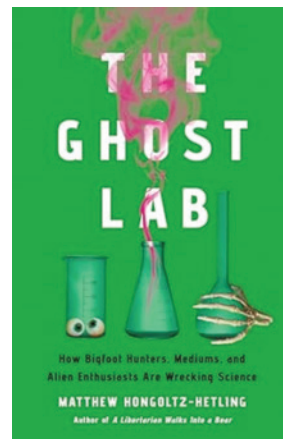
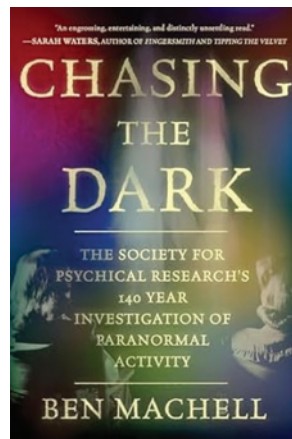


**BOOK AND
MULTIMEDIA
REVIEW**

Ghost Hunting in the Era of Institutional Distrust: An Essay Review of Two Books

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Chasing the Dark: The Society for Psychical Research's 140-Year Investigation of Paranormal Activity. By Ben Machell. Abacus Books, 2025. 320 pages. \$30.00 hardcover; \$14.99 e-book.

ISBN: 9781538770689

The Ghost Lab: How Bigfoot Hunters, Mediums, and Alien Enthusiasts Are Wrecking Science. By Matthew Hongoltz-Hetling. PublicAffairs, 2025. 352 pages. \$30.00 hardcover; \$18.99 e-book.

ISBN: 9781541703971

Two new books have recently appeared that take a popular approach to the history of psychic research in the UK and the US, respectively. *Chasing the Dark* is by Ben Machell, a writer and columnist for *The London Times* and *Times Magazine*, whose previous book was in the true crime genre. Machell's interest in psychic research was piqued when he was gifted a crystal ball by his dying grandmother shortly before beginning this project. According to the subtitle of the American edition, *Chasing the Dark* is a survey of the history of the London-based Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Snippets of this history are indeed covered, although the book mainly focuses on the career of Tony Cornell (1924-2010), a field researcher for the SPR whose voluminous papers are housed at the Cambridge University Library and in the SPR archives. A brief chapter on the Fox sisters and the birth of modern spiritualism in 1848 is followed by another on the founding of the SPR in 1882. The author uses this chapter to highlight the perennial difficulties of applying scientific methods to the study of psychic phenomena. Later chapters weave familiar episodes of SPR history with Cornell's life story, which is told primarily through a series of case studies of psychic events Cornell investigated from the early 1950s until his death over fifty years later.



Although by nature a sceptic, Cornell was objective enough to acknowledge that some events he witnessed as a youth did not easily admit of rational explanation. Chief among these was an uncanny interaction with a holy man in the Nilgiri Hills in southern India while serving there during WWII. Returning to England in 1946, Cornell took a degree in economics from Cambridge University and secured a job in sales, although he continued to be fascinated by the paranormal. Over the next few years, Cornell began investigating stories of local hauntings, perhaps, Machell suggests, as a way of dealing with the carnage witnessed during the war. In 1952, Cornell joined the SPR and came under the influence of the psychical researcher, Eric Dingwall (1890-1986), who warned him of the extreme difficulty of researching psychic phenomena. Despite this, Cornell, often in the company with other investigators met through the Cambridge University Society for Psychical Research (CUSPR), proceeded to spend more and more time investigating and recording appearances of ghosts, either manifested spontaneously or invoked by mediums. Machell is impressed by Cornell's ability to empathize with those who believe in ghosts while maintaining exacting research standards and remaining vigilant for instances of self-deception and fraud (indeed, many of the case studies Machell chose to highlight are clear cases of fraud). Cornell tended toward the "right wing" of the SPR, that is, those who are "skeptical of spiritualism entirely" (76), believing that genuine ghosts were more likely the product of the psi abilities of the human mind rather than the survival of human personality after death. Nevertheless, he remained open to working with others, such as clergy whose belief in the reality of spirits was more robust. In the end, however, after half a century of investigation and after amassing a wealth of detailed field research, the evidential results of Cornell's work were disappointingly meagre. Even with his development of new technologies (e.g., the Spontaneous Psychophysical Incident Data Electronic Recorder [SPIDER]), Cornell's results remained inconclusive. In his book, *Investigating the Paranormal* (2002), Cornell continued to argue for the psi origins of hauntings, although he admitted that it would be for future generations to definitively prove this hypothesis one way or another.

The second recent popular book to look at contemporary psychic investigation is Matthew Honglotz-Hetling's *The Ghost Lab*. Honglotz-Hetling is a Pulitzer-nominated investigative journalist whose previous work has explored right-wing politics and alternative medicine. *The Ghost Lab* centers on a group of amateur ghost hunters and paranormal enthusiasts who were members of the Kitt Research Initiative

(KRI) in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Founded by Andy Kitt, a part-time psychology graduate student at a local university, the KRI operated out of a converted storefront in a strip mall from 2009 to 2023. The KRI's goal was to "screen out unserious thrill-seekers" in order to create an organization dedicated to the collection of "Solid Phantoms," that is, incontrovertible empirical evidence for psychic phenomena. To this end, the KRI's mission statement called for the development of a scientific approach to the task. Among other things, such an approach would help to "validate or disprove research techniques, properly define terms like *ghost*, collect data, and act as a filter that would convey only the most promising evidence and theories to mainstream scientific institutions, and the public" (30). As it turned out, however, the group attracted a typical cross-section of true believers whose interests ran the gamut from ghosts, demons, and psi powers to UFOs and cryptozoology. Their investigations, moreover, were hardly scientifically rigorous, but largely ad hoc and experiential. Indeed, Honglotz-Hetling spends much of the book narrating the personal stories of a half-dozen or so members of the KRI in order to account for the fraught interpersonal dynamics that affected the ebb and flow of the organization and its work.

Taken together, perhaps the most interesting aspect of these two books, beyond simply documenting the work of modern psychic investigators, is that both authors share a concern over the future of psychic research in the 21st century. In the 1990s, near the end of his career, Tony Cornell noted that he was receiving fewer and fewer calls from the public asking him to investigate hauntings. By 2004, Cornell observed that CUSPR "used to get maybe 60 to 80 reports of ghosts in a year. Now we get none. None at all. A remarkable decline" (252). Some claimed that this decline was due to the fact that we now live in an environment pervaded by "electronic smog" (253) generated by such things as the now ubiquitous cellphone tower. Machell has a different theory, however: he believes that "the world is no less haunted than it was," but that "[m]obile phones, the internet, the modern technology on which we increasingly live our lives [...] have allowed people to share, describe and investigate their experiences of the supernatural in ways that no longer require them to appeal to intermediaries acting on behalf of a Victorian institution like the SPR" (262). In other words, "spontaneous cases are now, overwhelmingly, conducted by groups of individuals operating independently, and who share their investigations online to vast, eager audiences" (262-63) on X, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. For Machell, this development is highly problematic for a variety of reasons. Not only do

these online ghost hunters lack the professionalism of the old SPR investigators, but they are driven by the relentless logic of the internet, which rewards “clicks” above all else, including basic accuracy and even a modicum of objectivity. This leads to paranormal “investigations” that tend to be superficial, sensationalistic, and possibly even harmful to the people whose hauntings are being subjected to the internet’s pulverizing gaze.

Honglotz-Hetling’s *The Ghost Lab* takes up this theme, and indeed, it forms one of the prominent theses of the book. Honglotz-Hetling goes much further, however, arguing that the state of paranormal research in the US, now heavily slanted towards independent online amateurs, reflects the general erosion of trust in experts and institutions in this country. For example, with the ongoing defunding of public higher education—a major concern for the author throughout the book—the scientific tradition it championed is being undermined, giving space to alternative worldviews such as “paranormalism,” which in turn simply accelerates the process of “wrecking science,” as the book’s subtitle puts it. Even more alarming, Paranormalists “have a vision of a new post-institutional America, one that involves a mass decentralization of power, defunded colleges, empty churches, and a reduced role for hospitals, law enforcement, the scientific establishment, and government” (195). The ultimate result of this, the author warns, would not only be the fracturing of whatever shared reality the American public still possesses, but also the rise of dangerous superstitions leading to increased mental illness, ritual violence, and murder. Ironically, Honglotz-Hetling sees the continuing presence of the science-friendly wing of the American paranormal movement as the best chance to forestall such an apocalyptic future, but in this, he doesn’t sound particularly optimistic. In New Hampshire, for instance, while “the triumph of paranormalism over institutionalism [...] is far from complete, [...] the signposts are frightening, the trends undeniable” (268).

As an agnostic observer with an academic interest in the history of psychic research, I found both books

interesting reads. I found Machell’s measured approach in *Chasing the Dark* appropriate and insightful. I wouldn’t hesitate to recommend this book to general readers looking to learn something about the history of the UK’s Society for Psychical Research, and for those interested in the methods of a careful psychic investigator whose decades of field experience illustrate the inherent limitations of such research. In regard to Honglotz-Hetling’s *The Ghost Lab*, however, my reaction is decidedly ambivalent. On the one hand, I found the ethnographic component of *The Ghost Lab* engaging, and his concerns about the continuing marginalization of the scientific method in popular psychic research well-founded. And yet, I regard his notion of “paranormalism,” by which he conflates psychic research with modern spiritualism, the New Age, and paganism, as woefully unnuanced and seemingly designed to provoke yet another spiritual panic for which the US is so famous. Moreover, the fact that not just “paranormalists,” but large numbers of Americans in general have lost trust in institutions (Gallup 2025; Pew 2025) suggests that this problem transcends the boundaries of any particular worldview, religious or secular. Thus, in my opinion, to demonize any one worldview or family or worldviews as Honglotz-Hetling does in this book serves only to divert attention away from the real social roots of this problem, whatever they might actually turn out to be.

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