The Mothman of West Virginia: A case study in Legendary Storytelling

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David Clarke

[Preface]

A notorious American cryptid, Mothman's popularity may be due more to its prevalence in American popular culture than its very real origins in honestly reported sightings. These origins can be traced to four teenagers, driving in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, who reported to police a strange flying creature, a six-foot tall winged man with red eyes, chasing and harassing their car for miles, and at speeds over a hundred miles per hour. Additional town sightings followed.

In subsequent media attention, however, it was one man, John Keel, who did more than any for the Mothman legend, first by covering it as a journalist and then later, following the collapse of the Silver Bridge, by penning *The Mothman Prophecies*, a first-hand New Journalism account of his Mothman investigation. The book is a classic of "Fortean" research, that is, investigation into anomalous phenomena first systematically referenced by Charles Fort, the man most responsible for shaping modern views of the paranormal and the supernatural.

In the present chapter, journalist and legend scholar David Clarke, provided intimate access to Keel through first-hand correspondence and interviews, focuses on Keel's role in developing and perpetuating the Mothman legend. Keel and his book have become inextricable elements of the larger Mothman legend. Some of the legend's motifs that Keel reported, particularly the infamous "men in black," have spread and taken root globally. But Mothman remains firmly planted in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, internationally known, but local to the core, a perfect meeting of local sightings and international intrigue.

[Article]

> *What stands six feet tall, has wings, two big red eyes six inches apart and glides along behind an auto at 100 miles an hour? Don't know? Well neither do four Point Pleasant residents who were chased by a weird "man-like thing" on Tuesday night.*
>
> -Mary Hyre, Athens (Ohio) *Messenger*, November 17, 1966.

In November 1966, a syndicated dispatch from West Virginia reported that police were investigating reports of a mysterious "bird-like" monster five miles north of the city of Point Pleasant. The story was published across North America and a version appeared on page one of *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, read by American troops in Vietnam. It described how two young married couples saw the creature as they cruised around the 35-acre McClintic Wildlife Management Area near midnight on November 15. The four teenagers were driving near a wartime munitions dump, known locally as the TNT area, when a tall greyish figure appeared near the entrance to an abandoned power station. They said it was "shaped like a man, but bigger" but its most striking features were a pair of glowing red eyes and "big wings folded against its back." The wings unfolded and it took off vertically. Understandably terrified, they turned their car around and sped towards Route 62. As they drove towards the

city limits, the creature appeared again and followed them at uncanny speed (Sergent and Wamsley 2002, 81).

The four witnesses, Roger and Linda Scarberry and Steve and Mary Mallette, stopped at the Mason County Sheriff's Office and reported their experience to Deputy Millard Halstead. The officer returned to the TNT area with the teenagers but nothing unusual was found. The next morning the Sheriff's Office called a press conference that resulted in mass media coverage. Most of the newspaper stories referred to the unidentified creature as "bird-like" but one headline, read: "BIRD, PLANE OR BATMAN? Mason Countians Hunt 'Moth Man'"(Sergent and Wamsley 2002, 92). The Mothman moniker was a direct reference to the live-action television series *Bat-Man*, based on the DC comic superhero, showing on the ABC network. The label stuck and by December Mothman was used by most of the media reports of further sightings.

In the months that followed, numerous other individuals came forward to report extraordinary experiences with Mothman in and around Point Pleasant and other locations along the Ohio River Valley. The TNT area quickly became established as an area for legend trips. According to the police, more than one thousand people travelled to the area in cars, many carrying guns, in search of the Mothman. One account describes the area "ablaze from the lights of cars and flashlights as the curious travelled up and down the maze of dirt roads…every intersection was jammed with parked cars and small clumps of laughing, jostling young adults" and how abandoned buildings "rang with the shrieks of youngsters, scaring themselves" (Sergent and Wamsley 2002, 78).

The typical American legend trip is defined as "an organised (although sometimes spontaneous) journey to an isolated area to test the bravery of a group when faced with supernatural phenomena." (de Vos 1996, 56) People who participate in legend trips react in different ways. Some may believe in the literal truth of the legend and others will suspend their disbelief or take an intermediate position between belief and disbelief. Even those who dismiss the narrative as false play a role by taking part in the trip for a thrill, to test their own courage, to defy authority or simply because it seems to be the correct thing to do (de Vos 1996, 55).

The legend trip often involves the telling of legends, with believers acting out the content to make them come alive. This is known as ostension, the process by which people act out themes or events found within folk narratives. Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi proposed three sub-categories of ostension: *pseudo-ostension* involves the intentional acting out of a well-known story or legend to fool or inspire others to believe. An example of this is the creation of 'fake' crop circles to persuade others that flying saucers have landed. Another sub-category is *proto-ostension*, where a someone presents a version of an existing legend in the form of a personal experience which they claim happened to them. Finally, there is *quasi-ostension*, where an ambiguous event, natural or man-made, is misinterpreted in terms of an existing legend, such as an unfamiliar bird or animal reported as a monster (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983, 18-20; Ellis 2003, 162-63). All three types of ostension are found in the Mothman legend as the narrative grew and evolved from the initial sightings in 1966.

The Mothman Prophecies

All effective legends require a storyteller and in the case of Mothman this role was played by a New York journalist and UFOlogist, John A. Keel (1930-2009). His writings transformed a local legend into an international phenomenon that included a Hollywood film adaptation of the basic story.

Keel's interest in strange phenomena began in the 1940s when he read the books of Charles Fort (Fort 1919; Steinmeyer 2008). Born in Albany, New York, in 1874 Fort spent

many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and British Museum Library in search of evidence for a range of strange phenomena and experiences. His unconventional theories about visitors from other worlds led Keel to the writings of Ray Palmer, editor of pulp magazine *Amazing Stories*, that promoted the flying saucer mystery from 1947. In June of that year pilot Kenneth Arnold reported seeing nine mysterious flying objects moving at supersonic speed above the Cascade mountains in Washington State and news media coverage of his experience effectively launched the modern UFO phenomenon. In 1952, whilst serving with the American Forces Network in Europe, Keel observed his first UFO, in daylight, above the Aswan Dam in Egypt. 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 "abominable snowman" or Yeti. This experience and Keel's idiosyncratic accounts of other cryptozoological and Fortean mysteries were published in his autobiography, *Jadoo: Mysteries of the Orient* (Keel 1957). Because of the journalistic and investigative work of John Keel, the Mothman proto-legend became an international media phenomenon. In turn this fed back into the larger corpus of UFO-related 'mysteries' and other strange experiences, often through ostensive acts.

Keel returned to cryptozoology and UFOlogy during the mid-1960s as result of his friendship with the British-born biologist and Fortean writer Ivan Sanderson. A collection of North American monster legends form the central text of Keel's *Strange Creatures from Time and Space* (Keel 1970). Chapter 16 traces reports of what he calls "Winged Weirdoes" to ancient Babylonian winged deities, the Garuda of the Orient and the Thunderbird legends of the Native Americans. Another chapter collects accounts of alleged personal experiences with "Man Birds" from 19th century newspaper archives. He also includes a contemporary story from Kent, England, where a group of teenagers reported seeing a huge black headless figure with bat-like wings one night in November 1963 (Underwood 1971, 198). These disparate stories and legends segue into the chapter dedicated to "West Virginia's Mothman" (Keel 1970). This includes a list of what Keel describes as the twenty-six "most responsible" sightings of the creature by residents of West Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky, from September 1966 to November 1967. Keel claims that more than one hundred people reported seeing this "winged impossibility" and he summarises their accounts as follows:

> …those who got a close look at it all agreed…it was grey, apparently featherless, as large – or larger – than a big man, had a wingspread of about ten feet, took off straight up like a helicopter, and did not flap its wings in flight. Its face was a puzzle, no one could describe it. The two red eyes dominated it. (Keel 2002, 88)

John Keel's book *The Mothman Prophecies*, published in 1975, is the most accomplished account of the legend. It was re-published twice, in 1991 and 2002, with a new afterword contributed by the author in both editions. The most recent reprint coincided with the release of a movie based upon the legend. Crypozoologist Loren Coleman, West Virginia authors Donnie Sergent, Jnr, and Jeff Wamsley, along with a number of documentary film-makers have since collected and published additional personal experience narratives that were not included in Keel's books (Coleman 2002, Sergent and Wamsley 2002, Grabias 2002 and Breedlove 2017).

In his own account, Keel says he felt drawn to the community of Point Pleasant. His first field-trip was in December 1966, employing his credentials as a journalist to make contact with local law enforcement officials. Checking into a motel on the Ohio side of the river, he visited the Mason County courthouse where he met Deputy Halstead. The officer

assured him the young witnesses "saw something. I don't know what. Some say it's just a crane" (Keel 2002, 97). A sketch of the Mothman by "one of the original eyewitnesses" (Roger Scarberry) a transcript of an interview given by Linda Scarberry in 2001, and letters from Keel to Linda and her parents are reproduced in a later collection subtitled "the facts behind the legend" (Sergent and Wamsley 2002, 16). These sources explain how Keel was introduced to the extended families of the original Mothman witnesses and others who had reported personal experiences with the creature. On this first visit Keel met Mary Hyre, a journalist at the Athens, Ohio *Messenger*, who covered the Mothman phenomena in her weekly column *Where The Waters Mingle* (Sergent and Wamsley 2002). Keel quickly gained the trust of Hyre and the other witnesses and within hours of his arrival joined them on a legend trip to the ruins of the abandoned north power plant in the TNT area. On entering the ruined building the group experienced a feeling of terror and one Mothman witness, Connie Carpenter, briefly reported glimpsing the striking red eyes of the monster (Keel 2002, 99).

Keel's book describes how he found the Mothman phenomenon was accompanied by reports of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and other strange phenomena in West Virginia and the Ohio valley. Accounts of sightings begin to appear in local newspapers from April 1967 (Sergent and Wamsley 2002, 102-24). During his field investigations Keel also collected stories of unexplained animal mutilations and disappearances, poltergeists, and electromagnetic anomalies that disrupted radios and telephone systems. One UFO contact narrative that coincided with the arrival of Mothman was provided by travelling salesman Woodrow Derenberger. He claimed a UFO shaped like "an old fashioned kerosene lamp chimney" landed on the road in front of his truck on a road near Parkersburg, West Virginia, at 7 p.m. on November 2, 1966. A tall, tanned humanoid emerged from the object and approached. A conversation ensued in which the man said his name was Cold and he came from a country much less powerful than the USA. Cold promised to return and the UFO disappeared. Derenberger's farm in Mineral Wells later became a magnet for legend trippers in search of a UFO experience. He went on to write a book about his experiences in which he claimed to have taken trips with his mysterious visitor, Indrid Cold, to a planet called Lanulos (Derenberger 1971). Keel provided a foreword and promoted this and other UFO contactee stories in his own books and syndicated writings.

During his visits to the Ohio Valley, Keel also discovered that some Mothman and UFO witnesses had also reported surreal visitations from foreign-looking strangers wearing black clothes who arrived in large, apparently brand-new black cars. They asked questions about Keel's movements and tried to persuade witnesses not to talk about their unusual experiences. These sinister Men in Black (MIB) play a major role in the book that was written eight years after the events it describes. Although Keel did not invent the MIB he coined the acronym and was responsible for elevating an obscure UFOlogical legend to the pop culture status it currently enjoys (Rojcewicz 1987). Folklorist Peter Rojcewicz compares MIB stories with older traditions that associate blackness with the Devil. In folklore, the evil one is a shape-shifter who can appear as a "man in black" (Rojcewicz 1987, 155). Whereas some of the Mothman and UFO witnesses believed the MIB were government agents, or members of the mafia, Keel suspected they were part of a wider "ultra-terrestrial" phenomenon (Keel 1971). In his books he presents the ultra-terrestrials as shape-shifting intelligences that inhabit a parallel universe. Their demonic presence may explain the advice he gave to Linda Scarberry to keep a crucifix in her home as a deterrent to the MIB (Sergent and Wamsley 2002, 29-30). 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" (Dixon 2007, 201).

In *The Mothman Prophecies* Keel explains how the more he became immersed in the mysteries he discovered in West Virginia, the more he found it difficult to detach himself from the events he reported on. Instead, as he put it, "the phenomenon" appeared to play with his own thoughts and beliefs (Keel, personal communication 1992). In chapters 10 and 11 he describes his sightings of unexplained moving lights in the Ohio River Valley. These experiences occurred in the presence of other journalists and police officers. On several occasions Keel and Hyre attempted to communicate with the lights using a hand-held torch. He also claimed to have participated in telephone conversations with mysterious non-human intelligences including Indrid Cold who featured in the Derenberger narrative. Keel used his "ultra-terrestrial" theory to separate these entities from the more popular concept of extra-terrestrials that he had rejected in 1967 when his inquiries "disclosed an astonishing overlap between psychic phenomena and UFOs" (Keel 1971). According to his account, during his field investigations, anomalous voices contacted him by telephone, day and night, to relay ominous messages and warnings about impending earthquakes, assassination attempts and other assorted disasters. A cluster of these prophecies related to an unspecified catastrophe on the Ohio River that was the center of the Mothman and UFO "flap."

In the later stages of his investigation Keel returned to his apartment in New York for the Christmas holiday. On December 15, 1967, soon after President Lyndon Johnson switched on the festive lights at the White House, the television broadcast was interrupted by breaking news that the Silver Bridge that spanned the river at Point Pleasant, linking West Virginia with Ohio, had collapsed at rush hour. The falling structure sent forty-six drivers and pedestrians, including some Mothman witnesses, to their deaths. The bridge collapse occurred thirteen months after the Mothman legend began. Some of Keel's informants believed the Mothman/UFO phenomena was a premonition of the tragedy or part of its cause. It was certainly true that the number of reported anomalous experiences, reported in the local media, decreased after the disaster (Keel 2002; Sergent and Wamsley 2002).

A number of later sources link the bridge collapse to the Curse of Chief Constalk, a Shawnee chief who is commemorated in the State Park by a monument. One version of the story has Chief Constalk travel to Fort Randolph to negotiate a truce and avoid bloodshed between settlers and Native American tribes in 1777. He was taken hostage and later killed, together with his son, in reprisal for the death of a soldier who was part of a group caught in an ambush. As he died the chief is said to have placed a curse on Point Pleasant (Colvin 2014; Sherwood 2014, 26).

In his book Keel refers to the events of 1966-67 as "the year of the Garuda," making a direct link between the Mothman and the legend of a giant humanoid bird-like creature that appears in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. In these traditions the Garuda bird is the mount of the Hindu god Vishnu and is sometimes depicted in anthropomorphic form as a man with wings and other birdlike features. 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" (Coleman 2002,199). The banshee or *bean-sidhe* is a female spirit in Irish fairy-lore who heralds the death of a family member by wailing or shrieking. The banshee is "invariably attached to a family, and it must be to one of the old families." It can even follow them abroad, with documented examples from Canada and elsewhere (Briggs 1967, 25). In West Virginia the Mothman legend was associated with a small group of Point Pleasant families who reported frequent experiences with the creature before the bridge collapsed. One of the original witnesses, Linda Scarberry, claims she saw the creature on several later occasions and noted its distinctive red eyes (Sergent and Wamsley 2002, 22). There are many and varied descriptions of the banshee's size, colour and dress but some describe her as having red eyes from continual weeping.

Beliefs about luck or ill-luck brought by the appearance of specific animals are common in folklore. Birds are widely regarded as an omen, or even a cause, of death particularly if a wild bird enters a house or beats against a window. In English folklore moths are also regarded as omens of death when they appear in the homes of a dying person (Opie and Tatum 1989, 266-67).

The next section will explore how the story changed and evolved after the publication of Keel's seminal account in 1975.

The Mothman in Television and Film

Almost three decades after the publication of *The Mothman Prophecies* a new version of the legend appeared in the form of a movie. The movie's writers and director adapted the story for an international audience, working with John Keel who said "they have managed to squeeze the basic truths into their film. Not an easy task." (Keel 2002, 336).

When a script based upon Keel's book was adapted for a film by the director Mark Pellington in 2002 the writers chose to depict the Mothman as a shape-shifting supernatural omen of death. The MIB that feature prominently in Keel's book were omitted from the screenplay but the ultra-terrestrial, Indrid Cold, does make an appearance. He passes on predictions about earthquakes and plane-crashes to Gordon Smallwood, a fictional character played by actor Will Patton. Cold also uses the telephone to communicate with the lead character that is based on Keel's character as investigative journalist. The promo trailers claim the film is "based on true events" and the credits underscore this message, informing viewers the film is "based upon the book by John A. Keel." Producer Gary Lucchesi said he and actor Richard Gere rejected earlier scripts "that took the idea of a monstrous figure all too literally" (Dixon 2007, 202). 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" (Pellington 2002).

In the film Gere plays a New York journalist, John Klein, whose wife dies from a brain tumour shortly after an encounter with Mothman. He later discovers drawings of a winged creature, or angel of death, produced by his wife before her demise. Two years later Klein inexplicably becomes lost whilst driving to a reporting assignment and finds himself hundreds of miles away in West Virginia. There he discovers the residents of Point Pleasant are under siege from a range of baffling phenomena. Klein becomes obsessed with solving the mystery and understanding its apparent link with the death of his wife. He joins a police officer, Connie Mills, played by Laura Linney, to investigate a series of strange experiences including sightings of a giant winged creature with red eyes. Mothman is occasionally glimpsed but never fully revealed. The film poster plays on its elusive nature, posing the question: "What do you see?" above the image of a Rorchach inkblot.

Actor 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 they meet in Chicago, Leek draws directly on the theories developed in Keel's books, warning the journalist: "…there has never been a shred of evidence to show these things exist materially…[but] all sorts of things exist around us that don't 'exist'…electricity, microwaves, infrared waves, these things have been around us forever. They show up in cave paintings…they are a normal condition of the planet. They are just not part of our concept of what constitutes physical reality" (Pellington 2002).

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." In the film, the two characters portray opposing aspects of

Keel's personality: the skeptic and the believer/experiencer (Leek is Keel spelled backwards). A similar dualism was explored in the long-running television series *The X-Files* where the opposing dialectics are articulated by 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 filings-away; it carries with it an atmosphere in which anything can happen, and reality itself is always suspect" (Shirley 2002).

One result of the dissemination of the legend via the ostensive mass medium of film was the appearance of fresh Mothman narratives in online forums (Coleman 2002). Some of these were accounts of personal experiences with winged creatures. Others referred to sightings of Mothman before other natural and man-made disasters in recent history. These include accounts of "a winged creature" just before the leak of nuclear materials at the Chernobyl reactor in 1986 and the September 11 attacks by terrorists on New York and Washington, D.C. (Colvin 2014). The source of these stories can be traced to a scene in the film when Klein visits Leek in Chicago and is provided with a list of other occasions in which the Mothman creature has appeared, across the world, as a "prediction of disaster." A factual link between Mothman, Chernobyl, and other disasters is repeated, without qualification, in the non-fiction documentary *Search for the Mothman* (Grabias 2002) that was included in the DVD release of *The Mothman Prophecies* feature film. Another incorrect claim made in the end credits of the film is that 'the ultimate cause of the collapse of the Silver Bridge was never determined'. In fact, an investigation by the National Bureau of Standards traced the collapse to the failure of one of the eyebars on the bridge supports (Sherwood 2013, 31).

Loren Coleman writes that he and Keel "did our best to straighten out the record regarding that mythos that became the Chernobyl 'Mothman' accounts" and he confirmed the Chernobyl story and other examples given in the 2002 movie "were pure fiction…It is a bit of movie fiction that has, unfortunately, moved into pseudo-factoid cryptozoology" (Coleman 2010). The Chernobyl Mothman is just one example of ostension arising from the dissemination of the Mothman legend.

The section that follows will examine how the Mothman revival, in the first decade of the 21st century, led to further ostensive action including the establishment of a museum and an annual festival in Point Pleasant that has established the West Virginia community as a permanent focus for Mothman-themed legend trips.

The Mothman Revival

In the past two decades the Mothman has been adopted by the West Virginia community as a permanent attraction with a museum, statue and annual festival. The recent revival of interest in the legend has led to debates about the truth of the original accounts documented by John Keel and others. Folklore scholars understand that most legends emerge from the complex and often lengthy exchange of opinions that involve 'believers, skeptics, and others in between' and although believers help to keep legends alive, 'skeptics do too" (McNeill and Tucker 2018).

The release of the Mothman movie led to a revival of interest in the legend in West Virginia, although key scenes including the collapse of the Silver Bridge were actually filmed in Pennsylvania. In 2003 a 12-foot tall metal sculpture depicting the Mothman by artist Bob Roach was placed on the corner of 4th Street and Main Street in Point Pleasant. Based on a painting by Frank Fazetta that appears on the dust jacket of the 1991 re-print of *The Mothman Prophecies*, it was unveiled by John Keel at the second Mothman Festival. The event is held annually on the third weekend of September and visitors have grown from 500 in 2002 to 4,000 in 2014 (mothmanfestival.com). It features guest speakers, live bands, Mothman and

MIB costumes, a pancake eating contest, a 5K run, and hayride tours. In 2005 a local entrepreneur, Jeff Wamsley, opened the Mothman Museum, dedicated to the legend, offering minibus tours of the TNT area and other places linked with events in 1966-67 (Sergent and Wamsley, 2002; Sherwood 2013). [Include Figure 13 Near Here]

The revival of the legend also led to skeptical re-appraisals of the eye-witness accounts documented by Keel, Coleman and others. Non-extraordinary explanations have been proposed including the activities of pranksters and misperceptions arising from media coverage of the phenomenon. Some skeptics have re-examined claims reported in 1966 that the original Mothman scare was caused by the presence in West Virginia of a large, rare bird such as a Sandhill crane or a large owl (Sergent and Wamsley 2002). In his book Keel said he carried photographs of these animals during his investigations and none were recognised by Mothman witnesses. However, when skeptic Joe Nickell visited the TNT area, he noted it is surrounded by the McClintic Wildlife Management Area, "then, as now, a bird sanctuary" (Nickell 2002). He traced the grandson of a man who shot a snowy owl during the Mothman sightings in 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. Owl retinas can appear as bright circles at night when, like mirrors, they reflect artificial light such as from cars or flashlamps.

Others have linked the Mothman and MIB with rumours about psychological operations by the Defense Logistics Agency that maintained a facility in the Ohio Valley area during the 1960s. In 2014, a writer in *Soldier of Fortune*, a mercenary magazine, claimed the original Mothman sighting 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 but: "…what the Green Berets making those jumps hadn"t figured on was the fact that people on the ground could see it as well" (Hutchison 2014).

Further examples of pseudo-ostension can be found in the form of the UFO contactee stories reported in Keel's books. Some of these have since been revealed as fictional narratives inspired by the original legend. These include a narrative told by a psychology student, Tom Monteleone, who claimed he had met Indrid Cold and travelled to Lanulos, shortly after Woodrow Derenberger's UFO encounter received media coverage in 1966-67 (Keel 2002, 240-46). Monteleone later confessed his claims were invented as part of a college experiment (Clark 1998, 701). In an afterword to the 1991 edition of his book, Keel writes that he was aware that "Tom's whole tale [was] a hilarious put-on and that all contactee stories were highly suspect" (Keel 1991, 271). In addition, there is some evidence that some of the anomalous phone calls received by Keel in 1966-67 were pranks played by Gray Barker (1925-1984), a fellow UFOlogist, who joined the New York journalist on some of his field investigations. Barker was a West Virginia resident and author of a 1970 novel based upon the Mothman legend and the collapse of the Silver Bridge (Barker, 1970; Sherwood 2002). 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 bizarre phone-calls described in Keel's 1975 book (Sherwood 2002).

Conclusion: "Based on True Events"?

Hollywood interpreted the Mothman legend as a psychological horror story. Others have interpreted the events described in John Keel's book as being factually reported, or at least

"based on true events," as the film poster implied. Keel began his writing career as a reporter and, as a journalist myself, my concluding remarks will examine his literary contribution to the legend in the context of its strength as a "good story" (see Hobbs 1987).

The Mothman Prophecies was written in the "New Journalism" style that was popular when Keel was at his most prolific (Wolfe and Johnson 1975). This was a departure from the traditional model for news reporting because it did not place emphasis upon the importance of neutrality and factual accuracy. New Journalism immersed the writer within the story, "channelling a character's thoughts, using non-standard punctuation and exploding traditional narrative forms" (Boynton 2005). This style often involved a mixture of personal observation, overheard dialogue and extracts from documents or original notes and "frequently focusing as much on the quest for information as on the information itself" (Harcup 2014, 116). In her discussion of *The Mothman Prophecies*, Deborah Dixon makes this explicit, noting that Keel "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" (Dixon 2007, 201).

In 1992, Keel explained to me how he struggled to find a publisher for the book until he revised the introductory chapter, "Beelzebub Visits West Virginia," to include "a strong opening…based on a true story" (personal communication 1992). His storytelling slowly builds a feeling of dread and foreboding as he describes the events of 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. (Keel 1975, 1)

The Man in Black asks "May I use your phone?" in a deep, unfamiliar accent. The woman and her partner refuse to help and the MIB is left to repeat his request at another dwelling nearby. Keel explained the origins of this story in an extended interview:

> 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. (Roberts and Clarke 1992, 19)

In the version that appears in his book, Keel reveals how he learned that 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" (Keel 2002, 2). This narrative was so striking that it was re-interpreted for a scene in the movie, when John Klein arrives at Gordon Smallwood's farm after he finds himself in West Virginia following a missing time

experience. In both the book and film the scene 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." Similarly, contemporary legends with a supernatural theme "often depend on their twisted endings and ambiguous characters and situations for effect" (de Vos 1996, 7). He goes on to invoke dark landscapes and ordinary characters that face macabre, unexpected twists and turns as the story unfolds.

John Keel's role as the storyteller who interprets the disparate stories in the form of a over-arching narrative was pivotal in what Linda Dégh calls the dialectics of the legend, providing the story its latent power and longevity. The subsequent sharing of these stories in literature, film and online has encouraged others to confront and examine their view of the world, of what is possible and impossible, via the medium of the story. In a letter to the Mothman witnesses, dated March 15, 1970, Keel recognised that West Virginia's Mothman "is now part of history…in time it will become a folk legend" (Sergent and Walmsley 2002, 135). This re-invigorated legend has been embraced by members of the community in Point Pleasant and played a part, alongside the movie, in its recent revival.

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