

THE GUIDE

TV, VIDEO, RADIO, HOME ENTERTAINMENT

Week beginning Monday, October 23, 1995

Fiction stranger than truth **than truth**

By BARBARA HOOKS

THE THOUGHT processes of television executives are right up there with the most mystical elements of the universe, Barry Williams suggests with a mischievous laugh.

The irreverent president of the Australian Skeptics Society is at a loss to explain the proliferation of TV programs about the paranormal — at least scientifically. But it is certainly not the first invasion of its kind.

Popular interest in science fiction and the supernatural is often pegged to developments in technology; the industrial revolution in the 18th and 19th Centuries followed by the emergence of the...

the 18th and 19th centuries followed by the emergence of the military-industrial complex and the exploration of space in the 20th Century.

Jules Verne, the father of modern sci-fi, began writing about fantastic voyages to the moon, the centre of the earth and the bottom of the ocean in the 1850s. A few decades later, across the English Channel, H. G. Wells intrigued his readers with tales of time travel and alien landings.

While still in its infancy, the electronic media quickly grasped the potential for exploiting our fascination with extraterrestrials and the supernatural. In 1938 Orson Welles reduced America to a state of panic with his radio version of *The War of the Worlds*, H. G. Wells' 1898 account of a Martian invasion. The advent of television brought these other worlds light years closer.

In 1953, five years before NASA was established, the British made the first of four series of *Quatermass*, one of them starring Sir John Mills as the lab-coated hero, Professor Quatermass (a name plucked from the London telephone directory).

In the opening episode, an unfortunate astronaut developed an infection and slowly turned into a rampaging vegetable when his spacecraft veered off course before returning to earth. That was the comic-book story, but the loftier theme was science, especially military science, zooming ahead of human ethics

... man ethics.

Across the Atlantic the topic was just as popular. In 1959, Rod Serling created, hosted and frequently



wrote *The Twilight Zone* where space-time co-ordinates stylishly intersected the imagination.



In 1963, Leslie Stevens picked up where Serling left off with *The Outer Limits*, an

LIMITS, an anthology of supernatural stories that quick-

ly developed an enduring cult following.

Back in Britain in 1961, the BBC screened the thriller *A for Andromeda* by sci-fi doyen Fred Hoyle. It is mainly remembered today as the launching pad for the celestial career of an unknown drama student called Julie Christie.

Two years later, mindful that curiosity about the cosmos is not confined to adults, the BBC began

producing hundreds of episodes of a children's series that proved just as popular with parents. *Dr Who* introduced a travelling time lord whose principal opponents, the Daleks, have now passed into the official lexicon as meaning "any aggressive robot with rasping speech". *Blake's Seven*, another kids' series, was also appropriated by adults in search of cult viewing.

The '70s and early '80s were a quiet time for matters unexplained on television, although Hollywood produced blockbusters such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Alien* and *ET*.

But the late '80s and '90s have seen a resurgence of interest in science fiction and the supernatural on television, popularly led by *The X-Files* on Ten Capital. A quality US series, it shrewdly combines belief and scepticism in stories that are never resolved but dabble in alternative explanations for

events gone wrong, particularly of a military and medical nature.

The revival extends across the dial. In the top-rating Australian show, *The Extraordinary*, originally on Prime, now on WIN, a Dalek-voiced Warwick Moss presents hokey re-enactments of unexplained miracles, incredible stories of survival, freak accidents, near-death experiences, ghostly confrontations and close encounters of every kind. Robert Stack is doing much the same in *Unsolved Mysteries* on Ten Capital.

Earlier this year, WIN also screened *The Roswell Incident*, a documentary claiming to contain footage, long covered up by the US military, of a 1947 postmortem on aliens who had crash-landed their space craft in New Mexico.

This obsession with UFOs and aliens even reached the ABC's *Lateline*. Following screening of *The Roswell Incident* on WIN, *Lateline* aired a three-way debate between

sceptics and converts. It was preceded by a predictably sober report that nevertheless contained the alarming disclosure that so many Australians claim to have been abducted by aliens that a support group has been formed in Sydney to help them.

For sheer entertainment on Saturday nights, the ABC is running

urday nights, the ABC is running *Ghosts*, a new supernatural drama series from the BBC. In a promising first episode a convicted murderer used a near-death experience to embark on an astral killing spree.



And we haven't even touched on close encounters of an every-day nature in *Star Trek* and *Earth 2*. Peter Sutton, who produces and packages *The Extraordinary* for 70 countries, says the show unashamedly pitches itself as "a news magazine of the unexplained" for the mass-entertainment market.

However, he says every effort is made to screen contributors, corroborate evidence, run technical checks on material and submit data to scientific scrutiny.

Sutton believes there is a resurgence of interest in this type of programming because people are

gence of interest in this type of programming because people are better educated and more open minded.

He is aware of the critics, but believes they don't take the time to talk to people who have had unexplained experiences: "You can't be sceptical about reality stories. Boats disappear, planes disappear, people survive accidents against the odds. These things happen."

Sutton agrees that sometimes stories are given a supernatural spin, but only if that angle is still dominant after both sides have been looked at. "We're not the ABC. We're not *The Investigators*. This is entertainment television."

Peter Sutton left the clear impression he was aggrieved that more attention was being focused on the show's credibility than on its vibrant success as an Australian export earner.

Continued on page 12

Fiction is stranger than truth

Continued from page 1

PRODUCER Christine Morris says many people phone in to *The Extraordinary* because they have had a similar experience to one shown, and they simply want to talk to someone who will take them seriously.

As part of the reality check, she says any-

AS part of the reality check, she says anyone who wants their story told must submit it in writing, with names of corroborating witnesses: "A small number of people are off-the-planet, and they are usually obvious, but most people are legitimate."

As well as screening contributors, Morris also produces the re-enactments, elaborate mini-dramas in themselves, she says, and as


true as possible to the witnesses' account of the actual event.

The Australian Skeptics Society was formed in 1980. Says Williams, "No one can remember the exact date, so astrologers can't predict our future". But, like the Democrats, "it aims to keep the bastards honest" by investigating and reporting on pseudo-scientific and paranormal claims. The society's 1600 members share an interest, although not necessarily a career, in science. Skeptics are not non-believers. They just want proof.

"We apply critical thinking to evidence

people produce. Some things can never be proved. But we won't accept an explanation that seems to fly in the face of everything we know about the world ... But some people think that if they firmly believe something to be true it is evidence."

Sci-fi programs of the 50s and 60s were born of a genuine age of discovery. But sceptics find today's preoccupation with the paranormal more difficult to explain. Williams is not opposed to programs such as *The X-Files*, which not only presents itself as fiction, but offers a sceptical perspective.





He is concerned that networks are dishing up pseudo-scientific entertainment at the expense of the real thing, which he believes is infinitely more entertaining: "We don't appreciate we live in an age of miracles that have a very solid scientific background."
