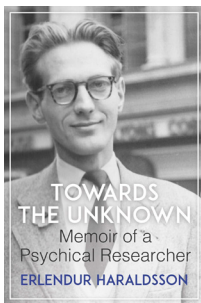


**BOOK AND
MULTIMEDIA
REVIEW**

Towards the Unknown: Memoir of a Psychological Researcher

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Towards the Unknown: Memoir of a Psychological Researcher:
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In the Acknowledgments section of this short but valuable book, Erlendur Haraldsson explains that it emerged in response to a request from an Icelandic publisher for his autobiography. He wrote up a list of chapters, asked to be interviewed for each, then read over and expanded the synopses supplied by the interviewer. Sometime later, after an acquaintance translated the book into English, Erlendur once again reviewed the text, deleting and expanding “as I saw fit for a foreign readership” (pp. 177–178). The English-language edition was completed and in production when Erlendur died of cancer at age 89 on November 22, 2020 (Matlock, 2020).¹

The book is composed of 19 chapters that proceed in roughly chronological order, beginning with Erlendur’s early years. He relates that in childhood he would often walk home from school along the beach. On these walks, he would sometimes “experience tremendous well being as if touched by some powerful divine being,” something that affected him deeply and exercised “tremendous influence” over his life (p. 1). Occasionally, he came into contact with other anomalous phenomena. As a student at the University of Copenhagen, he rented a room in a house where he would hear footsteps, observe object movements, and see the apparition of a man dressed in black. He never mentioned these things to his landlady, passing up the opportunity to investigate them, which he came to regret. Erlendur was introduced to parapsychology by Hans Bender at the University of Freiburg in 1958. Bender subsequently involved him in an experiment in which a psychic provided impressions of eight participants who had made scribbles on sheets of paper. Erlendur easily identified the readings intended for himself and a friend, leaving another profound mark on his psyche.

Erlendur spent a year with J. B. Rhine at the Foundation for Research at the Nature of Man, conducting an experiment with a random number generator brought to the lab by Helmut Schmidt for his doctoral thesis in psychology. Erlendur discovered that he scored as well above chance as the best operators in his experiment. Following the stint with Rhine, Erlendur went to the University of Virginia for a year with Robert van de Castle. While there, he met Ian Stevenson, with whom he was to collaborate on several projects in later years. From Charlottesville, Erlendur went to the American Society for Psychical Research in New York, where he got to know Karlis Osis. When Osis received funds to interview Indian physicians and nurses for a study of deathbed visions, he invited Erlendur to accompany him. The result was a classic work, *At the Hour of Death* (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977, 2012), which is still in print.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Erlendur discusses the trance mediumship of Hafsteinn Björnsson. Much of this occurred before Erlendur came into contact with Björnsson, but included drop-in communicators Erlendur reported in journal papers together with Stevenson. One of the most extraordinary episodes involved an instance of Inuit (a lan-

guage unknown to Björnsson) exchanged between a communicator and a sitter. Erlendur also was able to arrange a series of experiments with Björnsson. (For a comprehensive account of Björnsson's mediumship, based on notes left by Erlendur, see Matlock, 2021.) Later (in Chapter 16), Erlendur recounts his research on the early 20th-century medium Indridi Indridason, about whom he co-authored a book (Haraldsson & Gissurason, 2015). Although principally a physical medium, Indridason at one point brought through a communicator (identified by Erlendur through archival research) who correctly described a fire in Copenhagen, although news of the event did not reach Iceland until several weeks later (Haraldsson, 2017).

With Osis in India in the 1960s and 1970s, Erlendur became acquainted with Sai Baba. Although Sai Baba refused to engage in controlled tests, Erlendur returned to India repeatedly to interview witnesses to his feats and wrote another book about them (Haraldsson, 1987, 2013). In the late 1980s, Stevenson asked Erlendur if he was interested in participating in an attempt to "replicate" his research on children's past-life memory claims. Erlendur proceeded to study cases in Sri Lanka, Lebanon (among the Druze), and Iceland. He conducted the first major psychological studies of children with past-life memories, comparing them to their peers without such memories, and investigated the retention of past-life memories into adulthood. Erlendur published several journal papers on his reincarnation research, summarized in *I Saw a Light and Came Here* (Haraldsson & Matlock, 2016). In addition to his field research abroad, he conducted two major surveys of psychic experiences in Iceland, one on after-death contacts, reported in *The Departed among the Living* (Haraldsson, 2012).

In Chapter 17, Erlendur discusses his career at the University of Iceland. From 1974 to 1993, he taught required courses on experimental psychology, psychological testing, and research methodology, along with two elective courses on parapsychology and altered states of consciousness. From 1993 to 1995, he took leave to visit the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health in Freiburg, but when he returned to Reykjavik, he discovered that his courses had been assigned to someone else. He retired from the university in 1999, three years before it was mandatory, and devoted himself full-time to research, writing, and lecturing. The penultimate chapter treats personal affairs, including his family life and academic colleagues. In the final chapter, "Looking Forward to the Unknown," Erlendur reflects on his life's work.

Between Chapters 9 and 10, there are several pages of photographs. Most are personal, showing Erlendur with his parents, his spouses, and his most influential

colleagues, Hans Bender, J. B. Rhine, Ian Stevenson, and Karlis Osis. Only a few photographs relate to his many field investigations—one shows him with Sai Baba and another with Purnima Ekanayake, the subject of one of his reincarnation cases. A bibliography at the end of the book (pp. 168–176), organized by chapter, lists many of his journal publications, as well as his books.

Erlendur's narrative is complemented by a Foreword by Leslie Kean and an Epilogue by Carlos Alvarado. Besides reminiscing about Erlendur, Kean, and Alvarado, note the breadth of his investigations. Not only did Erlendur delve into an array of topics concerning postmortem survival—deathbed experiences, apparitions, mediumship, reincarnation—he approached them not only through fieldwork but also through survey questionnaires, experimental studies, and archival research. Few parapsychologists have demonstrated command of such a range of subjects and methodology.

This book gives a good sense of Erlendur's diverse contributions to parapsychology, but it does not constitute a definitive autobiography. Perhaps because he judged the topics of little interest to readers, Erlendur says little about the journalism that interrupted his graduate school years and mentions only in passing his activities with the Kurds (about which he wrote his first book, never translated into English). An account of these may be found in his chapter in the second volume of Rosemarie Pilkington's *Men and Women in Parapsychology: Personal Reflections* (Haraldsson, 2013), which also describes more of his psychic experiences in his formative early years. For a briefer general treatment of Erlendur's life, see his *Psi Encyclopedia* biography (Matlock, 2020).

ENDNOTE

- ¹ For the record, although I contributed a paragraph to a section headed "Praise for Erlendur" in the opening of the book, a brief excerpt of which appears on the back cover, I was not involved in the book's composition, editing, or production.

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