

## BOOK REVIEW

Karlis Osis, Ph.D.  
*American Society for Psychical Research*

**Return From Death: An Exploration of the Near-Death Experience**, by Margot Grey. London, England: Arkana, 1985. 206 pp., \$10.95, paper.

*Return From Death* is a sparkling book based on the author's thesis work, which involved interviews with 38 near-death experiencers (NDErs) and many more patients she later contacted in her own practice. We are told in the frontispiece: "Margot Grey is a Humanistic Psychologist with an abiding interest in the spiritual aspects of human nature." She is also an insider who knows first-hand the unique qualities of near-death phenomena. She had a near-death experience (NDE) in a close brush with death while traveling in India. The experience had a strong spiritual impact on her: during it she had an encounter with "light," which she says was "accompanied by a feeling of being very close to the 'source' of life and love, which seemed to be one" (pp. xiii-xiv).

Such personal characterizations set the book apart from anything else I know of in the professional literature. Grey is perceptive and appreciative of the main qualities of NDEs, which she does not press into alien conceptualizations, as outsiders sometimes do. This trend is strengthened by the humanistic attitude of acceptance and trust in what her interviewees had to tell: "By being prepared to accept unconditionally the impressions of the people involved in any situation, it allows their experience to speak and so aids the process by which we

---

Dr. Osis is Chester F. Carlson Research Fellow Emeritus at the American Society for Psychical Research. Requests for reprints should be sent to Dr. Osis at the American Society for Psychical Research, 5 West 73rd Street, New York, NY 10023.

may be afforded the opportunity of finding answers to the perennial questions concerning the riddles of existence" (p. 8). This indeed helped her to uncover seldom-told secrets.

Margot Grey even more boldly declared "a willingness to risk deviating from the rule" (p. 8). That increases the originality of the book, but it also casts dark shadows. There are gaps in her methods and, at times, the lack of a critical grip and precision in her statements. Cross-tabulations and percentages are presented, but there is no statistical assessment, as is customary in a research work. Information about consciousness-altering medication administered prior to respondents' experiences is mostly missing. The following is an example of a slack statement: "During this period [out-of-body episodes in the NDE] the individual can be observed to have reached the stage of brain death, with complete cessation of neurological function, deep unconsciousness without response to painful stimuli and without any EEG electrical activity" (p. 34). I certainly wish such an EEG would be properly documented anywhere in the literature! While the reference list is long, it is infrequently used in backing up the narrative. Still, in my opinion, this insider's book offers a more adequate picture of some aspects of NDEs than some very scholarly works that have pages teaming with well-chosen references. Love and respect for the "givens" of empirical material are among the necessary ingredients of successful research in frontier areas of science.

The book is divided into two parts: "Approaching Death" and "Beyond Near-Death." The first part describes the sample, procedures, and data of the main phenomena; the second part mainly takes up the fringes, the theories and interpretations.

Grey's data consist of structured interviews with 32 British and 9 American respondents, of whom 38 were accepted as "core experiencers" and were used in the analyses. Actually, Table 3 through 7 include all 41 respondents; that is, the data in those tables include the 3 individuals who lacked NDEs. The British sample was chosen on the basis of availability, referrals, and responses to ads. The U.S. sample was selected from the files of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). Her interview schedule was an adaptation of Kenneth Ring's (1980) and the basic organization of data was also built upon Ring's five "phases" of NDEs: "peace and sense of well being," out-of-body experience (OBE), darkness, "seeing light," and "entering light." Ring's influence is obvious. In the foreword, Ring himself says: "Suffice it to say that the evidence she adduces in support of her overall thesis replicates mine, and her conclusions likewise coincide with my own" (p. xi).

Fortunately, Grey often sticks to trends in her data, rather than to the opinions of her mentor. Regarding the backbone of Ring's conceptualizations—the five phases of NDEs unfolding from shallow to deep—Grey has this to say: “Although it will be necessary to take them in some sort of chronological order, the impression that one gains from the narratives of the respondents when they are relating this phenomenon is that in fact these features frequently happen in no definite sequence, but rather seem mostly to occur as a simultaneous matrix of impressions” (p. 73). Grey also takes an independent stand on another important issue: “I am obliged to conclude from the evidence I found that somehow it would seem that conscious awareness survives physical death” (p. 41).

Apparently Grey also had the courage to glance over the fence into parapsychology: “It would nevertheless be a considerable oversight to disregard the fact that research into the evidence for survival after death had been going on for almost a century prior to its recent publicity” (p. 13).

Innovative and important is Grey's chapter on negative experiences. She presents five of her own cases and nine negative cases from the literature. She also queried physicians, including one cardiologist, who had been keeping an eye on the NDEs of their patients. While her own negative cases happened some time before the interviews, the physicians emphasized that negative cases are only disclosed shortly after the episodes occur. Rawlings believes that negative experiences are quickly repressed. Grey found that experiencers do not want to disclose their hellish experiences: “they often felt ashamed to admit to what had apparently happened to them” (p. 56). They may also have had some past transgressions to which they attribute their having “had to go to hell,” so to speak, and which they do not want to confide to another. I think she has put her finger on the right spot. We might need to rethink our methods. Maybe we have relied too much on the self-reports of the patients and have failed to ascertain observations made through the cooler eyes of doctors and of nurses who were around when the patients started to talk about the NDEs that were still fresh in their memories.

Grey also raise a very important question: Do negative experiences follow the same pattern as positive ones? She came up with intriguing similarities, which I have juxtaposed on the following page.

Grey is aware that confirmation with better cases is necessary; I would say that those cases should be better ascertained than those of George Gallup (1982) or Maurice Rawlings (1978). But if this pattern is replicated and sound, it would require nothing less than considering

<i>Positive Experiences (pp. 24-25)</i>	<i>Negative Experiences (p. 72)</i>
1. Peace and a sense of well-being	1. Fear and a feeling of panic
2. Separation from the body	2. Out-of-body experience
3. Entering the darkness [tunnel]	3. Entering a black void
4. Seeing the light	4. Sensing an evil force
5. Entering the light	5. Entering a hell-like environment

the positive and negative NDEs as one integrated whole—a sweeping reorganization of our views.

Even more challenging are her findings of aftereffects in negative and hellish NDEs: “Like those respondents who had positive experiences, the people in this category [negative] returned from their encounters with an increased conviction that life continues after death. They also felt a strong urge radically to modify their former way of life” (p. 72). Maybe the angrily exclaimed phrase, “Go to hell,” is not a bad wish after all! Of course, giving full weight to negative NDEs does not mean taking the hell-like images literally, as Carol Zaleski has shown (1987). Quite modest alternative explanations abound. The fear of dying is most natural, and hellfire and brimstone preaching does leave its scars.

Grey concludes, “Since altogether about an eighth of my respondents reported experiences that were hell-like, this corresponds more closely with findings of Rawlings and Gallup rather than with those of Ring and Michael Sabom (1982). The reasons for this discrepancy remain to be elucidated” (p. 72). Indeed they must, maybe in someone else’s thesis project. My own guess is that a sensitive way of interviewing by an insider, whose NDE has provided a firm grasp of the unique qualities of these experiences, can acquire more truthful responses than the harder, more objective methods of a well-trained outsider.

Grey has paid more attention to apparition experiences than most others: Table 2 lists 10 cases of “meeting with deceased ‘spirits,’” and only 3 of “the ‘presence,’” that is “being of light” (p 74). She sees a pattern: “One of the most noticeable differences between the encounters that take place with the ‘presence’ and the ones that occur with deceased ‘spirits’ is that while the former appears to encourage people to decide for themselves, the latter, while greeting the individuals in a loving manner, almost always serve to remind them that it is not time for them to stay, and that they must ‘go back’ ” (p. 79). She also found a rare case in

which the "spirits" told the experiencer that a relative, known to be in good health, would arrive. Indeed that person died of a sudden heart attack while the respondent was still in the intensive care unit.

Grey found a new type of apparition experience, which was reported by a young girl who "saw" her grandfather and his mother—both dead long before she was born. Later, when visiting a relative's house with her parents, the young girl correctly recognized the apparitional figures in photos standing on a dresser (p. 81). The report lacks the details necessary for a firm interpretation: Had she seen those photos before? Was the identification spontaneous or following clues or prompting? Such phenomena could be very important for determining whether these apparition experiences are veridical and, in some sense, objective. It would be important in future research to look for such cases and investigate them with great care.

The second part of the book, "Beyond Near-Death," is of an uneven quality. A proper disclaimer is given some 60 pages into the section, but it really should have been presented sooner to prepare the reader: "As with all the other categories that are examined in the second part of this book, which did not form part of my original thesis investigation, I have not undertaken any systematic research and my observations have mostly been made in the course of my practice" (p. 152).

The first chapter of the second part is still grounded in the original sample and presented in three tables of data; it concerns changes in the personality and lifestyle of the NDErs. Grey characterizes these changes as a "shift towards experiencing life in a more positive way . . . a personal sense of renewal and a search for purpose and meaning (usually accompanied by personality and value changes with enhanced self-esteem). . . . The things that come to have value from henceforward are love and service towards others; material considerations are no longer so important" (p. 96).

A decrease in the fear of death is reported by 63% and an increase in the belief in life after death is reported by 76% of the respondents. Actually the percentages are higher than that because the calculations include the three non-NDErs among the 41 respondents. Close to half the sample reported an increase in religious feelings. Moreover, 11 of the 23 Protestants switched denomination, while 11 Catholics and 5 "Others" did not do so. These findings follow the findings by others.

Grey next reports qualitative analyses of the "Development of inherent gifts and talents that have lain dormant and neglected" (p. 99), which include exuberant claims of ESP and precognition, healing, and evolutionary aspects of NDEs. And yet with all these goodies, "There is never any sense of personal aggrandizement in these inclinations"

(p. 99). That might be so, but to me it sounds a bit like claims made about psychedelics in the 1960s; it took a couple of decades of debate to settle on a reasonable middle-ground.

The chapter on paranormal developments closely follows Ring's ideas and often repeats the cases he has published in this journal (1982). As a seasoned parapsychologist, I am at home with ESP and foresight into the future (precognition), but the chapter irked me because of substandard methods in documentation and interpretation. We have learned, over decades of research and debate, how to unscramble the illusory from the real in case research. With all this hard-won sophistication, it still is not easy to reach certainties, except through large samples and through strong cases where adequate documentation and verification are possible. Without spending time on a review of the relevant literature, one would be almost certainly lost in the jungle of occult patter, over-claims, misinterpretations, and self-aggrandizements of the informants. A necessary balance between the tendencies of over-acceptance and over-rejection does not come with the first try. However, the efforts of Grey and of Ring have a decidedly positive side, providing hints of what to look for in near-death studies. An example is given on p. 137: A leukemia patient reported healing imagery during his NDE, and said that he had had a remission without recurrences for six years (at the time of the interview). What the doctors said about this is not disclosed. Other report that they became psychics and healers after NDEs, claims that are very difficult to substantiate except when the claimant agrees to take part in a real research project.

The chapter on "Evolutionary Aspects of Near-Death Experiences" expounds ideas akin to those in Ring's book *Heading Towards Omega* (1984). Grey also likens kundalini experiences to NDEs.

At the end, Grey reviews explanations of NDEs offered in the literature. She finds faults and contradictions in these explanations, and insists, like most NDErs, that another side of reality is hinted at by mystical insights throughout the ages and should not be left out. "A mystical vision of the nature of the universe ultimately seems to offer the best basis for an understanding of NDEs" (p. 187). This will please readers with one kind of ontological conviction, but will annoy others. Let us remember that our budding new science of near-death studies is still in the beginning stage, where William James's advice seems useful, the gist of which is: Pay attention to soft-nosed *and* hard-nosed researchers, provided they have immersed themselves in empirical material and have new insights to offer; counting only the hard- or the soft-nosed might impede progress. Margot Grey's insider's book, *Return from Death*, is a contribution that well deserves our attention.

## References

- Gallup, G., Jr. (1982). *Adventure in immortality: A look beyond the threshold of death*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Rawlings, M. (1978). *Beyond death's door*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Ring, K. (1980). *Life at death: A scientific investigation of the near-death experience*. New York, NY: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan.
- Ring, K. (1982). Precognitive and prophetic visions in near-death experiences. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 2, 47-74.
- Ring, K. (1984). *Heading toward omega: In search of the meaning of the near-death experience*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
- Sabom, M. B. (1982). *Recollections of death: A medical investigation*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Zaleski, C. (1987). *Otherworld journeys: Accounts of near-death experience in medieval and modern times*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.