

BOOK REVIEW

Greening the Paranormal: Exploring the Ecology of Extraordinary Experience edited by Jack Hunter, Foreword by Paul Devereux. August Night Press, 2019. 332 pp. \$19.99 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-786771094.

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Far from a dispassionate survey of the intersection between ecology and parapsychology, Jack Hunter's recent anthology *Greening the Paranormal* is a collection of the deeply personal insights and discipline-defying questions that have arisen from the contributors' lived contact with some of the strangest aspects of the natural world.

From the very first page of Paul Devereux's Foreword, we are confronted with the inexplicably extraordinary: Devereux's sighting of a "green man" at the fork of a road in the Irish countryside. "Suddenly, standing on the grass, there was a figure, between two and three feet tall," writes Devereux.

It was anthropomorphic and fully three-dimensional. . . . It had sprung into appearance out of nowhere, and it caught my wife's and my own transfixed attentions simultaneously. The figure was comprised of a jumble of very dark green tones, as if composed of a tight, dense tangle of foliage. . . . It presented a distinctly forbidding appearance. As we crawled past in our car, the figure started to turn its head in our direction, but then vanished. (pp. xi–xii)

Devereux, it happens, was well acquainted with ancient folklore's references to the "green man," but he admits that, until that moment, he

had always considered those stories to be the product of gullibility and superstition. Not so afterward! “[G]rasping the ecological dimensions of what our culture calls the ‘paranormal,’” he says, “. . . will require us to re-acquaint ourselves with some aspects of the worldviews of earlier and indigenous peoples” (p. xii).

This sentence serves as a fairly accurate summary of the thrust of the entire anthology, if re-acquaintance is understood in the sense of firsthand experience. As Hunter points out in his introductory chapter, the paranormal is actually *normal* within the context of the natural world, and if modern, industrialized society so rarely experiences the paranormal, it is because we also so rarely experience nature—that is, a world unmanipulated by human design. In fact, Hunter suggests that our society’s rejection of the “paranormal” stems from the same faulty ontological assumptions that have caused the ecological crisis in which we find ourselves: the assumptions that only what is material is real, and that only what is human is valuable. Rejection of nature and rejection of the paranormal apparently go hand in hand. And so, it comes to seem in this anthology, may their recovery.

Winding through several of the essays, we find the theme that humanity has experienced its separation from the natural world as a “primordial spiritual trauma” (p. 50). We carry within us a deep wound that comes from having been torn away from our true home and our true selves. Contributor Maya Ward suggests that the depth of this primordial trauma has caused us to push away our ability to feel, leaving us with a huge backlog of unprocessed grief.

[A]nthropocentrism could be seen as a trauma response developed over millennia but originating during the profound rupture of people from place that happened . . . when we moved from hunter–gatherer communities, where humans were just one creature among a society of equally sentient creatures, to farmers, where plants and animals were ‘cultivated’. (p. 156)

Contributor Nancy Wissers points out that what remaining contacts we do feel coming from the wider earth community are now difficult for us to recognize. Wissers writes that many people, including

herself, have experienced communication with the earth, but they have rarely understood it in these terms. She writes,

Since we have little context for something from the outside touching the self without words, other than those provided by religion and culture, someone knowing only the Western worldview is likely to conceive of these golden moments as internal events of the self, or perhaps even as the presence of God. (p. 75)

Nevertheless, she argues, these are the kinds of experiences that indigenous people are talking about when they refer to being contacted by spirits (p. 74), and we still have access to these experiences, if we can recognize them for what they are.

At the same time, contributor Lance M. Foster suggests that, if our psychic connection to the natural world has been largely severed, this may have been a protective move on the part of that world, desiring to shield itself from manipulations by humankind—especially in its modern, scientific incarnation. Foster points out that, while science demands proof of unusual phenomena, it never actually stops with proof, instead always barreling ahead to develop technical (i.e. manipulative) applications of its knowledge. In fact, I would add that the quintessential way to “prove” things scientifically is to have already established some measure of control over them, which allows one to make them appear at will in the environment of the laboratory.

Foster notes that the indigenous have a very different way of responding to strange encounters, such as those with “[g]iants, little people, animals from ancient times, underwater beings, ghosts, bigfoot, sentient plants and places, things without names” (p. 91). Their response is to acknowledge these beings and respectfully leave them alone, something it seems “near impossible” for the nonindigenous to do (p. 96). In fact, contributor Cody Meyocks argues that science—a discipline based on abstracting away from anything individual or particular—has become the ultimate tool for justifying structures of political and economic domination. The deepest elements of nature can hardly be faulted if they shield themselves against its depersonalizing grasp.

Contributor Jacob W. Glazier expands on Foster's theme by using the archetype of the trickster to personify the hiding and "tricky" quality of psi. As parapsychologists well know, psi seems to flee the laboratory and to routinely frustrate, even in the field, any systematic investigation of its properties. This is one reason that contributors Elorah Fangrad, Rick Fehr, and Christopher Laursen argue for becoming psychic naturalists—studying psychic phenomena in the wild, in a participatory rather than a manipulative fashion. (They provide a detailed proposal for how they plan to pursue their study of the strange phenomena that frequently occur in a certain Ontario fishing lodge, phenomena that include anomalous figures, sounds, icy air, and poltergeist-like movements of objects.) "[M]anipulation causes the trickster to rebel," writes Glazier (p. 107), and this rebellion may be an attempt to pass on an essential message. Glazier quotes parapsychologist James E. Kennedy, who said, "The message from the trickster is that converting psi to technology is not going to happen" (p. 103).

So, given its apparent concern not to be manipulated, where does psi manifest itself most unguardedly? In "[c]ultures that are less hierarchical and more egalitarian," says Glazier, "less technological and more animistic, less ordered and more chaotic." That is, psi manifests most plainly in cultures that mirror the qualities of the trickster by "playing" with psi rather than attempting to enslave it to their purposes (p. 107).

Contributor Amba J. Sepie seconds this observation. She writes that the explanations for how indigenous people come to know the things they do about the natural world

rely on an understanding of indigenous and traditional metaphysics and the practices which extend from these, as concretely linked to the realization that Earth and other beings are kin [meant literally], that relationships are not abstract but personal, and that consciousness is not limited to a single human mind, but rather is something all life is *internal* to. (p. 64)

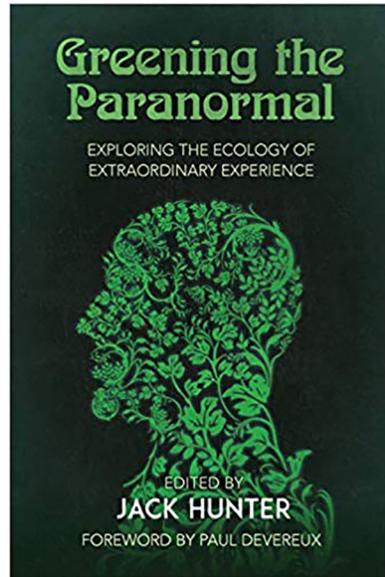
In other words, "civilized" humans have been cut off from knowledge of much of nature by their unwillingness to view other

beings as mental and moral equals, deserving—and rewarding—our respect and consideration.

Much of *Greening the Paranormal* is concerned with the question of how this estrangement can be repaired. Contributor Viktória Duda optimistically proposes that our technological outsourcing of the processes of our own bodies and minds has built into it its own remedy. She suggests that, when virtual reality comes to be indistinguishable from “real” reality, we may realize that everything was ultimately consciousness all along. I confess, however, that I don’t see

how viewing the natural world as just another simulation will increase our desire to interact with it, or to acknowledge that it has its own objectively valid concerns.

A more likely remedy seems to me to lie in the fact that, as evidenced by the experiences of several contributors to this volume, our efforts to heal the rift that exists between us and the natural world are often aided by non-human minds. For instance, contributor David Luke describes his experience on a plant psychedelic, where he felt himself transformed into a thorn bush and heard all the plants around him begin laughing riotously. “[S]ince then,” he says, “I have never considered ecology in quite the same way as before” (p. 182). Luke also cites two mycologists who take seriously the idea that mushrooms actually have the intention of helping us communicate with other species. And he himself has published surveys showing that encounters with plant consciousness are the most widely reported transpersonal aspect of experiences provoked by psilocybin mushrooms, ayahuasca, and the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom. In fact, 80% of psychedelic users report an increase in their subsequent interaction with nature, and more than 60% report increased concern with regard to nature. These results, Luke notes, mirror the increased ecological concern



reported by near-death experiencers and those who've had UFO or alien encounters.

Moving from plants into the realm of animals, contributor Brian Taylor discusses “soul birds”: the “widespread and ancient body of lore associating birds with survival beyond death and the flight of human souls” (p. 191). Taylor cites the prevalence of bird sightings around dying humans and describes his own powerful dreams and waking encounters with kingfishers, which he has come to realize have been strongly correlated with his grief over a lost loved one.

Contributor Silvia Mutterle discusses another avenue by which animal consciousness may interact with ours, describing the Wild Earth Animal Essences created by Daniel Mapel 20 years ago. In this process, the energetic vibration of the animal is apparently ceremonially “imbued” into water, carrying the species’ “most outstanding characteristics and gifts” (p. 204) and allowing them to be conveyed to those exposed to this water.

I admit it was a bit difficult for me to keep an open mind about the possible efficacy of the animal essences Mutterle describes, as they are completely foreign to anything in my own experience. But I tried to keep in mind what Hunter emphasizes in his opening chapter: that we must be willing to contemplate the “weirder” kinds of paranormal phenomena, not just the “(relatively) scientifically acceptable phenomena associated with *psi*” (p. 13). Hunter mentions, among other things, UFOs, alien encounters, cryptids, and fairies. He notes that ecological themes crop up over and over again in relationship to these weirder phenomena, and it seems that we cannot study one without the other. He writes,

I would argue that it is precisely the *most unusual* (and so least respectable)—the *Highly Strange*—accounts of paranormal experiences that we should be investigating, because they raise the most questions and challenge our established worldviews most strongly. (p. 15)

I agree with this, though I still would have liked to see a little more evidence that the Wild Earth Animal Essences are truly effective in doing what they purport to.

Speaking of weird phenomena, though, we haven't come to the end of what this book has to offer. In addition to benefiting from the contacts of animal and plant consciousnesses, it appears that our rapprochement with the natural psychic world may be aided by certain physical locations, which Hunter calls "window areas" (p. 29) and Devereux refers to as "thin" and "liminal" places. Devereux says these are "sites where 'breaking through' to otherworld realms or altered mind states . . . were felt to be more easily accomplished than other places" (p. xvii).

Contributor Mark Schroll builds on this thought by citing evidence that sacred places affect our dreams, and he proposes that rituals conducted in such places may help to heal our consciousness from its divisiveness and manipulateness. Contributor Christine Simmonds-Moore also focuses on aspects of physical spaces and places that draw out exceptional experiences. She argues for an expanded definition of exceptional experiences that allows for experiences that "emerge as conversations between liminal people and locations that have liminal properties" (p. 126).

But no excursion into ecology would be complete without some acknowledgment that the natural world is not all fellow feeling and *kumbaya*. Animals and plants feed on one another, after all. How do we understand the predatory relationships that feature so prominently in nature, and is there any connection to parapsychology *there*?

Contributor Timothy Grieve-Carlson tackles this question in his essay on Whitley Strieber, an author who has explored the predator-prey relationship both in his fiction and his nonfiction, the latter focusing on his experiences of alien abduction. Grieve-Carlson says,

Strieber himself has suggested that his earlier written corpus is actually the result of a lifetime of visitor experiences, sublimated and expressed through the form of the horror novel, with the visitors themselves appearing in the culturally mediated halloween fashions of the werewolf and the vampire. (p. 227)

As Grieve-Carlson brings out, Strieber's work investigates both the terrifying and mesmerizing qualities of the predator-prey relationship,

as well as its potential sacredness. “This compassionate love between predator and prey in Strieber’s writing is always somehow reciprocal,” writes Grieve-Carlson (pp. 229–230). Despite Strieber’s utter terror, he finds himself drawn to the visitors, wanting further contact, wanting “communion.”

In a related vein, contributor Simon Wilson examines Paul Devereux’s 1982 book *Earth Lights: Toward an Explanation of the UFO Enigma*. Wilson takes Devereux to be showing how Jung’s hypothesis that flying saucers are physical manifestations of mental forces might work, and might be related to shifts in the earth’s crust. But shifts in the earth’s crust are not just mechanical geological happenings in Devereux’s view, since the earth is a living system and these movements are actually profound changes in the earth’s *body*, linked to many other changes and inextricably bound up with what’s going on in the rest of the cosmos. In a UFO or Earth Lights experience, “consciousness resonates with the whole cosmos,” he says (p. 173).

Might UFOs, then, be dreams of the earth—of which we are part? Our relationship to these experiences and the entities that appear to reveal themselves within these experiences is an ambiguous, almost paradoxical, one. They seem to be *other* than us and yet at the same time *inseparable* from us. Are they trying to control us? Is it our destiny to become one with them? Wilson concludes that the most inspiring picture is one in which we are meant to continue in an interactive *relationship*.

The relationship between the physical and mental aspects of strange phenomena also is explored in this anthology as it relates to cryptids. Hunter mentions in his opening chapter a suggestion made elsewhere by Joshua Cutchin: that cryptids are “wilderness poltergeists” (*wildnisgeistin*). Hunter also notes that the Loch Ness monster seems to fit aspects of a particular Hindu/Buddhist serpent deity or spirit. This raises the question of whether such “magical animals” might embody the consciousness of the places where they are found, or perhaps humans’ repressed desire for interaction with them. At the same time, contributor Susan Marsh presents evidence that some cryptids appear to react to human settlement patterns in the way that flesh-and-blood animals would. I would ask: and what if they *are* flesh and blood? Does that make it impossible for these animals to *also* be the embodiment

of place consciousness? Mightn't the consciousness of a place react to human settlement patterns as well?

So many invigorating questions arise from the observations contained in this volume. Ultimately, however, all of the experiences and perspectives explored in this anthology agree on at least one unequivocal point: the necessity of a model of the universe "as a living system imbued with intelligence and agency" (p. 7). Hunter reminds us in his opening chapter that "by enhancing biodiversity we are also enhancing *psychodiversity*" (p. 39). That is, we are enhancing the variety of minds working and playing together, and thus promoting the likelihood of intelligent and creative solutions to the myriad spiritual and material dilemmas that come our way.

One day, perhaps, extraordinary experiences will no longer be so extraordinary. But only, it seems, if we are willing to remember a different way of being in the world, if we are willing to open our psychic eyes and ears and be welcomed home by the many other minds who share our planet.