

Book Review

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Life Before Life. A Scientific Investigation of Children's Memories of Previous Lives by Jim B. Tucker, MD. New York: St. Martins Press, 2005. Pp. X + 251. ISBN 0-312-32137-6 (hardcover). \$23.95 (hardcover).

Dr. Tucker so thoroughly and carefully undertakes the systematic presentation and analysis of the evidence in "Life Before Life" that it would make Sherlock Holmes proud. His book reads like a detective case, with all possible options and conclusions laid out for the reader to decide if reincarnation exists. Dr. Tucker's even-handed and objective presentation of data and counter-arguments makes it hard even for the hardened critics and skeptics of reincarnation to refute. In fact, at times, he goes to such lengths to offer arguments against the children's reincarnation memories that the reader loses sight of the most exciting material, the actual case studies being presented. That is when "Life Before Life" comes alive and captivates the reader.

Belief in reincarnation dates back to the ancient Greeks and into the present across many religions. The author notes that over 20-27 percent of Americans believe in reincarnation (p.4), along with a similar number of Europeans. It is not just Hindu and Buddhist religions that believe in reincarnation but also 21 percent of Christians in the US (p.4) according to the quoted 2003 Harris poll. Dr. Tucker is careful to state that the cases presented are not about "proof" and offers up the evidence for the reader to draw their own conclusions (p. 6).

As one would surmise there are many difficulties in researching reincarnation cases as children's remarks are not always written down or cases carefully documented

(only 33 cases out of 1,100 to date p. 96), and cases often cannot be investigated quickly enough before families meet.

“Life Before Life” data is broken down into *predictions and announcing dreams*, whereby the elderly or dying previous personality states when and to whom they will reincarnate (p.7) or the pregnant mother dreams of the impending birth and relationship to the previous personality; *birthmarks and birth defects* that match fatal wounds on the previous personality’s body or special markings made by the family on the deceased’s body in anticipation of reincarnation (pp.9, 27); *past-life statements* made by the child and corroborated by other adults; *past-life behaviors* that are unusual to the current life but similar to that shown by the previous personality (e.g. phobias, food, alcohol or tobacco preferences); and *past-life recognitions* of persons or objects which only the previous personality was familiar with (p. 28).

The investigation into children’s reincarnation statements actually begins in 1958, when Dr. Ian Stevenson won the American Society for Psychical Research contest on paranormal mental phenomena and the relationship to life after death in his essay “The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations” (p. 17). Since then, Dr. Stevenson devoted his life, until retiring in 2002, to following up leads across the world. In 1966 “Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation” was published, dealing with cases from Sri Lanka, India, Ceylon, Brazil and Lebanon. Soon afterwards additional leads appeared from Turkey, Thailand, Burma, Nigeria, and Alaska. Through Chester Carlson’s funding (pp. 18-21), and the establishment of the Division of Personality Studies at the University of Virginia, Dr. Stevenson and his assistants have been able to investigate reports of reincarnation made by children around the world

including the United States. In 1997, Dr. Stevenson's tome "Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects" was published (pp.17-23) and offered difficult to refute data on reincarnation.

Dr. Tucker joined Dr. Stevenson in 1996, leaving his psychiatric practice to pursue research focusing on American cases suggestive of reincarnation. He has received responses from dozens of American families through their website:

www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/personalitystudies. To date, there are 2,500 investigated cases world-wide. However, only 1,100 have been entered into the computer base and available for analysis across 200 variables (p.28). Those entered contain all the cases from India but none yet from Thailand, Myanmar or all the ones from the United States.

Of 971 cases from various cultures, 195 were cases involving the same family. In another sixty, the two families had a close association before the cases developed. In 115 cases, there was only a slight association. And in 93 cases the family knew of the other family but had no association. Interestingly, out of 971 cases, in 508 the previous personality was a total stranger. Out of those, more than half had information and clear identification of the previous personality that was deemed accurate (p. 106).

Dr. Tucker has done his homework in having read or been aware of the reincarnation research and writings of others. He graciously includes acknowledgement and some case descriptions of the reincarnation work of Dr. Erlendur Haraldsson (pp. 64-66), Dr. James Matlock (p.90), Dr. Richard Wiseman (p. 109), Dr. Sybo Schouten (p. 209) and author Carol Bowman (p. 53). A Notes section is included at the end of the book with footnotes for each chapter, and a complete Reference section where one can trace the original writings referenced.

Children making reincarnation statements seem generally indistinguishable from peers of the same age (p. 95) although many appear to be very intelligent (p.11) and some parents report they seem more mature or serious-minded than other children their age (p. 95). Children recounting a previous life typically do so at a very early age (p.11), usually between two and four years, with the average at 35 months (p. 89). Sometimes the communication is nonverbal, due to undeveloped language skills, with the child making gestures. (p. 89). Dr. James Matlock's work with 95 cases is cited in which he found that older children who report past-life memories often are reminded by having seen something associated with the past life (p. 90). The majority of the children (at least 300 cases across different cultures) stop talking about such past life memories around age six or seven, mean age of 72 months (pp. 12, 90). The children then proceed to move on with their current lives and may even deny any memories of the past life when directly asked (pp. 12, 90). Interestingly, 75% of the children are able to remember how they died. Of those 70% had an unnatural death by drowning, violent deaths, intentional deaths as with murder or suicide or unintentional deaths from accidents (p. 12, 92). Only 57% of natural death cases were able to recall specifics around their death (p. 93). The median time between the death of the previous personality and the child's current life is about 15-16 months (p. 12).

The manner in which the children report their past life memories are often matter-of-fact, spontaneously recounted during casual conversation at relaxed times, like bath time or trips, or from seeing something that spurred a memory (p. 94). However, some children recount their previous life or family often and with much emotion and are even distraught (p. 93). And some have difficulty letting go of their past memory, family, or

gender identity as they grow up. This book excels during those times that Dr. Tucker offers up detailed stories about these unusual and intense exceptions.

The reader is pulled into the life of Kendra Carter, who lives in Florida. At age 4½ while at her first swimming lesson she showed a strong attachment to Ginger, her coach. She recounted to her mother a few weeks later details about how Ginger's baby had died in utero due to an abortion, what that experience was like, and that she was that previous baby. Neither mother nor Kendra had known these details before and her mother did not believe in reincarnation. Soon Kendra became more and more attached to Ginger, even spending three nights a week with her. When she could not see Ginger caused by difficulties between Ginger and her mother, Kendra became depressed, stopped speaking for 4 ½ months, showed little interest in activities and slept a lot (p. 115-116).

The case of Ma Tin Aung Myo, a Burmese girl who reported detailed memories of being a Japanese soldier who was killed in World War II in Burma, highlights how previous life memories can deeply impact the individual. Not all cases reported are of the same sex as the previous life. Ma Tin Aung Myo showed a strong identification as a male, and when young played with boys, pretending to be a soldier (p. 124). She asked for toy guns, insisted on wearing boys' clothes, and refused to wear girls' clothing even when demanded by school authorities. This resulted in dropping out of school at age eleven. She continued as a young adult to identify herself as a male and at age 27 was still wearing male clothing and wanted to join the army. Out of 34 cases where the sex was of the opposite of the past life personality, 62 percent (21 cases) showed behavior that was appropriate for the opposite sex (p. 124). Although, most of the subjects in the

sex-change cases eventually did take on the gender identity that was consistent with their anatomical sex (p. 133).

Some additional unusual behaviors include food and alcohol preferences. Out of 1,100 cases, 34 showed an unusual preference for alcohol or tobacco that was consistent with the past personality. Jasbir Singh, an Indian boy, refused to eat his family's food, preferring that of the Brahmin's, a higher caste than his, but the same as his past life. His neighbor, a Brahmin, agreed to prepare food for him which he ate for one and a half years until he finally relented to eat his family's food.

The children often demonstrate unusual play (pp.15), looking a lot like post-traumatic repetitive play seen in children suffering from a traumatic event. Parmod Sharma, in India, from the ages of 4 to 7 year, became wrapped up in his play as a shopkeeper of biscuits and soda water which was the previous personality's livelihood (p. 15).

Many of the children suffer tremendously with these memories, feeling upset over being separated from the past life family that they feel strongly attached to. And their current parents have to deal with feelings of rejection from their child (p. 134). However, the intensity of emotions about the past life family often decreases after having a chance to meet them and to integrate the memories with their present life. In addition, the past life memories can often aid the person in their current life by helping them to avoid past mistakes and using the memories to guide their current behavior. Others have shown a lack of fear of death and the ability to detach from current life problems or death of loved ones (p.135) knowing that there is survival of the personality.

The author devotes a lot of detail to cases where the child is able to identify past life family members and locations. Typical of many of the cases is that of Indika Ishwara, who was an identical twin born in 1972 (pp. 60-64). At age three he began talking about a previous life, being from a town 30 miles away. He described his parents, older sister and uncle in great detail. His current family did not know anyone from that town but had a friend who worked there research the facts. Upon learning about Indika, the past life uncle unexpectedly came to visit Indika, aged four. Indika recognized him, and under controlled tests also recognized additional relatives by name when he went to visit the town, as well as a school and locations from the previous life, and verifiable details of his past death.

Additional detailed cases are also presented involving birth marks that match up with the previous personality's wounds at death or a special marking made on the body at death by a family member. A third of the cases from India include birthmarks or birth defects that seem to correspond to wounds on the previous personalities, with 18 per cent of those having medical records that confirm the match (p. 10). A very striking example is that of Patrick Christenson born in Michigan in 1971, twelve years after the first son, Kevin, died of cancer at age of two (pp. 52-54). This first son began to limp when he was one and a half which was due to mastastic cancer that was eventually diagnosed. As a result of a tumor, his left eye was protruding and bruised which eventually led to blindness. There were marks from a central line IV that had been inserted into the right side of his neck for chemotherapy. At birth Patrick displayed a slanting birthmark with the appearance of small cut on the right side of his neck, the same location as Kevin's central IV line. He also displayed a similar nodule on his scalp above his right ear where

Kevin's biopsed tumor had been, and an opacity in his left eye which caused him, like his deceased brother, to have little vision in that eye. In addition, when Patrick began walking, he limped and favored his left leg. At age 4 ½ years, Patrick began telling his mother things related to his past life as Kevin. He talked of their previous home (which Patrick never lived in) and surgeries he had, as well as identifying a picture of Kevin, when none were previously shown in the home (pp. 52-54).

Another interesting area discussed is that of memories between being reincarnated (p. 174). Out of 1,100 cases, 69 subjects had memories of the previous personality's funeral or handling of the remains, with 25 cases verified to be accurate, and 91 described other events happening on earth. There were 112 cases of reported memories of being in another realm with some reporting encounters with God or a deceased relative, and 45 reported memories of either conception or of being reborn (p. 145). Interestingly, whether the death was from unnatural or natural means did not seem to affect whether the child talked about earthly events that occurred after the death. However, cases in which the previous personality died by natural means are slightly but significantly more likely to include statements about their existence in another realm between rebirth over cases involving an unnatural means of death (p. 175). This chapter could have been enhanced by bringing in the extensive work on near-death experiences of children by Drs. Greyson, Morse and Moody, offering yet another interesting perspective to the children's reincarnation claims.

Another minor criticism is that of the statistics quoted about the 1,100 cases. There is some inconsistency and confusion in reporting with a few times where information is redundant or the statistics quoted seem not to match up (in reporting

manner of death and detailed memories). A few case studies were presented in a disjointed manner as different parts were presented as examples across several chapters. This became confusing to this reader, who at times had a déjà vu feeling that the case was read before but not knowing where or having the ability to put together the total picture in one spot.

“Life Before Life” shows its strength in the author’s detailed counter-arguments in order to refute possible alternative explanations of reincarnation (pp.31-51, 186-204). Fraud, fantasy, knowledge acquired through normal means, informant’s faulty memory, genetic memory, paranormal explanations such as ESP, possession, along with opposing viewpoints such as religious beliefs, population explosion, Alzheimer’s, as well as scientific and medical objections are tackled.

Interestingly, the author noted in ruling out the possibility of ESP as an explanation for reincarnation memories states that the children “never demonstrate any other paranormal abilities (p.45).” This reviewer has found that the corollary seems to hold true for psi research conducted with children and children’s spontaneous psi experiences. While showing paranormal abilities or reporting experiences, the children do not comment upon past life memories. However, this does not mean they might not have such memories, but rather the researcher or interviewer hasn’t probed or explored for that possibility. Something that perhaps should be included when researching children’s paranormal abilities or experiences!

The book includes the extra bonus of some guidelines for parents on how to handle their children’s statements about past lives (p. 226). The author suggests avoiding asking the child a lot of pointed questions, which could be upsetting to the child and even

lead the child to make up answers to the questions (p. 227). Sage advice not only for reincarnation cases but also for children's reports of psi experiences, as this reviewer also advises.

The author also whets our appetite by ending with some of the research being conducted at the Division of Personality Studies at the University of Virginia. Dr. Emily Kelly's (p. 233) work looking at a variety of unusual experiences that include apparitions, death-bed visions, and working with mediums to describe messages from deceased individuals known to volunteers looks quite promising. Also the ongoing work of Dr. Bruce Greyson, director of the division, in setting up a controlled experiment in a hospital treatment room to see whether those patients reporting near-death experiences are able to view a special laptop screen saver only visible from an out-of-body vantage point.

In general, "Life Before Life" offers the layperson and researcher a book rich with case material and scientific evidence that leans heavily toward the possibility of survival and reincarnation. Dr. Tucker repeatedly shows throughout the book that he has done his homework and is deftly able to respond to any possible critic with hard evidence. No matter which way you look at it, the cases suggestive of reincarnation are hard to dismiss. I for one look forward to sequels to this book, especially dealing with the American cases.

In closing, this reviewer has to agree with Dr. Tucker that "we have looked at the various criticisms of reincarnation, and we have seen that any certainty that people feel about the impossibility of reincarnation is not justified (p. 203)... We do not have an adequate reason to reject the concept and this body of work out of hand" (p. 204).