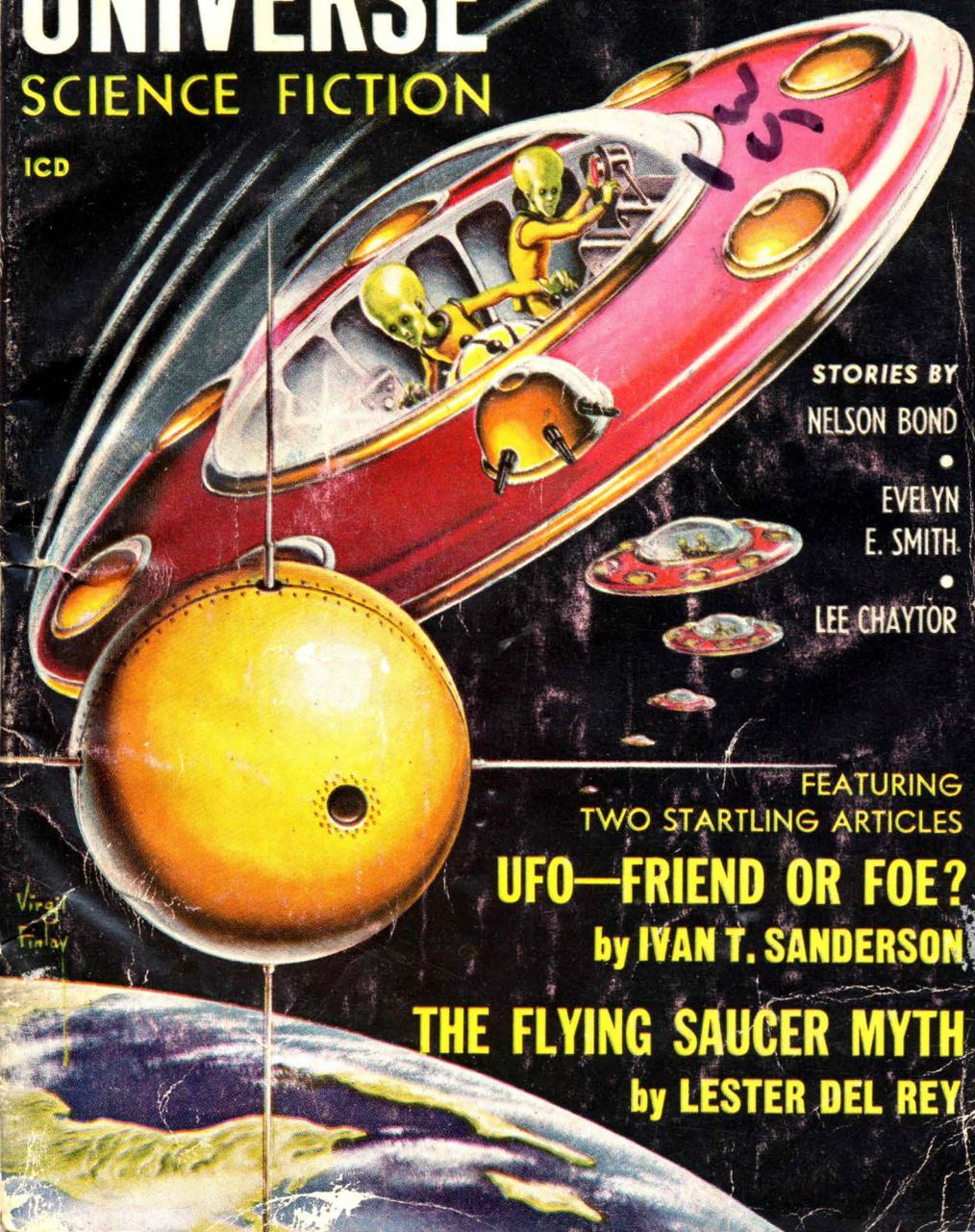


# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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**UFO—FRIEND OR FOE?**

by IVAN T. SANDERSON

**THE FLYING SAUCER MYTH**

by LESTER DEL REY

*Virgil  
Finlay*

# the saucer myth

by LESTER del REY

**When observers see shapes in the sky, are these detailed and exact only in their own blindly unquestioning minds?**

SOMETIMES when I read a magazine or attend a fan meeting, I get the feeling I no longer belong in science fiction. I never fitted into the comfortable majority of ideological pushovers too well, of course. I wasn't taught to believe in Santa Claus or Easter bunnies. In college, I couldn't swallow communism with blind faith, any more than I could stand the drooling fear of sections of the press. But I thought science fiction was essentially sane and healthy enough to inspire as much love and loyalty as anything in this human world.

Of course, it inevitably had its lunatic fringe. There was a group of paleolithic minds who cowered in fear of deros when Shaver distorted Mme. Blavatsky. The neurotics tried to become psychotic with the help of dianetics. And recently, poltergeists have been remodelled into psionics and tamed with the aid of amulets and charms known as printed circuits, to the bemusement of the gullible.

Under all such transitory ripples, however, I thought there was a steady current of

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*It is difficult to adequately describe Lester del Rey, SF writer and editor, author of the recent NERVES (Ballantine) and one of the most respected writers in the field. Here he discusses "The Saucer Myth", as bluntly as at the meeting he mentions where, to quote the Fantasy Times report, he "lashed out at flying saucers in no uncertain terms".*

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interest in science and respect for the methods and attitudes of scientific thought. I believed that the Smythe Report was of more interest than any number of myth reports.

I'm less sure now. Recently, at an annual conference of what I've considered one of the better s-f fan clubs, their only idea of promoting science fiction was to hold a symposium on flying saucers. This discussion wasn't even a pro-and-con affair. If L. Sprague de Camp hadn't dropped in as a voice of sanity and if I hadn't decided out of my own cussedness to make a futile attempt to insult the audience, there would have been no voice opposing saucers as the latter-day soul and embodiment of s-f interest. It seems that after nearly ten years of the myth, the fans no longer can realize that UFO stands for little but Unfounded Fatuous Optimism, not for Unquestionable Fact from the Oracles.

If the science in science fiction is based on no more than a willingness to accept, and if the readers can't spot the flaws that are part and parcel of the "scientific" attitudes of the saucer "observers", then I want *out!* Science has nothing to do with having a mind so open that the wind blows through it.

Science is based on *what* and *why*, not on *what-if* or *why-not*. It has to be that way

because no other method of handling our knowledge has worked, though all have been tried in the past. In science, any man has the right to present any theory as an explanation of observed facts, provided (1) that his facts can be checked or established beyond reasonable doubt; (2) that his theories do not violate what is already known; (3) that the steps of logic involved in arriving at those theories can be presented; and (4) that the burden of the proof of his theories lies with him. It is helpful if his theories tend to make understanding of other facts easier, and if they lead to tests which can be performed to check them. It is always suspicious, though not necessarily damaging, if his theories make things much more complicated than they were before. But the important idea is that a theory is nothing but speculation, and that he cannot demand that others automatically accept it even to the point of checking it; if he wants his idea to win acceptance, he must prove its value.

So far, the boys who are pushing the saucer myth seem to be demanding at least some measure of qualified acceptance, without doing the work of proving anything. They present what they call proof, but no scientist could dare to use such proof of anything in any other field.

There have been ten years

for some kind of proof to come in. I've tried to find what has been learned positively during that time, and I wind up with only a large body of what-if material. I can find more proof of ghosts, witches and werewolves than I can of anything of any significance whatsoever behind the flying saucer tales.

People have given accounts of seeing saucers. But there have been far more accounts of ghosts being seen. Men of the best possible reputation have reported ghost sightings. Men of considerable technical training have sighted apparitions. Huge groups have seen ghosts, and agreed on such a sighting. There has been far more agreement in the accounts generally than in the accounts of the saucers. The same applies to the hearing of banshees, meeting Satan, leprechauns, werewolves and vampires; in the case of vampires, at least, there was often the actual physical evidence of the mysterious weakening, loss of blood, and death.

This sadly weakens the biggest argument of the saucer fans, though they seem to have an almost majestic ability to disregard the weakness: "With so much evidence from so many observers, there must be something to it." Yet only the most extreme of the cultists would accept the same argument in favor of vampires or ghosts!

Reports of observers are unfortunately not good evidence. In the first place, they aren't necessarily all truthful. Any lawyer would be forced to admit that the most impossibly sound documentation of a man's character is no absolute proof of his veracity in any given circumstance. Human beings are capable of lying when they have no reason whatever for it—and even more so for local fame, or to cover up some real activity. The testimony of anyone as to the high character (or the obvious sincerity) of the observer doesn't make this much less the case, either.

Men can have fantasies—even men who are seemingly rational and who really want to be truthful. Men can be confused into seeing faces in clouds, or having a vague shape become sharp, detailed and exact in their own mind.

And worst of all, men have very little ability to judge size, distance, or even shape beyond a certain limited extent. The eyes are too close for any real stereoscopic vision to work beyond a hundred feet. We determine distance and other factors beyond that by other complicated habits of evaluation. Anything in the sky is hard to judge. Repeated tests have proved that a small object of some vague shape travelling at a comparatively low height and slow speed can be reported honestly by even trained

observers as something high up, of some highly complicated pattern, and moving at incredible speed.

If science must accept the reports and stories about the saucers as evidence, then the scientists had better get to work at once on checking back over all the sightings of witches on broomsticks and the other nonsense of observers.

But, of course, there are pictures! Well, that is...

Umm, it's amazing how few and how bad those pictures turn out to be after the marvelously detailed saucer accounts. In a country where millions of feet of film are processed regularly, and where everyone takes pictures of Aunt Sue at the beach, you'd think that the first impulse would be to get that extraordinary event down on film.

Yet the more exact the sighting, the less pictorial evidence there is. The photographs we have leave much to be desired. True, Adamski had pictures, but even amateur sleuths arrived at the facts about them—the object pictured was just too plainly an old-style lamp holder, with the workmanship that of a small object, not of a big one. His picture was too plain. The others are too vague.

One objection has been that the camera can't see as well as the eye—which is mostly nonsense. A camera can take

a sharp, detailed picture faster than the human eye, at just as great a distance, etc. The laws of optics don't change much, in spite of any mystic hankering we may have to be better than mechanical devices.

I've looked at quite a few pictures. Again, we have no evidence of distance, or hence of true size. And we usually find no real evidence of anything more than a vague shape. There are a few sharp pictures, but with less detail than there should be. I'm sure any scientist would be willing to examine one that did show detail; but these seem to evaporate on a request to examine one closely.

A high-powered magnification of a negative—not a print, please—can usually turn up amazing amount of information. The grains of silver in the negative emulsion can give a fair indication of the angle of light striking the film—and hence of the distance of the lens from the film. By care in this matter, the close-up film of a small object can be separated much of the time from a true picture of some object at a great distance. Needless to say, there have been times when good pictures of saucers turned out to be nothing but table-top mockeries.

Also from a negative under high magnification, an amazing amount of detail can be recovered, if the distance is

really great enough to justify using the infinity marking on the lens—but less detail will appear if the eye has guessed the distance wrongly. Detail is precisely what does not show up in most negatives.

Prints, incidentally, are worth precisely nothing. It's hard enough at best to determine how much fakery can be done, using a negative. A good man with an airbrush can work up a print, then re-copy it on film, and reprint it until it would fool nearly anyone. It just happens to be a little easier to spot any false note on the negative.

I have yet to see a film negative which showed anything of any value—other than vague shapes that could be anything, including dirt in the developer—and which would stand up under close scrutiny. If there is any such evidence, it should be brought forth with great willingness, and science would be at least genuinely interested. It would still be poor proof—but it would be something. Unfortunately, the men who seem to have the most pictures also seem to have the largest amount of nothing, on close examination.

I wouldn't accept the details of a new species of butterfly on such evidence. Why in hell should anyone expect a scientist who has serious work to do to take time off and give serious attention to such evidence when it is sup-

posed to support something so fantastic that even the fans can't hope to explain it adequately?

Gentlemen, the burden of the proof is on your shoulders. Why not weed out the trash yourselves first, and then present what you have in a form that can be used to convince science you at least have more than a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. (I won't give the rest of that quotation from Shakespeare, though it's very much in my mind.)

Also, a theory is supposed to explain something. So far, the best explanations on the subject of the saucers have been so full of arrant nonsense that the better mind among the saucer fans (and unfortunately, some quite nice and intelligent men have wasted their time on the hobby) will have no part of them.

The theory, stripped to its very basic nature, seems to be that there are things moving through our atmosphere that we don't know about or understand. These may be of more than one type.

So what?

There are a million places where science doesn't know all the answers. Why should the vague jumble of "facts" of all types the saucer men present win the attention the fans demand? All right, there are objects in the sky, or lights, or something else, which may not

all be fully explained by known facts. Of course there must be—I can't even explain the exact nature of every grain of dust, and science hasn't catalogued every germ in the air, I suppose. Maybe there are things there which are larger and have some significance. But what significance?

Foreign planes? That's obviously assinine. No foreign power would fly over our territory repeatedly to let us know about such things, and to risk giving up the secret in case of an accidental landing, any more than we would risk useless cruising over Russia with our latest developments.

Our own planes? If so, then the departments of the government deny it; and that means that it isn't something for science to investigate, since it is known somewhere, but is secret. Anyhow, if we have such marvels, why are we in such a tither over the arms race?

Objects from outer space? Well, that implies intelligent guidance. Are there any signs of this? There are claims there are. Yet for ten years, account after account has come in, indicating large numbers of such objects, sent out at what must be tremendous expense—for what purpose? Any race intelligent enough to build saucers must have at least enough intelligence to have some purpose in mind. Is that purpose satis-

fied by the childish business of scaring a few crackpots and stirring up a few people to waste time trying to contact them? Ten years of hanging around and making no provable contact—ten years of ineptitude in observing us without letting us know we're being studied, or in trying to contact us without contacting us? Ten years of just frittering around aimlessly, after such efforts in getting here? Ten years even of not knowing there is intelligent life here, when our own technological developments are flying through the air?

Why did they waste the tremendous efforts in building their craft (whatever the things may be like) or of wasting the energy to get here? The amount of energy would be tremendous, too. Maybe they can even exceed the speed of light (though why should we suppose they can?), but they surely aren't doing it without energy!

And since they must be from beyond the Solar system, if they are intelligently-built craft from space, the energy needed to reach us is almost beyond our power of imagining—so great that it becomes stupendous in amount of fuel needed, even if they should have the ultimate energy of the total conversion of mass to drive.

They don't come from Mars or Venus or Jupiter—or at least, science has every rea-

son to believe they can not and no reason to believe they can. We have been able to detect radio emanations from the planets, and our information theory has developed to the point where we could detect any evidence of intelligence or information on such signals; we might not be able to decode them, but we could easily determine that they carried intelligent messages. They do not. Nor do they carry what would indicate QRM to us—that is, the radio interference caused by technical machinery.

Magnetic power (shades of Ehrenhaft!) is still not free from such an objection, since electrical and magnetic fields interact—and anyhow, why should we accept such a hypothesis without a single shred of evidence to back up the idea of magnetic power?

(In fact, the explanations of the original theory become nothing but a lot more *whynots*, each of them with its lack of evidence and its needless cluttering of improbability on top of improbability. Don't expect science to accept such a mess, when even the basic idea behind all this hasn't been made more acceptable.)

There are many more reasons for being pretty sure that no such saucers are coming here from our own planets. So far, nobody has come up with any convincing evidence—convincing to anyone

trained to weigh evidence in any way—that they are coming from the sun's planets.

But there's even less reason why they should come from some other solar system for no good purpose. A minimum of four light years of space to be travelled is not conducive to simple curiosity, and any race that could make such a journey would not be afraid of us, would have some reason for more than a single ship coming, and would either be capable of hiding from us or else getting in touch with us.

Of course, you can suppose that maybe they have telepathy and are hanging around reading our minds. (Why should they be interested in us, anyhow? All we have is atomic power, and that wouldn't affect them.) But that's just adding still another unexplained improbability on top of another. Why can't there still be witches, but now so modern that they've mastered invisibility?

It wouldn't be so bad if there wasn't a fair explanation that satisfies much of the so-called evidence. Donald Menzel didn't give any absolute explanation, nor was he trying to. But he did come up with a theory which does what most of the saucer theories don't do—it serves as a possible explanation within the framework of the knowledge we have. Most of the objects could be caused by re-

fraction in the air, and he has demonstrated how this might work—and how anyone can create the same effect! (That's one of the things a good theory should point out.)

He may be quite wrong—but any other theory must have more validity on its side than his, if science is to pay any attention to it. So far, none seems to have as much.

And don't say that pictures prove there were real objects there. A mirage can be photographed, just as it can be seen. It isn't something of astral nature (if anything is); it's made up of light waves which can be focussed on film and which will activate photo-chemical changes.

Of course, there is still the point raised that the Army spent time and money to investigate the saucers, so there must be something to them; surely the Army wouldn't waste its time otherwise. Most assuredly, it would!

The duty of the Army is to protect this country, and to do so it must take into account almost any possibility. The FBI answers and investigates all kinds of stories, knowing that most of them will be false—because it can't miss even the slight chance of one being true. The same applies to the Army. If there is even a slight chance that there just might be something behind one of the various saucer sightings, then it

has to investigate them all to be sure. And since there was a whole mess of so-called evidence, the job took time and effort. But it doesn't prove that there was anything real behind the investigation.

Then, as a final bit on that, there is the fact that the Army turned up radar evidence for the saucers. This is most convincing to many who refuse to use the methods of science, but who think that any scientific gadget gives authenticity to anything. However, it neglects the nature of radar. Radar is simply a means for detecting anything which will reflect radio waves of high frequency when they bounce back. It's well known to radarmen that even such things as moisture in the air can cause cockeyed results. Radar is sometimes much easier to fool than the eye, sometimes less easy to fool. But a radar trace doesn't automatically prove that there is anything hard and solid present.

I've left out the men who have talked with beings from the saucers. This is a huge subject which I'd rather not touch here, just as I'd rather not be near enough to touch the men who may quite sincerely believe that they have done such things as talk to Venutians. I know a woman who believes quite sincerely that she talks regularly with the bird men of Mars. I can't

prove she's wrong, since I have never been to Mars, but I see no reason to change my opinion of the density of Martian atmosphere and the surface gravity of the planet, even though they indicate no bird people could fly there. She says they do fly, and she means it. I say they don't so far as I can determine. If sincerity is any proof, of course, she will win over me, any time.

I also refuse to accept the ideas that there are men who are in contact with other races in the saucers—highly advanced races at that—but who somehow can't come up with a single tiny bit of new and demonstrable information.

If we must set up a scientific society to investigate every bit of speculative nonsense that comes along, then my vote would go to a scientific investigation of sea serpents, with attention to the Loch Ness monster. That, at least is something interesting. There have been so many accounts of sea serpents that

there must be something behind it all, obviously. And think of what we could learn from finding a true living sea serpent—particularly one as smart and gifted with a perverted sense of humor as the monster. Or maybe vampires would be even more interesting, since they offer a key to the secret of immortality.

If men want to spend their time on the hobby of flying saucers, I don't object. But why drag it into science fiction? Why take up space that would be so much more profitably spent on interesting exploration of other myths?

As science, the myth is too ridiculous to justify the paper spent on it. As a myth, it presents a singular lack of interesting detail and significance in the life of mankind. They don't even make a basis for a good fantasy, damn it! As science fiction, they don't belong as much as did Shaver's unspeakable deros.

In other words, flying saucers simply aren't my dish of tea.

