The Interrupted Lecture

Professors love to talk.

It takes something dramatic to interrupt one during an impassioned lecture. But such an event happened to Bill at Chapman University in Orange, California. It was mid-semester and Bill was about halfway through a lecture in Smith Hall 211, standing before his class in front of the chalkboard. Thirty students sat in rows of tables, studiously taking notes.

“All of a sudden there was a large creaking sound right to my left like a large footstep.” The loud noise caused an astonished Bill to jump to the right and look down at the spot on the floor from where the sound originated. Some students near the front of the class heard this noise and noticed Bill’s surprise. They also looked toward the floor.

Bill composed himself and continued the lecture. But several seconds later a second footstep, not quite as loud as the first, echoed further to his left. The students could now tell that something strange was occurring and many stood up at their desks. About a second later, three more footsteps sounded at an accelerated pace, seemingly moving between Bill and the wall. According to Bill, the sounds were “so pronounced that I expected to see something, perhaps depressions in the carpet.”

The students became very excited, chattering with one another about what just happened. “It was very clear to all of us that the sounds were in the room with us.” By this point class was entirely disrupted, and Bill and his students spent the rest of the period trying to reproduce the sounds. Bill went into the classroom next door (which shared a common wall) and stomped back and forth, yelling to students who remained in Smith 211 to see if the sounds were repeated. They were not. Students walked back and forth in the hallways and up and down the stairs. After several such experiments, Bill related, “we convinced ourselves that we could not reproduce it.”

Bill and his students remain flummoxed by the incident. The story has since been shared around campus and the local community. Before
Bill’s experience, there did not appear to be tales of ghosts in Smith Hall. Since then, it has become notorious as one of Chapman’s haunted locations. Some employees have added their stories of feelings of dread and strange noises when working in the building late at night.

Paranormal America

In more than two decades of studying people who claim paranormal experiences, I (Christopher Bader) have had many fascinating experiences. Some have been alone, others with my co-authors. In the fall of 2015, I joined an all-star team of ghost hunters from popular paranormal television shows such as Fact or Faked, Ghost Hunters International, and Ghost Mine as they attempted to communicate with the spirit of Smith Hall at Chapman University.

I have also observed support groups for people who report abductions by alien beings and visited with therapists who claim to have recovered memories of vast Satanic conspiracies to control the planet. I have heard all manner of outrageous conspiracy theories, and wandered the aisles of innumerable New Age and paranormal book stores. My co-authors, F. Carson Mencken and Joseph Baker, have joined me on hunts for Bigfoot, visits to psychic fairs, and trips to haunted houses.

During this time we have noticed an interesting trend in how Americans relate to the paranormal: they are simultaneously fascinated and repulsed, intrigued and dismissive. The paranormal has permeated our culture, and the fascination Americans have with the paranormal appears to be growing.

A key indicator of the increasing popularity of the paranormal is the availability of related entertainment (see figure 1.1). Americans have long been entertained by fictional television shows with paranormal themes such as Supernatural, Medium, Ghost Whisperer, and The X-Files (which reappeared as a miniseries in 2016). In an earlier era our parents tuned in daily to watch the exploits of Barnabas Collins, the protagonist vampire on Dark Shadows. These shows may simply seek to entertain, but they also disseminate paranormal beliefs. Far more popular of late are paranormal “reality” shows that present documentaries about famous cases and/or related investigations. There is a bewildering variety of such programming. In the past few years, viewers with an interest in monsters
could choose from *Finding Bigfoot* (Animal Planet) or simply leave the television on Destination America, which offered *Monsters and Mysteries in America*, *Monsters Underground*, *Mountain Monsters*, and *Alaska Monsters*. The venerable *Ghost Hunters*, which premiered in 2004, still airs new episodes on the SyFy channel. It has produced spin-off shows such as *Ghost Hunters Academy* and *Ghost Hunters International*, but also faces stiff competition from dozens of other ghost-related shows, including *The Demon Files*, *Ghost Stalkers*, and *Amish Haunting* (all on Destination America). Paranormal researcher Sharon Hill maintains a list of paranormal television shows and their premiere dates at her website.3 Of the 231 shows listed in 2015,4 101 of them (44%) premiered since the first edition of this book in 2010.

If a viewer’s interest is piqued by such fare, she can delve into the large New Age/paranormal book sections of Barnes & Noble or Amazon.com, or join one of the nearly three million regular listeners of *Coast to Coast AM*, a nightly paranormal radio show carried on over six hundred stations. A variety of paranormal podcasts including *Mysterious Universe*, *Jim Harold’s Paranormal Report*, *Anything Ghost*, *Sasquatch Chronicles*, and *Expanded Perspectives* provide paranormal information on demand. Even more paranormal websites and forums allow users to swap ghostly tales and learn about Bigfoot and other phenomena.

Further, a significant number of Americans spend their weekends at UFO conventions hearing whispers of government cover-ups, at New Age gatherings learning the keys to enlightenment, or ambling around historic downtowns learning about resident ghosts in tourist-targeted