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Review of: Robert Powell, *UFOs: A Scientist Explains What We Know (And Don't Know)* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2024, 209 pages, appendix, footnotes, references, and index. Hardcover, \$32.00.

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With this book the author has filled several basic needs of ufology and filled them admirably. UFOs entangle with a sprawling cultural mythology composed of alleged facts, rumors, tales, beliefs, popular entertainment, cultural tropes, and conspiracy theories; but what are the real facts? Multiple byways and subfields like crash-retrievals, UFO abductions, crop circles, Mothman, and ancient astronauts lead interested parties this way and that, with little sense of direction or guidance through the maze. The UFO literature is enormous. I measured my own collection of books and periodicals and found it covered 135 feet of shelf space, give or take a yard or two, and Amazon offers far more for sale, countless sources of theories, claims, and realities of varied credibility. How does anyone, especially a newcomer, sort them out, catch up on nearly eighty years of history, and distinguish the true from the false?

Not all UFO literature is bad. Far from it, excellent treatments of individual cases, clusters of events, in-depth investigations, and provocative theories have accumulated over the decades. A few classics have undertaken to lay out the key facts about UFOs and a basis for their study, among them Richard Hall's *The UFO Evidence v.1-2*, Jacques Vallée's *Anatomy of a Phenomenon* and *Challenge to Science*, J. Allen Hynek's *The UFO Experience*, and Allan Hendry's *The UFO Handbook*. Jerome Clark's *UFO Encyclopedia* (now in its fourth edition) presents magisterial coverage of nearly everything ufological, while in *UFOs and Government*, Michael Swords and Robert Powell accomplish the same on their topic. The skeptics also earn a grudging bow for a literature that challenges UFOs with conventional and psycho-social explanations, assuming the necessary role of gadflies against intellectual complacency.

Still, the years have slipped by without an up-to-date book that returns to fundamentals like the very reality of UFOs and their reported characteristics...until now.

Robert Powell has written this book, one that is concise, authoritative, accessible to all audiences, and grounded in scientific purpose. It serves as a worthy introduction to the basic issues of ufology and leads everyone from green recruit to seasoned veteran toward a scientific approach to the subject. He brings impeccable credentials to the job, having trained as a chemical engineer and spent a career in management in the semiconductor industry. He served as director of research for the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) for ten years and became a founding member of the Scientific Coalition for UAP Studies (SCU). In sixteen years he has investigated, interviewed more than 200 witnesses, researched,

and authored in-depth technical papers on significant cases, among them the famous U.S.S. *Nimitz* encounter of 2004, that draw the benchmark for current understanding and future study.

The book begins with a brief history, primarily of governmental and scientific responses—or lack thereof—to the hundreds or thousands of sightings reported every year by witnesses from all walks of life. With military efforts usually superficial and any scientific treatment dismissive and disparaging, civilian organizations filled the void. They investigated, researched, and communicated UFO events, commonly on shoestring budgets and by amateur volunteers, but they kept the records of an ongoing mystery and recognized outstanding cases such as the ones Powell summarizes throughout the book for purpose of illustration.

Since the subject of the book is the science of UFOs, much baggage accumulated along the way has to go. UFOs as cultural phenomena, issues of psychology, sociology, and religion, and complex accounts of encounters with aliens and government secrets serve only to complicate and confuse inquiry into whether a unique UFO phenomenon exists. Even more misleading is the striking 90% or more of reported UFOs that are really Venus, satellites, aircraft, balloons, drones, and all the other confusing sights in the sky that fallible human observers repeatedly mistake for something unknown. These too drown out any genuine UFO signal.

Drawing on his experience as research director for MUFON, Powell recognizes that UFO reports and investigations are frequently inadequate. But contrary to the prevailing scientific attitude that anecdotal evidence is mere junk, he defends it as essential data for scientific study of UFOs. Reports from good, preferably multiple observers under favorable conditions and with instrumental support, with descriptions that are rich in information; reports that run the gauntlet of investigation and undergo criticism and still survive as unknowns: these are robust cases worthy of scientific attention. One helpful technique to separate accurate from fanciful reports is a Natural Language Processing program. It distinguishes value-free descriptive terms from emotional and belief-laden language, enabling rapid analysis of large samples. Though only a small percentage of total reports, the few that pass these tests amount to a sizeable number. Some eventually prove conventional, but even an impure sample of prospective unknowns will have a richer concentration of true unknowns, if any, than a body of unvetted reports. If a genuine UFO phenomenon exists, its indicators have the best chance to

emerge from study of these unknowns.

Meaningful scientific work can begin once this refined sample of cases is in hand. Powell starts with gathering basic facts like high-veracity versus low-veracity differences in reported UFO shapes and times of day for sightings. A finding that triangular shapes outweigh saucer shapes among high-veracity cases belies the argument that UFO descriptions simply echo cultural influence like flying saucers in the movies. He finds reported traits that stand out as both distinctive and recurrent, among them a “falling leaf” descent, an unusual barbell shape, extremes of acceleration, and accounts of electromagnetic interference associated with UFOs that shuts down automobile engines. Out of the varied descriptions a pattern emerges, as the pattern grows a phenomenon takes shape.

By now he has our attention, and as the climax of this journey through the sample of unknowns he dares to introduce the strangest properties associated with UFOs. High strangeness is a term that can designate the least credible UFO stories, and this book eschews them for due cause. But a list of UFO characteristics built from best cases includes some events that enter the realm of the highly strange, impossible according to known physics yet apparently all in a night’s work for UFOs. Beams of light that bend, fail to illuminate whatever they touch, or retract toward their source like solid objects; time that seems to slow or to stop and restart during a close UFO encounter—these are extraordinary, unaccountable experiences yet they are not one-offs. They recur in reports from around the world and deepen the impression of a complex singular phenomenon. Its origin and nature remain unknown but call for an explanation that, unlike the blind men and the elephant, considers the whole mystery and not just separate parts.

Powell’s face-to-face experience with witnesses and investigation of cases equips him with insight into human reactions to a strange but stigmatized phenomenon, how witnesses process the event, cope with it and the challenges of communicating it to others. Much more could be said about the personal and social dimensions of the UFO experience. An understanding of the shortcomings of observers, the mistakes they can make, the influence of expectations, the pliancy of memory, the social pressures on anyone who shares an experience all demand close study. So does how the media, military, government, and scientific community treat the subject. Powell raises the issues and summarizes them so any reader can gain a basic understanding, but he wisely leaves deeper discussions for other venues.

One emergent issue he discusses is the current renaissance of interest in UFOs. It dates to 2017 when the *New York Times* published articles about spectacular Navy sightings and an obscure, congressionally funded group designated the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program. This attention blew the lid off of UFO secrecy and shook up the established culture of ridicule surrounding the subject. Witnesses, including numerous Navy personnel, now speak in public without fear of possible threats to their careers; scientists too have broken the long-standing taboo against professional involvement, even organizing groups to study the phenomenon in defiance of disapproval from influential colleagues. Congress has taken interest and demanded both investigation and transparency; media attention has been mostly respectful and public fascination intense. Powell's experiences with these events and their key figures provide him with some good stories to tell, while his summary of these unfolding events pushes this book to the forefront as a record of a major new chapter in UFO history.

Despite this hopeful outlook, some disappointing trends continue to surface. The mandated reports to Congress show tactics of delay and avoid, with boasts of explaining a hundred reports out of two or three hundred received in a year, ignoring that ufologists identify a much higher percentage every year and without cost to taxpayers. We hear nothing about the most outstanding cases. In fact, standard procedure is said to assume inability to explain a case is due to insufficient information. If so, this practice equates "I saw a funny light in the sky a few years ago, must have been a UFO," with an object witnessed at close range in broad daylight by two F-18 crews and tracked on several Navy radar systems.

Powell's course is not indignation but trust that science, done rightly, finally wins out over prejudice, however stubborn. Throughout the book he maintains a focus on the practical study of UFOs as a physical phenomenon and builds his case step by step: How do we identify the subject matter, how do we gather the worthwhile examples, put to use the less than perfect reports gathered over the past decades? What do the unknowns tell us, are they consistent, do they suggest a coherent phenomenon? The evidence says yes. It suggests a great deal more—not only is the phenomenon real, but it confronts us with extraordinary characteristics unlike anything natural or man-made.

Here the reader stops to tremble on the edge. Powell's measured treatment has appealed throughout to rational thought, but even without trumpets and drums he admits

that whatever UFOs are, their main interest lies in the possibility that they are visitors from space. As soon as the conversation turns to aerial objects with uncanny properties, the inescapable alien enters the room. An effort to dissociate the phenomenon from aliens led to rebranding UFOs as unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP), though just as the aliens made a smooth transition from the term flying saucer to UFO, this latest dodge seems unlikely to dislodge them from their popular connection. Science has long considered the possibility of life on other worlds. The count of exoplanet discoveries grows exponentially, SETI continues to listen for messages from beyond, and a multitude of responses attempt to answer Enrico Fermi's question of "where are they?" Reasons for and against alien visitors nourish continued arguments, but an unearthly origin for UFOs is the direction in which Powell's research leads.

Again without fanfare, he acknowledges that acceptance of alien visitation will set off a revolution in our thinking, replacing paradigms we have taken for granted with new and perhaps uncomfortable understandings of our place and importance in the universe. Scientists and academics, government officials and every member of the public will face a change more shattering than the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions, and more immediate, if the answer to Fermi's "where are they?" hovers right over our housetops as we sleep—"they" are already here.

Robert Powell has given us a timely and readable book that strips away sensationalism and humbug from a subject long dismissed in its entirety as tin-hat nonsense. He redeems UFOs as a subject for scientific study, showing that quality evidence reveals some eye-opening facts and clearing a path for future study. With crisp, lucid writing he introduces an audience unfamiliar with the subject to a crash course in what ufology should be about and why it is important, while an audience already familiar will find a corrective to errors and misinformation, also an antidote to any sense that the subject has stagnated. Every reader who follows his systematic argument will likely feel a chill as they follow him to the threshold—of space perhaps, but certainly to a purposeful new era of discovery. This book comes as a refreshing oasis in the desert, a renewal of the ufological enterprise on a sound scientific footing, from which everyone interested in UFOs stands to learn and enjoy. And yes, there is much wonder left over, this time founded on evidence hard to deny.