

THE PSYCHIC MAFIA by M. Lamar Keene, as told to Allen Spraggett. Forewords by Ray Hyman and William V. Rauscher. Prometheus Books, April 1998. 177 pp. £14.50 (paperback).

This book falls in the 'True confessions of a former crook' category. It can also be read as a morality tale, and has possibly been packaged that way for the US market. Lamar Keene was born in Tampa, Florida, about 1937/38 (by my calculation—the lack of a clear chronology makes it difficult to set much of this book in the overall context of the times its narrative reflects). He and an old friend set up as fraudulent mediums. They were soon revelling in the easy money which, LK assures us, could be made in this way, and following some deft political manoeuvring within their particular vein of American spiritualism, they gained access to Camp Chesterfield, Indiana, "spiritualism's answer to Disneyland", according to LK—which plays host to tens of thousands of 'pilgrims' for a 'summer season' each year. To make progress in their careers it was important for them to be acceptable to the outright criminals (as LK portrays them) who ran this establishment. So successful was he that, at the age of about 24, he was made a trustee of the Universal Spiritualist Association (an apparently wholly legitimate group) and an excellent 'cover' for his calling as a shameless fraud. "I was, make no mistake, no mere mediumistic freelancer but a key figure in the mainstream of spiritualism in the United States", he claims. This was in about 1961 and he continued raking in money through deception for a further ten years, before becoming sick of his trade and abandoning false spiritualism. He then collaborated in writing this book (first published in 1976), intending it as an exposé and a warning to others. This is the bare substance of the work.

The bulk of the book is concerned with describing, in a racy and anecdotal fashion, the methods used by US fake physical mediums of a generation or so ago. LK claims to have been outstanding among them, "Clairvoyance? I was better than Kreskin. Mind over matter? In my presence objects not only bent, they defied gravity. Psychic healing? My spirit guides majored in it. My mediumship represented the ultimate in séance room razzle-dazzle." Essential to the whole business was a network—the 'Psychic Mafia' of the title—amongst the mediums, whereby every sitter had an index card or file in which were recorded all known details of him, his family (living and dead), his associates, his 'spirit guides', and so on.

The hub of this network appears to have been Camp Chesterfield. In this way, whenever a client booked a sitting with LK and his confederates in fraud, all the sitter's details were researched in advance by the 'medium', who, not surprisingly, was able to call on his 'spirits' to display an astonishing knowledge of the sitter and his circumstances.

The sitter was given exactly what he expected and wanted. LK states frankly, "People want spirit forms, spirit voices, spirit photographs, and similar wonders—and isn't the customer always right?" This, I know, is the age-old self-justification of the common whore, but on the basis of my own very small and limited experience as a village-fête 'fortune teller' and occasional concert-party magician, I have to support LK when he states that false mediums fulfil the demands of a strange but distinct market. His clientele paid for the thrill of

it all. Their need for 'psychic revelations/messages from the beyond' compelled them to return to LK and other 'mediums'—who simply referred to the same files, and then up-dated them for lucrative use on the next occasion . . . and so on, sitting by sitting.

Sometimes theft of small personal items was undertaken in order to have them returned as 'apports' by helpful 'spirits'. A variant on this process was to gain access to a victim's house, conceal some object belonging to the victim, and then have the 'spirits' reveal where it had been 'misaid'. At other times, once a suitable dupe had been identified and prepared psychologically, only the 'spirits' invaded his house. They gave him 'astral development' lessons as he slept, and LK quotes a 'fee' of a thousand dollars per lesson (in values of 30 years ago) as being quite usual. 'Spirits' often suggested to the newly bereaved that the medium's 'Church' needed large donations in order to continue in its comforting work. Alternatively the medium could simply mention a 'good cause' and take up a collection. The essential element, it is stressed, was to trade upon the victims' belief in the 'spirits', their expectation of 'wonders', and their conditioned perception and interpretation of the stunts which were produced for them in order to reinforce their belief (the cumulative effect of the 'wonders' is very important in this context), all to create a complete dependency upon the 'spirits'. Since 'spirits' meant, simply, 'criminal medium', the ramifications of the whole appalling fraud are easy to imagine.

The conditioned credence of the sitter must surely underlie the bizarre and depraved behaviour outlined in the "Sex in the Séance—or how to lay a ghost" (*sic*) chapter. Pathos and personal inadequacy contend with lewdness in this account, which will disappoint the salacious. Nor, in some instances, is it altogether clear who is exploiting whom.

There is also a chapter on past false mediums, who are given no benefit of doubt at all. To judge by correspondence appearing in *JSPR* occasionally, this section will offend some people. LK, on the basis of his own activities, works from the assumption that virtually everyone is gullible, given the necessary expectation and circumstances. He states, "All mediums [i.e., the fakes with whom he worked], including me, subscribed to the creed that a new sucker is born every thirty seconds and that the typical spiritualist believer is in sympathy with his own destruction. For our sitters . . . we had unspeakable contempt."

Their dupes supposedly paid enormous sums of money to have their deceivers lay on yet more thrills. It was all highly organised, and these days (the book deals with the period 1958–71 as I calculate) is no doubt fully computerized. The 'spirits' will be receiving the 'information the medium could not possibly have known about Aunt Daisy' via e-mail and Internet! Microchip technology has doubtless improved the 'spirit voices' and so forth in the same way.

This raises one large question, in my mind. If the money was as good, and was made as easily, as LK claims, where was the real mafia in all the fraud? A racket like this cries out to The Mob to muscle in, yet nothing is said about the extent to which organised crime was involved. Perhaps such a subject is too sensitive to mention.

So, to whom would I recommend this book? Certainly all students of psychology and sociology should read it. The scholar, serene in his ivory tower,

might well benefit from being reminded of the extent of human wickedness, for there is much of this in its pages. The sensible chap on the Clapham omnibus probably knows that fraudulent mediums exist, but would be intrigued by their methods. The averagely informed reader, such as I, would find little that was new, though perhaps not everyone appreciates the essential extent of the operation of belief in allowing, indeed, requiring, fraud to produce the desired results if they will not appear to order by other means. For this reason alone, the publication of this book will not put one solitary crook out of business, I am sadly sure.

It has a fine bibliography of 107 titles dealing with the psychology and methodology of spiritualistic fraud, though how many of them would be fairly easy to come by, goodness knows!

At £14.50 I consider it grossly over-priced, and the American journalese in which it is written grates somewhat. I would browse in it if I found it in a shop, but I would certainly put it down again. There is nothing in it I would regard as useful to me, and this would probably be true for most people, even would-be fake mediums. It deals, let it be recalled, with events in an unpleasant seam of American society as it was a generation or so ago. Whilst human nature is doubtless much the same nowadays, the social context for its foibles has altered. Thus, in the final analysis, this book is essentially a curious piece of social history.

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