

DOUBTING GHOSTS: PARANORMAL INVESTIGATION AND THE  
PARADOXES OF BELIEF

By Michele Hanks. Routledge. 2025. 193 pp. £39.99. ISBN 9781032655789

The back cover informs the reader that “this book will appeal to scholars of sociology and anthropology”, which is interesting since its title highlights paranormal investigation, implying that it might be of direct interest to us too. However, the acknowledgements do not mention the Society for Psychical Research, the Ghost Club or other leading authorities on the investigation of ghosts; instead, several friends and colleagues are thanked, as well as various American universities and the author’s writing group ‘Happy Medium’.

The author, Michele Hanks, is a clinical associate professor at New York University. In the introduction, she sets the scene by informing the reader that her fieldwork “was conducted during the summers of 2006, 2007, 2012, 2013, 2015 as well as an extended period of research in 2008–2009” (p. 18). It consisted of participating in ghost hunting investigations in the north-east of England, including the Golden Fleece pub in York and Castle Keep in Newcastle. Helpful notes outline the use of pseudonyms throughout the text for the investigators, the names of their groups, and the locations except where they were already in the public domain. The author also prepares the reader with a page of “Organization of the Book” (p. 21) setting out the brief details of each of the six chapters, which are titled:

1. ‘Creaky Floorboards and Flat Worlds: The Politics of Belief in the 21st Century’.
2. ‘Laughing in the Face of Rationality: Paranormal Humor and the Recognition of Multiple Subjectivities’.
3. ‘Enchanted Electricity: Theorizing the Paranormal’.
4. ‘Doubtful Spirits: Critiquing Mediums’.
5. ‘Visualizing the Heebie-Jeebies: Technologies of Detection and the Production of Anomalies’.
6. ‘Everyday Eruptions: Conspiracy Theorizing and the Power of Doubt’.

The chapters are followed by a conclusion, substantial references, and a good index.

Hanks draws attention to the scepticism of many of the investigators despite the considerable amount of time that they often spend in rational pursuit of the paranormal activities that they seek to discover. She also mentions that by the

time she had finished her research in 2015 there were “Hundreds of Facebook groups and websites” (p. 4) devoted to ghost hunting groups. Hanks reported that friends and colleagues queried whether the subject was worth studying; another individual stated that the people involved were “idiots”; and that there were generally mixed feelings about religion within the ghost hunting fraternity. The investigations discussed included the description of numerous types of phenomena, including orbs, ghosts, electronic voice phenomena (EVP), and poltergeist activity, as well as the input of mediums and the tensions that occurred concerning their roles during the visits to alleged haunted properties. Having described numerous investigations, the author brings together the multiple expressions of doubt that seemingly permeate the ghost hunting activity within the context of science, religion, and disenchantment.

The final part of the book, devoted to conclusions, highlights a number of areas discussed in the previous chapters. Contradictory and divergent reasons are suggested as to why “ghosts may feel more comfortable appearing in the dark” (p. 162), and this equally applies to the investigators with their “experience of confusion”. If key words were to be used, then ‘doubt’, ‘humour’, ‘scepticism’ and ‘friction’ would all be appropriate to the sensations that permeated the investigations.

I found the written style of the book occasionally difficult and at times annoying, since there are passages of chatty conversations which are recorded that could have either been omitted or paraphrased. For instance:

“So, what did you make of Joseph?” he asked ... “He’s a sound lad.” Steven agreed. “But what did you think of what he was getting?” “I wasn’t impressed, to be honest,” Alice interjected. “What he was getting was a bit ... on the nose, if you know what I mean.” (pp. 101–102)

“Flash,” she warned before snapping another series of photos. As she examined her shots, she urged Will to look at one particular image. “Do you see that?” She asked. Will peered at the screen. “Yeah,” he said after a moment. “It looks like something’s moving or something.” ... As Will looked at the camera, Adele turned to me. “I don’t think I moved or anything when I took the photo.” I nodded. She had seemed relatively steady to me. “So, you see something there too?” Adele asked Will again. “Yeah,” Will nodded. “Something’s odd there.” “It’s not just me then,” she nodded. (p. 124)

Conversely, there are other passages which I found somewhat wordy. For example:

“I want to propose that humour is a privileged site for reckoning with how people internalized the myth of disenchantment and how they sought, not always intentionally, to reconcile their project of paranormal investigation with the ideals of disenchanted secularity.” (p. 49)

The thrust of the book is ghost hunting investigations, which can be very different from other forms of paranormal investigative procedures. The

depth of study and research that is applied to fieldwork in, for instance, the investigations of the Society for Psychical Research can involve background work of a psychological, geophysical and sociological nature as well as other explorations before visits are undertaken. These aspects were outside the remit of this book.

There are a few black and white photographs of the investigators, without revealing their faces, and two locations (York and Newcastle), none of which particularly add to the book's information. The aforementioned index contains brief references in the text to some people who were or are involved in paranormal events who are generally recognisable within the academic study of the paranormal, such as Tanya Luhrmann, William Mumler, Robin Wooffitt and the Rhines. However, it is a pity that some of the most intrepid ghost hunters of the past do not receive a mention, namely Peter Underwood, Tom Perrott and Andrew Green.

Overall, the book would likely be of interest to sociologists and anthropologists, but I am not sure whether serious psychical researchers would learn a great deal from it.

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