



Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on July 25, 2023

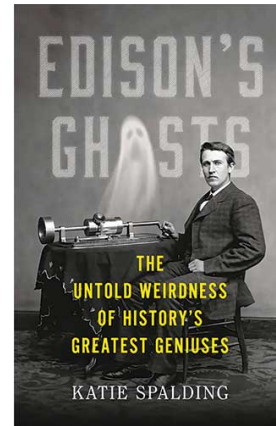
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The Review

The Hysterical Side of the Historical Record

Edison's Ghosts: The Untold Weirdness of History's Greatest Geniuses, by Katie Spalding, New York: Little, Brown, 2023, 352 pages, hardcover.

Some histories are records of man's intelligence. Others concentrate on the lack of it. What we have here inclines heavily in the latter direction, in certain regards. And it's entertaining — squared, or cubed (in a nod to the mathematician who researched and wrote this volume).



The book is a connected collection — a full 30 chapters of risible, rollicking anecdotes — that generally treats us to the hysterical side of the historical record. You need not read the chapters in order, which presents readers with a cornucopia of options as well as a quandary: Which do you choose to examine first, among, e.g., “Confucius Was an Ugly Nerd with Low Self-Esteem”; “Ben Franklin Uses World-Changing Technology to Prank Friends, Self”; “Marie Curie Defies All the Odds to Accidentally Poison Both Herself and Thousands of Strangers”; “Charles Darwin: Glutton; Worm Dad; Murderer?”; “Real-Life Supervillain Nicola Tesla Takes the Term ‘Pigeon-Fancying’ a Bit Too Literally”; “Albert Einstein: Public Nuisance, Love Rat”; and many more.

You really don't have to take your time before making snap decisions. While some chapters do get higher marks than others, there really aren't any duds.

The author acknowledges that this list is not an exhaustive directory of history's geniuses. To qualify for the book, in her view, her subjects “needed a very particular set of attributes.” To wit: They had to be “smart enough to be noteworthy, but not so smart as to never do anything really f**king dumb.” (That f-bomb, plus similar heavy ordnance unbleeped throughout the volume, is included here as a note of caution: There is a sprinkling of coarse language employed, presumably for shock effect — usually not worse than you might hear in a locker room or off-color nightclub show, though one's maiden great-aunt might well think otherwise.)

That said, the package is much more amusingly pedagogical than scatological.

Pythagoras Leaves the Beans, Takes the Theorem

Katie Spalding, the author of *Edison's Ghosts: The Untold Weirdness of History's Greatest Geniuses*, offers the following background note (with the language reflecting her Britishisms): She spent 10 years, in her words, “studying maths, which is just about the upper limit on how much maths you can do before people start actively avoiding you at parties.”

Her Ph.D. was awarded in 2018 for a thesis titled “Growth and Geometry in Multi-Valued Dynamics,”



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which is, as she puts it, “a particularly mathematical way of saying [she] drew a lot of pictures and pointed at them while saying ‘look, see?’ and hoping nobody asked any follow-up questions.” Spalding also has worked for a popular science website, provided research for a British comedy-panel game show, and written for academic and other periodicals.

While the wacky/funny side of the contents does drive much of this book, each chapter is supported by Spalding’s serious research, included at the volume’s end; footnotes in the body of the copy are usually asides and often waggish.

Where to start? For her part, the author begins with an equation. Most readers will likely guess which one — clue: It’s about hypotenuses. The chapter (“The Mathematical Cult Leader Pythagoras”), however, cares more about weird stuff, pointing out, among other matters, that Pythagoras “really, really hated beans. Total leguminophobe. And he was evangelical about it. He wouldn’t eat beans; his followers were banned from eating beans; heck, there’s even a story about him talking an ox out of eating beans.” Indeed, as we find out, this aversion may have cost the Greek his life.

Since this reviewer didn’t recall this specific leguminophobia, and we didn’t have easy access to the author’s cited sources, we hit our own shelves for confirmation — double-checking about these supposed creatures from the black legume. Voila! It did appear that while some folks might call the ancient Pythagoreans has-beens; they were indeed never-bean people. Those who lived in that community, as historian Will Durant did record in *The Life of Greece*, were forbidden to “eat flesh, or eggs, or beans.”

There’s more to that account, of course, but it’s time to jump to da Vinci to see what he’s been up to. Well, mostly, he’s not finishing his jobs, which is why Spalding’s chapter is entitled “Never, Ever Hire Leonardo da Vinci.” When he died in 1519, at age 67, as the author summarizes, da Vinci left

the world almost as many abandoned, half-finished, or outright lost masterpieces as complete ones....

Even his most famous work, the Mona Lisa, he never finished — he took it with him to France and insisted until his death that there was still more to do before it was complete. Which kind of puts the painting in a new perspective, really — the most famous image in the world, and yet nobody really knows what it was really meant to look like finished.

In passing, Spalding also does mention a potential mural competition between da Vinci and his contemporary Michelangelo. It didn’t happen. Personally, we think it would have been a draw.

Edison’s Spirit Phone Turns Out to Be a Dead Line

The titular story is about the guy you might say lit up the world. Thomas Edison’s considerable P.R. efforts certainly conveyed that impression. However, what is in *Edison’s Ghosts* shines more light in a different direction.

This chapter, as most of the others in Spalding’s book, brought to this reviewer’s mind the work of the incredibly successful American broadcaster Paul Harvey (1918-2009), who spent decades on the radio — with multimillions of listeners — as well as on television and in print. His trademark broadcasts usually had a twist and concluded: “And now you know ... the *rest* of the story.”



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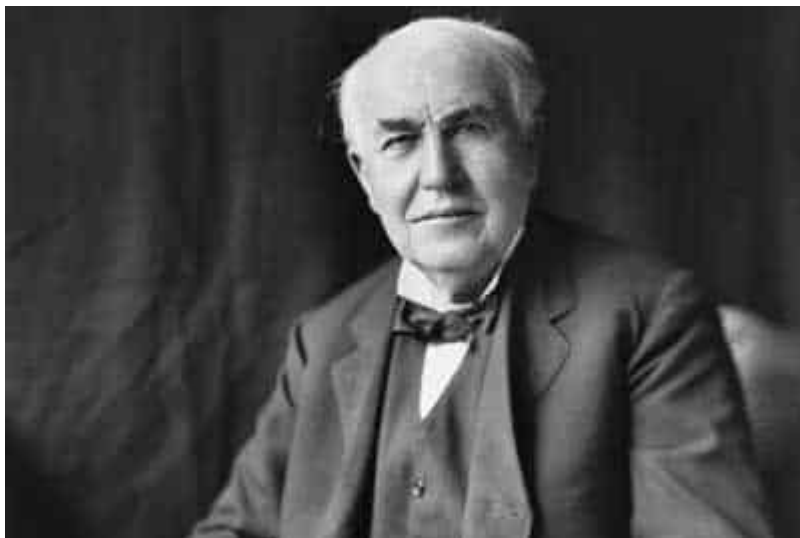
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Similarly, the accounts in this book set the stage for the star before his (or her) pratfalls.

In this case, beyond the light-bulb history and other better-known aspects of Edison's incredible career, Spalding turns the spotlight on "Thomas Edison's Lesser-Known Invention: Dial-a-Ghost." That's her chapter name for the "rest of the story" — about Edison's "Spirit Phone." Cited are Edison's comments in a 1920 interview in which he reveals that he has "been at work for some time, building an apparatus to see if it is possible for personalities which have left this earth to communicate with us." The author agrees that sounds absurd, while acknowledging that some biographers treated this episode as a hoax. However, she's got the goods from Edison's *Diary and Sundry Observations* — in the French (but not the English) version of the inventor's memoirs. "In French," as she relates,

the book had one extra chapter: Edison's designs for the spirit phone. Sketches showed that he was basing the idea off his phonograph designs — this was a standard way of working for him, a technique that modern biographers have called his "invention by analogy." His idea seems to have been to ramp up the sensitivity of the phonograph enough that it would be able to pick up the vibrations of the swarm. He even made a pact with one of his engineers, William Walter Dinwiddie, that whichever of them died first would send the other a message from beyond.

In 1933, two years after Edison's death, a magazine called *Modern Mechanix* reported about a group of scientists (previously convened by Edison) who allegedly spent hours watching a prototype of the machine for signs of communication. To no avail.



Thomas Edison (Library of Congress)

If that doesn't tickle you enough, move on to Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, described as a "feudal lord who lived with a drunk moose and psychic dwarf." Oh yes, and he had a brass nose.

Or "gravity inventor" Isaac Newton, who had a penchant for sticking needles, brass plates, or even his fingers into his eyes to see what happened. That was a bit different from when he stared at the sun for an extended period of time — and blinded himself for three days.

No doubt you'd like to know more about why the author compares Mozart to Britney Spears — as a child star who became too famous too fast. The title of that chapter, unfortunately, is a bit too gamy for



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these pages.

You may shake your head in astonishment at the actions of the discoverers of radioactivity, Pierre and Marie Curie, and their treatment of such elements, capable of causing health problems in mere hours. How cautious was Pierre with highly radioactive radium? (The two announced its existence, along with that of polonium, in 1898.) Well, he was careful — about his notes. As we read, Pierre noted

about how his skin became burned and lesioned when he *strapped a vial of the stuff to his arm for ten hours*. Marie would keep vials of radium and polonium in her pockets. At home, she kept a sample of radium next to her bed to use as a nightlight. (Emphasis in original.)

As it happens, Pierre died by getting run over by a cart; Marie died from aplastic anemia in 1934, apparently caused by radiation poisoning.

Dealing With Unrelieved Astronauts

But wait — there's more. There's the time that Napoleon squared off against his "fluffiest foe." You'll have to read the book for the details — and it's worth doing so — and Spalding brings it with *joie de vivre*. "Fresh from his victory," as she writes, "against the combined armies of Britain, Russia, Prussia, Sweden, Saxony and Sicily, the Emperor of France had finally been defeated." It was over. Yep, the "bunnies had won."

Tesla fits the bill well in *Edison's Ghosts*. He's quoted *in extenso* about how his projected "Teleforce" should not be called a death ray and why such terminology is not applicable. To which Spalding adds her rebuttal: "Got that? He's not the crazed inventor of a terrifying death ray. He's the crazed inventor of a terrifying death *beam*."

If you visited Benjamin Franklin back in the day, it wasn't necessarily the kite and lightning that should worry you, but you probably should have been concerned about what might happen if you were offered a drink. Ben, it turns out, liked to prank his buddies by hitting them with electrified wine glasses. He also came up with, as Spalding writes, "a party game called Treason, in which participants were told to touch a portrait of King George and would receive a shock when they did so."

You are not going to get hit with a lot of politics in the book's pages. What there is leans left — as you might expect from many of today's commentators and modern academe, especially from the U.K. In a chapter about how Ernest Hemingway was working, very ineptly, with *both* the NKVD and FBI, there's a bit of sneering about the United States going "full Red Scare" and its "McCarthyist 'committees.'" We do learn about Hemingway's "most likely drunken plan to become a bona fide pirate of the Caribbean" out of Cuba. We are introduced to Hemingway's "Crook Factory." This crew is described as "ragtag band" of

local bartenders, sex workers, Loyalist Spanish refugees, Basque priests, fishermen, smugglers, and whoever else caught Hemingway's eye and imagination. This motley crew — or as the FBI termed them, "an amateur information service" — would perform vital counterintelligence work against any Nazi spies hoping to infiltrate Cuba.

And all of that would be done, according to "Papa's promise," for a measly \$500 a month. Lest you



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wonder, that is about \$8,500 in today's money. "What a steal!" says a cheeky footnote.

The target for the final chapter is collective, entitled "NASA Forgets about Women, Toilets and the Metric System." This one may have you chuckling, if abashedly — because it is, well, more than a little indelicate. Surely mature people wouldn't chortle about bathroom humor. Yet, it is a wee bit difficult to act refined when a key character is known as Dr. Flush, and the best brains in the American space program then try to make a jump from UCDS (urine collection devices) to Disposable Absorption Containment Trunks.

Here's the issue at hand: It seems that the powers-that-be had neglected certain aspects amid the competition to the skies. Time travel has us imagining ourselves as Alan Shepard. At one point, because of NASA's lack of foresight, he was forced to relieve himself. Heroically, to be sure. And, writes the author, "because you're in a rocket waiting for blast-off, you generally have to be on your back, this left the Free World's first great pioneer in the Space Race lying face up in a puddle" of his own urine. We'll stop there.

What else can we say about *Edison's Ghosts*? You will get a charge out of it.



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