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Gray Barker's Book of Bunk Mothman, Saucers, and MIB

Feature

John C. Sherwood

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Those who seek the elusive truth behind the "Men in Black" and "Mothman" myths should know that material touched by Gray Barker's enterprising hand is tainted by self-serving deceit. He launched hoaxes, joined others' deceptions, and manipulated people's beliefs. "And I," says our author, "was one of those who helped."

In the film of *The Mothman Prophecies*, a phone rings and Richard Gere cringes.

So does the informed moviegoer.

Pseudohistory from the 1960s is twisted into fiction for the new millennium, and a questionable account of bizarre events is reshaped into fantasy.

I say so because I have a good idea who's making that phone call.

I accuse Gray Barker.

Only naive audiences believe film dramas show history accurately. Fortunately, the mixed reviews for Sony Pictures' *Mothman* suggest few moviegoers or critics take its eerie story seriously. Still, someone might trust the movie promoters' hints that truth exists out there. If they go searching they'll find only more questions.

The curious will find a new mass-market paperback edition of John A. Keel's *The Mothman Prophecies*, labeled by UFO writer Jacques Vallee as "significant" and "intriguing" (Hynek and Vallee 1975) and cited by Colin Wilson in *Alien Dawn* (Wilson 1998). In its pages:

- There's no sign of Gere's character, the fictional tormented widower "John Klein" invented by screenwriter Richard Hatem. Instead, the real-life Keel relates a series of weird anecdotal accounts sustained gleefully ever since by monster-hunters, UFO cultists, and West Virginia's tourism industry (Rife 1995).
- The mind-reading entity Indrid Cold evaporates into a fog of hearsay.
- The researcher played by Alan Bates morphs into Gray Barker, whose influence on Keel's book was palpably self-serving-and documentable.

Barker sure is having a great year. Columbia Pictures' sequel to its 1997 movie *Men in Black* - stepchild of Barker's 1956 book *They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers* - will treat moviegoers again to Barker's alien spawn. But those who seek the elusive truth behind the Men in Black and Mothman myths should be reminded that material touched by Barker's enterprising hand is tainted by deceit.

Gray Barker

Barker was a theatrical film booker and educational-materials distributor based in

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December 5, 2014

Public discussion of scientific topics such as global warming is confused by misuse of the term "skeptic."

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SKEPTIC AUTHORS STEVEN SALZBERG AND JOE NICKELL TO RECEIVE BALLES PRIZE IN CRITICAL THINKING

June 14, 2013

Forbes columnist Steven Salzberg and author-investigator Joe Nickell will each be awarded the 2012 Robert P. Balles Prize in Critical Thinking, to be presented by the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry at the CFI Summit in October.

Clarksburg, West Virginia. For three decades his sideline as a UFO writer/publisher generated extra income and self-satisfaction. The U.S. Government's bibliography of UFO publications reflected Barker's high status among the flying-saucer faithful, as he's among the handful of authors cited more than a dozen times (Catoe 1969).

Here's the dark side: Until Barker's death in 1984 at age 59, he hawked his books and magazines by embellishing stories and encouraging others to fabricate more. He launched hoaxes, joined others' deceptions, and manipulated people's beliefs. And I was one of those who helped.

Barker's UFO fame began in 1952 with reports of a spaceship-riding creature at Flatwoods, West Virginia. Barker's interviews with witnesses, written in *faux* objective style, appeared in *Fate* (Barker 1953). He soon became chief investigator for Albert K. Bender's International Flying Saucer Bureau.

In 1953 Bender dissolved the fast-growing group, blaming unidentified commands. The puzzled Barker sifted through Bender's story and similar tales, producing one of UFOlogy's classics, *They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers* (Barker 1956). Barker's prose gave Bender's story sufficient credibility to sustain an urban legend: Strange aircraft are observed, but, after black-clad men step from their huge auto, the witnesses clam up. In the 1980s Lowell Cunningham turned the tales into comic-book fiction, thus inspiring the Men in Black movies (Westcott 1993).

My involvement in all this began in early 1967 when I sent to Barker's Saucerian Publications my juvenile chronicle of Michigan's 1966 UFO flurry, which Barker gave the fanciful yet saleable title *Flying Saucers Are Watching You*. As it was printed, the Michigan "flap" seeped across Ohio into West Virginia, where began an eighteen-month series of reports of a flying creature popularly dubbed "Mothman."

Then came tragedy. The 700-foot Silver Bridge at Point Pleasant, West Virginia, collapsed during rush hour December 15, 1967 (the film of *The Mothman Prophecies* moves the event to Christmas Eve in the present day). Some area residents saw a link between the catastrophe, which took forty-five lives, and the apparitions. It was a notion Barker would borrow and Keel would reiterate.

Soon after, I committed my only journalistic crime. Encouraged by Barker, I wrote two articles for Barker's *Saucer News* "exposing" time-traveling UFOonauts, using the pseudonym Dr. Richard H. Pratt. When Barker reprinted the hoax in 1983, I remained silent. On Barker's death I considered the joke over, but guilt revived a decade later with *Men in Black's* release.

I exorcised this personal demon by writing "[Gray Barker: My Friend, the Myth-Maker](#)" for the *Skeptical Inquirer* (Sherwood 1998). A former acquaintance soon reintroduced himself. James W. Moseley, Barker's friend since 1954 and *Saucer News'* first publisher, said Barker's death had unlocked his own lips: "The public has the right to know how many UFO hoaxes there are, how easy they are to perpetrate, and what this shows about the gullibility of the UFO field" (Moseley 2001). In early 1985, Moseley had begun a series of revelations about Barker in a newsletter, *Saucer Smear*. (A book by Moseley and Karl T. Pflock, *Shockingly Close to the Truth!*, has just been published by Prometheus Books.)

"[Barker] pretty much took all of UFOlogy as a joke," Moseley told me. "I did also, on one level, but I always believed there was something real going on, behind all the nonsense, and I still do."

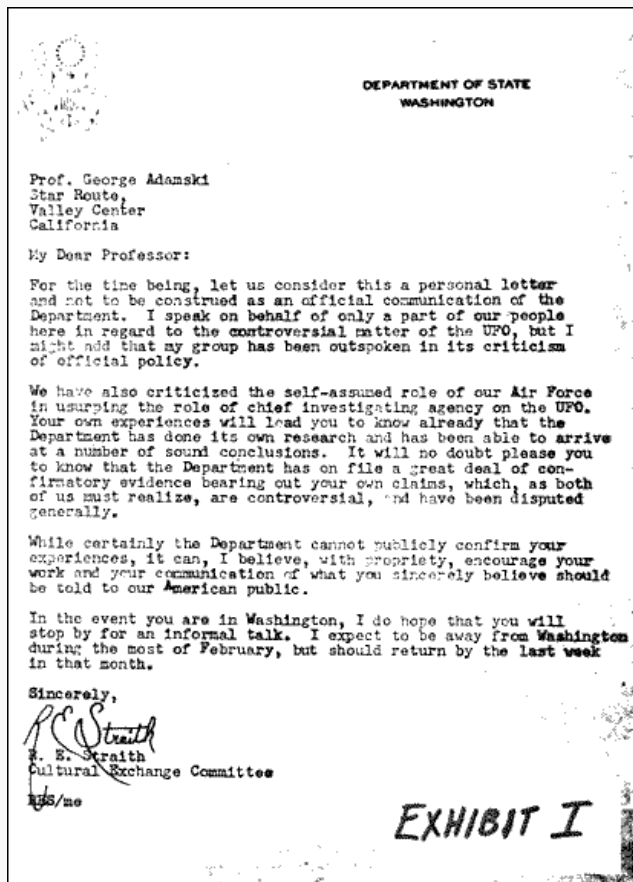
Barker died after "the more or less simultaneous failure of various organs, due most probably to AIDS (though it was not diagnosed as such in those days)" (Moseley 1998). The suspicion is restated in filmmaker Ralph Coon's documentary about Barker, *Whispers from Space*. The film depicts Barker as a closeted gay man who adored movies and fantasy, dressed as monsters and spacemen to scare kids, held fans at a distance, boozed heavily, and sold books chiefly to help his family.

Barker's sister Blanch quoted him as having justified his UFO interest financially: "There's good money in it," he'd told her. Moseley said Barker actually "did not believe in UFOs as an objective entity" but wanted "to please his audience" and tried "to keep the UFO field alive during slack periods" (Coon 1995).

Surreptitiously, Moseley and Barker had obtained blank U.S. State Department stationery. After "we had a bit to drink" in 1957, they concocted a message to

“contactee” George Adamski, whose book *Flying Saucers Have Landed* had related chats with Christ-like extraterrestrials. Adamski thus received an official-looking letter from “R.E. Straith” aiming to “encourage your work” (Coon 1995, Moseley 1998). Much of Barker’s book on Adamski focused on the letter as “one of the great unsolved mysteries of the UFO field” (Barker 1967).

About 1966, Barker helped Moseley create the “Lost Creek, West Virginia, UFO film.” A hamburger-sized ceramic chunk resembling saucers Adamski claimed he’d ridden was dangled from a pole and filmed against the sky. During college lectures, Moseley presented the film as authentic (Coon 1995, Moseley 1995, Moseley 2001).



A copy of the fraudulent “Straith Letter” to George Adamski, created by Barker and Moseley.

John Keel and Mothman

Now enters John Keel, a New York freelance writer and Fortean expert who still writes for *Fate* (not to be confused with the made-up *Washington Post* reporter portrayed in the Mothman film). Keel had gained attention for his articles in *Science Digest*, *Saga*, *True*, and *Playboy*, and a book about Eastern mystics, *Jadoo* (1957). He’d even invented the abbreviation “M.I.B.,” shorthand glorified by *Men in Black* in 1997.

A critical survey of the 1966-67 Mothman reports is beyond this article’s scope [but see “Mothman’ Solved!” by Joe Nickell, *Skeptical Inquirer*, March/April 2002], yet it can be shown

that Barker’s cavalier influence undermined Keel’s account. What’s disturbing is how poised Keel appears to have been for the deceptive antics of Barker and others interested in perpetuating a mythology of weirdness.

In *The Mothman Prophecies*, Keel painted Barker in guardedly flattering terms: “The diehard fanatics who dominated sauceriana during the early years were a humorless lot and Gray’s mischievous wit baffled and enraged them. At times it baffled me, too. This towering bear of a man was very hard to ‘read.’ But his investigations were always thorough and uncompromising” (Keel 1975).

In private, however, Keel regarded Barker and Moseley as inept investigators and hoaxsters, an attitude substantiated by the men’s correspondence filed at Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library in West Virginia.

Keel’s insight into Barker began with events surrounding the Congress of Scientific UFOlogists in June 1967. Moseley had organized the New York event, including Barker among UFO celebrities he’d booked. Keel was to be honored as “UFOlogist of the year.” Barker’s jaundiced view of the event emerged in a letter to me. Punning on Adamski’s title, he suggested another name: “Lying Saucerers Have Banded” (Barker 1967). Indeed, the lies soon began.

Keel recorded a phone call June 11 “from a middle-aged woman who said she was Princess Moon Owl. . . . [who] sounded like a man faking an Aunt Jemima accent. . . .

[After the tape aired on WBAB radio,] Long Island's lunatic fringe went wild with joy. At last a genuine space person was in their midst. . . . The most suspicious things of all were her transparent references to a major UFO convention scheduled to be held that June 24 in New York's Hotel Commodore. James Moseley . . . was staging press conferences and radio and television appearances to promote his investment. Princess Moon Owl seemed to fit too neatly into the publicity campaign" (Keel 1975). Moseley has denied initiating these calls, insisting the publicity would have helped others also (Moseley 2001). Whoever actually began these calls, though, established a pattern on which Barker would build.

Mysterious Phone Calls

Keel wrote in *Mothman* that, three weeks after the "congress,"

At 1 a.m. on the morning of Friday, July 14, 1967, I received a call from a man who identified himself as Gray Barker from West Virginia. The voice sounded exactly like Gray's softly accented mellifluous own, but he addressed me as if I were a total stranger and carefully called me "Mr. Keel." . . . [H]e had just heard about a case which he thought I should look into. It was, he said, similar to the Derenstein case. Gray and I had visited Woodrow Derenberger together so I knew this was not the kind of mistake he would make. . . .

I had received a number of reports from people in the New York area who had been receiving nuisance calls from a woman who identified herself as "Mrs. Gray Barker." I knew that Gray was not married but when I mentioned these calls to this "Gray Barker" he paused for a moment and then said, "No, Mrs. Barker hasn't been calling anybody up there." . . .

"Gray" sounded like a man under duress . . . as though someone was holding a gun to his head. I tricked him several times with different meaningless references and by the time I hung up I was definitely convinced that this man was not the real Gray Barker. . . . The next day I called Gray long distance and he denied having placed the call, naturally (Keel 1975).

In April 2001, Moseley insisted he'd had no prior knowledge of the call, but added, "Knowing Gray, he was probably drunk" (Moseley 2001).

Perhaps trying to provoke a confession, Keel told Moseley three days after the call that "these calls are part of a pattern which has been carefully planned by an individual or a group of individuals. Their eventual aim is to discredit my research or to involve me in some kind of a 'frame up.' . . . Extensive and detailed records of my current research, giving names, dates, etc., have been stored in a safe place and trusted friends have access to those records. Should I be arrested, murdered, or disappear, these records should immediately be examined and placed in the hands of a competent lawyer."

Keel added: "Please file the attached material in a safe place. If anything should happen to me, then print it. When you see Gray, give him the whole story and try to determine if he is involved in any way. I don't think he is. . . . If, by any chance, any of your cronies are planting occasional hoax calls . . . get them to stop it. They will be needlessly involving themselves in a situation that could cost them their sanity or even their lives (Keel 1967)."

This letter is still in Barker's files, indicating Moseley had shared it. The "attached material" was a four-page account of the July 14 call. In this version, the "wife" was "Mrs. Gray Baker" in every reference. Why she became "Barker" eight years later in *Mothman* is unknown-despite attempts to obtain clarification from Keel.

Keel asked Barker August 18: "Gray, can you account for where you were and what you were doing at the



James W. Moseley (left) with David Houchin, historian in charge of the Barker Collection and other materials relating to West Virginian authors. Photo by John C. Sherwood.

time I received that odd phone call. . . ? Do you suppose that there's any chance that you could have made that call without conscious knowledge of doing so?" (Keel 1967)

Barker told Keel September 23 he'd been in his apartment July 14: "The weird thing, is, though, that my telephone bill does show a dialed call to you on the 14th (See [photo]stat of phone bill). A local hoaxter [*sic*] could very easily call up person to person and give my number to the operator, but this would be difficult or impossible to dial. This has me almost believing that I *did* make the call! I just don't get drunk enough to not remember having made calls. . . . Maybe you can figure this one out. I can't" (Barker 1967).

Barker had been in Clarksburg at the time of the call, so Keel would have called him there next day. But only if *The Mothman Prophecies* is accurate. The book's scenario leaves no cause for Keel's August 18 request. None of Barker's letters reminds Keel they'd spoken again a few hours later. Keel's own initial account mentions no follow-up. Thus *The Mothman Prophecies* takes on the feel of a misremembered diary.

Keel told Barker October 7, "threatening phone calls were made to an individual on Long Island in your name. This individual (I must withhold the name because he is in grave danger) received a visit from the MIB. . . . Gray, this is an extremely serious business and these people play for keeps. I know for a fact that the MIB are active in West Virginia and have been seen several times in a large black car bearing Pennsylvania license plates. So watch your ass down there" (Keel 1967).

Barker responded by blaming hoaxsters. Keel's next three letters came at two-day intervals, decrying Moseley's "trickery" and "unsavory techniques," the use of which "merely muddies your reputation and adds to the confusion." Keel wrote October 24: "In 1968, there will be ten male births to every female. This trend spells genocide within two generations. In addition, there has been a sharp increase in fluoride poisonings. . . . Thousands of 'silent contactees' are being suckered into the biggest con game in history" (Barker and Keel 1967).

In a disturbingly manipulative response October 29, Barker recalled

[Y]our remark that you felt that the MIB, etc., might be programmed robots or androids of some sort-or beings under remote electronic control. I hesitate to go into this, for there is always the possibility that you yourself may be consciously or subconsciously serving these forces. There is a method which I have used which have kept me relatively unbothered by the MIB syndrome. . . . These methods, by which so far both myself and JWM [Moseley] have not been really "bothered," have something to do with our behavior over the past few months. . . . [T]his "method" has something to do with upsetting the *modus [sic] operandi* (sp?) of a "program," whether it be on a computer or whatever. . . . I was convinced that you would be the next victim of a "shush-up." But due to information reaching me since that time, I believe you are finding the ways and means of resisting such an eventuality (Barker 1967).

Keel resisted the bait, replying November 2: "I regard the letter as another hoax. . . . Did you expect me to believe that you and Jim were undercover agents? Let's stop all this happy horseshit" (Keel 1967).

Moseley, then *Saucer News'* owner, in November distributed Barker's version of the July call, in which Barker denied responsibility and repeated the android hokum: "If the reader is ever confronted by one of these strange people . . . Don't respond in fear. Most important, make some sort of joke! . . . If you throw off their programing [*sic*], they will be 'short-circuited,' so to speak, and will probably run screaming into the night or fade out like a motion picture would do" (Moseley and Barker 1967).

Recalling this episode, Moseley wrote to me, "Gray was delighted that Keel was reporting all sorts of 'persecutions' and paranoia" (Moseley 2001).

Keel now suspected Moseley had made hoax calls to UFO enthusiasts in Florida and Texas. He urged Barker to "hammer some sense into Moseley" (Keel 1968). But Barker was a bad choice for this honest task. About that same time he was urging me to write "a spellbinder article by Dr. Pratt. . . . We probably could fool the [1968 UFO] Congress on this too" (Barker 1968).



A display case in the Gray Barker Collection exhibits copies of Barker's magazine, *The Saucerian*, as well as the ceramic UFO model used in the fraudulent "Lost Creek UFO" film created by Barker and Moseley. The plastic model in the background was used to recreate the film in Ralph Coon's documentary *Whispers from Space*.

Mixing Fact and Fiction

Keel and Barker now toyed with collaboration on a Mothman book. Barker, who had done little firsthand research, accepted Keel's offer to share notes. Barker then wrote rough chapters, which he sent to me. After my favorable review, he sent his thanks and added, "I have deliberately stuck in fictional chapters based roughly on cases I had heard about.

Throughout the fictional chapters is an undertone which explains the sightings from a psychological viewpoint, though this is never stated" (Barker and Sherwood 1968).

Barker sent Keel a rough chapter describing Keel's first foray into West Virginia. Keel objected to "being turned into some kind [of] 'mysterious' character" and provided a rewrite (Barker and Keel 1968). Keel recalled this episode in one of his first messages to me in early 2001: Barker's books had been laced with fiction, he said. He'd been appalled by Barker's proposed chapter about him and his rewritten version probably was the finished book's only honest segment. He'd written *The Mothman Prophecies* to clear the record (Keel 2001).

On March 15, 1969, a rift opened with Keel's letter referencing a "Mothman Convention" Barker had held the previous Labor Day at Point Pleasant, West Virginia:

It is absolutely inexcusable that none of you bothered to interview a *single witness*. . . . Instead, you, Moseley, . . . et al. engaged in a typical buffery "investigation." You went down there and looked at the sky two years after the main incidents had occurred. This was tourism, not investigation, Gray. . . .

I made every effort to cooperate with you characters and devoted a lot of valuable time to writing for the various fan magazines. I have been repaid by groundless gossip, rumors, and maniacal nonsense. You and Moseley are directly responsible for much of it. It is little wonder that the subject has acquired such a disreputable aura. I don't pretend to understand your motivations but I do wish you would adopt a more mature approach to the situation (Keel 1969).

Apparently abashed, Barker no longer sought Keel's help. *The Silver Bridge* ended up on a private press and focused on few cases. In it, the phone call to Keel went ignored—a remarkable omission unless Barker knew it wasn't inexplicable.

In 1970, Barker wrote to me, "the kookie books are about all that I can sell these days. . . . I lost the 'sensible' subscribers to SN [*Saucer News*] long ago, so I get a kick out of letting it reflect the utter mental illness of the field." Barker soon sent a copy of *Bridge* to me. Keel, however, didn't get one. In fact, Keel waited three years before requesting a copy (Keel 1973). After the book arrived Keel told Barker, "I may quote a few lines in my new opus and spread your fame" (Keel 1974).

In *The Mothman Prophecies* Keel summarized Barker's work and presented him as a "player." But Barker's own book went unmentioned. Barker didn't complain. Their correspondence over the next decade was cordial. Before Barker died Keel even sent a get-well card.

The more intriguing of the two books is *Mothman*, which goes far beyond Barker's treatment of the anecdotal accounts. Keel perceived a "large and well-financed organization" involving "ultraterrestrials" manipulating humanity's perceptions and behavior. He outlined ominous activity ranging over decades, tied to political

assassination and fostering “the worldwide spread of the UFO belief and its accompanying disease” among a confederacy of duped contactees: “In their meetings with the entities they are served up platters of propaganda along with rumors and nonsense which they accept and repeat as fact” (Keel 1975).

After initial e-mail exchanges in early 2001, I approached Keel repeatedly to (a) clarify whether he still held such opinions, (b) resolve the contradictions between his book and his letters, and (c) determine whether he still believed someone other than Barker made the July 1967 phone call. Keel replied that eye surgery kept him from reading my questions. Over subsequent months my questions were surface-mailed twice and e-mailed twice more. No answers have been received.

A year before Barker died he squeezed more cash from an old hoax, restating my “Pratt” nonsense in *M.I.B.: The Secret Terror Among Us*. Unsolicited, he sent me a copy. As I scan it today, I’m reminded of a poem Moseley passed on to me (Coon 1995, Moseley 2001), with the explanation that Barker had written it in the late 1950s:

UFO is a bucket of shit
 Its followers
 Perverts
 Monomaniacs
 Dipsomaniacs
 Artists of the fast buck. . . .
 And I sit here, writing,
 While the shit drips down my
 Face in great rivulets.

I wonder whether Gray carried this hint of remorse to his grave. Maybe he consoled himself with the fun he'd had chasing monsters and goading others to pursue his creations. Sure, today's moviegoers will enjoy his otherworldly offspring. But those who hunt for any truth about them will find the path littered with deceitful diversions and fraudulent road signs plastered with his fingerprints.

Acknowledgments

Thanks go to David Houchin, historian and genealogist who supervises the Gray Barker Collection at Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library, Clarksburg, West Virginia; James W. Moseley for his aid and candor; Ralph Coon for his invaluable film; Don Roberts of Vinita, Okla., for information on Lowell Cunningham; Karl T. Pflock for his corrections; and my wife, Katāri Brown, for her flattery and love.

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