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Should Scientists Take UFOs and Ghosts More Seriously?

Journalist Leslie Kean investigates topics that many consider to be beyond the pale

By John Horgan on May 18, 2020 7



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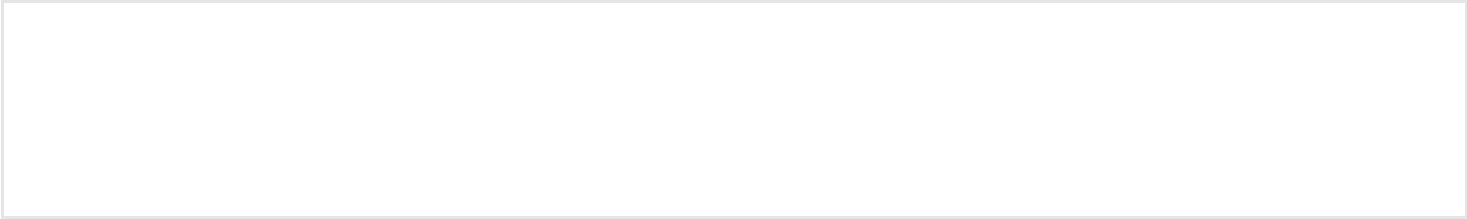
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Leslie Kean: “Where is the curiosity among scientists about the mysteries of the unknown? The challenge they provide to the status quo should make their study even more compelling!” Credit: Tatiana Daubek

Like many long-time readers of The New York Times, I was shocked when the staid old paper published, in 2017, a front-page article on Pentagon investigations of unidentified flying objects, or UFOs. This article, plus a shorter sidebar and a 2019 follow-up, heartened those who believe that extraterrestrials have visited us and annoyed skeptics like my friend journalist Keith Kloor. Last December, I met journalist Leslie Kean, a co-author of the Times articles and sole author of the 2010 bestseller UFOs: Generals, Pilots, And Government Officials Go On The Record, at a week-long symposium on challenges to conventional scientific materialism, about which I wrote here. At the meeting, which took place at the Esalen Institute in California, Kean talked about the possibility of life after death, a topic she explores in her 2017 book Surviving Death: A Journalist Investigates Evidence for an Afterlife (which includes chapters from other contributors). Kean and I hit it off. I told her that, although I have a hard time believing in ghosts and alien visitations, I admire the courage and professionalism with which she investigates these topics. I also enjoy talking to smart people whose views diverge from mine, like renegade biologists Rupert Sheldrake and Stuart Kauffman. So last week, after the Times published yet another UFO story by Kean and her collaborator Ralph Blumenthal—which triggered more pushback from Kloor—I emailed Kean a few questions. — John Horgan

Horgan: When I was a kid, I was obsessed with UFOs and the paranormal. Were you like that too?

Kean: No, not until I was an adult. Although I do remember having mystical feelings about Santa Claus as a young child. It happened when I saw that my cookies, carefully placed next to the Christmas tree, had been nibbled on by Santa during his visitation into my world the previous Christmas Eve. It was solid evidence that something magic, something “supernormal” had actually occurred. This fantastical being who could be everywhere at once had been in my living room and left behind a physical bite mark to prove his existence. The authorities of the day, my parents, confirmed it. I felt momentarily transported, expanded, into a new level of connection to something big and mysterious. That may sound silly, but it was true. When I found out the truth about Santa later, I felt betrayed. Something precious had been taken away. My parents weren’t trustworthy because they lied to me. Maybe at some unconscious level this led me to want to find out what’s real and to prove the so-called authorities wrong. I’m not totally serious, but I suppose it’s possible.



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Horgan: When and why did you first decide to write about UFOs? Was there any particular triggering event?

Kean: My serious interest in UFOs as a journalist began in 1999 when I was working as an on-air host and producer for public radio and publishing as a

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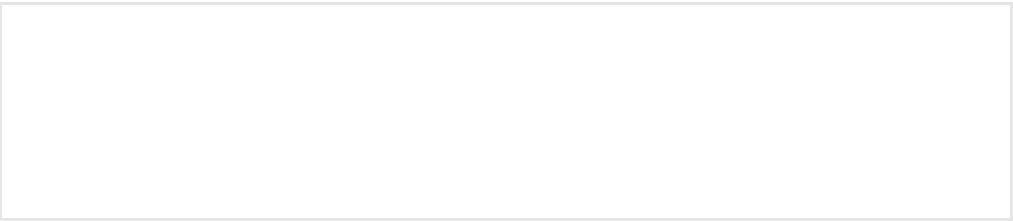
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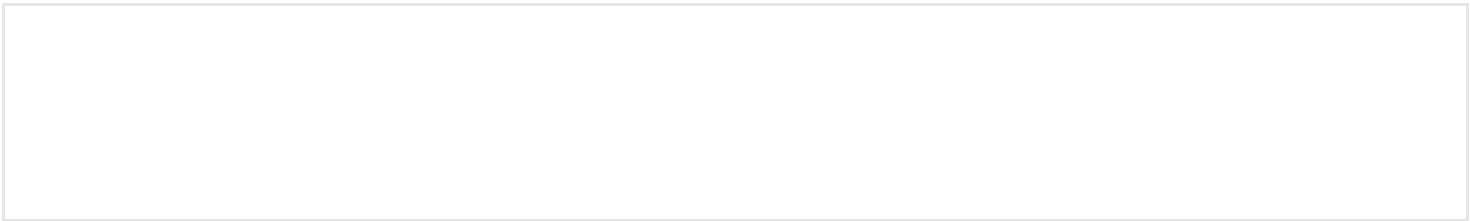
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freelancer. I unexpectedly received an explosive 90-page report titled *UFOs and Defense: What Should We Prepare For?* by retired French generals, police, scientists and an admiral. The report intended to “strip the UFO phenomenon of its irrational layer”. The group had spent three years documenting official military and aviation UFO cases. Most stunning was their conclusion: that the “extraterrestrial hypothesis” was the most valid and logical one to explain the data. Of course there was no proof, only an hypothesis. The authors were concerned about the national security implications of the phenomenon and proposed that pilots be trained on how to respond to UFOs to avoid future mishaps or even dangerous accidents. Given the stature and credibility of the group, I thought this was a huge story. I published a lengthy article based on the report, known as the COMETA Report, for the *Boston Globe* in May, 2000, which required overcoming the reservations of a very nervous editor. [See links to the COMETA Report [here](#) and [here](#).] That’s what set me on this path, and there was no turning back. And two decades later, I can hardly believe how things have changed. [See [this Times story](#) by Ralph Blumenthal for more background on Kean’s UFO coverage.]

Horgan: One admirer of your book *UFOs* describes you as an “agnostic” on whether UFOs are actually piloted by aliens. When I met you at Esalen, you struck me as a believer, not an agnostic. Am I wrong?

Kean: Piloted by aliens? I have an open mind, but no, I don’t believe that and have never said that. But I also will not rule it out. There are many possibilities on the table. I have made the point over and over that we do not know what these objects are, and that’s where things stand. My book concluded that a phenomenon exists, without question, named “unidentified flying objects” by the US Air Force in the 1950’s. It’s physical, and well documented, even by our government. But what these objects are is another question. That’s what everyone wants to know, and that desire has led to all kinds of speculation. On that question my 2010 book was agnostic, and it was recognized as such. These flying machines, whatever they are, might not even have any drivers at all for all we know.

Horgan: What is the best single piece of evidence that UFOs have an extraterrestrial origin?



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Kean: The extremely advanced technology that the objects have displayed since the 1950’s. They demonstrate tremendous speed and accelerations, the ability to make sharp right-angle turns, stand still in midair, zoom off and disappear in the blink of an eye, and operate under water. They appear to defy the laws of aviation as we know it, since they have no wings or visible means of propulsion. The documentation goes back more than 60 years, when no one on this planet had technology like this. In some cases, experts, such as officials from the French Space Agency, had enough data to rule out all conventional explanations (meaning it wasn’t something natural or man-made). These cases represent only a small fraction of those reported, but they are the ones that matter. So, what are we left with?

Horgan: What’s your view of alien abduction experiences?

Kean: I find them fascinating and don’t know what to make of them. I know sane, intelligent people who report such events, and some even have physical evidence of them. Their lives have been turned upside down by these experiences. However, this is not something I have studied in-depth and it has never been the focus of my work as a reporter. I don’t feel qualified to draw conclusions about it. It points to the greater complexity of this issue which goes beyond any simple hypothesis.

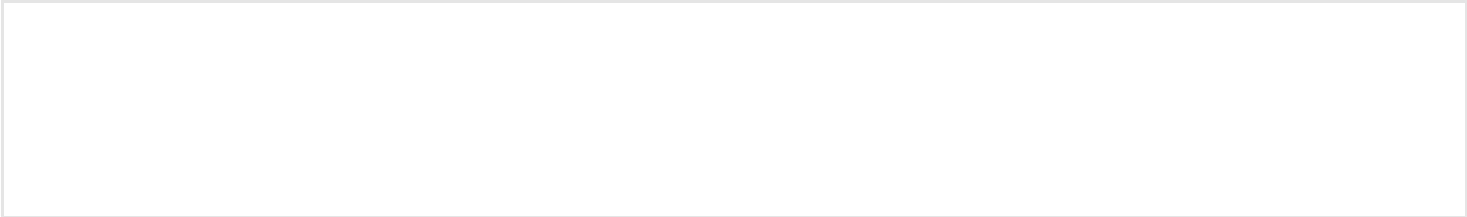


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Horgan: Journalist Keith Kloor, writing in *WIRED*, calls your recent *New York Times* article on UFOs “thinly-sourced and slanted.” Astrophysicist Katie Mack, in *Scientific American*, says she doesn’t take alien spaceships seriously enough to debunk them. How do you respond to these critics?

Kean: People are entitled to their opinions. As one of three people writing the *Times* stories, which include scrutiny by fact-checkers and multiple editors, I simply don’t agree with Kloor’s statement. We stand by all our reporting at the *New York Times* and will continue to cover the topic whenever we can. Our first story in Dec. 2017 reverberated around the world and has made the subject respectable for many who would not have touched it before. It opened the door to classified briefings on the Hill and a chain of events involving the Navy issuing new reporting guidelines and acknowledging the anomalies in the videos.



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I don’t think Katie Mack and I stand that far apart. She writes, “It’s not that we don’t think aliens exist. To the best of my knowledge, most of us do.” But the leap to alien spaceships in our atmosphere is another matter, for many reasons which she spells out. I respect her position. I have never claimed that UFOs are alien spaceships. Unfortunately, this is the takeaway for many people from our stories in the *Times*, even though this is not what is actually written and even though we include counter statements to this idea. So I would respond to Katie Mack that any question about alien spaceships misses the point. These are unknowns, plain and simple. But they are physically real. They interact with military pilots and commercial aircraft. Therefore, they deserve investigation.

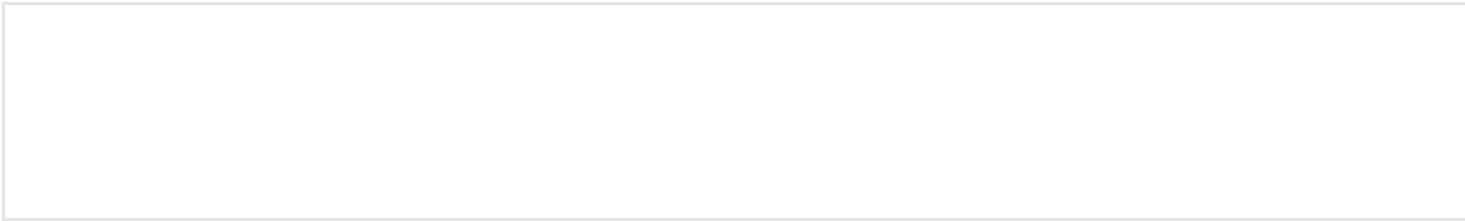
Horgan: Why did you write *Surviving Death*? Did your own paranormal experiences attract you to this topic?

Kean: During the ten years I was investigating UFOs, I had been intrigued by the question of the possible survival of consciousness when we die. I had poked around into some of the research, especially the work of Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia studying young children with verified past life

memories. After completing work with a film company on a History Channel special based on my book, my publisher (Crown/Random House) invited me to write a second book. Before they made that invitation, I had just completed a draft of a proposal for a book on evidence for possible survival after death, and had planned to give it to my literary agent the very week that they contacted her. It was an amazing synchronicity.

So, it wasn’t so much my own experiences that drew me to this, it was my interest in learning more and synthesizing the best, most rigorous material into one volume for the general reader, sort of like I had done for *UFOs*. This was another big mystery facing human beings: what happens when we die? It was the natural topic for me to pursue next, and it was a much bigger challenge than UFOs. Most of my “paranormal” experiences occurred during the time I was involved in the research, which began in 2012. I opened a door and didn’t know where it would take me. The experiences I had were beyond my imagination. They were life-changing. Some of them were precipitated by the sudden death of my younger brother in early 2013, a tragedy that deepened my quest for personal answers, as well as intellectual ones. So writing *Surviving Death* was a journey of discovery which unfolded while I was writing it, whereas *UFOs* represented a culmination of ten years of investigation without me ever seeing a UFO. The two books turned out to be very different as a result.

Horgan: Do you ever worry that your claims about life after death will discredit your claims about UFOs, or vice versa?



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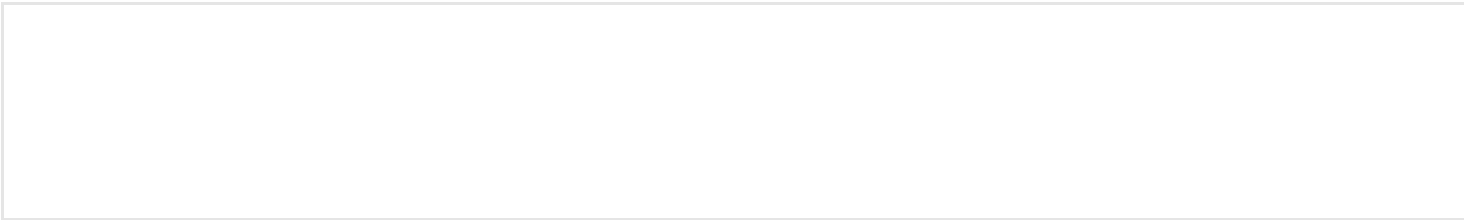
Kean: Yes, I was worried about that question regarding the material in *Surviving Death*. However, I didn’t make any “claims about life after death” that I felt could discredit me, at least in terms of reporting on research and drawing conclusions. I invited others to write their own chapters, and they said things that I didn’t say. My conclusion was that the evidence was suggestive, but not definitive, and I never claimed that we survive death. I pointed out that we all have our own criteria for “evidence” which is strongly impacted by personal experience.

I “tested” mental mediumship, received what appeared to be after-death communications from my brother, saw an apparition, and experienced genuine physical mediumship. I thought about whether to make myself vulnerable by including these things. But I think my narrative would have remained one-dimensional and abstract without this personal element. So, I stepped inside this investigation through first-hand examination, and not just from the perspective of a detached observer who studies data and peers into a strange world from the outside. Yes, it could be professionally risky to expose these very personal events, but I felt it was my obligation to do so. It would have been dishonest to omit them, because they impacted my thinking and my effort to come to terms with many remarkable phenomena. However, I was also careful to step back from them, remaining as analytical and discriminating as I was with everything else. The tricky aspect lies in the interpretation of the extraordinary events, not in their reporting.

So far, I have not felt that my work on UFOs has been discredited by my more recent endeavors. I approached *Surviving Death* with journalistic rigor, and this is its strength.

Horgan: When we discussed ghosts and other supernatural phenomena at Esalen, you seemed to be a believer, not an agnostic. Can you clarify your position?

Kean: It depends what you mean by a believer. Paranormal phenomena exist. People have capabilities and experiences that have been labeled “paranormal“. They seem to operate outside the limits of the current materialistic framework adapted by most scientists, while at the same time, nobody can explain what consciousness actually is. So the existence of “paranormal phenomena” is not a matter of belief. I find it astonishing that there are still some scientists who adapt the position that it can’t be, therefore it isn’t. I don’t have that choice, because I have witnessed many paranormal phenomena myself, and I know they exist. Those who don’t want to believe these things will dismiss them no matter what they read, and they are unlikely to open themselves up to their own encounters with these phenomena.



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I think believing comes into play when one tries to establish what the phenomena are, how they work, where they are generated from, why they occur - when addressing the bigger question of what they mean. Beliefs can operate on both sides of the spectrum, from extreme, black and white denial, as we see in so many skeptics, to extreme belief in an afterlife involving claimed “direct knowledge”. In fact, none of us knows very much about these big mysteries.

Horgan: What is the best evidence you’ve seen for life after death?

Kean: That is a huge question. The evidence that I have pulled together in *Surviving Death* comes from so many places, historical and contemporary, experiential and scientific. It’s the full gestalt that provides the best evidence. I think cases of very young children who report accurate details of a past life, complete with nightmares about the previous death and knowledge from the previous career, are compelling when the memories can be verified and the previous person is identified. If one does not accept rebirth as an explanation, then something else very “paranormal” is going on. Cases of responsive apparitions are also interesting - these “forms” demonstrate intelligence by reacting to multiple human observers, and sometimes provide information through telepathy about their lives on earth which are verified to be true. There are “actual-death” experiences, as resuscitation scientist Sam Parnia calls them, involving patients who are “dead” yet still return, even after spending hours as a corpse. Mediumship can also be evidential, especially when accurate information is provided that is not known to the recipient but is verified later by a family member. Even if this is a result of the medium’s own psychic abilities and does not involve communications from dead people, this is extraordinary in itself. The famous trance medium Mrs. Leonora Piper was studied by experts all over the world, including Willam James. In her

sittings, scientists and other discriminating sitters had extensive conversations with their deceased friends and family.

Drop-in communicators, who show up unexpectedly within a physical seance with no connection to any of the sitters or the medium, provide strong evidence for survival. In two famous cases, these communicators, who spoke through the entranced medium, provided detailed information about their lives on earth that were later verified. In the case of the Icelandic medium Indridi Indridason, the communicator spoke in a language unknown to the medium and provided the name Emil Jensen. Jensen’s identity was verified decades later by psychologist Erlendur Haraldsson, after searching through records in Copenhagen.

There is a wealth of literature on all of this, and much more evidence. And I like to refer to the words of William James: “If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn’t seek to show that all crows are black; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white.” Everyone has to find their own white crow.

Horgan: In *Surviving Death*, you say “there are still aspects of Nature which are neither understood or accepted, even though their reality has profound implications for understanding the true breadth of the human psyche and its possible continuity after death.” I wholeheartedly agree with this statement, and yet I am, I confess, skeptical of claims about alien visitations and life after death. Am I simply close-minded? Do you ever worry that you are too open-minded?

Kean: You’re not closed-minded. Skepticism is a good thing. I too am skeptical about claims of alien visitations as being the simplistic answer to the UFO question. I was a skeptic about the afterlife when I began my work on that topic; it was my personal experiences that opened my eyes. I don’t know how many paranormal events you have witnessed or experienced that might have been totally baffling to you. But I know you have studied consciousness and related phenomena for years, and your skepticism is true for you, and who I am to judge that? Can one be too open-minded? Or are you talking about gullibility? I think I’m grounded, and good at discrimination. Ultimately conclusions about my approach are up to my readers and those who know my work.

Horgan: Are there any pop-culture shows on UFOs and/or the paranormal that you especially like? Dislike?

Kean: I dislike most of the ones I’ve watched, but there are many that I haven’t seen. I loved the movies *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and M. Night Shyamalan’s *Unbreakable*. I enjoyed the *X-files* until it veered too much away from UFOs and into monsters and freakier territory. I didn’t like the History Channel series *Project Blue Book*, premiering in early 2019, because of its distortions and ridiculous plot lines. Ralph Blumenthal and I critiqued that show for the *New York Times* and reported on the real story of Project Blue Book, the Air Force project investigating UFOs in the 50’s and 60’s. One of my favorite UFO movies was Unidentified Flying Objects, made in 1956, with some real people as themselves, which accurately reflected the Blue Book files at the time. I suspect younger people will think this is lame! But that movie was true to fact. *Surviving Death* is the basis for a six-part

documentary series which will air this fall on a major streaming platform, so I guess it will become part of pop-culture.

Horgan: Are there any other topics, besides UFOs and life after death, that you think scientists and journalists should take more seriously?

Kean: It’s not so much “life after death” because that is not something science could ever definitely prove. It’s more about questions around the nature of human consciousness and its manifestations that appear to transcend the limitations of the brain, like a crossing over from the unseen world to that of the seen. Who are we really? Biological robots, or something else? I think all aspects of “superhuman” functioning - precognition, clairvoyance, telepathy, psychokinesis, and energy healing – should be taken seriously. They have been well documented. Where is the curiosity among scientists about the mysteries of the unknown? The challenge they provide to the status quo should make their study even more compelling! Sadly, it’s the opposite. I would also love to see more attention paid to mediumship, in all its forms, although I recognize this is not something that can be easily studied in the laboratory. More surveys on near-death experiences could be conducted, along with end-of-life experiences that occur within hospices. Some “parapsychologists” and other scientific investigators are doing brilliant work on all of this, but they are hampered by the mainstream scientific community’s irrational disrespect. Someday that dam will break.

Further Reading:

[Brilliant Scientists Are Open-Minded about Paranormal Stuff, So Why Not You?](#)

[Scientific Heretic Rupert Sheldrake on Morphic Fields, Psychic Dogs and Other Mysteries](#)

[Freeman Dyson, global warming, ESP and the fun of being "bunkrapt"](#)

[Can Mysticism Help Us Solve the Mind-Body Problem?](#)

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[*Mind-Body Problems*](#) (free online book, also available as [Kindle e-book and paperback](#)). See in particular my chapter on [chaoplexologist Stuart Kauffman](#).

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John Horgan

John Horgan directs the Center for Science Writings at the Stevens Institute of Technology. His books include *The End of Science*, *The End of War* and *Mind-Body Problems*, available for free at mindbodyproblems.com.

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