source of the Spook Light was merely car headlights from E-50 West. In 1946, the Army Corps of Engineers performed the same flashing headlight experiment that the Boomers reinvented eight decades later. Unfortunately, the experiment failed when Army researchers got disoriented and sent the car down the wrong road.

But let history show that three researchers—Charles W. Graham in 1946, R.E. "Bob" Loftin in 1955, and Robert Gannon in 1965—did it all; that is, they theorized that the source of the Spook Light was car headlights, conducted the flashing headlight experiment to prove their theory, and succeeded in seeing the flashing headlights from Spook Light Road. As to why the Spook Light appears so rarely and why it can be seen only from hilltops, the trio came to questionable conclusions. They hinged theories on ground moisture and heat waves, relative humidity and temperature, and refractions through misty skies to account for the shimmering light—all similar to the "Refraction Theory" advocated by Kansas City scientist George W. Ward. What do the Boomers think? On misty nights, humidity obscures distant traffic and gives an eerie glow of otherworld mystery; but as far as we know, the Refraction Theory has yet to be proven or even tested. Our conclusions suggest two reasons why the Spook Light appears rarely and only from hilltops—time and geography.

The rarity of sightings is built into folklore tradition, which advises observations after midnight; sightings are thus rare because there is less traffic on E-50 West late at night. By starting our investigations at dusk, the Boomers caught the last of rush hour traffic, resulting in more Spook Light sightings. We looked through binoculars during the day and could see the cars driving in the distance.

Regarding geography—and why Spook Light observations occur only on hills—let us imagine two high towers separated by thick forest with treetops two or three feet shorter than the towers. Fergie is on top of the first tower using a flashlight to send Morse Code to me on top of the second tower. Chris, standing at the base of my tower, cannot see Fergie's flashlight because the beams are blocked by trees. In the same way, E-50 West "towers" as a long, downward slope running west to east and aligning perfectly in cardinal direction and altitude with the other "tower" of Spook Light Road. Fergie's car beams from E-50 West travel in a straight line above the forested valley, striking only the tops of the three or four highest hills on Spook Light Road. This is why the Boomers couldn't see the phenomenon until we moved to the top of the hill. It also explains why the light disappears as you chase it (another mini-mystery the three Spook Light research heroes didn't address). From

a “tower” hill you can see distant car lights, which form the Spook Light; but when you walk or drive down the hill, the Spook Light disappears, now blocked by the hill or forest.

To their great credit, Graham, Loftin, and Gannon all clearly indicated that the source of the Spook Light was traffic from E-50 West and the two or three miles where it merges with Highway 69 (which they knew as Route 66). Surprisingly, none of them indicated the exact point along that route at which they conducted their experiments. This may seem a minor point, but traffic lights emanating from the eastern part of E-50 West cannot be seen from Spook Light Road. We know this because Fergie flashed his headlights at three separate points along E-50 West, where it starts at the westernmost part of the forest, and Chris and I failed to see the lights until we were at a strategic “tower” point. When we finally saw Fergie’s headlights flashing, his car was parked just a few yards east of the intersection of E-50 West and Highway 137. Also of timing note, our experiment was in the dead of winter, when few leaves were on the trees to block the car beams; in summer, when leaves are full, the experiment would likely be successful only if Fergie moved west, further *up* the long ramp of Highway 137.

So allow the Boomers to put a fine point on it. In our experiment, Fergie’s car was parked southwest of Quapaw, a few yards east of the intersection of E-50 Road and Highway 137, at these exact map coordinates: 36° 56.62′ N, 94° 47.227′ W. By putting a pushpin in the exact location of our experiment, and by explaining how increased foliage and the intervening forest could obscure the traffic source of the Spook Light from the easternmost parts of E-50 West, the Boomers helped validate the pioneering trio’s conclusions—and carved a niche in the Spook Light saga for ourselves.

On Skeptics and Thrill Seekers

Why do so many media outlets and Spook Light aficionados continue to declare it an unsolved mystery? Even contemporaries of the earlier research trio rejected their findings at the time they were published. Why? Because *seeing is believing*. The Boomers fantasize about going back in time, handing each of the researchers a video camera, thereby creating a collage of filmed experiments as renowned as the 1967 Patterson-Gimlin footage of Bigfoot. Since Graham, Loftin, and Gannon had no video proof to back their claims, the impact of their achievements has been all but lost, even to one another. Each man seemed to think (much as the Boomers did) that he was the first to prove his experiment. Their argument—that all could be explained by traffic—got lost in the debate, becoming merely one of a dozen competing theories, the chief of which was ghosts.

Our video footage is admittedly technically underwhelming, but it is hard to dispute: a now documented source of light located exactly where the Spook Light always appears that responds to my voice commands. Skeptics need not take our video footage on faith alone. We didn’t film a once-in-a-lifetime moment, like grainy footage of Bigfoot—it’s reproducible. If critics doubt our claims (and they should), they can travel to our GPS coordinates and conduct their own experiment. Even better would be drone footage, shot flying along the Spook Light route.

Although the Boomers solved (or re-solved) the mystery of the Spook Light, other puzzles remain. For instance, how could old-timers have seen the Spook Light before the invention of cars? Our guess is that a lantern, bonfire, or other light source near Quapaw might have caused a similar illusion. It would be interesting to flash

an antique lantern or create a small bonfire from the “tower” of E-50 West and observe it from Spook Light Road. Until someone films such an experiment, it remains a mystery.

An even bigger mystery is the long history of observers who claim that the Spook Light behaves in ways that no traffic lights could account for; namely, that the Spook Light rises up into the sky, that it appears in the east rather than in the west, and that it can move perpendicular from left to right or vice versa. Are these phenomena for real? Can they be explained? Maybe, and maybe not. The Boomers tend to be skeptical of patterns other than what traffic would account for.

We would love to be wrong about all this. The Boomers are always looking for the next great mystery. For now, we salute all the researchers and thrill seekers who have ventured out to an isolated stretch of farm road to catch a glimpse of something wondrous. The somewhat mundane, and arguably disappointing, answer to the mystery (that the Spook Light is merely traffic on the distant horizon) cannot detract from the fascinating illusion that the lay of the land and a trick of the eye impresses upon the human imagination.

ALLEN RICE was born and raised in Edmond, Oklahoma, and holds a Ph.D. in medieval and renaissance literature from Indiana University, Bloomington. He is a full professor of English at the University of Central Oklahoma, where he has served since 1991. He is the recipient of several distinguished teaching awards and his publications include co-authoring *Speak Your Mind: Arguing 21st Century Issues* (2004).

ELISA HERRMANN is an Assistant Professor of Mass Communications at Sam Houston State University, where she teaches TV and Film production, specializing in screenwriting and editing. She is an award-winning independent filmmaker and screenwriter. elisaherrmann.com

BRUNO MAESTRINI is a multimedia journalist currently based in China as director of photography of the *China Daily* newspaper. He specializes in new media and has a special interest in portraying the local culture and daily life of the places he visits around the world. brunomaestrini.com

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- ▶ *The Astronomy Café*. Spook Light writings, theories, and reports collected by NASA astronomer Dr. Sten Odenwald. astronomycafe.net (under “My Websites” select *Weird Things in the Attic*; scroll to *Spook Lights*)
- ▶ “*Tri-State Spook Light Booklet*,” assembled by retired Capt. R.E. “Bob” Loftin for the now-defunct Spook Light Museum. Includes newspaper clippings, local folklore, and Loftin’s account of investigating the mystery. inamidst.com/lights/spooklet (images of booklet at celticcaper.tripod.com)
- ▶ “The Hornet Spook Light,” Troy Taylor, Unexplained America. Includes Taylor’s commentary on visiting the area and turn-by-turn directions to the site. prairieghosts.com/devprom.html
- ▶ “Seneca’s Traditional Spook Light,” *Lands & Lores* video and blog. Filmmakers Bruno Maestrini and Elisa Herrmann interview Spook Light chasers who share local stories. landsandlores.com

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