



MESSAGES FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

As we prepare to don bat wings and witches hats for Halloween parties, **Elise Pitt** looks at the freakier real-life experiences of the paranormal.

Halloween has always been a holiday associated with mystery, superstition and the paranormal. While thought of predominantly as an American holiday, it actually began as a Celtic end-of-summer festival, during which people believed the boundary between the world of the living and the realm of the dead became blurred and ghosts returned to the earth.

Nowadays, we tend to associate Halloween with pumpkins, trick or treating and plastic skeletons, but the premise of being able to communicate with the dead still intrigues us.

Professor Richard Wiseman of Hertfordshire University in the UK, who has an international reputation for research into quirky areas of psychology, including deception, humour, luck and the paranormal, says about 10 per cent of the population reports experiencing a ghost.

And those who do are in good company. Hollywood starlet Michelle Williams has reportedly been visited by the ghost of her dead former partner Heath Ledger, not once, but twice. The first time she said she was awakened by strange noises and realised that her bedroom furniture was being moved around. She said she saw a shadowy figure, which she admitted scared her “half to death”. Ledger’s second visit was much more vivid and he actually spoke, telling her he was sorry for not being able to help raise their daughter Matilda.

Other celebrities who have reported ghostly encounters include Matthew McConaughey who has seen an old woman floating around his house who he has named Madame Blue; Liam Gallagher who was visited by the ghost of John Lennon; and Hugh Grant who heard the screams of a tormented spirit in

his Los Angeles home, and who he suspects may be the ghost of a former resident – Bette Davis.

But it’s not only celebrities who have had real-life encounters with the paranormal.

Sydney journalist Karina Machado interviewed more than 200 ordinary Australian women who have walked among the dead for her book *Spirit Sisters* (published by Hachette Australia, \$32.99).

Caroline Laurence describes her childhood in Dubbo as like “living in *The Exorcist*”.

Like many curious teenagers, Laurence dabbled with ouija boards and seances, but her interest turned into obsession and she started to hold seances twice daily.

One night, a murder victim came through. Jenny Black – her death dominated the media in the mid-80s – started to dominate Laurence’s seances.

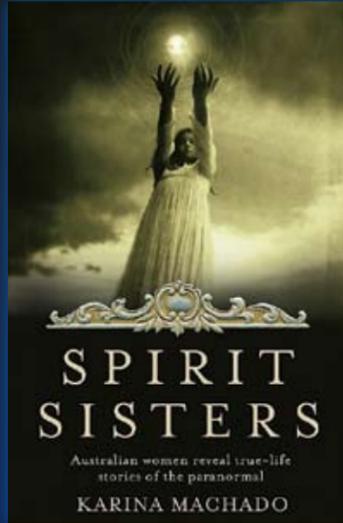
Later, Laurence realised it wasn’t actually the spirit of the murder victim, but rather a “pretender” trying to make itself familiar to the young Laurence. This intruder became attached to the sensitive teenager and started playing tricks on her.

Objects started to move by themselves. A clock would slide across the mantelpiece; the window would open; the temperature in Laurence’s room would change so suddenly from being warm to icy cold on a hot summer’s day in the outback that the windows would fog up. She started to hear people calling her name and feel as though someone was walking across her grave.

The eerie events came to a head one night when Laurence came home to an empty house; her mother at work and sister at her boyfriend’s place. As she walked towards her icy cold room, the stereo was blaring. Hands clapped over her ears, she tried to turn the volume down and then to turn the power off at the power point, only to realise it wasn’t plugged in.

She looked in the mirror and saw italic writing in a thick black substance spelling “Help Jenny”. It was written backwards, as though written from inside the mirror. Terrified, she fled to her friend Craig’s house, and returned with him a short time later. As they scrubbed the black substance off the mirror, a new word appeared: “PLEASE” in big capital letters.

The cutlery rattled, paintings fell off the wall, toys were



tossed off shelves. As Craig fled the room, closely followed by Laurence, the door slammed shut in her face and every light in the house went out. Screaming, she tried to open the door which had jammed. When she finally yanked it open the lights came back on but all her possessions had been rearranged – her dolls hung in a macabre puppet show from the light fitting. Later, they found a hangman’s noose on the back veranda. Laurence fled to Sydney a month later, never to return to her haunted bedroom.

Not all the women in Machado’s book had such terrifying experiences with the dead. Many have been contacted by deceased loved ones, such as South Australian grandmother Jill Sikorski, who used to smell her mother’s favourite cologne, 4711, for a long time after she died. She could even smell it at her daughter’s engagement party, where many of the guests also commented on it. “I think it was mum wanting to be there for my daughter’s big day,” she said.

When 37-year-old Sydney mum of three Deaneen Webster, hooked up the baby monitor to her computer to keep an eye on her two-month-old son, she didn’t expect to see her dead grandfather watching young Harry’s crib.

“A flash of light made me look at the screen, and I saw the blinds in my baby’s room whoosh open,” she said. “I saw a silhouette – like a negative – of a man standing by the crib. I could make out his trousers, shirt and glasses. He had a smile on his face and he was looking down. I could see his short grey hair and the back of his head – he was checking the newest member of the family.”

For some, a rational explanation can always be found for these weird and wonderful encounters. In *Spirit Sisters*, this comes from Sydney scientist Paul Willis, a broadcaster and presenter on ABC TV’s *Catalyst* and *Quantum* programs. Willis introduces the concept of Occam’s razor, which says that “if there are two competing hypotheses, the simplest is the most likely to be correct”. For example, is it more likely spirits are trying to communicate with us by knocking an object down, or that a rodent scuttled past it and tipped it over?

But Marie D. Jones, author of *PSilence: How New Discoveries in Quantum Physics and New Science May Explain the Existence of Paranormal*

Phenomena, says the human body is a “bioelectric entity” and this energy never dies, not even in death, but rather “simply changes form and transfers from one system to another”.

The jury is still out. Whether or not you believe in the afterlife, in spirits and ghosts who walk among the living, some of the firsthand accounts we’ve witnessed are compelling. They are not from the mouths of crushed velvet-wearing, incense-smelling gypsies who have seen them in a crystal ball. They

are accounts from well-known celebrities, and from ordinary Australian women. They could be your sister, your aunt, your neighbour or your best friend. And tomorrow, the next day or on Halloween, it could happen to you.

For her second book, Karina Machado is looking for firsthand experiences of living or working in a haunted place. If you have a story to share, please email karinamachado@optusnet.com.au.

SYDNEY'S MOST HAUNTED HAUNTS

- The Rocks
- Capitol Theatre
- Q Station (former Quarantine Station)
- Old Government House Parramatta
- Waverley Cemetery
- Darling Harbour
- Sydney Airport
- Castle Hill High
- Zoology Department – University of Sydney
- Picton tunnels

Up for a spooky tour? Visit paranormalaustralia.com/tours