

BOOK REVIEW

The Paranormal Surrounds Us: Psychic Phenomena in Literature, Culture, and Psychoanalysis by Richard Reichbart. McFarland & Company, 2019. 242 pp. ISBN 978-1-4766-3368-8.

REVIEWED BY JAMES CARPENTER

<https://doi.org/10.31275/2020/1799>

Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC

The Paranormal Surrounds Us is a tied-together collection of essays by Richard Reichbart, a practicing psychoanalyst whose several strong interests and lifelong love for the mystery of psi, and sense of adventure and ethical sensibility, give the collection several points of focus. Besides his current analytic practice of many decades, he has also been a student of literature, a playwright, a Yale-trained attorney, and an activist for Native American and African American rights. The book is as scattered as he has been, but it is so full of insights and pleasing prose, that it doesn't lose much for that. In this time when we prefer our intellectual material in bite-sized chunks, like sparky TED Talks and Internet articles, this may feel especially friendly to many. If there is an underlying focus to the work, it may be implicitly biographical: one curious man's study of, to paraphrase Freud, the vicissitudes of psi—its expression in our finest literature, in our private and shared unconscious processes, in our different subcultures, in the deepest privacy of intensive psychotherapy, and in the legal and cultural presumptions that implicitly structure our thinking and behavior.

There are three main sections to the book: Psi Phenomena in Western Literature, Psi Phenomena and Psychoanalysis, and Psi Phenomena and Culture.

It is the first part that I personally find most fresh and intriguing. I have long marveled at *Hamlet*, and will sometimes spill out some appropriate lines with tolerant therapy patients of my own, but I had long ago decided that I never needed to read another word about the

play. Wrong. Reichbart's treatment of *Hamlet* is delightfully original and, to me, compelling. Spoiler: Shakespeare was a parapsychologist of his day, and this play is a parapsychological experiment disguised in plain sight. Some will not be as convinced as I, but many readers will enjoy such a fresh take on a hoary old subject. His general thesis across these chapters is that many of our literary masters were interested in psi, knew a lot about how it shows itself in our lives, and wove it into their most important works, showing that psi events not only happen, they are often dramatically and tellingly important. Besides Shakespeare, he takes us through works of Tolstoy, E. M. Forster, G. K. Chesterton, Ingmar Bergman, and James Joyce, showing their very realistic (not cheaply overblown) and sophisticated use of psi pretty much as we know it—those of us who have lived with what Jule Eisenbud (more in a moment about him) called the “psi hypothesis.” It is in his discussion of Joyce's *Ulysses*, a book I personally never managed to finish, that we find a fine-grained weaving of psi connections among the memories, dreams, conversational accidents, and surprising behaviors of the characters. They were not only interacting, as novelists show, more or less consciously, but they were also interacting unconsciously, and in ways that reflected significant knowledge of one another that they had no right to have. Joyce was a parapsychologist, too. The other chapters in this section also will interest appreciators of these geniuses who might be intrigued to see an aspect to their work that they had not imagined. I can think of other writers and film-makers who could be added to this list, now that I think of it, and many others will, too.

The chapters have different voices because the writer was imagining different audiences. My favorite voice is the one he uses when he is writing for people who like to talk about Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Ingmar Bergman. The next most pleasing is when he is speaking to people who are interested in Navajos. Less pleasing is the voice when he talks to psychoanalysts: He becomes very serious and a little convoluted, as they tend to be.

But the beating heart of the book is in the two chapters on psi in psychoanalysis, the conduct of psychoanalysis and the literature of psychoanalysis, and in the exposition of the work of the psychoanalyst Jule Eisenbud.

An odd and striking thing he notes about the psychoanalytic

literature is that telepathic experiences keep being brought up and then forgotten and then brought up again by someone else, who often writes as if he or she has made a new discovery. Freud himself, who was considerably preoccupied with the “problem of telepathy” throughout his life, displayed this in microcosm, in one place finding it extremely important, then in another insisting that it doesn’t occur at all, over and over. At one point he declared that if he could live his life over, he would devote his life to psychical research, then later denied ever saying such a thing, until it was proven to him by showing him a copy of his letter. Most of what Freud had to say about the matter we only know from scholars who dug into his essays that were never published and talks that were not presented. Such were his fits-and-starts. Freud and other psychoanalysts have a lot to say about ambivalence and motivated forgetting, when found in their patients. That this occurred so much in Freud’s writing about this topic, and is mirrored in the recurrent amnesia, with moments of interest immediately suffocated by institutional hostility, shown by later writers in the field, obviously begs for psychoanalytical interpretation. Reichbart offers us some thoughts, emphasizing the ideas of Eisenbud and Angelos Tanagras.

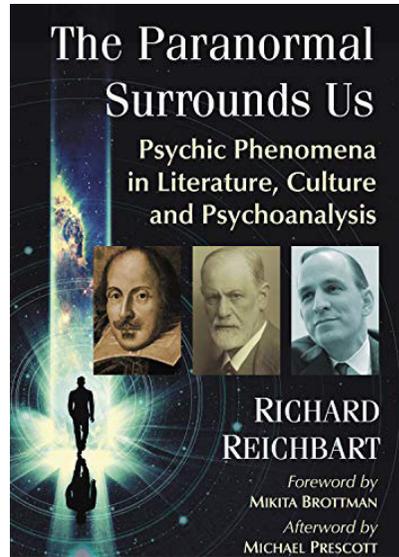
An especially nice contribution is Reichbart’s digested summary of the major principles proposed by Freud about the nature of psi (particularly telepathy). These include the assertion that psi experience does not only express severe shock or trauma, but is actually part of everyday (unconscious) life, that sleep facilitates psi expression, that analysts can usefully share the fact of a psi occurrence with the patient, that repressed material of the patient *and of the analyst* are both commonly expressed when telepathy occurs, and that the dynamic of jealousy for the analyst’s interest is a frequent motive driving the phenomena. Most of us grew up with siblings, and we have known a lot about jealousy for our whole lives. What a force it is, is one of the dark but retrospectively rather obvious discoveries made by psychoanalysts who encourage radical honesty about emotional matters in their sessions and who try to be honest in reflecting back to the patient her baser motives. It is such forces, thought Freud, that channel the expression of psi.

Then what drives the ambivalence about psi, the forgetting, the institutional oppression found in Freud and in the whole history of the

field of psychoanalysis? Reichbart thinks that Eisenbud was probably right in his assertion that psi, in the form of psychokinesis, is the critical factor. If psi exists, and mere thoughts can affect the world, then we cannot with certainty hold ourselves blameless when bad things happen that we might have wished for. He thinks that it is this dark, “voo-doo” implication of psi that is the basic stumbling block to accepting its reality, both for psychoanalysts and for the rest of us as well. Just as we repress our hostility, and even our knowledge

of our hostility, we repress the possibility that our hostility might be *really powerful* all by itself! When I first read of this argument of Eisenbud’s, I found it unconvincing. In fact, I dismissed it rather easily, then noticed that I had a little trouble even remembering it clearly later. When I tried to make myself take the possibility more seriously: “*Really, what if ___?*,” I found something like a vague, inchoate cloud of anxiety come up making further thoughts difficult. In other words, I found that I was perilously close to proving him right by my own complete but shifty rejection of the idea. Perhaps I accepted psi so easily because I didn’t *really believe myself* in the reality of psi, all my own work to the contrary. At this point, I would just say that I think that Eisenbud—and Tanagras and Charles Tart—were on to something real with this hypothesis, even if it might not cover all of the reasons for our cultural hostility to psi.

Reichbart mentions lots of contributions made by other psychoanalytic writers, including recently published brave souls like Janine DePeyer and Ofra Eshel and Ruth Rosenbaum, presenting a fine summary of this field. He also offers a number of clinical incidents from his own experience. The patterns he and others have found largely echo the early reports of Freud and his contemporaries Sandor Ferenczi and Istvan Hollos, and extend them and offer new thoughts



and hypotheses as well. In general, Reichbart makes it clear that psi events do occur in the course of analysis, at least for some analysts; some patients produce a lot of them. They occur in contagious “fields” rather than one-to-one communications, and these events often express important things about hidden emotional dynamics in the transference/countertransference relationship.

But the other psychoanalyst he knows best in this context and says most about is Jule Eisenbud. Reichbart had a long, many-sided relationship with Eisenbud. First, he received analytic treatment from him, which was very helpful at a critical point when he had no interest in psychoanalysis or parapsychology, but did have an emotional crisis to tend to. Then, learning about Eisenbud’s parapsychological interests mainly from reading and from other people, he came to appreciate Eisenbud’s insights and professional courage. As the years went on, they were friends and colleagues.

I have long had great appreciation for Eisenbud as well. He was a prominent analyst in New York, when he tarnished his reputation by his unequivocal exploration of the paranormal, particularly the paranormal photographs produced by an eccentric alcoholic named Ted Serios. Eisenbud also showed how much could be gained by taking the “psi hypothesis” seriously in psychotherapy, and spelled out his findings in books and articles. Just as Freud found the English stuffy (notably Ernest Jones, who kept trying to dissuade him from “the occult”), Eisenbud apparently came to find East Coast orthodoxy stuffy, and moved out west to Denver, where an intellectual climate of possibility is still more prevalent. This is where Reichbart met and first worked with Eisenbud.

Reichbart’s exposition of Eisenbud’s central thoughts is a fine service he provides in this book. I have read Eisenbud’s books, but his prose, while spirited and colorful, is somehow also often clunky and turgid. Reichbart is straightforward and lucid. This book is a good place to learn much of what one might want to know about Eisenbud’s thought and work.

The main weakness of the book is its repetitiveness. This is because several independent essays are presented, which often needed to cover the same ground in their introductions. Some editing would have helped, but I found this a minor annoyance. It does suggest that if Reichbart gave himself over to writing a longer, sustained exposition

of his observations and thoughts it would be fun and enlightening to read. Another annoyance is his clinician's subtle attitude of disdain for experimental work on psi, and his relative ignorance about it. He bridges worlds. It would make his contribution better if he would bridge these worlds, too.

Even so, this is a helpful book. It speaks to different groups of readers. Psychoanalysts, scientific parapsychologists, lovers of literature, fans of the unwashed paranormal, anthropologists, even legal scholars, will be goaded to learn more about each other's landscapes, to everyone's gain.

Such is the ambivalence, and professional fearfulness, of psychoanalysts that many of their more important contributions in this area have only appeared posthumously and, like Freud, dug up by others. Reichbart is slightly and justifiably proud of himself for coming out with this book while he is still alive. Be more daring, he and Eisenbud say to their profession. After all, why are they doctors of the soul? He says,

. . . . no matter how brutal and sad the internal world of our patients may be, what our profession ultimately desires for them is not only emotional stability but that they will be moved by our clinical work with them into creativity and wonder, into the ability to enjoy beauty, love, and admiration for this existence that we share. . . . Rather than defend against (psi events), we should be delighted to explore them as we would do with anything psychoanalytic and to bring to them the full range of our psychoanalytic understanding for our patients—and ourselves.