

Lyall Watson

Lyall Watson (1939-2008) was a South African-born zoologist, anthropologist and author of books about science and the paranormal. The popular metaphor 'hundredth monkey' was coined by him.

Life and Career

Malcolm Lyall-Watson was born in Johannesburg on 12 April, 1939. His father was an architect and his mother a radiologist. He attended Rondebosch Boys High School in Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand, where he studied zoology, botany and anthropology. He acquired his PhD in ethology from London University under the supervision of Desmond Morris, the curator of mammals at London Zoo and author of the best-selling book *The Naked Ape*.[1](#)

Watson travelled widely, working among other things as director of the Johannesburg Zoo, an expedition leader, a commissioner for the International Whaling Commission, and a television writer/ producer for programmes as diverse as sumo wrestling and parapsychology. The latter included a four-part series titled *Natural Mystery*, which described the work of Michael Persinger, Cleve Backster and other noted psi researchers.[2](#)

Hundredth Monkey

Watson is well-known for his coining of the expression the 'hundredth monkey', the idea that a new activity, once taken up by a sufficient number in a single community, can spread to other communities at a distance (effectively a form of telepathy). He based this on research by Japanese scientists in the island of Koshima, who observed macaques learning from others how to wash grit off potatoes, suggesting that this led to monkeys in other parts of the world spontaneously doing likewise. Challenged by a scientist who failed to find any evidence for the phenomenon in the scientific papers, he admitted that the term was a metaphor for a concept which he had based on 'personal anecdotes and bits of folklore among primate researchers'.[3](#)

The term 'hundredth monkey' has been widely used in titles of books and films[4](#) and has become iconic in the sceptic community as an example of a debunked claim.[5](#) His activities and writings brought him public recognition, which grew following a 1986 appearance on the BBC's *Wogan*.[6](#)

Supernature

Watson's 1973 book *Supernature* spent almost a year on the best-seller list in Britain and sold over 750,000 copies in paperback.[7](#) A reviewer for the Society for Psychical Research noted Watson's belief that '[a]ll the best science has soft edges, limits that are still obscure and extend without interruption into areas that are wholly inexplicable. On the fringe, between those things that we understand as

normal occurrences and those that are completely paranormal and defy explanation, are a cluster of semi-normal phenomena.’⁸

Uri Geller credits Watson with having introduced him to British audiences. He writes on his website:

Lyall phoned David Dimbleby and insisted he had to have me on his show. That live appearance sealed my international success, and began the love affair with Britain which I’ve enjoyed for 35 years. If it hadn’t been for Supernature’s bestseller status, the BBC wouldn’t have taken Lyall, or me, seriously — he gave me the scientific kudos that enabled the executives’ closed minds to open a fraction.⁹

Selected Works

Supernature: A Natural History of the Supernatural (1973). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

The Romeo Error: A Matter of Life and Death (1974). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Gifts of Unknown Things (1976). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Lifetide (1979). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Beyond Supernature: A New Natural History of the Supernatural (1986). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

The Nature of Things: The Secret Life of Inanimate Objects (1990). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Dark Nature: A Natural History of Evil (1995). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Further information

<https://katherinelyallwatson.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/lyall-watson-22696.mp3>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NS49ifaRGWE>

Melvyn Willin

Literature

Amundson, R. (1985). [The ‘Hundredth Monkey’ phenomenon](#). *Skeptical Inquirer* 9, 348-56.

Fortean Times 241. Necrolog: Lyall Watson, 24-25.

Frazier, K. (ed.) (1991). *The Hundredth Monkey and Other Paradigms of the Paranormal*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus.

Grimes, W. (2008). [Lyall Watson, 69, Adventurer and Explorer of the ‘Soft Edges of Science,’ Dies](#). *New York Times*, 21 July.

Haining, P. (2008). *True Hauntings*. London: Constable & Robinson Ltd.

Morris, D. (1967). *The Naked Ape*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Playfair, G.L. (2000). Mediawatch. *Paranormal Review* 16, 14-15.

Randall, J. (1974). Review of *Supernature*, by L. Watson. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 47, 326-28.

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Watson, L. (1979). *Lifetide* (1979). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Morris (1967).
- [2.](#) Cited in Playfair (2000), 14-15.
- [3.](#) Cited in *Fortean Times* (2008), 24
- [4.](#) Amundsen (1985), 349.
- [5.](#) Frazier (1991).
- [6.](#) <https://www.facebook.com/BBCArchive/videos/1986-wogan-lyall-watson/11261...>
- [7.](#) Grimes (2008).
- [8.](#) Cited in Randall (1974), 326-27.
- [9.](#) https://www.urigeller.com/lyall_watson_trinity_college_princess/