



## BOOK EXTRACT

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## Chapter 2: Defining the Paranormal

*"The weight of evidence for an extraordinary claim must be proportioned to its strangeness."*  
- Pierre-Simon, Marquis de Laplace [French mathematician and astronomer]

### **The Parapsychologist - Ciarán O'Keeffe**

#### **Parapsychology and the Paranormal**

The words 'paranormal' and 'parapsychology' share the prefix 'para' which means, in Latin, 'against, counter, outside or beyond the norm'. Parapsychology is traditionally defined as the scientific study of ESP and PK. PK stands for Psychokinesis and is the alleged ability to move or alter an object through the use of the sixth sense. A good example of this, which I'm sure everybody knows, is the alleged psychokinetic phenomena of spoon-bending. ESP stands for Extra-Sensory Perception and covers *telepathy, precognition and clairvoyance*. These are three alleged processes that rely on information being obtained without the use of any of the known five senses. *Telepathy*, for example, is essentially mind-to-mind communication, *precognition* is future prediction, and *clairvoyance* is the ability to decipher information about an object (i.e. mind-to-object interaction). Although laboratory tests of clairvoyance focus on a psychic's ability to get details about an object, or drawing, or details about the owner, the most common form of clairvoyance, as defined by parapsychologists, is psychometry.

#### **Psychometry**

Imagine the scenario, a team investigating the death of a third victim in a brutal serial killer case call in a psychic to help. The psychic knows no details about the case. He is presented with an object from the crime scene, a knife. The knife is the murder weapon, but because the murderer is forensically aware he wore gloves, and so no DNA evidence can be traced on the weapon. The psychic relaxes for a moment and attempts to divine, or discover, using their psychic ability. He picks up detailed information about the owner of the knife, even transporting himself, for a moment, to a vivid replay of the crime scene. Overcome by the ferocious emotions of the killer, the psychic stops. He has provided enough detail to give the team valuable clues - clues that will hopefully lead to capture, arrest and conviction.

The process that the psychic was going through is termed 'Psychometry'. A term that has been around since the late 1800s,

it refers to the ability to obtain information from an object, without the aid of any of one's normal senses. Scientific scrutiny of such ability is almost impossible. Take the knife from the criminal scenario described above. How can we be certain the information the psychic is allegedly picking up is from the murderer? It could be information from the knife's previous owner, or from the shop owner who sold it, or from one of the workers on the factory line that was responsible for its manufacture.

As parapsychologists interested in testing an alleged ability there is only so far we can search when it comes to psychometry. I've conducted tests on psychometrists, ingenious if I do say so myself. I've instructed a colleague to buy five identical items of jewellery and, still wrapped (or untouched in their identical gift boxes), give them to five different people with instructions to wear the jewellery over the Christmas holiday period. Then a psychic, specializing in psychometry, gives readings whilst holding the jewellery. The psychic is unaware of who each item belongs to, including whether they're male or female. In addition, when I interact with the psychic, I'm also ignorant of who the owners are. When all the participants are presented with the readings and asked to choose their own reading none of them are able to do so. If there is anything to the ability, the people taking part should be able to recognize the reading given to them. Unfortunately, it doesn't happen. But, if we were being truly thorough with the investigation we would track down everyone who had come into contact with the jewellery and present them with the readings. Psychometry, therefore, as an ability to be tested, is almost impossible. Mediumship, however, lends itself better to scientific testing.

### **Mediumship**

Defining mediumship is not the easiest task. It's commonly thought of as 'communication with the dead' but, frequently, the word 'dead' is replaced with synonyms such as 'discarnate entities', 'spirit' etc. It comes under the umbrella term of parapsychology because of the communication aspect. The Koestler Parapsychology Unit (in Edinburgh University) defines Parapsychology as "the study of apparent new means of communication, or exchange of influence, between organisms & environment". A medium, receiving messages from spirit, is demonstrating a 'means of communication'.

Mediumship is traditionally studied by psychical investigators rather than parapsychologists. This may be due to the fact that what is considered to be the founding era of spiritualist mediums (i.e. late 1800s, early 1900s), was rife with deception, fraud and sensationalism. Parapsychologists tend to distance themselves from the area of mediumship because of this early controversy and because of its elusiveness in the laboratory. Mediumship, or communicating with the dead, is traditionally conducted in a séance environment, where, it is argued, the presence of actual sitters assists with the communication. Elsewhere, communication can be achieved in one-to-one settings, on a platform in a Spiritualist Church, or in a theatre. Though there are cases throughout the last century of famous mediums volunteering for laboratory work (e.g. Harry Price's work with Rudi Schneider), the success rate in a highly controlled environment is not high. This may also be because of a number of natural explanations for what a medium produces. During a traditional reading with a medium, the medium usually produces a large number of statements and the sitter has to decide whether these statements accurately describe departed loved ones or relatives. It is widely recognized that the sitter's endorsement of such statements cannot be taken as evidence of mediumistic ability, as seemingly accurate readings can be created by a set of psychological stratagems collectively referred to as 'cold reading'. It is therefore vital that any investigation into the possible existence of mediumistic ability prevents any of these stratagems from being used. We discuss mediumship in greater detail in Chapter 3 when Billy introduces his experiences with this method of communication.