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REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



The Reliability of UFO Witness Testimony edited by V.J. Ballester-Olmos and Richard W. Heiden. Turin: UPIAR, 2023. ISBN 9781281441002, pp. 711.

Downloadable via <https://tinyurl.com/4mw3pksj>

Reviewed by Ray Ward

The Introduction to this hefty volume makes its approach very clear. Developments since the first post-World War II sighting in the USA which garnered wide publicity, private pilot Kenneth Arnold's 1947 report, when he claimed to have seen nine shiny unidentified objects flying past Mount Rainier at speeds he estimated at 1,200 mph (1,932 km/h), are summed up: only 2% of reports remain unidentified after investigation, but for phenomena defined with 'strong consistency' the percentage is zero. A psychosocial hypothesis is suggested: as far as close encounter claims are concerned, 'all seems to be in the mind'. None of the photographs, films, videos or other imagery is valuable: the focus should be on human testimony and how scholars observe this phenomenon of 'visual chimeras'. The objective is not to judge the behaviour, ethics, motivation or intention of UFO witnesses, but to assess the value of testimonies of weird tales which do not harmonise with palpable evidence. It is the 'alien encounter disorder' (AED), characterised by accounts bluntly dismissed as 'false', 'unreal, but real-to-the-subject', and 'delusional', which merits urgent psychological investigation. This attitude is repeatedly and variously expressed: 'UFOs come from inner space'; painstaking work has yielded no material proof; and the UFO event 'is essentially a psychosociocultural phenomenon, without any physical reality (other than misidentification of mundane stimuli)'. The editors sum up by referencing a term used by my friend Professor Chris French (a contributor): 'We are

convinced that UFO close encounters and abductions are mainly a sub-discipline of "anomalous psychology".'

It is impossible to summarise such a vast book, but I will pick out items and points which seem particularly interesting.

The Hills are, as Peter Huston says in his paper, probably the best-known of all abductees. He met Betty, and was impressed, but there are strong reasons for doubt.

There are seven sections. Section I, Case Studies (17 chapters) has some familiar names: the Phoenix Lights, Pascagoula, Gulf Breeze, 'Raël', and Barney and Betty Hill, and respected authors like Joe Nickell, James Oberg and Gary Posner. False recall, fallibility, ball lightning, hypnagogia, fireballs, 'When testimony becomes testament' and many other topics are discussed.

The Hills are, as Peter Huston says in his paper, probably the best-known of all abductees. He met Betty, and was impressed, but there are strong reasons for doubt. She was interested in such matters before the claimed incident, saw UFOs regularly, contradicted herself and made illogical or incredible statements. Another paper, by Nigel Watson, discusses the stresses the Hills were under at the time of their claimed experience. Theirs was a mixed-race marriage when such relationships were frowned on; Barney was worried about

his children from a previous marriage; both had stressful jobs and were involved in civil rights campaigns.

'Raël' (Claude Vorilhon) met an alien in 1973, founded an organisation, developed a doctrine to spread messages from extraterrestrials ... you get the picture. Claude Mauge's paper says *he lied from the beginning and added lies to lies as time went by. The positions of three sociologists who studied him from different viewpoints are presented. Raël is also discussed in another paper, by Susan J. Palmer, on his reliability, the challenges posed by the religious content of his extraterrestrial 'messages', and the problems and questions that arise from these.

Tim Printy considers the Weinstein catalogue of 80 years of pilots' reports, demonstrating that pilots are not the highly reliable observers suggested by its author. The matter is also discussed by Matthew V. Sharpe in his paper on forensic cognitive science, and by Richard F. Haines in Section III.

Wim van Utrecht describes a case in Poland in 1979 of an unidentified aerial phenomenon which apparently obstructed the passage of an ambulance carrying a pregnant woman. It was the setting moon, and the case had a classic mix of elements typical of such misinterpretations: the illusion of the moon being bigger when low; the parallax effect (the impression of being followed by a distant stationary object); and grotesque errors in estimations of size, distance and altitude.

Section II, Psychological Perspectives, has 12 chapters on eyewitness reports of alien life,

abduction claims, hypnotic regression and false memories (by Chris French), and cognition and memory distortion. David V. Forrest hypothesises that sleep paralysis, hypnosis, preoccupation with the paranormal and extraterrestrial, and perhaps a history of medical and/or surgical procedures, may predispose to 'alien abduction' claims.

When people are presented with unequivocal and undeniable evidence that their beliefs are wrong, they often emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of their beliefs.

Chris French discusses the use of hypnotic regression, and the evidence that it results in, not true memories of real events, but false ones produced by the technique itself, and that it can also implant false memories, concluding that reports based on it should be treated with extreme caution. He too mentions the Hills, and the view of a psychiatrist who regressed Betty that their accounts were fantasies based on her dreams. And he naturally refers to the work of Elizabeth Loftus (quoted on the back cover), the outstanding authority on false memory.

Section III, On Witness Testimony, with 14 chapters, discusses perceptual illusions, eyewitness reliability, UFO myth propagation before social networks, 'memories are not documentaries', three simple tests of

reliability, 'close encounter' claims, the superiority of data over accounts, objectivity and subjectivity, and, as mentioned, pilots' reliability. And George Adamski (does anyone now remember him?) gets an inevitable mention.

Cláudio Tsuyoshi Suenaga's paper mentions Leon Festinger, who also crops up in David Clarke's excellent book *How UFOs Conquered the World: the History of a Modern Myth* (Aurum, 2015), which I reviewed in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* (vol. 8 (3), 2015). Festinger found that when people are presented with unequivocal and undeniable evidence that their beliefs are wrong, they often emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of their beliefs. An alien message warned of a disastrous flood; no flood materialised; and the contactee said she had received a new message: their group had radiated so much positive energy that the gods had postponed the destruction!

Section IV's seven chapters, on Empirical Research, include ones on real clinical cases of alien delusions, memory distortion (again), dreams, misjudgement of size, sleep reports as lucid dreaming, fantasy imagery (with lots of colour illustrations of its literature!), and misperception of atmospheric entries of meteoroids and artificial satellites.

The three chapters of Section V, Anthropological Approach, discuss cognitive and social aspects of contact, similarities with claimed big cat

sightings, and belief in aliens and the imaginary.

Section VI has two chapters on Metrics and Scaling: the measurement of the subjectivity of UFO testimony, and the reliability of the UFO sighting story.

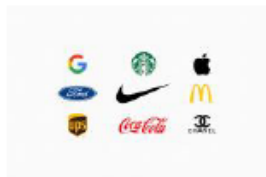
Section VII's two chapters cover Epistemological Issues: the fallacy of the residue (the small minority of cases supposedly unexplained); and research guidelines for dealing with the lack of reliability of UFO/UAP testimonies, when events cannot be reproduced under controlled circumstances, and how scientifically valid studies can be distinguished from the pseudoscientific detective-like efforts common in the field.

The book ends with information about the contributors, and acknowledgements, including to the proofreaders, among whom my name appears!

In this area as in all 'paranormal' fields, nothing will ever finally still the nonsense.

There is vastly more to this book than I can possibly summarise or even adequately mention, and it will be a valuable resource. But, as recent reports, and a response to my Clarke review when it appeared elsewhere, show, in this area as in all 'paranormal' fields, nothing will ever finally still the nonsense.

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Symbols: An Evolutionary History from the Stone Age to the Future Richard Sproat. Cham (Switzerland): Springer, 2023. pp xiii + 234.

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

This book deals with the nature and origins of linguistic writing systems and other associated symbolic systems. It will be of interest to anyone with a serious interest in language and/or symbols more generally. Many of the

issues involved are controversial and invite specifically skeptical interest.

Richard Sproat is a linguist whom I originally met at a conference about the Phaistos Disk (an ancient artefact bearing a still undeciphered written

text) which was staged in London in 2008. In addition to his linguistics, he is a semiotician, concerned with symbolic systems on a broader front (see below for specific examples). One of Sproat's many strengths is his close focus upon