

# Ouija Believe It?

BY RAYMOND SIMON

Considering that it's just a rectangular board inscribed with the alphabet, some numbers, and the words "Yes" and "No," it's surprising what strong reactions the Ouija board evokes. Some consider it a mere toy; many regard it as a gateway to hell.

Robert Murch knows that better than most people. He's the foremost authority on Ouija boards and has been discussing them at gatherings of paranormal researchers and horror film fans since the mid-1990s. "When I first got my first gigs to speak, I wasn't even allowed to stay for the whole convention," Murch recounted. "It was like, 'You can come. You can talk. But then you have to leave,' as if whatever had infected me from these boards, they might catch."

Lately, the public seems to be growing more comfortable with these mysterious objects. Just last April, the Talking Board Historical

Society, founded by Murch and fellow enthusiasts, convened in Baltimore to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Ouija board in the city where it was first manufactured. The Mayor's Office welcomed them with open arms, proclaiming April 25, 2015, Ouija Board Day.

Undoubtedly, Murch has helped to shift people's perception of Ouija boards. He's thoughtful, articulate, and has a sense of humor about his curious hobby, which he's discussed on numerous television shows, including the Smithsonian Channel's *My Million Dollar Invention*.

He's also consulted on films featuring Ouija boards like 2014's *Inherent Vice*. Those Hollywood gigs are apt given that Murch traces his interest in Ouija boards

to a fateful day in 1986 when he saw the Kevin Tenney movie *Witchboard*. "I had a grandmother who really loved sci-fi, horror and she took me to see it when I was clearly not supposed to see it," he said. "But, I mean, who's going to turn down an older lady sneaking a kid into the theater?"

The fright flick made a big impression on the 13-year-old, who watched wide-eyed as issues like belief, death, and the supernatural played out on the big screen. His interest deepened a few years later, when he helped some college buddies find old Ouija boards for a scavenger hunt. Noticing that all the boards were slightly different, he consulted some reference books,

which offered conflicting explanations. That started him on a two-decade quest to learn as much as he could about the Ouija board. "What I discovered was, just like in any story, the truth is much stranger and entertaining than all of the urban legends that have evolved around the Ouija board," he said.

According to Murch, Ouija boards emerged out of the Spiritualist movement, which began in 1848 when the Fox sisters, two young women from upstate New York, claimed that they could communicate with the dead. That initiated a nationwide craze. Séances and table turnings attracted people from all walks of life. Talking boards, precursors of the Ouija, were one of many devices associated with Spiritualism, and their purpose was undeniable:



ROBERT MURCH, THE "CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD"

"There's no doubt about it," Murch said emphatically. "The first talking boards, absolutely, 100 percent, were meant to talk to the dead."

Newspaper reports from the late 1880s first brought talking boards to the public's attention. Shortly afterwards, an enterprising man named Charles Kennard moved from a small town in Maryland to Baltimore, bringing along an idea for a toy version of the talking board that *might* enable people to communicate with the spirits. Kennard and his business partner, Elijah Bond, established the Kennard Novelty Company and began manufacturing Ouija boards in 1890. Their toy sold well. Within two years, the company had factories in Baltimore, Chicago, and New York.

The mysterious game's appeal continues unabated to the present day. "It's an amazing thing," Murch said, "because today we live in this world of tap and swipe and iPhones and tablets, and yet, the *Ouija* movie comes out and, according to Google, the Ouija board, as a product, was one of the top five selling games last year for Christmas."

The Ouija board's popularity has remained consistent over the decades, but perception of it has changed. Murch's collection of talking board ephemera includes numerous examples of vintage advertisements, photographs, and sheet music depicting the Ouija board as a harmless pastime. Norman Rockwell even painted two young lovers playing with a Ouija board for a 1920 cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Hollywood movies offer visible proof of a shift in perception. During the silent film era, Murch explained, Ouija boards often had a humorous connotation. In thrillers from the 1940s, they might be used to reveal a suspect's name. And by 1960, when William Castle's low-budget horror flick *13 Ghosts* appeared, they foretold death. But no movie had the same impact as William Friedkin's 1973 film, *The Exorcist*, which garnered critical acclaim and mainstream popularity. It also scared the

bejeezus out of everyone. In an early scene, Linda Blair's character, Regan, tells her mother that she's been playing the Ouija board by herself and speaking to someone named Captain Howdy. Eerily, the planchette slides away from her mother's grasp. It's a brief scene, but it was a watershed moment. "After that, almost every movie used it for either an evil spirit possession or a demonic possession," Murch said.

Curiously, Hasbro, which currently owns the trademark, continues to market the Ouija board as a game suitable for players "Ages: 8 Years & Up." Actually, since 1890 the board's makers have been coy regarding its use. For Murch, however, every interaction with the board represents an attempt to come to terms with death, even if people are unwilling to acknowledge it. "The Ouija board for most people is just a game and a rite of passage and, today, is played, at most, at sleepovers," he said. "In fact, it's most people's first experience with the paranormal."

There's no such reticence at the Talking Board Historical Society, whose members wholeheartedly embrace the Ouija. Murch hatched the idea for the TBHS in 2007–2008, when he discovered the unmarked grave of Elijah Bond. Wouldn't it be great, he thought, to create an organization for everyone whose knowledge and encouragement had helped him? Today, its board includes historian Brandon Hodge and artist A.G. Ruff, among others. "I have surrounded myself with a gaggle of people who make me look amazing," Murch admitted with characteristic modesty. The TBHS has even obtained 501(c)(3) status, although that raised some eyebrows. "The IRS did call me," Murch said with a chuckle. "They wanted to know if it was for real." The group has big plans, too. In the fall of 2016, it hopes to honor Helen Peters, who gave the Ouija board its name, by placing a new stone at her grave. But that's another story...

To learn more, visit [www.robertmurch.com](http://www.robertmurch.com) and [www.tbhs.org](http://www.tbhs.org). ■



THE TBHS CONVENES AT THE GRAVE OF ELIJAH BOND

IMAGES COURTESY OF ROBERT MURCH