

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. 255 pp. \$35.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4766-7384-4.

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Outside of Washington, D.C., in the town of Mount Rainier, Maryland, an episode of potential demonic possession was investigated by the Catholic Church and the Duke Parapsychology Lab, including the famous scientist J. B. Rhine. The episode, which involved a 14-year-old boy, was reported in *The Washington Post* in 1949. As is the case with most claims of possession, in order to protect the identity of the family involved, the church maintained a wall of secrecy around the specific events and the activities of the clergy who investigated this case. Twenty years later, William Peter Blatty (1971) produced a fictionalized novel featuring a young girl who was possessed by a demon and had to undergo the religious ritual of exorcism to be cleansed and to stop a horrifying series of events. The book was called *The Exorcist*.

In 1973, the novel was produced as the film *The Exorcist* which won the screenwriter William Peter Blatty an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. The film horrified audiences, caused many viewers to walk out of the theater in disgust, and elicited worldwide protests from religious leaders. Many years later, it is still considered one of the most terrifying horror movies ever made despite its antiquated special effects.

But, the real questions on the mind of nearly every person who saw the film were, “Has anyone really been possessed by the devil?” and “Is this based on a true story?” Sergio Rueda explores these questions and attempts to uncover the actual facts and observations of the 1949 case that appear to be the story behind *The Exorcist*.

Finding His Way

Rueda begins by describing the process that led him to initiate his investigation of this story. In an interesting synchronistic event, Rueda discovered a document that had never been released to the public about the 1949 case. While he was researching poltergeist activity at the Foundation

for Research on the Nature of Man (now the Rhine Research Center) in Durham, North Carolina, a file folder fell to the floor and caught his attention. The folder contained correspondence between a Lutheran Minister and Rhine, who was then the director of the Duke Parapsychology Lab. Though some of these letters were reviewed previously and summarized in articles and books such as *The Enchanted Voyager* (Brian, 1982), one document had never been revealed to the public before.

The Jesuit Report, as it is now known, is a detailed report of all the observations and events of the case including the procedures used by the priests involved in the sessions. This report was delivered to church officials for their records but was never released to the public. A second copy of the report was sent to Rhine at the Duke Parapsychology Lab, and it was kept in their archives until Rueda discovered it by accident at Rhine's Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man.

The Mount Rainier Case

The author provides very detailed descriptions of activity observed around a 14-year-old boy in Mount Rainier, Maryland, who was originally considered to have been experiencing poltergeist disturbances. By reviewing the Jesuit Report in detail, interviewing witnesses and participants in the case, and digging into previous articles and books written about it, Rueda paints a picture of phenomenal events that include chairs and beds moving on their own, scratches and writing spontaneously appearing on the boy's body, and strange sounds and voices heard near the boy. The result is an engaging story leading from some simple activity in a family home to a trip across the country to St. Louis, Missouri, and finally back to Washington, D.C., where a series of priests became involved in the investigation and declared it a case of demonic possession.

In the earliest phases of this investigation, Dr. J. B. Rhine of Duke University and his wife, Dr. Louisa Rhine, were contacted by a minister for their opinion and evaluation of poltergeist activity in the family's home. J. B. Rhine described the theories of the time which proposed that activity of this sort was the result of unconscious psychokinesis originating from a living person. Since the activity appeared to occur only when the boy was present, Rhine considered that he was most likely the source of the activity. As a conservative scientist, Rhine also suggested that the minister be extremely cautious of fraud or trickery by the boy. Finally, Rhine mentioned that discussions of demonic possession could have a strong influence on the beliefs and behavior of a suggestible child, and that statements of this sort should be carefully avoided in his presence.

Despite Rhine's advice, the priests in the case continued to explore the possibility of demonic possession and pursued other avenues to resolve these issues.

Personal Note

To be fully transparent in this review, it is important to disclose that I have no interest or predisposition toward a demonic interpretation of these or any events. Though I have a great appreciation of and fascination with science fiction and interesting paranormal storytelling, the subtle bias that underlies my scientific perspective prevents me from attributing events that are interpreted as *evil* to a demonic entity or the devil. In fact, my natural inclination is to consider all events in context which makes it difficult for me to implicitly identify any event as *good* or *evil*.

Nonetheless, I applaud Rueda's storytelling and review of the events included in the Mount Rainier case. His description of the activities related by witnesses and extracted from the Jesuit Report is thoroughly engaging. Rueda produces an enthralling vision of the events, and though there is a great deal of repetition and duplication from chapter to chapter in the earliest pages of the book, by the time the story is completed I found myself excited and cheering for the boy finally to be rid of the demon that was said to have possessed him. Demonic possession or not, Rueda tells a wonderful story and produces a great foundation for the next section of the book.

Interpreting the Activity

Until this point, this review may seem to be a discussion of great storytelling and an engaging series of events that formed the foundation for a popular horror film, but this book is much more complex than a simple review of the facts. In the second half of the book, Rueda provides a detailed and insightful evaluation of the original source material in the context of four different interpretations.

The evaluation begins by considering the possibility of deception or fraud on the part of the boy and/or his family members. Rueda examines the psychology of each individual involved and is rigorous in exploring the possibility or absurdity of fraud in the context of every paranormal observation. For example, could the husband be motivated to deceive his wife or might the observing priest have professional ambitions that could lead him to emphasize certain factors while ignoring others? Rueda's analysis fairly explores even the most absurd skeptical explanations and leaves the reader questioning whether the writer is being overly critical of each event due to his zealous attempt to find a fraudulent explanation. These

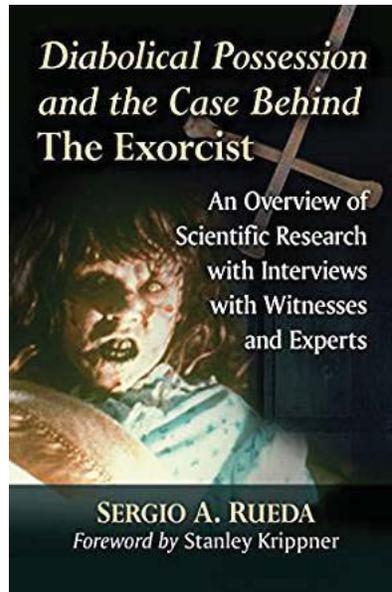
examples of extreme skepticism add credibility to the full analysis that follows.

Next, Rueda explores the possibility of a natural, scientific explanation for each observation using the reductionist principles of Occam's Razor. By specifically focusing on the psychology surrounding the young boy and his family relationships, the boy's subtle motivations are revealed to support possible claims of trickery or fraud. In addition, the author explores the psychological concept of a *conversion reaction*—a physical reaction, like dermal irritations, produced by strong, unconscious needs or fears—as a possible mechanism for the spontaneous appearance

of words or rashes on the child's body. These proposals are interesting by themselves, but also they provide support for the next area considered by Rueda—the parapsychological hypothesis.

In a thorough review of the parapsychological literature, Rueda cites descriptions of poltergeist activity from experts such as Alan Gauld and Tony Cornell (1979), Scott Rogo (1979), and William Roll (1977), among others. Rueda manages to capture the investigative spirit of poltergeist researchers as he provides parapsychological explanations for each of the observed phenomena. Rueda produces an excellent review of how the poltergeist is interpreted in the most modern terms while applying the parapsychological explanations to each of the phenomena described in the 1949 case. This is the most extensive portion of the case evaluation, revealing the scientific nature of the author's position and giving the reader the promised scientific foundation for exploring the case of possession.

Finally, as if it were an afterthought, Rueda discusses characteristics of the case that might indicate that the activity resulted from demonic possession or a disruptive spirit. By describing factors used by religious leaders to determine if a case is appropriate for an exorcism, the discussion becomes a lesson on the beliefs and procedures that must be established in order for a priest to be granted permission to perform an exorcism. Significant signs must be present and specific activity must be observed including the four stages leading to a diagnosis of spirit possession: Manifestation (inviting



a spirit to enter a host body), Infestation (the appearance of apparitions, shadows, or other physical factors representing spirit activity), Oppression (psychological, psychic, and emotional disturbances to an individual), and finally Possession (a fully manifested replacement of the human spirit with a demonic presence).

Rueda discusses the activity necessary to indicate that each stage has occurred including an expression of knowledge beyond the capabilities of the host/agent, xenoglossy or speaking unknown languages, and exceptional or sometimes superhuman strength demonstrated by the host.

Spoiler Alert

Rueda concludes that the priests involved in the case were overly enthusiastic to label the events as the result of demonic possession. He proposes that the PK-like activity was more likely produced by poltergeist effects and the rashes on the boy's body arose from both fraud and a conversion reaction due to his suppressed emotions and desires.

Additional Resources

The book contains nearly 80 pages of appendices which provide supporting information and detailed resources. These additional documents include ten letters of correspondence between Rev. Luther Miles Schulze, the minister initially called in to evaluate the Mount Rainier case, and Dr. J. B. Rhine, who directed the Duke Parapsychology Lab in 1949 when the events originally occurred. There is also a detailed interview with two primary witnesses in the case, the Rev. Luther Miles Schulze and his wife, Ruth, who had the young boy stay at their home so they could personally observe the claimed phenomena.

There is an additional interview with Ida Mae, a friend of the boy's family and the leader of the church group that organized a circle of prayers for the boy during the strange events in 1949. This interview was conducted in 1993 and includes a transcript of a brief phone call to the boy who experienced the strange activity in 1949, now a grown man. He had no memory of the events and was not interested in speaking about the situation.

Finally, there are complete interviews with experts on demonic possession. All of these experts on demonology and possession were included in the documentary *In the Grip of Evil* (1997), which the author considers the most accurate and reliable information ever produced on the Mount Rainier case.

Each appendix is annotated with comments, clarifications, and additional context to help the reader recognize the importance of each

interview or collection of documents. The comments give the reference materials a personal perspective that makes the information much more accessible and meaningful to the reader.

Summary

For those who are fascinated with demonic possession and the story of *The Exorcist*, this book provides all of the details and specific events that appear to have influenced William Peter Blatty in writing the novel which led to the popular film. Though this book begins with a lingering sense of repetition and continuous thematic messages through the first few chapters, it quickly matures into a riveting story of a troubled family that is battling with unexplainable phenomena. When the ministers and priests get involved in the situation, the activity appears to increase and take the form of a demonic possession which is resolved with a dramatic exorcism.

Though this story is engaging and provides a sense of suspenseful entertainment, the author clearly illustrates where the fictional account of *The Exorcist* strays from the documented activity, and he provides a firm connection between the Mount Rainier case and events described by Blatty in his novel.

Rueda then provides a fair evaluation of the phenomena following a well-defined scientific approach. He covers potential fraud, psychological contributions to the activities, parapsychological explanations, and, finally, the possibility of demonic possession. In his final evaluation, he clearly describes his reasons for concluding that it is very unlikely the events were the result of a spirit or demonic possession and how the priests involved in the investigation followed the wrong path in their evaluation of the phenomena.

Though some readers who are fixated on finding a demonic element in this story may disagree with the author's conclusions, he provides a firm foundation for his position. Even the most critically thinking scientist will leave the final chapter with questions. If these events were clearly described and documented by all witnesses involved, the results provide very strong evidence for poltergeist activity, a topic still being questioned by many scientists tied to a materialistic and reductionist foundation. Could this case be one of the strongest examples of a poltergeist ever formally investigated?

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