



# Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death

*Deborah Blum*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) ➔

# Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death

*Deborah Blum*

## **Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death** Deborah Blum

What if a world-renowned professor of psychology at Harvard University, a doctor and scientist acclaimed as one of the leading intellects of the time, suddenly announced that he believed in ghosts? At the close of the nineteenth century, to great public and professional astonishment, William James-the great philosopher, a founder of the American Psychological Association and brother of Henry James-did just that and embarked on a determined, lifelong pursuit of scientific evidence to prove it.

James came together with two other brilliant and charismatic thinkers of the day-Richard Hodgson, a converted skeptic, and James Hyslop, a natural grandstander who would often visit mediums unannounced, a hooded mask covering his face-to form the core of the American Society for Psychical Research. They eventually merged with the British Society for Psychical Research, adding to the group the Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick and his tiny, ferociously smart wife Eleanor, as well as the mythically handsome Edmund Gurney and others. While studies of ESP and ghostly visitations have occurred since the days of the society, at no other time have scientists of the caliber of James and his colleagues devoted themselves in such an ambitious and driven way for evidence of a life beyond. James and his band of brothers staked their reputations, their careers, even their sanity, on one of the most extraordinary (and entertaining) psychological quests ever undertaken, a quest that brought its followers right up against the limits of science.

This riveting book is about the investigation of the ghost stories-the instances of supernatural phenomena that could not be explained away-and it is about the courage and conviction of William James and his colleagues to study science with an open mind. At the heart of the story is the ongoing tension between empiricism and spiritualism-between a way of explaining the world that is grounded in the purely tangible and a way that is grounded in a mixture of the evident and the hidden. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Deborah Blum uses her extraordinary storytelling skills and scientific insight to explore nothing less than the nexus of science and religion. It is a territory as fascinating to us now as it was to William James and his colleagues then.

## **Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death** **Details**

Date : Published August 3rd 2006 by Penguin Press

ISBN : 9781594200908

Author : Deborah Blum

Format : Hardcover 371 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Science, Fantasy, Paranormal, Psychology, Ghosts, Biography



[Download Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scienti ...pdf](#)



[Read Online Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scien ...pdf](#)



**Download and Read Free Online Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death Deborah Blum**

---

# **From Reader Review Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death for online ebook**

## **Laura says**

Ok, it took me forever to read this book because it was so chocked full of information. I recommend this to anyone who wants to think deeply. A lot of head nodding & head scratching went on whilst reading. Paranormal concepts I got, but famous people & what they did triggered faint memories of science class tests. I'm in awe of the dedication of these super smart people of the (I think) Gilded Age who managed to endorse, fund, & study several causes &/or ideas simultaneously.

If you look at my read list you will find mostly romances & mysteries. Many of the authors I read include paranormal elements, or the "woo-woo" factor if you will, since that is the current fashion. William James & his colleagues would be appalled at how all their painstaking, reputation breaking work has become fodder for the mass market entertainment around the world.

This book explains so much about the very real war between religious thought, scientific process, and those of us; who in the famous words of Rodney King ask plaintively, "Can't we all just get along?".

Some fav quotes: (pg213) William James in an 1896 address to the Philosophical Club of Yale & Brown Univ, "we are doing the universe the deepest service we can" when we keep our minds open to what we do not know for sure, to what we have no idea how to prove.

Same page: from the collection "The will to believe"; "Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things", & religion says that the best things are eternal, "an affirmation which obviously cannot yet be verified scientifically at all." James suspected that many scientists dealt with the challenge by denying religious precepts entirely without asking themselves which intellectual pitfall was the greater evil: Better risk loss of truth than chance of error. James argued that the pursuit of truth, even when it might seem illogical by the rules of science, was always worth the risk.

Another great quote (pg 264) by W James: "Nature is everywhere gothic, not classic. She forms a real jungle, where all things are provisional, half-fitted to each other & untidy." Speaking about Mr. Myers acceptance of the complexity of the cosmic environment, "although we may be mistaken in much of the detail, in a general way, at least we become plausible."

One more, (pg 258) from the author,

William James had no such hopes, nor any fondness for this rational future that so many of his academic peers eagerly anticipated. The survival theory, he wrote, ignored the fact that civilizations come & gone had also been arrogantly sure that they possessed the one TRUTH above truths. He thought it a mistake to dismiss ideas of history simply because they didn't fit current scientific methodology.

---

## **Eric Wojciechowski says**

Halfway through this volume we come to this line from the 1890 book, "Revelations of a Spirit Medium" by the anonymous author, A. Medium: "thousands of persons earning a dishonest living through the practice of various deceptions in the name of spiritualism." A. Medium, recommended the scientific community

investigate the spirit world but avoid paid mediums. A. Medium mentions that “any street conjurer possesses the tricks to make lights dance in the dark, tables walk in the air.”

And this sums up what happened when Williams James, Alfred Russell Wallace and a cast of other intellectuals spanning across the Atlantic, from America to England, were taken in by clever stage magicians who chose to use their talents for evil. It’s an incredible story of caution that no matter how smart you are, you still have the capacity to be fooled. Especially since the tricks these mediums use are still used today.

One wonders why the rooms have to be nearly pitch dark. Or why spirits arrive and depart behind a curtain or out of a cabinet. Or why they communicate via rapping on a table or pushing a coaster around a board. Or why a glowing orb or breeze floats across the room. Simple stage magician tricks were deployed against Williams James and continue to be used to date.

Not all happens by deception. Not every medium resorts to tricks. Across these pages there are those claimed mediums and lay-people who truly thought they were communicating with the dead. But they were more than likely mistaking coincidence or seeing agency in otherwise natural, normal occurrences where there was none. Or more often than not, recalling an event long past which has been molded, exaggerated or repainted over the passage of time. Many stories of alleged contact with spirits have a big fish quality. The original story isn’t so grand but years later, the recall and retell molds and changes, painting something more mysterious than what actually happened. At any rate, William James and his peers relied quite a bit on surveys, giving them weight that anecdotal evidence just doesn’t deserve.

The mind is easily fooled. It does it to itself quite often without any help, when it mistakes wind rustling in the bushes for a predator or a coincidence as a precognition. But when a trickster or magician gives your brain an assist, as in the case of those doing magic tricks and claiming help from another world, well it’s all too easy to fall for it when you’re not in on the trick. I, myself, could swear the likes of David Blaine and others are sorcerers of today. They’re that good and lucky for us, they don’t monopolize on the ignorance of our own brains to claim otherworldly powers when they’re just entertaining us.

Seeing the intellectuals of the eighteen-hundreds attempt to validate a spirit world and fail with the mediums of their day, and seeing the same tricks and plays being used today, we can conclude there simply is no evidence of life after death through the study of mediumship or piling up testimonials and stories. Ghost hunting will surely continue just as Bigfoot is still vouched for even though there simply is no evidence at all. On the contrary, all there is are tricks and hoaxes and clever minds outdoing other clever minds. I suspect the search itself has meaning to the seeker. Perhaps if entertainment or just pondering a larger life than the material world is rewarding even if proof of such never materializes, the hunt will continue.

---

## **El says**

I'll be honest, I'm more interested in William James than I am in his more popular brother, Henry, because Henry wrote really snooze-worthy books and I have it in my mind that he wasn't all that nice to my BFF, Edith Wharton. I haven't read all that much of James's philosophy/psychology (but I have some of his stuff!), but the *concept* of him has always fascinated me, probably because Henry gets all the attention. (And then sister Alice gets no love whatsoever; my heart has always gone out to her, poor lady.)

I'm also interested in ghosts and the whatever stuff, so the concept behind this book intrigued me. Similar in a lot of ways to Mary Roach's *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife*, but focuses more on James himself and

his work (and presidency) of the American branch of the Society of Psychical Research. The problem I have with this book, however, is that even though "William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death" is the subtitle, the James portion is intermittent and isn't discussed as much as I had hoped.

I found there was a lot of anecdotal information about a variety of people, and at times I found my interest waning as I don't feel the author was able (or willing) to focus on one or two definitive aspects. Plenty of good history here, so if that's your thing, it's here in truckloads. The author did an incredible amount of research (and, according to her Acknowledgements, had great help) - personally speaking, however, I just wish it had been a little better streamlined.

As a side note, the real history about psychical research is nothing like this. In case you were wondering.

---

## **Bettie? says**

workaday mp3

Read By.....: George K. Wilson

Genre.....: History

Publisher.....: BBC Audiobooks Sound Library (Unabridged, 2006)

blurb - *New York Times*

*Sunday Book Review*

*Episodes of high comedy in the history of science are rare, but here is one: the investigation of Eusapia Palladino, a tempestuous and erotically charged medium from the slums of Naples, by a sober Cambridge don and his friends in 1895.*

*The Cambridge group was from Britain's Society for Psychical Research, and they trained themselves hard for the task. Their leader, Henry Sidgwick, was a prominent moral philosopher; his wife, Nora (the sister of a future British prime minister), was a mathematician and the principal of one of Cambridge's first colleges for women. Together the couple practiced how they would hold Eusapia down during seances. As Deborah Blum writes in her fascinating new book, "Ghost Hunters," Sidgwick developed an impressive skill for "dropping to the floor, his white beard trailing over the carpet, while he anchored Nora's feet in place."*

*Eusapia's apparent ability to levitate heavy tables, make mysterious winds blow and produce a substance known as "ectoplasm" — a sort of afterbirth of the netherworld — had already convinced some scientists in Europe that paranormal powers were real. But she had been married to a traveling conjuror and would be caught in trickery countless times. Members of the Society for Psychical Research wanted to be sure. But above all, they wanted to believe. If Eusapia was exposed, they would find someone with more impressive powers. Blum's strange tale shows how and why many British and American intellectuals (including some prominent scientists) ended up on a fruitless but determined hunt for ghosts.*

*Blum, a professor of science journalism at the University of Wisconsin, begins in America in the middle of the 19th century. In 1848, the Fox sisters, a pair of teenage girls from upstate New York, demonstrated their skill at eliciting information from spirits at P.T. Barnum's museum on Broadway. "The Night Side of Nature," a collection of ghost stories presented as fact, became a best seller. The spiritualist newspapers, of*

*which there were many, claimed two million believers. Table-tilting and spirit-writing were all the rage. By the 1880's, Sears, Roebuck and other companies were mass-marketing Ouija boards. America itself, Blum writes, "seemed possessed."*

*Meanwhile in England, Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-presenter of the idea of natural selection with Darwin in 1858, had started visiting mediums and was mightily impressed. He was particularly taken with Daniel Dunglas Home, whose powers, according to astonished witnesses, included the ability to levitate, float out of a window and then float back in. Home, who became one of the best-known mediums in Europe, also floated into high society, marrying a goddaughter of the czar, with the novelist Alexandre Dumas as his best man.*

*Darwin was exasperated by Wallace's gullibility and feared that his activities would somehow besmirch the theory of evolution. Wallace, however, suspected that evolution explained only the origins of bodies, and that a supernatural "overruling intelligence" was required to explain mental and moral life. Most of the scientific establishment, on both sides of the Atlantic, disagreed — often vehemently, as in the case of the scientist and lecturer T.H. Huxley, known as "Darwin's bulldog" — and asserted that spiritualism was pure trickery that needed exposing rather explaining. But a smattering of eminent scientists remained open-minded or even joined the cause.*

*Wallace brought the chemist William Crookes, future president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, into the fold. Crookes was the discoverer of thallium — a toxic element that some skeptics alleged had adversely affected his mind — and his work on cathode rays played a role in the discovery of the electron. Not only was Crookes convinced by Home, he was enchanted by Florence Cook, a strikingly pretty girl in her early 20's who liked to conduct her seances in tight black dresses. While Florence was locked in her spirit cabinet, her "spirit guide" would materialize in flowing, white robes and eat cakes and drink wine while she flirted with Crookes.*

*Even mediums complained of the fraud that was rife in their trade. So in 1882, Sidgwick and his friends formed the Society for Psychical Research with the earnest intention of investigating supernatural claims. Sidgwick, the son of a clergyman, had abandoned Christianity but feared the moral effects of the decline of religion. His co-founders included his pupil Frederic Myers, another disillusioned clergyman's son whose interest in spiritualism would markedly increase after his beloved drowned in a lake, and the Cambridge scholar Edmund Gurney, described as having "a mind as beautiful as his face" by George Eliot, who supposedly based *Daniel Deronda* in part on him. All three men accepted the dominion of modern science; their aim was to imitate its methods and provide rigorous, empirical evidence of a spiritual realm.*

*This idea, or something like it, evidently appealed to many intellectuals of the day, including Tennyson (who was Britain's poet laureate at the time), Leslie Stephen (the father of Virginia Woolf), John Ruskin, Lewis Carroll and Mark Twain, who were all members of the Society for Psychical Research. It also seized the interest of William James, who served as president of the British society for two years and was involved with the short-lived American version. (Blum's subtitle is misleading: James is not the main focus of this book.) As America's pioneer in psychology, he was intrigued by the apparently extraordinary powers of mediums' minds. But he was also drawn to the evidence they seemed to provide for his belief in "a continuum of cosmic consciousness against which our individuality builds but accidental fences." In 1885, shortly after the death of his 1-year-old son, he visited a Boston psychic named Leonora Piper at the suggestion of his mother-in-law. Although he never quite accepted that life after death had been proved, James was soon convinced that Mrs. Piper (who died in 1950, at 93) knew things she could only have discovered by supernatural means. Like many other investigators, James was prepared to rest his case solely on her startling abilities.*

---

## **Andrea Dowd says**

I had high hopes for this book but when it takes me more than a week of reading to get 100 pages into it, the author has not done their job or engaging me as a reader.

The story of William James really should have been the story of the British start of the Psychical Research Society since a majority of Blum's story took place there. She combined the significant physical, scientific, and research-based science progress in with the search for the paranormal. Combine all that backlog of historical scientific breakthroughs with ghost stories, mediums, charlatans and too much hopping back and forth between major scientist and you have a very boring and difficult to follow book.

If the book gets better as it goes along, I would be very impressed by the person who finished it.

---

## **Sonia Gensler says**

This non-fiction book focuses on Harvard psychology professor William James and his interactions with various 19th century scientists and philosophers who tried to document legitimate paranormal activity. Blum made me care very deeply about these men (& women!); their stories were so compelling that I had a hard time putting the book down. Anyone interested in Victorian scholars, 19th century Spiritualism, or studies of the paranormal should check this one out.

---

## **Rebecca says**

This fascinating and hard-to-put down volume (although I was a bit unnerved while reading it at night) follows several scientists who spent much of the 19th century (and a bit of the 20th) trying to reveal whether there was a scientific basis for many supernatural phenomena, including telepathy, telekinesis, communication with spirits, and haunted houses. In the process, they debunk many fraudulent claims (including Madame Blavatsky and the Fox sisters), but they can't quite explain away all the reports they collect.

As they repeatedly test remarkable mediums and hear overwhelming reports of ghostly warnings of loved one's deaths, these scientists become more convinced than ever that in the vast ocean of fakers, some events truly are supernatural in origin. But they face growing suspicion and ridicule from their fellow scientists and anger from spiritualists who find those they've put on pedestals tumbling down one after another.

My major problem with the book is the conclusion. It doesn't really conclude! As the original scientists in William James circle die off, the book simply draws to a close. But the real excitement of the book is their research, and the questions which it poses -- which have yet to be satisfied. Thus, you find yourself a bit at a loss, without a nice feeling of "fini" at the end of the book.

I think that structuring the book differently might have alleviated this problem. For example, had the book followed fewer people, focusing more on their narratives, it might have felt more "over" when the people at the center of the story die. Or having the final chapter or two follow more recent follow-up studies on the



same topic.

I think the book is appropriate for anyone over 14, so long as they don't get creeped out easily. It's rather clean and might stimulate some interesting conversations. I think, actually, a lot of teenagers (who are often curious about supernatural phenomena) will enjoy the details in the book about how to tell the difference between a fraud and someone who is either the real-deal or less-obviously playing their audience. ;) However, there are a few dry spots, and like me, they might find the end inconclusive and less than satisfying.

---

### **Barbara Johansen Newman says**

Finally found time to read this intriguing book.

This is an first rate account by Deborah Blum of the emergence of a growing curiosity and serious research project regarding the existence of life after death, the possibility of communication with spirits, as well as the existence of mental telepathy. The parties involved were a group of well respected scientists and psychologists in the US, as well as the UK, in the late nineteenth century who formed the "Physical Research Society." It is hard to argue with the respectability of William James and Harvard as well as several other educated and determined participants. In addition to their quest for knowledge and proof of an afterlife, they also set out to uncover the scam artists who were plentiful at the time. The work went on diligently for years by dedicated, educated people on both sides of the Atlantic, though many of their contemporaries spent a great deal of effort trying to dismiss any interest in this subject matter as pure folly. Those nay sayers and detractors made it their own mission to portray any of the documented findings in a negative and dismissive light.

While the book was dry in places due to the wealth of factual information provided, I found myself unable to put it down.

Guaranteed to make you think and think again about whether or not you will accept the concept of "something else" out there, that we cannot measure or prove the existence of given our tools today.

If you happen to read this book, please feel free to email me for further discussion.

---

### **Chris says**

Of course I love history...and this book was so interesting to me. William James is the brother of Henry James. William started a society that was going to prove life after death. This was in the late 1800's. It was so interesting to hear of all the "famous" people of that time who were part of this group. They basically debunked all of the spiritualists of that time. I really enjoyed it. After reading it, I read Thunderstruck, by Erik Larson, and at the time, didn't know until I read it, that they occur in the same time. A few of the people that are in Ghost Hunters are mentioned in Thunderstruck, one in particular....

---

## **Simon Cleveland, PhD says**

I have to admit this book excited my interests in the studies performed by the Society for Psychical Research (The SPR's former presidents' list reads like the Who's Who in Science). One reason may have been my enormous respect for the works of the father of American psychology William James who presided over the SPR from 1894 to 1895.

Anyone who read my second book on the meaning of existence will understand the my current dilemma. For the longest time I found support for my existential convictions in the works of Camus, Sartre and Nietzsche. Their foundation was further fortified by my believe in the theories of evolution and the development of human societies as defined by the works of Darwin and Diamond.

I don't tend to accept theories lightly, but this book exposed me to a double-blind study done by SPR in the early part of the twentieth century that still occupies my mind. I still yearn to uncover the reasons behind its results. Done by a few prominent scientists (and without going into the details) the study sowed in me if not doubt then some very good reasons to reevaluate my knowledge and understanding of human consciousness and brain physiology. I feel thrown back into the race for facts that can help me integrate the results with my perceptions of life and existence.

I recommend this book to you if you are firmly established in your existential beliefs as it will offer some overwhelming facts to the contrary. You will need a very full bucket of scientific proof to quench the fire it'll start.

---

## **Amra Pajalic says**

I love the Victorian period. It was a time of great invention and creativity. I've always loved stories about the paranormal so I was sold on this book when I read the blurb. If you're interested in spirits and mediums this is a must read. Well written and researched Blum looks at the history of the Society of Psychical Research and its key membership. Through their personal stories and obsessions there are many questions raised.

Blum is an author who knows her subject matter and has delved deep into the Victorian period. Scientists interested in proving the possibility of life after death embarked in investigating the phenomena of mediums. The book charts the controversy and conflict caused between scientists interested in the phenomena and those that didn't believe that this type of research was valid.

While there were many fake mediums during the Victorian period, there were some that could not disproved. The scientists researching mediums faced a quandary, at what point was there irrefutable proof as to life after death? And how could life after death be proven when the phenomena of mediums was so unreliable? Tests could not be replicated even with mediums who had proven to be accurate. The scientists undertaking this research developed many thesis that make for fascinating reading and provide food for thought. The book focuses on the medium Leonora Piper and her work with the Society of Psychical research. There were two things that I found most fascinating about this book.

When Fred Myers, a scientist with the SPR, passed over he made contact through Leonora Piper. During a seance when he was questioned about life after death he presented answers that tied in with Christianity

thought of God. SPR concluded that the medium mediates the message. That is whatever messages are sent by a spirit are interpreted by the mediums' thought processes and experiences.

This seems to illustrate why mediums can sometimes be accurate and other times so completely wrong. If the medium does not have knowledge of a particular subject matter or their brain works in a different way to that of the spirit, it's difficult for the message to be sent accurately.

The second was an experiment conducted by Margaret Verrall a friend of Fred Myers. Verrall decided to prove if there was life after death by communicating with Myers. She decided on automatic writing, the phenomena of holding a pen and having a spirit take over and write messages. Over three months she set aside at least an hour every day and waited. After three months of waiting she started writing about other matters.

On the other side of the world the SPR had contacted Myers through the medium Leonora Piper. On the days that there were messages from Fred, Verrall wrote messages that replicated the conversations Myers had with Piper. This makes me wonder if anyone could contact with spirits if they put the time into it. Do we all have the ability to get in touch with the paranormal? Or is it that the spirits are so eager to make contact that they are clamouring for anyone to speak to?

While I still don't know if I believe in life after death, I do believe that there are many mysteries in the world that we are ignorant about. That there is a world we can see and perhaps a world we cannot. Ghost Hunters is a fascinating read and one that will turn your ideas about life and death on its head.

---

## **Trevor says**

I wasn't quite sure what to expect from this book. When I was studying philosophy I first met James – the brother of the author and father of psychology in the US. I wasn't all that keen on him, but was a bit addicted to Hegel at the time and so found the fact that he had clearly read and understood Hegel something of a treat. Nonetheless, his and Dewey's pragmatism (or Instrumentalism) was a bit too simple for my tastes. The implicit denial of objective truth also caused me problems.

Books like this one, either written in support of spiritualism or against it, always follow the same formula. First you are given a series of miraculous tales. You are given time to ooh and ahh. Then some of these tales are completely discredited.

The books only diverge at this point. Those in favour focus on the 'successful' accounts and say something like, "Although we can never really know, some doubt must always be part of the scientific method and ..."

Others basically adopt my view of sports champions – we should wait to give them their medals after they are dead and therefore after we can do an autopsy to determine they had not cheated. It seems only fair. If they want their medals early then they will just have to submit to an autopsy early. And with Spiritualist and their supporters, we should wait until they are dead and can come back to prove 'life after death', and if they are in a hurry, well, that too can be arranged.

There are bits of this book I found terribly amusing. The little saying at one point about a woman who had become convinced that the only people likely to be saved were her and her husband George (and there were times when she wasn't all that sure about George) made me smile. There were also the times when James

would say things that also made me smile, but unfortunately not exactly with him. His agonising over why spirits would make the supreme effort it seemed to take for them to make contact with our realm and yet always seemed quite out of proportion with the nonsense they seemed to come off with.

This book is much more sympathetic to spiritualists and spiritualism than I would have thought likely. If I have one prejudice it is that this stuff does not deserve anything more than laughter.

So, it might seem reasonable to expect that I didn't like this book. Well, it is a strange thing. Parts of this book annoyed me – but not for the content so much as how it was told. I got a bit lost at times as there seemed to be too many stories going on. But this was less a book about the cheats (oh, sorry, spiritualists) and more about those who had been cheated (oh, I mean, their scientific investigators). I did warn you that I was prejudiced.

What is very interesting is the roll call of exceptional scientists who in one way or another gave their names in support of this kind of research. From Wallace (Darwin's co-discoverer of Evolution) to Arthur Conan Doyle. That I can think of not a single scientist who would be prepared to say that it is remotely likely that spirits can lift tables or move curtains today either proves that there has been a remarkably successful conspiracy to keep this stuff secret or modern scientific methods of detection are somewhat better at spotting fraud than they were at the start of the 20th century.

This book leaves much of what I would take to be the obvious conclusions that need to be drawn from these 'experiments' up in the air. This is very much the sort of book that someone of more religious feeling than myself may well come away from reading saying, 'one just never knows'. Like I said, I found it interesting because of the quotations from some of the greatest scientists of the age struggling to leave even a slither of a door open to religion in any form imaginable. It is sad to watch the delusions of great minds – such a terrible waste.

---

### **Margot Jennifer says**

Interesting subject. Slow and difficult read.

---

### **Michael Kleen says**

In her groundbreaking book, *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death*, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Deborah Blum has masterfully retold the story of the birth of spiritualism and the scientific pursuit of "psychical research." In the late nineteenth century, William James, renowned philosopher and psychologist, and a small group of eminent scientists staked their reputations, their careers, even their sanity on one of the most extraordinary quests ever undertaken: to empirically prove the existence of ghosts, spirits, and psychic phenomena. Deborah Blum artfully retells this story. Along with Raymond Moody's *The Last Laugh*, this book should be required reading for any aspiring investigator of the paranormal.

The cast of characters in *Ghost Hunters* reads like a who's who of late nineteenth and early twentieth century luminaries. Blum, however, leaves no one out of her narrative. Scientists, theologians, performers, mediums,

lovers, poets, working class families, and con men all share the same stage. Biographic surprises lurk behind every page. Even those familiar with the father of pragmatism and psychology, William James, are usually ignorant of his role in the investigation of paranormal phenomenon at the turn of the previous century. Other names appear. Alfred Russel Wallace, the forgotten coauthor of Darwin's theory of natural selection, the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, Charles L. Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll, author of Alice in Wonderland), and even Samuel Clemens were all members of the British Society for Psychical Research.

Blum was very adept at laying bare long forgotten antidotes of history. In *Ghost Hunters*, she approaches her brilliant and influential subjects as they were—human beings who experimented with narcotics, believed they had attained enlightenment under the influence of nitrous oxide, fell in love with their test subjects, and traveled to other continents to interview and test mediums and self-professed psychics. She weaves a detailed picture of a research field under siege by fellow scientists, journalists, and subjected to unending embarrassment caused by fraud and dubious conclusions at a time when England was ground zero in the battle between science and faith.

In the United States, William James led the charge at the helm of the American Society for Psychical Research, but his investigations seemed no more fruitful than those of his British counterparts. By 1886, Blum wrote, “their annual report... had degenerated into a list of exposures of professional practitioners.” Their experiments dismantled spiritualist claims one after another, and many members began to conclude that mental illness lay at the heart of ghost sightings.

Finally, one medium, who claimed to have received messages from deceased British Society for Psychical Research member Richard Hodgson, ultimately boosted their morale. In one message, the spirit of Hodgson allegedly revealed the name of a woman to whom he had proposed years earlier, but who had spurned his advances. William James contacted the woman, who, to his surprise, confirmed the story. This new phenomenon, known as “cross-correspondence,” continued to yield remarkable results, results that were not easy to dismiss as mere coincidence. James hesitantly concluded that, as evidence of an afterlife, that was as close as they were likely to get.

If there is any flaw in this well researched book, it is that Deborah Blum did not document her sources as thoroughly as she should have. Because this story is so remarkable, she should have made it easier for other researchers to confirm the information she presented. Never-the-less, her years of experience writing about science has given her the ability to weave a wonderful narrative without getting bogged down in technicalities and jargon. When it comes down to it, *Ghost Hunters* is both entertaining and informative, which is a rare combination these days!

---

## **Caroline says**

The Victorian era was probably the high-point of belief in spiritualism - who doesn't picture all those fine gentleman and corseted ladies participating in seances, dabbling with Ouija boards, tilting tables and automatic writing? It's probably no coincidence that this peak in belief coincided with the rise of science as we understand it - perhaps this emerging insistence that the universe could be codified and classified and explained also gave rise to some kind of reaction against it, this belief that there were some things beyond explanation?

The individuals explored in this book combined those two beliefs in one - they believed in both science and spiritualism; they believed that the former could explain the latter, and that an ordered, rational universe

didn't necessarily preclude the existence of the immortal soul and life after death. Probably at no point in history, before or likely to come, were so many eminent and respected men of science involved in the hunt for ghosts, telepathy, telekinesis, mediums, spirit communications, ectoplasm. Professors, authors, knights of the realms, Nobel prize-winners, men like William James, Sir Oliver Lodge, Charles Richet - these were no cranks or credulous fools.

This book will not convert the skeptics or shake believers. There is enough evidence, enough inexplicable occurrences, to make even the most rational reader have a few doubts - and the author herself admits that she came to this book as a woman of science and went away...a little less certain. It may not change anyone's mind, but I found this a fascinating read, of a time when science was just as certain it had all the answers as it is now. And yet the questions still remain...

---