

Putting the Pieces in Place

by

R.B. Russell



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Afterword
by Elizabeth Brown

In these stories Ray Russell presents us with situations in which apparently supernatural phenomena intrude, although rational or psychological explanations are also possible. No one explanation will account for everything that is meant to have transpired. Russell leaves the door open to the supernatural and his characters are forced to question what has happened to them, and in turn they start to doubt themselves. Their confidence is shaken, and it is in this respect that the drama of the stories is played out. They *are* tales of the supernatural and of the psychological, but they can also be considered tales of horror because the greatest horror is perhaps the realisation that you cannot rely on your own mind to interpret the empirical world around you. The stories are written to make the reader uneasy, and if it is of any comfort, then I am not certain that the author himself is sure of the answers to the questions he poses.

Ray tells me that he has an open mind when it comes to ghosts. He believes that it is highly unlikely that they are real, but he is not willing to discount the possibility entirely. He is cautious of anyone who dogmatically claims that they exist, but he is just as suspicious of anyone who insists that they do not. Science continues to make great

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inroads into territory where once only superstition supplied the answers, but he points out that there are still many areas left where science has failed to offer anything other than theories.

He has suggested to me that it is quite probable that ghosts and other supernatural phenomena may one day be explained away entirely as the faulty operation of the human mind and senses. Being a bit of a Romantic, he acknowledges that this would be a shame, but our ability to be misled, and to mislead ourselves, is perhaps even more interesting to him than ghostly phenomena (which, in cases of 'true hauntings' appear preoccupied with the mundane and the trivial).

From time to time in our lives we all experience phenomena for which there appear to be no obvious explanations. If the supernatural offers a working hypothesis then our reaction to this will vary depending on our disposition; rationalists will simply refuse to believe what they have experienced, while the superstitious will offer it as proof of the supernatural. Many of us, I imagine, will simply assume that we were mistaken in what we thought we had encountered.

A magician's sleight of hand, misdirection and optical illusion can be just as entertaining when they are explained as they are remarkable when the methods remain a mystery. If we are predisposed to be responsive then our senses and minds are even easier to cheat, which is of course, how mediums often ply their trade. Nobody can doubt that apparently supernatural phenomena can be faked, and the reasons for fakery are themselves of interest. But Ray Russell is fascinated by the way that we can trick ourselves.

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It is always astounding that two people who witness the same event can often have such different recollections of apparently objective facts. Perhaps it is down to the way that memory works: rewriting events every time we remember them and storing away the most recent version? If you are having problems recalling a detail from the past it would be reasonable to try to imagine various possibilities, discounting those that are the less likely. How we decide this will depend upon a number of conscious or unconscious factors, and can be susceptible to outside influence. Inevitably a particular possibility might make more of an impression than others, and when the question is considered later then it can happen that the memory you access is not event but the later reconstruction. And if you forget that you ever had doubts then it may be the only memory that you have available to you.

However, as I have already suggested, such explanations do not account for everything that happens in Ray Russell's stories. There is often something else at work, but how are we to know what it is? If we can't trust what our senses have told us and doubt the ability of our minds to make sense of any of it, then how are we to even ask for help?