

ENTITIES: ANGELS, SPIRITS, DEMONS AND OTHER ALIEN BEINGS by Joe Nickell.
Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1995. 297 pp. £21.00 (\$24.95).

Other-worldly entities have been part of the human experience throughout recorded history. Whether or not they exist in fact, these beings are perceived as real by many, and consequently have probably had a greater influence on human affairs than abstract principles or a-priori dogmas. The French soldiers of the Hundred Years War were less than enthusiastic about fighting the English so long as it was on behalf of an ideological proposition, but were roused to vigorous action when they thought a saint had come down from Heaven to inspire Jeanne d'Arc.

Any evaluation of other-worldly entities should take this continued interaction into account. Unfortunately, Nickell's book is too firmly set in its sceptical standpoint to see that there can be a constructive side to the entity experience, however ridiculous it may seem to one who does not share the belief system which 'authorizes' it. So his book feels shallow and superficial: and when we find him gathering sea monsters and extra-terrestrials, zombies and visions of the Virgin, all under the one umbrella, we suspect a dismaying lack of understanding as to what the entity experience is really about.

The title might lead us to expect a comprehensive overview of the diversity of these other-worldly creatures: the references that close each chapter, the presence of an index (though not a bibliography) might encourage us to hope for a scholarly contribution to the literature of this subject. Alas, what we get is disappointingly insubstantial, and the relentlessly reductionist approach makes it ultimately unsatisfying.

That having been said, it must be added that a good deal of the book is excellent. In his helpful Afterword, psychologist Robert Baker perceptively observes that "the value of Nickell's *Entities* rests upon the fact that the representative cases are based upon personal, on-the-scene investigations by the author himself". And indeed, whenever Nickell turns to his own personal experiences, he is lucid, fascinating and very much to the point. I hope he will one day write a book about his first-hand involvement with claims for the paranormal: it will be a fascinating and illuminating contribution.

The fact is that Nickell should not have attempted to fill out his personal account with a history of the encounter experience. His accounts of, say, the Fatima, Garabandal and Medjugorje visions skate over the events in a way which simply does not do them justice: his list of sources is revealing, both by those he cites—which tend to be secondary sources—and by the primary sources he seems not to have consulted. As it happens, his valuations will be seen by many as valid, but that is beside the point; the flimsy basis upon which those valuations are based leaves him wide open to attack from those more fully versed in the literature. I doubt, for example, whether Gaudl or Cornell will be impressed by the way he dismisses the whole of the past history of the poltergeist phenomenon, to which they devoted a whole book, in four short pages.

Although the book gives evidence of a creditable attempt to familiarize himself with the key events in the entity experience, there are lapses which suggest that his knowledge has been rather perfunctorily acquired. When (on p.192) he gives 1929 as the year when *Amazing Stories* first appeared, instead

of 1926, it doesn't destroy his argument: but it doesn't help his credibility. On page 19 he refers to Margaret Fox's husband as "a surgeon named Elisha Kane"; he would not have had to look long or deeply into the Fox-Kane relationship before realizing that Elisha Kent Kane was in fact one of America's best-known polar explorers. On page 89 he writes "[Anita] Gregory is a British parapsychologist who is inclined to believe in paranormal phenomena": if he had made any serious effort to establish Gregory's credulity or otherwise, he would soon have learnt that she died in 1984. On page 192 he tells us that Charles Fort "believed" that unidentified objects in the sky indicated visits from space aliens: whereas anyone with the barest first-hand familiarity with Fort's writings would know that it is basic to his philosophy that he 'believed' in pretty well nothing at all!

I would like to have reviewed this book more favourably, because on the whole I share Nickell's views and sympathize with his approach. But in taking on this subject he has stepped into deeper waters than perhaps he expected, and his shallow book skims the surface in a way that does less than justice to the richness and complexity of the entity experience.

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THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST UNSOLVED MYSTERIES by John and Anne Spencer. Headline, London, 1995. 374 pp. £19.99 (hardcover) £6.99 (paper).

This well-researched and readable survey of the mysteries of our subject includes topics outside the range of our usual investigations, but there is much of special interest, including the less obvious aspects of our subject. The reader will be rewarded, as is to be expected from such leading experts in a cognitive discipline, by sections on UFO-related matters. Some of the items, however, may seem less pertinent than others. It should be pointed out that Vampires (or, rather, the belief in Vampires) arose from the observed muscular contractions of dead bodies. The Tanguska explosion is a *lesser* mystery, as indeed suggested by the authors themselves. At a pinch, we could have done without the dubious 'blessings' of Toronto, and the allegedly healing crystals, however attractive they are aesthetically.

Where so much comes under the microscope, there are naturally a few errors, as on Plate 4, where there is a confusion between the two protagonists at Bromley, Elms and Taylor. That most remarkable and impeccable medium, Mrs Elizabeth Hope (otherwise 'Mme D'Esperance') features as "D'Esperant": she deserves not a spelling mistake, but more attention, in the text. Alas, the romantically-named Hexham (which needs no boost!) owes nothing to the verb *to hex*. According to Ekwall it gets its name from "Hagustald's stream", the original name of the town being "Hagustaldes ea". The Japanese professor and thoughtographer, Fukurai, is misspelled "Fukaria".

Apart from such almost inevitable minor flaws, this is a valuable work of reference, and an essential tool for the thoughtful reader and student. I particularly welcome the realization that the frequent electrical interferences