

"We pay for your spooky stories"

If ghost stories are the stuff of fiction, why do they appear in mainstream newspapers?

By Wendy Sloane

Years ago I wrote several articles for *Chat it's fate* and *Spirit and Destiny* magazines. One was about a woman who made a startling "discovery" while undergoing past-life regression therapy: her relationship with her current boyfriend was unusually volatile because in a past life - about 200 years ago - she had been a slave girl and he had been her sexually abusive master. Who knew?

It was a typical story for *Chat it's fate*, which has recently run such articles as "Haunted by my own son", "Stalked by a shapeshifter - who hates me!" and "A Satanic monk hacked out his own heart. Now he wanted mine".

Who reads this stuff (I know who writes it!)? Do readers really believe it? And as those featured often receive payment for interviews, do they even believe it themselves?

Here in the UK there's a vibrant market of spooky/haunted/psychic stories -- and it's not only speciality consumer magazines that print them. Some mainstream UK newspapers have dedicated sections that regularly give lip service, if not full-on credence, to other-worldly happenings.

The Independent, Daily Mirror and the Daily Express have a regular Ghosts page, while the Sun has a Ghosts and the Supernatural section. Most of the tabloids are happy to run a ghost story, preferably one that features spooky sightings in a well-known pub, hotel or area of local interest – hopefully with a healthy dollop of sex thrown in ("Horny evil spirit 'used man as sex slave every night for two years'", was a Mirror headline last year).

Many say this is not real journalism but fake news. Others say that spooky stories have as much news value as, say, the Sun's spate of articles about Katie Price's "mucky mansion": the red-top has run 217 stories on the topic - or stories referring to it - since February, 2018, according to its online search engine.

"Some publishers have a moral obligation to their audience, others don't. It depends who you are selling your newspaper to," says Richard Evans, Programme Director of Undergraduate Journalism, at City, University of London. He adds: "It's 'Freddy Starr Ate My Hamster'. Was it made up? Of course it was. But attribution in the serious press can cover a multitude of sins."

Monica Cafferky would beg to differ. The freelance journalist is perhaps the most prolific "spooky" writer in the UK, with a psychic spiritual page that ran every Friday in the Mirror for almost three years. Her debut novel *The Winter's Sleep*, described on Amazon as a "tale of ghosts, betrayal and fraud", came out in October.

Cafferky, who has undergone past-life regression herself for research and says she grew up in a haunted house, believes her role is not that of psychic investigator (think Arthur Conan Doyle and the Cottingley Fairies). "I am not asking people to prove to me that the ghost is real. I am asking for a true account of their experience. My role is to interview them and put their story out there," she says.

"Often people just want to share their strange experience. If someone has had a strange and scary encounter, the fact I'm interviewing them and listening to their story can help them to make sense of it and find peace with what has happened to them."

Colin Wilson, who could be described as Cafferky's predecessor and was the foremost UK psychic investigator/journalist, produced more than 100 philosophical and journalistic books before he died in 2013. But times have changed, she says. "He would go out to a haunted house, investigate it and write about his investigation, weaving in quotes from people who lived in the property. Now that investigative element has mostly disappeared and the stories in the UK press are the real-life experience of people who have lived it themselves, although occasionally experts are sought for their analysis of events."

Almost two decades of freelance experience has allowed Cafferky to suss out who's telling the truth, she adds. "The first job I have as a journalist is to use my antenna, my bullshit monitor. I have to trust my intuition.

"There are Instagram and Facebook pages devoted to people who have haunted dolls, for example, and it's very easy to spot someone doing looking for publicity or financial gain. There will be warning signs, such as asking for money or contradicting themselves factually.

"I always do a recce interview first and if alarm bells ring I won't go back and do a full interview," says Cafferky. "And of course, there are those in the 'psychic field' who prey on the vulnerable, so I avoid any kind of story where I'm promoting anyone I suspect to be a charlatan."

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Some of the supernatural stories have gained an audience wider than just the spookily inclined.

Perhaps the most well-known psychic story to gain credence in the press in recent times was the tale of 11-year-old James Leininger, who claimed to be the reincarnation of a World War II fighter pilot shot down by the Japanese in 1945. The Texas-born tween's story appeared not only in dubious websites such as ghost-story.co.uk and Psi Encyclopaedia but also in the (arguably) more respectable Mirror, Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail and more.

Last year, the story of a Northern Irish woman who claimed she married a 300-year-old Haitian ghost because she was "fed up of looking for the perfect man" ran in all the usual outlets as well as the Washington Post, which almost as an aside mentioned that she is "aware that some speculate that she is schizophrenic".

Are these types of articles taking advantage of people who may be mentally ill?

Charlotte Potter, who edits Bauer's Spirit and Destiny Magazine and Take a Break Fate & Fortune (the "mystic magazine full of true life stories and advice"), is the first to admit that some of the people who write in with their true-life tales are suffering from mental health issues. "We have people who write rambling letters and we do have to say that something is not happening to them except in their mind," she says. Occasionally she receives letters penned by people who are sectioned.

Journalistic instinct guides her in deciding which stories to pursue. "When there are real details you can tell there is a real story. If things start to get garbled and the details don't pan out you realise that something isn't right or correct, if they are tripping over themselves or are really cagey," she says.

"True life journalism is very factually based, everything has to be very clear cut. The details are what make a story. If that's not there you start to get suspicious. We have people who call us who have been suffering with a haunting from a violent ghost or spirits for years. They are desperate, and after interviewing them and asking for details you can tell they are honest."

Potter, who does pay for interviews, relies on a small team of "go-to freelancers" who not only know what detail to look for but also ask for photographic "evidence" such as photos of

ghosts or angels. “We’ve had people who feel a connection to a relative and don’t know why, then they stumble upon a picture and they look exactly the same,” she says. Her team is also trained in how to recognise when apps are used to alter photos.

The most popular stories in her magazines are the “really spooky” ghost ones - ghosts that have attacked people, demons that have stolen people’s underwear (“always popular”), cats that have brought home evil spirits after visiting cemeteries and getting dust on them from a grave that had broken open, ghosts that create havoc with couples (Spirit tried to split us up!).

“We are one of those very strange magazines. I think people laugh at us a lot and question the reality of our stories. I always get asked if they are true. But then you start to talk to people about our stories in more detail and they are hooked, they love it,” Potter says.

“Nine times out of them they say: this happened to me, or I do believe, or I carry an angel with me. We are just making it more mainstream, we’re saying these things happen, let’s talk about it.”

Potter’s stories aren’t as newsy as tabloid ghost stories, she says. “The Mirror and other tabloids tend to touch on stories with a news element, like my house is so haunted and the council will not move me on. When we write about it we have an expert element, we put photos with it and package it in a really good way, we give advice but are entertaining at the same time.

“We also touch on loved ones that have passed away, that brings comfort to readers. We entertain and scare, there is a lot we do within the pages of the magazine, but we also comfort, inform and educate.”

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Self-described “psychic medium and author” Nicky Alan derides the media for its poor coverage of the paranormal, saying that most stories “tend to lean towards evil and darkness,” which she says only makes up about three percent of the paranormal world.

The paranormal is about “beauty, love, people not dying but going on to another place. It’s about their loved ones not going anywhere, and it would be nice to see things in the media about this, to see stories of sceptics having things happen to them that cannot be explained,” she says.

“There are people trying to make contact from other realms. It’s not about bringing fear to people, it’s about bringing energy, letting them know that their loved ones do carry on, that there are angels.”

Despite the prevalence of spooky stories in the UK media, some editors won’t touch anything spooky with a barge pole. The current Sunday Times Europe Editor, Peter Conradi, who formerly edited the paper’s property section, recalls that every Halloween hordes of “desperate freelancers” would pitch stories about haunted houses. “My response was that tying them into Halloween made it absolutely less likely, as I thought it was a lot of nonsense and as a matter of principle refused to commission it,” he says.

“In the era of social media you can get much more absurd stuff floating around on the internet,” he adds. “There is a sense in which maybe certain news outlets in the interest of maximising clicks are going to react to growing competition from more web-based sources by actually just drifting off to print any kind of unverified nonsense, because it will bring them more readers and the most clicks.”

Will Gore, former Executive Editor of the Independent who is now Head of Partnerships and Projects at the NCTJ, says he doesn’t really know why his former newspaper has an online

Ghosts section. He believes it has more to do with automatic SEO categorisation than anything else.

“What it’s got in it is almost anything that mentions ghosts,” he says, pointing out that on a specific day the website featured articles about the hotel that inspired *The Shining*, a piece about the top three scientific explanations for ghost sightings, and a travel piece by him (“I don’t believe in ghosts. Well, probably not...” it begins).

“I imagine there are all sorts of section pages. My suspicion is that the Ghost section is just one of those pages, and that there will be thousands of topic pages, which bring together all sorts. All the articles on there are not set to be in the ghost section, there are in other sections but are brought together with a tag.”

His article, “Who was this man standing next to the empty gallows?”, was originally published as one of his weekly walking columns. As a child, Gore says, he dreamt about climbing a hill and encountering an old man standing next to a gibbet. When walking with his family in the Lake District he stumbled upon what he had seen in the dream, then found it was the site of Derbyshire’s last gallows. “It was the only time I ever had any slightly odd encounter,” Gore says.

Such ghost stories are simply a “niche interest”, according to journalist and novelist Brian Jarman, who has worked for the BBC and Public Radio International in Boston. “A lot of people believe and a lot don’t. Journalists should keep an open but sceptical mind about these things, and only treat them as news stories if they’re newsworthy,” he says. “If you devote a whole section to it you’ve got to fill it up with something and it gives it a legitimacy which many people would say is unwarranted.”

Richard Evans at City University implies that legitimacy, in this case, is underrated. “Some audiences are smart, some aren’t. Do audiences of supermarket tabloids in the United States believe every word that’s printed in the magazines? Maybe, maybe a proportion don’t,” he says. “What they’re getting is entertainment and escapism.”

Wendy Sloane worked as a journalist in Moscow from 1989 to 1995 and has been a magazine editor in the UK for Eva magazine, Marie Claire and Woman’s Own. She now freelances for the Sunday Times, among others, and is an associate professor and the journalism course leader at London Metropolitan University.