

GETTING INTO MYSTERY

ARTHUR C. CLARKE'S MYSTERIOUS WORLD. By Simon Welfare and John Fairley. Collins. 217pp. Illustrated. \$19.95.

Reviewer:

BRIAN JEFFREY

"THE Universe", says science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, "is such a strange and wonderful place that reality will always outrun the wildest imagination; there will always be things unknown, and perhaps unknowable".

'Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World' is based on a new 13-part television series which, if the book is any indication, should be worth waiting for. It looks at what Clarke terms Mysteries of the Second Kind: those which are still mysteries, though in some cases we have a fairly good idea of the answers. For the record, Clarke distinguishes these mysteries from those of the First Kind — "something that was once utterly baffling, but is now completely understood", e.g. a rainbow; those of the Third Kind — "phenomena — or events — for which there appears to be *no* rational explanation", e.g. the phenomenon known as Sponta-

the phenomenon known as Spontaneous Human Combustion; and those of the "Zeroeth Kind" — where the only mystery is why anyone ever thought there was a mystery in the first place, e.g. the Bermuda Triangle.

Mysteries of the Third Kind appeal to Clarke because they include an intriguing blend of questions which may one day be fully answered (thus making them Mysteries of the First Kind) and questions which may never be answered satisfactorily, especially where historical events are concerned, because the evidence has been lost or destroyed. Thus, while we may yet discover living examples of animals long thought to be either extinct or figments of the imagination, we may never know who built the stone circles of Britain or which star the Three Wise Men followed to Bethlehem.

Under Clarke's direction, scriptwriter Simon Welfare and pro-

ducer John Fairley travelled five continents interviewing witnesses of strange events and unexplained phenomena. They talked to men and women who claimed to have seen monsters from the depths of oceans and lakes, to have been showered by frogs and fishes, and to have watched "unidentified flying objects" crossing the night sky in brilliant light. They talked to explorers and mountain dwellers who

brilliant light. They talked to explorers and mountain dwellers who claimed to have seen the yeti or abominable snowman and his cousin, Big Foot, who is said to stalk the forests of North America.

They also called on the expertise of men and women who have devoted if not their lives then certainly their imaginations to solving their own favourite mysteries. Among them are Tim Dinsdale, who saw the Loch Ness Monster and promptly gave up his job and 20 years of his life to try to find it again; Professor Roy Mackal of Chicago, who trekked into the darkest Congo jungle in search of a living dinosaur; and Professor Michael O'Kelly, who waited alone in the dark in an Irish night to prove his theories about the oldest building in the world.

What makes the book outstanding is the authors' skill at popularising science while resolutely avoiding any inclination to sensationalise the details. Clarke's postscripts to the text are subtly humorous, balancing scepticism with credulity.

It will come as a surprise to some readers to learn that Clarke, a science fiction luminary, co-author of the script of the film classic '2001:

A Space Odyssey', and author of a seminal paper on communication satellites and their practicability which influenced popular thinking about the uses of space, does not believe in UFOs. "I have now ob-

believe in UFOs. "I have now observed so many UFOs", he says, "that the subject bores me to tears", adding, "in every single case my UFO eventually turned into an *Identified Flying Object*".

Despite Clarke's scepticism, the chapter on UFOs is lively and impartial, and includes a recollection of the controversial sighting in December 1978 by Australian television reporter Quentin Fogarty.

Some of the most interesting mysteries in the book concern relatively minor curiosities such as the unexplained showers of everything from mustard seeds and hazelnuts to fish and frogs which have been recorded since earliest times; and unlikely things which have turned up in unexpected places on the ground, including a trail of Chinese ceramic seals used by early dynasty scribes which were found in Ireland in the 1800s.

Indeed, the authors speculate that we must ourselves be creating mysteries for our remote descendants to puzzle over. Why did the Americans and Russians dig those holes in the ground capped with heavy metal lids like the lairs of giant trapdoor spiders? What is really going on in those ancient films of rock concerts — could they be some kind of religious ceremony? Did Charlie Chaplin, James Bond, David Frost, Tarzan, Stalin really exist, or are they purely mythical?

'Arthur C. Clarke's *Mysterious World*' is surely one of the best

World' is surely one of the best popular books of its kind to appear for many a long day. Certainly, after consulting its text and illustrations, one is apt to agree with Nobel prizewinner Richard Feynman, who once remarked, "It does no harm to the mystery to know a little about it".