

# Fortean *times*

THE JOURNAL OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

NOW IN ITS **26th** YEAR!

## IT'S A MIRACLE

Rome validates  
Lourdes cure

## BODY SNATCHERS

Wife replaced  
by robot

## GHOST BUSTED

Belgrave Hall  
spook exposed

# EXORCIST

the **REAL** case that inspired the movie



# FT 123 introducing this month's features

## THE HAUNTED BOY P34-40

### THE REAL-LIFE CASE THAT INSPIRED THE EXORCIST



Mark is the first investigator to have uncovered actual details of the original story that inspired film and book – he is also the first to speak to the 'possessed' child, now in his mid-60s. This article is exclusively adapted for FT by Bob Rickard from Mark's 18,000-word report in Mark Chorvinsky's *Strange Magazine*.

Mark found the sad story of a lonely, troubled boy who exploited the spiritualist credulities of his German Lutheran mother and grandmother. The pivotal 'first exorcism' – on which so much of *The Exorcist's* dramatically horrifying possession was based – turns out to have been a garbled retelling of a failed attempt to baptise the struggling boy. Subsequent storytellers and researchers saw only what they wanted to see, writes Mark – each manipulating the facts to fit their own agendas.

Mark writes that the story of 'Rob Doe' must rank as "one of the most influential examples of paranormal phenomena in history" and, for foretells, it is a significant example of the 'butterfly effect': From a simple beginning, it grew in the telling, inadvertently spawning movies, books, and

videos that have, in turn, influenced hundreds of 'copycat' cases around the world, leading to exorcism-styled assaults, mutilations, and even deaths (see our selection of fatal exorcisms on page 40).

Serious, widespread and far-reaching consequences of this scale show how imperative it is, in paranormal investigation, for care in researching primary sources of a story – as Mark demonstrates.



MARK OPSASNICK

Mark Opasnick was born 20 January 1962 in Washington DC, graduating from the University of Maryland in 1984. He has been a contributor to *Strange Magazine* since 1987 and for the past decade has worked as a case manager for the Montgomery County (Maryland) Department of Health and Human Services. A cultural historian with numerous published articles on unexplained phenomena to his credit, Opasnick has also authored two books on rock and roll music, *Capitol Rock* (1997) and *Washington Rock and Roll: A Social History* (1998). He resides in Prince George's County, Maryland.

FOR DETAILS OF SUBSCRIPTIONS,  
HOW TO ENTER  
COMPETITIONS, HOW TO SUBMIT  
MATERIAL AND OTHER INFORMATION FOR  
NEW READERS, SEE PAGE 60.

**SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES**  
01454 620070

**MERCHANDISE & BOOK ORDERS/MAIL ORDER**  
01789 490215

**GENERAL FT ENQUIRIES**  
01771 565 3130

**PICTURE ENQUIRIES and SYNDICATION**

Express Newspapers syndication 0171 922 7906

occasionally use material that has been placed in the public domain. It is not always possible to identify the right holder. If you claim credit for something we've published, we'll be pleased to make acknowledgement.

**YOU CAN REACH FT ON THE INTERNET**  
www.forteanimes.com

**THE GANG OF FORT**

**EDITORS**

BOB RICKARD, PAUL SIEVING

**MANAGING EDITOR**

JANE WATKINS

**ART DIRECTOR**

ETIENNE GILFILLAN

**PICTURE RESEARCH**

CHRISTINE WOOD

**CONTRIBUTING EDITORS**

STEVE MOORE, IAN SIMMONS,  
JOE MCNALLY, MARK PICKINGTON,

**WEB WRANGLER**

PETE WOODHEAD

**RESIDENT CARTOONIST**

HUNT EMERSON

**FORTEAN STUDIES EDITOR**

STEVE MOORE

**PUBLISHER**

JOHN BROWN PUBLISHING LTD,  
THE NEW BOATHOUSE,  
136-142 BRAMLEY ROAD,  
LONDON W10 6SR, UK.

TEL: 0171 565 3000 / FAX: 0171 565 3053

**GROUP PUBLISHER MIKE DASH**

**GROUP ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER RICHARD MERGLER**

**CIRCULATION & SUBSCRIPTIONS MANAGER**

KERRY FITZMAURICE

**CIRCULATION & SUBSCRIPTIONS EXECUTIVE**

KAREN WYATT

**MERCHANDISE MANAGER TERESA STOW**

**MERCHANDISE ASSISTANT KIRAN SHARMA**

**PRODUCTION MANAGER DEBBIE BICKNELL**

**ADVERTISING ENQUIRIES**

FAX: 0171 565 3055

**ADVERTISING MANAGER ION LARGE**

TEL: 0171 565 3199

johnl@johnbrown.co.uk

**CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING JAMES LYON**

TEL: 0171 565 3152

jamesl@johnbrown.co.uk

**AD DESIGN**

KEITH JACKSON, RACHAEL KNAGGS

**AD PRODUCTION**

ZOE GRAY

**ORIGNATION**

GRAPHIC IDEAS STUDIOS

**PRINTED BY**

ET HERON

**DISTRIBUTION**

DISTRIBUTED IN UK BY COMAG

Taverstock Road, West Drayton, Middlesex UB7 3QE

TEL: 01895 444055 / FAX: 01895 433602

COLO SHIP AND SPECIALITY STORES DISTRIBUTION BY VIZ

omic Distribution, PO BOX UE, Newcastle upon Tyne,

NE99 1LE. TEL: 0191 281 5629

Fax: 0191 281 1449

outside USA by Eastern News Distributors Inc 2020

Superior St, Sandusky, Ohio 44870.

TEL: (212) 649 4484 / FAX: (212) 265 6239

US readers can discover their nearest FT stockist by

ringing Eastern News toll-free on (800) 221 3148.

**STANDARD SUBSCRIPTION RATES**

30 per annum (12 issues); EU £37.50/US\$70; REST OF

THE WORLD \$45/US\$90

**US POSTMASTER**

Fortean Times is published every month for

\$59.40 per annum. Second Class postage is paid at

Champlain, NY and additional mailing offices.

Please send address changes to:

Fortean Times, 3330 Pacific Avenue, Suite 204,

Virginia Beach VA 23451-2983, USA

Member of the Audit Bureau of Circulations.

Printed in the UK.

ISSN: 0958-5899

© Fortean Times, April 1999

# editorial



## better the devil you know...

**W**elcome to the brighter, clearer, new look Fortean Times. This extensive redesign has enabled us to bring FT up to date and to add extra value for readers old and new. Let us know what you think. We also have an exclusive cover mount of *The Book of UnConventional Wisdom*, a taster for this year's UnConvention.

Usually the huge variety of material in each issue comes together courtesy of the mysterious random processes that play havoc with the best laid plans. Occasionally, even we are surprised when several different elements come together, unplanned, to hint at a theme of the month; this issue it seems to be exorcism. How it must gall the rationalists that, at the close of this century, superstition and credulity are as strong an influence on the average mind as they were in the last century.

By the time you read this, Vatican officials of the Congregation will be approving the beatification of Padre Pio, the Capuchin priest famous for his stigmata (marks of Christ's crucifixion), who died in 1968. One more miracle, and he will be eligible for canonisation – full-blown sainthood. With rather tasteless timing, the disgraced former archbishop of Lusaka, Monsigneur Emmanuel Milingo, has likened himself to Padre Pio – see page 12. Where Pio was, by all accounts, a humble man, Milingo is a living embarrassment to the Vatican having been accused of witchcraft (he was exonerated) and defying an official order not to hold his notorious 'mass exorcisms' in the city of Rome.

Milingo's exorcism ceremonies resemble African and voodoo rites, featuring trance-dancing and fits by the 'possessed' while the surrounding assembled chant and sing... a world away from the 'stiff' formal confrontations of mainstream Christian exorcisms. The equivalent Catholic ritual has

remained virtually unchanged since it was formulated in 1614, but now the Vatican has announced a revision of those standing rules on driving out demons from the possessed – see page 13. The modern view from St Peter's is to do away with the scary images of evil personified, describing them in ways more compatible with psychology and psychiatry.

The Vatican exorcists stress that the Devil can disguise demonic possession as a mental illness but, to anyone outside the faith, this sounds like special pleading and confuses any distinction between the mentally ill and the possessed.

We have noted a disturbing increase in 'unofficial' exorcisms (including non-Christian ones) that 'go wrong', resulting in great physical harm and even death to frightened victims – see page 40.

Just as we can see some roots of the UFO phenomenon in early science fiction, it is now difficult to picture a possessed person without thinking of the demonic images inspired by the 1973 movie *The Exorcist* and its many imitators (from the *Amityville* series to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). On page 34, Mark Opsasnick notes the pivotal influence of *The Exorcist* and describes his investigation into the claim that it was based on a real case.

Mark spent years searching through old phone books, school yearbooks, housing records and local newspapers for leads to the troubled family and the actual case he uncovered was substantially different from that misleadingly sold in the press and books on the subject. The *Washington Post* (30 March 1999) said "even veteran reporters could learn a lot about the craft of reporting from Opsasnick's account". Hear, hear!



**COVER IMAGE**  
RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE  
RETOUCHING ETIENNE GILFILLAN

*Paul Sieving*

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'FORTEAN'?

**FORTEAN TIMES** is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort.

Throughout his life, Fort was sceptical about scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data was ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away (which is quite different from explaining a thing).

Fort, born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He

marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

His dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate state between extremes. He had ideas of the universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena.

He coined the term "teleportation" and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."



# the haunted

# BOY

One of the most successful films ever made from a best-selling book, *The Exorcist*, is widely believed to have been based on the true story of the demonic possession of an adolescent. Detailed research by **Mark Opsasnick** uncovered layer upon layer of factual error to reveal the truth about 'the haunted boy'.



MOVIESTORE COLLECTION

## REGAN PUKES, SPINS AND CURSES

**t**o this day, *The Exorcist* stands as one of the most horrifying movies ever made – a vivid portrayal of an epic struggle between human lives and demonic forces. From the moment it was released by Warner Brothers on 26 December 1973, overexcited media discussion focused on the shocking depiction of an innocent child possessed and corrupted by the Devil. Almost as disturbing was the revelation that Blatty had based the story on a supposedly real event that took place in the Washington DC area back in 1949.

Adapted from William Peter Blatty's best-selling 1971 novel of the same name, the film was nominated in 1974 for 10 Academy Awards (including Best Picture) and was the recipient of two: Best Screenplay Based On Material From Another Medium – William Peter Blatty – and Best Sound. Produced by Blatty himself and directed by William (*The French Connection*) Friedkin, it is the harrowing tale of diabolically possessed 12-year-old Regan MacNeil (portrayed by Linda Blair) and the ensuing battle waged by her mother Chris MacNeil (Ellen Burstyn), Father Karras (Jason Miller) and the chief exorcist Father Merrin (Max von Sydow) to free her soul from the Devil's grasp.

Set in the Georgetown area of Washington DC, the movie gained notoriety for its gut-wrenching scenes; Regan pukes, curses, spins her head around and commits various grotesque acts of indecency and blasphemy. Mixed in with her ill-mannered behaviour are sensational special effect realisations of levitation and other supernatural phenomena designed to send the weak of heart and stomach heading for the exits. *The Exorcist* is a truly modern cultural phenomenon; first a best-selling novel, then one of the highest grossing movies of all time, with video sales and rentals still bringing home healthy sums.

Early reports that Blatty based his 1971 novel on a story of demonic possession that he learned of while a student at Georgetown University in 1949 were confirmed by his own book-length account of the creative process behind the story, *William Peter Blatty On The Exorcist From Novel To Film* (1974). He writes that he was a 20-year-old English Literature major when he read an article in the *Washington Post* (20 August 1949) by Bill Brinkley. It told of a 14-year-old boy, of Mount Rainier, Maryland, who had been freed from a tormenting devil by a Catholic priest earlier that year.

BOTH IMAGES: RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE; PHOTO MANIPULATION: STENNE GIBELIAN





DEMON: (Above) Regan levitates. (Below) Father Hughes.

# IT WAS GREY, DRAB AND LOOKED LIKE A HAUNTED HOUSE

Blatty went on to become a screenwriter-author – he scripted *A Shot In The Dark*; *John Goldfarb, Please Come Home*; and *What Did You Do In The War, Daddy?* among others – but the notion of demonic possession stuck in his mind. He began writing *The Exorcist* in 1969, drawing upon the material he had discovered some 20 years earlier, and finished during the summer of 1971.

In his book, he tells of writing to the priest who conducted the actual 1949 exorcism and learning of a diary kept by an assisting priest, recording the daily events of the on-going exorcism – see diary panel. The exorcist refused Blatty's request to see the diary so, to ease the priest's anxiety, Blatty changed his central character from a 14-year-old boy to a 12-year-old girl. Eventually, Blatty gained access to one of a number of copies of the diary and based much of his book and movie on its contents.

Dozens of newspaper and magazine articles since have tried to tell the 'true' story behind *The Exorcist*, as have books, television specials and video documentaries – notably the 1993 book *Possessed: The True Story Of An Exorcism* by Thomas B Allen and the 1997 Henninger Media video *In The Grip Of Evil*. Most of these published works are poorly referenced and offer contradictory and even erroneous material. So much has been embellished and fabricated that it has become nearly impossible to differentiate fact and fiction. The



absence of basic investigation is only thing that unites their authors; not one had ever actually talked with the possessed boy or his neighbours.











Consider the widely-held belief that the story behind *The Exorcist* took place at 3210 Bunker Hill Road, Mount Rainier, Maryland. In 1992, I spent many hours canvassing this smallish working-class community, researching the life of blues-rock guitar great Roy Buchanan for my book *Capitol Rock* (1997). Almost without exception, the old-timers I talked to insisted that the haunted boy had never actually lived in Mount Rainier. Not one person knew either the boy's name or the names of any of his family members.

The address has been a vacant lot since March 1962, when the house burned down, not through supernatural causes but as an authorised training exercise for firemen from several neighbouring boroughs. Since the early Eighties, it has been the hangout of local youths who erect wooden crosses, drink and yell through the night until police chase them away.

Over time, I established that the real occupants of 3210 Bunker Hill Road had never had children, hence the haunted boy could never have lived there. This was corroborated by long-time neighbours who recall no children and no talk of anything unusual at all about the house or the people in it. Peggy Lanahan, for example, who attended piano lessons in the house as a girl, told me: "It was grey and drab [...] and looked like a haunted house. There was never any talk of a possessed boy living there."

Robert Landolt, who grew up in the area, said "You know, that was just a strange house and we called it 'the haunted house' because in the Fifties it would be empty for long periods of time and it was the only house in the neighbourhood that was like that."

When I tracked down some of firemen who were present at the burning of the house, I was told by retired fire chief Ralph Collins, 82: "As I remember, that house was all boarded up and in bad shape and looked kind of spooky and the city of Mount Rainier was disgusted with it. It was set up through the University of Maryland Fire School. No-one ever said anything about it being the house where *The Exorcist* happened [...] It was just an old house that had to go." The rest said said the same thing. Like many locals, the first they heard about the house being the location of *The Exorcist* story was after the movie's release.

the exorcist	the possessed	the house	the exorcists
the film	 Regan MacNeil, 12 (Linda Blair)	 Georgetown, Washington DC	 Father Merrin (Max Von Sydow)
the "real" case	 "Roland Doe", 14	 Vacant lot at 3210 Bunker Hill Road, Mount Rainier, MD	 Father Hughes  Father Bober
the REAL case	 "Rob Doe", 14 is one of these highschool boys	 3807 40th Avenue, Garden City, MD	 Father Bowdern

# finding the **identity** of the BOY

Armed with Rob Doe's true identity, Mark Opsasnick visited the neighbourhood where he had grown up. Speaking to people who had known him well, he found quite a different story.

Once I had established the true identity of Rob Doe, through straightforward, if time-consuming, detective work, everything else quickly fell into place. In all, I taped interviews with 102 individuals; specifically, I located and interviewed people who resided in the 3800 block of 40th Avenue in 1949. Many were friends of Rob Doe, having gone to school with him at Cottage City Elementary and Bladensburg Junior High – some were aware that *The Exorcist* was based on events that happened to him and some were not.

I found considerable evidence of the family's involvement in Cottage City community life, including their regular bridge evenings. The Doe family frequently played cards with some neighbours named Kagey and I eventually located their son Alvin, now a dentist in Southern Virginia. He told me: "I know that [Rob] somehow [...] became 'sick' and [...] he and his mother went out to St Louis for 'treatment'. They were Lutheran and at some point there was a conversion to Catholicism. I remember during that time his father telling my father something about how [Rob] was acting funny or strange or something ... 'Possession' was not used at all."

Another valuable confirmation came from one of three brothers who were well known for their community involvement. 'JC' said his younger brother (BC) had been Rob Doe's best friend; they were born just days apart. "They were virtually inseparable," he said. "They were loners who found each other and they caused a lot of mischief. I attended the local premiere of that video [*In the Grip Of Evil*] and they exaggerated so many things that happened. One of the things that they tried to emphasise in that show was the thing about the boy spitting. Well, [Rob and BC] could spit with great accuracy up to 10ft (3m). It was a common thing [...] Another thing was with the

bed moving about. In those days the beds had wire springs and were on wheels and it was not too hard at all to make the bed bounce and move about."

I asked JC directly if he thought the boy was actually possessed by the Devil, and he responded: "No, I don't think he was ever possessed. I think it was psychological [...] They were German Lutherans and he was an only child and I think the grandmother is actually the central figure. She played a very influential role in all of this. You had



**BAD BOY:** "Rob Doe" seemed just like the rest of the class in this photo. Which one is he?

this Old World religious superstition and the mother got caught up in it and the father just kind of stayed in the background. I think [the father] could see what was going on which is why he is never mentioned. The true story is much more intriguing from a psychological point of view [...] You had these two mischief makers [who] were trying to outdo each other."

Eventually, I spoke to BC himself. He gave me an intense and detailed description of his childhood relationship with Rob Doe in Cottage City, most of which has to remain confidential. I can say that BC described Rob as an only child with a far from normal childhood – smothered by his obsessively religious mother and grandmother, both of whom held a deep interest in spiritualism

and ouija boards; shunned by his classmates at school; prone to tantrums and even violence towards his family and his few friends; exhibiting cruel and at times even sadistic behaviour towards other children or animals. It was evident that elements of the alleged possession had always been there, going back years and years. Modern-era psychiatrists might describe him as 'dysfunctional'.

BC told me frankly: "He was a mean bastard. We were together all the time and we used to fight all the time." Overcoming his initial reluctance, BC told me of the last time he saw Rob Doe in school. "We were in eighth grade, it was the 1948-1949 school year [...] He was sitting in a chair and [...] it looked like he was shaking the desk. The desk was shaking and vibrating extremely fast and I remember the teacher yelling at him to stop it and I remember he kind of yelled 'I'm not doing it' and they took him out of class [...] I don't know if he was doing it or what was doing it."

No journalist before me had ever identified or spoken with Rob Doe. While I felt it was imperative that I establish some type of contact with him, I realised that, in all likelihood, an interview with him would prove anticlimactic. The haunted boy now resides on the East Coast of the USA. When I called Rob Doe himself answered. Our conversation was brief and he gruffly spoke to me in a very deep, gravelly voice. He stated that he had seen *The Exorcist* but did not offer his take on it. He seemed very alarmed that I had contacted him and told me there would be no co-operation on his part whatsoever. He would not confirm that he was the subject of this investigation and firmly stated he did not want me to call him back again ever. His response was typical of someone who did not want to be reminded of some embarrassing event from his past.

The belief that the haunted boy had lived in that house, then, was nothing more than an urban myth, spurred on by some irresponsible journalists. However, during my research, several Mount Rainier residents told me, confidently, that the haunted boy lived in Cottage City, a small semi-isolated community just a short distance away.

It was clear that a fresh, thorough investigation was needed to counteract the erroneous information published since 1949. In October 1997, I decided to establish the facts of the case without regard to the question of whether (or not) the boy had actually been possessed. I wanted to determine who the boy was and where he grew up; I wanted to talk to him about his experiences and interview his boyhood friends or his family. None of this had ever been done before.

Most elements of the modern legend of the haunted boy of Mount Rainier can be traced back to the handful

of news reports that broke the story on 10 August 1949 and shortly after, which took to referring to the "ghost plagued family" as 'Mr. and Mrs. John Doe' and their son 'Roland'. In essence, they tell of a boy, 13 or 14 years old, who underwent a first exorcism at Georgetown University Hospital conducted by local priest Father E Albert Hughes. In a rage, the boy slashed Fr Hughes' arm with a bedspring and the traumatised priest was said to have suffered a nervous breakdown later and a premature death. A final and successful rite of exorcism was undertaken by Father William Bowdern at Alexian Brothers Hospital in St Louis, Missouri, in the spring of 1949. During the rite the youngster would break into violent tantrums of screaming and cursing, sometimes using Latin phrases. The proceedings climaxed, apparently, when the boy had a vision of St Michael driving off the Devil; then normalcy returned.

After considerable research I managed to trace and speak to the boy himself, some of his childhood friends

## HE CUT THE PRIEST WITH A BED SPRING

# THE DIARY

ONE OF THE PRIMARY DOCUMENTS IN THE CASE IS THE MYSTERIOUS DIARY ATTRIBUTED TO FATHER RAYMOND BISHOP, ONE OF THE ST LOUIS EXORCISTS. BUT HOW RELIABLE IS IT?

**A**s an alleged chronicle of what happened to the haunted boy, the 'diary' kept by Father Raymond Bishop, who assisted Father William Bowdern during the final exorcism, is a key source document. It was a copy of this diary that provided many of the details for Blatty's novel and film. It also formed the basis of Thomas Allen's book *Possessed* which, in turn, was adapted for the TV documentary, and is referenced by most of the later discussions.

However, it is not an actual diary, as Father Bishop did not arrive on the scene or meet any family members until 9 March 1949, almost two months after the initial symptoms occurred; this renders much of his reported background information as hearsay.

More seriously, Father Bishop does not always make it clear who actually witnessed the events described. He often fails to mention when the priests are in the room, when they are absent, and when the information comes secondhand from the boy's mother. The possibility of fraudulent activity or psychosomatic illness is neither considered nor investigated, nor is the first exorcism attempt by Father Hughes at Georgetown University Hospital mentioned. Together, these factors make the diary unreliable, yet so much ques-

tionable material has been culled from it to be enshrined in the modern and baseless legend. Here are some summary extracts...

## 15 January 1949

Dripping noise heard in grandmother's bedroom by the boy and his grandmother. A picture of Christ on the wall shook. Scratching noises were heard under the floor boards and for 10 consecutive days. After three days of silence, the boy heard "squeaking shoes" on his bed that continued for six consecutive nights.

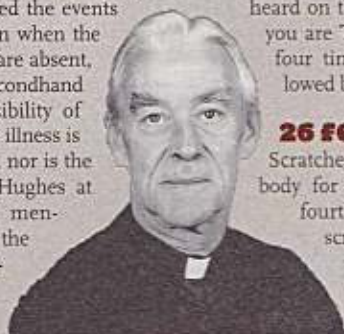
## 26 January 1949

At one point Mrs Doe asked: "If you are Tillie, knock three times." Waves of air began striking the grandmother, Mrs Doe, and Rob and three knocks were heard on the floor. Mrs Doe again queried, "If you are Tillie, tell me positively by knocking four times." Four knocks were heard, followed by claw scratchings on Rob's mattress.

## 26 February 1949

Scratches or markings appeared on the boy's body for four consecutive nights. After the fourth night words formed, seemingly scratched on by claws.

**WITNESS: Father Halloran assisted Father Bowdern in the exorcism.**



**CLAW MARKS APPEAR ON THE BOY'S BODY FOR FOUR NIGHTS**

and some of the priests involved in the proceedings – see panel. Rather than present the whole confused legend and then set about refuting it, I'll here set out the sequence of events as far as I have been able to establish them – the supporting details can be found in my full report in *Strange Magazine* #20 or at *Strange's* website: [www.strangemag.com](http://www.strangemag.com).

**R**ob Doe – as I prefer to call him – was born on 1 June 1935, making him around 13 when the exorcisms were conducted. The Doe family were German Lutherans and lived with the boy's grandmother who barely spoke English.

We know that, in January 1949, members of the family – probably led by Rob's mother and grandmother – began experimenting with a ouija board. The disturbances began around 18 January; scratching noises came from the walls, the boy's bed would shake violently and objects (such as fruit and pictures) would jump to the floor in the boy's presence. Rob – if he was suspected at all – claimed to be possessed by an "invisible entity". It is significant (from the diary entries) that Mrs Doe suspected that there was a connection between the strange events and the death of 'Aunt Tillie', a spiritualist who had introduced the family to the ouija board. At various points throughout this ordeal, Mrs Doe attempted to communicate with Aunt Tillie, apparently alternating the beliefs that the problems with her son were either the work of the Devil or their departed relative.

The family agreed to let Rob spend a night (17 February) at the home of their local priest – the Reverend Luther Miles Schulze, pastor of St Stephen's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Washington DC – so he could observe the boy. Despite his scepticism, Fr Schulze told of hearing vibrating sounds from the boy's bed and scratching sounds on the wall. During the course of the night, he allegedly witnessed a heavy armchair (in which the boy sat) tip over seemingly on its own and a pallet of blankets on which the boy lay inexplicably move around the room. He called in the family doctor, who prescribed phenobarbital for the whole family.

My investigation led me to conclude that the mother made the initial contacts – she took the kid to the rectory and later to the Georgetown University Hospital – and not

## THE EXORCIST: Father Bowdern

Father Hughes as the legend has it. "She's the one who gave Father Hughes all the information," said Father Bober to me later.

A source verified for me that Rob Doe was admitted to Georgetown University Hospital under his real name on the morning of Monday, 28 February 1949 and released three days later.

Despite what is written in *Possessed*, there is no evidence that Father Hughes was ever suffering theological doubts or confusion at all about this situation – (see exorcists panel). In fact, there is no written record of the alleged exorcism attempt at Georgetown University Hospital (except for the frustrated attempt to baptise Rob, mentioned in the diary).





## late FEB – early march 1949

Mrs Doe claimed many phenomena happened: blessed candles were extinguished by a flying comb, fruit flew across the room, a kitchen table turned over, food moved off a table, a coat and its hanger flew across the room, a Bible landed at Rob's feet, and a rocker in which Rob sat spun around.

Rob was removed from school because his desk moved around on the schoolroom floor.

An attempt was made to baptise Rob during a three-and-a-half day stay at Georgetown University Hospital – he responded with rage.

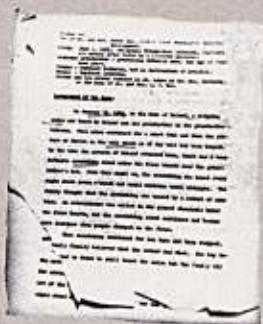
The phenomena continued when the boy was taken to Normandy, Missouri, during the first week of March 1949, where relatives were said to have witnessed the skin brandings.

## 9 MARCH 1949

Father Raymond J Bishop of St Louis University was called in (for the first time) and witnessed the scratching on the boy's body and the motion of the mattress.

## 11 MARCH 1949

Father Bowdern (the exorcist) arrived. He read out the Novena prayer of St Francis Xavier, blessed the boy with a relic (a piece of bone from the forearm of St Francis Xavier) and fixed a relic-encrusted crucifix under the boy's pillow. The relatives and Fathers Bowdern and Bishop departed. Soon afterward, a loud noise was heard in Rob's room and five relatives rushed to the scene. They found that a large book case had moved about, a bench had been turned over, and the crucifix had been moved to the edge of the bed. The shaking of



HELL: A page allegedly from the 'diary'.

Rob's mattress came to a halt only after the relatives yelled, "Aunt Tillie, stop!"

## 16 MARCH 1949

Archbishop Joseph E Ritter gave Father Bowdern permission to perform the formal rite of exorcism, which he begins this night, assisted by Father Bishop and Walter Halloran.

## late MARCH – early April 1949

Throughout the ongoing ritual, Rob is moved back and forth between the home of his aunt in Normandy, a nearby rectory and the Hospital in St Louis.

## 18 APRIL 1949

As the exorcism continued, Father Bowdern forced Rob to wear a chain of medals and hold a crucifix. Rob's demeanour changed; he calmly asked questions about the Latin prayer. Bowdern demanded to know who the demon was and when he would depart. Rob responded with a tantrum and screamed that he was one of the fallen angels. Bowdern kept up his recitations until, near midnight, Rob unexpectedly interrupted. In a new masculine voice Rob said: "Satan! Satan! I am St Michael! I command you, Satan, and the other evil spirits to leave this body, in the name of Dominus, immediately! Now! Now! Now!" Rob had one last spasm then fell quiet. "He is gone," said the voice. Rob later told Bowdern he had seen a vision of St Michael holding a flaming sword. Twelve days later he left Missouri and returned to a relatively normal life in Maryland.

So what really happened? I have shown that Father Walter Halloran – the sole living eyewitness to the St Louis exorcism attempts – maintains that he did not witness any supernatural behaviour by Rob Doe: no strange foreign languages (other than mimicked Latin), no changes in tone of voice, no prodigious strength, no excessive vomiting or urinating. To top it off, he is uncertain about the nature of the markings on the boy's body. The credibility of the important diary has been called into question.

Personally, I do not believe Rob Doe was possessed. There is no question there was something wrong with Rob Doe prior to January 1949, something that modern psychiatry might have addressed better. There is simply too much evidence indicating that, as a boy, he had serious emotional problems stemming from his home life. There is not one shred of hard evidence to support the notion of demonic possession. The facts show that he was a spoiled and disturbed only child with a very overprotective mother and a non-responsive father (sources close to the family told me he did not believe the boy was possessed).

To me his behaviour was indicative of a lonely youth who desperately wanted out of Bladensburg Junior High School at any cost. Throwing tantrums was the answer. He was rewarded by having a collection of priests (who had no previous exorcism experience) dotting over him as he lay strapped to a bed. His response was that of any normal child – he reacted with rage; he wanted out.

Each of the parties involved in this case approached it from its own frame of reference. To psychiatrists, Rob suffered from mental illness; to priests this was a case of demonic possession; to writers and producers

this was a great story to exploit for profit. Those involved saw what they were trained to see. Each purported to look at the facts but just the opposite was true; in actuality they manipulated the facts and emphasised information that fitted their own agendas.

The story of Rob Doe went on to spawn movies, books, and videos, and influenced hundreds of 'copycat' cases around the world, leading to exorcism-styled assaults, mutilations, and even deaths. Consequences of this scale make it imperative, in paranormal investigation, for close scrutiny of the initial accounts and providers of information. In this instance, the primary sources muddled the picture by embellishing the story when facts were uncertain. [7]

## RESOURCES

### RECOMMENDED READING

#### KEY BOOKS ON THIS SUBJECT

- Exorcising Devils** Dom Robert Petitpierre (1976)
- Witch Children** Hans Sebald (1995)
- Possession and Exorcism** Hans Naegeli-Osjord (1988)

### RECOMMENDED VIEWING

#### KEY VIDEOS ON THIS SUBJECT

- The Exorcist** (1999)
- In the Grip of Evil** (1999)

### RECOMMENDED SURFING

#### KEY WEBSITE ON THIS SUBJECT

- [alapadre.net/exorcism.html](http://alapadre.net/exorcism.html)  
Link site for history & doctrine of exorcism

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?



This article was adapted from the original in *Strange Magazine* no. 20. Sections cited from that original are copyright 1998, *Strange Magazine*.

Subscriptions to *Strange* for four issues cost £17 to the UK and \$21.95 to the US.

Cheques should be made out to Mark Chorvinsky; Visa/Mastercard accepted.

*Strange Magazine*, Box 2246, Rockville, MD 20847, USA.  
Email: [strange1@strange.com](mailto:strange1@strange.com)

# FATAL exorcisms

Paul Sieveking looks through the FT archives and finds that exorcism can be dangerous...

## crucifix stuffing

MARIO GARCIA, FROM Pawtucket, Rhode Island, punctured his 47-year-old mother-in-law's oesophagus, when he jammed two 8in (20cm) steel crucifixes down her throat during an exorcism on 31 March 1996. Garcia, 31, was screaming "The Devil is inside her!" when police arrived to find the woman on the front porch, blood pouring from her mouth. She was in critical condition, but the absence of subsequent reports suggests she survived. *Pawtucket (RI) Times, [AP] 3 April 1996.*

PAUL JAMES MARTIN, a 25-year-old Maori from Auckland, forced a crucifix and a piece of wood up the nose of his girlfriend, Carolyn Shea, with such force that it entered her brain. She was critically ill, but was expected to survive. The attack took place in December 1997 after Shea called in a Catholic priest to perform an exorcism. Martin was supported during his trial by the Maori victim and several Maori Christian priests who said they believed he had been under the influence of an evil spirit or *makutu*. The New Zealand High Court made legal history by accepting this reasoning and let Martin off with a two-year suspended sentence. *[AFP] D.Telegraph, 24 Mar 1998.*

## expelling djinns

MOUNA RAI, 47, a Sunni Muslim teacher from Syria, beat Farida Patel, 22, of Ilford, east London, with a plastic vacuum cleaner pipe and a walking stick for over five hours, interspersed with readings from the Koran, on 8 December 1993, to rid her of *djinns* that were said to possess her. The beating continued the next day, with Rai jumping up and down on her stomach and chest, fracturing nine ribs. She died after four hours. *Times, 12 Oct; D.Telegraph, 26 Oct, 25+26 Nov, 21 Dec; D.Mail, 12 Oct, 26 Nov; Scotsman, Independent, 26 Nov, 21 Dec; Guardian, 12+21+26 Dec 1994; D.Telegraph, 20 Jan 1995.*

OTHER FATAL EXORCISMS of Muslims include that of Louise Lardjourne, a 19-year-old of Algerian descent in Roubaix, northern France, in July 1994; a mother killed by her daughters in Cairo the following month; and a 10-year-old girl somewhere in Egypt in March 1996. Egyptian faith healers killed 47 people and injured another 98 in 1995 by beating them to drive out evil spirits. *[AFP] 4 July 1994 [AFP] 13 Sept 1994, 1 Jan 1996; [R] 5 Dec 1994, 22 Mar 1996.*

## suffer the children

JANICE GIBSON, 33, joined the fundamentalist Apostolic Church in the small town

of Inglewood in New Zealand's North Island in 1993. Some months later, she declared she was God and that demons lurked in her family, a delusion shared by her husband, Lindsay. On 17 May 1994, she slapped her two-year-old daughter Emily on the face for five or 10 minutes to beat the Devil out of her. The next day, Janice decided her son Dane, 12, was the Devil incarnate and ordered Lindsay to hold him down while she exorcised him. She took a broken concrete block and hit her son repeatedly on the head as he screamed for help, pleading that he believed. He died shortly afterwards. *[R] 26 Nov 1994.*

OTHER CHILDREN KILLED in the course of family exorcisms in recent years include



FATAL PRAYER: Vivian Miranda being arrested for murder.

Kira Canhoto, a two-year-old girl in Kitchener, Ontario, forced to drink huge quantities of water by her mother and grandmother in January 1995; Breeann Spickard, five, beaten to death in Los Angeles by her mother and friends in July 1996; Amy Burney, five, of New York, forced to drink a poisonous potion by her mother and grandmother in April 1997; and Sylvester Orieso, also five, strangled by her mother in New Cross, South London, in November 1997. *Victoria (BC) Times-Colonist, 21 Jan 1995; 11+27 Jan, 13 April 1996; NY Daily News, 19 May; USA Today, 20 May 1997; Los Angeles Times, 15 Oct 1997; Scotsman, 12 Sept 1998.*

## santeria in Long Island

CHARITY MIRANDA, A 17-year-old cheerleader, was suffocated to death on 18 January 1998 with a plastic bag at her home in Sayville, Long Island, by her mother Vivian, 39, and sister Serena, 20, after an unsuccessful exorcism to free her of demons. Police found the women chanting and praying over the prostrate body. Not long before, they had embraced *santeria*, a Cuban variation of voodoo involving animal sacrifice. Charity resisted pressure to join, confessing to friends that she was horrified by the change in her staid,

white, upper-middle-class mother. In the last week of her life she had flu and lost 10lbs (4.5kg), which her mother interpreted as demonic possession. Charity's sister Elizabeth told police that Charity had been "consumed by a demon" for several months and had agreed to the exorcism. In March 1999, Vivian Miranda escaped trial on the grounds of insanity. *NY Daily News, NY Post, 20+21 Jan; Times, 21 Jan 1998; [AP] 7 Mar 1999.*

## other cases

LEON JACKO, A 19-year-old Ojibway Indian, was acquitted in Ontario in May 1997 of manslaughter in the bludgeoning death of Ron Thompson, 45, who was reputed to be a bearwalker – a powerful, shape-shifting demon that uses sorcery to trigger sickness in people and even kill them. The judge accepted evidence that Jacko believed he was defending himself from Thompson when he hit him with a ceremonial walrus bone the size of a baseball bat on 30 June 1995 at the Sheguiandah reserve on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, where both men lived. *Victoria (BC) Times-Colonist, 22+23+24+29+30 May; Toronto Globe & Mail, 30+31 May 1997.*

SIX MEMBERS OF the United Pentecostal Church of Brazil whipped and stamped to death three adults and three children they believed to be possessed by the devil. The killings took place on 14 November 1998 in a remote rubber plantation on the Amazon, 1,860 miles (3,000km) northwest of São Paulo, when the pastor, Francisco Bezerra de Moraes, announced during a sermon that he could hear voices from Jesus ordering a former leader of the group, Francisco Oliveira de Franca, and all his followers to be punished. Franca escaped and told police. *D.Telegraph, 2 Dec 1998.*

THEN THERE WAS Cheung Kiu Ho, 48, jumped on by her brother in Norwich in October 1993; Mary Odegbami, 26, beaten and starved for 14 days by her boyfriend, Nicholas Sogunro, in East Ham, east London, in April 1994; and Sommai Chaipanya, beaten to death with a dried stingray tail by a female shaman in Udon Thani, Thailand, in April 1996.

IN JULY 1995, six decomposing bodies were found in the home of faith healer Sachiko Eto, 47, in Sukagawa, Japan. Arrested with three followers, Eto said she beat her clients – and encouraged them to beat each other – to exorcise evil spirits. *Guardian, D.Record, 13 Sept 1994; Time, 17 July; Guardian, 17 Oct, 2 Dec; D.Telegraph, 2 Dec 1995; [AP] 22 April 1996.*