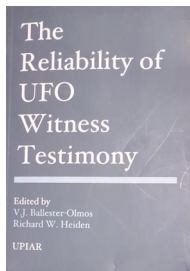


**BOOK AND
MULTIMEDIA
REVIEW**

The Reliability of UFO Witness Testimony

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Ballester Olmos, V.-J., & Heiden, R. W. (2023). The reliability of UFO witness testimony. UPIAR.

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Dr. Jacques Vallee, in a book review in the Fall 2001 issue of the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* (15,3), wrote, "In his introduction Jacobs (David Jacobs, *UFOs and Abductions: Challenging the Borders of Knowledge*) proposes a statement of dual problems of contemporary UFO research: (1) all the work done by ufologists over the last 50 years, 'has not solved the problem of building bridges between them and the scientific community,' and (2) the key issue is to decide whether people 'are accurately recalling real events, or are they generating psychological based accounts?'"

The major complaint about UFO research and UFO researchers was that a great deal of the evidence is in the form of testimony, which science often claims is anecdotal in nature. Science suggests that evidence for alien visitation lacks reproducibility, that it can't be taken into the lab to be examined, and it can't be replicated in the lab. We are left with the observations of people, some highly trained and some who never finished the most basic of education, as the witnesses.

Ballester-Olmos and Heiden have put together a book of 711 pages in an 8½ by 11 format that explores this problem. It is filled with photographs and charts, which reduces some of the reading time, but it does take time to work through most of the scientific papers. Some of the papers, rather than looking as if they were prepared for a peer-reviewed journal, look as if they were written for a popular magazine. While there is a comprehensive table of contents, there is no index. Each of the entries provides a bibliography of source material for those who wish to assess the value of those sources and that entry.

The book is divided into seven sections, beginning with case studies of various UFO events and ending with epistemological issues, including "On the Fallacy of Residue," which suggests there will always be an unresolved residue of cases for reasons that have nothing to do with the alien nature of the events but because there will always be cases in which critical information will have been overlooked or left out. And, of course, this is an accurate statement.

About the first thing I noticed about the case studies was that most of the entries were written by those who resided in the skeptic's community. That's not necessarily a bad thing though that bias might have infected the thinking of some of the authors of the various papers. Although I try to maintain a dispassionate view in my investigations, I sometimes find that my biases creep into my books and articles. It is one of those things that many of us work to avoid but frequently fail to do so completely.

The book does not have to be read in sequence to understand the points of view. I turned to the case histories with which I had some intimate personal knowledge. The first segment I read was the analysis of the abduction of Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker, which was provided by Joe Nickell of CSI. There are portions that seem disingen-



uous; however, he does move from the position that the case is either a hoax or an alien abduction by providing a third theory. He postulates that it was the result of a hypnogogic hallucination. Although hypnogogic hallucinations are always associated with sleep, Nickell suggests that Hickson had been drinking prior to the abduction, and this might have induced both the necessary sleep and another explanation. There is no evidence that Hickson had been drinking prior to the event and none that he had fallen asleep. This aspect of the theory is invented by Nickell.

Nickell wrote, "Although the UFO reported by the men had apparently not been seen by people on the heavily traveled nearby highway, there had been sightings in the area, including on the night in question." That quote is attributed to me, but Nickell had to know the original source was Philip Klass, and it was later documented to be false.

The area in question was a highway bridge that did have a view of the abduction site, but the terrain, the structure of the bridge, and the vegetation in the area obscured that site so that only a fleeting glimpse was available. More importantly, however, is a document created by high-level Air Force officers at Keesler Air Force Base the day after the abduction. It provides the names of two witnesses who saw the UFO and links to two others who were on the bridge at the time. This information was readily available when Nickell wrote his analysis because he cites Ralph and Judy Blum's *Beyond Earth: Man's Contact with UFOs*, published months after the sighting, which contained the witness information.

In a discussion I had with Calvin Parker, I asked about the claim that he had passed out and had no real memory of the event. He said that he hadn't wanted to be involved, and it was Hickson who suggested that he say that he had passed out. Parker had a clear memory of what happened and later described his examination onboard the alien craft. This, it seems, renders Nickell's hypothesis moot.

In the discussion of the Phoenix Lights by Tim Callahan, a solution, that is flares dropped by military aircraft during an exercise, is suggested as the solution for all the sightings. The evidence is persuasive. The lights filmed and spotted over Phoenix were the flares, contrary to what a few UFO researchers have claimed.

In his discussion about the case, Callahan noted there were three Air Force bases in the general area, but none of them responded to the lights. Davis-Monthan AFB is in Tucson, but there is no air defense capability there. The 355 TFW was a training unit in 1999 but was equipped with the A-10 Warthog, which is a ground support fighter and not an interceptor. The Air National Guard Papago Park Military Reservation had no air defense mission

and had no capability of intercepting the intruder. Finally, Luke Air Force Base was a training facility in 1999 and had no air defense responsibility. In answer to Callahan's question, none of those bases had the equipment nor the mission to provide intercept of any intruder. His question about that is irrelevant.

In his analysis, Callahan cites Dr. Elizabeth Loftus, the psychologist who is a leading authority on memory and perception, to explain that witnesses can often be subtly led during interviews. Sometimes their memories are colored by what they have heard about a situation or by discussing it with other witnesses or family members. In Phoenix, the sightings were important news that was reported almost immediately. This is an obvious source of contamination.

Loftus' studies are often cited when dealing with eyewitness testimony, and they certainly suggest that those gathering the data should be careful when interviewing witnesses. With the Phoenix Lights, it seems that the sources of contamination are ignored by the UFO investigators.

However, Callahan has assumed that the Phoenix Lights and the sighting of a large triangular-shaped object were also reported that night as two components of the same event. Witnesses I have interviewed who were not in the Phoenix area but did see the triangular object said that it was solid, based not on it blocking out the stars but because they could see the actual shape. This sighting was not explained by the flares.

The discussion about perception and memory are important factors in dealing with an event, especially when the interviews are conducted weeks, months and years later. Loftus is cited in many of the subsequent sections of the book as well.

Wim van Utrecht's report on "Lunar Terror in Poland: A Doctor's Dilemma, provided another problem. While it seems that the solution of the sighting is correct, there was one aspect of this that was worrisome. On page 208, while discussing the possible solution, he discovered a discrepancy with the date. It had been widely reported by UFO researchers that the sighting date was September 5, 1980, but using astronomical records, the moon was not in a position that could be seen given the directions and times. However, on September 5, 1979, the moon was right where the witnesses had said they saw the circular UFO. He found a reference to the sighting that did confirm the earlier date, but that source had cited another source. He didn't follow up on that.

Tim Printy, in his discussion of expert witnesses, mentioned a sighting from Stockton, California, on August 15, 1975, that, according to Printy, had "been thoroughly investigated and used several independent sources

es of information.” This suggests a solid case and one that deserves scrutiny.

But Printy, here, does what I think of as “chasing footnotes.” He wrote, “However, as one pulls on the string, the entire garment unravels. It appears that all of these individuals obtained their material from one single news story that was missing a lot of pertinent data.”

That is the real point to made in these investigations. The leads must be followed to the end to ensure that the best information is recovered. In van Utrecht’s analysis, he did not check the primary source, which had no real impact, but that extra step would have made the analysis stronger. Printy took that step, which made his analysis strong and weakened the importance of the case.

The real importance of the book comes in the sections following the case studies, which might be thought of as the scientific papers. Here is where the book shines. It provides the current research on various psychological, anthropological and eyewitness testimony as well as related other issues that are important to understanding the status of UFO study.

Thomas D. Albright reported “On Eyewitness Reports of Extraterrestrial Life.” He provides a definition of the various kinds of evidence, rating the importance of them and there is no complaint about that. For proper investigation, proper definitions are necessary. The problem here seems to be a lack of understanding of the history of UFO reports and UFO evidence. Instead of reporting on Close Encounters of the Third Kind, referencing reports of alien beings, he examines Our Lady of Fatima, bringing a religious element into the discussion.

But, he does examine the importance of gathering testimony and the biases that are built into such reports. He looks at “The Eyewitness: Expertise of Everyman,” which provides insight into the problems with eyewitness testimony. He offers some methods of improving the gathering of testimony and that the investigator must be aware of some of these problems.

I do want to note that there are articles that are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Tim Printy analyzed the idea of expert testimony, suggesting that pilots, while highly skilled and highly trained, were not experts in what was in the air around them. He suggested, rightly, that even pilots with thousands of hours of flight time could be fooled by the unusual. The term an expert witness, while enhancing the credibility of a pilot testimony, might be misleading.

Richard Haines, in “Witness Reliability: Accuracy – Reliability of Pilots – Personal Honor,” suggested that a pilot’s skill and training, along with thousands of hours of flight experience, did, in fact, provide them with a different perspective. Their observations from the cock-

pit are often corroborated by hard sensor data, as seen in the discussion of aviation accident analysis and “near miss” incidents. In other words, pilot eyewitness testimony isn’t nearly as unreliable as other forms of eyewitness testimony.

What makes Haines’ paper interesting is that it challenges some of the conclusions drawn by Printy in the case study section. Printy suggested that labeling pilots and law enforcement officers as expert witnesses might be something of a misnomer. While they are highly trained, that does not necessarily translate into expertise when observing ambiguous objects under unusual conditions. Haines suggests that, because of their training and experience, they are more careful in their observations than the general public. I think of them as more credible witnesses, which does not mean that they can’t be in error, only that they are better at these sorts of observations than the average citizen.

That makes for an interesting discussion of the relevance of such testimonies and the weight that should be given to them. Both Printy and Haines make the case from their personal perspectives.

There are instances in which various papers support one another. Robert Young examines the Kecksburg UFO crash, while Dr. Jean-Pierre Rospars, in “Abilities and Limitations of Eyewitness Assessed on Atmospheric Entries of Meteoroids and Artificial Satellites,” supports much of Young’s thesis.

I agree with Young, that the Kecksburg UFO crash is a misidentified meteor fall based on the research that I have conducted. The physical evidence and the photographs of the smoke train lead to that conclusion.

Before this gets completely out of hand, let me say this. I found the first section of the book, that is, the case studies, to be slanted toward the skeptical. I’m not sure that this point of view matters in assessing the overall importance of those cases specifically or the book generally. The heart of it, most of it, deals with the ongoing research into various arenas that directly affect UFO research. Sleep paralysis, for example, as an explanation for many tales of alien abduction, is an area of research that wasn’t understood in the 1970s and 1980s. David Hufford’s book, *The Terror that Comes in the Night*, examines what we now think of as hypnogogic hallucinations. Many of the abduction tales mimic the illusions from an episode of what Hufford called sleep paralysis. Hufford’s book helps us understand this latest book.

There are many of the scientific papers that should be required reading for those who wish to engage in serious UFO research. There is a cluster of papers that deal with alien abduction that provide many of the terrestrial explanations for the abductions. I have advocated for years

that a protocol be developed to distinguish between alien abduction and sleep paralysis. Although some have told me that they were working on that, I have seen nothing being used in the world today.

In the end, this book is worth the effort to study it because it addresses one of the major flaws in UFO research. Too many of us ignore the scientific method and the scientific literature that would benefit us as we investigate UFOs. Those who see themselves as investigators and researchers should be required to read the book because of the comprehensive nature of the work.

While this is a worthwhile effort, the sad thing is that this book comes to us twenty years after Jacob's made his comments. UFO research has not advanced very far since then, but this book should begin the process of moving into the scientific arena. At the beginning of a scientific project, one of the basic requirements is to complete a literature search. This book provides the basis for that literature search. Now, the rest of us must build on that process with this book as the first of those steps, and I highly recommend it for anyone interested in UFOs and UFO research.