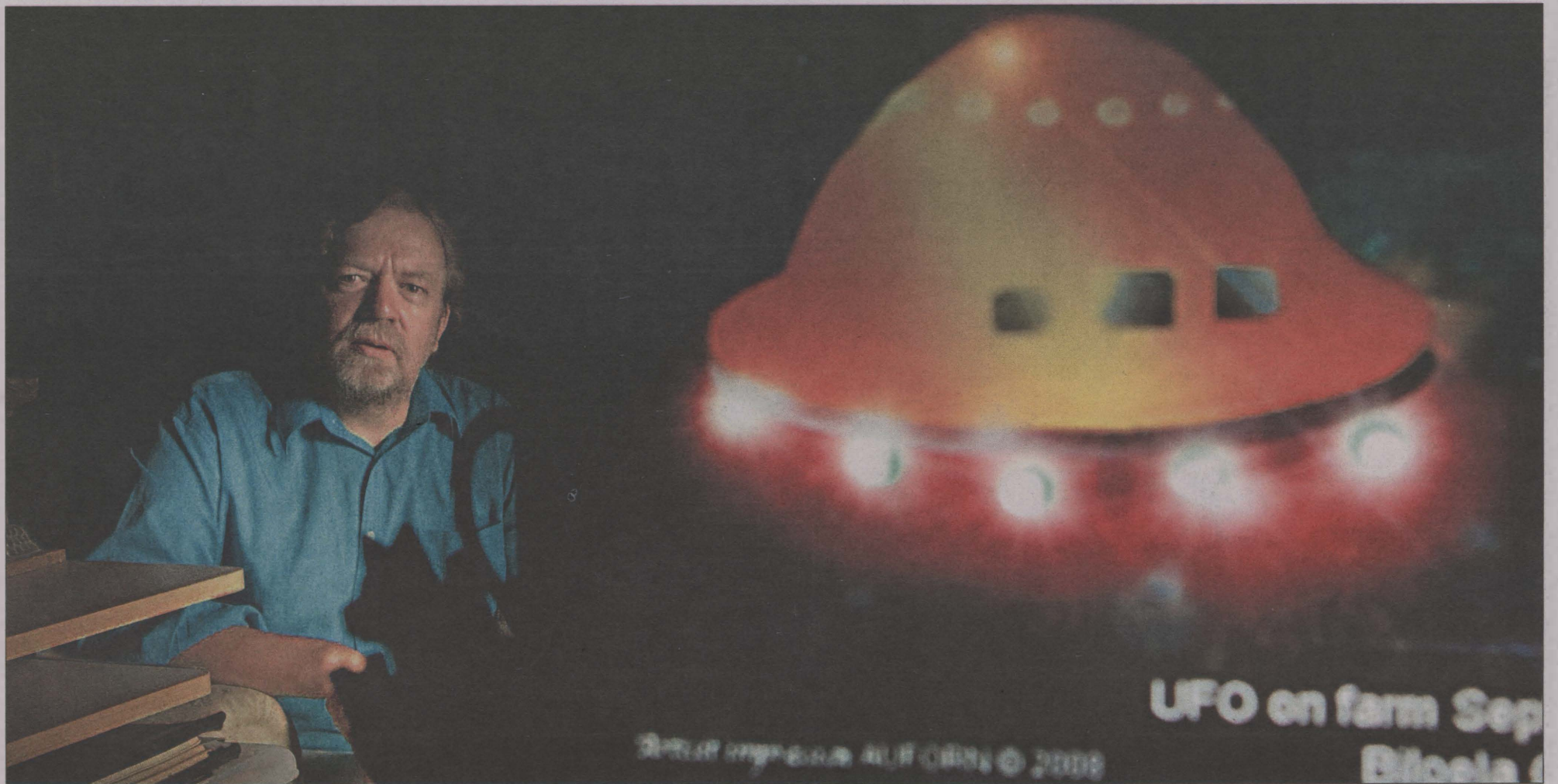


EXTRA PROFILE



Close encounters

Bill Chalker may be older than the television FBI agent but it is a cosmic inevitability that he inspires Fox Mulder comparisons. The 57-year-old veteran Sydney UFO researcher and author dismisses the idea but, on the surface at least, he appears to have more than a few things in common with the brooding *X-Files* linchpin – in particular, his passionate belief in investigating unexplained phenomena.

“The subject of UFOs is one that has impacted at quite an extraordinary level on the public consciousness, yet there’s a big disconnect between the public consciousness and belief in UFOs,” Chalker says. “I’ve always been driven by the fact that there is something here that seems to be real and seems to be amenable, if given sufficient resources, to a scientific investigation.”

It was a spate of UFO activity in his home town of Grafton in northern NSW during the mid-1960s that first sparked Chalker’s interest. He has spent the subsequent four decades painstakingly investigating reports of sightings, close encounters and even claims of alien abduction.

While there’s certainly no shortage of UFO enthusiasts dotting the landscape, Chalker is readily distinguishable. Armed with a degree in mathematics and chemistry, as well as 25 years in the field of laboratory management, he’s always opted for the scientific approach, championing a reliance on logic and impartial analysis over blind acceptance.

“This is a phenomenon that’s worldwide,” he says. “It’s been going on for an awfully long period of time, certainly longer than since 1947, which is the modern popularised start date.”

“It’s definitely real and has very real physical dimensions to it. But it is also one of the most neglected and misrepresented.”

“To me this is a subject that screams out for serious scientific investigation.”

Australia has long been regarded as a hotbed of UFO activity among those in the know, providing no shortage of material to provide a basis for his work.

However, in 2009, the focus of UFO activity seemed to inexplicably shift to China. The sightings are characterised by identifiable patterns and trends, he says, but discerning their exact nature these days has become more difficult due to the internet and the vast plethora of online UFO discussion sites. The little green men are now at risk of being hidden by the noise about them.

Has evidence of UFOs been covered up by the authorities? OWEN THOMSON spoke to a researcher who wants to believe.

“There’s always been waves or flaps of UFO sightings – through the ’70s and ’80s there was almost like a three-year pattern – but it’s more difficult to define those patterns now simply because there are more and more available channels for people to report sightings to,” he says. “There’s no shortage of information. It’s actually investigating these sightings that’s the problem.”

Chalker had his first UFO encounter while studying at the University of New England in 1972. “I witnessed an egg-shaped object passing over the university campus that was also witnessed by others,” he says. “That to me was pretty unusual because it occurred under circumstances that allowed me to eliminate balloons, aircraft and all sorts of other different possibilities.”

Chalker’s work hasn’t just been restricted to the investigation of civilian UFO reports. Between 1982 and 1984, he was granted access to Australian Department of Defence files about UFOs. He says the tome of documents revealed an organisation beset by reports of sightings and close encounters.

“It showed me they were dealing with more or less exactly the same thing that civilian researchers were dealing with and that was a very broad cross-section of lights in the sky, daylight discs, the odd close encounter-type report, even abduction reports,” Chalker says.

He says one of the most compelling instances was a radar-visual case from 1954 involving the pilot of a navy Sea Fury based at HMAS Albatross in Nowra. Records from the time indicate the case was the subject of much investigation by both the military and intelligence communities.

X factor ... Bill Chalker (top) investigates UFOs, drawing inevitable comparisons with Fox Mulder, as played by David Duchovny, pictured, with Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson).

Main photo: Jacky Ghossein

“The pilot in question had an encounter with two objects that took up positions either side of his aircraft and stayed there for a couple of minutes,” Chalker says. “It was confirmed by ground radar and there were also ground witnesses. When the objects departed, his [the pilot’s] comment to me was that this made him look as though he was standing still, even though he was flying an aircraft which at the time was the fastest plane in Australian skies.”

Like many other examples never aired in a public forum, it raises the tantalising question: is there, or has there ever been, a UFO conspiracy or cover-up undertaken by Australian authorities?

‘This is a subject that screams out for serious scientific investigation.’



“I would be more surprised if there was no governmental intelligence, military kind of response to the UFO subject,” Chalker says. “But like anything that’s not fully understood, most organisations will tend to contain the problem and seek to minimise the nature of it, at least in the public domain, and hence you get what is perceived as a cover-up.”

Of all the aspects of the UFO phenomenon, it’s the subject of alien abduction that remains the most controversial and maligned. Indeed, Chalker says it’s even the subject of conjecture within the UFO research community; vivid reports are often attributed to human eccentricities and overactive imaginations.

He had reached the very same conclusion himself by the early 1990s but Chalker says that several cases prompted a radical rethink.

One such instance involved the late-night encounter by a woman and her husband while driving in the Dandenongs in Victoria in 1993.

“She had an awareness that there was another car; three other people further down the road were also witnessing the same thing – an object in a paddock with what appeared to be beings or creatures coming out of it,” Chalker explains. “Not only did the case have abduction components to it, like missing [or unaccounted for] time, it also had very physical impacts, particularly for the women involved. One had what appeared to be ligature marks around her ankles, while triangular marks were also left on their abdomens. There were also gynaecological issues. Coming from a scientific point of view, that argued very powerfully that there was a strong reality to the nature of this experience.”

Chalker is now privately funded and engaged in UFO research on a full-time basis. He says he is optimistic that answers will be forthcoming. But while concrete explanations have so far proven elusive, he has formulated his own theories regarding the possible intentions of visiting extraterrestrials.

“To me, part of it seems to be something about an intrusion within our culture where maybe in fact they’ve been tinkering with our own DNA,” he says. “That sounds like a pretty outrageous suggestion but even [physicist, author and chair of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence taskgroup at the International Academy of Astronautics] Professor Paul Davies has suggested that we should be looking at our own DNA for evidence of possible alien intrusion. Just as we tinker with human and animal life forms, to argue that intelligent life that might be visiting is not doing the same thing with us, to me, would be surprising.”