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Prophecies**

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**A New Demonology:
John Keel and *The Mothman Prophecies***

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Flying Saucers, the Shaver Mystery and the Occult Revival

Charles Fort is often credited as one of the founders of the study of unidentified flying objects (UFOs), although he died fifteen years before the origin of the modern UFO phenomenon. The birth of UFOlogy can be traced to the sighting of nine mysterious flying objects above the Cascade Mountains in Washington, USA, by a private pilot, Kenneth Arnold, on the afternoon of 24 July 1947. Arnold's description of their movement, 'like a saucer would if you skipped it across water,' was subsequently transformed by headlines that reported the arrival of flying saucers in North American skies.

This mystery was promoted by Ray Palmer, editor of the Ziff-Davis pulp magazine *Amazing Stories*. Palmer mixed Fortean material with avowed science fiction. In March 1945 he published a story, 'I Remember Lemuria,' contributed by Richard S. Shaver of Pennsylvania, who **claimed to have personal experience of** a sinister, ancient civilisation that hid in caverns beneath the surface of the Earth. Shaver attributed a range of malign occurrences on the surface to the activities of creatures he called Detrimental Robots (or deros) who kidnapped and devoured humans. Although Palmer presented what he called 'The Shaver Mystery' as fiction he implied the stories were fundamentally true. He claimed *Amazing Stories* **had** received thousands of letters from people who claimed to have **met** the deros. **Shaver said the creatures travelled in spaceships and rockets and were associated with evil extraterrestrials.** When flying saucers were sighted independently, Palmer regarded this as further validation of the factual nature of Shaver's claims.ⁱ

Palmer was prominent among a new generation of writers and publishers who sought to reinterpret Charles Fort's material, but few were successful in their attempts to emulate his unique philosophy. Biographer Jim Steinmeyer argued that Fort established a literary template that others have followed, namely: '[the] relentless arrangement of haunting facts to build suspicion, the ridicule of standard explanations [and] the trustworthy, disinterested, conversational tone.'ⁱⁱ Fort's books became available to a mass audience during the 'occult revival' when they were re-published in paperback form.ⁱⁱⁱ According to the sociologist Marcello Truzzi this revival began in the late 1960s when publishers expanded their lists to include a number of new occult titles and reflected a growth of public interest in a range of esoteric phenomena including UFOs and ancient astronauts, ESP, the Loch Ness Monster and Uri Geller.^{iv} Simultaneously, a number of new writers sought to update Fort's catalogue of anomalies and, in doing so, developed new theories and philosophies tailored for a Space Age audience.

John Keel: 'not an authority on anything'

Like Fort, John Keel began his career as a journalist. He was born in the town of Hornell, 200 miles (322 km) from Fort's birthplace in Albany, New York. His parents separated at an early age and he grew up on a farm with his mother and stepfather. As a teenager he devoured books on science, travel, humour and magic. At 16 he left for New York City in search of work as a professional writer. His introduction to Fort and *Amazing Stories* came at an early age. When interviewed by this author in 1992 he recalled their impact:

I read Charles Fort when I was very young, when I was about 12 or 14 years old...I was reading *Amazing Stories* in those days too, and they were getting letters...about things people had seen in the sky, this is before 1947, and I was writing a newspaper column at that time in my home town newspaper...I did a couple of columns on that kind of thing, lights in the sky and people who saw contrails high overhead and thought that it was some kind of spaceship...Anyway, I was around when the whole [Ken Arnold] thing broke and I remember I was standing in a carnival in my home town...and a friend of mine came up and say "Hey Keel have you seen this newspaper story about this guy out West who saw some strange things over the mountains?"...and it was like a shock to me. I thought "Oh my God, it's starting."^v

A poll by the Gallup organisation in August 1947 found the vast majority of Americans who held an opinion on flying saucers believed they were products of 'the imagination, optical illusions, mirage, etc.'^{vi} John Keel was one of the few Americans who, in 1947, opted for a more esoteric explanation for UFOs. When asked to elaborate on what he initially believed, Keel responded: '...I assumed, after reading Fort...they must be spaceships. Fort didn't really come right out and advocate the ET thesis but he said there was something there and that it had been around for a long time because he'd traced reports all the way back.'^{vii} The Extra Terrestrial Hypothesis (ETH) for UFOs would later be embraced, or at least accepted as plausible, by millions across the world including a number of establishment figures.^{viii}

On the outbreak of the Korean War, Keel was drafted into the US Army and became Chief of Continuity and Production for the American Forces Network in Frankfurt. In 1952 he wrote and produced a radio programme, *Things in the Sky*, and two years later, whilst on a trip to Egypt saw his first UFO. A circular spinning object appeared in the sky above the Aswan Dam in broad daylight. 'The thing I saw was Saturn-shaped and it appeared the centre was not moving but the outside was spinning...it was a very odd thing and various people were looking at it with me.'^{ix} After leaving the army in search of adventure, he spent three years travelling through the Middle East and Asia. It was on this trip, whilst crossing into the Himalayan state of Sikkim, that he followed and briefly glimpsed a mysterious creature that local people identified as the legendary abominable snowman, or Yeti. This and accounts of other unusual experiences were published in his autobiography, *Jadoo*, when he was 27 years old.^x

A decade later Keel returned to New York where he made a living as a mainstream writer and journalist with his own syndicated newspaper column. He also worked in Hollywood, wrote scripts and jokes for television shows and produced a string of comic novels, using pseudonyms such as Harry Gibbs and Thornton Vaseltarp. From 1966 there was a prolonged period of public interest in UFOs and Keel used this opportunity to pitch an idea for 'the definitive article' on the subject to *Playboy* magazine. From this point he became a full-time investigator of the phenomenon, reading everything he could find on UFOs and occult subjects. Like Fort he began by collecting published accounts of anomalies culled from newspapers, firstly by subscribing to a clipping service. Unsatisfied with second-hand stories, he followed-up some of the strangest cases at first-hand, travelling widely across the US midwest to interview witnesses.

Keel said he abandoned the ETH when his field investigations 'disclosed an astonishing overlap between psychic phenomena and UFOs'. In explaining this conversion, he said his inquiries revealed that: '...a large part of the UFO lore is subjective and many alleged UFO events are actually the products of a complex hallucinatory process, particularly in the contactee and [close encounter]-type reports. The same process stimulated religious beliefs, fairy lore, and occult systems of belief in other centuries.'^{xi} From 1970 he developed his theory in five books that challenged the ETH and offered an alternative, occult-based

hypothesis for UFOs and related phenomena. These were *UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse* (1970), *Strange Creatures from Time and Space* (1970), *Our Haunted Planet* (1971), *The Mothman Prophecies* and *The Eighth Tower* (both published in 1975). He also produced a stream of syndicated articles both for mainstream media and the specialist UFO magazines including Palmer's *Flying Saucers* and the British-based *Flying Saucer Review*.

In his books and articles Keel 'sought to recast UFOlogy and Fortean study as aspects of demonology.'^{xii} He borrowed a key concept, 'ultra-terrestrials,' from the writings of a Californian occultist, N. Meade Layne, who believed the occupants of flying saucers were shape-shifting spiritual entities from 'the etheric realm.'^{xiii} Whereas Layne believed the etherians were benign, Keel's ultra-terrestrials, like Shaver's *deros*, sought to control and manipulate humans. According to Keel, these ultra-terrestrials (or UTs) 'cultivate belief in various frames of references, and then...deliberately create new manifestations which support those beliefs.'^{xiv} Although Keel produced no explicit definition of what he meant by 'ultra-terrestrial,' he believed UFOs (as flying saucers were described from the 1960s onwards), were the medium by which these intelligences entered our world, writing: 'The objects and apparitions do not necessarily originate on another planet and may not even exist as permanent constructions of matter...it is more likely that we see what we want to see and interpret such visions according to our contemporary beliefs.'^{xv} In *The Eighth Tower* (1975), Keel substituted Layne's etheric realm for what he called the 'super-spectrum,' and proposed that UFOs were composed of energy from the 'upper frequencies of the electro-magnetic spectrum.' According to his theory, these shape-changing objects only became visible when they descended to the very narrow range of light that is visible to the human eye.

The Mothman Phenomenon

Of the books Keel produced during the 1970s *The Mothman Prophecies* is the most accomplished and successful. Dixon describes it as 'a Fortean classic.'^{xvi} The text is redolent with the Fortean influences that shaped Keel's thinking. It describes how Keel read an Associated Press report about a monster that scared two young couples at a disused wartime munitions dump late on 15 November 1966. The four teenagers claimed the seven foot tall, winged creature suddenly appeared as they cruised around the 35-acre McClintic Wildfire Zone, five miles north of Point Pleasant, West Virginia. It was 'shaped like a man, but bigger' and its most striking feature was a pair of glowing red eyes. As they sped away the creature spread its bat-like wings and took off, following their car at uncanny speed. The next morning the Mason county sheriff's office held a press conference and a newspaper sub-editor dubbed the creature 'mothman' after the *Bat-Man* series then showing on TV. In the months that followed, numerous other individuals came forward to report extraordinary experiences with the mothman, UFOs and a variety of other strange phenomena in the Ohio Valley region. Thousands of visitors poured into the TNT area, as the zone where the phenomena occurred was known locally, in search of the giant 'bird' or mothman.

In his accounts of these events, Keel said he felt drawn to the small community of Point Pleasant, 370 miles away from his home in New York. He discovered that some mothman witnesses had also reported surreal visitations from foreign-looking strangers wearing black clothes who arrived in large, apparently brand-new black cars. These 'Men in Black' play a **significant** role in his book that was written eight years after the events it describes. Although Keel did not invent the legend of the sinister Men in Black he coined the acronym MIB and was responsible for elevating an obscure UFOlogical legend to the pop culture status it currently enjoys.^{xvii} Deborah Dixon notes that Keel's book is heavily coded in terms of insider-outsider references and 'it is unclear how much of the anxiety [he] expresses...stems from his own projection of racial conflict in the US, or simply reiterates the concerned views

expressed to him.^{xviii} The folklorist Peter Rojcewicz compares MIB narratives with older traditions that associate blackness with the Devil. In folklore, the evil one is a shape-shifter that can appear as a 'Man in Black.'^{xix} Whereas some of the experiencers and fellow UFOlogists believed the MIB were government agents, or members of the mafia, Keel suspected they were part of the wider ultra-terrestrial phenomenon.

In addition to harassment from the MIB, Keel claimed to have had first-hand experience with the extraordinary phenomena he wrote about. **Chapter 10 of *The Mothman Prophecies* describes his own sightings of mysterious moving lights in the skies of the Ohio Valley during the spring of 1967. These were made in the presence of another journalist and police officers and, on occasions, he tried to signal to these UFOs using a hand-held torch. He also claimed to have participated in telephone conversations with mysterious individuals whom he believed were ultra-terrestrials. Keel dedicated one of his books to one of these non-human entities, 'Mr Apol.'**^{xx} This occurred as a direct result of his introduction to the twilight world of the 'silent contactees' whom he met during his travels in West Virginia, Long Island and other areas of UFO activity. According to his book, during his investigations in 1966-67, anomalous voices contacted him by telephone, day and night, to relay ominous messages from UFO intelligences.

In *The Mothman Prophecies* Keel explains how the more he became immersed in UFOlogy, the more the phenomenon appeared to play with his thoughts and beliefs. In the later stages of his investigation, with warnings of an approaching catastrophe reaching him by phone and mail from assorted UFO contactees across North America, he returned to his apartment in New York for the Christmas holidays. On 15 December, soon after President Lyndon Johnson switched on the festive lights at the White House, the broadcast was interrupted by breaking news that the ageing Silver Bridge, that spanned the river at Point Pleasant, linking West Virginia with Ohio, had collapsed at rush hour. The falling structure sent 46 drivers and pedestrians, including some mothman witnesses, to their deaths. The disaster occurred 13 months after the mothman experiences began. Some of Keel's informants believe the phenomenon was a premonition of the tragedy. It was certainly true that the number of reported anomalous experiences, reported in the local media, decreased after the disaster.^{xxi xxii}

Keel referred to the events of 1966-67 as 'the year of the Garuda' and made a direct link with the legend of a giant humanoid bird-like creature, the Garuda, that appears in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Crypto-zoologist Loren Coleman also detected what he believes is a hint of European banshee traditions in 'the strong sense of the foreboding dread of gloom [that] underlies...Keel's chronicling of all the events leading up to the collapse of the Silver Bridge.'^{xxiii} In English folklore moths are regarded as omens of death when they appear in the homes of a dying person.^{xxiv} More recently, internet rumours have reported sightings of winged humanoid creatures immediately before other natural and man-made disasters, including earthquakes, the Chernobyl disaster and on 9/11.^{xxv} **My interpretation of these new stories is they are examples of ostension, a type of behaviour familiar to scholars of folklore and contemporary legend. Ostension occurs when facts and ambiguous facts are combined and transformed into new narratives. These, in turn, are presented by story-tellers and the mass media as if they were true accounts of factual events.**^{xxvi}

When a script based upon Keel's book was adapted for a film by the director Mark Pellington in 2002 the mothman was portrayed **not as monster or cryptid** but as an ancient, unknowable supernatural omen. The 'oriental' MIB that feature strongly in Keel's book are missing **from this new version of the story**. The promo trailers claim the film is 'based on true events' and the credits underline this message, informing viewers the film is 'based upon the book by John A. Keel.' Producer Gary Lucchesi **explained that** he and actor Richard Gere rejected earlier scripts 'that took the idea of a monstrous figure all too literally.'^{xxvii} Instead

they chose to create ‘a psychological mystery with surreal overtones’ and to address the question of ‘what happens when sane, reasonable people are faced with the unbelievable...in this case it was the harbinger of death.’^{xxviii}

In the film Gere plays a New York journalist, John Klein, whose wife dies from a brain tumour shortly after an encounter with the mothman in New York. Two years later Klein inexplicably loses a period of time during a reporting assignment and finds himself driving 400 miles away in West Virginia. There he discovers the residents of Point Pleasant are under siege from a range of baffling phenomena. He becomes obsessed with solving the mystery and unravelling its apparent link with the death of his wife. The mothman is occasionally glimpsed but never fully revealed. The film poster plays on its elusive, shape-shifting nature, posing the question: ‘What do you see?’ above the image of a Rorschach inkblot. Alan Bates plays Dr Alexander Leek, an expert on ultra-terrestrial phenomena, to whom a grief-stricken Klein turns in his quest for answers. When Klein demands to know if ‘they’ are responsible for the death of his wife, Leek says their motivations are ‘not human.’ All that mattered is that ‘you noticed them and they noticed that you noticed them.’ Jointly the two characters portray opposing aspects of Keel’s personality: **the investigator** and the experiencer (Leek is Keel spelled backwards). A similar dualism was explored in the long-running TV series *The X-Files* where the opposing perspectives (**sceptic/believer**) are split into two characters of different genders. In his review John Shirley described *The Mothman Prophecies* as the first truly Fortean film: ‘...it is sceptical while being relentlessly open-minded about the anomalous; it refuses to come to easy answers, easily filing-away; it carries with it an atmosphere in which anything can happen, and reality itself is always suspect.’^{xxix}

The release of the mothman movie revived interest in the West Virginia legend, although key scenes were actually filmed in Pennsylvania. In 2003 a 12 foot tall metal sculpture of the mothman by artist Bob Roach, based upon a painting by Frank Fazetta, was unveiled by John Keel at the second Mothman Festival held in Point Pleasant. The festival is held annually on the third weekend of September and visitors have grown from 500 in 2002 to 4,000 in 2014 (mothmanfestival.com). In 2005 a local entrepreneur, Jeff Wamsley, opened a museum dedicated to the legend. It offers minibus tours of the TNT area and other places linked with events in 1966-67.^{xxx xxxi}

The revival of the legend also led to sceptical re-appraisals of the eye-witness accounts documented by John Keel. A number of alternative, non-extraordinary explanations have been proposed including the activities of pranksters and the possibility that the original mothman scare was created by the presence in West Virginia of a large bird such as the rare Sandhill crane, or an owl. When sceptic Joe Nickell visited the TNT area, he noted it is surrounded by the McClintic Wildlife Management Area, ‘then, as now, a bird sanctuary.’^{xxxii} He traced the grandson of a man who shot a snowy owl during the mothman sightings of 1966. Although only two feet tall, a newspaper called it ‘a giant owl’ as it had a wingspan of nearly five feet. Nickell noted that eye-witness accounts of the creature’s glowing red eyes were well known to ornithologists. Some birds’ eyes shine bright red at night when they reflect artificial light such as from cars or flash-lamps.

Others have linked the mothman and MIB with rumours about psychological operations by the Defence Logistics Agency who maintained a facility in the Ohio valley area during the 1960s. In 2014 a writer in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine claimed the mothman scare was caused by the activities of Green Berets who were, at the time, experimenting with new techniques to insert special forces into enemy-held territory in Vietnam. One method covertly tested in the Point Pleasant area was, he claimed, ‘the high-altitude, low-opening (HALO) freefall parachuting technique.’ Luminous paint was used during the exercise to keep track of soldiers: ‘...what the Green Berets making those jumps hadn’t figured on was the fact that people on the ground could see it as well.’^{xxxiii} A number of UFO contactee stories reported in

Keel's books have since been exposed as hoaxes.^{xxxiv} In addition, there is evidence that some of the anomalous phone calls received by Keel were pranks played by Gray Barker, a fellow UFOlogist, West Virginia resident and investigator of the mothman phenomenon.^{xxxv} Barker's 1956 book *They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers* launched the legend of the 'three men in black'. He later confessed to a number of UFO-related hoaxes and is suspected of having placed at least one of the calls described in Keel's book.^{xxxvi}

'Based on True Events'?

Hollywood interpreted the mothman legend as a psychological horror story. Many readers, including this author, have accepted the characters and events described in Keel's book, *The Mothman Prophecies* as being factually reported, or at least 'Based on True Events,' as the film poster implies. My revised interpretation does not attempt to divine whether **Keel's account of the mothman** story is true or false. It is based upon a close examination of **the original** narrative and the contents of interviews Keel gave on the subject of his writings. His non-UFO and Fortean related literary output is little known but was considerable **and it** provided him with a living as a freelance writer. Keel's biography contains comic novels, scripts for situation comedies and a book called *The Hoodwinkers*, on hoaxers.^{xxxvii} *The Mothman Prophecies* was written in the 'New Journalism' style that was popular when Keel was at his most prolific.^{xxxviii} New Journalism was a departure from the traditional model for news reporting because it did not place emphasis upon the importance of neutrality and factual accuracy. It immersed the writer within the story, 'channelling a character's thoughts, using non-standard punctuation and exploding traditional narrative forms.'^{xxxix} New Journalism often involved a mixture of personal observation, verbatim transcripts of conversations, overheard dialogue and extracts from documents or original notes, often delivered at great length and 'frequently focusing as much on the quest for information as on the information itself.'^{xl} By definition this type of discursive writing could be both subjective and irreverent in its style. One of its characteristics was the mixing of fact **and** fiction.

In her discussion of Keel's reporting of the West Virginia phenomena Deborah Dixon says he 'adopts a pulp fiction style of writing that simultaneously undercuts the eyewitness veracity the original testimonies strived for and buttresses his own authoritative position as the purveyor and interpreter.'^{xli} Keel's inventive story-telling was also recognised by the folklorist Peter Rojcewicz in his analysis of MIB legends. He notes that although **they** form a distinct part of the larger UFO mythology, readers should be aware of 'the conventions of form, content...[of] reporting, or what is sometimes called 'journalistic fiction,' in order to scrape away the personality of the investigator.'^{xlii}

A striking example of Keel's use of the New Journalism style appears in the first chapter of *The Mothman Prophecies*. In 1992 he explained to the author how he struggled to find a publisher until he re-wrote the introductory chapter, 'Beelzebub visits West Virginia,' so that it featured 'a strong opening...based on a true story.' **The narrative** slowly builds a feeling of dread and foreboding **as it sets the scene on a** stormy night in **November** 1967, just weeks before the collapse of the Silver Bridge. **A stranger approaches** a farmhouse in the hills of rural West Virginia and **raps** upon the door until a young woman **answers**:

'She opened the door a crack and her sleep-swollen face winced with fear as she stared at the apparition on her doorstep. He was over six feet tall and dressed entirely in black. He wore a black suit, black tie, black hat, and black overcoat, with impractical black dress shoes covered with mud. His face, barely visible in the darkness, sported a neatly trimmed moustache and goatee. The flashes of lightning behind him added an eerie effect.'^{xliii}

The Man in Black asks ‘May I use your phone?’ in a deep, unfamiliar accent. The woman and her partner **refuse to open the door and the MIB leaves to repeat** his request at another dwelling nearby. Keel explained the origins of this story **to me as follows**:

‘I had been out in the hills with another journalist following up stories about lights in the sky. Our car had run off the road on a very rainy night and I was dressed in a necktie and a full suit...you didn’t see that very often on back roads in West Virginia, a black suit...and I went around pounding on doors to get somebody to call a truck for me. It turned out that the people who finally made the call were among the people that were on the bridge that later collapsed. The day after I knocked on their door, they told everybody they knew that a strange man in a black suit and a beard had called and he must have been the devil.’^{xliv}

In his book, Keel reveals how accounts of his visit to this rural area had subsequently entered folklore as a premonition of the collapse of the Silver Bridge: ‘It had, indeed been a sinister omen. One that confirmed their religious beliefs and superstitions. So a new legend was born.’^{xlv} The Beelzebub story was re-interpreted for a key scene in the 2002 mothman film. In both the book and film **it** functions as a plot twist of the type commonly found in contemporary legends with a supernatural theme. Keel invokes Film noir in his account of it, comparing the West Virginia setting with ‘an opening scene of a Grade B horror film from the 1930s.’ He goes on to invoke dark landscapes and ordinary characters that face macabre, unexpected twists and turns as the story unfolds. Similarly, contemporary legends with a supernatural theme ‘often depend on their twisted endings and ambiguous characters and situations for effect.’^{xlvi}

Discussion

John Keel died in 2009 and his obituaries emphasised the divisive nature of his literary legacy. One of his contemporaries, John Michell, called him ‘the best of all UFO writers,’ whilst Fortean blogger Nick Redfern refers to Keel as ‘one of the most important people in the field of Fortean...someone who recognised the deep and undeniable cross-overs between ...the worlds of UFOlogy, cryptozoology and demonology.’^{xlvii} During his lifetime critics within UFOlogy dismissed Keel as credulous, paranoid and crankish. Others said his books were ‘littered with factual errors and other evidence of sloppy reporting’ and claimed he was unable to distinguish ‘the most blatantly apparent hoaxes from more credible cases.’^{xlviii} Yet despite disapproval from some sections of the UFO community, Keel’s pacy writing style and story-telling skills attracted a loyal following.^{xlix} Friends and admirers have ensured his books and articles remain in publication via a series of reprints and edited collections. In 2009 a John Keel website was launched by his close friend Doug Skinner as ‘a tribute to a unique writer and character.’¹

In retrospect Keel’s contribution to the development of Forteanism and UFOlogy should be regarded as both considerable and hugely influential. His ultra-terrestrial hypothesis provided a fresh, alternative explanatory framework for UFOs and other extraordinary phenomena at a point in the development of the UFO controversy at which many former believers had begun to doubt the validity of the ETH. It was attractive precisely because it was inclusive and consistent with the zeitgeist. Keel put forward his theories in an engaging and highly readable style that appealed to a mass audience. In contrast, Fort made no attempt to provide a coherent hypothesis in his books and preferred to propose provocative theories only to denounce them at a later stage. His aim in doing so was to make the point that such

outlandish ideas were equally applicable as explanations for anomalies as those that were routinely offered by the scientists. Nevertheless, Jim Steinmeyer notes that Fort did not appear to believe many of his wilder theories, such as the Super-Sargasso Sea. Fort referred to this early version of the 'Bermuda Triangle' in his *Book of the Damned* as a type of cosmic junkyard into which things were mysteriously teleported, or from which they fell to Earth.^{li} Elsewhere he writes of believing nothing 'of my own that I have ever written' adding that 'I cannot accept that the products of minds are subject matter of beliefs.'^{lii}

In my interview I asked Keel how Fort had influenced his own writing. 'Fort was very persuasive if you could get through his style,' he replied. 'He had an odd style of writing, a humorous style which a lot of people to this day don't quite comprehend...I sort of sometimes satirise Fort...he used to use certain phrases like, 'I have a theory, that the stars are hanging from strings and the sky is only 800 feet up,' and that would be a joke and people would seriously quote that and say, 'Well, Charles Fort thinks the stars are hanging on strings.' I think my own style sort of evolved over the years. I appreciated his mocking sense of humour and some of the ideas in my books were, like Fort's, deliberately meant to be provocative and outrageous.'^{liii}

Although he claimed to be an atheist, Keel did express belief in the existence of 'an occult or metaphysical system of control' that had existed since the dawn of mankind. He was never clear about the exact nature and purpose of this 'indefinable and certainly incomprehensible' system but was certain UFOs were part of it. In this respect he borrowed from Fort who, in *The Book of the Damned*, speculated that Earth and its inhabitants might be regarded as 'property' by visitors from other worlds, whose ships were occasionally seen in the sky.^{liv} In an earlier interview with Richard Toronto Keel made similar comments, noting: 'men have always been aware of it on different levels and have tried to define it (and worship it) – that's what theology is all about.'^{lv}

The idea of a 'control system' was the basis for Keel's ultra-terrestrial hypothesis. **This was** his most enduring contribution to the UFO controversy, **but he** later disavowed ownership of his own creation, asserting that he did not invent the word that he claimed has 'been in use for generations.'^{lvi} Nevertheless, research by this author has failed was to locate any literary reference that pre-dates Keel's usage in *Our Haunted Planet*.^{lvii} Neither is there any clear evidence of a pre-modern lineage for ultra-terrestrial in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. *The Urban Dictionary* defines an ultra-terrestrial as 'a superior, non-human entity of natural or supernatural origin that is indigenous to planet Earth,' or 'as a being from another dimension or plane of reality.' The latter is a reference to a line from an online discussion about the American television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, that aired from 1997 to 2003.

Martin Kottmeyer regards ultra-terrestrial as a neologism. He believes Keel employed it to avoid the religious connotations of spirit or demon.^{lviii} Others have not shared his reluctance. For some evangelical Christians and proponents of UFO-related conspiracy theories, ultra-terrestrials are shorthand for demons controlled by Satan.^{lix} Kottmeyer notes that one indication of the continuing popularity of Keel's ideas in UFOlogy is the frequent appearance of ultra-terrestrial in book titles.^{lx} Keel was scathing of what he referred to as the 'cottage industry of other writers who churned out books that merely copied my material.'^{lxi}

When questioned about his ultra-terrestrial hypothesis, Keel urged me 'not to take it too seriously.' My colleague Andy Roberts, who was present during the interview, recalled: 'despite numerous conversations, no one could work out what he really believed. What's more he told different people different things, probably according to what he thought they wanted to believe.'^{lxii} Less kindly, another acquaintance of Keel's, Bob Sheaffer described him as 'a trickster' [who] 'did not seem to be taking his own writings very seriously, which suggests that they were entertaining stories that paid the bills.'^{lxiii}

In a 1985 interview with Richard Toronto, Keel dismissed much of the contemporary UFOlogical obsessions, such as the Roswell legend and alleged government cover-ups, as nonsense. Toronto challenged this assertion and asked: 'Haven't you just replaced what you consider outmoded pulp zine images with updated ones of your own?'^{lxiv} Keel's response was revealing. He said 'there are literally hundreds of Devil Theories, some of them with millions of paranoid followers.' He added: 'If you read my books carefully, you will see that 'ultraterrestrials' are a literary device, not a theory.'" Keel expanded on this **statement** in a letter published by *Fortean Times* in which he explained:

'...basically, what I attempted to do [in my books] was set up a frame of reference that the reader could, hopefully, understand. Obviously, I failed in this. Even now people...are still assuming that ultraterrestrials are actual entities...what I said in five books, carefully spelled out and defined, is that *we* are the intelligence which controls the phenomena.'^{lxv}

Charles Fort and John Keel had much in common. Both began their careers as journalists and both returned from their youthful travels with a desire to write about anomalous phenomena and to challenge the prevailing orthodoxies of their day. Loren Gross described Fort as 'a philosopher who proposed wild theories using an entertaining writing style.'^{lxvi} When Tiffany Thayer asked Fort what he called himself, his response was simple: 'I'm just a writer.'^{lxvii} Similarly, when Toronto asked Keel how he would like to be remembered, he responded not as a UFOlogist or even as a Fortean, but 'as a novelist and playwright – if I am remembered at all.'

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- ⁱ Loren E. Gross, *Charles Fort, The Fortean Society, and Unidentified Flying Objects*. (Fremont, California: privately published, 1976).
- ⁱⁱ Jim Steinmeyer, *Charles Fort: The Man Who Invented the Supernatural*. (London: Heinemann, 2008), 289.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Chris Evans, "The Occult Revival," *New Humanist* 88(5) (1972): 195-98.
- ^{iv} Marcello Truzzi, "The Occult Revival as Popular Culture," *Sociological Quarterly*, 13 (1972): 16-37.
- ^v Andy Roberts and David Clarke, "The John Keel Interview," *UFO Brigantia*, 34 (1992): 16.
- ^{vi} Robert Durant. "Public Opinion Polls and UFOs" in *UFOs 1947-97: Fifty Years of Flying Saucers*, ed. Hilary Evans and Dennis Stacy (London: John Brown), 321.
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