

BOOK REVIEW

The UFO People: A Curious Culture by MJ Baniias. White Crow Productions/August Night Books www.augustnightpress.com, 2019. 202 pp. \$17.99 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-78677-092-9.

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The UFO People has the rare distinction of being a UFO book that is not about UFOs. Author MJ Baniias relegates the flying objects to the background along with the usual questions of whether they are, what they are, and where they come from. The title signals where his interests lie, and he joins a growing band of scholars with humanistic approaches to the UFO subject. Jodi Dean, Brenda Denzler, Jeffrey Kripal, D. W. Pasulka, and the contributors to Robbie Graham's anthology, *UFOs: Reframing the Debate*, have broadened the inquiry past radar analysis or psychometrics to philosophical, cultural, and religious issues. It is in this spirit that Baniias looks at the people attracted to UFOs and the culture they form.

Baniias declares from the outset that he does not know what UFOs are. He has earned his credentials, having investigated for MUFON, worked with noted ufologists, interviewed both ordinary experiencers and ufological celebrities. He acknowledges that UFOs are real enough for people to see and be affected, stricken, fascinated by them, to have lives and outlooks altered. The experiences of thousands of people are undeniable, but the nature of those sights in the sky remains open to question and the evidence ambiguous. Anyone, proponent or skeptic, who claims to know all the answers is guilty of overreach.

If uncertainty surrounds the objects, we can learn much about the collective relationship of people with the subject and the rest of society. Most people have heard of UFOs and many believe they are real, making UFOs perhaps the most popular paranormal belief today. Here's a story worth a closer look. It leads into the intellectual living rooms of UFO followers, into a gap between the life of going to work and mowing the lawn, and a life of experiences that should not happen and possibilities that should not be thought, much less believed. This gap is a haunted place at the cultural fringe where heresies thrive and subvert established norms, where ordinary people turn against the ordinary and become the Other, in a sense alien themselves.

All people aware of UFOs are “UFO people” in the widest sense. Those who see, study, and discuss UFOs; those who join organizations, read books, scan websites, and watch UFO-themed TV shows; those who believe and speak out or keep their thoughts to themselves make up the UFO community in its usual sense. But skeptics, scoffers, and deniers interact with proponents and participate in disputes. People who go to movies like *Independence Day* or *Predator*, who laugh at a little green man advertisement or Halloween costume, have their opinions shaped by UFOs in popular culture. These, too, belong. Baniya adopts “UFO subculture” as a more meaningful collective term, one that encompasses multiple viewpoints, interests, experiences, narratives, and beliefs. A subculture suggests some level of collective identity and some differences from mainstream society, issues of key importance throughout the book.

The collective consists of individuals, and each one arrives in the subculture by a personal route. The first part of the book takes a glimpse at some of these people. Amy, a Manitoba farm wife, had recurrent UFO sightings, experienced an abduction, encountered a ghost, and dreamed of coming disasters. Few people knew of her UFO connection. The encounters brought fear, but she gained clarity, insight, and possible psychic ability from them. Roy reported multiple and unpleasant abduction events. Unlike Amy, who was centered, reliable, and at peace, Roy was not truthful. He had lost his family, his personal life had fallen apart, and he filled the emptiness with stories that were objectively false yet purposeful to him. UFOs also benefitted Roy, albeit in a sad way.

Richard Doty has the opposite of a quiet and private relationship with UFOs. He stands out larger than life within the subculture, lauded by some for spilling secrets of government interaction with aliens, condemned by others as an agent of disinformation and spreader of tall tales. He has certainly added mightily to UFO mythology. His yarns stoked the “Dark Side” of 1980s ufology and rewrote human history as a story of alien intervention on earth. No matter how often discredited, this alternative history remains gospel for some parts of the subculture. Doty both created UFO mythology and was created by it, having become the symbolic, if not the actual, author of extreme lore that drags the group’s image toward the far shores of Otherness.

Christopher Green, Hal Puthoff, and Gary Nolan are distinguished research scientists with government connections. They have a lower public profile than Doty, and gladly keep it that way. They belong to an informal network of scientists, academics, and professionals who research topics such as physical effects of UFOs and exotic energy sources, often on their own time and dime. Members of this “invisible college” risk reputations

and jobs out of commitment to study a stigmatized subject. Experiencers, mythmakers, and scientific researchers vary in interpretations but unite in common interest, each participating in the subculture and adding to its vibrant milieu of accounts, beliefs, and theories.

Passing on to the collective as his primary interest, Baniyas devotes the book's second part to the UFO subculture. Individuals compose it as cells make up a body. He wants to define the full organism, what it is, how it works, where it lives in the cultural environment, and its effects on the intellectual ecosystem of modern life. Baniyas draws his theoretical structure from Jacques Derrida, the philosopher famous—or notorious—for deconstruction. Derrida questions how we know what is real. An objective reality exists, but no human has the godlike power to access it directly. Everything we know is mediated by language, layer upon layer of it. How we perceive and conceive of experiences is shaped by language-based expectations, how we communicate, think about, and remember takes place through language. In this view, the description of a UFO is not a fixed reality but a work in progress, its image building, changing with every added adjective or altered verb. Words themselves bear no set relationship with an object. They take meanings and nuances from the ways they relate to other words. The claim of science to objective truth is false because all knowledge clings to the slippery slopes of language.

How UFOs and the UFO subculture fit Derrida's scheme is best understood through his metaphor of the ghost. A ghost exemplifies dualities. It is dead yet moves as though alive. Senses detect it, imagination turns it into stories true and false. Official science says there's no such thing; ordinary people insist they are eyewitnesses. UFOs, too, come and go like phantoms, elusive and unpredictable yet seemingly a material presence. People see them, believe in them, tell stories about them. UFOs haunt the skies, haunt individuals, haunt an ideological gap between things forbidden to exist and things people experience, nonetheless. UFO people themselves are ghosts, their alternative reality bringing a chill in the night to mainstream folk who waken to the possibility that their familiar reality has been illusory all along.

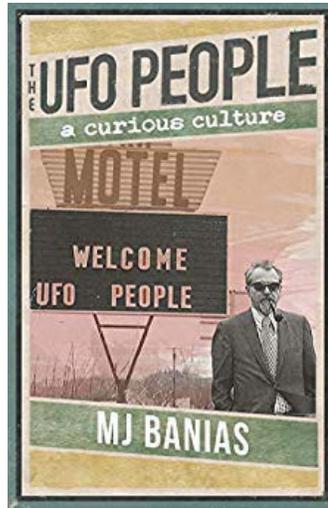
One idea inseparable from UFOs is the extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH). Flying saucers soon acquired popular synonymy with alien spaceships, and the association has stuck. What else could they be? Such machines seem trite, a product of pulp fiction, and Baniyas wishes for an explanation more in keeping with the numinous quality of UFO experiences. He hints at the paranormal, the deep psyche, or the *mundus imaginalis*; some members of the subculture prefer experimental technology or unknown natural phenomena. Others commit to no explanation. Yet the ETH makes sense to many people, at least as a possibility. Though narrow and materialistic, it opens a dynamic

environment for creativity, fantasy, and speculation to build a rich UFO mythology. A symbiotic interplay of event and idea, experience and interpretation, history and mythology flourishes in the hothouse climate of the subculture's ideological terrarium, where the UFO narrative grows and mutates to create a unique version of reality. Meanwhile the ETH provides the expansive tie that binds the group together.

Other consequences of the ETH prove less positive. Popular culture portrays aliens as monstrous or cute, more often hostile than friendly, but nothing to take seriously. Outsiders in the mainstream stereotype UFO people as nothing more than science fiction groupies who forgot the fiction clause. These misrepresentations reduce a subculture of diverse experiences, different understandings, and lively discussions to a single-issue, single-idea band of fanatics who says the answer to every question is aliens. This caricature does the complexity of the subculture an injustice and delegitimizes the experiences of witnesses. By making a joke of UFOs, the mainstream asserts control-by-ridicule over the narrative and banishes the subject to the fringe.

Official science issues the strongest warrant for rejection. Scientists proclaim time and again that UFOs do not exist yet lend support to SETI. Baniyas argues that faraway aliens are acceptable while aliens at the front door pose a danger, not with ray guns drawn, but with a challenge to social and intellectual structures of power and authority. The alien come to earth represents a superior Other that threatens the human position as center and apex of the universe, an extraterrestrial Copernicus to boot our achievements and egos off to the sidelines. The deep-down reason that science rejects UFOs lies in their threat to the power of science as arbiter of truth about the physical world.

Any suggestion that they challenge science would come as a shock to members of the UFO community. Far from wanting to overthrow scientific authority, they crave its approval. Eighteen of 49 annual MUFON symposia include science or technology in their title themes. Ufology does not decry science, only scientists' failure to study UFOs scientifically. Proponents never doubt the significance of UFOs but take a largely passive view of their roles, waiting and watching but relying on the government and UFOs



themselves to take the lead. Anything as drastic as dethroning scientific authority seems entirely outside the ufological agenda.

Banias takes quite the opposite view. He sees the UFO subculture as a source of world-changing effects and believes a revolution is already under way. How do people different only in their devotion to a seemingly harmless belief share in a heresy that rattles the bars of mainstream orthodoxy? As individuals, they do not. The particulars of UFO belief do not. The real agent of change is the subculture itself. It does not have the unified voice of an advocacy group, or guidance by deliberate intent, but effects change by its collective example.

What is “normal” are the everyday norms we take for granted. These ideas and practices get a free pass, no questions asked. The way things are is the way things should be, and we sink into acceptance like a comfortable easy chair. We know what’s real and what’s not as a matter of common sense, and for most of us UFOs fall into the “not” category. Science sides with this same judgment. Charles Fort and the Fortean Society doubted and poked fun at scientific authority, but they were exiled to the lunatic fringe. The UFO field looks to the casual observer as equally fringe-worthy, a collection of preposterous claims and extravagant beliefs taken seriously by people who cannot be taken seriously, who carry on a gaudy, noisy, multi-ring circus that Barnum himself would envy.

Still, most UFO people live day by day as card-carrying loyalists to convention. They appear normal and ordinary except for one deviation. If they are reliable most of the time, can they be rejected out of hand for UFO beliefs? Ufologists accused military and political leaders of cover-ups years before Vietnam and Watergate made such distrust the new norm. UFO people were ahead of their time. Science denies the reality of UFOs, but countless first-hand testimonies refute the verdict of science. Maybe there’s more “out there” than our received wisdom allows. Maybe the reality passed to us is wrong and UFO people once again have a jump on the truth. The UFO subculture raises such doubts, gives a knock to the pillars of mainstream reality. Our easy chair feels less comfortable now that we have questions buzzing around our heads.

Banias recognizes that the UFO subculture is more than a subculture. It is a counterculture, an opponent to established norms that does not allow reconciliation and therefore serves as an active irritant abrading the mainstream’s confidence in its reality. UFO people reject the official taboo on UFOs, immune to argument or persuasion, resistant to ridicule and rejection, content within their own culture to participate in mainstream culture even as they defy its authority and control. This irreconcilable difference makes the subculture, by its very existence, a source of transformative pressure

on the paradigms of thought, social structures, ideologies, identities, and norms that the mainstream takes for granted. It forces the rest of us to question what is real, and how do we know? The idea of aliens coincides with a broader range of fears and anxieties—of invasion and violation, of a world increasingly unknowable and out of our control—to symbolize our insecurities as well as unsettle securities we've not yet questioned.

The UFO subculture seethes with dissent. Even when the content is some nonsensical conspiracy theory or phony alien autopsy film, the effect is countercultural, a constant rejection of official truth, an ongoing series of small cuts to injure trust in the norm. With the Internet as its platform, UFO people disconnect from the mainstream construct of reality to build their own channels of communication and alternate truth—or rather, each his or her own truth. A democratization of power is under way, an anarchy of opinion. The subculture has no rules, no authority, no arbiters of truth. Each voice is equal, each has its unrestricted and uncontrolled say, while much of what is said about UFOs, true or false, loses even the authority of a specific author as it echoes back and forth across the Internet in perpetuity.

In final consideration, the UFO subculture is not about belief in UFOs or the ETH. Its real unifying force lies in a shared state of not knowing, a location in the gap between object and subject with no certainty which is which. This culture is not so much its myths and ideologies as it is a role, that of a living mirror held up to official and mainstream culture. As a counterculture, it erodes certainties, blurs boundaries, and breaks down categorical boxes. This group is the Other to normal thinking, full of taboo ideology and intellectual anarchy, but it reflects a message that you the mainstream are Others as well, bound by truths that are not true and norms that are not inevitable. Your culture is no truer or better than ours. The UFO subculture is not a classic subculture that deviates from the norm; rather, it exposes mainstream culture as arbitrary and illusory. Baniya proposes exoculture as a more fitting term, a group that exists in its otherness without need to measure itself against another. This exoculture is exemplary of difference—ideologically independent, without structures, rules, and standards, free to create its own reality and recreate it time and again. The UFO exoculture is an alien living in plain sight on earth, to the wonder, bewilderment, and dread of those committed to the status quo.

UFO people who read the book will have some objections. Derrida's deconstructionist theory denies objective knowledge and permanence of experience in favor of uncertain and shifting representations in language. These ideas suggest people do not know what happened to them and eyewitness testimony is worthless. This sounds like skeptical talk, yet it should be no cause for alarm. His principles apply to all knowledge rather

than singling out UFOs, leaving the relationship between language and ufological truth no better or worse than it ever was. UFO history testifies to the power of language: “Flying saucer” evoked an image, and newspapers repeated the term even when it did not fit witness descriptions. Thousands of reports have described disk-shaped UFOs that turned out to be conventional objects, demonstrating that language influences how UFOs should look, how to describe them, and how communication determines public knowledge. Witnesses to the 1965 “Incident at Exeter” UFO described it and subsequent illustrators pictured it. These depictions vary from a glaring blob of light to a metal disk with portholes, chrome, and closed hatch, looking so much like the product of a Detroit auto factory that turn it around and it would carry a license plate. Between these extremes are varying discoidal objects with different arrangements of lights. The same descriptive words had different meanings for each reader.

Terms like *myth* and *ideology*, implications of a reality that is not “the” reality, also are suspect. Mythology suggests falsehoods, yarns, UFOs that do not consist of nuts and bolts. These are, too, the words of skeptics, of anyone who regards UFOs as delusions, errors, and jokes. Such sensitivity is understandable considering mainstream treatment, but so much uncertainty surrounds UFOs that speculation necessarily fills in the gaps, while continued reworking rationalizes fact and fiction into a coherent understanding. The results make sense whether they are true, false, or somewhere in between. They join the parts into a working narrative, in short, a mythology that serves as the subculture’s best guess at truth. Baniyas, like thoughtful ufologists, simply recognizes the undeniably indefinite character of much UFO knowledge and discourse.

The biggest question is whether a subculture based on UFOs really drives culture change. UFOs carry some useful properties for a counterculture. They allow for—even invite—personal experience, and participation keeps up interest and involvement. They foster storytelling and nourish a rich history, mythology, and ideology with connections that branch into government, the military, conspiracies, the ancient past, and other anomalies such as crop circles. And they are out of this world. But what obvious leverage derives from 70 years of UFO reports, even impressive ones? Individual contributions, whether from modest witnesses or flamboyant public figures or credentialed professionals, have counted for little. Baniyas argues that the subculture rather than the UFO is the transformative agent and describes how it might push the levers of change; but has it? Again, more than 70 years have passed without clear evidence that the UFO subculture has moved the needle a single degree.

To be fair, Baniyas never insists that the UFO subculture revolutionizes the

world single-handedly. This one subculture offers a hypothetical example of processes afoot throughout the modern world, activities and ideologies that converge to undermine established authority, norms of belief, and standards of truth. The trends that demonstrably shake the old order are social and political—populism, nationalism, tribalism, and a long list of other “isms” that reshape the landscape. Major instruments of change are the Internet and social media. Like so many others, the UFO community embraces the Internet as its preferred forum. Here is the modern Wild West, free, wide-open, lawless, anarchic, a platform that levels all voices, usually downward. Facts, expertise, authority, even distinctions between truth and fiction no longer apply. Quality UFO websites and sound information exist, if you can find them, but shadowy sources ply the ether with rumors, hearsay, lies, cons, distortions, and endless repetitions that do not distinguish viable sightings and claims from those already dead and ought-to-stay buried. Cyberspace has become the realm of choice for “other” realities with no solid footing on the ground.

Perhaps the author’s most controversial argument regards the place of science in this culture conflict. The “science wars” debate has gone many rounds over the years. Derrida is right that science is conducted in language and only the gods know absolute truth, but science deals with more than words. There is a reality outside our heads—a hot stove burns every hand that touches it, whatever we think or say. Objectivity may be out of reach, but not all propositions are equally true. Inventors learned there are many ways for a flying machine to sit on the ground or crash but only a few consistent principles by which it will fly. Scientific truths are only relative truths, but scientists recognize the provisional nature of their knowledge and discard—not gladly or quickly—even a beloved theory when evidence requires it. Disease may be due to evil spirits, divine punishment, maleficent witchcraft, miasma, or humors out of balance, but germ theory displaced the rest because it explains more observables and is better able to effect cures. Evil spirits may be to blame after all, but pending new evidence vaccines work better than exorcism. Scientific knowledge is not absolute, but science delivers the most reliable, successful, and useful truths we can achieve. We stake our lives on them every day.

A rejection of UFOs because they threaten scientific power and authority is a proposition that may contain a grain of truth. Science is a human enterprise and equally subject to human jealousies and self-interests, but concern for status and position hardly tells the whole story. Scientific consensus sets the usual standard for scientific truth. A consensus may look like the closed ranks of an elite fraternity to those who find their beliefs rejected, but when contradictory theories contend, the collective wisdom

of informed judges is most likely to choose the best. Consensus is not groupthink but a form of peer review. It closes the door on the occasional truth, but far more often it bars junk data and pseudoscience, error and faulty reasoning, quackery and propaganda. The mantle of scientific authority comes with responsibility to defend the best truths we have, defined by the concurrence of genuine experts and more likely to capture the truth than pet theories of outliers or preferences of know-nothing politicians.

Banias foresees a coming democracy of knowledge where everyone is equal; where authorities, experts, and hierarchies are gone; and where presently accepted facts, truths, and norms are exposed as illusory. Such prophecies are coming true before our eyes. The Internet has become the go-to source of news and information, and not just for UFO people. Anyone with a website or social media account can now create “truth,” spread it around the world, and gather followers. National leaders make up truths as they go along and distinguish genuine news from fake news according to what they want it to be, with inconvenient facts and investigations dismissed or disparaged. Scientific evidence is suppressed or ignored if it interferes with political and business interests. The gatekeeping duty of science against fraud and nonsense is under attack, journalists suffer abuse or demonization simply for doing their jobs.

To couch these trends in terms of democracy, equality, and freedom lends them an appeal they hardly deserve. This version of democracy recalls the Athenian disaster where freedom degenerated into mob rule, demagogues manipulated the public to serve their own ends, and democratic governance got a bad name that lasted two thousand years. Everyone can have his or her opinion, but useful knowledge to serve the common good requires a commitment to factual evidence, a meritocracy of experts, and a social structure to promote education, research, and application. We need science and reason to police against wrong or harmful beliefs such as anti-vaccination and climate-change denial. Otherwise, this new freedom may prove less a leap into a blissful tomorrow than free fall back to the Dark Ages. Banias is right about where we may be headed, but a note of alarm at what we stand to lose might also be appropriate.

Of course, one book has room only for so much, and we can be grateful for what Banias has given us. Whether or not the UFO subculture can break the status quo and reshape modern culture remains to be seen, but who would have imagined that interest in UFOs could have effects that ripple across the breadth of modern culture? He breaks free of the usual “yes they are” / “no they aren’t” range of UFO discourse for a refreshing new perspective on the UFO community as a subculture, counterculture, and exoculture. From awareness of these unsuspected depths, members may

gain a new sense of their own potential significance. The philosophical and cultural theories that inform his argument could have made for hard going, but the author has proved a lucid and helpful guide. For that, too, he earns our thanks—and a reading.

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