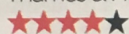


## Magic and monsters? They're all just a trick of the mind

**MATTHEW SWEET**  
MAGIC

### The Spectacle Of Illusion

Matthew L Tompkins  
Thames & Hudson £19.95



**W**ould you like to see something demonic? Here's how. Wait until dark. Wait, if you must, until Walpurgisnacht, when the wolfbane blooms and the veil between this world and the next is at its thinnest. Go into the bathroom, switch on the torch function of your mobile phone and place it on the floor, so that the light isn't directly visible in the mirror. Stare for a few moments at your dim reflection in the glass – and you'll discover if you're one of the 66 per cent of the population that sees a monster staring back.

Matthew L Tompkins is responsible for the moment when the bottom half of my face collapsed to form a forbidding black hole. Him and two psychological phenomena: Troxler's fading, under which static, unchanging stimuli bleed gradually from our awareness; and pareidolia, which causes us to discern patterns where none exists, and so convince us that we've seen a phantom in the scullery, or the face of Our Lady on a piece of burnt toast. Tompkins is an experimental psychologist and a practising magician. That might sound like an exotic combination, but all magicians are psychologists – that's how they make us pick the six of diamonds, or persuade us that they've made an elephant disappear.

Magic, under his definition, extends far beyond the bunco booth and the Royal Variety Performance. *The Spectacle Of Illusion* is populated by clairvoyants, telepaths and ghost-hunters, materialised using imagery drawn from the archives of the Wellcome Collection. The pictures are thrilling. A spectral priest kneeling at an altar rail in Arundel; a child hurled through the air by the apparent agency of



A 1915 promotional poster for American Howard Thurston, the most famous illusionist of his day

the Enfield Poltergeist; grinning masks and muslin shrouds, the macabre props and costumes of a fake medium. Tompkins's book is the glossy, academically respectable successor to those Eighties partworks with ESP cards taped to the cover and inside pages thick with shots of ectoplasm-spewing Edwardians. Those publications generated pleasurable mystery. This one aims to dispel it, arguing that the power of the paranormal depends on our tendency to misperceive the world around us – a tendency that magicians make it their business to exploit.

Tompkins isn't, however, in the business of killing joy or horror. There are many kinds of magic. Gaze at the photograph of the fake medium's prop store and you can't help imagining what it would have been like to slip into the ghost costume and enter those dark suburban rooms where bereaved punters waited to be reunited with their dead relations. Look long enough at the pictures of the Enfield children and you'll begin to notice the damp-rotted wallpaper and scuffed linoleum – weak evidence of a supernatural happening, but a convincing record of British poverty in the late Seventies.

'No psychologist,' writes Tompkins, 'can claim that science has been able to fully describe how a human mind can construct conscious experience.' Our apprehension of the world is partial, compromised, easy to disrupt – and is sometimes as unreliable as a spirit photograph. By the looks of him, I think the demon in my bathroom mirror would agree.