

Stephen E. Braude's interest in the paranormal grew out of an experience he had as a graduate student in 1969.

# Ghost buster

Being a paranormal investigator in academia isn't easy. Just ask Stephen E. Braude. By Scott Carlson

PHOTOGRAPHED BY KIRSTEN BECKERMAN

**S**itting in an easy chair in his immaculate home in Ellicott City, Stephen E. Braude explains that his interest in the paranormal grew out of a personal experience in Northampton, Mass., in 1969, while he was in graduate school. Just for fun, he and two friends held a séance while sitting at a table in his home. Suddenly, Braude says, the table shuddered and rose off the ground. Then it rose again, and again, and again.

Braude, a professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, is disarmingly friendly, yet he parries skeptical questions about his Northampton experience. He dismisses suggestions that his friends could have been lifting the table. (There was too much light in the room, he says, and they weren't practical jokers.) Then he adds: "I should tell you, we were not stoned."

He is one of the few mainstream scholars studying topics that many find odd, silly or downright ridiculous. Psychokinesis. Telepathy and ESP. Mediums and ghosts. He has served as president of the Parapsychological Association and published a series of books with well-known academic presses about paranormal phenomena. His latest, "The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations," came out recently from University of Chicago Press, and it's filled with stories of people who allegedly could move objects with their minds, make spooky images spontaneously appear on Polaroid film, talk to the dead and predict the future.

One such person is D.D. Home, a medium who lived in the mid-1800s and once held an accordion by one hand inside an electrified cage as the instrument played itself (or so said observers of the day). Another is the real-life gold leaf lady of the book title, whom Braude has met and studied. She's an allegedly illiterate Florida woman named Katie who goes into trances and writes in French, has predicted events for police detectives with stunning accuracy (one time, she predicted bales of marijuana would wash up on a particular beach on a particular day and they did) and occasionally finds flakes of paper-thin brass growing on her body.

On a computer laptop, Braude plays a video of his interview with Katie, showing a moment when he believes brass spontaneously appeared on her face. Katie rubs under her eye, puts her hand down by her side, then rubs under her eye again. When she pulls her hand away, there is a small piece of foil on her cheek.

Alas, Braude notes with disappointment, her hand went out of camera range during the scene. "There's no way for the observer to tell that she wasn't just dipping it [in foil] and placing it on her eye," he says. But, he adds, "... we examined her hands and arms. There was no stash of foil."

Because of his unusual interests, Braude says he has been passed up for teaching awards, laughed at by colleagues who call him a "goofball" and an "embarrassment to the university" and shouted down when lecturing to other departments. But he does get respect from other philosophers.

"He is setting the standard for how an analytic philosopher who takes this stuff seriously should proceed," says Raymond Martin, chair of the philosophy department at Union College in New York, who met Braude when he taught at the University of Maryland, College Park. "A lot of people just don't want this stuff on the table, because they regard it as an embarrassment to philosophy. Steve does take it seriously, and he has paid a price."

Braude, 62, isn't sure he will continue to study the paranormal after he retires. He is a

pianist and he plans to devote time to performing jazz. He is also a stereoscopic photographer with a collection of antique equipment. His portraits of people are so life-like they are eerie—human beings locked in time, almost like wax figures.

But he has recently discovered new horizons in parapsychology, thanks to his wife of five years, Djurdjina Ruk. Once a professor of psychology at the University of Novi Sad, in the former Yugoslavia, Ruk supported herself during the recent civil war by providing astrological predictions for European and Chinese soccer teams and for the Serbian mafia, as Braude details in the last chapter of "The Gold Leaf Lady."

The couple plan their trips and vacations around her astrological charts. They also gamble based on her predictions; their winnings during the 2005 football season paid for a summer vacation.

Braude once regarded astrology with the sort of disdain that others bring to his work, but now he thinks he should have an open mind. "I stopped worrying about trying to convince other people," he says. "I'm in this to try to figure out things for myself." □

*Scott Carlson is a senior reporter for The Chronicle of Higher Education, where a different version of this article appeared.*