

WHAT MAD UNIVERSE?

M I C H A E L L . S H U M A N

Spies and Saucers

By Robert Guffey

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THINK OF A NUN. Make her an ugly, bony nun who goes from aristocratic eloquence to backwoods prattle in a flash.

Then think of an entire convent of nuns—a *SWAT team of nuns*—armed with machine guns while attempting to prevent two tabloid journalists, hacks of the shady enquiring-minds-want-to-know variety who happen to moonlight as CIA agents, from freeing an extraterrestrial alien chained to the monastery's basement wall. This alien molts psychedelic skin, see, and when the nuns dispose of that skin in their furnace, the smoke pollutes the surrounding countryside air and sends everyone into pumped-up psychotropic trips.

Next imagine a zonked-out grower-of-weed from a remote area of Malibu who, watching the body of your nun fall from the sky into his backyard and later stuffing her, unceremoniously, into the trunk of his derelict car, suddenly materializes, post-fracas, into the monastery basement after touring the moon with a giant Cyclops and a Devil Bat just raised from the dead.

Consider all of that and you have an approximate notion of the characters and action in Robert Guffey's *Spies and Saucers*, a three-part collection nearly defying explication, and most perplexingly, enjoyably so. But remember: This is only the beginning.

Guffey's extraordinary fictional narrative is an extension of his interest in conspiracy theories and the wild suppositions and events these curious belief systems declare as truth. *Cryptoscatology*, Guffey's 2012 non-fiction book examining conspiracy theories from a cultural perspective, earns its title from the author's own term for the study of ideas and events just outside normal expectations, "the weird shit" reported in sensationalist online and print publications such as *Fate*, *Fortean Times*, and *Weekly World News*. Social media, of course, now provides an essentially unmonitored and wider-reaching platform for wild rumors, while web sites devoted to strange conspiratorial stories spread such odd-ass news fast and effectively. News of UFOs, Bigfoot, modern gnomes, Bat Boy, and out-of-the-body experiences are still with us, along with an aging Elvis, of course.

Guffey dedicates *Spies and Saucers* to an A-list of true believers who ensured that news of UFOs remained in the public consciousness throughout that heyday of outer space alien madness, the 1950s. George Adamski, purported sidekick of the deep-tanned, telepathic alien Orthon and perhaps the first human being to tour the planets in Orthon's spaceship, receives first billing as much by notoriety as by alphabetized surname, immortalized in tin-hat mythology by his tell-all books, *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953) and *Inside the Space Ships* (1955). Kenneth Arnold receives honor not for riding in saucers but for sighting them, nine in formation in the skies near Mount Rainier in 1947, thus igniting modern UFO mania. Gray Barker, author of *They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers* (1954) and editor of *The Saucerian*, a Clarksburg, West Virginia UFO publication, notably started the Men in Black mythology and thus is well-suited for Guffey's distinction. And the co-founder of the National Investigations Committee on Ariel Phenomena (NICAP), retired Marine Corps aviator Donald Keyhoe, is worthy of note for both establishing NICAP and for popularizing ufology through such entertaining and engrossing books as *The Flying Saucer Conspiracy* (1955) and *Flying Saucers: Top Secret* (1960). Orthon gets a nod all his own.

Keyhoe's books, in particular, anticipate the style and sense of Guffey's fiction and foreshadow the strange incidents and authorial temperament of *Spies and Saucers*. Keyhoe writes in first person, explicitly quoting dialogue as he recounts his investigations into UFOs with a conspiratorial, hush-hush tone that makes the reader part of the covert, uncanny events. The books represent early examples of creative nonfiction—topsy-turvy antecedents to Norman Mailer's masterful *The Armies of the Night* (1968) and *Of a Fire*

on the Moon (1970)—where our determined reporter, the outlier Keyhoe, recounts his efforts to understand aliens landing on Earth rather than humans trying to stop a war or reach our nearest celestial neighbor. It's written like fiction, it reads like a novel, but Keyhoe uses the methods of verfabula to draw the reader into the narrative, thus convincing us that everything he recounts is straight-arrow true. Guffey's content and style, like Keyhoe's, more properly represents a sort of *creative quasi-fiction*, a genre where the narrative actually presents myths, legends, propaganda, and mad-cap rumors as truths, a shadow realm of authenticity that escapes universal acknowledgment and is obvious only to the clandestine few.

Identifying truth in this alternative landscape requires persistence and determination, an ability to maneuver through a web of illusion, deceit, and government cover-ups. "I have tried to show the strange developments in our search for the answer," Keyhoe writes early in *The Flying Saucer Conspiracy*, describing his investigation of saucer sightings in White Sands, New Mexico. He then outlines the confusing obstructions encountered in his search for truth, "the carefully misleading tips, the blind alleys we entered, the unexpected assistance, the confidential leads, and the stunning contradictions" (14). Guffey presents the same bewildering obstructions for his truth-seeking characters. In "Communist Town, USA," Pythagoras Invictus, a UFO cult leader partially modeled after Adamski, campaigns for the social and political system of the planet Orpheum while Philip Trowbridge, an unemployed greeting card writer, tries to comprehend the seemingly-communistic nature of the professed planetary traveler's notions. Trowbridge also attempts to sort out the truth behind the Middlesburg Youth Council and the local PTA, both whispered to be communist fronts. Curt Adamson, a struggling screenwriter and author facing backlisting for presumed communist activity in "Spies and Saucers," the titular story of Guffey's collection, is pressed into service by the OSI to create a film representing threats from another world, part of a government project in mind control and behavior modification. Dr. Kenneth W. Dolbraith, a science fiction fan and coordinator of the project, explains the nature of effective propaganda while projecting a film depicting a man being interrogated by aliens, ostensibly to uncover their victim's communist associates. Over time, he maintains, as more and more people are subjected to such interrogations and release their stories to the press, the public will begin to accept alien abduction as the truth. "Lies and disinformation and propaganda," he says, "can only work if

they have some basis of *truth* behind them. You're looking at the truth on the screen. A legend in the making" (253).

Charles Mackay, a Scottish journalist and author, was an early researcher in such misconceptions and the mass acceptance of disinformation. In *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1841), Mackay analyzes such phenomena as the wide acceptance of religious relics, the fascination with stories of criminals who slowly poison their victims, the European witch prosecutions of the sixteenth century, and the nineteenth century mania for tulips. Mackay's account of such prevalent group dementia anticipates Dolbraith's conspiracy and demonstrates that society's susceptibility to beguilement and deception is not at all a modern affliction. "We find that whole communities," Mackay writes, "suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit; that millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion, and run after it, till their attention is caught by some new folly more captivating than the first" (5). The modern ministers of propaganda indeed represent a long lineage of bad actors and craven charlatans, both government-sponsored and spontaneously ignited by the popular imagination.

Apart from social and institutional disinformation and propaganda, Guffey also contemplates the basic human impulse to tell lies, an innate tendency complicating any attempt to discover truth. Curt Adamson, for example, hopes to make money from selling fake sculpture and forged art, and later tells a whopper about getting drunk and having sex, on the front lawn of his high school, with a green-eyed girl he later marries in Las Vegas. But all of this is a lie: "Curt didn't lose his virginity until he was twenty-two. He didn't have his first drink until he was twenty-three. He'd never been to Vegas" (203). Even social institutions are a source of misapprehension and an accelerant for self-deception. Johnny Layton, one of the hard-boiled sleuths in "The Falling Nun," reflects on the impact of religious indoctrination on perception and the comprehension of truth. "Where I saw humanity, Mother Superior Aimee Machail saw Satan. What might very well have been the very first human/alien contact was twisted and perverted by religious fanaticism. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised" (30).

The Zone of Fear, Guffey's notion of an area that both creates dread in human beings and feeds upon that fear, may have been caused by burning alien skin in "The Falling Nun," but it also reveals the remarkable human impulse for self-deception and delusion, an impulse perhaps related to our

tendency to lie. In Guffey's extraordinary universe, such lies and self-deception can become incarnate. Finn mac Cumhall, the hulking Cyclops from McGuire's childhood books of folktales, gains flesh and substance from McGuire's own reaction to the fear zone. "I'm a tulpa," the Cyclops explains, "a spirit given three dimensions by the palpable fear generated by a human being" (41). Mother Superior may believe that she has captured the Devil, a figure conjured from her own religious indoctrination, but McGuire's secular abomination leaps from European folklore, another form of political and cultural mind control just as potentially malicious as organized religion.

In the modern world, Guffey suggests, fear is centered in the individual and politics is often its source. Curt Adamson, the protagonist of "Spies and Saucers," recognizes the personal nature of fear and the unique motivators of dread in the mid-twentieth century. People today are no longer afraid of vampires or monsters, he speculates while considering the propaganda film he is about to develop:

Now they were afraid of *themselves*, of the communist next door and the egghead scientist who had conjured up the atom bomb and the politician in human form lurking just outside the door ready to attack at the barest provocation. Now they were afraid of the demons that might possibly lay beyond the farthest star, ready to arrive in metal crafts shaped like halos to upset the cosmological view instilled in them by decades of intractable religion. (237)

In *Cryptoscatology*, Guffey discusses the malleability of fear and how the accelerants that incite that fear have changed in the twenty first century. "In the end," he writes, "the important point to remember is this: in the modern day digital environment truth is as malleable as viscous liquid. You can't make up anything that won't come true a few minutes later" (35). Human fear is so diverse in cause and effect, so complex and multi-faceted in its origins, that it resembles a confluence of storm clouds crashing together, changing form and appearance and moving on to create other manifestations of their rolling energy.

Charles Fort, author of *The Book of the Damned* (1919) and the inspiration for *Fortean Times*, observes this constant mutation of truth and extends the concept to include all elements of existence in a complex, philosophical

argument. Fort tirelessly researched strange accounts of extra-natural occurrences appearing in daily newspapers, effectively creating his own early version of *Weekly World News*, and identified stories of UFOs, mysterious disappearances, and frogs inexplicably falling from the sky as *the damned*, objects and incidents rejected by modern science as they exist outside the boundaries of accepted physical laws. He maintains that the physical world actually consists of “one inter-continuous nexus” and that all “things” are merely projections of that nexus constantly trying to establish themselves as real. This attempt at singular identity is futile and disastrous, Fort says, employing an ocean metaphor to illustrate his point. Things seeking constant identity and stasis—a state of truth or factuality—inevitably act futility, “just as would one who draws a circle in the sea, including a few waves, saying that the other waves, with which the included are continuous, are positively different, and stakes his life upon maintaining that the admitted and the damned are positively different” (7).

Guffey emulates this fluidity of identity and the inconstant state of truth through shifting narrators and assumed personas. In “The Fallen Nun,” Kyle Black’s narration gives way to Johnny Layton, while Layton actually physically swaps places with Sister Marina Wilson through the effects of a preternatural wormhole between dimensions. The science fiction author Carmichael Forrest, in “Spies and Saucers,” actually is the pen name of Phil Anslinger, a propagandist and author of a book on psychological warfare. Philip Trowbridge, sent to Middlesburg to investigate suspicious activity in “Communist Town, USA,” assumes the undercover name of Herb O’Leary but, after encountering Pythagoras Invictus and his UFO proclamations, comes to question the truthfulness of every aspect of his existence. Trowbridge later talks with FBI agent Felix Tomney, who complains that liberal politicians in Congress are not convinced of a communist threat and maintains that the Bureau must create a counter-myth to dispel that misconception. “Wouldn’t that be . . . the truth?” Philip asks. The unreal becomes real once again, and shadowy showmen like Pythagoras Invictus popularize tales of saucers to create extraordinary popular delusions, casting waves into the nexus of truth and reality (154).

Ray Palmer, editor of the science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories* in the late 1930s through the 1940s, remains one of the most prominent figures in mid-century paranormal event and conspiracy theory dissemination. Guffey includes Palmer in his dedication-page list of 1950s “Flying Saucerers”

no doubt due to Palmer's editorship of *Fate*, *Flying Saucers from Other Worlds*, *Search*, and other strange-event publications throughout the decade. Palmer published Kenneth Arnold's account of his flying disc encounter in the first issue of *Fate* and steadfastly campaigned for public acceptance of saucers as real spacecraft from other worlds, but questions about his sincerity remain. "Palmer, as always, was hard to pin down," writes Fred Nadis in his biography of Palmer, *The Man from Mars* (2013). "How serious was he? . . . *Fate's* mission was to examine 'unexplained mysteries,' often based in old folklore and 'rejected knowledge.' But at the same time it was helping create the new folklore of the space age." Nadis concludes that Palmer's ultimate domain was documenting the shifting identity and relationship between truth and reality through lore, "a dignified term for a body of knowledge that is capable of bearing truth, nonsense, or notions in between" (136). Palmer's identity and convictions indeed are as confusing as those of Guffey's characters. He was seriously injured as a child and remained physically affected by that misfortune, but his accounts of the accident often differed from those of family and friends. As Richard Toronto explains in *War Over Lemuria* (2013), a study of the hollow earth accounts of Richard Shaver, even Palmer's middle name was disputed. "And so it went with most people who knew Ray Palmer," Toronto writes. "They were never quite sure what to think of him. Did he truly believe in *anything*? Though he often tried to express his beliefs, he was never very good at it. His agile mind was in a constant state of flux. Facts were open-ended, never a sure thing for very long" (5).

The Shaver Mystery, popularized in Palmer's *Amazing Stories* between 1945 and 1948, may be one of the most remarkable post-war campaigns to promote contemporary lore. Shaver, a factory worker who maintained that the machinery in his workplace allowed him to hear other people's thoughts, later insisted that he had been a prisoner of the deros, members of an ancient civilization living inside our hollow earth. Deros, Shaver said, could monitor human beings with complex ray machinery, project thoughts into surface-dweller minds, and cause many of the accidents and misfortunes normally considered natural events. Palmer's motivation for promoting these outrageous stories may have resulted more from a desire to increase the circulation of *Amazing Stories* than from a sincere belief in the truth of Shaver's stories, but the Shaver phenomenon earned attention from such mainstream publications as *Life* magazine and Shaver Mystery Clubs were active in several US cities. As Guffey's book fictionally demonstrates, the

war-ridden 1940s and the communist-focused 1950s were tumultuous times encouraging widespread beliefs outside of normal experience. “Unconsciously or not,” Toronto writes, “Ray Palmer transformed Shaver’s stories of a subterranean world of evil deros into a metaphor for the evil that gripped a war-torn surface world. . . . He may well have seen the Shaver Mystery as an allegory of Man’s descent into Hell, a modern-day *Paradise Lost*” (5). Or, as other observers maintain, Palmer was seeking a buck and promoting a media scam using Shaver, a prototype of Guffey’s Pythagoras Invictus, as his pitchman. In fact, both notions of Palmer’s motivations may be true, with reality existing somewhere in the deep dark depths of Fort’s rolling ocean. Palmer’s influence on modern thought, however, is undeniable. “Palmer’s greatest impact has been in the murky world of conspiracy theory,” Nadis writes. “When consensus reality is denied, new narratives rush in to fill the void. As an early impresario of the paranormal, Palmer shares in much of the credit—or the blame—for the development of contemporary conspiracy theory culture, particularly its cross-fertilization with popular culture and entertainment” (257).

Guffey’s *Cryptoscatology* extensively examines conspiracy theory and its immersion into media and society, and in *Spies and Saucers*, Guffey’s appropriation of popular culture artifacts both illustrates his notions of conspiracy and demonstrates his immersion into the media and subject matter forming the nexus of his fiction. Pythagoras Invictus, for example, seems influenced by both George Adamski and Valentine Michael Smith, a human raised on Mars in Robert A. Heinlein’s 1961 novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Smith develops a cult-like circle of admirers, much like the groupies who follow Pythagoras Invictus, thus illustrating the cultural attraction of fringe groups and their leaders examined in *Cryptoscatology*. Curt Adamson, contemplating his film project to fabricate menace from another world, wonders if shared fear serves a Darwinian purpose, perhaps uniting people rather than drawing them apart. This notion of a fabricated extraterrestrial threat uniting nations echoes “The Architects of Fear,” a 1963 episode of the science fiction television program *The Outer Limits*. Wolf 359, a red dwarf star remarkably near our own sun and chosen by Curt as the solar host of his imaginary planet, was used by L. Sprague de Camp for a 1952 short story and appeared in a 1964 world-building episode of *The Outer Limits*. Harlan Ellison, a controversial science fiction writer who is rumored to have hounded Palmer into revealing the truth about the Shaver Mystery, pro-

moted a world-building project much like Adamson's in *Harlan's World* (1985), a collaborate effort by prominent science fiction authors. Guffey's style and sensibility, especially in "Spies and Saucers," has elements of the tough-guy fiction of Mickey Spillane, whose novels *My Gun is Quick* (1950) and *The Big Kill* (1951) enthralled thriller audiences and are precursors to Ian Fleming's James Bond novels published later that decade. Elements of Philip K. Dick's paranoid science fiction, Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo journalism, and the 1970s television monster sleuth Kolchak also resonate throughout Guffey's work. *Spies and Saucers* is steeped in cultural trends and trivia, and such content amplifies the author's implicit connection between media, propaganda, and modern conspiracy theory.

The media and culture of the 1950 may seem now, from a perspective of nearly seventy years on, simplistic and naive, the ill-formed post-war antecedent to today's digital environment of eBooks and streaming services. Nevertheless millions of post-war children were captivated by television programs such as *Rocky Jones*, *Space Ranger*, juvenile novels in the Winston Science Fiction Series, genre magazines lining newsstand walls, and the resplendent future of technology and space travel promised by mainstream media. Growing up in a small West Virginia town surrounded by timbered mountains, I anxiously looked forward to my family's weekly shopping trip to the big city of Clarksburg, population 32,000, where science fiction publications such as *Galaxy*, *If*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* awaited purchase at Rex Hex Newsstand. I wondered, as we drove into the city, which imposing industrial building provided office space for Gray Barker's *The Saucerian*. I mail-ordered issues of Ray Palmer's *Flying Saucers from Other Worlds* from his Wisconsin farmhouse and was captivated by stories of pilots encountering aliens and the reader-submitted plans for building UFO detectors. As a teenager I watched George Adamski's television appearance on, I believe, *The Mike Douglas Show* and desperately hoped his stories were true, although my maturing sense of reason suggested they were not. I read Donald Keyhoe's fascinating books with admiration and awe for the obvious government cover-ups and implicit intrigue. Guffey's *Spies and Saucers* resonates as a reconstruction of that mid-century media and those exceptional, nearly mystical experiences when flying saucers hovered above us and communists, hidden in doorways, watched us with subversive intent.

Guffey's novel seems spontaneously generated from the troposphere of fear hanging above us at the beginning of a new, byte-infused century, a lit-

erary tulpa expressing the nexus of propaganda, false narratives, and outright lies we experience every day. Conspiracies range worldwide, and political parties prey on the most vulnerable members of society from the closed-door sessions in the Capitol building or the basement of a pizza parlor. We have landed on the moon—or we have not; the Earth is round—or it is flat. Communism may have receded as an existential threat, replaced perhaps by something darker and more indefinable within ourselves, but the dread of repression remains. Truth, more than ever, is an *n*-body problem constantly shifting and receding in unpredictable ways, much as celestial objects, so bright and attractive, interact with each other in a confluence of uncertainty. How can we be sure, after all, if anything is true? Does Guffey's *Spies and Saucers* reflect our own culture, really, or does it exist in another universe entirely where fiction is fact and fact is an enigma?

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