

Bias and Error in Children's Nonfiction Books on the Paranormal

An analysis of five children's books claiming to be factual and non-fiction found that 85.2 percent of the passages either explicitly confirmed certain events as paranormal, failed to present alternative explanations, or dismissed such explanations as implausible.

RICHARD WISEMAN and CLIVE JEFFREYS

Children are fascinated with the paranormal. They enjoy being frightened by ghost stories, are intrigued with the notion of magical powers, and delight in fantastic tales of mythical worlds inhabited by elves, fairies and goblins. With their curiosity fired, they are eager to know if ghosts *really* exist, if people *really* are psychic, or whether science *really* is unable to explain "supernatural" happenings.

No child would be disappointed by a visit to their local bookshop or library in search of material on the paranormal. A trip to my local bookstore yielded five of the most popular children's titles: *Puffin Factfinders: The Supernatural*; *Unsolved Mysteries Project Book*; *The Usborne Book of the Haunted World*; *The Usborne Guide to the Supernatural World*; and *The Usborne World of the Unknown: Ghosts* (hereafter referred to as *The Supernatural*, *Unsolved Mysteries Project Book*, *The Haunted World*, *The Supernatural World*,

and *Ghosts*, respectively).

All of these books claim to be factual and were shelved in the nonfiction section of the bookshop. The books cover a huge range of material including psychic powers, hauntings, UFOs, the Bermuda Triangle, and Bigfoot. But do they present a child with anything approaching a balanced view of the paranormal? To find an answer, two topics that were common to all were analyzed—psychic abilities and ghosts.

As with most children's books, the text was neatly broken into easily digested passages, and each passage could be placed into one of three groups.

First, some passages presented a "pro-paranormal" viewpoint by suggesting that genuine paranormal phenomena actually existed. Support was either explicit—for example, *The Haunted World* notes, "Ghosts often have a good reason to haunt people. Some have an urgent message or warning to deliver"—or implicit, with passages failing to mention possible normal explanations or mentioning such explanations but dismissing them as implausible (e.g., relating a poltergeist case without mentioning the possibility of hoaxing).

Second, there were passages that presented a more "balanced" view by outlining potentially normal explanations for "paranormal" phenomena but not stating whether these explanations were actually proven. Mentioning that a certain psychic *might* be fraudulent but without stating whether he or she had *actually* been caught cheating was an example of this in *The Haunted World*.

Finally, a third type of passage presented an "antiparanormal" view by explicitly noting that a supposedly paranormal phenomenon had a normal explanation. Ghostly noises in a "haunted" house that turned out to be caused by scurrying mice is a case in point.

Table 1 presents the number and percentage of the three types of passages in each book.¹ It clearly illustrates that the books presented a pro-paranormal viewpoint. Overall, 85.2 percent of the books' passages either explicitly confirmed certain events as paranormal, failed to present alternative explanations for such phenomena, or mentioned such explanations but dismissed them as implausible. *Ghosts*, the book that displayed the smallest amount of bias, still contained 64 percent pro-paranormal passages, although it did at least outline how scientific methods could be used to investigate hauntings and clearly detailed three cases where normal explanations were shown to account for "paranormal" phenomena.

An even more worrying aspect of the analysis was the discovery of some appalling errors in some of the "pro-paranormal" passages.

For example, both *The Supernatural World* and the *Unsolved Mysteries Project Book* describe the ghostly phenomena associated with Borely Rectory (labeled "the most haunted house in Britain") and in particular the "poltergeist" activity reported by 1930s investigator Harry Price. No mention is

Richard Wiseman is a psychologist at the University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, Herts. AL109AB, U.K. Clive Jeffreys is a freelance writer in London.

made of the fact that it is widely believed that Price faked much of his investigation and report (Dingwall, Goldney, and Hall 1956).

The Supernatural World describes how one scientist, Cleve Backster, wired plants to a lie detector and discovered that the act of his thinking about burning the leaves of the plants caused the detector to show a large response. The book concludes, "Plants seem to recognize a killer." The section doesn't mention that other scientists failed to replicate Backster's findings, nor does it mention that they suggested Backster was using inappropriate techniques to record levels of the electrical activity in leaves (Horowitz, Lewis, and Gasteiger 1975; Kmetz 1977).

On a worse note, some of the books endorsed "paranormal" events that are *known* to have normal explanations. *The Haunted World* contains a photograph of an Indian fakir appearing to float above the ground. The caption reads, "Apparently Subbayar Pullavar levitated for four minutes in 1936." In fact, the fakir is clearly performing a simple, and well-documented, magic trick in which the performer is connected to a harness under his clothing and supported by one end of a cloth-covered pole (see, e.g., Waters 1988). A few pages later the book presents a photograph of the medium Carlos Mirabelli apparently levitating. The caption reads, "This photograph claims to prove that Mirabelli could levitate." The photograph is a known fake. Research has shown that the photograph has been extensively retouched to remove the object (probably a ladder) that Mirabelli was standing on at the time of the "levitation" (Playfair 1992)!

Likewise, *The Supernatural World* reproduces various "Kirlian" photographs, stating that "Kirlian pictures seem to show that all living things and some inanimate objects have a twinkling aura that constantly surrounds them." In fact, several scientists have demonstrated that such photographs are simply recording the discharge produced when a high-frequency voltage is applied to a grounded object (see, e.g., Watkins and Bickel 1986). These photographs have a perfectly natural explanation, and *The Supernatural World* is wrong to conclude that they may "help us understand psychokinesis and psychic healing."

Children's enthusiasm for the paranormal presents educators with an excellent opportunity to teach them about many different aspects of science. Children's critical thinking skills could be enhanced by their having to consider alternative explanations for supposedly paranormal events, and they could be encouraged to think about the types of investigations needed to evaluate these explanations. Some of the principles involved in evaluating evidence could be illustrated, including, for example, the problems of assessing eyewitness testimony and the way in which books and other media sometimes distort information.

Could not a really well designed book invite children to play the part of a "paranormal investigator," analogous to some currently available children's "detective" books? If books can present readers with clues relating to a fictional crime and ask them to play the role of detective, then children could surely

Book	Total number of passages	Number (and percentage) of "pro-paranormal" passages	Number (and percentage) of "balanced" passages	Number (and percentage) of "anti-paranormal" passages
The Supernatural	60	55 (91.6%)	3 (5%)	2 (3.4%)
Unsolved Mysteries Project Book	30	25 (83.3%)	4 (13.3%)	1 (3.4%)
The Haunted World	99	90 (90.9%)	7 (7%)	2 (2.1%)
The Supernatural World	177	158 (89.2%)	10 (5.6%)	9 (5.2%)
Ghosts	75	48 (64%)	11 (14.6%)	16 (21.4%)
TOTAL	441	376 (85.2%)	35 (7.9%)	30 (6.8%)

Table 1: Number (and percentage) of "pro-paranormal," "balanced," and "anti-paranormal" passages in each of the books examined.

be presented with evidence relating to "paranormal" events and be asked to try to solve the mystery.

It is a great pity that none of the books examined fulfilled this potential. Indeed, rather than informing or exciting their readers about science, the books more or less promoted the notion that "supernatural" events demonstrate the limitations of a scientific approach. Often this argument was supported by incorrectly describing instances where scientists and investigators had apparently been unable to explain "paranormal" phenomena. Both *The Supernatural World* and *The Supernatural* refer to the paranormal powers of Ted Serios, a "psychic" who claimed to project mental images onto photographic film. The first book states, "Neither Ted Serios, nor the scientists who have tested him, have any explanation of how the power of thought is able to affect photographic film," while the second book notes, "Experts are unable to explain the strange pictures created by psychic photography." Neither book notes that skeptics have suggested various ways in which Serios might have faked his demonstrations (see, e.g., Eisendrath and Reynolds 1967; Randi 1987).

The Haunted World contains a brief account of Harry Houdini's investigation of the medium Mina Crandon ("Margery"). The book notes that Houdini locked Crandon in a box to prevent her from cheating during test séances. Apparently, "As the séance began the box burst open. Margery said 'Walter' [her 'spirit control'] was very angry. When she was shut into it again, something inside shook and banged so much that the experiment had to be abandoned. Houdini was left frustrated." No mention is made of the fact that Crandon failed to produce any convincing phenomena during Houdini's test séances or that later evidence strongly suggested that she was a fraud (see, e.g., Tietz 1973).

All of the books examined present themselves as being factual and may be the first source of information on the subject encountered by young, inquisitive, and impressionable minds. The analysis undertaken suggests that, at best, they badly mis-

inform their readers.

Publishers would surely shy away from producing a children's history or science text that was obviously biased and full of errors. It is unfortunate that they feel it is acceptable to do so when publishing books on the paranormal.

Note

1. Most books also contained "neutral" passages which might, for example, pose a question (e.g., "Does psychic ability really exist?") or discuss individuals' beliefs concerning the paranormal but not discuss the possible reality of such phenomena. These passages are excluded from the present analysis.

Books Reviewed

- Puffin Factfinders: The Supernatural*, by John Day, published by Puffin Books, 1995, 32 pp.
Unsolved Mysteries Project Book, by Steve Barlow and Steve Skidmore, published by Headway Books, Hodder and Stoughton, 1993, 32 pp.
The Usborne Book of the Haunted World, by Caroline Young, published by Usborne Books, 1995, 48 pp.
The Usborne Guide to the Supernatural World, by Eric Maple, Eliot Humberstone, and Lynn Myring, published by Usborne Books, 1990, 192 pp.
The Usborne World of the Unknown: Ghosts, by Christopher Maynard, published by Usborne Books, 1990, 32 pp.

References

- Dingwall, E., K. Goldney, and T. Hall. 1956. *The Haunting of Borely Rectory*. London: Duckworth.
Eisendrath, D. B., and C. Reynolds. 1967. An amazing weekend with the amazing Ted Serios. *Popular Photography*, October 1967, 82-158.
Horowitz, K. A., D. C. Lewis, and E. L. Gasteiger. 1975. Plant primary perception. *Science* 189: 478-480.
Kmetz, J. M. 1977. A study of primary perception in plants and animal life. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 71(2): 157-170.
Playfair, G. L. 1992. Mirabelli and the phantom ladder. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 58(826): 201-203.
Randi, J. 1987. *Flim-Flam*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.
Tietz, T. R. 1973. *Margery*. New York: Harper & Row.
Waters, T. A. 1988. *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Magicians*. New York: Facts On File Publications.
Watkins, A. J., and W. S. Bickel. 1986. A study of the Kirlian effect. *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* 10(3): 244-257. □