

Book Reviews: UFO

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1. Philip J. Klass, *The Real Roswell Crashed-Saucer Coverup*, Prometheus, Amherst NY, 1997, 240 pp., hc, \$24.95;

2. Kendrick Frazier, Barry Karr and Joe Nickell, eds, *The UFO Invasion: The Roswell Incident, Alien Abductions, and Government Coverups*, Prometheus, 1997, 315 pp., hc, \$25.95;

3. Robert Sheaffer, *UFO Sightings: The Evidence*, Prometheus, 1998, 327 pp., hc, \$25.95.

If a genuine extraterrestrial spacecraft were to land on the White House lawn, and its occupants were to say that they have had planet Earth under surveillance for hundreds of years and that theirs was the very first extraterrestrial visit, stubborn UFOlogists would not believe them. The ETs would be accused of being part of the government's coverup." That conclusion by Philip Klass in *Crashed Saucer Coverup* (p. 219) summarizes the difficulty the rational face when they offer mere facts to persons whose minds are made up.

As promised on the cover blurb, Klass shows that there has indeed been a coverup-by the perpetrators of the fiction that the „Roswell incident" has any more reality than the Bermuda Triangle, Von Däniken's space gods, or the Great Pumpkin. Klass establishes, not only that all pro-UFO books reach indefensible conclusions, but that they do so intentionally, by suppressing evidence that refutes and annihilates those conclusions.

In citing the selective editing of an Air Force document by the authors of the book that essentially invented the „Roswell incident," Klass writes (p. 29), "This omission of vitally important 'hard data' is understandable only if [Charles] Berlitz and [William] Moore were intentionally trying to cover up information that could demolish the credibility of their crashed-saucer book." And he points out that every later book endorsing the reality of a crashed saucer also suppressed the same evidence.

Klass's chapter on „The CIA's once-secret UFO Papers" concludes (p. 57), "They provide incontrovertible evidence that if one or more crashed saucers and ET bodies were recovered from New Mexico in 1947, word of this historic event had not been reported to top CIA officials or President Truman as of 1952-some five years later." He reports that, when he was interviewed about Roswell by CBS's *48 Hours*, NBC's *Unsolved Mysteries*, CNN's Larry King, and the producer of a documentary for A & E, he gave all of those interviewers a photocopy of the formerly secret Air Intelligence Report #203, showing that as late as 1948 the Air Force believed that, if UFOs had any factual basis at all, they were probably „from a Soviet source." Not a single reference to that document, or Klass's explanation of its implications, was broadcast by any of the alleged "news" peddlers. (p. 207)

And nothing has changed. More than a year after the publication of Klass's book, NBC broadcast a two-hour endorsement of Whitley Strieber's fantasy novel, *Communion*, treating it as nonfiction during the 1999 February sweeps period.

A point that a lot of readers are likely to overlook, since Klass does not make an issue of it, is that one of the most totally discredited „eyewitnesses" to alleged alien bodies, Gerald Anderson, easily passed a polygraph test. The pretence that polygraphs are „lie detectors" that work better than tossing a coin, "heads it's the truth and tails it's a lie," is as recklessly perpetuated by the media as the pretence that a crashed spy balloon was a flying saucer.

The UFO Invasion is a collection of articles that first appeared in *Skeptical Inquirer* between 1984 and 1996, updated where necessary by the original authors, plus one previously unpublished article by Robert Baker.

In the chapters by Philip Klass on William Moore's „M J 12" hoax, Klass demolishes any pretence that Moore is merely an incompetent investigator who sees little green men under every bed. While Klass leaves it to the reader to draw such a conclusion, the evidence leaves little doubt that Moore is a blatant, conscious liar with a depraved indifference to anything but personal profit.

On Whitley Strieber's best-selling fiction, Robert Baker (p. 221) is probably being too charitable when he categorizes Strieber's alleged experiences as hypnopompic hallucinations that Strieber sincerely mistakes for reality, rather than simple profit-motivated lies. Certainly Strieber's pages parallel hypnopompic incidents. But they also parallel the science fiction

fantasies that he was writing long before turning to pretended nonfiction. But I agree with Baker's conclusion that, while Budd Hopkins (*Intruders*) manipulated his „hypnotized“ interviewees into saying what Hopkins wanted to hear, he probably did not do so intentionally.

On the Fox network's „alien autopsy“ hoax, Eugene Emery summarizes (p. 145), "It was not what you would expect from a major network that thought it was broadcasting a history-making film. It was, however, what you would expect from a network trying very hard not to spoil an illusion." In other words, Fox was not deceived by the hoax. Fox was a conscious co-hoaxer. While the various contributors are correct in concentrating on actual UFO reports and investigating whether there is a discernible mundane explanation, they seem to be missing a bet in not stressing the impossibility of life forms evolved from extraterrestrial DNA resembling humans in *Star Trek* make-up. As Isaac Asimov observed (*Life and Time*, p. 15), „Considering in how many different ways life developed on earth... it would be an almost impossible chance to have a species there closely resemble some species here." Only Baker raises such a point (p. 219): „The fantasy-prone abductees' stories would be much more credible if some of them at least reported the aliens as eight-foot-tall, red-striped octopoids riding bicycles and intent on eating us for desert." And he recognizes (p. 259), „If they appear to be humanoid this proves they are imaginary." And on page 263: "Like his gods, man also creates his aliens in his own image."

Other authors did raise some logical objections: the astronomical distances between star systems, the prohibitive amount of fuel (fifty tons for every ton of payload) needed to accelerate even to ten percent of light speed, and the certainty of a sudden, ninety-degree turn by a spaceship turning any protoplasmic occupants into "grape jelly." But they acknowledge the futility of raising issues that believers can shrug off with the delusion that the laws of physics are not necessarily the same elsewhere in the universe. The parallel with religion, which postulates metaphysical beings not bound by the laws of nature, is very evident.

I was on the point of dismissing the chapter by Armando Simon on „Psychology and UFOs" as an indefensible inclusion written by a super-gull who endorses the reality of psychoanalysis, MMPI, and psycho-quackery in general. But when Simon quoted Thomas Szasz's definition of hypnotism (p. 48), "two people lying to each other, each pretending to believe both his own and his partner's lies," I concluded that his article was worth printing after all. Even so, the suggestion that the mental state of alleged abductees can be better evaluated by psychiatrists than by bartenders or tealeaf readers is not one I accept.

Of the three listed books, Robert Sheaffer's *UFO Sightings* is the most readable, for the logical reason that it covers a wider canvas than Klass, and is written as a continuous narrative by a single author, as the Frazier book is not.

Sheaffer covers the „Roswell incident" as concisely as possible, given that he was not trying to compete with the definitive book on the subject published by Klass a year earlier. Given the way Roswell has been touted as UFOdom's equivalent of goddess-mythology's Lourdes, I was surprised to learn that, as late as 1966, when Project Bluebook asked the two largest UFO-promoting groups to supply a list of their most impressive cases, Roswell was not listed by either organization as worthy of investigation. I was also surprised to learn the extent to which UFO mythology has been inflated by John Fuller and Charles Berlitz, two men whose ability to create a mystery where none exists gave the world *The Ghost of Flight 401* and *The Bermuda Triangle*. I was under the impression that the „Roswell incident" was front and center long before 1980, when Berlitz and Moore resurrected what had previously been a dead issue. Not so.

UFOs first hit the headlines in 1947, when pilot Kenneth Arnold reported seeing some unidentified flying objects. As Sheaffer notes (p. 15), "Arnold didn't say the objects *looked* like saucers—actually he said that they looked like boomerangs.... that flew erratic, like a saucer if you skip it across the water." But because a reporter misquoted Arnold's words, thousands of people started reporting „flying saucers" rather than „flying boomerangs." As Sheaffer observed, "Seldom had the power of suggestion been so convincingly demonstrated." I find myself thinking that, if *Star Trek* aliens for the past thirty years had all resembled canines, abductees would have reported being taken aboard the mother kennel.

Sheaffer notes that (pp. 81-82), „The descriptions of supposed UFO aliens contain clear cultural dependencies; in North America large-headed gray aliens predominate, while in Britain aliens have been mostly tall, blond, and Nordic.... the Galactic High Command must have divided the earth into Alien Occupation Zones whose boundaries reflect those of human

culture."

On the absence of plausible UFO photographs, Sheaffer writes (p. 103), „The only reasonable explanation for such a curious slate of affairs is that there are no genuine UFOs to be photographed."

Sheaffer's chapter on „UFOs and the Media" shows that, while the Fox network's alien autopsy hoax was the most blatant fraud perpetrated in the name of news and public affairs, it differed only quantitatively from the incompetent investigation and deliberate suppression of demystifying evidence by every element of the mass media. Sheaffer identifies callous disregard for fairness and accuracy in stories by the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Baltimore Sun*, CNBC, NBC, CBS, *Science Digest* (amisnomer) and *National Inquirer*. He summarizes (p. 187), "This incident [refusing to report when sensational claims in previous stories are falsified] reveals no real difference between 'respected' newspapers and the *National Inquirer* when it comes to UFO reporting." And on page 193: „Apparently they get away with such sloppiness because no journalistic peer pressure develops to push them toward more accurate reporting."

The moral bankruptcy of UFO reporting is best illustrated by the Travis Walton case. When *National Inquirer* first involved itself with Walton, it arranged for him to take a polygraph test. That was a safe procedure, since a finding of „truth" could be front-paged, whereas the actual finding of „gross deception" (p. 38) could be, and was, suppressed. Later, since two polygraph tests, especially when administered by different persons, are no more likely to produce identical results than tossing two coins will produce two heads, Travis was tested again and declared to have passed. That result was widely publicized, even though „the less-experienced polygraph examiner who had passed Travis was repudiated by his employer, who disagreed with the interpretation of the test results." That information has been public domain since 1976, yet UFO apologists continue to cite the Walton case as evidence that UFO abductions are real. Paramount made a movie about it in 1993, and that movie has been broadcast more than once on a major TV network with no warning that the „based on a true story" subtitle is a conscienceless lie.

I fully expected that these books would provide details I had not previously encountered. What I did not anticipate is that they would change my overview. For example, I had long believed that the prime manipulators of public opinion in the direction of gullibility were sincere investigators such as J. Allen Hynek, who had either never heard of Occam's razor or deemed it applicable only to other people's security beliefs. On the basis of the new (to me) evidence presented here, I am now satisfied that UFOlogy would still be widely recognized as crackpotism but for the machinations of two of the most conscienceless liars to perpetrate a profit-motivated swindle since a science fiction writer invented a new religion (that has outlived him) to win a bet: William Moore and Charles Berlitz. Their out-of-context quotations, suppression of falsifying evidence, often from the same documents they selectively quoted, and (in Moore's case) deliberate forgery of alleged government documents, show them to be as intentionally fraudulent as the creator of the „Hitler diaries."

It seems no coincidence that all three books have titles calculated to win them shelf space in bookstores that would shy away from openly skeptical titles. Since Prometheus cannot be expecting to sell copies to hardcore believers, their strategy is presumably to get the books before the public, where they will be seen by persons with more discrimination than the nonsense-peddlers believe exists. It might even work. On the other hand, reading the overwhelming evidence against an alien presence presented here will no more cure the dogmatic ignorance of true believers than the equally overwhelming evidence could cure believers in gods, fairies, hairy hominids, angels or psychics.

In a society manipulated by television into believing in every kind of imaginary creature capable of keeping viewers glued to the disinformation tube and enriching the prostitutes who produce saleable lies, books like these are the only source of accurate information most people will ever encounter. I am recommending that my local public library buy all three, and I urge *American Rationalist* readers to make the same recommendation to libraries in their areas. The inane fantasies of Strieber, Hopkins and Mack cannot be restricted to the fiction shelves where they belong, but at least they can be balanced.

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