

BOOK REVIEWS

TELEPATHIC TALES PRECOGNITION AND CLAIRVOYANCE IN LEGEND, LYRIC, AND LORE

By Daniel Bourke. Destiny Books. 2025. 320 pp. Paperback, ebook, and audiobook

Of all scientific frontiers, attempts to establish the existence of psi phenomena may have produced greater gains than any other in recent decades. An ever-growing handful of institutions continue to take the matter quite seriously, and, combined with the efforts of dedicated researchers, have pushed the conversation into territory our forebears would envy. To those tracking these developments, the question is not if these phenomena exist, but rather how they exist.

Collective culture is slowly coming to terms with the data. In the meantime, it seems more important than ever to reevaluate our past through the lens of this new emergent reality. How do the stories we've told—from the religious epic to historical fact to the passing anecdote—encode, reflect, and reveal humanity's latent psychic talents?

Enter *Telepathic Tales*, the latest offering from Daniel Bourke, 320 pages including endnotes, a bibliography, and an index. Over the course of a brisk, thoroughly cited 236 pages, Bourke leverages incisive comparativism in service of a compelling argument. Despite the different terms we choose for a variety of psychic experiences, these phenomena remain pervasive across all cultures and epochs and may well distil into a single word: *knowing*.

The book's foreword, penned by Dr Gregory Shushan, clearly establishes the tone and Bourke's aims. Shushan was an excellent choice: his extensive work examining near-death experiences and afterlife narratives from the ancient and indigenous worlds aligns well with Bourke's thesis. As someone who has not only skilfully employed but also defended comparative studies to great effect, Shushan conveys the central notion that precognition and clairvoyance are "panhuman phenomena" (p. x), as he puts it. In his own humble way, Bourke has applied the same sort of comparativism to this suite of extrasensory experiences.

To that end, Bourke's main text draws upon a diverse set of stories told by people (and *peoples*) from all walks of life. The eight chapters—focusing on

psychic forerunners, crisis apparitions, nearing-death awareness, deathbed visions, doppelgangers, and shades of the deceased, and knowledge of hidden objects, miraculous cures, and shared revelations—come from a staggering array of sources.

Sections within each chapter shed more light on specific variations of each phenomenon, digressions adding a welcome depth to the breadth already on display. Although a bit reductive to say so, *Telepathic Tales* could be considered a primer for the uninitiated, carefully and methodically walking readers through each psychic expression. Rather than getting bogged down in any region-, era-, or culture-specific terms for these experiences, Bourke showcases an impressive capacity to find the common throughline in story after story, compiling each subset into an overwhelming catalogue of evidence.

Bourke unites old and new, east and west, global north and global south, emphasizing that no one time, place, people, or culture can lay sole claim to extrasensory abilities. These are talents inherent to the human condition.

Somehow, even in the face of this monumental task, Bourke manages to maintain a balancing act: a readable tone while still thoughtful and elegant, with an economy of words buttressed by scholarly diligence. In lesser hands, readers would only be presented with the most-retold cases, a sort of ‘greatest hits’ of psi phenomena. While seasoned readers will certainly recognize accounts here and there, Bourke leans into rarely presented examples or manages to reframe stories many might regard as unrelated to the matter at hand.

A common refrain across the book is how often the lives of many Christian saints exhibited instances of clairvoyance and precognition, even if not conventionally conceived of as such. While parapsychologists may have already come to the same conclusion, it is always refreshing to see these modalities re-emphasized in this fashion. It stands to reason that any effort to incorporate psychic talents into our collective paradigm is best served by reconciling their existence with pre-existing belief systems. Populations seem much more amenable to new ideas when such opportunities are afforded.

Standout chapters include an entry on the *vardøger*, a phenomenon you may have encountered yourself. Essentially, this is a “spiritual predecessor” (p. 5) to someone’s arrival, foretold through a common sound—a car door slamming, boots across the foyer, keys dropped on a table—or, in more dramatic cases, a full-bodied apparition of the expected visitor. Despite how universal and common this experience appears to be, such cases are especially underrepresented in literature from the Anglosphere, and seeing so many gathered in one place is a joy.

Another worthwhile digression (one that I would have loved to have spent more time with, frankly) is Bourke’s interesting chapter *Revenants, Wraiths, and Disinterested Shades*. Bourke obliquely undermines the commonly held view that these apparitions are solely externalized and contextualises them within the framework of psychic visions. Simultaneously, he possesses an intellectual honesty that refuses to shy away from their embodied physicality.

As an example, “a Chuj Mayan memorate of a man who had not come home for a little longer than usual”. The man in question labours nightly “to work on the wool, as is his usual habit” (p. 127). Days later, the man’s remains are found. Such cases highlight an oft-overlooked aspect of these experiences, what Bourke calls their “simultaneously corporeal and incorporeal nature” (p. 129).

In an era that tends to think of visitations from the dead solely as ephemeral spectres, Bourke’s engagement with this apparent duality is welcome. My own personal biases interpret the paranormal as rarely an either/or affair. Many manifestations seem to straddle the corporeal/incorporeal line with aplomb, and our acknowledgement of this capacity may eventually allow progress into uncovering a host of mysteries, not only ghosts but also UFOs and cryptids as well. I am pleased that Bourke is willing to embrace such contradictions.

In addition to being an author, Bourke is also an artist, notably a poet and songwriter. Perhaps because of this affinity, Bourke’s carefully selected subtitle reveals his preoccupation with the appearance of telepathic talents not only in recorded fact but also their representation in what we may, in a gentle sense, deem fictions: religious texts, legends, and folktales. A wise choice, as these sources underscore both the pervasiveness of such narratives and the way they convey deeper—dare it be said, *archetypal*—truths.

Therein lies the primary complaint. These stories are rich, and so much of that richness goes unaddressed. Bourke effortlessly establishes the universality of our psychic capacity in these accounts. For the most part, however, that is where the discussion ends.

Telepathic Tales represents a successful effort to catalogue abundant examples of extrasensory experiences from every inhabited continent—and little more. Each chapter amasses so much evidence for a specific manifestation that any open-minded reader is well convinced of its existence long before the chapter concludes, only for Bourke to move on to the next subject with little discussion of the possible meanings, mechanisms, etc. For instance, what religious, folkloric, or neuroscientific reason might lie behind the apparent tendency for the souls of the dying to wander from their bodies? Regardless of their accuracy, plentiful explanations have been proposed. Yet these receive only passing mention.

Given Bourke’s obvious command of the subject material, I would have relished the opportunity to follow him on a journey to the more theoretical interpretations of his robust collection. It isn’t that his insights are entirely absent—Bourke weaves in a few here and there—but the book would have benefited from more, not only in the interest of thoroughness, but also to offer a change in how each chapter is paced, which largely consists of a string of accounts.

I am hesitant to belabour this point. I remain wary of what I call ‘seafood restaurant’ criticism: people visit an acclaimed seafood restaurant, order steaks, and complain about their meal. They base their assessment off their own

desires and expectations, rather than engaging with what has been presented to them as a speciality.

Most likely, this sort of granular analysis was never Bourke's intention. This is a survey, after all. Bourke set out to gather as much information as possible, and, in that respect, *Telepathic Tales* represents a resounding success.

Having acknowledged that, the more theoretically minded researcher might still find the book less useful than someone new to the topic. Nonetheless, the sheer number of experiences related guarantees that even those deeply immersed in the field will undoubtedly discover something new.

Daniel Bourke's *Telepathic Tales* comes to us at an appropriate time: in an era when we see more division than ever, some clamour for common ground. Bourke's work showcases that more unites us than divides us, and that truism includes extraordinary experiences. They happen to people regardless of where, when, or who they are. I applaud Bourke for his ability to articulate how psi is not only a universal human talent but also something of a birthright belonging to our entire species.

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