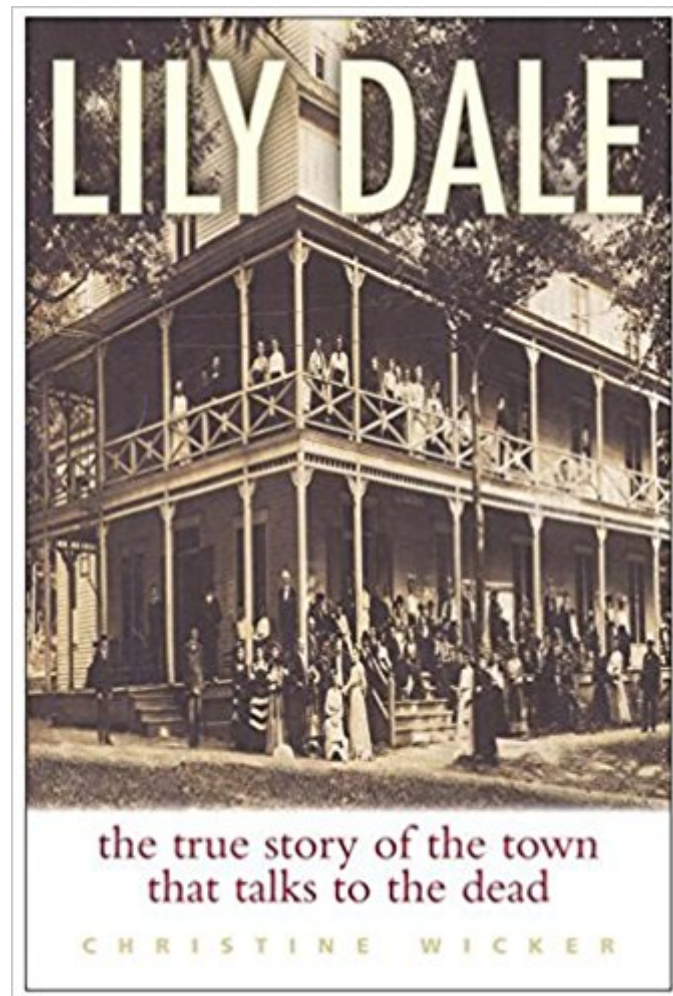




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# Lily Dale: The True Story Of The Town That Talks To The Dead



## Synopsis

In Lily Dale, New York, the dead don't die. Instead, spirits flit among the elms and stroll along the streets, sometimes dressed in garb more common 120 years ago, when Lily Dale was founded and suffragette Susan B. Anthony was a frequent guest. According to Spiritualists who have ruled this Victorian hamlet for five generations, the dead don't go away and they stay anything but quiet. Every summer twenty thousand guests come to consult the town's mediums, who can hang out a shingle only after passing a test that confirms their connection to the spirit world. On the hot June day when reporter Christine Wicker comes to the world's oldest and largest Spiritualist community, she is determined to understand the secret forces -- human or otherwise -- that keep Lily Dale alive. She follows three visitors: a newly bereaved widow; a mother whose son killed himself; and a beautiful, happily married wife whose first visit to Lily Dale brings an ominous warning. Are the mediums cold-hearted charlatans, as Sinclair Lewis wrote of them? Or are they conduits for a hidden world that longs to bring peace and healing to the living, as psychologist William James and muckraker Upton Sinclair once hoped to prove? Investigating a movement that attracted millions of Americans in the 1800s and now barely survives, Wicker moves beyond the mediums' front parlors and into the lives that tourists never see. She follows the mediums to a place where what we know and how we know it is the greatest mystery of all.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Since it's become nearly extinguished, the American Spiritualism movement seems more ripe for

sociological study and amused incredulity than a topic for deep reflection or journalistic memoir. But Wicker, a Dallas Morning News religion reporter, resists her own skepticism just as Lily Dale's citizens resist letting the movement die. The result is a portrait not just of an upstate New York town built 122 years ago on old-fashioned spirituality, but also of the mediums who practice there, their clients, and Wicker herself, who lets details of her own spiritual beliefs lightly shade her travels to Lily Dale. Although the book details the town's story, Wicker uses its history merely as a framework to explore more slippery topics, e.g., the nature of faith, the value of belief and the need for solace. She explores these areas through the stories of those who visit Lily Dale annually, craving a few insightful words about deceased family members or hoping for a premonition about romances, careers or children. Some of the tales are sad ones, but Wicker's jaunty pacing and humor keep the work from growing too dark and leave the reader with a feeling of tenderness, rather than pity, toward her subjects. She also weaves in stories of trickery, giving the tales of otherworldliness a nicely earthbound counterpoint. By the end, Wicker feels subtly changed, and she offers no answers as to why that might be or how long it may last. This lack of resolution is refreshing, however, and wonderfully fitting for a book about the mystery of faith. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

• (Cleveland Plain Dealer) • A probing study of the nature and power of faith, Wicker's story is often a hoot as well.... • (Fort Worth Star-Telegram) • Royally entertaining. • (Dallas Morning News)

Had to buy it for a class. It's honestly not a "bad" book, but the author has a lot of trouble trying to decide how she feels about what she's writing, which doesn't translate well. She's supposedly an anthropologist, but she's extremely flighty and doesn't seem to form any really solid conclusion about anything she discusses. She also tells disjointed and unrelated stories in no particular order and seemingly for no particular reason. I guess it's "interesting" but it's certainly not very entertaining or even very informative. I'd give it a miss unless it's your only option for some reason.

Journalist Christine Wicker "is the first reporter to write a book on Lily Dale, a town that refused to co-operate with journalists until a few years ago." She wrote in the first chapter of this 2003 book, "I was a religion reporter ... when I first drove a rental car past the filigree sign that proclaims Lily Dale to be the world's largest community of Spiritualists... For more than a hundred years, people of the Dale have believed they can talk with the dead. They think anybody can. Call them demented,

sneer at their gullibility, suspect them of trickery---catch them in it even, lots of people have---but they won't give up what they believe... I wanted to know why this strange little outpost clings to such absurd ideas. I wanted to know who these people are and what makes them tick." (Pg. 1-2) She notes, "Only Spiritualists can buy houses in the 167-acre compound, a stricture that can be enforced because the Lily Dale Assembly is a religious corporation made up of community residents... Lily Dale residents don't own the land their houses sit on. They lease the land from the Assembly. This ensures the Spiritualists will never lose control of Lily Dale, but it also keeps real estate prices depressed." (Pg. 45) She records, "Their beliefs once caused them to be considered freethinkers. Freethinking about religion, which included escape from Christian ideas about original sin and atonement, were important reasons for the original appeal of Spiritualism." (Pg. 47) She interviews a person who "remembers when the Assembly went to court to evict Christian Spiritualists who wanted to start a church of their own." (Pg. 58) Later, she adds, "I noticed that a number of the Spiritualists' adult children were conservative, rather disapproving Christians. I wondered whether the loosey-goosey ways of their parents had sent these children scurrying toward faiths that give them certainties and firm doctrine." (Pg. 119) She observes, "Alcoholism is also a common affliction among mediums... John Slater, known as the dean of American spiritualists in the 1920s, often disappeared for multiple-day binges with his secretary, forcing Lily Dale authorities to pacify his fans with concocted stories of illness and emergency." (Pg. 25) She frankly reports, "Lily Dale... admits everything. There used to be a shocking amount of fraud, perpetuated by bad mediums, and there's still some of it around, the mediums say. It blackens the name of good, honest mediums, and it ought to be stopped. In the 1940s, Lily Dale outlawed all physical mediumship except in classes and private circles." (Pg. 67) This is an absolutely fascinating and utterly unique book, that will be "must reading" for students of religion, Spiritualists, New Age sympathizers, and anyone looking for an engaging book about a little-known culture.

It's always been a suspicion of mine that everyone is fascinated with the bizarre. I refuse to believe that I'm the only one interested in esoteric belief systems and people who claim to be experiencing phenomena whose reality common sense denies. However, there is a tremendous dearth of voices writing about these things with an anthropological perspective or in an accessible voice. Normally, if one wanted to learn anything of contemporary Spiritualists--yes, apparently they still exist!--one would probably have to read some how-to manual from the New Age section of the local bookstore, which, of course, would be filled with more naïve credulity than most could bear. Fortunately, though, Christine Wicker has saved us from this fate with her book *Lily Dale: The True Story of the*

Town That Talks to the Dead. Never has there existed a voice so perfectly suited to write on this topic. Wicker was formerly the reporter for the religion section of the Dallas Morning News, and subtracting from the richness of her own experience in the topic, she approaches all of her topics from the objective lens of a journalist. She isn't a believer in out-of-the-ordinary things, but she respects everyone she encounters with compassion and empathy, and gives validity to their experiences. She points out ridiculous things when she sees them (and there are plenty of them in this book), but she avoids condescension as much as she can. She humanizes her subjects (which, in this case, are generally widows) by explaining their life stories and how their beliefs have helped them overcome struggles. In this book, Wicker travels to the town of Lily Dale, a community in New York which was designed as a summer camp for Spiritualists during the religion's late 19th century heyday. While this place is perfectly real, it sounds like something out of a young adult fantasy novel: in order to own property in Lily Dale, one must prove one's abilities as a medium before the community's board. Every summer Lily Dale hosts workshops on all things arcane, and people come from all over in hopes of communicating with the dead, seeing into the future, and getting supernatural healing. On top of that, Lily Dale actually contains the U.S.'s best examples of Victorian gingerbread architecture, making it the ideal setting of any horror novel. I read this simply because I was fascinated with the idea of anyone continuing to believe in Spiritualism. While it once had a million followers, most of its respected mediums had their feats disproven during their own lives. I imagined that any contemporary practitioner would have to do as much as possible to create distance from these charades, but I was quite wrong. At the workshops she attended, Wicker was informed very precisely how one could replicate the psychic forgeries that were well-known in the past. (In attempts to avoid more of these, Lily Dale has banned its residents from accepting money to produce physical displays of medium abilities, but there are still people in the town who claim to have experienced it.) The people of Lily Dale readily admit their forefathers' frauds and continue to sell psychic feats to a public that doesn't seem to mind at all. Wicker thoroughly investigates the community's residents and visitors in the book. Her prose is lovely and she treats everyone with respect, even though they're all bizarre, and she does all of this without losing humor. If the topic appeals to you, there's no reason that you shouldn't thoroughly enjoy the book.

Fantastic book about a fantastic town!

A Great new Lily Dale Book to add to my collection! Great book! Great price! Fast Shipping! I would recommend!

Full of wonderful info on the great psychics of New York and how Lilydale got started way back when. Very intriguing book full of great stories.

Visiting Lily Dale has been on my to-do list for a few years. A friend recommended this book & as soon as I finished it I made my first trek to NY... I can't wait to return! The author's first person, in depth account helped me know what to expect. Loved the book & love Lily Dale :)

This is an honestly, thoughtfully written memoir of several visits to Lily Dale and the people she met there. The author examines openly her own feelings and questions, and presents an honest and intelligent interpretation of her experiences.

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