

BOOK REVIEW

The Big Book of UFOs by Chris A. Rutkowski. Dundurn, 2010. 396 pp. \$19.99. ISBN 978-1554887606.

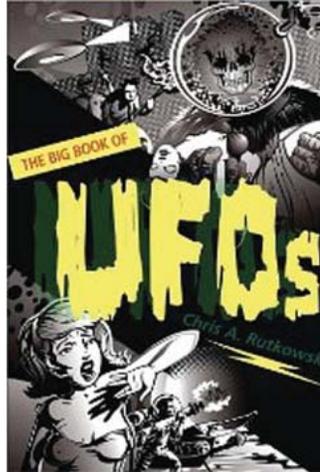
You don't need to wander very far into Chris Rutkowski's aptly named *The Big Book of UFOs* to get the message: The guy knows his stuff. He's got it in chronological order, from pre-20th century trends all the way up to the double-aughts of the 21st. He's got it broken down into narrow categories: contactees, abductees, implants, hybrids, hoaxes, debunkers; you name it, this 396-page tome likely has a reference.

Much of the material, such as Roswell and SETI, is so familiar that you don't even have to be a hardcore student of the genre to recognize it. But some entries are so arcane it's doubtful that even Jeopardy-caliber UFO nerds could pass the test. Category: The 1890s Wave. Answer: During the Teddy Roosevelt Administration, sightings of unknown "airships" became so common that this company took out newspaper ads with graphic UFO illustrations stating "This Is What You Saw," accompanied by the slogan "High up in quality, low in price." Question: What is White Star Baking Powder?

On the other hand, Rutkowski's sojourns into remote corners of the world could also prepare us for some future Geography category competition. There were the miners who saw triangular lights outside Taparko, Burkina Faso, on Christmas night, 2005. The following year, at Port el Kantouni, Tunisia, a couple of people reported seeing low-flying rods with running lights. Some encounters are more unfortunate than others. A dog dies in Uruguay from internal bleeding in 1977 as a possible result of exposure to UFO radiation. The same year, a Polish resident of Piastow suffers headaches and faceburn after an alleged encounter. In 1975, a fellow living near Macheke, Rhodesia, is thrown to the ground and rendered unconscious when struck by a "bright white beam of light" outside his house.

The Big Book of UFOs is also something of a laundry list, with declassified government documents thrown in with cultural trivia. Readers are reminded, for instance, that the Robin Williams sitcom *Mork & Mindy* was actually a *Happy Days* spinoff, in which Richie Cunningham's abduction was derailed by Fonzie's intervention. "This episode aired several months after the infamous 'jump the shark' episode. . . ." There are interactive features as well, such as a checklist to tell if you yourself might've been abducted by aliens.

In other words, there is no narrative thread unifying Rutkowski's *Big Book*. There doesn't even appear to be an agenda, aside from a reference book-like compendium of 100-plus years of weird goings-on in the sky. But Rutkowski, a Canadian astronomer and science writer who's spent more than 30 years on this dim trail without so much as the satisfaction of seeing a UFO himself, is careful not to make a case for one theory over another. In fact, he reviews the hoaxes and offers conventional explanations for incidents where conventional explanations are the most logical.



But for a long-time UFO watcher with a low threshold for official nonsense, Rutkowski's 2010 *Big Book* apparently delights in highlighting some of the more twisted explanations offered by authorities and debunkers.

In 1966, for instance, during what would appear to be a precursor to the crop circle mystery, an Australian farmer saw a spinning “football-shaped object” one morning that evidently left reeds and grasses in two locations depressed in a clockwise rotation. Although the Royal Australian Air Force confirmed that no aircraft had been in that location, the local police attributed the swirls to a helicopter, and the event to the farmer having seen “sunlight gleaming on the rotating blades.”

The Big Book serves up a number of such contortions, but one of the highlights involves a retired British intelligence officer named Angus Brooks. In 1967, as a British Airways employee, Brooks reported a complicated, shape-shifting UFO hovering near a field amid a “Force 8 gale wind.” The Ministry of Defense jumped on the case because it occurred “between an atomic energy station, an underwater weapons base, and a USAF communications base.” The MoD concluded that Brooks must have fallen asleep, and when he awoke was confronted by a “vitreous floater” in his eyeball. “However,” Rutkowski writes, “as the witness himself noted, it would have been nearly impossible to fall asleep while sitting in such a strong wind.”

If you're looking for a wide-angle take on what the UFO fuss is all about—cults, astronauts, even the Face on Mars—*The Big Book* is as good a place as any to start. But from there, you're on your own.

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