

EDITORIAL

Parapsychologists are often—and understandably—concerned about finding reliable and stable repositories for the donation of manuscripts, published books and articles, investigator’s notes and diaries, and other valuable research materials. (No doubt this challenge also confronts other areas of frontier science, but I’m personally familiar only with its manifestation in parapsychology.) University and public libraries can be fickle, initially accepting donations of these materials but disposing of them later. And parapsychological organizations often struggle to maintain a tenuous hold on their own existence—and, of course, the existence of their libraries and archives.

For example, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in London at one time housed an extensive and rich collection in the Society’s home at 1 Adam & Eve Mews (one of the world’s great addresses). But when financial pressures forced the SPR to relocate to a much smaller venue elsewhere in Kensington, the organization had no choice but to divide its collection and deposit most of the rarer items in the Cambridge University Library (where, I’m told, some of those items occasionally “dematerialize”).

Similarly, the Rhine Research Center (RRC) in Durham, North Carolina, has been in a precarious financial position for decades. When the organization moved to newly built headquarters several years ago, their valuable archives were at least moved to a home that was not a fire or flood hazard (unlike the basement of the former RRC building across the street from Duke University). But if the RRC folds, either from financial pressure or a paucity of support personnel, what becomes of its collections?

Currently, the Parapsychology Foundation in New York City is in serious financial trouble, and its enormous and well-organized library could easily be out of a home in the near future. It’s no wonder, then, that I—along with other chronologically challenged psi researchers—worry about what to do with our own private collections of books, notes, and other archival materials. Can any relevant and useful organization be counted on to survive, and can any person be trusted to respect and preserve the donation, or (following retirement or death) to pass the collection on to another trustworthy person?

I faced this dilemma about ten years ago when I was asked to sort through and preserve the letters, papers, and books of my close friend psychiatrist Jule Eisenbud. Eisenbud is probably best-remembered for his investigation of the psychic photography of Ted Serios, an alcoholic Chicago bellhop who appeared to produce anomalous images on “instant” Polaroid film (for the full story, see Eisenbud, 1967, Eisenbud, 1989, and for a summary and update see Braude, 2007).

The Serios case, in my view, is very strong and very important, and Jule's materials are an exceptionally valuable resource. Jule's library was enormous; he had written a hefty collection of books and articles; he had many boxes of videos and other materials pertaining to the Serios case; and he had also preserved nearly all of his written correspondence (both personal and professional) since the 1930s, including many exchanges with leading figures in parapsychology and mainstream science.

As Jule's health declined in the 1990s, he realized the urgency of finding a safe haven for the original Serios photographs, numerous signed affidavits, and other documents bearing on the case. Probably because Jule was something of a celebrity in the Denver area, the Denver Public Library seemingly came to the rescue. The Library's director offered to hold and protect the Serios materials and also digitize the photos as a backup. So even though Jule died unsatisfied about the public response to his work with Ted, he was comforted in his final months believing that the evidence would survive and be accessible to researchers willing to study it fairly.

Jule died in March, 1999, and not long thereafter (near the beginning of 2002), the Denver Public Library informed Jule's son Rick that it had decided to divest itself of the Serios holdings. The Library's management had changed, and those now in charge evidently felt no need to honor their earlier commitment to Jule to maintain and protect his donation. In fact, Rick asked the new Director what the Library would have done with the material if they had been unable to reach him. To his astonishment, the Director replied that they would probably have thrown it all away. Of course, Rick was angry over the Library's cavalier attitude, and he and I were anxious about finding a dependable home for his father's legacy.

Rick and I agreed that the major parapsychological organizations lacked either financial security, safe storage, or reliable personnel, and in fact Jule had reached the same conclusion years earlier. That's why he had donated his most important Serios material to the Denver Public Library. He assumed (reasonably) that they weren't going to fold, and he'd been given what appeared to be an iron-clad commitment to preserve and maintain the collection. Naturally, the Library's subsequent betrayal left both Rick and me wary of trusting other apparently stable institutions to be recipients of the Eisenbud/Serios material.

Nevertheless, I figured there was no harm in asking Tom Beck, Chief Curator of Special Collections at my university's Albin O. Kuhn Library and Gallery, whether he'd be interested in housing and maintaining the material, and to my surprise and delight Tom recognized what an intriguing and valuable acquisition this would be. He recognized the intrinsic interest in the collection and hoped that it would attract researchers from around the globe. Moreover, Tom felt it would further enhance the UMBC Library's already very distinguished

collection of nearly two million photographs, from some of the world's leading photographers (including Ansel Adams, Lotte Jacobi, and others). Before long, Rick sent the University of Maryland Baltimore County fourteen big boxes of photos, videos, letters, supporting documents, and much more.

Tom was right. After the Library issued some press releases, the Eisenbud/Serios material quickly became a magnet to both domestic and European researchers eager to examine it carefully for themselves. For example, in 2003, a team from German television accessed the collection for a series they were producing on the paranormal. The following year, the collection was examined thoroughly by Andreas Fischer, from the Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene (IGPP) in Freiburg, Germany. As a result of his efforts, UMBC lent thirteen Serios thoughtographs to the renowned Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris. From November 2004 until February 2005, those photos were part of an exhibit entitled "Le Troisième Oeil: La Photographie et l'Occulte" (The Third Eye: Photography and the Occult). In September 2005, the exhibit moved to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where it ran until December under the title "The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult." Each exhibit was accompanied by a handsome and very large catalogue of its photos, many of them extremely rare. Since then, researchers from around the globe have visited the collection, and plans are again under way to lend some of the photos to exhibits in Europe.

One reason I'm especially glad to have this material available for inspection is that it puts the lie to magician James Randi's widely disseminated misinformation about his role in the Serios case. Despite Eisenbud's repeated—and financially generous—challenges to conjurers to duplicate the Serios phenomena *under controlled conditions similar to those prevailing during the experiments*, no one has come forward. Some have claimed to produce Serios-like effects, but those claims have never been supported by public demonstrations under careful conditions or any other hard evidence.

During the late 1960s, when the Serios case was getting considerable public attention, Randi insisted that the phenomena were fraudulent, and he claimed that he could reproduce them under conditions similar to those in which Serios succeeded. That would, indeed, have been a neat trick, because those conditions included wearing clothing supplied by the experimenters and being separated from the camera (sometimes in another room, and sometimes in an electrically shielded "Faraday" cage). Nevertheless, with his usual bluster, Randi appeared on the morning television *Today* show with Eisenbud and accepted Jule's challenge to duplicate the Serios phenomena and make good on his claim.

Of course, confidence is easy to feign, and Randi has done it routinely in his role as magician. He's also cleverly taken advantage of the occasional high-profile case he successfully exposes as fraudulent, by publicizing those

successes and creating the impression that he's a generally reliable guide when it comes to the paranormal. So Randi's dismissal of the Serios case was all it took for those already disposed to believe that Serios was a fake, and it was probably enough even for those sympathetic to parapsychology but unaware of Randi's dishonesty. Many (possibly most) viewers were left believing that the case was without merit.

What the TV audience never learned was that when the show was over and Randi was pressed to make good on his wager, he simply wriggled out of it (as Jule noted, like any escape artist would). Early in their correspondence, Randi bragged in a letter dated September 28, 1967, that it would be very simple to duplicate Serios's effects by mere trickery. But after Jule replied, offering to arrange a demonstration of Randi's alleged conjuring finesse, Randi quickly responded (in a letter dated October 8, 1967) that it would be impossible to arrange such a demonstration, because (he claimed) there was no chance of agreeing on the meaning of the terms "range of phenomena" and "similar conditions." So in his first attempt to change the subject and avoid making good on his boast, Randi dropped the issue of whether he (Randi) could duplicate Ted's phenomena and instead shifted the discussion to the conditions under which Randi could test Serios himself.

Jule replied to this evasion promptly on October 12, noting that it wouldn't be necessary to duplicate Ted's entire "range of phenomena." It would be sufficient if Randi managed to duplicate the results obtained in "two or three clear, well-defined and well-documented experiments with Ted." Jule continued, "We need not, moreover, get hung-up over what constitutes 'similar conditions'. It would be sufficient if you used the identical physical set-ups as Ted with either the same observers (in the following suggested experiments a total of ten—all hard-boiled sceptics) or observers of equivalent background and training. . . . The conditions of control of camera and film would merely have to be the same as those used with Ted—that is, with marked and initialed cameras and film under the surveillance of one or more of the observers."

Jule then suggested some clearly defined tests—for example, that Randi allow himself "to be stripped, clad in a monkey suit and sealed in a steel-walled, lead-lined sound-proof chamber." Randi would then have an hour to "produce six identifiable pictures with the camera held and triggered by the observer," and that if Randi chooses to use a "gismo" like the rolled-up cardboard used by Ted, that immediately before the shutter is triggered the observer be allowed to look through the gismo's barrel. Jule then went on to describe, in an equally detailed fashion, two more tests successfully passed by Serios, including the conditions that Randi (like Ted) allow himself "to be stripped and searched, including a thorough inspection of body orifices . . . [and then] sewn into a monkey suit without pockets and . . . ankle and wrist cuffs will be taped."

It's regrettable, in hindsight, that Jule proposed as well that Randi—like Serios—be inebriated for the trial (although Jule wryly granted that Randi needn't consume as much alcohol as Ted). I knew Jule very well, and I'm confident he made that proposal only to goad Randi and to emphasize the extent of the handicap under which Serios operated. Unfortunately, that suggested provision allowed Randi another distraction from his initial boast. He wrote back to Eisenbud, protesting that he didn't drink, apparently believing that by rejecting this non-essential (if not frivolous) requirement he could justify totally withdrawing from the challenge. In fact, in Randi's reply of October 20, 1967, he makes no other mention at all of his initial claim that the phenomena of Serios could be easily produced by trickery. Instead, he continues to write about arranging conditions for testing Ted himself.

Jule immediately responded on October 23, offering to waive the alcohol requirement and once again requesting that Randi reply to the original issue of meeting the challenge to duplicate Ted's phenomena. At that point, since Randi had no excuse left, it's not surprising that neither he nor his representatives appeared at a New York hotel for a meeting Jule had repeatedly tried to arrange. And in subsequent correspondence, Randi again tried changing the subject, from the question of whether he (Randi) could do it (which is what the challenge was all about) to whether Serios could do it. That is, rather than follow through on his boast to reproduce Serios's images under the good conditions in which Ted had succeeded, he disingenuously claimed that this was not the issue; what mattered, he said, was whether Ted could do what Eisenbud had claimed. And so Randi again simply side-stepped the challenge, knowing full well that most would be satisfied just knowing he claimed on national television and elsewhere that the Serios phenomena could be duplicated by simple trickery.

I should emphasize that drinking was nothing ever imposed on Serios; Serios did that quite voluntarily. Jule's challenge to Randi was to duplicate the phenomena under the good conditions imposed successfully on Serios. And that's something Randi has never done or ever publicly tried to do, and there certainly is no evidence of his having actually succeeded. Interestingly, this paucity of evidence never prevented the widely read and respected but (under the circumstances) inexcusably non-authoritative Martin Gardner from claiming that Randi "regularly" duplicates the Serios phenomenon, "and with more skill" (*Nature*, 300 (November 11, 1982):119). It's not difficult to imagine what Gardner's source was for that falsehood.

At any rate, to help prevent others from learning about the aftermath of his *Today* show boast, Randi prohibited publication of his correspondence on the matter. That was undoubtedly a shrewd move, because the letters show clearly how Randi backed away from his empty boast. But now that the correspondence is all in the UMBC Library, it's been accessed by eager researchers and remains

available for additional scrutiny. So if anyone doubts my account of the Eisenbud–Randi challenge and correspondence, it’s very easy to confirm.

I wish I could say that I’m comforted by Tom Beck’s assurance that the Eisenbud/Serios material will be treated with more respect and appreciation than was accorded by the Denver Public Library, that it will survive both my retirement and Tom’s subsequent retirement, and that it will truly have a permanent home at UMBC. That may be; it may be (as Tom says) that universities are generally loathe to purge collections already on hand, especially those that attract researchers from around the world and bring attention (mostly positive) to the university. (In any case, Rick Eisenbud has arranged for the material to be returned to the family just in case UMBC decides to unload it.) However, I’m jaded enough from my study of the history of parapsychology—and (for that matter) from history generally—to worry about the scoundrels who have yet to appear. So I encourage all those interested to examine the Eisenbud/Serios archives at UMBC while they’re being so lovingly maintained and instructively organized. For those interested in macro-PK, and for those interested in getting the facts straight about a case so routinely misrepresented, the Eisenbud/Serios material (and, of course, both editions of Jule’s book on the Serios case) are not to be missed.

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References

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