

Fooling People for Money and Profit

GREG MARTINEZ

In recent years, the documentary film genre has blossomed, finding increased audiences and a wider distribution through the DVD format. Recently two small, independent productions linked by subject matter have been released: portraits of prominent twentieth-century hoaxers Alan Abel and Gray Barker.

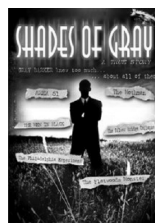
Abel Raises Cain is a jolly, affectionate portrait by Jenny Abel of her father, Alan Abel, a puckish gadfly who has tormented the mass media since the 1950s with a series of well-planned hoaxes. The film depicts him as currently down on his luck and living in the basement apartment of a friend's home in Connecticut, with his belongings and archives in storage. The documentary traces his prapetetic rise from Ohio State University graduate and percussionist with the Glenn Miller band during World War II to an accidental beginning as a professional hoaxer.

In 1959 Abel wrote a satirical story about an imaginary organization called



Abel Raises Cain

Directed by Jenny Abel and Jeff Hockett.
Abel Raises Cain, LLC, 2009. DVD.



Shades of Gray

Directed by Bob Wilkinson.
Seminal Films, 2010. DVD.

The Society for Indecency to Naked Animals (SINA), which broadly parodied the prudishness of contemporary sexual morality. It was written as a plan to clothe naked animals, protecting children from such an indecent sight (one slogan was “A nude horse is a rude horse”), with such subtlety that the edi-

tors of the *Saturday Evening Post* angrily rejected it, unable to discern its satire. As a lark, Abel transformed the piece into a series of press releases that garnered national media attention. As interest rose, he persuaded his friend Buck Henry, then an unknown actor, to pose as the group's president, G. Clifford Prout, turning their public appearances into a cross between Swiftian satire and performance art. With the support of his wife Jeanne and Henry's considerable improvisational skills, the farce was maintained until a *Time* magazine article in 1963 exposed the hoax. But Abel's future path was fixed.

Abel began a career of fooling reporters, talk-show hosts, and other members of the media with a series of sturdily constructed and just-plausible-enough stunts that exposed the truth behind television and radio's need for lively narratives and sensation (or as he puts it in the

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NEW BOOKS

film, “perversions and calamities”) at the expense of actual reporting and research. Booking agents for evening newscasts and afternoon chat shows were all too ready to suspend their skepticism and good judgment to book guests who were sure to inflame their audiences with safe, pointless outrage over such non-controversies as a phony group that was against breastfeeding (because it was borderline incestuous). In another hoax, Abel, calling himself Omar, promoted the fake “Omar’s School for Beggars”—which taught effective ways to beg for money—on Tom Snyder’s NBC show *Tomorrow* and Mike Douglas’s syndicated talk show.

Abel was able to sustain these and many other hoaxes for decades, but the advent of the Internet, cable television, and the twenty-four-hour news cycle has diminished his ability to pull these off as successfully as he once did. Abel’s clever and witty voice has been drowned out by a cacophony of angrier and less coherent voices, though other media hoaxers have emerged (see, for example, the 2003 documentary *The Yes Men*).

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Gray Barker, a figure familiar to many readers of this magazine, is the subject of *Shades of Gray*, a feature-length profile of Barker’s extensive career in the UFO field as a promoter and hoaxer. As he emerges in the sensitive hands of director Bob Wilkinson, Barker’s a complex and sad figure who cheerfully (and perhaps a bit cynically) exploited the gullibility of the UFO crowd from the 1950s through the 1970s.

Born in 1925 in Riffe, West Virginia, Barker moved from obscurity into slightly less obscure notoriety as the most industrious of the UFO-craze promoters of the 1950s. Attaching himself to a succession of “contactees,” Barker eventually worked himself into prominence with his energetic (and mostly false) promotion of some of the most notable saucer myths of the late twentieth

century. Stories of the Flatwoods Monster, the Mothman, and the Silver Bridge Collapse all originated practically in his backyard, and he peddled those tales to an eager and credulous mob of believers. But his most significant contribution to the field was his development of the “Men in Black” myth in his 1956 book *They Knew Too Much about Flying Saucers*.

The film plays out in a series of acts; the first reviews Barker’s career as a saucerian (a turn of phrase that eventually provided the name for his self-published magazine), then takes away the mask of entertainer to scrutinize him as a person. Barker was a member of an extended family and a citizen in a rural town (he earned his living as a film distributor to drive-ins and small-town theaters). He was also a deeply closeted homosexual, and his friends and colleagues eventually began to speculate about how his time in the closet affected him and influenced his career as a hoaxer and a fabulist. Barker died at age fifty-nine from multiple-organ failure (his friend James Moseley speculates that it was probably due to AIDS, but they didn’t know what AIDS was at the time). It seems now, more than twenty-five years after his death, that much of his life was a hoax.

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Different in their approaches, these two films are similar in their carefulness and craft. They both thoughtfully present rounded and absorbing portraits of people whose chief claim to fame is their skill at lying to us. These films give us some insight into the restlessness at the heart of such hoaxers, but the sobering aspect of these movies is how eager people are to consume lies—and still want more. ■

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ENCYCLOPEDIA OF DUBIOUS ARCHAEOLOGY: From Atlantis to the Walam Olum. Kenneth L. Feder. Greenwood, Santa Barbara, California, 2010. 293 pp. Hardcover, \$85. *Encyclopedia of Dubious Archaeology* is a

handy, welcome, and authoritative yet highly readable short encyclopedia giving the scientific viewpoint on scores of controversial topics and claims that appeal to popular audiences about the human past. Feder is professor of anthropology at Central Connecticut State College, author of *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries* (also newly out in a 2010 edition), and a CSI fellow and SI consulting editor. He has a knack for writing succinctly and with a light—even personal—touch about these supposed mysteries. He always provides short but nuanced assessments and appropriate published scientific information that places these topics into proper context. Most entries run no more than a page or two, so it is easy to skip around to topics of personal interest: African Inspiration of the Dimec, Atlantis, *Ancient American* magazine, Edgar Cayce, Chinese Discovery of America, Crystal Skulls, Barry Fell, Graham Hancock, Lost Civilizations, Mars Face, Nazca, Nazi Archaeology, Noah’s Ark, Piri Reis Map, Shroud of Turin, Sandia Cave, Vinland Map, and Erich Von Daniken, to name just a few. —K.F.



IMPLAUSIBLE BELIEFS IN THE BIBLE, ASTROLOGY, AND UFOS. Allan Mazur. Transaction Press, New Jersey, 2009. 246 pp. Hardcover, \$34.95. Allan

Mazur, professor of public affairs at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University, offers an explanation of why otherwise intelligent, educated people believe a variety of unlikely claims. The book mostly focuses on—as the title suggests—beliefs about the Bible, astrology, and UFOS, but Mazur covers many subjects, including deceased Harvard UFO-abductee believer Dr. John Mack and suicide cults such as Heaven’s Gate and the Peoples Temple. Mazur’s discussion of the mass media’s handling of alien-abduction stories is particularly insightful. Part 4 of this book is perhaps the most valuable for its general discussion of the ways in which people develop and sustain irrational beliefs in the face of disconfirming evidence. Overall, this is an interesting contribution to the discussion about the psychological and social reasons why people adopt, and maintain, implausible beliefs. —B.R.

