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Opening Extract from...

Paranormality

Why We See What Isn't There

Written by Richard Wiseman

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Professor Richard Wiseman

PARANORMALITY

Why We See What Isn't There

MACMILLAN



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To Jeff

A Quick Test Before We Begin

This book contains lots of tests, experiments, exercises and demonstrations. Here is the first of them. Take a quick look at the inkblot below.



What does the image look like to you?

Many thanks. As we will discover later, the thoughts that have just crossed your mind reveal a great deal about you.

Introduction

In which we learn what happened when a supposedly psychic dog was put to the test, and begin our journey into a world where everything appears possible and nothing is quite as it seems.

As I gazed deep into the eyes of Jaytee, several thoughts passed through my mind. Was this cute little terrier really psychic? If not, how had he managed to make headlines around the world? And if he could predict the future, did he already know if our experiment would be a success? At that precise moment, Jaytee gave a small cough, leaned forward and vomited on my shoes.

My quality time with Jaytee took place about a decade ago. I was in my early thirties and conducting an experiment to discover whether this supposedly psychic terrier really could predict when his owners would return home. By then I had already spent over ten years investigating a variety of alleged paranormal phenomena, spending sleepless nights in supposedly haunted houses, testing mediums and psychics, and carrying out laboratory experiments into telepathy.

This fascination with the impossible started when I was eight years old and I saw my first magic trick. My grandfather had me mark my initials on a coin, made the coin disappear, and then revealed that it had been magically transported into a sealed box. A few weeks later he explained the secret to the supposed miracle and I was hooked. For the next few years I found out everything I could about the dark arts of magic and deception. I searched second-hand bookshops for obscure works on sleight of hand, joined a local magic club, and performed for friends and family. By my teens I had a

couple of hundred shows under my belt and had become one of the youngest members of the prestigious Magic Circle.

In order to successfully deceive an audience, magicians have to understand how you think and behave. More specifically, they need to know how to make you misperceive what is happening inches from your nose, prevent you from thinking about certain solutions to tricks, and persuade you to misremember what has happened right in front of your eyes. After fooling people on a twice-nightly basis for several years I became fascinated with these aspects of human behaviour, and eventually decided to enrol for a psychology degree at University College London.

Like most magicians, I was deeply sceptical about the existence of paranormal phenomena, and had confined them to a mental file-drawer labelled 'not true, but fun to talk about at parties'. Then, when I was just coming to the end of the first year of my psychology degree, a chance event changed everything. One day I happened to turn on the television in my student digs and caught the end of a programme about science and the supernatural. A young psychologist named Sue Blackmore popped up on the screen and explained that she was also fascinated by things that allegedly go bump in the night. Then she said something that had a huge impact on my career. Instead of examining whether such phenomena were genuine, she explained that she thought it more worthwhile to investigate why people experienced these strange sensations. Why did mothers think that they were in telepathic communication with their children? Why did people believe that they had seen a ghost? Why were some people so certain that their destiny was written in the stars? Suddenly, the penny dropped. Before then I hadn't seriously considered carrying

out any research into paranormal phenomena. After all, why would I waste my time looking at the possible reality of things that probably didn't exist? However, Sue's comments made me realize that such work could be worthwhile if I were to move away from the existence of the phenomena themselves and instead focus on the deep and fascinating psychology that lay behind people's beliefs and experiences.

As I delved deeper I discovered that Sue was not the only researcher to have adopted this approach to the paranormal. In fact, throughout history a handful of researchers have dedicated their lives to discovering what supposedly paranormal phenomena tell us about our behaviour, beliefs and brain. Daring to take a walk on the weird side, these pioneering mavericks have carried out some of the strangest research ever conducted, including removing the head of the world's top thought-reader, infiltrating several cults, attempting to weigh the souls of the dying, and testing a talking mongoose. Just as the mysterious Wizard of Oz turned out to be a man behind a curtain pushing buttons and pulling levers, so their work has yielded surprising and important insights into the psychology of everyday life and the human psyche.

My investigation into the allegedly psychic terrier Jaytee is a good example of the approach.

Before becoming the highly successful self-help guru that he is today, Paul McKenna hosted a television series about the paranormal. I was invited to be one of the resident scientists on the show, offering my opinion on a whole range of remarkable performances, experiments and events. It was a mixed bag. One week a man appeared to generate sparks from his fingertips, while another time Paul invited millions of viewers to psychically influence the national lottery by concentrating

on seven specific numbers during the draw (three of the numbers came up).

One episode involved an especially interesting film about a terrier called Jaytee. According to the film, Jaytee had the uncanny ability to predict when his owner, Pam, was returning home. Pam lived with her parents and they had noticed Jaytee seemed to reliably signal their daughter's homecoming by sitting in the window. A national newspaper had published an article on Jaytee's amazing ability and an Austrian television company had conducted an initial experiment with him. The test was shown on Paul McKenna's programme and involved one film crew following Pam as she walked around her local town centre while a second crew continuously filmed Jaytee in her parents' house. When Pam decided to return home Jaytee went to the window and remained there until his owner arrived. Pam, Jaytee and I were all on the show and chatted about the film. I said that I thought it was very curious, and Pam kindly invited me to conduct a more formal examination of her apparently psychic dog.

A few months later my research assistant, Matthew Smith, and I found ourselves driving to Ramsbottom in north-west England to test Jaytee. We all met and everything seemed to be going well. Pam was very friendly, Matthew and I liked Jaytee, and Jaytee seemed to like us.

During the first test Matthew and Pam drove to a public house about 8 miles away and, once there, used a random number generator to select a time to head back – 9 p.m. Meanwhile, I continuously filmed Jaytee's favourite window so that we would have a complete record of his behaviour there. When Pam and Mat returned from the bar we rewound the film and eagerly observed Jaytee's behaviour. Interestingly,

the terrier was at the window at the allotted time. So far, so good. However, when we looked at the remainder of the film, Jaytee's apparent skills started to unravel. It turned out that he was something of a fan of the window, visiting it 13 times during the experiment. During a second trial the following day, Jaytee visited the window 12 times. It seemed his time in the window was not the clear-cut signal that the clip from Austrian television suggested. Pam explained that summer was perhaps the wrong time for the experiment because of the many distractions, including the local bitch being on heat and the coming of the fishmonger.

In December we returned to Ramsbottom and conducted another two trials. In the first session Jaytee made four separate trips to the window and one of them was about ten minutes before Matthew and Pam set off home. Close, but no cigar. On the final trial Jaytee made eight trips to the window. One of them was just as Matthew and Pam started their return trip, but he only spent a few seconds there before running into the garden and vomiting on my shoes.

All in all, not exactly overwhelming evidence for animal magic.[1] However, the interesting question is not whether animals really have psychic gifts, but rather, why might



Field footage of Jaytee test
www.richardwiseman.com/paranormality/Jaytee.html

people come to believe that they have a psychic bond with their pet? The answer tells us a great deal about one of the most fundamental ways in which we think about the world.

In 1967, psychologist husband and wife team Loren and Jean Chapman, from the University of Wisconsin, conducted a now classic experiment.[2] The study involved a form of psychiatric assessment that was popular in the 1960s called the 'Draw A Person Test'. According to clinicians at the time, it was possible to detect all sorts of possible problems, such as paranoia, repressed sexuality and depression from an individual's drawing of a typical person. The Chapmans, however, were not so sure that the test stood up to scrutiny. After all, many of the alleged relationships, such as paranoid people making drawings with large eyes, seemed to fit surprisingly well with the stereotypes that the public carry around in their heads, and so the Chapmans wondered whether the alleged patterns were actually in the minds of the clinicians. To test their idea, a group of students was presented with drawings of people made by psychiatric patients, along with a brief description of their symptoms, such as 'He is suspicious', 'He is worried about not being manly enough', 'He is worried about sexual impotence'. After looking through the pairings of pictures and words, the volunteers were asked whether they had noticed any patterns in the data. Interestingly, the volunteers reported the same types of patterns that professionals had been using for years. They thought, for example, that paranoid people draw atypical eyes, those with issues surrounding their manliness produced broad-shouldered figures and that small sexual organs were indicative of impotence-related matters.

There was just one small problem. The Chapmans had randomly paired up the drawing and symptoms, so there were no real patterns in the data. The volunteers had seen the invisible. The Chapmans' work completely discredited the 'Draw A Person Test' and, more importantly, revealed an important insight into the human psyche. Our beliefs do not sit passively in our brains waiting to be confirmed or contradicted by incoming information. Instead, they play a key role in shaping how we see the world. This is especially true when faced with coincidences. We are remarkably good at paying attention to events that coincide, especially when they sup-port our beliefs. In the Chapmans' experiment, volunteers already believed that paranoid people would produce drawings with large eyes, and so noticed instances when a particular person's drawing actually had large eyes and played down the images from paranoid individuals that had perfectly normal eyes.

The same principle applies to matters of the paranormal. We all like to think that we have untapped psychic potential and get excited when we think of a friend, the telephone rings, and they're on the other end of the line. In doing so, we are forgetting all the occasions when we thought about that friend, the telephone rang, and it was a double-glazing salesman. Or all the times you weren't thinking about the friend and they unexpectedly telephoned. Similarly, if we have a dream that reflects the following day's events, we are quick to claim the gift of prophecy, but in doing so we are ignoring all of the times when our dreams didn't come true. It is the same with animal magic. If we believe that owners have a psychic bond with their pets, we pay attention to when an animal seems to predict their owner's homecoming, and forget when

the animal made a prediction but was wrong, or failed to foresee a return.

Perhaps more importantly, the same mechanism also leads us astray with matters of health. In the mid-1990s researchers Donald Redelmeier and Amos Tversky decided to investigate the possible link between arthritic pain and the weather.[3] For thousands of years people have convinced themselves that their arthritis flares up with certain changes in temperature, barometric pressure, and humidity. To find out if this was really the case, Redelmeier and Tversky had a group of rheumatoid arthritis sufferers rate their pain levels twice a month for over a year. The research team then obtained detailed information about the local temperature, barometric pressure and humidity over the same time period. All of the patients were convinced that there was a relationship between the weather and their pain. However, the data showed that their condition was completely unrelated to the weather patterns. Once again, they had focused on the times when high levels of pain were associated with especially odd weather patterns, forgotten about the times when this was not the case, and erroneously concluded that the two were related.

Similarly, we might hear about someone who was miraculously healed after praying, forget about those who were healed without prayer or prayed but were not healed, and incorrectly conclude that prayer works. Or we might read about someone who was cured of cancer after eating lots of oranges, forget those who were cured without oranges or consumed oranges but weren't cured, and end up believing that oranges help cure cancer.

The effect can even play a role in promoting racism, with

people seeing images of those from ethnic minorities engaged in acts of violence, forgetting about the individuals from minorities who are law-abiding citizens and the violent people from non-minority backgrounds, and concluding that those from minorities are especially likely to commit crime.

My research into Jaytee started off with an investigation into a supposedly psychic dog and ended up revealing a great deal about one of the most fundamental ways in which we misperceive the world. This illustrates why I find supernatural science so fascinating. Each journey takes you on a voyage into the unknown where you have no idea who you are going to meet or what you are going to find.

We are about to embark on an expedition deep into this hitherto hidden world of supernatural science. In a series of fantastical tales, we will meet a colourful cast of characters, go backstage with expert illusionists, observe charismatic cult leaders in action, and attend mindboggling séances. Each adventure will reveal unique and surprising insights into the hidden psychology behind your everyday life, including, for example, how you have evolved to be afraid of things that go bump in the night, how your unconscious is far more powerful than previously imagined, and how your mind can be controlled by others. The journey is going to be far more than a passive sightseeing trip. Along the way you will be urged to roll up your sleeves and take part in several experiments. Each of these tests offers an opportunity to explore the more mysterious side of your psyche, encouraging you, for example, to measure your powers of intuition, assess how suggestible you are, and discover if you are a natural-born liar.

It is almost time to depart. Prepare to enter a world where anything appears possible and yet nothing is ever quite what

it seems. A world where the truth really is stranger than fiction. A world that I have had the pleasure of calling home for the past twenty years.

Hurry now, there's a storm brewing, and we are about to begin our journey into a world far more wonderful than Oz . . .