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Our friends from the sky

Bryan Appleyard 's 'open-minded' exploration of belief in aliens reads like the story of a religion in the making, says Tabish Khair



Tabish Khair
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Aliens: Why They Are Here

by Bryan Appleyard

352pp, Scribner, £ 15.99

The moon may have been a giant leap for mankind, but it is only a short step from the burning bush to the "glowing oval" of UFOs. That is the conclusion some open-minded readers are likely to reach on perusing Bryan Appleyard's *Aliens*, though Appleyard resists that conclusion himself because he wants to be, yes, open-minded.

As such, quite early in the book, he arranges explanations of the alien phenomenon into three well-named categories - "nuts and bolts", "third realm" and "psychosocial" - and he determines not to scorn any of the explanations. All are valid, he assumes, because aliens are part of reality as experienced, in fact or fiction, by people. In general, this ought to be a good assumption. But there is a flaw to the reasoning, and one that reveals a lot about aliens and their adherents. The flaw lies in ranking the three categories equally, for while much empirical evidence exists to back the broad outlines of the "psychosocial school", the "nuts and bolts" school has yet to offer us a single nut or bolt from a flying saucer, and the "third realm" school is, by definition, beyond reasoned discussion and empirical observation.

People who believe in aliens as real - in the third realm or in outer space - reason in a way that resembles the reasoning of people who take religions literally. No matter what the evidence, it can be used to prove the same point. So, if there is no conclusive evidence, it simply proves that the CIA is hiding it. Like God, aliens and UFOs are beyond rational debate for their adherents. They are a matter of belief and, as Kierkegaard suggested, belief flourishes not simply on implausibility but also on contradiction.

But Appleyard is no blind believer, and his book does a good job of gathering together all the loose ends of the "alien phenomenon". By demarcating it largely to phenomena experienced in and after 1947, Appleyard manages to avoid an unmanageable wealth of data. But he can never really hide a subterranean streak of resentment towards those fault-finding spoilsports, the "psychosociologists", and tends to reduce their explanations to bland rebuttal: "crazy people see crazy things." This, in turn, ensures that though Appleyard touches on many complex explanations, he does not always develop the most scientific ones. Instead, he spends much time - especially in the first half of the book - recycling the experiences and opinions of various ufologists.

In the second half, titled "Questions", the discussion takes a more interesting turn.

Appleyard still balks at the empirically scientific but he provides some interesting excursions into the metaphysical-philosophical, for example in the chapters dealing with eyes, gazing and the skies. At its best, Appleyard's reading of aliens and UFOs link them to the workings of human consciousness, especially as it confronts otherness, its own relative marginality and the immensities of time and space. At its worst, his book shows a tendency to accept some rather tall claims and the persecution-complex of some ufologists. He often repeats claims that the academic world or the media are prejudiced against people who consider aliens "real", even though his own narrative indicates how the media have been instrumental in giving shape to the "aliens".

Aliens: Why They Are Here contains intriguing facts and possibilities, many of them not worked out. These include bits of information such as the fact that internet sex sites are the only ones hit more often than "alien" ones, or that 1947, the year Appleyard designates as the take-off point for UFO sightings, was also the year of the establishment of the CIA. Again, Appleyard correctly links the rise in alien sightings in the postwar and cold war phase to the threat of atomic war and environmental destruction, but he does not explore how the very notion of the alien connects to the creation of various "aliens" in the west around the second world war: Jews and Gypsies, and then communists and black immigrants.

In fact, Appleyard largely avoids political explanations: he notes that the intermingling of alien theories and conspiracy theories suggests a degree of suspicion between the citizen and the government, but does not explore that matter much further. Similarly, he notes that aliens have been considered both benign and hostile, but does not examine whether such perceptions are related to the dominant political climate in a country or the way in which the media portray "foreigners".

Given such missed opportunities, his conclusion - "the aliens are just there, real, projected and demonic at the same time" - is likely to prove stimulating only to a sceptical believer, for that is how Appleyard finally defines himself. For those who cannot believe, his book resembles an account of a religion in the formation: a new faith's attempt to make symbolic sense of a disparate world, its many small groups sharing a broad conviction, its schisms and heresies, its evolving language and mythology, its occasions of paranoia and euphoria, its rehashing of previous religious images, its trust in salvation from beyond Earth, its compromised struggle with the status quo. This has its uses: after all, belief in aliens, like belief in God, serves as a reminder of both the divine possibilities and human limitations of Homo sapiens. This reminder is necessary in spite of the fact that in most accounts aliens, like God, sound so vapidly ordinary that one wonders how they ever managed to catch the intergalactic express to Earth.

· Tabish Khair is the author of *The Bus Stopped* (Picador).