



LW6 Houdini on the Crime Scene: Debunking Psychic Sleuthing

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The goal of this presentation is to illustrate the truth behind the claims of alleged psychics regarding the involvement of paranormal abilities in forensic investigations.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing correct information about the supposed involvement of psychics in forensic cases, thereby protecting the reputation of law enforcement.

When media devote attention to a missing person case or a murder investigation that appears to be particularly complex, it is common to have so-called “psychic detectives” offering their help to the police. Various unproven abilities are proposed as tools to locate the missing individual, the victim’s body, or the perpetrator. Frequently, mediums declare their paranormal feelings to newspapers or are invited to appear on television shows, and they support their alleged professionalism by claiming to have been previously successfully involved in forensic investigations.

An accurate and scientific analysis of their statements expose a different reality behind the psychic detectives’ words.

In the United States, a very popular medium claimed to be a psychic sleuth with an accuracy rate between 87% and 90%. This assertion was examined by skeptical scientists and journalists with the results showing a discrepancy: the confirmable accuracy rate was 0%. The only cases in which this medium was not proven wrong were those that remained unsolved.

Another way to debunk psychic sleuthing, following the teachings of the great magician Harry Houdini, is to demonstrate how illusionists can replicate the same apparently paranormal abilities claimed by mediums by using “magic” methodology. The difference is the goal for which the trick is performed: for fraudulent purposes or for entertainment. Despite this, in the United States mediums are offering courses and classes on how to become a psychic detective, communicate with murder victims, and find their bodies.

One of the most intriguing cases allowing an in-depth understanding of the procedures behind the allegedly successful divination of paranormal investigators is that of the Italian “Lake Soothsayer.” The body of a missing young female was found in Lake Como, Lombardia, by apparently following the paranormal indication of a psychic. Since that time, journalists have referred to her as a positive example of psychic sleuthing officially involved with the judicial authority; however, an investigation carried out by the Italian skeptic society Committee for the Investigation of Claims of the Pseudosciences (CICAP) pointed out that the psychic was never appointed or involved with any police force. Most importantly, it was demonstrated that the search during which the corpse was discovered was not conducted following any paranormal clues or advice.

The missing individual had disappeared during a stormy night while driving home; the route she had traveled between the last location she was seen and her house ran along the lake bank. The investigators conducted scuba searches along the shore; however, one area had been left unchecked due to the fact that the bottom of the lake had a steep gradient. In addition, the road above that location had a very dangerous curve before a tunnel entrance and during the night of disappearance, debris from a construction site had been abandoned near it. All of these details were published by media and were very well known when the psychic visited the site two years after the disappearance with a volunteer scuba rescue team, who had previously offered the use of their robotic submarine unit to check the area that had not yet been explored. The clairvoyant claimed to feel the presence of the body from the lake just as the new in-depth survey was planned. When the search discovered the victim in her sunken car in the area not reached by the previous activities, the newspapers stressed the apparent paranormal success.

This case is helpful in clarifying how the psychic achieved the alleged success, by using common sense and the information available from the news, but also how she was never appointed by the forensic investigator. Moreover, the analysis of this event is emblematic in understanding the “myth-making process” by which mass media create “successful” psychic detectives. This is achieved by concealing the non-paranormal methods used, not questioning the assertions regarding the official appointments, and not reporting the unsuccessful performances. The “Lake Soothsayer” herself has tried to make claims concerning other cases, both forensic and historical, but all the locations and clues provided were incorrect. Unfortunately, only skeptic societies provide information regarding these failures, which are not reported by media.



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With the support of both the investigative approach and an illusionist background, this presentation exposes several psychic detective cases to demonstrate not only how their stories are unreliable and without any scientific foundation, but also clarifies that law enforcement agencies never ask for help from self-styled clairvoyants or bizarre unscientific consultants.

Psychic Detective, Skeptic, Paranormal Investigation