

# Louisa Rhine

Louisa Rhine (1891–1983) was an American parapsychologist, wife and colleague of JB Rhine. She helped him to develop innovative experimental methods to study psi phenomena, but is chiefly remembered for her large collection of spontaneous cases which she discussed and analysed in several books.

## Early Life and Career

Louisa Ella Weckesser, the first of nine living children of an Ohio truck farmer and his devout Mennonite wife,<sup>1</sup> was born on an island in the Niagara River in New York state, USA on 9 November 1891.<sup>2</sup> She said her childhood was defined by religion and poverty: being distinguished by her Mennonite garb taught her at an early age that ‘it’s OK to be different if you know you are right.’

Louisa became an avid reader and excelled at school. Her mother resisted pressure to limit her education, sending her to high school. There she doubled her courses to graduate aged fifteen, earned her teaching credentials at seventeen and worked to earn funds for college.

In 1911, her father rented the family farm to a Pennsylvanian family named Rhine, and twenty-year-old Louisa met the eldest son, sixteen-year-old [Joseph Banks Rhine](#), whose interest in books caught her notice. They had extensive philosophical discussions about human nature, finding common ground in the conflict between religious belief and scientific discoveries.

In 1919, Louisa earned a baccalaureate in botany at the University of Chicago, followed by an MS in 1921 and a PhD in 1923 in the same subject.<sup>3</sup> Joseph left college to join the Marines, returning at the end of World War I. They married in 1920.

The Rhines worked as research fellows in plant physiology at the Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research in Yonkers, New York in 1923 and 1924. Louisa Rhine then taught Latin for two years at West Virginia University in Morgantown.<sup>4</sup> The couple’s interest in parapsychology was aroused by a lecture on psychical research and Spiritualism given by [Sir Arthur Conan Doyle](#), who impressed them with his sincerity; they were also intrigued to learn of the many distinguished scientists interested in parapsychology.<sup>5</sup> In 1924, Joseph joined the [American Society for Psychical Research](#).<sup>6</sup>

## Parapsychology

KR Rao notes that parapsychology was not an end in itself for the Rhines; their main question was ‘what we human beings really are’.<sup>7</sup> Rejecting religious doctrine for science, they both gained from their botanical work ‘a strong appreciation of the *spirit* of science, its extreme demands of objectivity, its logic in excluding overconfident assumptions about its own data, and more’.<sup>8</sup> They became aware of

larger questions than plant physiology could address and decided to switch subjects.

Joseph and Louisa Rhine believed the scientific method could be applied to any question. 'If we are fascinated by the baffling scientific story of man's evolutionary origin,' they wrote, 'why should we not give all the other questions of fact over to research instead of leaving them to speculative philosophies and authoritarian theologies?'<sup>9</sup>

Together with [Walter Franklin Prince](#), the Rhines embarked on the investigation of involved physical mediums, notably [Mina \(Margery\) Crandon](#). But they were discouraged, believing these to be largely fraudulent. In the course of this activity they met [William McDougall](#), a British psychologist and parapsychologist, who later moved to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina to set up its psychology department, and asked them to join him. Joseph was provided with work teaching psychology and philosophy on the understanding that he would also undertake psychical research. The Rhines moved to Durham in 1927. Joseph founded a parapsychology laboratory as part of the department in 1930, and in 1935 funding was secured to expand it in its own building on the campus.

With Louisa's help, Joseph began experimental ESP testing, developing a system of card-guessing using cards with five symbols which produced positive results, as certain of the student subjects proved able to guess consistently above chance.<sup>10</sup> Encouraged, he branched out into studies of telepathy, precognition and psychokinesis, obtaining evidence of success in all, continually refining his methodologies and gaining both renown and notoriety.<sup>11</sup>

Louisa took time off to raise four children, but by 1936 she was testing her own and other youngsters for ESP, and published this research in her first parapsychological paper in 1937.<sup>12</sup> Once her children were in school, she returned to the lab part-time, then full-time in 1948 when her youngest child began university.

Louisa's long-term project was to collect and analyze spontaneous cases of psi phenomena, many of which were recounted in letters received by the laboratory, whose correspondence she curated. Over decades, the collection grew into the largest ever gathered,<sup>13</sup> and her analyses of them, published in books and papers, grew her reputation as the foremost researcher of spontaneous psi cases.

She also carried out and published laboratory experiments, and served as editor and consultant for the *Journal of Parapsychology*. Her other interests included civic affairs – she co-founded the Durham League of Women Voters and corresponded with congressmen on public issues – as well as supporting good causes and helping those in need.

Louisa's sixty-year partnership with her husband ended with his death in 1980, the same year she served as president of the [Society for Psychical Research](#). She then took on the role of executive director of the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man (FRNM), which Joseph had founded in 1962 and which served as parent organization for the Institute of Parapsychology, its research and training division,

and the Parapsychology Press, its publishing division. It is now known as the [Rhine Research Centre](#).<sup>14</sup>

Louisa Rhine died in 1983 in Durham, aged 91. Her autobiography was published posthumously.

## Ideas About Psi

On the basis of experiments and Louisa's analysis of spontaneous cases, the Rhines reached the following conclusions:

- Psi is non-physical, showing no association with brain localization, musculature, sex, age, ethnicity or health, is not mediated through the normal six senses, and is not limited by space or time.<sup>15</sup>
- Psi is 'an active functioning aspect of personality and not just a hidden trace of a nearly extinguished one carried down from our primitive ancestry',<sup>16</sup> and thus is universal, though some people have greater ability.
- Psi has two main stages (following GNM Tyrrell): Stage I is the purely non-physical process of psi interaction and receipt of information, performed at the subconscious level through a not-yet-understood mechanism; in Stage II the psi information is processed into consciousness, filtered through the percipient's psychological limitations. Louisa Rhine did not explicitly say that information received at Stage I was both complete and accurate, but implied it, hinting at psychic omniscience at the subconscious level.
- Psi information comes to consciousness in four forms: realistic dreams, unrealistic (symbolic) dreams, hallucinations (during waking, including bodily sensations such as pain corresponding to an injury to a remote person) and intuitions ('just knowing' or feeling a compulsion to act).
- Dreams provide relatively complete but relatively less correct information, while intuitions tend to be relatively correct but relatively incomplete, sometimes nothing more than surges of strong emotions; these patterns demonstrate that totally complete and accurate information is only available at Stage I and is partially blocked at Stage II.
- Types of psi that use visual imagery are less subject to psi-missing (obtaining results below chance). Psi-missing can be caused by blocking of psi information by strong emotion.

## Spontaneous Case Collection

### Method

Louisa Rhine's case collection methodology was somewhat controversial. Cases in earlier collections such as that of the [Society for Psychical Research](#) were double-checked for accuracy through multiple independent witness interviews, and eliminated if likely normal explanations were found. Rhine did little or no follow-up work to verify reports or rule out normal explanations, accepting any report from a person who appeared sane. In her opinion, greater rigour was not needed because the existence of psi could only be established in the lab, not by

spontaneous cases; their role, she felt, was to suggest how to proceed with research. Accordingly, she looked for trends across large numbers of cases.<sup>17</sup>

Louisa studied the degree of conviction or confidence her subjects had that their psi impressions were correct, and found people were more likely to be confident when the information came while awake rather than dreaming and, surprisingly, when it was sketchy rather than complete in details.

### **Psychokinesis**

Louisa studied reports of spontaneous cases of abnormal movements of objects connected to remote crises, such as clocks that stopped, objects that fell from walls or shelves at the moment of a remote person's crisis, or a picture of a loved one that inexplicably dropped off a wall at the moment of their death. She concluded that they are the result of percipient [psychokinesis](#) as a response to the psi signal: the percipient unconsciously senses the death through ESP at Stage I, and at Stage II uses PK on an object associated with the person to call attention to them. This held implications for cases of auditory hallucinations; Rhine realized that some might not be hallucinations at all, but rather percipient PK acting on the sound-producing object (such as a doorbell) to make it produce a genuine sound.

### **ESP Messages**

Investigating the 'anxiety hypothesis' – which proposes that ESP messages are motivated by concern for the well-being of close friends or relatives – Louisa found that ESP about one's own life tends to deal with trivial events, while ESP about relatives and friends concern serious events. ESP about the death of a close person tends to be precognitive, but about a non-fatal accident or illness, contemporaneous. However, she was surprised by how many experiences concerned trivial events, distant relationships or strangers, from which she inferred that psi is a broad-based information-gathering mechanism.

Louisa investigated whether precognition enables percipients to avoid or prevent foreseen events, finding that two-thirds did not try – as the information was too vague to act upon – but that those who did were successful twice as often as not. This usually involved avoidance, for instance changing travel plans to avoid an accident; however, in nine cases, a tragic event was averted entirely by the person's actions.

### **Survival**

In investigations concerning post-mortem survival, Louisa looked at hallucinatory ESP experiences conveying information about a third party's crisis (9%), and found that living agents rarely produced such information, whereas deceased agents often did (72%). She concluded that this was due either to discarnate agency or percipient belief that the dead have psychic powers, so that establishing discarnate agency would have to be done on other grounds. She also doubted that an apparitional experience was anything more than a psychic hallucination.

The Rhines's conclusion that the percipient is more active than the agent in telepathy was controversial among survival researchers, as it weakened the evidence for discarnate agency. Parapsychologists Hornell Hart and [Ian Stevenson](#) alleged that Louisa allowed a theoretical bias against survival to influence her subjective interpretations concerning the role of the agent. She also clashed with Stevenson over a critical review of his book *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*.

## **Publications**

A publisher said of Louisa Rhine that she was 'one of the very finest writers that the parapsychological profession has ever produced'.<sup>18</sup>

### **Books and Monographs**

*Hidden Channels of the Mind* (1961). New York: William Morrow & Co. Analyzes the results of Rhine's study of spontaneous cases, addressing questions such as the incidence of ESP, what sort of people have it, are women more psychic than men and whether foreseen dangers are inevitable or can be prevented or avoided.

*Manual for Introductory Experiments in Parapsychology* (1966). Durham, North Carolina, USA: Institute for Parapsychology. Instructional work.

*ESP in Life and Lab: Tracing Hidden Channels* (1967). New York: Macmillan. A reconciliation of psi laboratory research and real-life experiences of psi.

*Mind Over Matter: Psychokinesis* (1970). New York: Macmillan. Relates the history of psychokinesis research up to time of writing, discusses the meaning of PK in the context of paranormal phenomena such as hauntings and [poltergeists](#).

*Psi, What Is It: The Story of ESP and PK* (1st ed. 1975). New York: Harper & Row. A textbook for parapsychology courses for young adults, which became the standard.

*The Invisible Picture: A Study of Psychic Experiences* (1981). Jefferson, North Carolina, USA: McFarland. Overview of her entire work.

*Something Hidden* (1983). Jefferson, North Carolina, USA: McFarland. Rhine's posthumously-published autobiography, describing her life, marriage and career with JB Rhine.

### **Papers**

Some Stimulus Variations in Extra-Sensory Perception with Child Subjects. *Journal of Parapsychology* 1/2 (1937), 102-113.

Conviction and Associated Conditions in Spontaneous Cases. *Journal of Parapsychology* 15 (1951), 164-191.

Subjective Forms of Spontaneous Psi Experiences. *Journal of Parapsychology* 17 (1953), 77-114.

The Relation of Experience to Event in Spontaneous ESP. *Journal of Parapsychology* 17 (1953), 187-209.

Frequency of Types of Experience in Spontaneous Precognition. *Journal of Parapsychology* 18 (1954), 93-123.

Precognition and Intervention. *Journal of Parapsychology* 19 , 1-34.

The Relationship of Agent and Percipient in Spontaneous Telepathy. *Journal of Parapsychology* 20 (1955), 1-32.

Hallucinatory Psi Experiences: I. An Introductory Survey. *Journal of Parapsychology* 20 (1956), 233-56.

Hallucinatory Psi Experiences: II. The Initiative of the Percipient in Hallucinations of the Living, the Dying, and the Dead. *Journal of Parapsychology* 21 (1957), 13-46.

Hallucinatory Psi Experiences: III. The Intention of the Agent and the Dramatizing Tendency of the Percipient. *Journal of Parapsychology* 21 (1957), 186-226.

The Evaluation of Non-Recurrent Psi Experiences Bearing on Post-Mortem Survival. *Journal of Parapsychology* 21 (1960), 8-25.

Psychological processes in ESP experiences: Part I. Waking experiences. *Journal of Parapsychology* 26 (1962), 88-111.

Psychological Processes in ESP Experiences: Part II. Dreams. *Journal of Parapsychology* 26 (1962), 172-99.

Spontaneous Physical Effects and the Psi Process. *Journal of Parapsychology* 27 (1963), 84-122.

Auditory Psi Experience: Hallucinatory or Physical? *Journal of Parapsychology* 27 (1963), 182-98.

Factors Influencing the Range of Information in ESP Experiences. *Journal of Parapsychology* 28 (1964), 176-213.

Comparison of Subject Matter of Intuitive and Realistic ESP Experiences. *Journal of Parapsychology* 29 (1965), 96-108.

Toward Understanding Psi-Missing. *Journal of Parapsychology* 29 (1965), 259-74.

Hallucinatory Experiences and Psychosomatic Psi. *Journal of Parapsychology* 31 (1967), 111-34.

Co-authored with JB Rhine: The Psychokinetic Effect: I. The First Experiment. *Journal of Parapsychology* 7 (1943), 20-43.

## **Collection of Papers**

An extensive collection of JB and Louisa Rhine's papers, including case studies, writings, manuscripts, critiques and reviews, is kept by Duke University Libraries.

See [here](#).

## Legacy

Louisa Rhine worked together with her husband to establish parapsychology as a scientific field. Their daughter Sally Rhine Feather writes:

The early 1930s at Duke University and the beginning of the Parapsychology Laboratory—are by now fairly well known among parapsychologists as the beginning of parapsychology as a science, the period during which the basic experimental and statistical methods of the field were developed,' and 'she helped bring legitimacy to parapsychology out of the dark past of mediumship and the occult, yet always relating it back to people's experience that they could understand.[19](#)

As JB Rhine has been called 'the father of modern parapsychology', Feather refers to her as its mother.[20](#)

*KM Wehrstein*

## **Literature**

Rhine, J.B. (1934). *Extra-Sensory Perception*. Boston: Boston Society for Psychical Research.

Duke University Libraries (1987). [Guide to the Louisa E. Rhine papers, 1890-1983: Historical note](#). [Web page.]

Feather, S.R. (1983). Something different: A biographical sketch of Louisa Rhine. *Journal of Parapsychology* 47/4, 293-302.

Feather, S.R. & Ensrud, B. (2018). [JB Rhine](#). Society for Psychical Research *Psi Encyclopedia*.

Matlock, J. (1987). Cat's paw: Margery and the Rhines, 1926. *Journal of Parapsychology* 51/3, 229-47.

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1.](#) Feather (1983), 293. All material in this section is drawn from this work unless otherwise noted.
- [2.](#) Duke University Libraries (1987).
- [3.](#) Duke University Libraries (1987).
- [4.](#) Duke University Libraries (1987).
- [5.](#) Feather & Ensrud (2018).
- [6.](#) Matlock (1987), 233.
- [7.](#) Rao (1983a), 347.
- [8.](#) Rhine & Rhine (1978), 189.
- [9.](#) Rhine & Rhine (1978), 185.
- [10.](#) Feather & Ensrud (2018). For a detailed overview see Rhine, J.B. (1934).
- [11.](#) Feather & Ensrud (2018).
- [12.](#) See Rhine (1937).
- [13.](#) Rao (1983b), 4.
- [14.](#) Feather & Ensrud (2018).
- [15.](#) Rao (1983a), 349. All information in this section is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted.
- [16.](#) Rhine (1981), 246.
- [17.](#) Weiner & Haight (1983), 303-5. All information in this section is drawn from this source.
- [18.](#) Cited by Rao (1983b), 5. All book descriptions here are drawn from this source.
- [19.](#) Feather (1983), 297-8, 302.
- [20.](#) Feather (1983), 302.