

I SAW A LIGHT AND I CAME HERE: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF REINCARNATION by Erlendur Haraldsson and James G. Matlock. Hove: White Crow Books, 2016.

This highly informative book by two eminent reincarnation researchers comes in the form of 32 short chapters, presented in two parts written separately by each author. The first part, by Erlendur Haraldsson, concentrates primarily on investigations of children reporting memories of a past life, while in the second part James Matlock, an anthropologist by training, provides a broader context for this phenomenon.

The first part includes mainly accounts of Haraldsson's own investigations of numerous cases in Sri Lanka, Lebanon, India and Iceland. However, this is not simply a review of the existing database of cases; there are historical cases as well as some new and ongoing ones, and both authors refer to the work of other researchers, including Ian Stevenson, Antonia Mills, Jim Tucker and Hernani Andrade. The selection with which we are presented is thus aimed at providing us with a comprehensive insight into the current state of the field and the direction in which the research seems to point.

In much of the literature on the subject we hear only about the most impressive cases of past-life memories fitting a previous personality (solved cases), but this is hardly a balanced view, as this volume clearly demonstrates. Striking cases can be found — like the solved case of a Druze boy in Lebanon — so full of remarkable instances of behaviours, recognition of family members, and memories of unusual details (like having his car batteries charged twice by Israeli soldiers when driving from Beirut) that it seemed “too good to be true” (p. 26), but it did stand up to a very rigorous investigation. However, this is contrasted with randomly selected cases where the accounts are very nebulous and difficult to confirm, and this reflects the uneven quality of the evidence in the field as a whole. Above all, however, Haraldsson's accounts make us aware of the tremendous investigative effort, the dedication and the attention to detail involved in pursuing this research, with repeated interviews, efforts at corroboration, attempts at identifying the previous personality, quite often fruitless yet going on over many years. We also get some insight into the effect of childhood memories of a previous personality as the children become adults (which, on the whole, seems to be neutral or positive), while a psychological study of cases of children from different backgrounds reveals shared characteristics which cannot easily be dismissed as coincidental.

Haraldsson links the reincarnation evidence, including that of the ‘intermission’ cases where children report memories of life in between death and birth, to a brief discussion of death-bed visions, near-death-experiences, spontaneous after-death-communication and mediumship. He hypothesises a “circular/spiral model of human life's progression” (p. 165), where life follows death over and over again, with the possibility of a “gradual development” in a number of areas, just as humanity as a whole has been making progress in many areas, particularly in science. The cases of “quick return after violent death at an early age” make him wonder whether “these cases could be exceptions to the law of how reincarnation works” (p. 165) — a point which might be very important in creating a credible model of the reincarnation phenomenon.

The second part of the book focuses on providing a comprehensive review of the field in search of patterns. James Matlock provides us with a valuable section on the history of reincarnation beliefs, their distribution throughout the world and the cultural influences which have shaped them. We also learn that historical cases from, for example, China or Burma bear close resemblance to recent cases recorded in, for example, tribal societies in Canada or urban communities in Brazil. This wide overview points to the conclusion that “past-life memory is a universal human phenomenon” (p. 219), sharing such features as birthmarks, behaviours, phobias, memories and the age at which the memories emerge and die down.

Not surprisingly in view of its cultural openness to the idea and the research effort undertaken there, the most and best validated cases come from India. However, some of the most strikingly convincing evidence comes from the West, such as the case quoted by Matlock of 5-year-old Ryan Hammons, investigated by Tucker (2013), whose case was ‘solved’ by identifying the previous personality with the involvement of the media, the internet and archive film footage. In fact, the internet plays a significant role in Matlock’s own research into ongoing cases, making it possible to follow them closely as they develop on a world-wide basis.

There are chapters on xenoglossy, on the effect of suicide, on cases which cross international boundaries, on memories of being in the womb and of birth and, importantly, on the ‘intermission’ cases, where children claim to remember the period between death and birth. The latter seem to be culturally influenced (from meeting divine entities to hovering near the family home) but that may be because “the ideas we hold in life continue with us into death and help to determine what we do next” (p. 226).

The book is very much a description of ‘work in progress’, of a developing field, where the conclusions are hypotheses for testing against new data. However, there are definitely patterns emerging from the collection, which by 2013 included some 2,500 cases, 68% of them solved. Violent death of the previous personality appears to be much more common than in the general population, although, as Matlock points out, perhaps it might be more appropriate to talk about death expected and prepared for as opposed to a death that is sudden and untimely. There are also indications that some reincarnations involve deliberate choices, concerning one’s family and other relationships, as well as ‘unfinished business’, a life not completed. The presence of physical traits, birthmarks and practised skills points to the mind influencing the body, and may lead to the wider conclusion that maybe “we all feel the effects of reincarnation subliminally” (p. 266).

To sum up, this is a book for those who take a serious interest in the development of this area of research and its implications.

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REFERENCES

- Tucker, J.B. (2013). *Return to life: Extraordinary cases of children who remember past lives*. New York: St Martin’s Press.