



# Psi-Fi

## [The Inner Life of Objects](#)

by Maxine Combs

Corvallis, Oregon: Calyx Books, 2000

Paperback, 179 pages, \$14.95



## [Lorraine Schein](#)

Maxine Combs's book, about three women who work in the office of a society for psychic research, manages to be both funny and thought-provoking. Though little occurs in the way of the usual dramatic action, such as sex, violence, etc. (though there is a fire), I was still drawn into the characters' lives.

The three women are very different, yet get along well in the office. Further, they are defined by the nature of their beliefs, and how that affects their perception of reality.

Opal, a former aspiring actress, is now the middle-aged editor of the Zoetic Society's review, a position she has held for almost thirty years. The book describes Opal in a passage that catalogs her beliefs:

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What does Opal believe?

In keeping an open mind. A Chinese monk could have visited the Grand Canyon in the fifth century. The Celts could have established a pre-Columbian settlement on the east coast.

The unfinished figure in [Opal's husband] Sol's painting could one day speak to her.

Three thousand milligrams of vitamin C a day promotes healing.

Broccoli should be eaten three times a week. High quality olive oil should replace most other fats and oils. No white bread.

Some people can penetrate the barrier between the living and the dead. Ida Lupino. The mystic poet Novalis.

UFOs and aliens don't exist.

A disciplined life is better than a hedonistic one.

Breathing is paramount. When you breathe, you inhale the universe.

It's possible to live for decades with people, yet only partially know them. People, like Mayan wells, conceal both gold rings and garbage in their depths.

Her father died at too young an age.

She would have made a strong Lady Macbeth, although she liked being a witch.

Dreams restore the psychic equilibrium and always mean something.

Poppy Greengold, the second protagonist, is a single mother whose beliefs center around into goddess worship, while Geneva is a Ph.D. in Yeats studies who questions all beliefs. She has never had a paranormal experience and doubts anyone else has. Geneva joined the society, "because she hoped belonging to a group investigating the paranormal would improve her critical skills," and take her out of the rut academic life has left her in—with a degree, but no boyfriend, no social life.

And what of the mystery man, George Bluestone, who works upstairs in their building? No-one has ever seen a visitor entering his office, and there is no occupation listed on his door. The three women wonder what he does, and Geneva follows him one day on her lunch hour to see if she can find out.

The three women's lives change with the arrival of the psychic Abel Moore. A former businessman who comes to give a lecture to the Society, he became a psychic in middle age after an operation for a brain tumor left him with the ability to do psychometry (divination by touching or being near a physical object). But his predictions are only accurate 33 percent of the time.

Abel Moore's lecture is about the inner life of objects. After it, he collects personal items from audience members to do his readings. He is nervous about this, as he is not always "on."

One of the first objects Moore picks—a golden ring—gives no psychic impression, so he improvises, saying that the ring's owner has had a face lift. He thinks this will get him off the hook and no one will claim the ring, as no woman would admit to having had a face lift. But he is

surprised when the ring's owner speaks up, proving his improvisation to be an accurate reading.

Moore's predictions for Geneva and Poppy create suspense; part of the pleasure of reading this book is finding out whether they come true.

Throughout the book, the author's language is vivid and poetic: "The sky's an eye shadow blue" and the moon is "pale as biscotti." Her dialogue is wonderfully funny and fresh too: Her characters' interactions are humorous and quirky:

"Greetings," Geneva says. She arrives—without knocking anything over—at her swivel chair and fishes inside her lopsided striped straw handbag for a can of Diet Coke. She pulls the tab and announces, "I heard on the radio that a vision of Eleanor Roosevelt appeared on an old Formica tabletop in a city dump."

Poppy sniffs as if Geneva's just dragged home a dead bird to show it off.

Opal straightens her back. "A vision of Eleanor Roosevelt! What city?"

"Houston. They've built a shrine, and hundreds have started bringing flowers and burning incense."

Opal crumples a napkin around her chicken bone and tosses it into the wastebasket. Eleanor Roosevelt on a tabletop. A possible story for the Review? What will people dream up next? Florence Nightingale in a birdbath? Madam Blavatsky in an ice cube tray! But back to Eleanor. "City dump. Tell me all."

"It started as a glow, then changed into a face."

Opal takes a few notes.

Geneva pops open her plastic salad box. "Possibly an optical effect."

"Optical effect's a cop-out explanation," Poppy complains, her glance resting on Geneva's unevenly cut fingernails. "Some people explain the Yellow Blob that way. Or UFOs."

Geneva raises an eyebrow as if the gesture were force enough to disintegrate the Yellow Blob. As well as any stray UFOs. Why are you so gullible, the eyebrow seems to ask.

And consider the author's off-center eye for detail:

It's still light when Geneva leaves the restaurant. As she walks home she keeps an eye out for rough spots in the pavement and potholes. What causes potholes? Cold weather? Abrupt changes in the weather? She has a Ph.D. but most simple facts elude her.

The sun's low and radiant. Late afternoon's the best time for photographing buildings, but why is that? Because the angle of sunlight softens them? Highlights them? She can define postmodernism, but knows nothing about angles of sunlight. A shame, because it's amazing what happens to buildings against a late afternoon golden sky. They seem glorified. The dry cleaners, the wedding dress shop, the bookstore; a fire seems to transfigure them all.

Opal has a souvenir key chain from a conference on Cosmos and Mind she attended that says, "Science as an interpreter of the mysteries of the universe is a dismal failure." That sums up the attitude taken towards science in this book, but Combs's work succeeds in giving us an enjoyable glimpse of those mysteries.

The approach she takes toward the subject of psychic phenomena is not one of heavy mysticism or New Age reverence. Psychic ability is not even seen as the sign of a superior, enlightened person, or as something that can be controlled or understood. It just happens, as it did to Abel Moore.

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