

*The Amityville Horror.* by Jay Anson. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1977. 201 pages, \$7.95.

*Reviewed by Robert L. Morris*

This book claims to be the true account of a month of terrifying "paranormal" events that occurred to a Long Island family when they moved into a house in Amityville, New York, that had been the scene of a mass murder. Throughout the book there are strong suggestions that the events were demonic in origin. On the copyright page, the Library of Congress subject listings are "1. Demonology—Case studies. 2. Psychical research—United States—Case studies." The next page contains the following statement: "The names of several individuals mentioned in this book have been changed to protect their privacy. However, all facts and events, as far as we have been able to verify them, are strictly accurate." The front cover of the book's dust jacket contains the words: "A True Story."

A close reading, plus a knowledge of details that later emerged, suggests that this book would be more appropriately indexed under "Fiction—Fantasy and horror." In fact it is almost a textbook illustration of bad investigative journalism, made especially onerous by its potential to terrify and mislead people and to serve as a form of religious propaganda.

To explore this in detail, we first need an outline of the events that supposedly took place, as described in the text of the book, plus a prologue derived from a segment of a New York television show about the case.

On November 13, 1974, Ronald DeFeo shot to death six members of his family at their home in Amityville. Shortly after, DeFeo was sentenced to six consecutive life terms, despite a plea for insanity by his attorney because DeFeo claimed to have heard voices in the house telling him what to do.

In the early middle of November 1975, George and Kathy Lutz were shown the house by a realtor who, at the completion of the tour, told the couple of the house's history. They nevertheless agreed to buy the house, since the price was good.

On December 18, the Lutzes and their three children moved in. Their house was blessed by a friend, Father Frank Mancuso, in the afternoon. Earlier that day Mancuso had lunched with four friends, including three priests who had advised him of the house's history and had suggested he not go. During the blessing, Mancuso heard a strong, masculine voice say, "Get out!"

Twenty-eight days later, on January 15, 1976, the Lutzes moved out, leaving their possessions behind. During these twenty-eight days the Lutz family, so the story goes, was beset by a wide variety of unusual events. Some were physical: a heavy door was ripped open, dangling on one hinge; hundreds of flies infested a room in the middle of winter; the telephone mysteriously malfunctioned, especially during calls between the Lutzes and Mancuso; a four-foot lion statue moved about the house; windows and doors were thrown open, panes broken, window locks bent out of shape; Mrs. Lutz levitated while sleeping and acquired marks and sores on her body; mysterious green slime oozed from the ceiling in a

hallway; and so on. Some phenomena were experiential: Mrs. Lutz felt the embrace and fondling of unseen entities; Mr. Lutz felt a constant chill despite high thermostat temperatures; the Lutzes' daughter acquired a piglike playmate; the Lutzes saw apparitions of a pig and a demonic figure; the children misbehaved excessively and the family dog slept a lot and avoided certain rooms; marching music was heard; et cetera.

During this same period of time, Father Mancuso is said to have experienced unusual phenomena also, although his only contact with the Lutzes afterward was an occasional phone call (some calls got through, although most did not). A few hours after his blessing of the house, the hood of his car smashed back against his windshield, tearing loose a hinge, and the door flew open. Then the car stalled. In the following month, Mancuso was beset by a series of illnesses, including sores on his hands and the flu, and a strong unexplained stench emanating from his room at the rectory following a votive Mass on behalf of the Lutzes.

Approximately two weeks after they moved out, the Lutzes met William Weber, an attorney representing Ronald DeFeo, through a mutual friend. A week later, on February 5, Weber stated on a local TV news program (described in the prologue) that he hoped to prove that some force capable of influencing human behavior (including his client's) existed at the Amityville house, that he had commissioned scientists to rule out certain kinds of physical phenomena, and that it would then be turned over to a group of psychic researchers. Two weeks later the Lutzes held a press conference in Weber's office, at which time they announced that they intended to keep the house for awhile but not live in it, and were awaiting the results of an investigation by parapsychologists and other professional occult researchers.

On February 18, according to the epilogue, a group of people spent the night at the Amityville house and conducted informal investigations, including three séances. Included were a clairvoyant, a demonologist, two psychics, two parapsychology field investigators, and a local TV news crew. Several reported unusual subjective impressions, but that was all. In March the Lutzes moved to California and posted their house for sale.

Since the book's publication, additional information has emerged. According to Curt Suplee's book review in the *Washington Post* (Dec. 9, 1977), the Lutzes were at about this time advised by a friend to sell their story to Prentice-Hall. A Prentice-Hall editor put the Lutzes in contact with a New York writer of documentary scripts, Jay Anson. Working from tapes provided by the Lutzes, plus some interviews with Father Mancuso (and local police officials, according to Anson's afterword), he turned out the book in three to four months. The Lutzes and Anson share the book copyright, although Anson retains the movie rights exclusively. The book has become a national best-seller in hardback and is scheduled for paperback release. The Lutzes have emerged from seclusion and have appeared on television.

According to an article in *People* (Feb. 13, 1978) by Burstein and Reilly, the Amityville house is now owned and occupied by a new family, who report no unusual phenomena save for extensive harassment by tourists and the curious. The new family "have sued the Lutzes, Prentice-Hall, and Anson for \$1.1 million

in damages—and are trying to enjoin them from characterizing their story as true.”

This is the picture as it has been presented to the public. The basic problem is that Anson appears to have made only meager attempts to assess the truthfulness of the Lutzes’ story, contrary to his own claims in the book. His only listed sources of information are joint tapes made by the Lutzes, plus additional interviews with Father Mancuso and local police officials. He does not claim to have talked directly with the Lutzes or to have questioned them in any way. Father Mancuso is a poor witness because he set foot in the house only once, and that immediately after having been warned by other priests to stay away. Local police officials were not directly involved in any of the phenomena. The most interesting witnesses would have been others who reported unusual feelings in the house (to see if they corroborated the Lutzes’ descriptions of their experiences) and the repairmen called to fix damage done to the house, who would have commented on the nature and extent of the actual damage done. No interviews were described with the scientists mentioned by DeFeo’s lawyer or with the parapsychologists from the Psychic Research Foundation. Since I am a former employee of the PRF, I know both investigators. One of them, Jerry Solfvin, had indeed talked to Anson at some length by phone. He described the PRF’s involvement in a letter to me as follows:

We *didn’t* carry out an investigation there—just an informal visit on my part, and a collecting of the Lutzes’ reports (after they moved) by George K. The case wasn’t interesting to us because the reports were confined to subjective responses from the Lutzes, and these were not at all impressive or even characteristic of these cases. All in all, the family moved out rather quickly (about a month after moving in) and refused to return, making further investigation less appealing to us.

In addition to his failure to collect (or at least to include) interview data from the most important witnesses, Anson never (apparently) visited the house himself to check on the damages described, collect impressions of his own, or do investigative journalism of any thorough sort. Thus Anson’s statement in the afterword (p. 197), “To the extent that I can verify them, all the events in this book are true,” is patently false. It should read, “To the extent that I *bothered to* verify. . . .”

The flaws of this book as evidence for the “paranormal” can be further seen by considering some of the basic problems of spontaneous cases investigations in parapsychology, in general.

1. *Witnesses may be totally unaware of factors involved in the production of certain phenomena.* For instance, the flies that suddenly appeared in one of the rooms (pp. 29, 45) may have hatched from eggs in something that was being stored in the room (at the time it was mainly a storage room), perhaps even something rather recently purchased. On one occasion following a levitation by Mrs. Lutz, it was noticed that she had deep lines on her face, making her look very old, which soon disappeared. These lines may have been produced by wrinkles in the material she was sleeping on, a common phenomenon that could easily be misin-

terpreted given the circumstances. Once such an event is past, it becomes essentially impossible to recreate the original circumstances completely, such as to ascertain the absence of such "hidden factors," although often a partial re-creation can enable us to ascertain their presence.

2. *Witnesses may have faulty perception of what actually happened.* Father Mancuso had been warned away from the house because of its history by the priests with whom he had just lunched, and he was nervous in the house. There are many ordinary mechanical noises that contain some or all of the acoustical frequencies found in human voices, and he may have perceived one such sound (familiar to the Lutzes and therefore ignored by them) as a human voice saying the short sentence, "Get out" (p. 17). Also, on page 191 we have the following: "Then, still in his dreamlike state, George saw Kathy levitate off the bed. She rose about a foot and slowly began to drift away from him." If George was still in a dreamlike state, he could easily have greatly misinterpreted his wife's bodily position and movements. On pages 96-97, an incident is described in which George finishes putting out a fire in the fireplace, then notices two "unblinking red eyes" in the window, eyes which could easily be only the reflection of dying embers. They then went outside and in the light of a flashlight noted cloven-hoofed piglike tracks leading around the house. Yet such tracks could easily have been produced by melting ice from the eaves of the house into the snow below, in which case the "tracks" would be expected to follow the contour of the house.

3. *Witnesses may have a faulty memory of the events that happened.* This problem, of course, potentially arises throughout the book. On page 29 is the statement, "Kathy's bathroom door was at the far end of her bedroom," which is contradictory to the floor plan on page 10. On page 81 George Lutz describes having been told by the Amityville Historical Society that "the Shinnecock Indians used land on the Amityville River as an enclosure for the sick, mad, and dying." Yet Curt Suplee's recent inquiries of this and another historical society reveal that the Massapequa Indians lived near Amityville but that the Shinnecocks lived nowhere around Amityville. Apparently either Lutz was misinformed or he misremembered, getting his tribes confused.

4. *Witnesses may give biased or faulty impressions of their own memories.* In making their tapes, the Lutzes would have been highly motivated to remember and report selectively those incidents which made the most interesting listening and the best case. Any tendency to exaggerate could not be teased out by comparing the Lutzes' separate versions for consistency because they made the tape together and were free to evoke a consensus before speaking. For instance, on page 26, it is said of the Lutz children, "Ever since the move, they seemed to have become brats, misbehaved monsters who wouldn't listen, unruly children who must be severely punished." In other places (for example, pp. 35, 54), one is given the impression that the Lutz children started to misbehave only after moving to the new house, and that the Lutzes were only now having discipline problems. Yet on page 86 we read, "Later in the afternoon was the second time Danny and Chris threatened to run away from home. The first had been when they lived at George's house at Deer Park. He had restricted them to their room for a week, because they were lying to him and Kathy about small things. They had revolted

against his authority: Both boys refused to obey his orders, threatening to run away if he also forced them to give up television. At that point, George called their bluff, telling Danny and Chris that they could get out if they didn't like the way he ran things at home." The following paragraph states that the children had run away from home but had returned and, "For a while, they stopped their childish fibbing. . . ."

In a similar vein, the family dog, Harry, is described in detail on page 165 as being ill at ease in the basement, finally running from it, and later (p. 180) as refusing to enter the basement. Yet on page 174, brief mention is made of the fact that Harry spent the night in the cellar, with no mention of Harry's behavior at that time. In addition to such selective emphasis and exaggeration, there are instances throughout the book in which the Lutzes describe themselves as unusually calm in the face of what would appear to be tremendously unnerving events.

5. *Witnesses may deliberately fabricate events.* Although it is difficult to separate straight intentional fabrication from some of the possibilities mentioned earlier, there are some suggestive examples. On page 81, Lutz describes having learned about the Shinnecock Indians from the Amityville Historical Society. Yet according to Curt Suplee, the Society not only claims that Lutz's information about the Shinnecoeks is completely false, they also claim never to have heard from him. It is possible, of course, that they are the ones with poor memories.

A more telling example involves the Lutzes' descriptions of the weather. A comparison of the weather as described in the book with the weather data my staff and I have extracted from microfilmed copies of the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* (*N.Y. Times* was unavailable at my library for December) reveals some rather major discrepancies. Three examples will suffice.

During the days in December covered in the book, the *Los Angeles Times'* daily record shows only one twenty-four-hour precipitation above .18 inches; on December 27, the temperature in New York City ranged from a low of 33 °F to a high of 53 °, and 1.97 inches of rain fell. Yet on page 64, the weather on December 27 is described as follows: "The weather was bright and clear, the temperatures hovering in the low teens." Perhaps the Lutzes made an honest mistake and were off by a day. On page 57; we read of December 26, 5:30 p.m.: "The roads were reported to be icy from the recent snow, however, and it was a Friday night." December 26, 1975 was a Friday night, so the Lutzes are correct here. The description of December 28 makes no mention at all of the weather.

On pages 83-85, a heavy snowfall is described for December 31, with the snow starting at about 4:30 a.m. and continuing past 10:00 a.m., with a local radio station predicting the Amityville River would be completely frozen by nightfall. The *New York Times* describes light rain that day, with a temperature of 37 °F at 8:30 a.m. and a high of 44 ° at 12:50 p.m. No such snowfall is reported for the adjoining days, and since it was December 31, the likelihood of a confusion over dates is rather low.

Perhaps the strongest example concerns a torrential rainfall that supposedly occurred on January 13, forcing the Lutzes to spend an extra night in their dreaded house. Confusion about dates seems especially unlikely because it was the last day the Lutzes spent in the house, and because the rainstorm had a tremendous

impact upon their behavior (and occurred at just the right moment in the story, from a dramatic standpoint). On page 178, we read: "The rains and wind picked up in intensity, and by one o'clock in the afternoon, Amityville was hit by another storm of hurricane strength. At three, the electricity went out, but fortunately the heat remained in the house. George switched on the portable radio in the kitchen. The weather report said it was 20 degrees and that sleet was pelting all of Long Island. Since the radar showed an enormous low pressure system covering the entire metropolitan area, the weatherman could not predict when the storm would subside." On page 179, we read: "By six in the evening, the storm still hadn't slackened. It was as though all the water in the world was being dumped on top of 112 Ocean Avenue." On page 180, we read: "Torrents of water were still smashing against the house, and he somehow knew they wouldn't be allowed to leave 112 Ocean Avenue that night. He picked Kathy up in his arms and took her to their bedroom, noting the time on the kitchen clock. It was exactly 8 p.m." On page 181, we read: "At one o'clock, George felt he was freezing. Because of the noise of the storm raging outside, he knew there was no hope of heat in the house that night from the oil burner." The storm is described as having stopped shortly after.

The *New York Times* for January 14 and 15 gives a different picture of the weather during the day and evening of January 13 and early morning of January 14. The temperature rose above freezing at 11 a.m. on the thirteenth and rose steadily throughout the day and evening. Precipitation from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. was 0.01 inches. From 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. the following day, there was 0.39 inches of rainfall. This was the only rainfall of any extent that occurred January 10 through January 14. One could argue that Amityville may have experienced its own storm so limited that it did not reach New York City or get mentioned in the weather news of the area. However, the radio forecast in the book described a large low-pressure area over the entire metropolitan area. Also, such "micro-storms" are by their nature of short duration; the storm in the book lasted over twelve hours. Such discrepancies between the weather described in the book and the weather as actually recorded seem, on the surface at least, to be more than mild exaggerations for dramatic purposes. The last storm, especially, was described as influencing the Lutz family's behavior over a considerable period of time. I should mention that the reason I troubled to look up the weather to begin with was my curiosity about the weather report's description of rain and sleet occurring in 20-degree weather.

6. *The investigator may not collect enough information to assess the reports of witnesses.* An example of this is Anson's (the investigator, for present purposes) apparent failure to corroborate the Lutzes' accounts by interviewing other key witnesses or by double-checking some of their factual statements, such as the weather descriptions.

7. *The investigator may collect and disseminate incorrect information.* Anson describes the parapsychologists as from the Psychological Research Institute (pp. 194-195), whereas the correct name is Psychical Research Foundation. The TV news reporter states that the Lutzes moved in on December 23 (p. 2), whereas a couple of pages later it is clearly stated that they moved in December 18.

8. *The investigator may selectively report the data he has collected.* Anson describes the fact that parapsychological investigators were on the scene, but presents no information about their opinions. Yet Jerry Solofvin told me that he had talked extensively with Anson by phone and Anson was aware of the PRF's response to the case. Why was nothing said of this in the book? Perhaps Anson did indeed interview other key witnesses but isn't discussing this material because there was nothing exciting to report.

9. *The investigator may deliberately elaborate upon the details of the case.* Throughout the book, Anson fills in details of dialogue and the Lutzes' behavior that would seem to go beyond their capacity to recall particulars, including very trivial events and dialogue. Also, much of the distortion or elaboration that was placed at the Lutzes' doorstep in the above paragraph may in truth have been the product of Anson's imaginative typewriter. One would need access to the original tapes to resolve where the responsibilities lie.

10. *The investigator may deliberately fabricate events to buttress a case.* Once again, it may have been Anson who created the dramatic weather discrepancies rather than the Lutzes, a question that could be resolved mainly by access to the tapes.

11. *The investigator may interpret the findings in a biased way, thus misleading the reader.* Anson appears to have a bias in favor of occult interpretations of the phenomena in the case. Sometimes it shows up in a minor way, as on page 81: "John set up residence within five hundred feet of where George now lived, continuing his alleged devil worship." Apparently Anson regards the worship as more than merely alleged. Sometimes it is more general. On pages 198-199, Anson sounds impressed by the fact that many of the phenomena reported by the Lutzes also occurred in other reports of "hauntings, psychic 'invasions,' and the like"; yet if one considers the phenomena reported in other studies of anomalous events, one finds that such a tremendous variety of events have been reported that such parallels are almost inevitable.

In his afterword, pages 199-201, Anson quotes in detail the demonological interpretation of one of those who examined the case, yet gives no comparable space to the PRF investigators or others whose interpretations might stick closer to the information at hand. Although he states that we are not obligated to accept such psychic interpretations, he also states (p. 201) that any others would involve "an even more incredible set of bizarre coincidences, shared hallucinations and grotesque misinterpretations of fact."

12. *It is very difficult to assess the role of coincidence in any assessment of spontaneous cases.* For example, much was made of the static on the telephone lines between the Lutzes and Father Mancuso. Yet we have no knowledge of how likely such an occurrence of static would be by chance without knowing whether the lines were in general filled with static for one reason or another. Coincidences do happen and when we notice them we tend to impute meaning to them.

For all these reasons, *The Amityville Horror* has relatively little value as documentation of a real set of anomalous events. On the surface, it looks as though various problems, including inconsistency, exaggeration, and distortion, are abundant, and there is suggestive evidence of fabrication. If the Lutzes and

Anson are to continue to maintain that this is a true story, they are obligated to clarify the discrepancies mentioned. If they can do so, fine and dandy. If not, then the public should be informed loudly and clearly that this book and any further representation of it in the media should be regarded as entertainment only. As it stands, the cover of the book would appear to constitute false advertising and should be handled in the same way as false advertising is handled in analogous cases. ●

*The World Almanac Book of the Strange.* By the Editors of the World Almanac. New American Library, New York, 1977. 482 pp., paperback, \$2.50.

*Reviewed by James Randi*

Several members of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal were contacted months before this book went to press. The results of those consultations are obvious, though we understood from the beginning that many of our comments and corrections would not be incorporated, simply because of a lack of time to rewrite certain sections; books just do not get into print if every last-minute revision and correction is implemented. Where the Committee was able to serve the editors, accounts of apparent miracles are well tempered—in other places, the usual misinformation is repeated.

The cover advertises this very informative and intriguing volume with: “The world is full of amazing things: strange people, creatures, places, powers, practices, miracles, facts, legends, frauds, objects, customs, religions, and every other phenomenon that anyone has ever wondered about.” Inside, we come upon many genuine and fascinating items such as “killer bees,” black holes, Druids, Tiahuanaco, and Oak Island. Then we must suffer through remote viewing, Peter Hurkos, the “Philip Phenomenon,” and other similar codswollop. But it is all quite well done, despite the lack of a dissenting view on, for example, the Targ/Puthoff “Mind Reach” experiments that have since proved rather less than well designed and implemented. Such data were simply not available to the editors at the time, and in talks with George E. Delury, editor of *The World Almanac*, I have been assured that future editions, when revised, will include the CSICP’s modifications.

The Geller myth is particularly well handled; in fact, the editors consulted the CSICP on this particular case just after the group was formed. The resulting account shows what can be done to create an intelligent and adequate coverage of a controversial and difficult subject, though Geller is hardly the cult-figure that he once was, now that the truth is out. The work of Kammann and Marks, in New Zealand, and Martin Gardner, Ray Hyman, and others of the Committee is quoted and referred to many times, and the truth about Geller and the