

NEWS front

It's a beautiful world we live in, but does that really explain why we seem to have so many UFOs dropping in to visit?

**I** BELIEVE in alien civilisations. But, call me arrogant or ill-informed — as indeed, some do — I can not believe aliens are crossing interstellar space, in flying saucers or cigar-shaped craft, and making regular landfall on our planet.

I am quite certain that humans, not aliens, are responsible for the cryptic patterns in British cereal crops. And two or four-legged predators of terrestrial — not extra-terrestrial — origin are disembowelling cattle on beef ranches in Texas and Utah.

Ask yourself: What advanced civilisation would spend tens of thousands of years travelling across the galaxy to collect a few prime cuts of beef and a few kilos of hamburger mince?

As a science writer, I am occasionally contacted by people asserting aliens have taken control of their minds by telepathy, or are beaming messages directly into brains with invisible rays. Some represent themselves as the chosen terrestrial ambassadors for alien superbeings who are taking a paternal interest in our troubled planet.

Occasionally, such individuals bob up on television current affairs programs because producers and reporters do not recognise the symptoms of mental illness.

Paranoid schizophrenics, seeking to explain how strange voices or images appear spontaneously in their minds, will often invoke supernatural mechanisms that, to them, make perfect sense: only aliens with superhuman powers or advanced technologies could implant such information directly into their brains.

For every genuine delusion there are a dozen outright charlatans whose primary interest is not extra-terrestrial visitors, but earthly wealth. And for every charlatan, there are scores of people, ignorant of the laws of physics or the inconceivable distances between stars, whose near-medieval belief in mysticism make them subjects for exploitation.

Which brings me to Swiss-born author Erich von Daniken who, in the 1970s, earned international notoriety, a considerable swag of foreign exchange, and the scorn of most orthodox scientists, by publishing his bestseller *Chariots of the Gods* and its sequel.

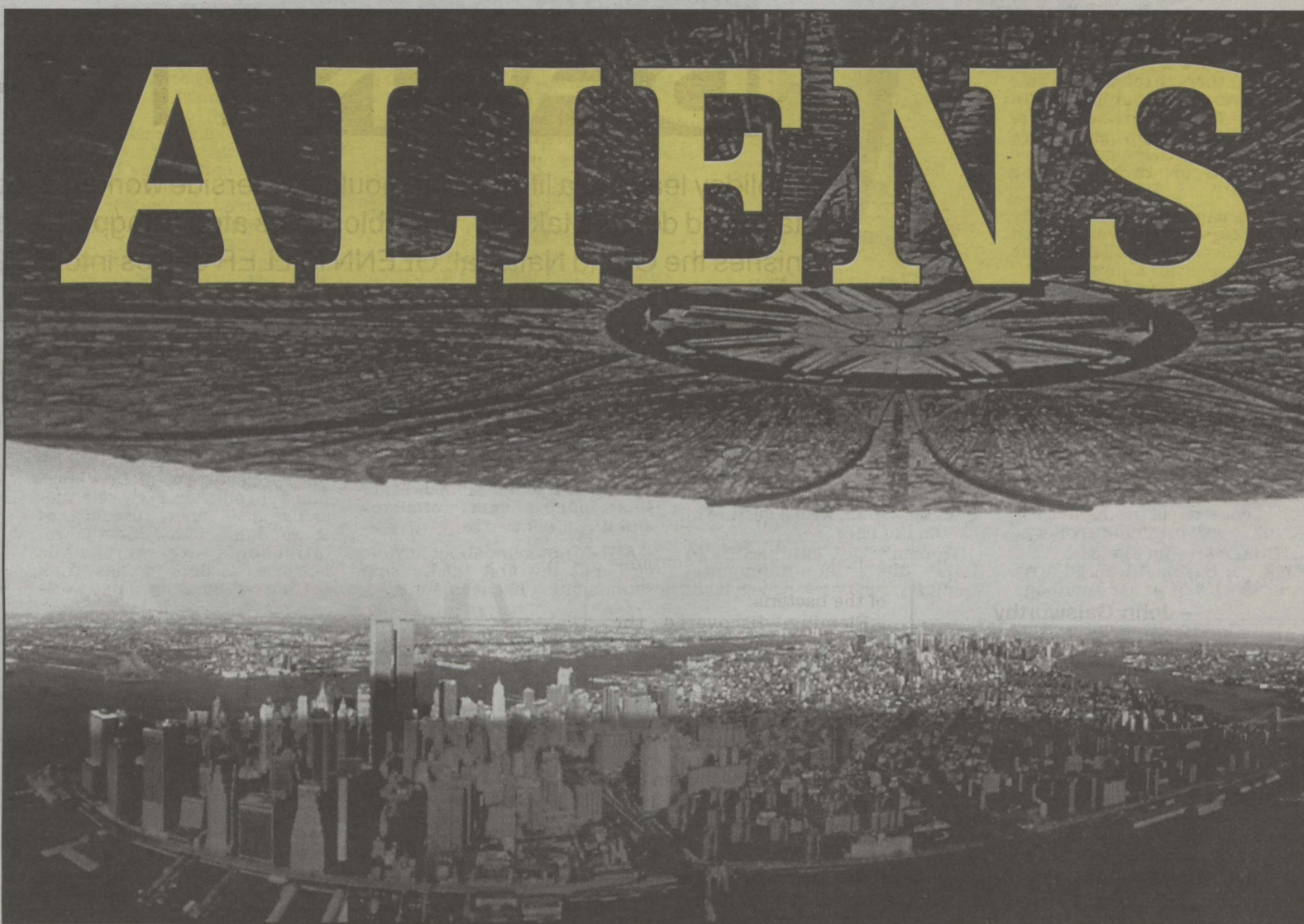
Von Daniken's strategy was to downplay the undoubted technological capabilities of ancient human cultures, then, by default, attribute just about every mysterious structure, unexplained phenomenon or weird piece of folklore, from the great pyramids to the huge animal symbols laid out in lines of stone in Peru's Nazca Desert, to the handiwork of superbeings from distant stars.

Last week I interviewed astronomer Dr Seth Shostak, one of the leading experts on the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence (SETI), and author of a new book, *Sharing the Universe*. He passed on some interesting intelligence on von Daniken.

Shostak's scientific mentor was astronomer Frank Drake, whose name is commemorated in the Drake Equation, a formula for estimating the likely number of intelligent civilisations that have evolved in our galaxy.

According to Shostak, Drake once met von Daniken personally and pressed him about his belief in ETs. Surprise, surprise — von Daniken does not subscribe to his own extravagant theories, but he is no fool: his creation of a modern body of mythology has been highly profitable.

Some media — particularly television — are guilty of similar cynicism. Documentaries routinely blur the distinction between science and naked charlatanism.



# Are they coming?



**GRAEME O'NEILL**  
SCIENCE WATCH

Last week the Nine Network screened yet another documentary that purported to offer the strongest evidence yet for alien craft in our skies.

Documentaries of this genre inevitably justify themselves by accusing scientists of having closed minds, or invoking grand conspiracies involving the government and the military to suppress the evidence that would prove, once and for all, that ETs exist — witness the durability of the myth of the Roswell flying saucer crash half a century ago, despite the best efforts of scientists and the United States Air Force to debunk it.

But in the final analysis, documentaries such as this and its ilk prove nothing, except that those who photograph or film UFOs are afflicted by a congenital inability to focus a camera.

**Y**ET here is a paradox: while most scientists share Seth Shostak's scepticism that little green men — or their modern-day successors, little blue-grey beings with huge bald heads and dark cat's eyes — regularly visit our planet in flying saucers, they will cheerfully admit to believing that intelligent life exists elsewhere in our galaxy.

How can these apparently conflicting views be reconciled?

Why, indeed, do so many believe in aliens and UFOs at all? Seth Shostak's entertaining, informative and often witty book, *Sharing the Universe*, addresses both issues.

In the opening chapter, *Aliens*



**Dr Seth Shostak**

*are Everywhere*, he describes how our "humble world, an insignificant pinprick in a vast, churning universe", has become Tourist Destination No. 1 for aliens.

Hollywood and television offer us good aliens, such as *ET* and the benign aliens from *Cocoon* and *The Abyss*. Evil aliens are now cast in roles once occupied by Nazis, "commies" or the bloodthirsty Indians of the Wild West.

Yet many people — including, it seems, a majority of Americans — genuinely believe aliens are cruising the stratosphere, and defacing British agriculture.

"The media are chock-a-block with the complaints of just plain folk who say that pushy extra-terrestrials have forced them aboard their saucers, attempted to get them pregnant, or simply removed ova or sperm for unspecified and unapproved use elsewhere," says Shostak.

(I have long wondered why aliens take such an inordinate interest in human beings' private bits, to the exclusion of other interesting organs such as the kidneys, lungs and brain.)

Why the unprecedented level of interest in aliens, real and celluloid? Shostak says that more than 2000 years ago the ancient Greeks believed that the Earth's creation was not special, nor a one-time only event. They proposed the existence of other worlds, in various stages of evolution, popu-

lated by strange people and beasts — but they did not believe these creatures would actually show up on the doorstep.

It is only with the age of modern rocketry that alien visitations became common. No surprise, says Shostak, because once we had the tools to venture into space, the idea that others might be cruising the interstellar depths became more plausible.

**T**HE first "flying saucer" was described by a pilot, Kenneth Arnold, in 1947 (a landmark year that also spawned the Roswell incident).

Reports of saucers and other UFOs persist, says Shostak, because mundane explanations such as sightings of natural phenomena, weather balloons and aircraft are clearly less interesting (and therefore less frequently reported) than assertions that lights in the sky are of extra-terrestrial origin.

Aliens are as intriguing as the Yeti and Bigfoot, but have the advantage that they are not evolutionary throwbacks. They are creatures with knowledge and abilities far beyond our own.

Traditionally, God has filled the niche of a Superior Being, but in this increasingly Godless age, aliens fill the niche of high-tech angels. A deity's existence can never be proved, but, in principle, the existence of aliens can — so there is less demand upon faith.

Before addressing the daunting logistics of interstellar travel, Shostak investigates the simple logic of alien visitations.

He suggests that postulating alien visits to our planet validates our own importance, even more so if these celestial beings select us for sexual experiments or give us joy rides in their saucers.

That Hollywood's aliens, and those who reportedly flit around our atmosphere, do take an interest in human beings, suggests they have been invented for our own purposes, says Shostak. Their task is to show us we are important in a vast and indifferent universe.

*Sharing the Universe*

comprehensively debunks visiting ETs but, at the same time, offers some suggestions as to what genuine aliens on other, Earth-like planets might look like — and they are very unlikely to look humanoid.

Shostak explains that natural selection is extremely unlikely to converge on the same configuration of limbs and sensory organs that characterises our species.

But the laws of physics do constrain the range of options. For example, an alien would never evolve to resemble the strawberry jelly horror in Steve McQueen's B-Grade, sci-fi movie *The Blob*, because too little oxygen would diffuse through its surface to prevent its deep interior becoming gangrenous.

Logic insists we seek simple explanations for the seemingly inexplicable, before resorting to extra-terrestrial sources.

Two weeks ago the *Sunday Herald Sun* reported on the intriguing case of the Dogon tribe of Africa, which worshipped the brightest star in the sky — Sirius.

Dogon myth suggested Sirius had a small, invisible, but massive, companion. Modern astronomers have confirmed that Sirius is a member of a binary star system, with its small dark companion invisible even to powerful telescopes.

This is the von Daniken effect at work: How did the Dogon acquire such information?

I asked Seth Shostak if there was a plausible alternative. Yes, there was. Modern astronomy has also shown that nearly half the stars in our galaxy belong to binary systems, and that a significant percentage of these involve small, dark companion stars.

Sirius is one of the brightest and most obvious objects in the night sky, after the Moon and the planets. It is unsurprising that Sirius would figure in the mythology not only of the Dogon, but of other cultures.

That one tribe would describe Sirius as having a dark companion is then explicable in terms of a lucky guess, or pure coincidence.