

## MIDWEEK MAGAZINE

# Ufologists: inhabitants of a wacky world

**L**ADIES and gentlemen, boys and girls: believe it or not but the modern religion of Ufology — the quest to interpret the mystery of unidentified flying objects — today enters its 42nd year. In short, however bizarre its foundations, Ufology continues to stake its claim as a social and global curiosity of some magnitude.

Like many serious religions it is evolving fast — adapting itself to a hostile environment with speed and panache. It has priests and missionaries, miracles and messages, though nothing, to date, resembling a grand orthodoxy. It is a religion of the space age that offers us heavenly lights, god-like aliens and flying green jellies — above all, the reassurance that we are not alone: that the universe pulses with intelligence. As, of course, it might.

Recently there has been an epidemic of UFO sightings, in Britain, where the number of UFO stories carried by the media so far this year — more than 530 — has already exceeded any annual total for the past 10 years, and from there to the South Australian bush and back. In turn, there is a craze of UFO abduction stories sweeping America.

The most widely reported British sighting this year produced multiple stories claiming that eight policemen in Kensington, London, had witnessed a grey-green-blue flying saucer through the telescope of 16-year-old Zena Sfeir, and had been converted into "complete believers" on the spot. It was later realised that all nine had been looking at Jupiter through a malfunctioning telescope.

tioning telescope.

In turn, the great American abduction caper has reached such a pitch that abductees are now holding their own conventions, claiming, among other things, that grey-skinned aliens are regularly sweeping from the skies to conduct medical examination of humans aboard their ships. They like biopsies, these aliens, and are fond of transponder implants: tagging humans like wandering caribou. Most disturbingly, painful surgical procedures are allegedly being used to remove human sperm and eggs.

There is an extravagant literature on UFOs offering hundreds of snappy titles which augment the millions of words produced each year by the world's 40 or more UFO research organisations.

These include seven in Britain, with names like Bufora (British UFO Research Association), Lufbic (Leicester UFO Investigation Committee) and Wyuforg (West Yorkshire UFO Research Group). To immerse yourself in the subject, you cannot improve on *UFOs 1947-1987: The 40-year Search For An Explanation*, compiled by Hilary Evans and John Spencer for Bufora to "commemorate the 40 years of investigation of the evidence for unexplained aerial phenomena commonly termed UFOs".

You do not have to voyage very far into Ufology to encounter your first surprise: namely, that this embryonic religion possesses a positive modern starting date — June 24, 1947, when businessman-pilot Kenneth Arnold ("The man who started it all") claimed to have seen nine silvery objects travelling at tremendous speed

near Mount Rainier, Washington, fluttering and swerving and behaving "like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water".

Yet what about the streamers of light and fabulous flying machines of the distant past? Or

**fabulous flying machines of the distant past? Or the biblical references? Or the wonders and sightings of medieval times? Or the aerial phenomena of the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries? Or the equivalent phenomena of the early 20th century, including the phantom airships scare, the "foo-fighters" (small discs and spheres of unknown origin), the ghost rocket scare, and so on?**

**Whatever the explanations for these phenomena, they pale into insignificance when set against the uproar triggered by Arnold's prototype sightings of "flying saucers" 41 years ago. During June and July of 1947 there were at least 850 reported saucer sightings. The new religion was up and running, even though Arnold had been duped: perhaps by mirages — it hardly matters, unless you are a zealot.**

**A SEASONED Ufologist like Hilary Evans of Bufora is swift to offer some key admissions: that some UFO witnesses deliberately lie, that some lie unconsciously, or that others are acted upon by intangible cultural or psychological influences that may bias, says Evans, "both the ability to perceive and/or the ability to interpret what is perceived".**

**Nor does he gloss over Ufology's most obvious weakness, the tawdriness (in fact, the non-existence) of its evidence. "For one thing," he says, "almost every scrap of it is eye-witness testimony only, unsupported by any confirming evidence. When we are offered tangible evidence, it invariably falls short of being totally convincing..."**

**But then he switches tack: "On the other hand, the sheer quantity of testimony is impressive. Hundreds of thousands of reports have been made. Even if only one in a thousand merits serious attention that is still a very great number of anomalous events, reported by people whose word we would have no reason to doubt in other**

word we would have no reason to doubt in other circumstances." In his views: "On whatever level of reality the UFO exists, it certainly exists as a new and uniquely complex challenge."

Does it now? Without more ado, let us plunge into the wacky world of Ufology. It is a place of exceedingly low gravity, so let us check our life-support system lest we explode into a zillion astonished pieces:

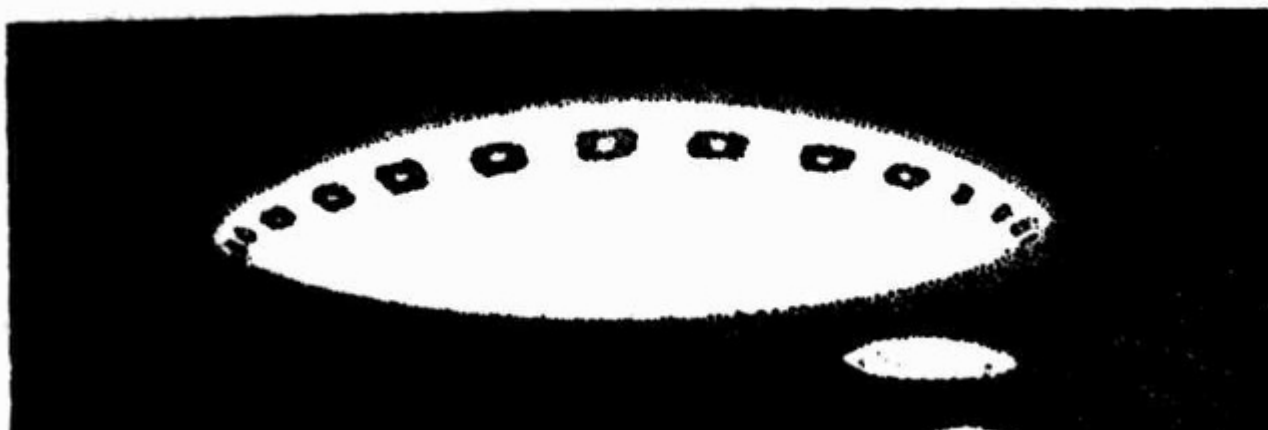
● **NUMBERS:** A 1966 Gallup poll indicated that 5 million Americans over the age of 18 believed they had seen a UFO. By juggling this figure, calculations were made indicating a global total of 500,000 flying saucer sightings each year for 20 years — 1370 per day, or virtually one a minute, somewhere on Earth. Wishing to be ultra-conservative, the researcher eliminated 99.9 per cent of sightings, which still left what Ufologists like to call 100,000 "hardcore unknowns" over 40 years.

These figures are worthless, of course. Serious Ufologists admit this, yet they sometimes employ them in stunning sleights of hand to underpin the claim that whatever you think of the

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Spurred by an epidemic of alleged abductions and sightings, Michael Thompson-Noel, in London, investigates the bizarre new religion of UFOs, aliens and messages from deepest space.

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figures, the UFO phenomenon is global, unique, complex, awe-inspiring and deserving of serious interpretive help from physicists, astronomers, engineers, meteorologists, psychologists, physiologists, sociologists, anthropologists and mythologists — very few of whom, however, ever answer the SOS.

● **ALIENS:** Now it becomes interesting, for we are being visited, it appears, by whole genres and massive sub-groups of foreign-looking beings — often in the same week and always ignorant of each other's presence or existence. Bless them all, for we are seeing fairies and little fat men, hairy dwarfs and giant hominids, aliens "resembling Italians" and creatures of limitless resourcefulness: "I am bigger than I appear to you now," one alien told a contactee. "We can make the old young, the big small, the small big."

We have been visited by headless black figures with webbed feet and bat-like wings, and by a naked black woman glowing with green lumi-

— (Da Nang, Vietnam, reported by sever-

nescence (Da Nang, Vietnam, reported by several US marines).

One research group analysed "thousands of cases" and determined that there were four main types of visiting alien: small humanoids, experimental animals, human-like entities, and robots.

But how eccentrically they behave! How frequently, when they are not collecting soil or flowers or abducting innocent humans, are they to be seen repairing their spacecraft, which are forever breaking down! "The examples of apparent absurdity are very numerous," one researcher concedes, "and we find almost always one or two absurd details in every well-reported case. Some cases are veritable festivals of absurdity."

● **ABDUCTIONS:** The current epidemic of them (mainly in the US) merely adds to the pile of alleged abductions since the second world war. These include numerous "classics", such as Whitley Strieber's alleged abduction in 1985 which he describes in his megaseller, *Communi-*

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*nion: Encounters With The Unknown*, now in paperback.

Crucially, every case of an alleged abduction is unique. In America, some of those claiming to have been abducted have been subjected by psychologists to the Rorschach test, the Bender Gestalt test, the Wechsler test, the thematic apperception test and the Minnesota multiphasic personality inventory. Says New York psychologist Elizabeth Slater: "These people were careful but not paranoid. They shared a greater than average intelligence and a richness of inner life."

● **PHYSICAL TRACES:** One in five of all alleged close encounters with UFOs or their occupants is claimed to leave some sort of trace: burnt ground, footprints, powdery residues, metallic fragments, etc. None of this alleged evidence is worth a brass farthing.

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● **CRASHES AND CONSPIRACIES:** There is a modern folk-tale that holds that numerous governments are hoarding crashed saucers and/or alien bodies (generally mutilated), and that a global cover-up is in full swing. There is not a scrap of evidence to support these contentions.

● **CULTS:** To the embarrassment of most Ufologists, UFOs attract the attention of numerous fruit-and-nut cults. Most are short-lived. Most arise in the US. But the most durable and famous of them, the Aetherius Society, started in Britain in the mid-1950s after George King, formerly a Shropshire farmer, alone in his London flat, was told to prepare himself to become the voice on Earth of the Interplanetary Parliament.

These days he is known as "His Eminence Sir George King, Primary Terrestrial Mental Channel". The society claims "thousands of members and tens of thousands of sympathisers". during the five-day period April 25-29, 1986, coinciding with the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, the society claims to have pumped out 53,040 emergency prayer-hours from its spiritual energy radiator in Los Angeles after His Eminence had been instructed to do so by his cosmic masters. The society is also into healing, ESP and yoga, and runs a health food shop in London's Fulham Road. You can shop there this morning.

● **UFOs AND THE CINEMA:** You can say one thing for saucers and aliens: they are magic at the box office. Over the past 85 years a remarkable range of films has played a strategic role in creating and reinforcing the UFO/crashed alien/space invasion/cover-up motif in modern culture, from *A Trip to the Moon* (1903) to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) to *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968: Arthur C. Clarke has always scoffed at reports of UFOs)



**That, at least, is true.**

**M**ICHEL Monnerie lives in Paris, where he works for the Archive Nationales. He used to be a keen UFO investigator but became discouraged by the readiness with which witnesses misinterpret natural phenomena, and the readiness of investigators to accept those misinterpretations. He is now a hard-boiled sceptic, arguing that in 40 years there have been no investigations, no measurements, of UFOs. What has happened has been that some people, wishing to peer beyond simple anecdotes, have probed witnesses' *memories* of what they think they saw — all of this material, like civilisation itself, originating within the cerebral cortex. Charmingly, Monnerie sees Ufology as nothing more than a modern folklore with which man has been preparing himself for the greatest transformation of them all: his journey into space.

In short, our brains — as usual — are playing up.

That is all very well. Yet after weeks of grappling with the rubbish-mountain of non-evidence on which Ufology is perched, my own brain has now gone on the blink, becoming spiteful and provincial. There may be no evidence of UFOs, it says, but then there is very little evidence for *anything*. least of all for the wimps' notion that the galaxies pulse with intelligent life. Of course there are no flying green jellies, it says. Nor are there hominids or fairies or aliens that look like Italians. There are no bat-winged black women and no talking XXXX cans. In all the reaches of time-space, it now maintains, we will never find anyone else to talk to or play tennis with. How can this be? *Because we are alone.*

— Financial Times