

## BOOK REVIEW

**Diabolical Possession and the Case Behind “The Exorcist”: An Overview of Scientific Research with Interviews with Witnesses and Experts** by Sergio A. Rueda. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018. 265 pp. \$35 (paperback), \$9.99 (Kindle). ISBN 978-1476673844.

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Sergio Rueda’s book *Diabolical Possession and the Case Behind “The Exorcist”* is a detailed case study of the real events that inspired William Peter Blatty’s 1971 novel *The Exorcist* (1971) and subsequent movie, released in 1973, of the same name (Blatty et al. 1973). This book’s connection to the popular fiction novel and the even more popular horror genre film that followed creates a prominent marketing appeal. However, to Rueda’s credit, references to Blatty’s book and movie are made judiciously throughout the text and are then relevant connections with the real case. That being said, however, there is little in the way of an actual manifestation of a demonic possession that can equal the spin that Hollywood special effects can present to theatergoers (no pun intended). The victim of possession that Rueda describes from the actual case never has his head spin 360 degrees, nor projectile-vomited green vomit, nor appeared in all His demonic glory to be Satan himself. Blatty’s story is highly fictionalized and presents the “dark inner voice” we all possess as an archetypal force in the collective unconscious in a literal, yet also metaphoric, way. The real thing is quite a bit subtler, and thus easier to sweep under the table.

The actual case that Blatty’s *The Exorcist* is based on, and the subject of Rueda’s book, is a demonic possession case that took place in 1949 and involved a 14-year-old boy named Ronald who lived with his mother and father in Mount Rainier, Maryland, just minutes away from Washington D.C. Rueda claims that this Mount Rainier case is the most-documented possession case in history, and consequently the most famous. Blatty was indeed inspired by the case and based, sometimes loosely, his even more famous tome on the 1949 events. Most of Rueda’s book, and I would assume most of Blatty’s book as well, was inspired by a document Rueda calls “The Jesuit Report” which was a written narrative by several of the priests involved with the Ronald possession case. Rueda claims to have found this report, along with pertinent correspondence between J. B. Rhine, the

celebrated parapsychologist who headed the Duke Parapsychology Labs at Duke University from 1935 to his retirement in 1965, and Rev. Luther Miles Schulze, one of the first witnesses to Ronald's alleged possession. Rueda stumbled across these documents during his tenure at the Foundation for the Research on the Nature of Man, an organization the retired Rhine established in 1965. Quite an intriguing story already, and again, to Rueda's credit, one of the most informational, and credible, foundations for his book—that and the interviews he conducts with some of the key participants, including Ronald himself, more than 50 years after the actual events.

There have been several other books and articles written about this case—Rueda cites a few of them throughout his book, most notably *Possessed: The True Story of an Exorcism* by T. B. Allen (1984). When asked by a colleague why yet another book on Ronald's possession, the author remarks:

... the issue remains important at the present time, not only because *The Exorcist* is still a scary movie, but also because the book and the film frame the long and ongoing religious and philosophical struggle between good and evil, and people from all walks of life are still interested in this subject. My effort also sheds new light on the investigation of this type of demonic possession cases from scientific, psychological, and religious perspectives, which will expand the knowledge about the case and clarify the truth behind the famous film with up-to-date dramatic information. (p. 7)

Rueda, himself a clergyman, clearly has a personal and spiritual interest in what he reports in his book. However, he makes great efforts to keep his conclusions objective and does attempt to be scientific in his approach even though he is not a trained scientist—open minded, reasonably skeptical, and careful to investigate all possible angles, including fraud.

The book, apparently an adaptation of a Ph.D. dissertation, is laid out in a typical fashion—a preface, introduction, 16 chapters, 5 appendices, notes, a bibliography, and a (regrettably) minimal index. Rueda spends the first pages describing the sources for his narrative (including the aforementioned “Jesuit Report”) as well as more detail on Blatty's book and movie *The Exorcist*—describing the similarities, differences, and important points Blatty found necessary to exploit in his fictional accounts of the case. Rueda also brings forth ideas regarding the importance of the public's responses to Blatty's work—where a demonic possession of a human being constellates collective unconscious archetypes even in our modern, scientifically objective, psyche. Rueda then proceeds with a chronologically inspired order of chapters beginning with the first events of the case when young Ronald begins to experience strange phenomena such as odd personal

behavior—feeling unusually sick, throwing his pillow at the ceiling light in his bedroom, being abnormally belligerent or defiant, as well as external physical phenomena—various noisy creaks and knocks, his bed violently shaking, and mysterious writing appearing on his body (although it should be noted that on several occasions only the parents could make out actual English words on Ronald’s body, others saw only rash-like markings)—among other things. Subsequent chapters investigate the ensuing procedures to bring young Ronald back to normalcy, which, in this case, become quite complicated.

There is much room in the proceedings of this case to doubt credibility, as Rueda is careful to point out. The whole family situation, for example, is odd—a boy who doesn’t want to attend school, an aunt who was a spiritualist and to whom the boy was close dies early on in the story, séances, Ouija board consults, parents who change faith from Catholicism to Lutheranism and believe they are being punished for doing so, the initial involvement of the Catholic Church to perform an official exorcism, among many other unusual details about the family and the clergy involved. In fact, Rueda declares that Ronald experienced two actual exorcisms, and even contemplates that an official possession, as described by the Catholic criterion set forth in the official doctrine of Satanic exorcism, *The Roman Ritual*, was not ascertained until the second exorcism actually began.

Rueda makes great effort to explore all possibilities, with several chapters dedicated to subjects such as “Science in Search of the Truth” and “The Art of Trickery.” In the latter chapter, Rueda methodically examines every possible explanation for the phenomena experienced by Ronald et al. Some of these possible explanations border on the ridiculous and seemingly are implausible (such as the father being in collusion with Ronald’s efforts to not attend school and through his skill as an amateur tinkerer concocts devices that, when planted under the floorboards of Ronald’s bedroom, could cause, on remote demand, scratching and thumping sounds). Rueda concludes his heroic effort at skepticism with this remark:

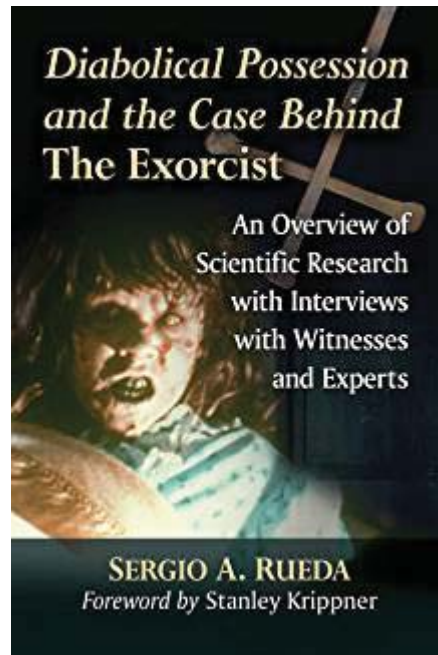
It is, however, important to remark that the fraud hypothesis cannot by itself explain all the phenomena in this case, such as the spontaneous marks that later appeared on the boy before several witnesses—particularly those that appeared on his body during the exorcism that took place in St. Louis at the Alexian Brothers Hospital. In this particular event, the witnesses are much more reliable than the parents, as they included priests and probably some mental health professionals or medical doctors, who may well have participated in the process before the exorcism resumed, even though we have so far no actual records of such participation. Marks spontaneously appeared on the boy while many people were looking at him, and it is hard to imagine that all the participants were deceived by him. (p. 87)

Schulze, the original Lutheran clergyman who first examined Ronald, considered himself a die-hard skeptic. He was, however, convinced that the phenomena he experienced with Ronald were authentic. He said, “The boy was not faking it. I wondered if I was going screwy” (p. 101). There were many other witnesses whom Rueda cites, who came to the same conclusion—trickery was not a factor.

Rueda also investigates other possibilities than demonic possession. He makes a clear effort to distinguish a differences among possession, poltergeist activity, Dissociative Identity Disorder (at the time of Ronald’s experience this disorder would have been called Multiple Personality Disorder), and other psychological conditions, both natural and supernatural, that could explain all that happened in this case in 1949. He spends much time in this section examining classic poltergeist activity, and comes to the conclusion that although there are many attributes of the case that fit the poltergeist criteria, there are too many that do not. He in several spots in the narrative suggests that possibly the exorcism itself turned what could have been deemed an “ordinary” obsession (and possibly poltergeist) situation into a bonafide possession case. He said:

The Mount Rainier case constitutes a good example of how superstition and belief in demonic possession may combine to create a real case of demonic possession. In this regard, Oesterreich (1966) observes, “At so primitive levels of culture and with patients of such enhanced autosuggestibility, it is not surprising that a state of possession should readily arise.” (p. 95)

It is also important to note that most of the possession material presented in this book is through a Roman Catholic frame of reference, or at the very least a Christian-Biblical perspective. It does seem to be assumed in our modern culture that the Roman Catholic Church “wrote the book” on demonic possession. This is primarily due to our Western cosmology, which is deeply influenced by a Judeo-Christian paradigm. Although this



may seem comfortable to our Western sensibilities, it is by no means accurate. Demonic possession, as well as any variety of spirit possession, can be found in nearly every culture throughout the world (Laycock 2015). Since the Mount Rainier possession case was handled predominately by the Catholic Church, it stands to reason that Rueda's book is going to be presented predominately through a Roman Catholic lens.

Rueda also makes it clear that the officials from the Catholic Church, who were either assigned to the task or took possession of it by their own authority, could have incompetently handled the whole process. He feels that not enough effort was made to investigate a psychological or physiological etiology to the phenomena, an effort that would have been exhaustive and conclusive in today's climate. Even the Roman Ritual demands that a subject meet certain clear criteria before being deemed officially possessed. As said before, there is some question whether Ronald met these criteria only *after* the final exorcism began, rather than them being the basis for a church-sanctioned exorcism.

Toward the end of the book, Rueda recaps the previous investigations into the various possibilities that the Mount Rainier case presented—fraud, natural (psychological) etiology, poltergeist, and demonic possession. Even if one concludes it was indeed a demonic possession, was it then induced by suggestion? This reader was reminded throughout the experience of reading this book of the New Thought concept of creating one's own reality—it is done unto you as you believe. How many spirits, evil or benevolent, are injected into some sort of reality, material or non-material, through intention, belief, and thought? Rueda hints at this himself, making a comment in the final chapters of his book,

The human condition becomes malignant under the influence of the devil, which has deteriorated the values of society with wars, exploitation of the disadvantaged, and injustices of many kinds. It seems to me that this message is more important than whether or not the devil or demonic possession exists, which is, of course, a matter of faith for those who believe it. (p. 158)

The book's chapters are followed by several appendices, which prove to be some of the most interesting parts of the book. Here Rueda expands upon many of the evidential aspects of his narrative, such as his sources of information, letters, details on the Jesuit Report, and several very interesting interviews (most notably an interview with Luther Schulze, the first clergyman called into the case). He also speaks with Ronald himself on the phone for a brief conversation, and although not very informative (Ronald said he would speak to Rueda but would not talk about the case) it

adds a bit of grounding to an otherwise “other worldly” story.

Unfortunately, Rueda’s writing style leaves a bit to be desired, nothing a good editor could not have remedied. It also seemed at times that his chapters were originally written as stand-alone articles, and much that had already been thoroughly explained before is in each subsequent chapter reiterated. That being said, those interested in exorcism and spirit possession in general, and the Mount Rainier case in particular, would likely benefit from reading this book. Rueda makes great effort to present the facts about the case in much detail, and adds his own questions, thoughts, conclusions, and uncertainties to augment an already richly detailed account. He thoroughly examines the case from scientific, religious, parapsychological, and skeptical (fraudulent) perspectives. The connection to Blatty’s book and movie *The Exorcist* is passively interesting but could have possibly been omitted or only casually mentioned. However, Blatty’s views on the real purpose behind his work (a commentary on the morals exemplified in a 1970s deteriorating society, on page 158), as Rueda points out, are clearly relevant.

—TODD HAYEN

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