



Amityville: The Horror of It All

The bestselling book *The Amityville Horror: A True Story* was followed by a movie of the same title and a sequel, *Amityville II: The Possession*. Although the original event proved to be a hoax, that fact does not seem well known to the general public. [For more on the Amityville story, see "The ABC-ville Horror," p. 53 of this issue—Eds.] Now a new book sheds new light on the sordid affair and reviews the multiple-murder case that preceded it. Written by Ric Osuna, it is titled *The Night the DeFeos Died: Reinvestigating the Amityville Murders*.

The saga began on November 13, 1974, with the murders of Ronald DeFeo Sr., his wife Louise, and their two sons and two daughters. The six were shot while they slept in their home in Amityville, New York, a community on Long Island. Subsequently the sole remaining family member—Ronald Jr., nicknamed "Butch"—confessed to the slaughter and was sentenced to twenty-five years to life. Just two weeks after his sentencing late the following year, George and Kathy Lutz and their three children moved into the tragic home where—allegedly—a new round of horrors began.

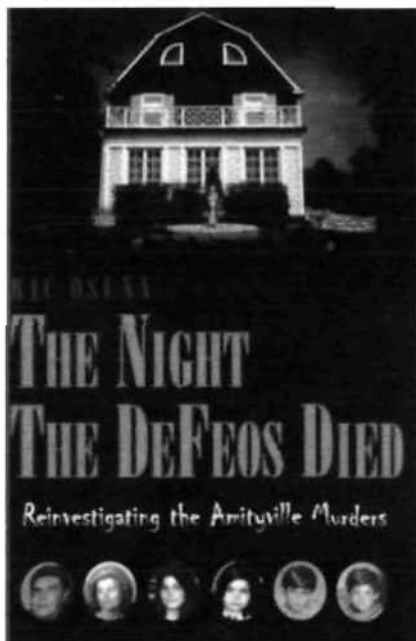
The six-bedroom Dutch Colonial house was to be the Lutzes' residence for only twenty-eight days. They claimed they were driven out by sinister forces that ripped open a heavy door, leaving it hanging from one hinge;

threw open windows, bending their locks; caused green slime to ooze from a ceiling; peered into the house at night with red eyes and left cloven-hooved

supposedly paranormal phenomena, including inflicting a priest with inexplicable, painful blisters on his hands.

Local New York television's Channel

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tracks in the snow outside; infested a room in mid-winter with hundreds of houseflies; and produced myriad other

5 "investigated" the alleged haunting by bringing in alleged psychics together with "demonologist" Ed Warren and his wife Lorraine, a professed "clairvoyant." The group held a series of séances in the house. One psychic claimed to be ill and to "feel personally threatened" by shadowy forces. Lorraine Warren pronounced that there was a negative entity "right from the bowels of the earth." A further séance was unproductive but psychics agreed a "demonic spirit" possessed the house and recommended exorcism (Nickell 1995).

In September 1977 *The Amityville Horror: A True Story* appeared. Written by Jay Anson, a professional writer commissioned by Prentice-Hall to tell the Lutzes'

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story, it became a runaway best seller. Anson asserted: "There is simply too much independent corroboration of their narrative to support the speculation that they either imagined or fabricated these events," although he conceded that the strange occurrences had ceased after the Lutztes moved out.

Indeed, a man who later lived there for eight months said he had experienced

ing the extensive damage to doors and windows detailed by the Lutztes, she noted that the old hardware—hinges, locks, doorknob, etc.—were still in place. Upon close inspection, one could see that there were no disturbances in the paint and varnish (Nickell 1995).

In time, Ronald DeFeo's attorney, William Weber, told how the Lutztes had come to him after leaving the house, and

For his part, Osuna has his own story to tell. He buys Ronald "Butch" DeFeo's current story about the murders, assuring his readers that it "is true and has never been made public" (18, 22). DeFeo now alleges that his sister Dawn urged him to kill the entire family and that she and two of Butch's friends had participated in the crimes.

In fact, Butch maintains that Dawn began the carnage by shooting their domineering father with the .35-caliber Marlin rifle. Butch then shot his mother, whom he felt would have turned him in for the crime, but claims he never intended to kill his siblings. He left the house to look for one of his friends who had left the scene and, when he returned to find that Dawn had murdered her sister and other two brothers, he was enraged. He fought with her for the gun and sent her flying into a bedpost where she was knocked out. He then shot her.

Osuna tries to make this admittedly "incredible" tale believable by explaining away contradictory evidence. He accepts DeFeo's claim that he altered the crime scene and asserts that the authorities engaged in abuses and distortions of evidence to support their theory of the crimes. Even so, Osuna concedes that "Butch had offered several different, if ludicrous, versions of what had occurred" (33), and that he might again change his story. But he asserts that "Too much independent corroboration exists to believe it was just another one of his lies" (370).

I remain unconvinced. Butch DeFeo has forfeited his right to be believed, and his current tale is full of implausibilities and contradictions. Osuna appears to me to simply have become yet another of his victims.

References

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- Nickell, Joe. 1995. *Entities: Angels, Spirits, Demons, and Other Alien Beings*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 122–129. (Background for the present article has been abridged from this source.)
- Osuna, Ric. 2002. *The Night the DeFeos Died: Reinvestigating the Amityville Murders*. N.p.: Xlibris Corporation. □

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nothing more horrible than a stream of gawkers who tramped onto the property. Similarly the couple who purchased the house after it was given up by the Lutztes, James and Barbara Cromarty, poured ice water on the hellish tale. They confirmed the suspicions of various investigators that it was a bogus admixture of phenomena: part traditional haunting, part poltergeist disturbance, and part demonic possession, including elements that seemed to have been lifted from the movie *The Exorcist*.

Researchers Rick Moran and Peter Jordan (1978) discovered that the police had not been called to the house and that there had been no snowfall when the Lutztes claimed to have discovered cloven hoofprints in the snow. Other claims were similarly disproved (Kaplan and Kaplan 1995).

I talked with Barbara Cromarty on three occasions, including when I visited Amityville as a consultant to the *In Search Of* television series. She told me not only that her family had experienced no supernatural occurrences in the house, but that she had evidence the whole affair was a hoax. Subsequently I recommended to a producer of the then-forthcoming TV series *That's Incredible*, who had called for my advice about filming inside the house, that they have Mrs. Cromarty point out various discrepancies for close-up viewing. For example, recall-

he had told them their "experiences" could be useful to him in preparing a book. "We created this horror story over many bottles of wine that George Lutz was drinking," Weber told the Associated Press. "We were creating something the public wanted to hear about." Weber later filed a two-million-dollar lawsuit against the couple, charging them with reneging on their book deal. The Cromartys also sued the Lutztes, Anson, and the publishers, maintaining that the fraudulent haunting claims had resulted in sightseers destroying any privacy they might have had. During the trials the Lutztes admitted that virtually everything in *The Amityville Horror* was pure fiction (Nickell 1995; Kaplan and Kaplan 1995).

Now Ric Osuna's *The Night the DeFeos Died* adds to the evidence. Ronald DeFeo's wife Geraldine allegedly confirms much of Weber's account. To her, it was clear that the hoax had been planned for some time. Weber had intended to use the haunting claims to help obtain a new trial for his client (Osuna 2002, 282–286).

As to George Lutz—now divorced from his wife and criticized by his former stepsons—Osuna states that "George informed me that setting the record straight was not as important as making money off fictional sequels." Osuna details numerous contradictions in the story that Lutz continues to offer versions of (286–289).