

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." — James Randi

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Knowledge and the Production of Nonknowledge

Reviewed by Martin S. Kottmeyer

Mark Featherstone, *Knowledge and the Production of Nonknowledge: An Exploration of Alien Mythology in Post-War America* Hampton Press, 2002

Uh-oh. Postmodernism has found ufology. Featherstone's book depends on the authorities of Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Haraway and several others in that tradition. There is a perhaps commendable desire to provide a political and sociological framework for studying ufo mythology, but the way of postmodernism is a difficult path and I fear that this book will be embraced by folks who want to create the appearance of deep understanding without the trouble of actually knowing their subject.

Let's start with one opaque passage:

Taken at the level of form, the morphological movement of alien myth is also related to the mimetic circuit. That is, while the attempt to mime God remains restrained, alien myth follows science and is able to remain legitimate in the face of its model paradigm. However, when any particular submyth begins to overtake its role as a disciple of science, the mime goes bad. The story's connection to the scientific model is and it experiences the satanic fall; its functionality as myth evaporates. (p. 172)

I stared at this line for minutes. I was interested in the possibility that it might relate to the way cosmic identity themes appear in the final stage of paranoia. I really wanted to understand it. But, no, I had to give up. I couldn't make any sense of it. Sometimes, some ideas do

evaporate – the idea that ufos were surveying the planet in advance of a Landing has diminished in favor of the hybrid program idea. But it was not miming God when it did so that I am aware of. Fifties contacteeism and its warnings of atomic peril would perhaps be a better candidate,

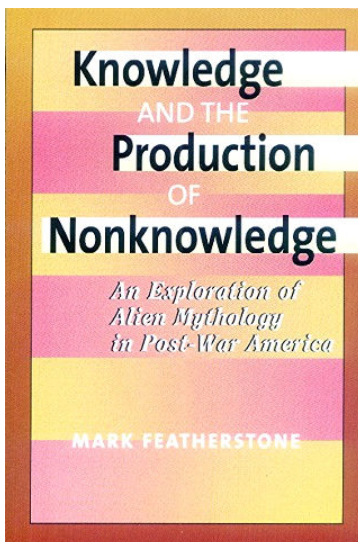
but, in truth, contactees are still numerous and atomic perils are still worried about in transmuted form.

As I pondered longer stranger questions arose. Didn't contactees always mime God while growing and flourishing in its heyday? What about the ancient astronaut craze of the 70s. Erich von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods* spawned dozens of books with Gods in the title that went beyond went well beyond science discipleship. Some would say it still goes strong in the works of Zecharia Sitchin. How does 'mime goes bad' meaningfully describe this submyth's cultural trajectory? Featherstone provides no example of an evaporated submyth, so what is one to make of such a statement?

Here's another passage, a dense clump of words:

However, when decoded alien myths explain dominant class anxiety because the form of two mythological levels – political myths as encoded projections of the dominant centre's technological anxiety, and popular myths as encoded de-ciphers of the political myths – is structurally related to the transcendental technological level. Moreover, while this connection allows one to read the political and popular myths and thus demystify the effects of the technological level, it is also this lineage that allowed the mythological dimension of the political and popular levels to become the ideological agent of the post-industrial system in the first place. Consequently, it is

("Knowledge and Nonknowledge" continued on page 4)



In This Issue

Knowledge and the Production of Nonknowledge.....	1
Creationism Monitor	3
Gleanings.....	6

Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL does not reject paranormal claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

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From the Chairman

Wally Hartshorn

October is upon us! The annual season of witches, ghosts, zombies — and other newspaper nonsense.

Whenever I see a newspaper article about ghosts running near Halloween, I'm torn. Part of me says, "Nobody really believes any of that stuff these days. It's just Halloween-time fun!" And another part of me says, "Have you not been paying attention? What makes you think that people don't believe in ghosts?"

Oh well. Anyone have any way to respond to such news stories without coming across as a humorless stick in the mud?

Darwin's Too Deadly Legacy?

I never did catch the "Darwin's Deadly Legacy" episode of "The Coral Ridge Hour" on WAND. Is it possible that WAND decided that running it was a problem? Or did I just manage to miss it? Hmm...

I ordered the DVD from Coral Ridge Ministries (I know, I know), so we might end up watching it at a future meeting.

This Month — *The Privileged Planet*

See the back cover for details. ☹

A Nod to Our Patrons

REALL would like to thank our patron members. Through their extra generosity, REALL is able to continue to grow as a force for critical thinking in Central Illinois. To become a patron member of REALL, please use the membership form insert. Patron members are:

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Creationism Monitor

Wally Hartshorn

The primary topic of interest to members of REALL for the last few years has been the various attacks on evolution by proponents of various flavors of Creationism (e.g. Intelligent Design).

Recent court decisions have somewhat blunted the threat, but a quick check of the Internet shows that they haven't given up — and aren't likely to do so anytime soon.

Pandas is a Banned Book?

Dr. John West, in a unique contribution to the annual Banned Books Week created by the American Library Association, has nominated *Of Pandas and People* as being a banned book. Dr. West, a senior fellow of the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, claims that the book was banned from the school library as a result of *Kitzmiller v. Dover*.

As Nick Matzke of pro-evolution web site "The Panda's Thumb" points out, "There is only one problem here: *Pandas* was not banned from the library by the *Kitzmiller v. Dover* decision. This was, in fact, an impossible result, since this remedy was not requested in the plaintiffs' original Complaint, nor in subsequent litigation."

Quoting from one of the legal documents in the case: "Applicants are inexcusably wrong. Plaintiffs for their remedy seek to ensure that copies of the book *Of Pandas and People* are not maintained in the school's science classrooms and that teachers of

that class are not required to direct students to that textbook as part of the biology curriculum. Compl. at 22-23 (Prayer for Relief). Contrary to Applicants' assertion, plaintiffs do not seek to have the book removed from the high school library."

Matzke closes by noting that, so far as we know, *Of Pandas and People* may well still be in the Dover school library, since nothing in the judge's ruling indicated that it should be removed.

So, Dr. West, explain to us again how this qualifies as a banned book?

(Details at http://www.pandasthumb.org/archives/2006/09/the_silliest_th.html)

Coffee = Evil?

PZ Myers at Pharyngula opened a recent blog entry with this:

I never thought I'd say this, but...coffee must be evil. Look at Starbucks, for example. I could stop there, I suppose, and everyone would understand my point, but to give a little more detail, PunkAssBlog highlights one of the quotes they are printing on their cups.

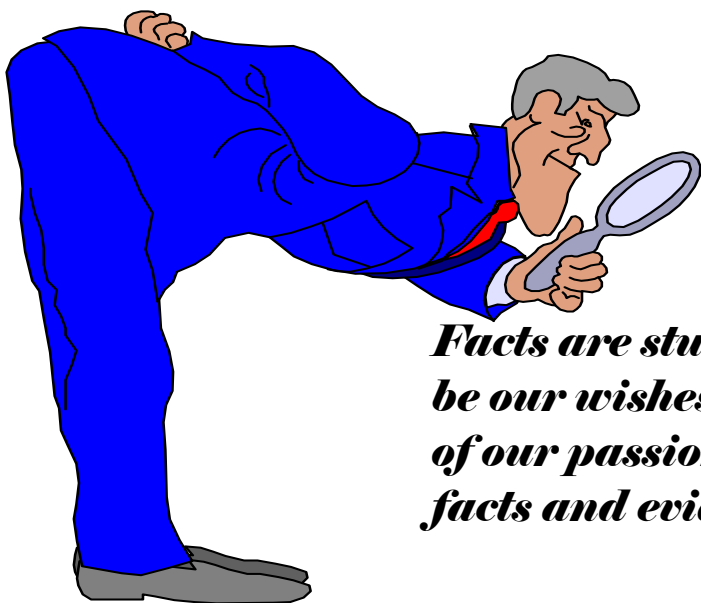
The morality of the 21st century will depend on how we respond to this simple but profound question: Does every human life have equal moral value simply and merely because it is human? Answer yes, and we have a chance of achieving universal human rights. Answer no, and it means that we are merely another animal in the forest.

Wesley Smith

senior fellow with the Discovery Institute

Oh, Starbucks does put a disclaimer on all these quotes — "The opinions put forth by

("Creationism Monitor" continued on page 7)



Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.

— John Adams

Phew, you get all that? I kind of think this may be an important premise in Featherstone's argu-

WAS GOD AN ASTRONAUT?

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

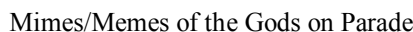
CHARIOTS OF THE GODS?

THE UNUSUAL MYSTERIES OF THE PAST

BY ERICH VON DANIKEN

THE SENSATIONAL TRUE STORY

DO ASTRONAUTS VISIT THE EARTH LONG BEFORE ADAM?
IS THERE EVIDENCE OF A PREHISTORIC ASSAULT ON THE MOON?
WAS CAPTIVATED EGYPT SET UP TO DECEIVE?
THE GREAT STONE FACES THAT POINT EASTWARD? GIANTS?
AND OTHER CRAZY MYTHS OF UNBELIEVABLE AGE!



into the project of explaining alien mythology. I found myself grousing, why the hell is he piling up all this turgid stuff if you don't get a pay-off in eventually giving insight?

One of the baffling aspects of the book to me is how he even fails to build an argument when he actually has an understandable premise. He discusses the fear of the Atom in the Fifties, provides a nice history that could serve as a diving off point for an exploration of nuclear themes in contactee and abductee cases, maybe show how it relates to the secret weapon theory. He notes that H-bombs made America aware nobody was safe from nuclear destruction. It would be easy to start building from a way explain the ufo flaps of 1952 and 1957 in terms of Cold War fears. He could have discussed all the SF movies of the Fifties that transmuted anxieties about the Atom or at least reference some of the authors like Cyndy Hendershot or Joyce A. Evans who have already done that. No. There is a ton of stuff he could have talked about. He mentions Adamski's use of The Bomb, a good start, Marvel comics superheroes – Spiderman, Hulk, Thing – and bikinis. This is not merely disappointing, it makes one wonder if he just hasn't read much ufo literature.

Certainly there aren't many cases mentioned: Roswell, Adamski, Strieber, the Hill abduction. And I wonder whether the Hill case maybe should have been omitted given some of what he says about it:

While one can see the Barker [MIB] narrative as the alien myth which describes the centre's racial anxiety, it would appear that the Hill narrative represents the messianic side of the repressive mechanism. Thus the Hill abduction narrative explains the dominant centre's temporary success at repressing the racial anxiety which plagued them during the 1950s and early 1960s. (127)

A footnote adds:

The Hill couple do not represent a black and white woman, but rather a disciplined black man and disciplined white woman. In the same way that Leslie and Adamski's narrative depicted a messianic reconciliation between human and alien, a story that represented the repression of the centre's postindustrial anxiety, the Hill submyth personified the communion between the centre's naturalized black man and white woman and the anxious projection of the black man and white woman. (139-40)

Messianic. Disciplined. Naturalised. Just WHAT is being de-coded here? I don't think I even want to know. Repress that.

We are told, at first correctly, the atom began to find a strong association with the eroticism of an apocalyptic sex/death relation in the 50s. Anyone who has seen **Dr. Strangelove** will accept this. But what does this later statement mean?

"...the eroticisation of the atom was never complete; it remained a transitory condition that would enter the American psyche and depart at regular intervals" (106)

How does one determine this. For example, how is **Dr. Strangelove** not a "complete" eroticisation? It seems plenty eroticised to me.

There are plenty of other things that bother me. Featherstone talks of repression. He accepts Jung's mandala speculation. He relies too heavily on Peebles history of ufo mythology. Don't get me wrong; Peebles is an honest broker; telling things as he sees them and assessing facts as best as one can in this difficult subject. But in some degree, he follows David Jacobs's *The UFO Controversy in America* too much. His book is rather sanitized of the juicy parts of ufo history and frames the controversy in ways that skew to the benefit of ufo advocates. Too little is said of the secret weapon theory, too little about the nuttier fears expressed in Sixties ufo books. Such matters seem to me far more useful to a postmodernist analysis than the stuff he found in Peebles. Featherstone should have read more widely.

Featherstone's book was given a favorable review at *Science Fiction Studies* [volume 31 (March 2004): 143-6]. It's what made me seek a copy. It's still on their website last I looked and if you want the good points of the book, you should check it out. I lean to warning people away from it as an unhelpful book. How many people knowledgeable in ufo matters have grounding in postmodernism to a degree they feel they can understand and assess this mishmash fairly? It seems designed more for some clique of academics than the typical skeptic. I guarantee few will consider it easy or entertaining reading. Maybe if you are a collector of skeptical ufo books, you will want this to help have a complete collection. Beyond that, I'm not honestly sure whether anyone can squeeze anything useful out of it. Maybe one should regard it as word art, idea blocks juxtaposed and feathered at the edges with hints of interconnection and symmetries, but opting to evoke a feeling that an illusion of perspective is being achieved.

Martin Kottmeyer lives in Carlyle, IL. He is a frequent contributor to The REALL News. ♡

Gleanings by Clark Olson

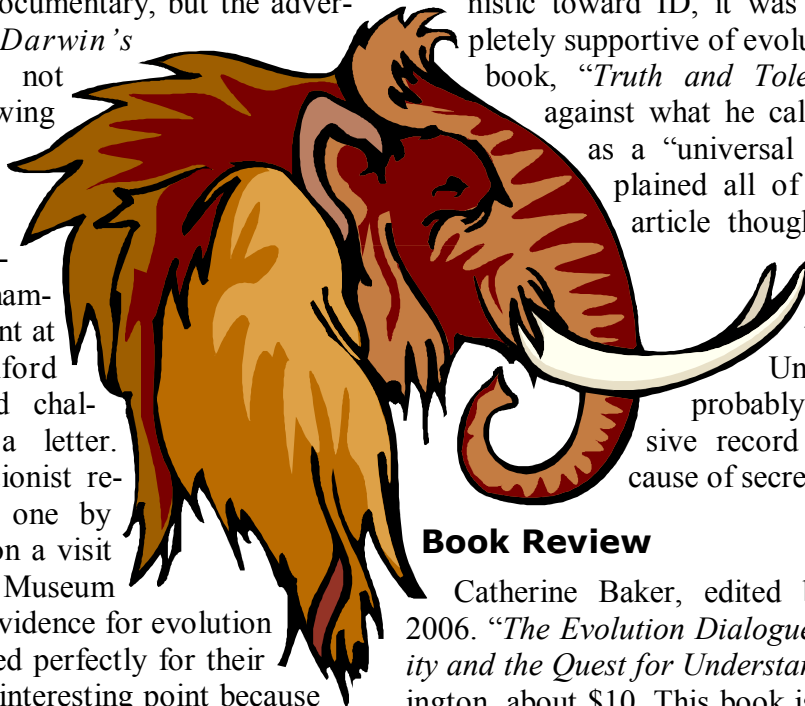
The *State Journal-Register* continued to print some letters to the editor at the end of August and beginning of September. These were started out by Rob Bjerk publicizing a program on “The Coral Ridge Hour”, a conservative religious program from Fort Lauderdale, shown here on Channel 17 (NBC). Wally mentioned this in the last Newsletter. The following Sunday (8-27-06) the hour carried part of a church service including an anti-evolution sermon and a short anti-ACLU documentary, but the advertised documentary (*Darwin’s Deadly Legacy*) was not shown then or the following week (9-3-06). I don’t know whether they eventually showed it.

The paper had published an article on a mammoth tusk find by a student at Lincoln College. Milford Franks praised that and challenged creationists in a letter. There were several creationist replies to that, including one by Eddie Bratton reporting on a visit to the Illinois State Museum where he didn’t see any evidence for evolution but did see animals “suited perfectly for their environment”. This is an interesting point because in many museums, parks, and ecology writings one does come across comments about the “balance of nature”. The authors of the language on signs and articles are not anti-evolutionists but are writing about the appearance of balance in the short term. Of course, in the long term even the most “balanced” ecosystem has imbalance leading to evolution of one or more species in it. The creationist letters in this period are apparently all from Biblical literalists who continue to deny dating and the body of evidence.

The *New York Times* (September 20, page C13) carried an obituary for David Lykken, who was a psychologist at the U. of Minnesota for many years. He did many significant studies including leadership of the Minnesota Twin Studies. The article concluded with the provocative remark that he was intrigued by examples of what he thought was telepa-

thy between twins. I looked up his autobiography and he does say that, but it is just a short paragraph at the end and apparently he never published anything on it.

The Pope convened a conference early in September (*New York Times*, 9-2-06, p 3) to discuss evolution. Several speakers included scientists and theologians and Cardinal Schonborn. Although most of the sentiment expressed before hand was antagonistic toward ID, it was not necessarily completely supportive of evolution. The Pope, in his book, “*Truth and Tolerance*”, 2004, wrote against what he called treating evolution as a “universal philosophy” that explained all of life. In addition, the article thought he might be a bit more dubious of the science of evolution than his predecessor. Unfortunately, we will probably not get a comprehensive record of this meeting because of secrecy.



Book Review

Catherine Baker, edited by James B. Miller, 2006. “*The Evolution Dialogues. Science, Christianity and the Quest for Understanding*”. AAAS, Washington, about \$10. This book is the product of a discussion group of pastors, teachers and scientists meeting over the period 2000 to 2003 about how to talk about evolution in church and school. It is designed for a lay audience of high school level and older. Religious groups involved Methodists, American Baptists, Lutherans and Episcopalians. The book is designed for Christians only because the anti-evolution feeling comes mainly from there. The book consists of eight chapters alternating between science interest and religious response over the historical period from Darwin’s time. A unique feature of the book is a fictional narrative of a conservatively religious college freshman coming to terms with becoming a biology major in dialogues with her biology advisor and college chaplain. This part was a little “hokey”, but apparently the advisory group thought it was realistic. ♡

(“Creationism Monitor” continued from page 3)

contributors to “The Way I See It” do not necessarily reflect the views of Starbucks” — and they say the purpose is to “get people talking,” so I’ll bite.

Smith is a vacuous twit. Let’s talk about that.

Ha! Myers then goes on to provide a few paragraphs of background about the views of Wesley Smith, then ends with this:

I guess I’m just going to have to boycott that overpriced Starbucks stuff. Instead, I’ll frequent my local coffeeshop, which is run by a consortium of local evangelical churches.

Damn.

Like I said, coffee must be evil.

Ha! I sympathize, Mr. Myers, but remember that the fundamentalist Christians in this country are a persecuted majority, or so they keep telling us.

(Speaking of which, can you believe that the War on Christmas Season has already started? It starts earlier and earlier every year, doesn’t it?)

You can see the whole thing at http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/09/disposable_philosophy_from_a_s.php.

“Lucy’s Baby”

Remember “Lucy”, the 3.2 million year old fossilized skeleton of *Australopithecus afarensis*? Well, scientists (real scientists, not Intelligent Design “scientists”) a 3.3 million year old fossilized skeleton of a *Australopithecus afarensis* child, believed to have been about 3 years old when she died.

The discovery was made just 4 kilometers from the location in Ethiopia where Lucy was found.

The bones were actually discovered in 1999, encased in sandstone. It was only recently that they were finally able to expose enough of the bones to describe their find in the September 21 issue of *Nature*.

Coverage by *Scientific American* is available at <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?chanID=sa004&articleID=00076C1D-62D1-1511-A2D183414B7F0000>. (Type carefully!)

Richard Dawkins Foundation

Richard Dawkins, author of such books as *The Blind Watchmaker* and *The Ancestor’s Tale*, has created a new charity, “The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science”.

In a video explaining the foundation’s mission, Dawkins notes:

I have just visited my local branch of Britain’s biggest bookshop chain, and this is what I found: six books on astronomy and nineteen books on astrology. The real science is outnumbered three to one by the pseudo-science. There were twenty books on angels, which means that angels and astrology together (39) outnumber the totality of books on all the sciences (33). When you add in the books on fairies, crystal healing, fortune telling, faith healing, Nostradamus, psychics and dream interpretation, it is no contest. Pseudo-science outnumbers science by at least three to one, and I didn’t even begin to count the far larger number of books on religion.

He goes on to note that:

A recent Gallup poll concluded that nearly 50% of the American public believes the universe is less than 10,000 years old. Nearly half the population, in other words, believes that the entire universe, the sun and solar system, the Milky Way galaxy, the Andromeda galaxy, and all the billions of other galaxies, all began after the domestication of the dog.

The activities and goals of the foundation include:

- sponsoring research into the psychological basis of unreason
- supporting rational and scientific education at all ages
- keeping a list of people willing to receive invitations to lecture
- facilitating charitable giving for humanitarian causes through secular organizations

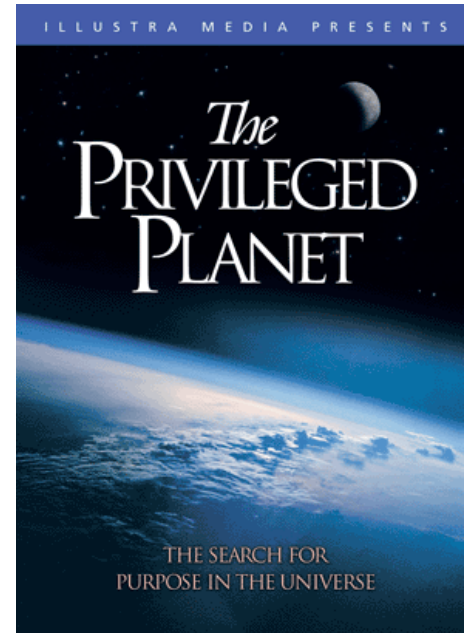
For details, visit <http://richarddawkins.net>. ☹

Our Next Meeting

Video: *The Privileged Planet*

This documentary, along with the book of the same name, presents the view that the features of our planet that make intelligent life possible and which allow us to learn about the cosmos are evidence that we did not “just happen”, that we were put here for a purpose.

It’s been quite popular with the Intelligent Design crowd, so be prepared to be frustrated. The video is about an hour long, so we’ll have plenty of time to grumble about it afterwards. (I suspect we’ll need it.)

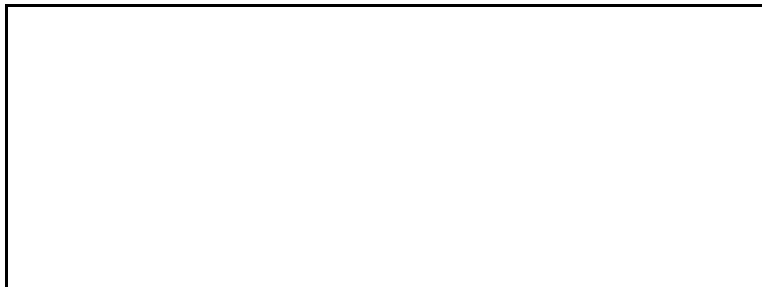


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In This Issue

Knowledge and the Production of Nonknowledge	1
Creationism Monitor	3
Gleanings.....	6