

## **Spectral Speculation**

**By Will Storr**

Published: October 27 2006 15:34

Rose-Mary Gower and her family are used to the weird goings-on in their home by now. Since they moved into 17th century Penyffordd Farm in Treuddyn, north-east Wales, nearly 10 years ago they have glimpsed faces at windows, heard muffled voices in empty rooms, sensed presences that have sent the temperature plummeting to minus 15°C and discovered previously blank walls decorated with ancient Welsh script, which, when translated, seems eerily relevant to their own modern, domestic lives.

So far, even after extensive studies by a team of expert “parapsychologists” from John Moore University in Liverpool, England, no rational explanation has been found for the phenomena.

And the Gowers’ farm is not unique. Indeed, in spite of what most level-headed people would reasonably assume, science still appears to be some way from adequately explaining all the hauntings that continue to be reported by homeowners in locations around the world.

Europe is famously riddled with ghosts that reflect its rich and frequently bloody history. A house on Center Street in Warsaw is said to be haunted by the moving phantoms of dolls that used to belong to two resident girls who died in a car accident. At Apertin Manor in Kil, Sweden, visitors sleeping in the guesthouse often awake in the night to see the apparition of a noblewoman pass through the wall. And a residential property in Kolodeje, Czech Republic, has been plagued for three decades by spectral dwarves that chase pets around the corridors, which, not surprisingly, has made it difficult for the landlords to rent it out in recent years.

But do these bizarre stories really amount to proof of the existence of ghosts?

Kyriacos Markides, an American sociologist and professor at the University of Maine, thinks they might. “The majority of people around the world in the majority of cultures believe in spirit beings and take the reality of other dimensions for granted,” he says. “So the question is: Why in modern western society do we look upon these phenomena as weird, bizarre and somehow unreal?”

The good news, Markides adds, is that attitudes seem to be changing; haunted houses are now discussed in academic papers, not just depicted in B-grade movies. “In the past 30 years [more] people have come out from the closet. They speak about personal encounters and spiritual experiences, which are reminiscent of experiences of yogis, shamans and lamas from other traditions, including Christian mystics. [And] to understand the phenomenon of ghosts and haunted houses, we need to understand [this] wider phenomenon.”

One resource he points to is the British Society for Psychical Research [SPR], which was founded by scientists in the 19th century. Maurice Grosse is a senior member of the SPR and well-known for his role in investigating a 1978 haunting in a north London council house, now known as the Enfield Poltergeist.

“I went along to the house and, as soon as I got there, I realised that the case was real because the family was in a very bad state,” the octogenarian recalls. “Everything was in chaos. Nothing happened for a while. But then I experienced Lego pieces and marbles flying across the room. I was in the kitchen and a T-shirt leapt off the table and flew to the other side of the room. I thought ‘Well, now I’ve really seen something’. And of course the family and neighbours had experienced all sorts of incredible things: furniture being turned over, the daughter being thrown across the room.”

After decades of such investigations, Grosse firmly believes that ghosts do exist. “Don’t forget, we’ve only got five senses,” he says. “That doesn’t mean to say that nothing exists outside

those five senses. It's the arrogance of human nature to say that we understand everything."

There is, however, a sizeable group of academics, not to mention laymen, who vehemently disagree.

Chris French, a psychologist and professor at the University of London, is famous in ghost circles for his indefatigable research into the subject and for his sceptical stance. "One possibility really is that something – a spirit, soul or whatever you call it – has somehow survived bodily death. But I have to say I'm not convinced," he says. "So then you look for other explanations."

One argument is that many of these cases are deliberate hoaxes. "One of the most famous is the Amityville Horror," French says, referring to the story, later turned into a Hollywood film, of a family being terrorised by evil spirits in a New York house where a murder had been committed. "Everybody who knows about the case would now acknowledge that it was a hoax from start to finish but most people who have read the book or seen the film still think it was based on a true story. Well, it just isn't. It was dreamt up over a few bottles of wine. It was deliberately just a money-making venture from the word go."

In other cases, people who report hauntings may be quite sincere but still mistaken. "They're simply misinterpreting natural phenomena of various kinds," French says.

Perhaps they hear footsteps in the night and don't realise the sound is coming from neighbours or they awake to scratching in the loft that is actually coming from rats or wind blowing across a cracked window pane. "People often report electrical devices going wrong," he says. "Well, maybe they just need their wiring checked out."

But the rational explanations that French likes best have to do with psychology.

“A more interesting example, for me, is a phenomenon called ‘sleep paralysis. In its most basic form it’s just where you’re half asleep and half awake and you realise you can’t move. About 40 per cent of people will experience something like that at least once in their lives, so it is a very common experience. For about five per cent, when it occurs it’s associated with visual and auditory hallucinations. It can be very, very scary. They will see things, strange figures or lights moving around the room, they will hear things, like voices or footsteps or mechanical sounds. There’s a very strong sense of presence, that there is something in the room that doesn’t mean you any good.”

French also believes that, ultimately, humans’ willingness to believe in tales of haunted houses are rooted in a very deep need to believe in life after death. “The thought of our own mortality is something that we just find difficult,” he says. “The idea that people that we know and love are going to die and be separated from us for ever is very, very hard to deal with. So there’s a very strong motivation to believe in ghosts.”

Whether you are a believer or a sceptic, there’s no question that the scary stories and the stigma of haunted houses persist. Gower, resident of the supposedly haunted Welsh farmhouse, keeps an online diary on the BBC’s website. “The spooks appear to be friendly, and the house has a pleasant atmosphere but folk frequently ask us how we can be so calm about living with our unofficial lodgers,” she writes. “At first we were more than a little surprised and if, for instance, a new word appeared on the wall we would immediately rush to look at it. But, after five years, we have become a little blasé and we don’t bother to get up from a favourite TV programme to look at the latest manifestation. It can wait. Having said that, I think I might be freaked out visiting another haunted house. One’s own spooks are one thing; someone else’s, quite another.”

Not everyone is as comfortable with their house being haunted. Not long after noted jewellery designer Barry

Kieselstein-Cord moved into his 18-room mansion on New York's Upper East Side, his son started seeing a figure sitting at the foot of his bed every night. Eventually, Kieselstein-Cord also spotted an apparition scurrying up the back stairs. "I mentioned to his assistant and he said: 'Oh you mean the ghost? I see her all the time'."

Kieselstein-Cord called a psychic friend, who explained that that the house, which had been empty for some time, probably seemed welcoming to wandering spirits. So "my wife found a feng shui master who exorcised the place," Kieselstein-Cord says, chuckling. "He ran around and put incense in every corner. And so far we've been eight years ghost free."

Ridding one's home of ghosts – or at least of the perception that it's haunted – is a sound financial decision, according to Randy Bell, a US-based "damage economics" specialist who deals with measuring the effect that any negative peculiarity might have on property values. Although he concedes that commercial properties, such as hotels, can benefit from associations with spectres, he says residential homes don't, particularly when the stories behind them are tragic ones.

The closest he's come to dealing with a house that might have been haunted was when we was hired to assist with sale of the "Heavens Gate" mansion in Santa Fe, California, where 39 cult members committed suicide in March 1997. "We got phone calls from literally all over the world about people that were interested in buying but I was somewhat sceptical that anyone would," he says. "Just for the sake of the client's interest, we put it on the market and indeed our suspicions were right. People were just talking and there was no money behind any of it. I took all kinds of people through the house and there was one particular room that everyone got the heebie jeebies."

The owner, who had a mortgage on the property, gave it back to the bank and lost his equity. Eventually, the bank sold it on and the purchaser had it demolished.

French, the sceptic, says he is not surprised by such anecdotes. Nor does he completely discount the accounts of Gower, Kieselstein-Cord and others. "Personally, I'm not convinced there's such a thing as truly paranormal phenomena." he says. "But I think that anyone who says 'I know there's nothing paranormal' is obviously talking rubbish, because, ultimately, we can't know that ghosts don't exist."