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When *Scientific American* Put Psychics to the Test

Review of *The Witch of Lime Street: Séance, Seduction, and Houdini in the Spirit World* by David Jaher

REVIEWED BY MICHELLE E. AINSWORTH

According to the séance record, the table pushed [a sitter] out of the den, through the dark corridor, and into the... bedroom ... Were four respected physicians and their wives collectively hallucinating? (123)

CAN THE DEAD TALK TO THE LIVING? Can it happen with worldwide press coverage and with the future of psychical research on the line? In 1924, *Scientific American* magazine, which often exposed charlatans, offered a contest seeking proof of testable séance phenomena. Several candidates were dismissed before the magazine's judges chose the wife of a Boston surgeon, medium Mina Crandon, known to the public as Margery. During her séances tables moved mysteriously and a Victrola started and stopped without anyone visibly touching them—all this apparently caused by the medium's dead brother Walter, whom she channeled. Scoffers became converts. Historical context (from the Old Gold brand cigarettes nervously smoked by one of the investigators, to the hit song of the day "Yes! We Have No Bananas"), dramatic tests, and ensuing controversies are engagingly presented by David Jaher in *The Witch of Lime Street: Séance, Seduction, and Houdini in the Spirit World*. His prose brings the past to life, despite being weak when it comes to precise dates. The book seemed at first reading to be highly credulous, even though the details it presents, taken together,

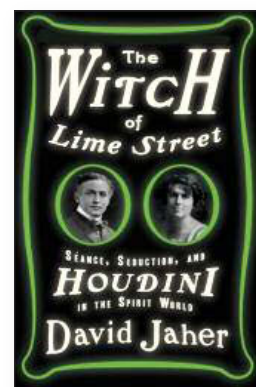
indicate consistent fraud by Margery.

Jaher divides his book into nine major sections and innumerable unnumbered subsections. The first quarter of the book sets the post-WWI stage, discussing the U.S. tours of two British spiritualist advocates, scientist Sir Oliver Lodge and writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and provides background material on magician Harry Houdini. Doyle inevitably clashes with Houdini, as he sees religion where the magician sees fraud. *Scientific American* magazine regularly ran articles on spiritualism, while a 1920 prize for the best short essay explaining Einstein's theory of relativity had boosted the magazine's circulation. These two strands combined in a November 1922 editorial meeting to discuss a séance contest. Ironically it was suggested by Doyle himself (72), who arranged sittings in England, at different times for Houdini, the *Scientific American* editor, and Margery. (Doyle corresponded both with the editor and with Margery's husband throughout the subsequent investigation). Jaher reproduces the contest announcement in facsimile (82), but does not tell precisely when or where it appeared.

Jaher then spends perhaps too much time detailing the early attempts at winning the prestige of an endorsement (and a \$2500 prize) by the magazine's committee of judges (a psychologist, a parapsychologist, a physicist, a writer, and Houdini). The *Scientific American* offices

were outfitted with testing equipment, some of it hidden, including a camera (designed to flash using electricity, not magnesium), a concealed microphone, a galvanometer, and hidden electrical contacts in the medium's chair that would reveal if she (or he) had secretly stood up (104). The latter is how the first serious contestant, Valiante, was exposed in May of 1923 (119). In October, the second, the Reverend Jesse Stuart, was literally caught with cards up her sleeve (141, 147). The third serious contestant was Nino Pecorarro, but when Houdini was granted permission to tie him with rope, Pecorarro's ghosts were also restrained.

Jaher then introduces us to Margery, who became the final, most famous, most controversial contestant, and justifiably the focus of the rest of the book. In contrast to most of the mediums tested, she (and her surgeon husband) were articulate, upper class, and never charged or accepted gifts for her séances, which added to her credibility—as did the couple's alleged surprise as they slowly discovered her mediumship throughout the spring of 1923. By the summer of 1923 she was giving séances for friends, and by November members of the *Scientific American* committee had initial sittings with her.



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Margery's fame made her an important subject: a German newspaper declared that spiritualism itself was on trial with her (241), the tests were covered in *The New York Times*, in Hearst newspapers (242), and the Boston press. Articles about her appeared in popular magazines such as *The Atlantic*, *Colliers*, *Time*, and *Life*. Sitters from around the world came to her Boston home (279, 400), and she held séances for scientist Charles Richet in Paris and the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in England. Even Bell Labs tested her (405).

Through the first half of 1924, *Scientific American* committee members participated in up to a hundred (a number I had difficulty finding) sittings with Margery, and investigators were mostly flummoxed, at least at first, by phenomena she produced. In darkness, red light, or full light, tables moved, a clock stopped to a time chosen by a sitter, mysterious lights floated in the air, and more. Skeptic Houdini's attendance at sittings was decisive, deducing fraud in his first sitting in July and stopping all phenomena in the final and controversial August sitting.

In February 1925, the *Scientific American* committee concluded that Margery had committed fraud (323), though Jaher is surprisingly unclear about whether this was announced in a newspaper or in *Scientific American* itself. Fraud was also the conclusion of subsequent investigations of a Harvard committee a year later, of the American Society for Psychical Research, and, unofficially, of parapsychologist J.B. Rhine (394). Significantly, a split between views about her powers fractured the American Society for Psychical Research (326-327) and probably caused the shift in parapsychological testing from the séance to the laboratory (396).

Frustratingly, Jaher never sums up either the case or the evidence for Margery's fraud. She did admit in one instance that information supposedly revealed by her dead brother had been previously provided to her by a living person, and conspiratorially requested that this breach be kept secret (233-234). A Harvard investigator confessed to helping her cheat in another séance, and late in her

life Margery apparently asked psychic Eileen Garrett for help in committing a fraud (404). There were accusations of bribery, and alcohol was often served at her séances. Investigators often stayed at her house. Jaher concludes that at least two of them had sexual relations with her (246, 341) and she apparently tried to seduce several others. One of the most consistent red flags: the crucial control of her right hand to limit cheating was "customarily" given to her husband (259).

The settings in which test séances were held also might provide circumstantial evidence for fraud. With characteristic ego, Houdini had exposed some of the *Scientific American* office's secret testing equipment (119, 141). So Margery's test séances were held elsewhere, mostly in her "architecturally complex" (160) home. Jaher's bibliography includes books by Proskauer and Rinn that detail the use of trapdoors or fake furniture by fraudulent mediums. However, use of such items was never proven in the Margery case.

Perhaps coincidentally, several examples of physical evidence of fraud by Margery are from the (second) Harvard investigation, which mostly did not take place in her home. Her "ectoplasm" upon closer examination appeared to be made of animal tissue (324). The discovery of the true identity of the owner of a fingerprint that Margery's "dead brother" had supposedly been leaving at séances cost her more credibility—in 1934 an investigator revealed that the fingerprint was that of her dentist (404). Margery died in 1941 of cirrhosis of the liver, a shadow of her former ebullient self.

Despite the evidence of fraud Jaher mostly seems credulous. Perhaps using the word "allegedly" in describing the events that happened in Margery's séances would have made the prose too cumbersome. Sentences such as "sitters... were communicating with a disembodied mind" (125) and "Sometimes Margery channeled an intruder that blocked [her dead brother's] normally clear signal" (279) are perhaps a fair description only of her sitters' perceptions. At other times Jaher's credulity will strike skeptics as over the top. For example, when he states that

two of the ladies at a séance were not "possible confederates" simply because of their social standing (210); or when he states, without evidence, that Margery couldn't whistle (127). Although Jaher's book includes an index, I could not find the word "fraud" or its synonyms in it.

Jaher rarely provides precise dates in the text. I deduced some of them with difficulty, but other crucial ones are not offered. Nor are there citations. He does list books (including an unpublished biography of Margery), archives (especially correspondence), and acknowledges persons consulted. Jaher points out that full footnotes would have made the book too long, but his refusal to mention the source of even some of the most significant or controversial points in the text is frustrating.

The serious researcher will therefore need to consult outside material. Many of the descriptions and quotations from Margery's séances so vividly recreated are also used in *The Secret Life of Houdini* (Atria, 2006), which Jaher does list, but he does not mention its companion volume, *The Secret Life of Houdini Laid Bare: Sources, Notes, and Additional Material* (Magic Words, 2007) which gives the citations to that crucial material. Surprisingly, Jaher also does not list Massimo Polidoro's *Final Séance: The Strange Friendship Between Houdini and Conan Doyle* (Prometheus, 2001), which discusses the Margery case with greater skepticism than Jaher offers.

Jaher's title, *The Witch of Lime Street*, comes from the *Colliers* article, in the form of a quote from Margery (328). His book sometimes reads more like a suspense novel when it includes material not related to the supernatural on topics such as the melodrama of betrayal among the players and the charges and countercharges between them. Supporters of psychic phenomena may see enough conflicting motives and unexplained individual phenomena to find *The Witch of Lime Street* inconclusive. Thus the perhaps apocryphal quotation from Margery's deathbed seems appropriate: "Why don't you guess, you'll all be guessing... for the rest of your lives." (410). **S**