

The Debriefing

By Arthur O'Keefe

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We were surprised at how quickly we were drawn into this fascinating 'dark urban fantasy' that nimbly combines Real People fiction with sci/fi and spec lit. This is genre fiction at its best and the plot driven narrative holds our interest right to the last word. The author's 'down to business' prose, exacting vision and fertile imagination come together in a remarkable 'entertainment'. On another track, when a submission almost 'works' and we see enough in it we like, we ask for a rewrite. And invariably, the result is an improvement. Less often, an author will impose this on his/herself without our prompting. The result can be hit or miss. In the case of 'The Debriefing' we liked the revised version but we liked the original submission better. Sometimes with writing it's first time lucky and knowing where to stop is as important as knowing how to begin.*

The Debriefing

While it occurred to the young man that he was one of only ten living people allowed access to the information he had learned, such reflections had long ago ceased to inspire any awe. It was if anything an annoyance, as it narrowed down the number of persons responsible for the inevitable administrative tedium. (Usually that number was one, meaning himself). Still, this case was quite interesting, and he wondered how it might affect his own research. But that was a question for later.

He sat alone in a silent, windowless room more than two hundred feet below street level. Smoke rose in a slow, lazy stream from the cigarette placed in the ashtray before him.

The stark glare of overhead lights illuminated the grey, utilitarian space he occupied: conference table, swivel chairs, a large metal locker set against the wall behind him. On the table was a magnetic tape recorder, its twin reels motionless and mute, the personnel file open next to it. A shelf on the wall to his left held a coffee percolator and a few ceramic cups.

He picked up his cigarette and took a long satisfying drag, letting the smoke fill his lungs, holding it for a moment. He then released it, gazing at the file and the tape recorder, puzzling over the story he had just heard. He was convinced the old man believed everything he'd said. The evidence was just tenuous enough to be doubtful, yet substantial enough to be credible.

He glanced at the clock over the door. Nearly eighteen-hundred hours. He had been told in no uncertain terms that he alone must transcribe the debriefing. The information was too sensitive to leave to a clerk-typist, regardless of security clearance. And it had to be approved for release on a need-to-know basis by the station chief no later than noon tomorrow. He was a slow typist, and didn't look forward to the task. His one consolation was the foresight he'd shown in packing a couple of sandwiches in his briefcase. He'd take a break from typing and have them later.

Taking a last puff of his cigarette, he rubbed it out into the ashtray, then got up and double-checked that the door was locked. He walked to the locker and opened it. Removing a typewriter and a stack of paper marked with the appropriate security level, he set both down on the table, then got a cup of coffee from the percolator. Placing his coffee next to the typewriter, he sat down, inserted the first sheet of paper, and set the carriage.

The click-clack of the machine's keys broke the room's silence as he typed the introductory memorandum. Completing it, he then switched on the recorder and began to transcribe the interview.

TOP SECRET / NOFORN / SPECIAL ACCESS

REQUIRED

SIDDOC-1007346 / Debriefing of Patrick J. Donnelly / 16FEB43

Dissemination date: 16 FEB 1943

From: Chief, Research Section 13, Special Intelligence Division

To: Director, Special Intelligence Division

cc: POTUS, OSW, SECNAV, SECARMY, SECSTATE, Dir. IPU, Dir. OSS

Subj: Debriefing of former SID agent Patrick J. Donnelly
regarding events of special interest in the year 1899.

Attachments: 1. Analysis of Detected Substances

2. Attempt to Elicit Data via Hypnosis

(See also SIDDOC-1007343 / Preliminary Report by Patrick J.
Donnelly / 11FEB43.)

Summary:

The following transcript is of an interview with
Mr. Donnelly regarding 1) the detection on 7 JAN 1943 by SID
researchers of apparent spatio-temporal anomalies which had
occurred on 8 FEB 1899, 27 AUG 1899, and 10 SEP 1899; 2)
activities during 1899 of Mr. Donnelly, then-SID agent Walter
Stern, then-MI-6 agent-at-large Edward Alexander Crowley (aka
Aleister Crowley), and inventor Nikola Tesla which apparently
relate to said anomalies; and 3) the possible relation of 1) and
2) to the alleged invention by Thomas Edison of a device for
communication with the spirits of the dead, and the attempted
weaponization of said device by an individual named Ambrose
Temple in what Mr. Donnelly refers to as "a different 1899" (see
interview transcript for clarification).

Immediately following reports on 8 January this year of Mr.
Tesla's death, all of his equipment, papers, and other items

were seized by the Office of Alien Property on orders of the FBI. After a brief but intense jurisdictional dispute, OSS operatives acting on behalf of SID took custody of a mass of melted metal, solidified within in a crucible and nailed into a crate marked at the top with an X. The item was then delivered to the SID Region 17 Headquarters in Manhattan (publicly known as Stern Promotions, Inc.). SID Region 17 Director Theodore Jakes reports that shortly after the item's delivery, former agent Crowley arrived to examine it briefly, declared it "safe," (by what definition he did not say), and refused requests for further information. SID Region 17 Director Walter Stern (retired) arrived soon afterward to thank Mr. Crowley for his inspection of the item, and the two soon departed. Mr. Stern's subsequent request to keep the item as a piece of memorabilia was declined. It was shipped under maximum security measures to Research Section 13, San Diego. Despite ongoing efforts, including inquiries to MI-6, we are currently unable to contact or locate Mr. Crowley to elicit further information.

Analysis of the crucible's content has resulted in identification of 17 metallic elements plus silicon carbide, in addition to trace amounts of calcium carbonate and iron sulfate, suggesting the incineration of paper and ink (see Attachment 1 for details). The mixture had been exposed - it is assumed deliberately - to temperatures in excess of 3000°F for 30

minutes or longer. As noted in the preliminary report and following transcript, Mr. Donnelly claims it is the remains of Mr. Edison's prototype spirit phone, allegedly destroyed in February 1899 by Mr. Tesla in a forge kept in the latter's laboratory. As of this writing, it is unknown whether analysis of the material may yield information useful to the war effort.

Mr. Donnelly claims to have no knowledge of the alleged device's assembly or composition, and no such information was retrievable through attempts at hypnosis (see Attachment 2).

Interview subject: basic biographical details

Name: Donnelly, Patrick James

DOB: 7 March 1864 (age 78)

POB: New York, New York

1884-1909:

New York City Police Department; concurrent on-call Field Agent, SID. Retired NYPD at the rank of Detective, 1909.

1909-1929:

Special Intelligence Division, Region 17 HQ Manhattan. Retired as Assistant Director, Region 17, 1929.

Current residence:

2802 Caminito Chollas, San Diego, California

Marital Status: Married

Debriefing process:

The following interview took place in Conference Room 3-A, Basement Level 3 of the Special intelligence Division Research Center, located within the Restricted Access Zone of the U.S. Naval Repair Base, San Diego.

Date and duration of interview: 15 Feb. 1943, 0900 - 1700 (break for lunch, 1200-1300). The interview was conducted by SID researcher Mr. Robert A. Monroe.

[START OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT]

Robert A. Monroe:

This interview is now being recorded by audio tape, with the full knowledge and consent of the interviewee. The time is now zero nine hundred hours local time. The date is Monday, fifteen February, nineteen forty-three. This interview is taking place at the Special Intelligence Division Research Center, San Diego, Conference Room 3-A. Individuals present are two in total: Robert Allan Monroe, SID Research Specialist, acting as interviewer, and Patrick James Donnelly, SID Assistant Director for Region 17, retired. I hereby identify myself as Robert Monroe. Sir, for the record, may I ask you to identify yourself?

Patrick J. Donnelley:

Patrick James Donnelly. I am the former Assistant Director for Region 17, Special Intelligence Division.

RAM:

Thank you very much for consenting to this interview, Mr. Donnelly. You're a legend in the Division.

PJD:

I didn't exactly consent to it, but you're welcome just the same. As for being a legend, well, such stories grow in the telling. How old are you, son?

RAM:

Twenty-seven, sir. I was designated 4F due to ulcers, and then SID recruited me.

PJD:

I wasn't questioning your draft status. What's your specialty?

RAM:

It's a bit eclectic. I've done some work in aeronautical engineering, especially flight simulators. I'm a pretty fair pilot. And some work on audio technology.

PJD:

And what else?

RAM:

The effects of certain sound patterns on human consciousness.

I research the possibility of inducing what we call the "OOBE."

It stands for Out of Body Experience.

PJD:

Figured it was something like that. Astral Projection? That's what Crowley called it.

RAM:

With all due respect to Mr. Crowley, that's a somewhat mystical term. I try to take a scientific approach to things, including terminology.

PJD:

Fair enough. Well, I guess you're the one who should be asking the questions. Fire away.

RAM:

I must admit, it's a bit difficult to know where to begin. The preliminary statement you've provided is rather puzzling.

Perhaps you could start with some background about your early life, and how you first came to be involved in SID, and we can go on from there.

PJD:

All right. I was born in Hell's Kitchen in 1864, as it says there in my file. My parents came off the boat in New York the month before I was born. Like a lot of immigrants, they decided to settle there. My father later told me he'd tried to convince my mother to stay in Ireland and wait a few years after I was born before emigrating. He was worried about her making the voyage pregnant. But she insisted she would be fine, and was determined that her child be born in America.

RAM:

What did your parents do?

What didn't they do? My father was a laborer at first, mostly working construction, but he also did odd jobs any chance he could get: moving furniture, street cleaning, what have you. But not before he got conscripted into the Civil War right after they'd arrived in '64. He was infantry, of course. His unit saw some action, but he was lucky enough to come home with no lasting wounds and an honorable discharge. By the time I was fourteen he'd found a steady job as a barman. You could say we were poor, but I never really felt it. Never went hungry. We were luckier than a lot of families there.

My mother took in rich people's laundry, and later got a job as a cook and housemaid. They were both very strict about keeping me away from the influence of the gangs, but especially my mother. It was easy for a kid to get mixed up in crime back then. Still is, I guess.

So they kept me on the straight and narrow, I suppose you could say, and I managed to finish high school. I'd never gotten good grades, but I liked to read. Twain, Poe, Dickens, a little Shakespeare. Whatever I could get my hands on. And I found I had a good head for numbers and some mechanical aptitude. College was financially out of the question, so I worked at the saloon with my father for a couple of years and then decided to join the police. I suppose it's a stereotype, is that what they call it? The Irish cop.

So about five years later, Walter Stern – he'd just made detective – had taken notice of the fact that the Tammany Hall boys couldn't buy me, and I had a good record, and was a crack shot. So he asks me if I'd be up to a real challenge, something secret, chasing after bigger game than the typical Tenderloin ruffians. I said sure. I assumed he was going to put me on some kind of undercover plainclothes duty, which even patrolmen were occasionally called on to do. Well, I did spend some time in plainclothes, but it was like nothing I'd expected or ever experienced.

We were chasing spies. Then I realized, hell, we *were* spies. And the stuff we were using. Secret experimental high-speed airships. Portable machine guns that made a Gatling gun look like a toy. Though I'm sure it's nothing compared to the stuff you fellows are using now.

At first, and for years afterward, we didn't even know who we were working for. Except of course that it was a person, or persons, somewhere within the federal government. Proof enough of that was provided. I think you know how it worked back then. It was, at the time, a pilot program, and so that mainstay of the intelligence community, Plausible Deniability, was especially required. God forbid that people be held accountable for things they personally authorized.

And at times it wasn't just people we were chasing down, at least not ordinary people. You've got to keep two different compartments in your head, one for day-to-day events, and one for ghosts, magic, people with superhuman powers, and things that go bump in the night of all varieties. I don't regret it, not any of it. And yet, I'm very happy now to have an ordinary life. It's underrated, you know. After all I've seen, I find joy in the prosaic. And that I don't have to deal with those damnable New York winters I moved here to get away from.

But let's cut to the chase. You fellows called me in here for a very specific reason, so I'll tell you what I know about it. But first and foremost, you should know this: that lump of metal you have in your possession won't serve you any practical purpose. Not for the war or anything else. Even if you manage to figure out which components and materials result in a working spirit phone, it won't actually work. Not anymore. Though you may have slightly more than a snowball's chance in hell, and that's what worries me. You already have my initial report, but I'll cover this in more detail as we go along.

We'd worked with Crowley a couple of times before, back in the late 90s. Smart young fellow, brilliant even. Kind of narcissistic and arrogant, though, and occasionally liked to make subtle digs at people. Had a rather macabre sense of humor, too. But when it came to a pinch, he became deadly serious. Damn good at his job. We lost touch after he quit the whole espionage thing and decided to focus more on his occult studies. "Magick-with a k," as he called it. And regarding that, he could do amazing things.

I have no idea where Crowley is. If he doesn't want to be found, he won't be. He'll turn up if and when it suits him. I'm sure he's enjoying the fact that you're all so frantically trying to find him. To be honest, I never much liked the guy, but I respect him.

As for Edison. Well, he's dead, and I doubt you'll find anything among his papers, records, or extant equipment that will tell you anything. Though I'm sure you've started looking. There are just rumors, and some vague comments he made in a couple of interviews back in the 20s. In this other 1899 – that's the only way I can think of to put it – Edison was at least instrumental in getting the spirit phone made and marketed. I think he had some help with it, but that part isn't clear to me. Anyway, he was credited with inventing it, though by the time things got out of control, the whole thing was out of his hands.

So, these spatio-temporal anomalies, as you call them. How did your people detect them, and connect them with me and the spirit phone remains? Right, privileged information. Need-to-know basis. Sorry I asked. Some things are better not knowing.

I don't remember what the spirit phone looked like, or rather would have looked like. Though you already know that, since your hypnotist failed to pull it out of my subconscious. It's the biggest gap in my memories, for want of a better term. Crowley said it was the result of a "special adjustment" he'd made in something he called the Akashic Records. A kind of astral archive of all events in the universe. Another result was that even he couldn't remember how he'd done it. The events – the ones I remember in my dreams with ever-diminishing clarity – were erased from existence. For that I am grateful. As I said, I now take joy in the prosaic.

In February of 1899, I started having dreams that progressed into disjointed nightmares about murder, grave robbing, demons in human guise, and fighting a small army of near-invulnerable, savage men whose only aim was to cause anguish and suffering and death for its own sake. Monsters. Rather unpleasant, one might say. All of it is tied into the spirit phone.

The dreams have diminished in frequency and vividness, and now they rarely occur. Crowley called them memories of what was, and yet was not: the events of another 1899, which he and Tesla had stopped from happening. I don't know how Tesla even got mixed up in it, but we're all lucky he did.

A time machine? I don't know. If anyone could possibly invent such a thing, it would've been Tesla. But I don't think that was it. Somehow Tesla, earlier in 1899, got wind of what was going to happen, and changed it. He melted down the prototype spirit phone. Nipped it in the bud. As to how he got his hands on it, or why Edison didn't simply build another, I've no idea. There's more to it than I know, but that's just as well. I'm sure Crowley had a hand in it.

These memories, as it were, included my death, and those of my three companions, Stern, Crowley, and Tesla. In a quick if unpleasant manner. Again, it's hard to recall details. We were at the airship. There were mountains around us. There was a flash, a short, intense burning. I believe I was killed in an explosion.

There were these monsters, as I said. But they were not *physical* monsters until later. They were evil spirits, if you like. And this Temple fellow. Ambrose Temple, his name was. He decided to bring them into this world in physical human form, using the spirit phone Edison had invented and started marketing. It's all very vague, except I know it involved hooking up a hundred men to a hundred of these machines, these spirit phones. But these were not ordinary men. They were duplicates, specially created by Temple to act as vessels for the spirits. Some kind of biological engineering. No idea how he did it.

Once these things got into their vessels – that is, attained physicality – they would have tremendous physical and psychic powers. Temple's plan was to imprison them and use them as

enforcers for some kind of world government with him in charge. In our present-day terminology, he planned nothing less than a global totalitarian state. And this was 18 years before Lenin and his boys took over Russia. Whatever else you can say about the guy, he was in his way a visionary. And his abilities were akin to those of Crowley and Tesla combined, though perhaps even greater.

No record of an Ambrose Temple? Of course. I take it for granted he'd disguised himself using "magick," or technology, or both. We didn't talk much about it afterwards, but Tesla thought he might have been Elihu Thomson, the inventor. Crowley disagreed, saying we'd likely never know. They'd both met Thomson before, so who knows?

I can tell you fellows are really keen to figure all this out, and instinct tells me you're searching in a direction you shouldn't be. So if I may, let me offer a bit of advice.

In my dreams, I have seen something that stands out more than anything else, even as the dreams have faded. Temple's biggest piece of intellectual arrogance, or to put it more bluntly, self-aggrandizing bullshit: "Nothing can go wrong. I've accounted for every possibility." Whatever you do with this thing, never tell yourself that. Because there is no way, ever, to account for every possibility.

As I said, in this other 1899, Temple thought he could control those things, those monsters, and use them as enforcers for his crazy-ass vision of a world state with him in charge. He thought freedom was a curse causing humanity to suffer, and that he was the cure. He didn't even have an idea of how to run global politics or the world economy. He said those were just details to be worked out later. I still marvel at how anyone could be so brilliant yet willfully stupid. He was such a genius at all that technology and occult stuff that he thought trapping those

things and running the world would be a piece of cake. As soon as they got in, they broke loose and began slaughtering his personnel. “I’ve accounted for every possibility.” Like hell. No, I don’t know how he tried to restrain them.

Now, then. I was a cop in New York for twenty-five years and a spook-chasing spy for forty. My instincts have often helped me stay alive. And right now those same instincts are telling me that someone in charge, somewhere, wants to try the same thing Temple did in that other 1899: bring those twisted, obscene monstrosities here and turn them into weapons. I get it, you can neither confirm nor deny. But there are two things I have to say to you. They’re important. Very important. I hope you take this to heart, son. You seem like a clever fellow.

First: Don’t. There’s very little chance you’ll succeed. But if you do, you’ll wish you hadn’t. And so will everyone else. And by that I mean *everyone*. Second: There is one other thing which stands out in my might-have-been memories. All the stuff that has been built up electrically in the past hundred years or so – the power systems, telegraph and telephone lines, and such – somehow it all acts as a kind of barrier to keep those things out. For about the past 40 years, anyway. So even if you somehow figure out how to build a working spirit phone, make the required human vessels, the whole shebang: it won’t work. You’d need to shut down nearly the entire world’s electrical grid for at least six months to make it function the way you’d want it to. Or at least scale it all back to pre-1900 levels.

And that brings me to something else. I’ve debated whether to tell you this. It might do more harm than good, but you’d figure it out on your own anyway. There is something else you need to prevent at all costs, whatever it takes...

RAM:

Even assuming your hypothesis of a secret atomic bomb project is plausible -

PJD:

Can we please cut the bullshit, son? We both know it's happening. Fine, you're not authorized to confirm whether it's true, assuming you even know. The point is, if enough electrical infrastructure is destroyed on a global scale, it would be sufficient to bring down the barrier I spoke of. If that happens, as long as there is enough remaining electricity somewhere to power a set of working spirit phones -

RAM:

So,

to prevent the entry of these things into "physical space-time," as in here on earth, you're saying that we need to not have a global atomic war.

PJD:

Well, it seems like a good idea not to have one anyway, especially if it's global. But yes, that's it.

RAM:

Then how do we prevent it?

PJD:

You're asking the wrong guy. I assume not making the bomb is out of the question.

RAM:

That's way above my pay grade as well, sir. But even assuming such a project exists, if our people don't make it first, the Japanese or the Germans will. Or at least they'll try.

PJD:

Yes, I imagine so. I don't pretend to have all the answers. Except one: Do not attempt to make a spirt phone. Ever. Please.

RAM:

Your view of the matter is duly noted, Mr. Donnelly. I promise it will be conveyed to higher authority. I think that completes our line of inquiry. Is there any other information or comment you would like to add?

PJD:

No.

RAM:

Very well. Thank you again very much, sir, for your service to our country, and for your time today.

PJD:

You're welcome. And good luck. Better you than me.

[END OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT]

[END OF DOCUMENT]

Switching off the tape recorder, the young man looked at the clock on the wall. Just past 2230 hours. He got up and stretched his muscles and joints with welcome relief. After putting away the typewriter and the remaining unused sheets of paper, he locked the memorandum, personnel file, and reels of magnetic tape in a safe at the bottom shelf of the locker.

Exiting the room and locking the door, he walked to the end of the windowless corridor to a door labeled RESEARCH and knocked. A small sliding door opened from the inside, revealing a window and the ruddy face of a bespectacled middle-aged man. The sliding door closed and the door opened.

Within was a large space with one wall devoted to panels with multiple dials, buttons, switches, reels of magnetic tape, and at regular intervals shelf-like protrusions embedded with typewriter keyboards. Against another wall were shelves containing recent, cutting edge publications in mathematics, technology, and various subfields of physics and engineering. Next to these were yet more shelves equally filled with much older-looking, leather bound volumes. Many bindings were blank, while others were marked with odd-looking symbols such as pentagrams and glyphs unintelligible to the casual observer. The ancient texts formed an incongruity against the modern, gray, government-issue bookcase which contained them. There were also multiple desks and filing cabinets. On one desk, on which sat nothing else, was the crucible filled with greyish, solidified metal. The remains, Donnelly had asserted, of the spirit phone.

“Evening, Bob,” the older man said. “Burning the midnight oil, too, I see.”

“Good evening, Jerry. Fortunately, it’s not midnight yet.”

“True. So, what did he tell you?”

“Not much of practical value, really. Though it’s not his fault. We’ll just have to keep trying, assuming you really want to proceed as planned. I’ll have the report in triplicate with the audiotape on your desk by oh-nine-thirty tomorrow. We’re arranging to interview Stern in New York, but if anything he seems to know less than Donnelly.”

“Well, we have to be thorough about it regardless. And with any luck, our boys will locate and isolate Crowley. But about Donnelly. His preliminary statement included something about a barrier preventing those entities from accessing earth, resulting from artificially generated electricity, remember?”

“Yes. He talked about it in more detail today. It’s in the report.”

“Good. Well, I’ve done a bit of tinkering and calculating. I think that besides electrical transmission per se, it’s largely the result of multiple isolated hermetic vacuums plus heat, over a wide geographic scale. In other words, vacuum tubes.”

“How the hell could the existence of vacuum tubes cause something like that?”

“At the moment, I have no idea. But pretty soon silicon semiconductors should make the tubes obsolete. They require no vacuum, and have a far lower conduction temperature. That might facilitate the process.”

“You mean the process of bringing those things here. And using them as weapons.”

“Right. Assuming they’re not a figment of Donnelly’s imagination. We both know this line of work can force one to confront things that challenge fundamental concepts of reality. It’s mentally unsettling, and this is especially true for field agents. Despite the psych screening protocol we have now, there’s still the odd agent who breaks down in the face of certain experiences.”

It was true. There was a special convalescent home for such agents – now former agents – about an hour’s drive north of San Diego. Bob had been there once to assist in the debriefing of one such individual. It was often impossible to distinguish between what the man had actually experienced and what was delusional; his mental state was one of terror almost beyond description, which sedatives could do little to alleviate. Most of the other residents there simply stared into space catatonically, with occasional whimpers of fear. Bob hoped he would never have to go back there.

“So,” Jerry went on, “there’s always the possibility the old man simply has a few screws loose. Still, there were the anomalies we detected, and his story seems to hang together. My instincts tell me it’s all true, so far as he can recall it.”

“He said it would be very dangerous for us to try and bring those things here physically.”

“Come on. Risk is part of the game, and in this case I’d say it’s an acceptable one. My theory is that whatever these things are, once they’re physical, they can kill *remotely* with a sufficient focus of mental power. Can you imagine what it could mean for the war? Entire battalions – perhaps even armies – eliminated at one fell swoop, with no civilian casualties. Makes the atom bomb project look like a kid’s toy.”

“But if you read the initial statement, you know it’s also supposed to include some way of...duplicating people. Biological engineering of some kind. Frankenstein stuff. Donnelly knew almost nothing about it.”

“There’s some research going in that direction as well. It’s looking feasible. I’m also formulating a method of keeping them restrained and confined, once they’re physical. Damn, this is exciting. This is why I love this work, Bob.”

“Those things are supposed to be monsters. Powerful ones. What if they don’t want to be weaponized, under any conditions we might offer or impose? What if they escape?”

The older man smiled. “They won’t. I’ve accounted for every possibility.”

THE END

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *“The Debriefing” is essentially a short story sequel to a novel I’ve written called The Spirit Phone. (Or if you like, The Spirit Phone is a prequel to “The Debriefing.” The Spirit Phone was written first, and I am actively seeking publication).*

I’ve always loved tales of the paranormal, whether presented as fiction or (alleged) fact (e.g. The Twilight Zone, the Time-Life: Mysteries of the Unknown book series, etc.). One day, a little over ten years ago, after I’d been reading about Thomas Edison’s alleged attempt to invent a machine to communicate with the dead, I struck upon the idea of writing a novel in which Edison actually creates such a device and begins mass production for the market, complete with an advertising campaign. In addition to Edison, I immediately decided upon Nikola Tesla and Aleister Crowley as major characters (or rather, my fictionalized versions of them). That was the basis for The Spirit Phone, and The Spirit Phone was the basis for “The Debriefing,” in which Robert A. Monroe is also a fictional analogue of an actual person. Though I should add that, to the best of my knowledge, the real Monroe was never a secret government researcher.

I have been asked to cite influences here. I think that for all of us who strive to write seriously, everything we read (or at least the stuff we like) influences us in some way. In this story, besides my interest in paranormal urban legends mentioned above, the element of fantastical

counterfactual history incurs a debt to authors such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling (The Difference Engine), Harry Turtledove (The Guns of the South) and Mark Twain, who wrote that brilliant archetype of the genre, A Connecticut

Yankee in King Arthur's Court. More generally, my reading is a mix of genre and literary works by various writers: H.G. Wells, Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, Agatha Christie, Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, Dante, Homer, etc.

BIO: *I was born in New York and live in Japan, where I am a Lecturer of English at Showa Women's University, Tokyo. My short fiction has appeared in Ragazine and Manawaker Studio. I am a contributing writer for The Japan Times, Metropolis, and Pop Matters. My academic writing on Mark Twain has been published in the The Midwest Quarterly, among other journals.*