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# Review of "Area 51: The Dreamland Chronicles"

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It is an experience that happens mainly in dreams. I turn on the television late at night, flip through stations at random, and there I am, saying something about Area 51. I pick up the local newspaper, and there's a quote from the same character in his capacity as a "military watchdog." On CNN, TNT and the Discovery Channel, I can be seen (albeit briefly) in endless documentary reruns talking about both UFOs and Las Vegas buffets. On the internet, lurid allegations about my sex life are distributed by people I have never heard of, and I seem to be aware of only a fraction of what is written about me. Upon arriving in Budapest, Hungary, on one strange and surreal vacation, I buy a UFO magazine at the train station. I glance through the pages and there I am, pictured in the Nevada desert and quoted in incomprehensible Hungarian.

What does this do for the ego? Humbles it for the most part. What I see on TV is an actor delivering sound bites on cue. The person on the screen is not me, only a facsimile, and I am not sure he should be there at all. After a few bad media experiences among the mostly positive ones, I greet each journalist with a hidden fear that he might be Geraldo Rivera sent to expose this fraud.

Thus I have anticipated David Darlington's new book, "Area 51: The Dreamland Chronicles," with some apprehension. Darlington was granted unprecedented access to the Groom Lake Interceptors, a merry band of mostly virtual investigators of which I am considered the spiritual leader. Other journalists have appeared at the border for only a day or two, and under these circumstances it is fairly easy to edit oneself for publication. Darlington has been following us for four years. He took an interceptor name ("Ranger"), attended most of our outings and took part in our bizarre rituals -- which mainly involved ruining rental cars, telling implausible tales around the campfire and slinking around the borders of military facilities with feigned stealth to confirm, in most cases, that there isn't anything there after all.

Although he was one of us for research purposes, it was clear Darlington wanted to be a "neutral journalist" -- the most dangerous kind -- and that he would present us with our warts intact. In the beginning, we tried to keep secrets. When internal conflicts arose or sensitive intelligence came to us, we said, "Let's not tell Ranger or he'll put it in the book." Alas, Interceptor security is nowhere near

as efficient as that of the Air Force, and in the end he had access to nearly all of our secrets through no coercion apart from showing up and asking questions.

The results, I am relieved to report, are not all that horrifying. Darlington takes the tact of letting each of the characters speak for himself. In addition to myself, he interviews Tom Mahood, Agent X, Bill Uhouse, Jim Goodall, John Andrews, Tony LeVier, Pat & Joe Travis, Anthony Hilder and Ambassador Merlyn Merlin II, giving each of them the major part of a chapter to explain themselves. Bob Lazar and Gene Huff -- known collectively as "Hular" -- are represented in absentia by their past interviews and extensive creative works on the internet. The quotes are lengthy and generally fascinating, as the insane clearly reveal themselves and even the outwardly sane appear, after talking for a while, to drop off the deep end. Only occasionally does a character run on for too long, as in the case of Hilder's explanation of the sinister New World Order controlling the base and just about everything else.

In one early chapter there is a review of Groom Lake's aviation history, including a long interview with Tony LeVier, the Lockheed employee who first scouted the site. Although this history will no doubt be subject to enhancement and minor correction in future aviation books, Darlington provides the best account to date for a general audience. There are no real mysteries in the base's early years, and modern history seems to be catching up as well. (The "black box" in which the aliens or hypersonic aircraft might be hiding is getting smaller and smaller.)

The real story, however, is not about the base but about the sundry characters who lurk around its perimeters and who, like vampires, have drawn their energy from it. (Like, well, me for instance.) Bob Lazar's flying saucer claims are recounted, as well as those of Bill Uhouse, who tells a similar tale of working with government saucer technology at secret facilities. Darlington keeps on neutral ground here, simply retelling the claims as they were originally presented. (I suspect that Lazar's protector Gene Huff will go ballistic when he sees this account, because there are a few minor errors in the Lazar section, and Huff's own invective-laced correspondence is extensively quoted.) These stories come across as perplexing, and although Campbell and Mahood find many mortal flaws, the claims do seem to live on and this book won't lay them to rest. It is as though this is the first volume in epic series.

Although no truth is deduced at the end, that's not the point of the book. What we learn about is the fragility of truth. Maybe nothing is real at Area 51; maybe it is all malleable perception. As ufologist Erik Beckjord says about the aliens supposedly lurking there, "My other theory is that human beings create these things out of their own minds, but it does in fact exist -- it has hair and blood, but disappears when you wake up." This book unfolds like a sort of murder mystery, in which the reader must look for subtexts in all of the interviews to determine who is telling the truth. Unlike Agatha Christie, though, Darlington leaves the mystery open.

Apart from Lazar and Uhouse, whose portrayal is understandably ambiguous, most of the characters are sharply drawn; one gets a good grasp of each personality from their interviews. However, one character seems a bit fuzzy: my own. In spite of his being the Supreme Leader mentioned in most of the chapters, I found Campbell somewhat undefined. He calls himself a "philosophical warrior" and in the words of Beckjord is both "into it and not into it at the same time." We learn about his crusades against the Air Force, the local sheriff and the State of Nevada; about his leading of hikes, his childhood interest in UFOs, and about what various other characters have to say about him. But in spite of all the facts provided, I don't feel that I have learned much about his motivation or worldview.

As portrayed, Campbell at times seems distant, detached, condescending of the "common man", uncomfortable in the outdoors and given, it is said, to manic outbursts, yet he is also responsible for some of the funniest and most insightful lines in the book. Darlington draws heavily on Campbell's Groom Lake Desert Rat newsletter, almost to the point that Campbell could be called a co-author; yet as a reader I don't feel that I understand him. As a wholly intellectual character without apparent warmth, it seems odd to find him, at the end of the story, married with four step-children. I would like to know more about this warrior's philosophy.

Another underdeveloped character is the author himself, who I think shouldn't even be there. This book is mainly about perceptions, about

how two people can look at the same event and each see something totally different. Darlington's task is to record these perceptions without judgment, and he at his best when he is a quiet observer, asking questions at the right time, but otherwise letting the characters tell the story. When he occasionally slips into commentary about the characters -- saying something about them instead of showing it -- or when he talks about, say, the depravity of Las Vegas, I want to tell him, "Get off the stage; this is not your story." The effect of these evaluations is that we not only have to compensate for the perceptions and possible distortions of the interviewees but also those of Darlington himself.

There is an index but few useful footnotes, and attribution is weak in places. There is no problem with direct quotes, which all seem accurate, but paraphrased passages sometimes lose their source. Darlington reports as fact events that he did not himself witness, based on information he is apparently getting for one or another of his characters. Unless we know who made the claim, we are deprived of the opportunity to correct for that person's biases. Rachel is a particularly difficult place to get reliable information, since the few people who reporters usually talk to also have the richest imaginations. For example, Darlington says that Rachel's only schoolteacher was forced from town after he dressed up local boys in women's clothing. As a Rachel historian, I know this event is real only in the memory of one Rachelite known for colorful tales. It is especially annoying, as a central character, to read statements about myself without attribution that I believe are off-target.

In the margins of the book, I am tempted to added footnotes and provisos like "Not quite right," or "That's Pat Travis talking" or "Yes, but..." These are minor corrections, though, important only to myself. It is natural for me to be a little oversensitive about "my" story, and on the whole the book is accurate and fair. This is, after all, reality, not fiction. In this volatile environment where everything is still "under investigation," rounding out all the characters and polishing all the facts to perfection would have been impossible without delaying the book into the next millennium.

Aside from the personal commentary, this is probably the book that I would have written had I been in Darlington's position. Just stand back and let people talk. I couldn't write it myself because I am caught up in the thick of things, and you can't both focus on a task and record yourself doing it at the same time. I am happy that this book was written because it provides what modern society calls "closure" -- maybe not for UFO investigators but at least for myself. Darlington has hit all the major topics of the Desert Rat, and has distilled the vast library of Area 51 lore into a manageable package. Since Darlington has written the book that I would have, I can now feel free to leave this part of my own history behind and move on to the next.

As when watching myself on television, I feel a certain detachment about the Campbell character: I'm both into it and not into it at the same time. I see him in the third person. I know, due to the constraints of this medium, that he is not quite the real thing, only an actor portraying him, but the approximation is good enough for most purposes. I feel like Huckleberry Finn who speaks with tolerance about his creator Mark Twain: "He told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth."

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"Area 51: The Dreamland Chronicles" (published by Henry Holt & Company) is available from the Area 51 Research Center for \$25.00 plus \$4.00 priority mail postage (in the USA). Credit card orders are accepted by email (orders@ufomind.com) or by phone (702-729-2648), or you may send a check to Area 51 Research Center, PO Box 448, Rachel, NV 89001.

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