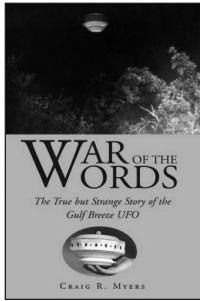


Farha includes three of his own articles and several more from James Randi.

One more pleasant surprise awaits the reader who picks up *Paranormal*

Claims: while his name does not appear on the book's cover, Michael Shermer wrote the foreword for this anthology.



A Model UFO Debunking

ROBERT SHEAFFER

War of the Words: The True but Strange Story of the Gulf Breeze UFO. By Craig R. Myers. Xlibris Publishers, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2006. ISBN-13: 978-1-4257-1654-7. 192 pp. Hardcover, \$30.99; softcover, \$20.99.

Given the current bear market in UFO conferences, books, and magazines, it seems odd that someone would publish a book detailing one, single UFO case, albeit an extremely important one. That is doubly true when the book is written from a skeptical perspective. But, nonetheless, that's what we have here, and while such a book is not likely to make any best-seller list, it's a valuable contribution to our understanding of the contemporary UFO mania.

The first Gulf Breeze UFO photos were published, anonymously at first, in *The Gulf Breeze Sentinel* on November 18, 1987. These were soon followed by many others, most of them looking laughably bogus, with the *Sentinel* playing the role of chief UFO booster. It didn't take long for the identity of the photographer and chief UFO contact to be revealed as local contractor Ed Walters. Author Craig Myers is a reporter for the rival *Pensacola News Journal*, and seems to enjoy needling the competition's uncritical, even sensationalist, reporting.

Assigned by the *News Journal* to do a special report on the UFO hysteria, Myers recounted how UFO buffs would gather at Shoreline Park, near the Pensacola Bay Bridge. Often, they would see a red UFO nearby, which some attributed to a lighted kite, possibly being pulled by a boat. This is where Walters claimed to have discovered sev-

eral circular UFO landing pads while being interviewed by Myers's colleague, who later said, "It looked like someone just trampled down the weeds or something." Ultimately, the UFO issue became very divisive in the community, and Myers gives us an insider's view of the controversy. In 1990, Walters used his new fame to launch a bid for the Gulf Breeze City Council. Out of a field of nine candidates, he came in "dead last."

Anyone who is undecided about the Gulf Breeze claims or who may have been swayed by Bruce Maccabee's pro-UFO analysis needs to read this book. Myers recounts in full detail how the case unfolded, where the battle lines were drawn, and who fired what salvo from what position. MUFON, the largest UFO group in the United States, took an unambiguously pro-Gulf Breeze position. When facts should have gotten in the way of that position, the facts were ignored. MUFON held its 1990 convention in Gulf Breeze to capitalize on the excitement.

Myers was the reporter who interviewed the people who had moved into the house where Walters had been living at the time of his first UFO photos. They found a model UFO, apparently tossed up in the attic, made of styrofoam plates and such. "It was the Gulf Breeze UFO," writes Myers, and he now held it in his hands. Later, Myers was able to duplicate Walters's UFO photos almost

exactly using the model. Confronted with the undeniable evidence, Walters claimed that the model had somehow been planted in the house by "professional debunkers" who "will do whatever [is] necessary to debunk a case."

Because the book gives such an in-depth, close-up view of the Gulf Breeze controversy, the story contains many subplots. One is the amusing story of the "Doomsday Six," six members of a U.S. Army intelligence unit in Germany, who apparently belonged to some sort of end-of-the-world cult. They deserted their posts and traveled to Gulf Breeze for some purpose that was never entirely clear, apparently at the suggestion of a Ouija board!

The book reprints humorist Dave Barry's satirical essay on his own investigations of the Gulf Breeze photos, in which he recounts his conversations with Walters, who told him weird tales, such as being trapped by the UFO's paralyzing ray and of hearing strange telepathic voices. The more Barry heard about this case, the more skeptical he became. Most major UFO cases are like that—they sound impressive when one hears just a little about them in sensationalist media reports, but, upon reading the full details of what did (and did not) transpire, the differences between the "UFO incident" and "a real event" become glaringly obvious. Sometimes, Myers stretches his metaphors to the point where they seem to groan back at you right there on the page, and some of his witticisms seem too clever by half. He seems to think he can write like Dave Barry, but, unfortunately, he cannot. This distracts from the serious message of the book. Nonetheless, all reporters who are called upon to write on UFOs and other "paranormal" subjects should read this book for a solid example of hard-headed investigative journalism and proper skepticism. ☒

Robert Sheaffer is the author of UFO Sightings: The Evidence (Prometheus 1998) and a regular SI columnist.