

# The Amityville Horror: An Inquest into Paranormal Claims





# The Amityville Horror: An Inquest into Paranormal Claims

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This book is dedicated to the memory of  
James “The Amazing” Randi  
(born Randall James Hamilton Zwinge)

August 7, 1928–October 20, 2020

Friend, mentor, and master investigator of occult,  
paranormal, and supernatural claims.

James Randi was an inspiration to me for nearly half a century. I lament the fact that he couldn't live to read and criticize this book.



*James Randi (left) Sitting with Frank Zindler (right)  
Photograph by Catherine E. Zindler*

## Advanced Endorsements

*The Amityville Horror: An Inquest into Paranormal Claims* is Frank Zindler at the height of his creative and analytical powers, a skillset honed over six decades of using science and logic to challenge supernatural claims. Using an investigative methodology that utilizes both scientific inquiry and historical analysis, Zindler systematically exposes the paranormal claims in Jay Anson's 1977 bestseller, *The Amityville Horror: A True Story*, as a fraud.

—Dustin Lawson  
Author of *The Ghost of Democracy*  
and *The Firing of Doctor Democracy*

Why a book today on a decades-old “true” supernatural story? First, the original 1977 account has continued to spawn movies as late as 2017. Second, Americans remain susceptible to “alternative facts,” baloney, and bald-faced lies. In a series of meticulous and short readable chapters analyzing each day of the alleged events, Zindler deftly debunks the Amityville myth. Yet if anything, the abundance of such hoaxes and the nefarious branding of inconvenient facts as hoaxes by certain parties has further eroded the very notion of truth and demonstrated the peril of gullibility and credulity. In this way, Zindler's project is as timely as ever.

—Jack David Eller, PhD  
Author of *Trump and Political Theology*  
and *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*

Zindler's book is *precisely* the kind of thorough and proper investigation into the paranormal that pop culture has repeatedly failed to conduct in their complicit furtherance of hoaxes and frauds. Those who are adamant in their belief in the paranormal need to read this formidable work by a true master of skepticism so as to see a brilliant example of critical thinking at play.

—Darren M. Slade, PhD  
Author of “Properly Investigating Miracle Claims”  
in *The Case Against Miracles*

## Acknowledgements

Special recognition must be given to my daughter, Catherine, who had the arduous task of converting the hand-corrected typescript produced in 1980 into the digital file needed for completion of this book. She was also the one who prepared the illustrations, with special credit to the reconstructed blueprints for the house at 112 Ocean Avenue in Amityville, New York. In a phrase, Catherine has been *sine qua non* for the appearance of a book that first began when she was still in high school.

Thanks also must be given to my friend Prof. Jack David Eller, who brought my unfinished project to the attention of his editor, Dr. Darren Slade. Thanks must be given to Dr. Slade for his decision not to allow the information in this book to slip unnoticed into the oblivion that has swallowed up so many of the efforts that have been expended in the cause of reason throughout history. Finally, I must thank Jaclyn Prout at GCRR Press whose editorial eye and sense of academic style has improved this book greatly.

## A Selection of Publications by Frank R. Zindler

*Thomas Paine, The Age of Reason, Part Three: Examination of the Prophecies* (edited and annotated by Frank Zindler, American Atheist Press, 1993)

*The Legend of Saint Peter: A Contribution to the Mythology of Christianity*, by Arthur Drews (translated and annotated by Frank Zindler, American Atheist Press, 1997)

*The Jesus the Jews Never Knew: Sepher Toldoth Yeshu and the Quest of the Historical Jesus in Jewish Sources* (American Atheist Press, 2003)

*Through Atheist Eyes: Scenes from a World that Won't Reason, Volume I. Religions & Scriptures* (American Atheist Press, 2011)

*Through Atheist Eyes: Scenes from a World that Won't Reason, Volume II. Science & Pseudoscience* (American Atheist Press, 2011)

*Through Atheist Eyes: Scenes from a World that Won't Reason, Volume III. Debates* (American Atheist Press, 2011)

*Through Atheist Eyes: Scenes from a World that Won't Reason, Volume IV. Omnium-Gatherum* (American Atheist Press, 2011)

*Bart Ehrman and the Quest of the Historical Jesus of Nazareth: An Evaluation of Ehrman's Did Jesus Exist?* (American Atheist Press, 2013)

*Confessions of a Born-Again Atheist: The Implausible Lives of a Godless Guy* (American Atheist Press, 2019)



*Mark 1:32*

And at even, when the sun did set, they brought unto him all that were diseased, and them that were possessed with devils. 33 And all the city was gathered together at the door. 34 And he healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils; and suffered not the devils to speak, because they knew him.

*Luke 8:26*

And they arrived at the country of the Gadarenes, which is over against Galilee. 27 And when he went forth to land, there met him out of the city a certain man, which had devils long time, and ware no clothes, neither abode in any house, but in the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he cried out, and fell down before him, and with a loud voice said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God most high? I beseech thee, torment me not. 29 (For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For oftentimes it had caught him: and he was kept bound with chains and in fetters; and he brake the bands, and was driven of the devil into the wilderness.) 30 And Jesus asked him, saying, What is thy name? And he said, Legion: because many devils were entered into him. 31 And they besought him that he would not command them to go out into the deep. 32 And there was there an herd of many swine feeding on the mountain: and they besought him that he would suffer them to enter into them. And he suffered them. 33 Then went the devils out of the man, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the lake, and were choked.

The names and some identifying details of several individuals mentioned in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

—Declaration at the beginning of  
*The Amityville Horror: A True Story*

Tam Mossman, the book's editor at Prentice-Hall, said that "the necessity was—and the author and I agreed on this—was to change the circumstances so that, yes, the book is not strictly true. And yet the intent of what was discovered, or alleged, still remained. But the facts had to be changed simply to protect the guilty or innocent so that Prentice-Hall and the authors were not sued. There are places here where we had to change the facts, alter the facts, or even ascribe them as happening to somebody else, because if we told them straight we would be saddled with a very unhappy private individual or even saddled with a[n]... invasion of privacy suit or even a libel suit."

—Interview with Alex Drehsler & Jim Scovel,  
reported in *Newsday*, Nov. 17, 1977

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## Foreword by the Author

*Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.*

—Voltaire

America and the wider world did not first enter a “Post-Truth Era” in 2016 with the election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States. “Alternative facts” were not invented by U.S. Counselor Kellyanne Conway on January 22, 2017. “Alternative facts,” such as those that characterize and define post-truth eras, have existed since early antiquity when, during the course of cultural evolution, science and religion became separate, competing approaches to acquiring knowledge about the world in order to understand the place and status of humanity within it. The first Post-Truth Era was born when deception had been developed into a tool that could be employed by certain classes and groups of people for the purpose of religious, economic, political, or military domination. For several millennia, human beings have had to live in two thought-eras at the same time: an era of scientific modes of enquiry—an era ultimately becoming justifiably describable as a “Truth Era”—and an alternative-facts era characterized by reliance on beliefs and disinformation instead of facts—in other words, a “Post-Truth Era.”

A Post-Truth Era flourished in what historians have aptly dubbed “The Dark Ages”—the Ages of Faith that followed the fall of the Roman Empire in the west and the suppression and destruction of Greco-Roman science by the early Christian emperors. With the closing of Plato’s Academy by the Christian emperor Justinian in 529 CE and the destruction of the Library of Alexandria by Patriarch Theophilus near the end of the fourth century CE, a Christian Post-Truth Era commenced that held sway in the Western World for nearly a thousand years.

The Western World’s millennium-long sleep of reason was disrupted by the rediscovery of Greco-Roman arts and sciences, thanks to Muslims who had preserved—and in many cases improved upon—the ancient scientific understanding of how the world works. The Renaissance marked the return of a Truth Era. As scientific understanding of the world expanded from astronomy and mathematics to physics, then to chemistry, agriculture, mining, and finally to biology and psychology, the sphere of “alternative facts” and

religious explanations shrank in proportion. With the triumph of Darwinian evolutionary theory at the beginning of the twentieth century in Britain and Western Europe, it appeared that a Truth Era was about to supplant the Post-Truth Era that had perdured in force since the fall of the Roman Empire.

Unfortunately, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was not published in America in 1859; rather it entered the world of thought in England. The American Civil War began just two years later and lasted until 1865. When *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* came out in 1871, many of the most important arguments in favor of the natural selection theory leading up to its publication had never been heard in America. Distracted by the Civil War, Americans paid little attention to Darwin, and acceptance of evolutionary theory in America lagged far behind its advances in England and Western Europe. This was to continue up to the present, when many Republican legislators—at both state and federal levels—are young-earth creationists. Since the Scopes “Monkey Trial” of 1925, Truth-Era understanding and acceptance of evolution advanced slowly until the early 1960s, when the National Science Foundation bankrolled the development of three related editions of a high school biology text. All three versions incorporated evolutionary theory into virtually every part of the course. The texts were wonderful, and I myself was among the first to use them during the three years that I taught high school biology (1963–1966).

The backlash was violent, and it endures to the present. Young-earth creationism, nearly laughed out of the public consciousness after the Scopes Trial, came roaring back to the public arena. Among its most skilled warriors were Henry Morris and Duane T. Gish, debaters skilled in the art of rhetorical fallacy who demolished—in the eyes of their uneducated audiences—famous scientist after famous scientist who had never had to deal with disinformation in any of their previous scientific disputes. With the unexpected success of creationist propaganda, fundamentalist forms of Christianity regained ground. Fundamentalist parochial schools were built, and home-schooling became popular as a means of shielding children from the facts of science. With the growth of fundamentalist belief in the literal inerrancy of their Scriptures came belief not only in a world-wide flood around 2,348 BCE, but a belief that Jesus had cured diseases—and still could do so—by casting out devils and demons.

Belief in devils and demons had never weakened all that much in Roman Catholicism as compared with the Mainline Protestant churches by the time that William Peter Blatty published his novel, *The Exorcist*, in 1971. When the movie version came out at Christmas in 1973, an entire nation was made to solidify opinions on the reality—or not—of demons and devils. The publication of Jay Anson's *The Amityville Horror: A True Story* in 1977 and the release of the film in 1979—and then, the release of the sequel books and films—brought Satan and his minions back into the consciousness of many

millions of Americans. The foundation was laid for a “Satanic Panic” that would overwhelm the nation in 1983, when a preschool teacher was accused of subjecting one of his students to satanic ritual abuse. Not many months later, hundreds of children around the country were thought to have been abused in satanic rituals. Even psychologists and law enforcement agents became infected by the ensuing social contagion, arguing about the significance of “recovered memories” of abuse by Satan-worshipping daycare workers. The Satanic Panic led to one of the longest and most expensive criminal trials in American history, not being concluded until 1990, when the original daycare worker was acquitted of dozens of charges that had been leveled against him.

Although the Satanic Panic of the 1980s eventually died down, worries of satanic child abuse never fully disappeared from the list of things that Americans worry about. Then, in November of 2017—the first year of the presidency of Donald J. Trump—“Q Clearance Patriot” appeared on the right-wing message board 4chan, and QAnon was born. Suddenly, famous people—including nearly all present or past Democratic elected officials—were being charged with satanic sexual abuse of children. QAnon followers quickly became allied with President Trump and would become enthusiastic believers in the conspiracy theory that he won the election of 2020. Along with many evangelical Christians, they would figure prominently in the seditious attack on the Capitol of the United States on January 6, 2021. In their minds, the government of the United States had to be overthrown in order to save children from Satan.

Post-truth partisans nearly succeeded in bringing about the extinction of constitutional, representative democracy in America. But there is an even more ominous aspect of the near-success on January 6, 2021 of reality-denying, science-decrying, facts-denying believers in the existence of ghosts and goblins. Such beliefs can be traced back to a time before the development of scientific methods for the discovery of truth—before the dawn of what might be called the Truth Era. Many of the anti-democracy seditionists of 2021 were not just post-truth partisans—believers in “alternative facts”—*they were actually pre-truth thinkers*. Most surely, they were believers in demons such as those whose actions were depicted in *The Exorcist* and *The Amityville Horror: A True Story*.

In the pages that follow, I demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that almost everything alleged in Anson’s book is fictional—at least in the context described. Moreover, I show that there are extremely strong reasons to conclude that at least some degree of fraud was involved in the confection of an alleged “True Story.” For evidence-driven thinkers who read this book, my exposé will be welcomed but obvious—perhaps even considered overkill. But for readers who still harbor worries that His Satanic Majesty just possibly might yet stalk the world, I offer this long-delayed inquest into paranormal

claims as an anxietytic—something to dissolve their anxieties and engage their minds in the pleasurable excitement involved in the pursuit of truth.

It is my wish that by demonstrating the falseness of the Amityville story—a story likely accepted as factual by QAnon-type thinkers and their fundamentalist allies—this book will encourage others to join the fight against the pre-truth “alternative facts” that now pose a truly existential threat to American democracy.



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## Preface

I didn't read ghost stories very often after reaching adulthood. Indeed, as an occasionally organized professor of psychobiology at Fulton-Montgomery Community College in Upstate New York, I rarely had time to read fiction at all. Until November of 1979, I'd had only the vaguest awareness of the existence—let alone the purport—of the book by Jay Anson entitled *The Amityville Horror: A True Story*.

In October of that year, I had just finished the task of shepherding a new course through the College's Curriculum Committee and had managed to convince get the faculty to adopt it into the curriculum. The new course, entitled "Science and Its Imitators," was designed to teach students how to research the facts and evaluate the evidence surrounding such subjects such as astrology, ESP, geometric figures in Bermuda, UFOs, biorhythms, and any other blends of fact and fancy which may someday crawl out of the parascientific woodwork.

No sooner had my course been adopted that it came to my attention that the College Union Board was going to pay nearly a thousand dollars to bring Ed and Lorraine Warren to the college to lecture on "The Amityville Horror." According to the publicity package sent in advance, Lorraine was a clairvoyant and Ed was "one of only seven leading demonologists in the United States."<sup>1</sup>

I was dismayed and delighted at the same time. I was dismayed to see the College lend the dignity of its name to such a presentation and waste so much money on such obvious humbug. But I was delighted because I would soon have a chance to give a public demonstration of the skills I hoped to teach in my new course. I reserved the College's Little Theater for December 6—the day after the Warren's lecture—and put up signs announcing that I would give a free, public lecture entitled "The Amityville Folly." I had not yet read Anson's book! I had barely two weeks to read the book, make some telephone calls to Amityville, check some microfilms of Long Island newspapers, and prepare to meet a demonologist for the first time in my life.

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<sup>1</sup>I never was able to discover the criteria used to rank demonologists nor could I identify the agency that issues such ratings.

To my utter astonishment and glee, *The Amityville Horror: A True Story* fell apart almost immediately after I began to pry into its evidential crevices. I quickly was able to prove that much material had been copied from William Peter Blatty's novel, *The Exorcist* although I had not suspected that so much material in *The Amityville Horror* had been obtained from William Weber, the defense attorney for the murderer Ronnie DeFeo, whose murder of his parents and three siblings had taken place in the horror house prior to its occupation by the Lutzes. The actual encounter with the Warrens turned out to be a boring disappointment (I almost fell asleep during their presentation), but my lecture the next day was quite successful. I had such a mountain of evidence that my only problem was to avoid "overkill," lest I cause my audience to sympathize with these purveyors of the preposterous. After the dust had settled, I looked at the mounds of material I had collected while over-preparing for my lecture. I had collected enough material to write a book! After several visits to Amityville, I was struck by the realization that the *real* story behind *The Amityville Horror* was much more fascinating and curious than the fictionalized fatuities presented as fact in Anson's book.

I called the publisher of a major publishing house specializing in books and magazines examining paranormal and supernatural claims. I described my research and findings and asked if I might submit an article for publication in one of the publisher's magazines. My call was received with enthusiasm, and I was asked if I might have enough information with which to write a book. I had not yet been able to obtain the transcript of a civil trial held in in the United States District Court in Brooklyn, New York on September 10, 1979, in which the Lutzes—the major protagonists of the horror story—had been sued for fraud. I said that I was certain the information in the transcript of that trial would be crucial, but the transcript would cost about five hundred dollars.

I was asked if I could write in "a popular, journalistic style," and I replied that it was my normal writing style. Then the publisher informed me there were rumors that the new owners of the horror house were probably going to publish a debunking book, and it would be necessary to write with lightning speed in order to get the scoop on the new owners of the house. If I were to visit Amityville, I would have to avoid interviewing anyone who might tip them off about a possible rival.

The Christmas-New Year's winter recess at the college was coming up in less than two weeks. I was scheduled to teach a three-week "minicourse" in non-majors' biology, but I told the publisher I could get someone else to teach the course and would have twenty-one days to write full-time. Given how much was already written, I probably could have a completed book in about six weeks if I had the expected treasure-trove of damaging information to be found in the trial transcript. To my surprise, I was told that I would be reimbursed for the transcripts by a publisher's advance. After detailed

discussion, I believed we had a verbal agreement, and I would receive not only a written contract but also a check to reimburse the cost of the transcripts.

After hanging up the telephone that Thursday afternoon, I immediately called the college Dean to find someone else to teach my course, thus forfeiting the take-home pay of about eight hundred dollars. I wrote a check for \$500 and a letter to the Brooklyn court specifying the desired transcripts. My teaching schedule was such that I had no Monday teaching duties. So, if I left for Amityville the next day after my last class, I would have three full days to surveil the horror-house neighborhood, visit the Amityville Historical Society, the Amityville public library, the Amityville police department, a Catholic church, and other agencies and persons that figured prominently in the horror story. Unfortunately, I would not be able to inspect the inside of the house at 112 Ocean Avenue, nor could I interview the neighbors. Even so, I was confident that I could expose the fraud that even by then was yielding millions of dollars of profits to the Lutzés, Prentice-Hall, and the author of the horror book, Jay Anson.

As soon as I returned from Amityville, I began to write *The Amityville Humbug*. The first week of the mid-winter recess ended, and I realized I had not yet received either a written contract or a publisher's advance. I called the publisher's office but was unable to reach him. I made a number of calls over the next week, always to no avail. Nevertheless, I continued to spend twelve hours per day typing out my exposé on my portable electric typewriter. By the end of the recess, I had written about eighty percent of the desired book.

At last, I was able to reach the publisher. He didn't know who I was, or what book I was talking about! I was told that book contracts are never made on the telephone, and they never paid advances. I was invited to submit my manuscript to the editorial committee. Completely shaken, I did as I was bidden. About a month later, my manuscript was returned with a note explaining that they were an academic and scientific publishing house and that my book had been written in "a popular, journalistic style"—exactly what I had been commissioned to do!

I stopped writing my exposé and packed my manuscripts, interview notes, and reference books and materials into a large cardboard box—a box that would not be opened until more than forty years later.

Early in the spring of 2020, I began to sort through my libraries and file cabinets to see which books, manuscripts, records, and Freethought memorabilia needed to be transported to Cranford, New Jersey, to be deposited in the Charles E. Stevens American Atheist Library and Archives. I filled seventy-nine large crates for transport to New Jersey. One of them contained just the large cardboard box in which my unfinished *Amityville Humbug* manuscript had been placed, along with all the associated research materials. As I examined the contents for the first time since 1980, I was astonished at how much work had gone into my research. I had prints of many, many pages of magazine and newspaper articles; the 500-page transcript of

the Brooklyn trial; notes of interviews with important sources in Amityville; day-by-day weather records pertaining to the events alleged in the horror book; correspondence with Amityville sources; evidence that I had actually been allowed to take notes from the auction catalog itemizing materials abandoned in the horror house and talk with the realtor who sold the house to George and Kathy Lutz, and much more. I even had a copy of the report of one of the two polygraph tests that the Lutzes had undergone in order to validate their claims!

I couldn't let all that research disappear into oblivion—especially now that in the intervening years the Amityville fraud had turned into an industry grossing hundreds of millions of dollars. I kept the seventy-ninth crate at home, vowing to complete the project before I cashed my chips in. Fortunately, I have managed to stall the Reaper long enough to be able to place *The Amityville Horror: An Inquest into Paranormal Claims* before the reader.

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## **Introduction: Discourse on Method**

*“When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened; I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.”*

—David Hume On Miracles

**M**y investigation of *The Amityville Horror: A True Story* was intended to make the most of a “teaching moment” and show students in my newly created course, “Science & Its Imitators,” how to investigate claims of the paranormal and supernatural. Even before the investigation had been carried out—let alone completed—it was intended to be an evolving lesson in method. At the very beginning of the course, before the Amityville case became an issue of interest, I had lectured my students on the philosophy and methods of science.

### **The Meaning of Meaning and the Nature of Science**

First, I discussed David Hume’s principle that “...no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle [*in the context of my course, any paranormal or supernatural claim*], unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous [*i.e., more unbelievable*] than the fact which it endeavors to establish.” Science by its very nature is biased against miracles.

Second, I discussed the “Falsifiability Principle” of the modern philosopher of science, Karl Popper, and the “Verifiability Principle” of A.J. Ayer and the Logical Positivists. I concluded with my generalization of their views, my “Testability Principle.” I explained that science can only deal with claims and propositions that are—at least in principle—capable of being

## 2 *The Amityville Horror*

tested. Those that cannot be tested even in the imagination are scientifically meaningless. They cannot even be false.

To illustrate my philosophical method, I contrasted two propositions:

- (1) The moon is made of green cheese.
- (2) Undetectable gremlins inhabit the rings of Saturn.

The first statement is a proposition that could be tested at least in the imagination long before humans first set foot on the moon—or even before the advent of absorption spectroscopy. Without violating any known principles of science, one could imagine walking on the moon, picking up the substrate, and checking to see if it was green cheese or not. The first statement is scientifically meaningful. It is now known to be false.

The second statement, however, is fundamentally different. It cannot be tested even in the imagination. One could fly a rocket containing NASA's most sensitive gremlinometers to the rings of Saturn, but undetectable gremlins would, by definition, remain undetected. There is no way to “prove” that undetectable gremlins inhabit the rings of Saturn. The second statement is untestable and scientifically meaningless. It cannot even be false.

In my discussion of the scientific method, I explained that above all else, scientific explanations must avoid a fallacy first identified by Medieval philosophers: *ignotum per ignotius*, the act of trying to explain the unknown in terms of the even more unknown. To illustrate the problem, I discussed the American Enlightenment solution to the question, “What is lightning?”

Clergy at the time of the American Revolution considered lightning to be an instrument of God's wrath, a divine force wielded in judgement of wicked men and institutions. Why it struck church steeples more often than it struck oak trees seems to have remained an unsolved theological problem. The clerical explanation sought to explain an observable phenomenon in terms of something that was more inscrutable, more unknown, and more difficult to investigate—indeed, something unknowable—the will of an undetectable divine being.

Benjamin Franklin, as is well known, had done fundamental experiments trying to understand the nature of electricity and to discover the “laws” governing electrical behavior. After his kite experiment, he was able to show that lightning shared all the properties of electricity that were known at the time. He was able to explain an unknown phenomenon—lightning—in terms of something better known and understood at the time: electricity. On the practical level, Franklin's discovery led to the life-saving invention of the lightning rod. To be sure, we still haven't fully explained electricity, but all progress in science since Franklin has involved explaining the unknown in terms of the better known.

Finally, I explained that in formulating scientific theories—the highest level of scientific explanation—research had to be exhaustive. Every fact or phenomenon even remotely related to a hypothesis seeking to be elevated to theory level had to be accounted for. To become a theory, a hypothesis had to be able to account for everything known at the time. Then, if something was discovered later that did not fit into the theory, the theory would have to be amended wherever possible. If not, the theory would eventually have to be discarded.

### **Investigative Methodology**

In order to investigate the paranormal claims of *The Amityville Horror: A True Story*, a series of important tasks had to be carried out. Since my Amityville investigation was to be as scientific as possible, my inquest had to be as exhaustive as feasible given the constraints both of resources and time. My findings had to explain the greatest number of facts possible. It had to deal with as many claims of the *True Story* as I could investigate.

Obviously, I had to carry out a very close reading of the book. The only edition of the book that was immediately available to me at the time was the seventeenth printing of the paperback version, and so that was the first version I read. As I read it, I underlined in red all sentences alluding to claims suitable and capable of investigation. That included names of persons, institutions, almanac and weather conditions, and anything else that seemed susceptible to fact-checking. Sometime after reading the paperback, I found an article that indicated numerous changes had been made between the early printings of the hardcover edition and the paperback edition. Unfortunately, the only hardcover copy I was able to obtain had already been changed to agree with the paperback, and I was limited to investigating the changes reported in secondary sources until I could examine an earlier printing of the hardcover edition. It was only after I was able to obtain a transcript of a Federal Court trial in which the Lutzes (the protagonists of the horror story) were being sued for fraud that I would come to understand the reasons for the changes in the text.

Among the changes noted in the early reports were alterations of the room assignments shown in the floorplans of the horror house. That, combined with references in Anson's book to blueprints for the house that I encountered as I tried to resolve spatial relations implied in certain episodes of the story, prompted a failed effort to obtain copies of the blueprints that I could study. Only in the Age of the Internet, forty years later, could I procure the authentic blueprints for the house that appeared in a slightly simplified form in the book.

### **Weather Records Crack Open the Case**

As I read the book for the first time, I was struck by the extraordinarily violent or extreme weather conditions that were reported. It seemed significant that many of the episodes were crucially dependent upon weather conditions: pig tracks in the snow; extreme cold making it hard or impossible to start cars; hurricane-force winds knocking out power in Amityville, leading to the need for a candle during room-by-room exorcism of the horror house; heavy rain flooding the house through demonically opened windows; and so forth. It was easy enough—even in the modest library of the community college in which I was teaching—to make microfilm prints of *The New York Times* weather reports for the 28 days allegedly chronicled in the book. As soon as the daily records were compared with the corresponding dates in the book, many of the most frightening claims of the book fell apart. The first fabrication to fall were the alleged pig-tracks in the snow. There had been no snowfall. In fact, there had been almost no precipitation at all in the days prior to the alleged event.

Shortly after I had printed out the weather reports for the days the Lutzes claimed to have been living in the house, I faintly remembered reading something about the horror house in the pages of *The Skeptical Inquirer/The Zetetic* over a year earlier. I was a charter subscriber to the journal, and I possessed all the issues published before November of 1979. In the Spring/Summer 1978 issue of the magazine, I found a review of *The Amityville Horror* written by Robert L. Morris. It immediately corroborated my findings and pointed to a host of other issues that needed to be investigated.

### **Library Research**

It quickly became apparent that I needed the resources of a much larger library in which to carry out an exhaustive search of periodicals carrying information about the book. And so, I went to the State University of New York (Albany) library to search for “Amityville,” “*Amityville Horror*,” and “Jay Anson” in *Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature* and the index to *The New York Times*. I made a list of all available references. With the aid of a reference librarian, I was able to discover the names of several newspapers that were not covered in *Readers’ Guide*, including several covering the Amityville area. I listed them and made plans to go to Amityville to see if any of them had published anything about the horror story.

Once I had a list of all available references, I proceeded to find microfilms for all that were available, and then I made prints to take home for study. For articles in journals for which microfilms were not available, I requested photocopies from Interlibrary Loan at Fulton-Montgomery Community College (SUNY), my home college.



Once at home, I read everything, taking notes and underlining or highlighting in yellow key facts and references. I discovered that there were several published accounts of the Lutzes' experiences in the horror house that seemed to reveal earlier, simpler versions of more extreme episodes recounted in Anson's book. I made charts of all the contradictions, omissions, or additions discovered as compared to Anson's version. In several articles that were critical of Anson's book, I jotted down all the findings in the margins at their corresponding position in the paperback edition of *The Amityville Horror*.

### ***The Exorcist in the Background***

Various articles I obtained discussed Jay Anson's authorial history, including his prior work on a documentary about the filming of the movie version of William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*. I realized I needed to discover all I could about the author, hoping to find clues relating to the claims of his book. It immediately became obvious that I would have to read *The Exorcist* to orient myself in the experiential world of the author of *A True Story*.

### **Close Readings and Indexing Required**

I obtained a paperback edition of *The Exorcist* and subjected it to the same close reading done with *The Amityville Horror*. Because of Anson's association with the filming of *The Exorcist*, I remained vigilant to see if there were any parallels between it and *The Amityville Horror*. In my close reading of *The Exorcist*, I noted all similarities to *The Amityville Horror*. Forty years later, when I had forgotten even the main plot of the novel, not only did I have to re-read the book, I had to make a coarse-grained, key-word index of the book to assist in finding further parallels to the Amityville novel.

Since several newspaper articles mentioned lawsuits involving the Lutzes, I had to find citations giving the legal style of the cases to see how the cases had been settled. That required a visit to the nearest law library and the help of a reference librarian. Since an important case alleging fraud had been settled out of court, I had to obtain the 500-page transcript of the trial that had been held in US Federal Court in Brooklyn, New York. Lamentably, because the case was now sealed, I could not examine the various depositions that had been made, nor could I examine the many exhibits presented at the trial.

A close reading of the trial transcript immediately showed that much of *The Amityville Horror: A True Story* was far from truthful. Forty years later, when I decided to complete this book, it was hard to relate material in the court transcript to specific parts of my manuscript that had been written decades ago. It was necessary to create a detailed key-word index to the transcript so that as I reworked the earlier manuscript, I could immediately find the relevant passages in the trial transcript.

Unfortunately, I quickly realized that over the course of forty years, I had completely lost control of the details of the horror story itself and had to make a detailed key-work index of *The Amityville Horror*, as well. Although this was a tedious and time-consuming task, it entailed another close reading of the Anson text—a reading that led to several hitherto overlooked problems.

One amusing problem was a detail I had overlooked between my first reading of page 77 and page 100. Page 77 deals with the events of Saturday, December 27, 1975, and it mentions that the Lutzes returned from the wedding reception of Kathy's brother, Jimmy, at three AM. By inference, her brother and his bride would have flown to Bermuda for their honeymoon sometime later that Saturday morning. Page 100 deals with events of Monday, December 29, 1975—just a bit more than two days after Kathy's brother left for Bermuda. Page 100 of the paperback tells us, "After George drove off that morning, Kathy's mother called to tell her that she had received a card from Jimmy and Carey in Bermuda..."

Why was this amusing? When we recall that postcards have the lowest priority of ordinary mail, that Bermuda is a foreign country, and that almost all post offices are closed on Sundays, it became apparent that the greatest paranormal event of the whole book had not been noted by Anson at all: the telekinetic transport of a postcard from Bermuda to a mailbox in West Babylon on Long Island, New York!

### **Time-Line Charting of *Amityville Horror* Claims, News Reports, and Trial Transcript Data**

Since the book purported to be a day-by-day account of the Lutzes' stay in the house at 112 Ocean Avenue, I had to purchase a wide roll of shelf paper in 1978 on which to construct a time-line calendar, creating very large cells in which to note each day's events as alleged in the book, together with any contradictory evidence that might be collected during my research. After the trial transcript had been obtained, dates of events established at the trial were added to the time-line chart.

It quickly became obvious that just as there was an important relationship between *The Exorcist* and the *Amityville* story, details of the DeFeo murders and the trial of Ronnie ("Butch") DeFeo (the backstory of Anson's tale) might also prove to be intimately intertwined with the story alleged by the Lutzes. I had to go back to the university library to research the DeFeo murders and make microfilm prints as needed to understand possible relationships between the murder case and the horror story.

In addition to the time-line calendar made for the horror story, I made a similar time-line calendar for everything I learned about: (1) the events surrounding the DeFeo murders that occurred in the horror house; (2)

everything learned about how the *Amityville Horror* related to the DeFeo murders; (3) the persons (including lawyers) associated with the DeFeo trial; (4) everyone involved in the publishing of the horror book; and (5) all facts established in the fraud trial of the Lutzes.

Since many events in the book involved extraordinary claims about weather conditions and the phase of the moon, I zeroed in on all the places in the book where the events were ruled out by the actual weather conditions. Then, I had to try to figure out where Anson obtained his material to fill in the days where the events reported were ruled out by the weather records.

Numerous trips were made to Long Island to visit Amityville. I surveilled and photographed the horror house and familiarized myself with the neighborhood. Since my verbal publishing agreement stressed that I had to work in secrecy because it was thought the new owners were writing their own exposé, I was not allowed to interview the new owners or their neighbors. For financial reasons, my publisher needed to publish before they did, and so I was not able to request a personal tour of the house—a serious liability as contradictory floorplans had been published and I would only discover much later that several events alleged in the horror story were ruled out by the actual floorplan of the house.

### **Investigations in Amityville**

Because of various claims alleged in *The Amityville Horror*, I needed to visit the Amityville Historical Society and The Amityville Free Library to interview staff and make copies of materials in their collections. At the Historical Society, I sought materials pertaining to the history of the house at 112 Ocean Avenue. At the Library, I was able to copy articles and clippings of stories pertaining to various claims of the horror bestseller and its author.

On one trip to Amityville, I sought interviews with the police, priests at the Catholic church closest to the horror house, and Edith Evens, the realtor who sold the house to the Lutzes. As it turned out, she had detailed knowledge not only of the layout of the house, but also of the furnishings. Best of all, she had a copy of the auction catalog listing the contents of the horror house when it was sold by the bank that reclaimed the house after its abandonment by the Lutzes. The catalog included a photograph of the ceramic lion alleged to have been telekinetically moved about in the horror house. Details of that photograph would prove to be convincing refutation of several events claimed to have occurred in Anson's book.

When I visited the house forty years later, I discovered that 112 Ocean Avenue had become 108 Ocean Avenue. The emblematic jack-o-lantern, quarter-moon windows at the front of the third floor had been replaced by ordinary rectangular windows. The dark-shingled exterior of the house had been painted white, the in-ground, heated swimming pool was gone, and a beautiful enclosed sunporch had been added to the back of the house, facing

the water. Because the neighborhood is still plagued by parades of the preternaturally curious, parking is strictly prohibited in a rather large zone surrounding the house. I had to park more than a block away and walk back to the house in order to take the photographs printed in this book.

### **Explaining the Unknown with the Known**

I have already explained how the research carried out for this book was originally intended to serve as a lesson in methodology for my course “Science & Its Imitators”—a demonstration of how to explore one type of claim of paranormal (supernatural) phenomena. A year after I discontinued work on this book, Richard E. Blowers, a student in my class, investigated *Amityville Horror* publicity claims touting a polygraph test allegedly passed by George and Kathy Lutz as they sought to bolster their credibility in the public and in the press. Mr. Blowers’ term paper, “A Report on the Polygraph Test Administered to George and Kathy Lutz,” along with the official report of the polygraph test, made it possible for me to write part of Chapter 37.

The investigative methodology acquired by my class by the end of the course was surprisingly common-sensical and unsophisticated. It was just one more example of needing to explain the unknown in terms of the known. Once the first facts about the case had been discovered, they led to new facts; those in turn led to further discoveries.

Once weather records had shown the impossibility of certain key episodes in the book, the problem of explaining the origins of the false episodes cried out for investigation. That led to investigation of Jay Anson’s connection to *The Exorcist* and the discovery of earlier, simpler versions of various episodes. Discovery of the earlier versions led to a discovery of the lawsuit in which the Lutzes were sued for fraud. That led to a complete collapse of *The Amityville Horror* as “a true story.” Only curious, small details yet remain to be explained by the obsessive author of this book.



*Fig. 1* The Amityville house at 112 Ocean Avenue where Ronald DeFeo murdered his family on November 13, 1974, as it appeared the following day. (Photo by Stan Wolfson/Newsday RM via Getty Images)



*Fig. 2* The Amityville house now at 108 Ocean Avenue as it appeared in November of 2020. It was repainted and remodeled after the abandonment of the house by the Lutz family in January of 1976. Photo shows west (Ocean Avenue) and south sides of house.



*Fig. 3* Photo showing the north (rear) and west sides of the horror house and its distance from the neighbor on the north side. The narrow projection from the north wall is the rear entrance to the house.



*Fig. 4* Photo showing the south (front) and west walls of the horror house and its distance from the neighbor on the south side. The main entrance that allegedly had a 250-pound wooden door is beneath the narrow triangular projection from the south wall.



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