

content of these two books, this reviewer has a hard time imagining the more “radical” material that has been omitted from them!

Is there a face on Mars? Certainly yes, and quite a striking one when properly illuminated—very much in the class with various “great stone faces,” “sleeping Indians,” and the like, identified in the hills and mountains of our own planet. Are there pyramids on Mars? Again yes; rough pyramidal mesas seem to be a characteristic feature of the wind-eroded hills in parts of Mars, such as Elysium and Cydonia. But do these represent, as these books claim, one of the most important discoveries in human history, discoveries destined to alter fundamentally our conceptions not only of Mars but of the origin and evolution of life and the nature of human consciousness? I seriously doubt it, and I regret seeing such specious arguments used to justify our space program or to urge additional missions to Mars. Perhaps the most optimistic note I can draw from a study of these two books is that Hoagland writes so poorly that I cannot imagine anyone actually reading his book (or the transcripts of his thinking in Pozos’s book) who was not required to do so.

## Haunted or Hysterical in West Pittston?

*The Haunted.* By Robert Curran. St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1988. 261 pp. Cloth. \$16.95.

Mary Beth Gehrman

**A**S I BOARDED a plane headed for the beaches of sunny southern Florida, I figured that, at worst, I would find within the pages of *The Haunted* a few hours’ light entertainment. I was wrong.

This book, subtitled *One Family’s Nightmare* and billed as a “harrowing true story,” would not even make good fiction.

It is the tale of Jack and Janet Smurl and their four daughters; just a normal family from West Pittston, Pennsylvania, who were besieged by “spirits” and then by reporters from all over the United States when in August 1986 they told the Associated Press of a demonic infestation with a twist: supernatural rape (see *SI*, Winter 1986/87). At that time the family reported, in addition to this dramatic revelation, a number of your more mundane paranormal occurrences: the stench of smoke and rotten meat; pig grunts, hoofbeats, and blood-curdling screams and moans; doors opening and closing by themselves; levitations; a banging noise in the walls; formless “ghostly glows” traveling about; and so on. Their 75-pound German shepherd was reportedly thrown against the wall by an invisible force, and 17-year-old Dawn Smurl gave several different accounts of her experiences, the most memorable of which was the time she was “attacked and bruised” by a demon in the shower.

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Written by *Scrantonian Times* reporter Robert Curran, *The Haunted* would probably never have come about without the intervention of Ed and Lorraine Warren, "demonologists" from Monroe, Connecticut, who helped to make famous a sleepy little town on Long Island with their part in the publication of another "true story" and the subsequent release of movies based on it called *The Amityville Horror* and *Amityville II*.

Shortly after the films were released, the Warrens' veracity was completely discredited when William Weber, a key figure in the Amityville case, admitted that he and George and Kathy Lutz, the owners of the Amityville house, had "created this horror story over many bottles of wine."

I suspect *The Haunted* may have had a similar origin, though Curran makes several lame attempts at establishing the professional credibility of the Warrens. The author's note contains the following semi-disclaimer: "Certain minor liberties have been taken with the chronology of events, and some scenes and dialogue have been recreated in a dramatic fashion."

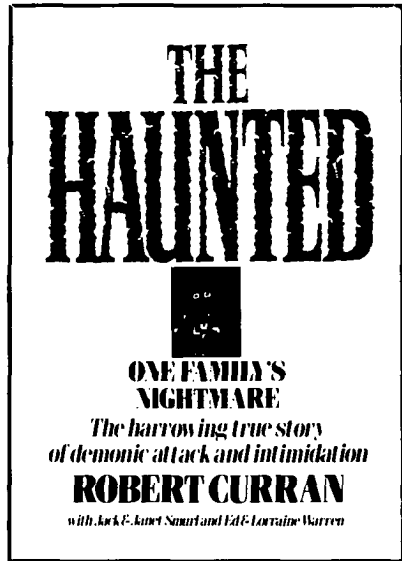
Liberties? Definitely. Dramatic? Hardly.

In September 1986, Barry Karr and I were sent to West Pittston to investigate the Smurl case because the CSICOP offices were being deluged with calls from reporters who wanted an objective opinion. Although the Warrens had suddenly and unceremoniously closed the house to skeptical investigators (indeed, to anyone outside their own "team of psychic researchers"), we did manage to uncover many facts surrounding the case. Curran chose to disregard these facts, if he ever bothered to learn them at all.

For a fleeting moment when I encountered a paragraph on page 2 about the sporadic problems caused by the abandoned coal mines that honeycomb the area, I did think that perhaps this book would provide a somewhat balanced treatment of the events that had allegedly occurred. CSICOP investigators had originally hypothesized that these might be a cause of some of the unusual experiences the Smurls reported. Curran's lack of objectivity rushes back from its short hiatus, however, when he notes that the frequent cave-ins of a few decades ago "may have caused demons to rise up from ground used for satanic purposes."

Thus Curran's vivid imagination rears its overstimulated head from the beginning. "Long before the Smurls arrived," he writes, "there were rumors about the duplex. Residents who wish to be unnamed say that for decades there have been stories. . . . These people even mention that occasionally the police were called in to investigate odd occurrences, though the police have no such record of any investigation."

In many extensive interviews, Karr and I did not find a single person, unnamed or otherwise, who would corroborate this claim. In fact, Steve Ellis, who lived in the house for almost two decades before selling it to the Smurls in 1972, adamantly denied that he had ever experienced anything untoward there. In any event, the implication that demons from hell have nothing better to do with their time than dig



through police records, presumably so that there will be no way for humans to substantiate their existence, is more than a little bit ludicrous.

Contrary to original reports, Curran states that the family had unusual problems virtually from the moment they moved in, and every minor incident of the past 17 years is magnified until it becomes a catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions. Artistic license gives Curran the opportunity for boundless retrospective theorizing, and facile, a priori rejection of alternative explanations occurs throughout. Empty lawn chairs rocked on the front porch “as if invisible inhabitants were sitting in them,” and scratches in a newly installed sink appeared “as if the talons of some frenzied beast had clawed at the porcelain.” When the television burst into flames, bad wiring in the decades-old house was not suspected. When copper pipes leaked, it was seen as a “mysterious occurrence.” When a “foul stench” filled the air, the open sewer pipe at the end of the street was not considered.

Exaggeration, as any moviegoer knows, is the key to success in the horror biz, and filmdom has made many “paranormal” events seem almost commonplace to the collective American psyche. But the Smurls’ story features the unique and, perhaps coincidentally, highly marketable component of rape by a succubus.

In 1986, Jack told reporters that he had had sexual intercourse with a grotesque female demon “at least a dozen times.” In the book, only two of these encounters are described, though we do learn that the evil spirit kept its sex life interesting by teasing Janet and *nearly* raping Dawn as well.

In a graphic interview recounted in *The Haunted*, Curran, in what appears to be a brief bout with lucidity, asked Jack what had convinced him that he wasn’t having a nightmare when he was visited by the firm-bodied white hag. Jack’s answer? A succinct, “Her scales.”

Jack’s testimony, of course, remained uncorroborated, since his wife was asleep downstairs during the first attack and was incapacitated by a “deep psychic sleep” during the second, and since *before* he told Janet what had happened Jack washed off his body all traces of the “sticky substance” the creature emitted. However, in an odd coincidence on which I will comment no further, he reported that his oldest daughter, Dawn, shocked him the morning following the first incident by relating a dream she’d had in which her father was being sexually molested by a “horribly ugly woman.”

Are the Smurls sincere in their beliefs? It is difficult to say. They are a very religious family, but the Catholic church has steadfastly refused to become involved with their case from the beginning. It is not inconceivable that their strong belief in a higher power led them to jump to conclusions and that the Smurls’ fear fed on itself until they actually became terrified of every little bump in the night. Curran, of course, continually portrays them as skeptical. He relates one interview in which Jack says, “The first thing the average person does is *reject* the idea that he’s dealing with the supernatural. . . . No, I didn’t reject it. I just hoped some other explanation would come along. . . . No other explanation was possible. Not a one.”

Passages like this are obviously supposed to lead readers who may still have a brain cell or two clogged with rationality to the belief that all the more prosaic explanations had been thoughtfully considered, and thus to the conclusion that the only plausible reason for the Smurls’ problems was that the family was indeed plagued by demons.

Whether or not the Smurls are truly convinced that they were being haunted (or continue to be—their story becomes nebulous at this point) is a matter for speculation, but it is hard to conceive of a supposedly sophisticated, objective, and (as far as

I know, at least until now) credible reporter like Curran taking their story seriously, given the complete lack of any empirical or physical evidence to support it. (Mention has been made of videotapes, though thus far none have been produced—in any sense of the word.) This becomes even harder to envision when we encounter lines like: “[Janet] wondered if it was illegal to sniff the big red plastic bottle of Era Plus, her laundry detergent of choice and one that she found pleasant to smell.”

Curran continually goes to such ridiculously corny lengths to assure the reader that the Smurfs are just simple, salt-of-the-earth folk who live in a “model working-class neighborhood: clean, well-kept, American flags vivid in the light of national holidays.” Jack and Janet are portrayed as traditional, deeply religious Catholics who strenuously uphold the work ethic and devote all their energy to civic activities and to raising four daughters who, if we are to accept the maudlin picture painted by Curran, make the Brady Bunch look like the Manson family. Curran carefully notes that Jack and Janet never had anything to do with the politically rebellious, sexually promiscuous, hallucinogen-happy hippies of their generation or with “troublemakers and chronic complainers” of any sort. He even goes so far as to tell us that the family’s underwear (I kid you not) was “nothing fancy; just the kind you bought at Penney’s and Sears.”

Amid all this superfluous trivia, Curran fails to mention one rather glaringly significant detail—Jack Smurf’s brain surgery for “water on the brain” in 1983. This is by no means unimportant, since much of the “demonic” activity originally reported focused on Jack, raising the question of whether group hysteria stemming from the delusions of a central figure could be playing a part in this case.

But, if it is difficult to fathom Curran believing his own story, it is almost impossible to imagine this seasoned writer actually thinking that his sappy sarcasm is subtle enough to ring vaguely true to any but the most naive reader. Yet, since it is supposed to be a terrifying true story that “will disturb many people” and “deals factually with proof of the demonic underworld,” one has to wonder why Curran would make such blind stabs at levity if he did not think he was shrewdly manipulating his audience.

I can suggest two possible explanations for the injection of this type of condescending wit: (1) he is trying to break up the already minimal tension of the rest of the book with a few laughs, or (2) he wants to create the kind of light-hearted Spielbergian setting that has proved to translate well onto the big screen. If pressed, I think I would choose Door Number Two, especially since he repeatedly tells us that the Smurfs kept their sense of humor (such as it is) throughout their ordeal.

Time and again Curran reminds us that the family “had to be very careful not to be used or exploited by people seeking money or publicity or both.” They went to the media for *help*, he reiterates, *not* because they smelled cold, hard cash. They called in Ed and Lorraine Warren, those modest, taciturn, publicity-shy homebodies, because other “experts all smacked of theatricality and greed.” Seems logical.

The residents of West Pittston I interviewed, however, did not hesitate to tell me that they’d been suspicious from the first of the Smurfs’ motives for “going public” about what many believed to be, at best, a hysterical reaction to absolutely normal events. Several residents of Chase Street agreed with one neighbor who voiced the opinion that a book or movie deal had been in the works all along.

Sure enough, as early as September 6, 1986, the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader* reported that Jack Smurf had been negotiating with a Hollywood production company for the film rights to his story. Stay tuned, because you can bet that’s one cinematic experience I am not going to miss. ●