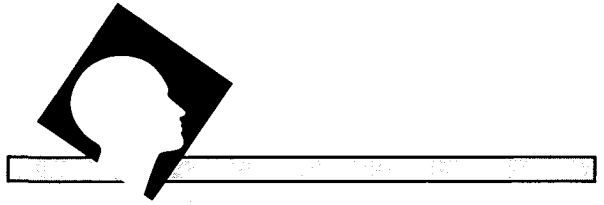


Book Reviews



The Commonality of Hallucinations

Fire in the Brain: Clinical Tales of Hallucination. By Ronald K. Siegel. Dutton, New York, 1992. 275 pp. Hardcover, \$21.00.

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Knowledgeable psychologists, psychiatrists, neurologists, and other experienced clinicians are well aware that many perfectly normal, healthy, sane, and emotionally stable individuals will occasionally hallucinate—experience false perceptions—and subsequently may develop fixed delusions, i.e., false beliefs. These facts are not as well known by the general public. To remedy this situation Ronald Siegel, a UCLA neuropsychologist and the author of the authoritative study of the behavioral effects of drugs, *Intoxication: Life in Pursuit of Artificial Paradise* (Dutton, 1989), has selected from his extensive files 17 of his most unusual cases and, in his new book *Fire in the Brain*, has made it very clear that when normal and ordinary people are exposed to highly abnormal or extraordinary conditions they will, almost invariably, hallucinate.

Conditions favorable to hallucinations include high fever, sensory isolation, terminal physiological conditions due to illness, physical and mental exhaustion, sleep deprivation, drugs of various kinds, as well as most sorts of extreme physical and emotional distress. Hallucinations also show up regularly during vivid dreams

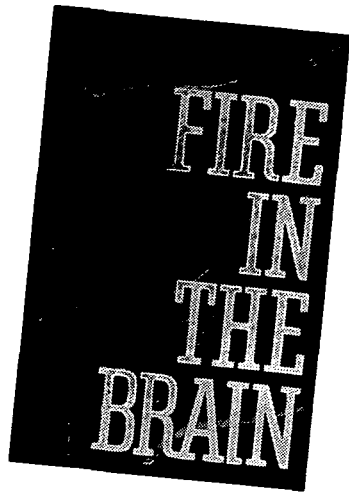
and are frequently reported as encounters with “ghosts,” “demons,” or “extraterrestrials,” and they are common under conditions of extreme fatigue, i.e., in physical and psychological states of near exhaustion.

To better understand these hallucinatory states Siegel himself frequently becomes a psychological subject. Early in his career, while studying at the University of Chicago with the psychologist Heinrich Kluver, Siegel became fascinated with the problem of how other beings experience the perceptual world. When Siegel questioned Kluver about how one could comprehend the world of a fly, for example, Kluver told him, “Become the fly!” Siegel also learned from Kluver that “even in our wildest and maddest hallucination the mental landscape is the same for all of us.” Recognizing that the laws of brain functioning and the principles of human perception are the same for everyone, Kluver knew that if and when we are subjected to such extreme environmental conditions or pressures we, too, will hallucinate. Siegel learned this firsthand by immersing himself in the warm, 93-percent epsom-salt bath of John Lilly’s flotation tank for several hours.

During this swim, Siegel met a number of little gray extraterrestrials who threatened to carry him away, as well as a friendly, naked Buddha with large Mickey Mouse ears, who held a pink balloon and informed Siegel, "I am *them!*" To better understand the experience of a Vietnam veteran who came to him for help, Siegel had himself locked inside a bamboo tiger-cage similar to the kind used by the North Vietnamese to torture POWs. Such personal experiences and encounters have, as one would expect, provided Siegel with insight and understanding that makes him not only an unusually skillful therapist but a superb storyteller as well.

In his clinical work Siegel has been challenged by some truly bizarre cases. One involved a surgical patient who jumped off a hospital table to hotly pursue a ghost. Another was that of a Hollywood actress who saw Voodoo priests throwing darts at her whenever the camera lights were turned on in the studio. These stories are only introductory sidelights, however. The major portion of Siegel's book is devoted to detailed and informative case histories of 17 individuals who underwent a number of very real and very terrifying experiences. Siegel presents each of these cases in the form of a mystery that he, as the clinical private investigator, unravels and solves. Divided into four parts, *Fire in the Brain* provides four cases dealing with visionary drugs, four concerned with dreams, five involving imaginary companions, and four of people facing life-threatening danger.

In the section on visionary drugs, Siegel reports that people under the influence of marijuana often report seeing a black curtain covered with disembodied eyes. This result, issuing from his lab under controlled conditions of drug administration, is also



reported from India, Japan, and England, where pot users had the identical hallucination. Drugs were also responsible for a music teacher routinely hearing the voice of God and for the confusion of two women who correctly insisted—against all tangible evidence—that they had been raped. Also reported is the intriguing case of a pool hustler haunted by LSD flashbacks.

As for dreams, the most common of the nondrug gates to hallucinations, it is interesting to learn that the "gate" stays open for some people even when they are awake. Hypnopompic and hypnogogic dreams are very common. Many people wake from a deep sleep (hypnopompic) to find an incubus (male demon), or a succubus or old hag (female demon), a ghost, or some other night terror sitting on their bed. These same visions, or "waking dreams," can occur when one is falling asleep (hypnogogic). Other individuals, sometimes in the middle of a lovely sunny day, will see a horrible vision. One of Siegel's most fascinating cases should be read by all believers in UFO abductions. It involved a father and his adult son who took a wild ride on an alien spaceship. Curiously enough,

“the scenery they rode through was the same hallucinatory landscape seen by earthbound dreamers.” And, when Sheila, a professional nurse, was deprived of sleep for an extended period her brain started dreaming while she was awake and she saw little black swastikas on the bedsheets of all her patients.

Using the pages of *Omni* magazine, in 1988 Siegel carried out an international survey of hallucinatory experiences. It not only confirmed what earlier surveys had shown but also revealed that 79 percent of his respondents reported having occasional hallucinations. Moreover, a third of this group said they had also been fooled into thinking the hallucinations were real. An interesting corollary of the survey was the report that 31 percent of the group also had imaginary playmates as children. It seems that a fertile imagination is all that is needed for us to mix fantasies with reality. Many people never let go of their childhood fantasies, and when grown up they still live in a world of dragons and invisible rabbits. In the section on imaginary companions, one of Siegel’s most poignant cases deals with a man who so longed for a daughter that he mentally created one: a flesh and blood “ghost”! Equally intriguing is the case of a sailor who hallucinated that he was caught in a storm in the Bermuda Triangle. In another case, a lovesick young man is so haunted by the face of his girlfriend that he sees her everywhere he looks and is unable to control when and where she appears. Finally, there is the case of Henry, a bored teenager who takes an invisible assassin named Sergeant Tommy to school with him to deal with his substitute teacher.

In the last section we learn that too much of the wrong stimulation can also cause the brain to hallucinate and that when ordinary people are subject

to life-threatening danger they will often find their perceptions betrayed. Siegel makes this crystal clear with his final four cases, involving: (1) an ex-POW who during his imprisonment was horribly abused both physically and psychologically; (2) a grandmother locked in a small closet by a burglar and threatened with death; (3) a torture victim who escaped the pain by traveling to a mentally created paradise; and (4) a number of beautiful afterlife visions experienced by an elderly professor who survived a near-death experience. As an afterthought to this fourth case, Siegel notes, “Just as physiological shock helps keep the body together, the near-death experience keeps the potentially disorganizing emotion in check” (p. 255).

In this continually fascinating, enlightening, and entertaining book, Siegel ends forever the notion that hallucinations are the exclusive domain of the insane. Images that may be bizarre but that are in no way “crazy” arise from many common biological experiences and common psychological and physiological reactions of the brain and nervous system to either excessive stimulation or extreme deprivation. It is certainly high time that many of the people in the mental-health establishment who believe in demon possessions and alien abductions become aware of this fact. For all such individuals, and for anyone having even a passing interest in the human nervous system and the things that can go wrong with it, Siegel’s *Fire in the Brain* should be required reading—especially in 1992-1993, the third year of the Decade of the Brain (1990-2000).

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