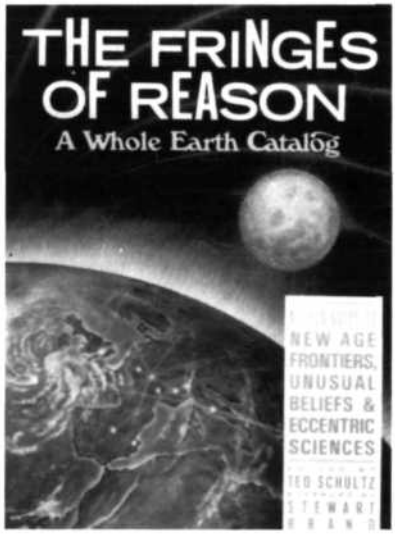
Book Reviews

Cornucopia of Eccentric Sciences

The Fringes of Reason: A Whole Earth Catalog. Edited by Ted Schultz. Harmony Books, New York, 1989. 224 pp. Paper, $14.95.

Brian Siano

IN THE WINTER 1988-89 SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, I reviewed Ivan Stang's *High Weirdness by Mail,* a hilarious compendium of fringe and crackpot information sources. I mentioned that the book was an expansion of a shorter list Stang had published in the *Whole Earth Review*'s Fall 1986 issue, which was devoted to strange beliefs and eccentric science, and that the book had managed to provide a much-needed field guide to the fringe. Now, the Whole Earth people have upped the ante with an expanded version of that issue. *The Fringes of Reason* might not provide the laughs-per-page of Stang's book, but it is better researched, more informative, and might just be the best picture of the New Age movement(s) currently in vogue.



As we should all recognize, one of the problems in evaluating the New Age is simply defining it. Its earlier roots are certainly honorable; the advent of humanistic psychology in the 1950s, coupled with the cultural advances of the 1960s, has given American society the willingness to question meaning in our lives, as well as more options to choose from as alternatives. But during the 1980s, much of the movement has been swamped with vulgarized mysticism sold as "expanded consciousness," "holistic" pseudoscientific claims, and a return to superstition and popular myth as a structure for validation. Sadly, this is what has attracted the attention of the news media, and even worse, it is what seems to be attracting most people to the movement.

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The *Whole Earth Review* has been one of the better magazines within the movement, and one that, thankfully, has rarely lapsed into an uncritical, pro-paranormal point of view. Usually, its content has been a combination of alternative technologies, sources of reliable information on whatever its staffers were interested in, and some of the better social and philosophical speculation around. Along with the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER and the *Utne Reader,* it's one of those magazines my friends get subscriptions to at Christmastime.

To the publisher's surprise, the "Fringes of Reason" issue, subtitled "Strange Myths and Eccentric Science" (Fall 1986) was the first *Whole Earth Review* to be sold out. And thankfully (since my copy is getting very dog-eared and ragged), Whole Earth has seen fit to expand the issue to an indispensable and enjoyable book. It is not without flaws, which I'll get to in a moment, but I don't think any self-respecting examiner of paranormal claims should be without *The Fringes of Reason.*

I don't even know where to begin describing its delights. It starts off with "The End," a discussion of end-of-the-world predictions and how they have fizzled over the years (including the "Harmonic Convergence" of August 16-17, 1987). In sidebars, Jeane Dixon and Edgar Cayce come in for some solid examination—especially timely as the year 2000 approaches. Lawrence Jerome, author of the new book *Crystal Power: The Ultimate Placebo Effect* (Prometheus Books), provides a concise examination of crystal claims. Jay Kinney goes over current political conspiracy theories and the Theosophist Society. Kinney, by the way, is a former editor of *Whole Earth Review* and several excellent underground comic books, as well as the founder and editor of *Gnosis* magazine. Robert Anton Wilson contributes an examination of the various definitions of "truth" in the guise of an amusing "true or false" quiz.

Charles Tart outlines the issues of parapsychology, followed by a piece by Susan Blackmore giving the reasons she is no longer as much a believer in psi as she once was. There are lengthy essays on flat-earth theories, flying-saucer religions, the "Men in Black," and William Corliss's "Sourcebook" project. Skeptical books are represented alongside pro-paranormal texts, with extensive commentary; there's even a special section for skeptical books, such as James Randi's *Flim-Flam!* and *The Faith Healers,* Martin Gardner's *Science: Good, Bad and Bogus* and *The New Age,* Laurie Godfrey's *Scientists Confront Creationism,* and George Abell and Barry Singer's *Science and the Paranormal.*

The sections on trance-channeling and modern shamanism are probably the most enlightening for skeptics; these two subjects are not usually submitted for scientific scrutiny, and they are likely to be dismissed as primitivism or charlatanry without proper investigation. Editor Ted Schultz's essay on channeling outlines what is already known about the mind that may give rise to behavior commonly described as "possession" or "channeling," such as alternate personality theories, the ability of many individuals to perform two unrelated chores simultaneously, cryptomnesia (recalling something long-forgotten, but believing it to be an original thought), and psychological dissociation of subpersonalities within the individual.

Chas Clifton adds an amusing essay on how the recent wave of "shamanism" in America differs from its cultural precedents, in "Armchair Shamanism: A Yankee Way of Knowledge." Clifton goes over Richard de Mille's investigations of Carlos Castaneda's books, and Clifton's amusing estimate of Lynn Andrews (*Jaguar Woman, Medicine Woman*) bears repeating:

> More accessible than Castaneda, ready to leap into lecturing and producing tape cassettes, Andrews writes novels that bear the same relationship to traditional shamanism that Harlequin Romances bear to a solid, enduring marriage. Instead of the poor but honorable working girl who marries the moody lord or rising businessman, they feature Lynn the butterfly shaman and her magic carpet of credit cards. She books flights to one exotic location after another—northern Canada, the Guatemalan jungle, the Australian outback. No sooner does she arrive than she discovers women possessing ancient secrets who scarcely meet the blonde stranger before they fall all over themselves offering her one dizzying initiation after another.

The book also provides a reprinting of the most thorough debunking of the "Hundredth Monkey" legend. The first is Ron Amundsen's article from the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER (Summer 1985), illustrated by Norman Dog. The second is a rebuttal by author Lyall Watson, whose book *Lifetide* was the original source of the myth. (I only wish the book might have reprinted Amundsen's reply to Watson, which also appeared in *SI,* Spring 1987.) But the most devastating critique of the story comes from psychologist Maureen O'Hara, who points out that the story's moral (that if enough people believe in something, it becomes "true" for the rest of the population through a group-mind communication) is

> a betrayal of the whole idea of human empowerment. . . . Individuals no longer have any obligation to develop their own worldview within such a collective—it will come to them ready-made from those around. . . . This is not a transformational myth impelling us toward the fullest development of our capacities, but one that reduces us to quite literally nothing more than a mindless herd at the mercy of the "Great Communicators." The myth of the Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon is more chillingly Orwellian than Aquarian.

Not all of the book's New Age focus is on paranormal claims. There is a dandy piece of journalism on the Airplane Game, a Ponzi-like money-making con game that has gained popularity in the New Age movement. Clothed in "workshopping" and "community" sales pitches, the Airplane Game designates a hierarchy of one pilot, two co-pilots, four flight attendants, and eight passengers. Each level pays $1,500 to the next higher level; the pilot "jumps out" after collecting $12,000, and the plane splits into two, with two new "pilots." The game is sold as a way of parlaying a small investment into a nearly eightfold return, but the mathematics show differently; for the eight people at the bottom to "pilot out," they'd have to recruit 64 newcomers, who in turn would have to recruit another 512 people, who in turn—well, you get the idea. Usually, the games die out after the first few "pilots" make off with their payoffs. (This con game is not native to New Agers; recently, the same scheme was working in Philadelphia under a "black pride" aegis.)

The Fringes of Reason has only two flaws, but I regard them as major; and, oddly enough, both involve the same contributor, Jerome Clark. The first problem is in the section on UFOs. While several skeptical books are reviewed, with excerpts, none of the essays are by critics of UFO claims. This is not to say that the articles are uniformly pro-UFO; John Keel's "The Man Who Invented Flying Saucers" is an amusing profile of Ray Palmer, who popularized the UFO stories of the 1940s and 1950s. There are excerpts from Douglas Curran's *In Advance of the Landing,* a collection of photos and essays about the popular culture that has sprung up around the saucers.

But the articles addressing specific claims (crashed saucers, abductions, and the

like) are written from a pro-UFO view. The section as a whole gives the impression that UFO debunkers are merely naysayers opposing "overwhelming" evidence. As a result, in his essay on crashed-saucer claims, Jerome Clark can write without contradiction that the MJ-12 documents "[have] not been successfully debunked (despite some frantic efforts by veteran UFOphobe Philip J. Klass . . .)." I don't think that Klass would appreciate being characterized as a frantic UFO*phobe,* but he doesn't get a chance to respond. This is a shame; the book deserved to have at least one Klass debunking, if only as an example of how many UFO claims dissolve into fantasy under a really thorough investigation.

The second flaw is a reprint of Clark's article in *Omni* magazine, "Censoring the Paranormal." This essay is notorious among skeptics for its use of misleading and inaccurate reportage to defame the aims and methods of CSICOP. One paragraph, for example, incorrectly describes a particular Philadelphian as "one of their [CSICOP's] number" and quotes from one of his mailings, encouraging the use of "any means short of breaking the law" to "get the point across to people who have no demonstrated ability to reason."

I am an organizer of the Delaware Valley Skeptics, based in Philadelphia, but I have not yet encountered this person, nor anyone who remotely shares his deplorable view. I think I'm justified in feeling a bit slighted by having these reprehensible tactics linked to Philadelphia skeptics. (In all fairness, the essay was written before this group had organized, but a phone call to CSICOP to confirm the essay's claims would have disclosed the facts.)

Similarly, CSICOP had severely criticized the mailing in correspondence with this individual, as well as explaining the situation to *Omni* magazine in a subsequent letter of protest. It was made clear to both *Omni* and Clark that this individual did not speak for or on behalf of CSICOP. Yet, Clark allowed the article to be reprinted in *The Fringes of Reason* without a correction or a reply from CSICOP.

But these flaws are slight compared with the worthiness of the rest of the book. I wish it could have been longer, with more critical stuff on UFOs, more detail on the history of parapsychology, and more recent history of the New Age movement. But the book is a cornucopia to begin with, and as it stands, it is still an indispensable overview of fringe beliefs and trends of the 1980s. •