

Book Tests

In mediumship research, a 'book test' is an experimental method that shows knowledge of book contents that neither medium nor sitter could be expected to know. A variation is the 'newspaper test', designed to show knowledge of future events. This article describes the use of this method in the early twentieth century.

Summary of Method

From the outset, investigators of mediumship acknowledged that information purporting to come from deceased spirits could often be more economically explained in terms of telepathy between medium and sitter. However, in some cases, facts unknown to the sitter, and later found to be accurate, were also communicated. It was found that this could be confirmed experimentally, as follows.



A researcher, acting as sitter, would ask the medium to describe some of the contents to be found on a certain page in a randomly specified book in a private library (for instance, 'third book from the left, second shelf from the top, page fifteen'). Alternatively, as often happened in practice, the experiment would be initiated by the personality communicating through the medium, as a means to provide evidence of him or her having survived death. The sitter had no idea what book this would turn out to be, let alone the contents of the specified page. If it turned out that the medium could correctly identify the book and page contents, this could be seen as evidence that the information was not supplied by unconscious telepathy between medium and sitter, strengthening the exchange as evidence of survival of death.

It could still be argued that the medium might access information from individual minds anywhere in the world, or tap into some 'cosmic reservoir' for historical facts (the so-called 'super ESP' or 'super-psi' theory.) In a variation of the book test method, the communicating personality provided details from next day's newspaper, events that could not have been recorded in any memory.

Some Early Book Tests

James J Mapes was a professor of chemistry and natural philosophy at the National Academy of Design in New York, and a renowned inventor of agricultural products. During the 1850s, Mapes was disturbed by reports of mediumistic phenomena witnessed by family members and friends, who he believed were 'running to mental seed and imbecility'. He was particularly anxious when his daughter claimed herself to have become an automatic writing medium.

Mapes asked his daughter to give a demonstration, at which she wrote a message that appeared to come from his deceased father. As proof of identity his daughter's hand wrote: 'You may recollect that I gave you, among other books, an encyclopedia; look at page 120 of that book, and you will find my name written there, which you have seen.' Mapes had not seen the book for 27 years as it had been stored in a warehouse. He retrieved it and found his father's name written on page 120.^[1]

During the 1870s, William Stainton Moses, an Anglican vicar, discovered that he had mediumistic ability, that included the automatic writing of 'spirit messages'. Concerned that his mind was playing tricks on him, he set out to test the 'spirits'. In one test, Moses asked the communicator to go to the bookcase and provide the last paragraph on page 94 of the last book on the second shelf (he did not check to see which book this might be). His hand wrote the following:

I will curtly prove, by a short historical narrative, that popery is a novelty, and has gradually arisen or grown up since the primitive and pure time of Christianity, not only since the apostolic age, but ever since the lamentable union of church and the state by Constantine.

Moses went to the book shelf and opened the book at page 94. He found this to be the exact wording of the last paragraph, except that the word 'narrative' had been substituted for 'account'.

In a variation of the test, Moses's hand wrote: 'Pope is the last great writer of that school of poetry, the poetry of the intellect, or rather of the intellect mingled with fancy.' Instructions to Moses followed to take the eleventh book on the same shelf and open it. It opened at page 145 where he found the exact quotation.^[2]

Gladys Leonard

In the autumn of 1915, the physicist and psychical researcher Oliver Lodge attended sittings in London with a trance medium, Gladys Leonard (1882-1968). Through the voice of her 'control' Feda, Leonard provided a stream of messages purporting to come from his son Raymond, recently killed in battle. Leonard subsequently agreed to give sittings for other researchers associated with the Society for Psychical Research, and these often included book tests.

In 1921, Eleanor Sidgwick published an appraisal of tests in sittings attended by 39 researchers, of which the largest quantity (63) were in sittings attended by Marguerite Radclyffe Hall and (Una) Lady Troubridge.^[3] Others included Helen Salter, who received tests from her deceased father AW Verrall (12); and Charles Drayton Thomas (19), who described tests independently (below). Of 532 items, Sidgwick judged rather over a third were completely or approximately successful.^[4]

In some cases the correspondence was found to be more or less exact. In one sitting, a reference was made to 'long pole'. The book, identified by its location, turned out to be *Daisy Miller* by Henry James. On the designated page the following passage was found:

'I should like to know where you got that pole,' she said.

'I bought it!' responded Randolph.

Elsewhere in the book the pole is referred to as an *alpenstock*, a long wooden pole traditionally used by shepherds in the Alps.

Other correspondences have more to do with ideas and feelings than with exact terms. In one sitting, Helen Salter was directed by her deceased father AW Verrall towards a book, identified only by its location, in which she would find, 'at the top... but not quite at the top' of the designated page, a statement that referred to 'a part of his Earth life' in which 'he had to make two conditions meet and it wasn't very easy to do it'. The passage, she was further told, would remind her of the circumstances.

The book and page were found, and, in the correct position, were the words ‘...nor the rapidly declining state of her own health, had power to blunt the energies of her mind’, a sentence which, Sidgwick commented, ‘altering the pronoun, all Dr. Verrall’s friends will agree applies with great appropriateness to him during the last years of his life.’^[5]

Charles Drayton Thomas

Charles Drayton Thomas, an English Wesleyan minister, began sitting with Leonard in February 1917. He heard frequently from a communicator who identified himself as his deceased father, the Reverend John Thomas, also a Wesleyan minister. ‘John Thomas’ suggested book tests as a means to help confirm his identity.

In an early experiment Thomas senior told his son, when he returned home, to go into his library, and take the sixth book from the left on the lowest shelf. On page 149, three-quarters down, he would find a word that conveyed the meaning of ‘falling back’ or ‘stumbling’. Drayton Thomas found the passage and read ‘...to whom a crucified Messiah was an insuperable stumbling-block’.^[6]

Thomas senior commented that he was able to get the ‘appropriate spirit of the passage’ more easily than the actual words. He made clear that this was as much a matter of experimentation on his side as it was for Drayton Thomas. Over a period of eighteen months, he found he was able to pick up more and more words and numbers, gradually shifting from ‘sensing’ to ‘clairvoyance’. In some cases, he seemed able to sense the sound of the words, as spoken, but not the correct spelling: a book whose cover contained a word sounding like ‘A-sh-ill-ee’ was found to be authored by a Mrs Ashley Carus-Wilson.^[7]

It was certain that Leonard had never visited Drayton Thomas’s house and knew nothing of the books it contained. Realizing, however, that his subconscious might have recorded the details read years before – as well as the exact location of the book in his library – he decided to experiment with books in a friend’s house. He informed his father of the plan so that the father knew where to search. In one test there, Thomas senior said that, on page two of the second book from the right on a particular shelf, there was a reference to ‘sea’ or ‘ocean’ – he was not sure which, having sensed the idea and not the words. Drayton Thomas visited the friend’s house and pulled the book from the shelf, reading, ‘A first-rate seaman, grown old between sky and ocean’.^[8] In another experiment, a similarly specified passage that he was told had to do with ‘changing of colors’ was found to read: ‘Along the northern horizon the sky suddenly changes from light blue to a dark lead colour’.^[9]

A total of 348 tests were carried out over a period of about two years. Of those, 242 were counted successful, 46 as uncertain and 60 as failures. Thomas senior explained the failures as an inability on his part to communicate an idea through the mind of the medium, or the idea being distorted in process of transmission.

Alternative Interpretations

Fraud on the part of the medium in this context can effectively be ruled out. Experimenter fraud is possible in isolated cases but is implausible as a global explanation for a phenomenon reported independently by different investigators at different times.

A more plausible normal explanation is that some exact matches occurred by pure coincidence, and that spurious matches were discerned by investigators misled by wishful thinking. The possibility of coincidence was addressed in the early 1920s in a series of sham book tests.^[10] Sixty people were asked to choose ten books from their shelves and to search for each of the three following ideas on a specified page:

A passage which is particularly relevant to your father. *Top quarter of page 60 in each book.*

An allusion to circles of some kind. *Bottom half of page 35 in each book.*

Frost and snow, or a passage conveying that idea. *The top ten lines of page 84 in each book.*

A total of 1800 passages were examined. The results were tabulated and compared with the genuine book tests examined by Eleanor Sidgwick. Combined successes and partial successes in the sham tests were found to total less than five percent, compared with totals of 38, 47 and 68 percent for three of the most successful Leonard communicators.

Other Experiments

Sir William Barrett, a professor of physics and co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research, described a book test in a sitting he attended in August 1921. He was told by a communicator who identified himself as the deceased Frederic Myers (a SPR colleague who died in 1901) that the cover of the fourth book from the left on the second shelf of Barrett's home library would suggest a sense of 'progression'. When he got home, Barrett identified the book as George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. 'Myers' further told Barrett that two or three books further along he would find references to the 'studies of his youth'. Barrett found these books to be textbooks by Professor John Tyndall, under whom he trained during his apprenticeship.

In a 1921 book, *The Earthen Vessel*, Pamela (Lady) Glenconner described 27 books tests which she carried out with Leonard.^[11]

Newspaper Tests

Drayton Thomas also carried out 'newspaper tests' with Leonard, starting in 1919. Here, Thomas senior provided information that could be found in newspapers and magazines that at the time had not even been printed – apparently by a combination of precognition and clairvoyance. On January 16 1920, Drayton Thomas was told to examine the *Daily Telegraph* for the following day, where he would observe the name of his birthplace – Victoria Terrace in Taunton – printed near the top of the second column of the first page. When he checked the January 17 issue he found the word 'Victoria' in exactly that place.^[12]

In a test on February 13 1920, Drayton Thomas was told that in *The Times* the following day, near the top of column two of the first page, he would find the name of a minister with whom Thomas senior had been friendly when the family were living in the Staffordshire town of Leek. Lower in the column, he would find his (Drayton Thomas's) name, his mother's name, and an aunt's name, all within a space of two inches. When the paper appeared the next morning Drayton Thomas found his name, a slight variation of his mother's name, and an aunt's name – all within a space of about 1½ inches. He saw no other names that he recognized. However, his mother called his attention to the name 'Perks', telling him that the Reverend George T Perks had been a friend of his father and used to visit when they lived in Leek.

In the same test, Thomas was told that, two-thirds of the way down column one, he would find a word suggesting 'ammunition', the name of a former teacher, and next to it a French place name, looking like three words hyphenated into one. The next day, Thomas found the word 'canon' appeared twice in the designated place – referring to the clerical rank, although phonetically identical to 'cannon'. The Belgian town of Braine-le-Château was also in the column indicated, and the name of his former teacher 'Watts' next to it in the adjacent column.^[13] After contacting the newspaper, Drayton concluded that this page had not yet been typeset at the time these details were given.

On April 23 1920, Drayton Thomas was unable to keep his appointment with Leonard, and sent a friend in his place, a Dr Dyson, unknown to the medium. Dyson was told that he would find his name about half way down the first column of the first page of *The Times* of the following day. About two and-a-half inches below Dyson, he would also find the name of the communicator, a deceased friend named Andrews.

The following day, the names 'Dyson' and 'St. Andrews' appeared in the predicted locations. The communication continued, 'A little below, say three-quarters down, is the name of a place which they have visited and much enjoyed'. Here, Dyson found mention of 'Filey', a seaside town in Yorkshire where he and Andrews had frequently spent holidays together. 'A little above is the name of a mutual friend of theirs.' There, Dyson found 'Jones' and 'Davies', both names of mutual friends.^[14]

Many other newspaper tests were carried out by Drayton Thomas, not all of them in *The Times* or *Daily Telegraph*. In each case, he immediately wrote down the information, sealed it in an envelope and mailed it to the Society for Psychical Research before the type was set at the newspaper office. Further, he would check papers from at least 10 other days, to confirm that the same names did not appear in those editions, ruling out coincidence. Some of the tests were inconclusive and a few were failures, but the positive results were by far the majority.

Speculation About the Process

Asked how he was able to see words on a page that had not been typeset, Thomas senior said he did not understand it himself. He referred to the process as some kind of 'etheric foreshadowing', which he likened to seeing the shadow of a man around a corner before the man himself. He continued:

I suspect, but I am not sure, that whatever is about to materialize on earth has its spiritual counterpart, which is

reflected, say on the atmosphere or ether, but not visible to all. Admitting that each *object* may have such counterpart, you will ask how an *event* yet to happen can have its spiritual counterpart? I think in the same way that an intention may be sensed by a sensitive before it is put into action by the sitter. Sometimes when a man proposes to commit murder his intended victim feels a sense of impending danger. Animals feel this even more than do human beings, seeing what is about to happen.

Now the things I see are frequently but the spiritual counterparts of things which are about to take form; some of my tests from the *Times* might be called shadows of a substance. When you see a shadow it is but an outline, and you do not look for detail, and that explains the difficulty of these tests; we cannot always sufficiently observe detail.

He further explained that as he had moved from sensing to seeing, he could not always see the word clearly, as in one case he gave the word 'rain' for what proved to be 'raisin'.

On another occasion, Thomas senior pointed out that although the words may not be in type, someone's thoughts are on them and someone has formulated the wording. However, he conceded that, for the most part, the process is beyond human comprehension.

Literature

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Doyle, p. 134.
- 2.^ Moses, p. 33.
- 3.^ Sidgwick.
- 4.^ Sidgwick, p. 245.
- 5.^ Sidgwick, 296.
- 6.^ Thomas, p. 30.
- 7.^ _____ p. 66.
- 8.^ _____ p. 54.
- 9.^ _____ p. 55.
- 10.^ Unattributed, 1923.
- 11.^ Glenconner.
- 12.^ Thomas, p. 126.
- 13.^ _____ pp 88-95.
- 14.^ _____ pp. 102-103.