

Stephen E. Braude*The Gold Leaf Lady and other parapsychological investigations*

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Reviewed by Chris Nunn

You might well ask why your review editor should have written about this lady. I'm no expert on parapsychology and knew of Stephen Braude only as author of a book on multiple personality (*First Person Plural*) that I had admired for its good sense. I originally approached two parapsychologists about reviewing this new work. The first had already been nabbed by another journal; the second didn't reply to my emails. I got fed up with composing begging letters. Meanwhile the publishers had sent us another copy. Maybe this was a synchronistic hint that I should read it myself — anyway it looked intriguing.

Before offering no doubt naive views on the book, I should perhaps describe my own 'psi' preconceptions — given that opinion on the subject is so often polarised. The statistical evidence that weak 'psi' effects occur is now stronger than the rather similarly based evidence that antidepressant drugs, for instance, can cure depression. Since I often prescribed antidepressants, believing in their efficacy, it would be dishonest to deny the probable reality of 'psi'. Of course it is often claimed that there is a vital difference of principle in that people can explain, they say, how antidepressants work, whereas no-one has a clue how 'psi' could occur. But it's worth remembering that, after 40 years of research, stories about precisely how antidepressants cure still involve a lot of hand-waving. Despite my basically pro-psi stance, however, the aura of tackiness and self-deception that surrounds the whole field had put me off taking any great interest in it.

Stephen Braude, on the other hand, has never been so pusillanimous. He has been an active 'psi' researcher for many years, often, so he tells us, enduring opprobrium from academic colleagues (he's a philosophy professor) in consequence. This book is not about statistics; he goes for the big effects, arguing that they actually provide better evidence for the reality of 'psi' than endless card guessing protocols, or whatever. And he's surely right about this. The old aphorism is true that, if a drug is *really* effective, elaborate statistics are not needed for proof. Similarly, one incontrovertible example of large

scale psychokinesis, for instance, should be enough to establish the reality of 'psi'. So he gives us a selection of case histories, which are of two sorts: some describe putative examples of 'psi', mainly psychokinesis; others detail shenanigans that some psi enthusiasts and debunkers have got up to. The debunkers come across as the more dishonest and hypocritical from these accounts, for their misrepresentations are generally cloaked in a mask of virtue.

The eponymous Gold Leaf Lady ('Katie') is a hick from the sticks, now in her fifties; almost illiterate because she had to drop out of school to look after her Mother who had developed a 'psychogenic paralysis'. It's a sadly common type of story. But then, after marrying her second husband and moving to Florida, Katie displayed rare talents. The most unusual was to apparently exude flecks of brass foil (they have been collected and analysed) from her skin; she also showed a range of clairvoyant talents, plus an alleged ability to write quatrains in archaic French in the style of Nostradamus. Braude thinks the 'gold' leaf provides the best evidence of 'psi' since deception seems to have been fairly convincingly ruled out, while magicians, when consulted, said they doubted they could replicate the phenomenon. He suggests it should be regarded as an example of psychokinetic 'apportation', rather than some ectoplasm-like phenomenon.

Another description is of Ted Serios, the ex-elevator operator who could cause images to appear on polaroid film and who was investigated rigorously by a number of people including Braude. This case appears fraud-proof and is also remarkable for the widely trumpeted claim that psi debunker and CSICOP stalwart The Amazing Randi had 'easily' duplicated Serios' images — a claim that was repeated by Martin Gardner among others. In fact, says Braude, Randi always ducked out of trying to produce images in the tightly controlled settings used in the Serios investigations. The one time he did try, under looser conditions during a television show, he failed.

And that's basically it, evidence wise. Not all that much to show, one may think, for nearly a lifetime in the field. 'Big psi' seems almost, but not quite, as elusive as Bigfoot. Apart from the final chapter, the remaining case histories describe historical examples (Braude thinks that D.D. Home and Eusapia Palladino produced 'genuine' phenomena, though Palladino was also at times fraudulent), or examples of relatively recent fraud and/or self deception, along with their associated tantrums and hissy fits. There are also some thoughts on confusions surrounding the concept of synchronicity and the difficulties of 'psi' research.

The final chapter is mainly about the current Mrs Braude, an astrologer. She has developed her own methods, dependent on exactly calculating to within a minute or so relevant 'times of birth', which enable her to make remarkably accurate forecasts, especially sporting ones. At least the Braudes have put their money where their mouth is and placed bets (allegedly with good resultant profit) on the basis of her forecasts. But the astrological claim did rather exceed my personal boggle threshold. After all, apart from anything else, births are usually quite prolonged and messy affairs so what could a 'precise' time of birth possibly mean? Braude himself wonders whether his wife may not be using astrological paraphernalia to focus an unconscious talent for clairvoyance.

I enjoyed the book for its fascinating anecdotes and discussion of issues that they raise, though I'm not sure that it has strengthened my belief in the reality of 'psi'. One would probably need to personally encounter and test a Gold Leaf Lady for that to occur. It can certainly be recommended, however, to anyone thinking about entering the 'psi' arena, for it gives a clear impression of the heat to be found in that particular kitchen. One has to admire Braude for having endured it so long with no apparent impairment of his enthusiasm or integrity.