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Out of this World

Can a man who stretches the truth about himself be trusted to report accurately about UFOs and extraterrestrial life?

Late last summer, in a quiet South Side neighborhood, a group of friends gathered to celebrate Don Schmitt's 40th birthday and the recent release of the Showtime movie, *Roswell*, based on Schmitt and co-author Kevin D. Randle's first book, *UFO Crash at Roswell*. The books and the movie focus on a reported U.S. government cover-up of an alien spacecraft landing in New Mexico in 1947.

Guests carrying paper plates heaped full of lasagna, fruit salad and cake conversed softly with one another and waited. While some wandered out by the pool, others planted themselves firmly in front of a large television screen and watched videos about UFOs and close encounters. In the living room, small groups huddled to chat about their personal experiences with aliens.

Suddenly a buzz of excitement circles the house. *He has arrived*. The small groups quickly broke up and moved to the kitchen, where Don Schmitt held court. Sitting at the head of the kitchen table, with guests forming a half-circle around him, the UFO investigator and author, who was born and still lives in Hubertus, patiently answered their questions like a Buddhist master imparting knowledge to seekers. With two books and the Showtime movie starring Kyle MacLachlan and Dwight Yoakam to his name, Schmitt is considered a national expert in the study of unidentified flying saucers.

At another kind of gathering, Schmitt may have drawn catcalls, but here, there were only adoring followers who hung on his every word. With a detective-like air of authority, Schmitt told the crowd snippets of his latest findings. The most startling revelation was about a private conversation he had with a high-ranking Pentagon official who claims a retired general will finally tell the truth about the Roswell incident, Schmitt then teased them with a second story of a different Pentagon official who called him an "American hero" and said Schmitt should be commemorated for the work he's done for the people of the United States. The crowd murmured with approval.

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Through their books, Schmitt and Randle have heightened interest in an almost 50-year-old incident that has solicited more media attention and debate than any other UFO case.

Believers say that in 1947, an alien spacecraft crashed on a remote ranch near Roswell, New Mexico, and the U.S. military helped recover the wreckage, along with the bodies of several extraterrestrial creatures. Sensing the potentially explosive nature of the find, believers insist the government ordered a cover-up.

The facts of the case are these: On July 8, 1947, Col. William H. Blanchard of the 509th Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force based in Roswell directed 1st Lt. Walter Haut, a public information officer, to write a press release saying that a "flying disc" had been recovered. Within moments of the release, the press flooded the base with calls seeking more information.

That same evening, Brig. Roger Ramey, commander of the Eighth Air Force, held a press conference to explain that the disc was only a weather balloon. Ramey and a colleague even posed for photographs with the tattered remnants.

Thirty years later, in 1978, an officer who was one of the first people at the crash site, went public saying the weather balloon story was a cover-up and that the debris was

the remnants of a flying saucer. Following the crash, he said he was ordered not to talk to reporters. Until his death, he maintained that the material was "not from this earth."

Smelling a story, UFOlogists began investigating, and the debate has escalated. The case even caused some governmental squirming recently. At the urging of his constituents, U.S. Congressman Steven Schiff of New Mexico requested that the General Accounting Office (GAO) release its files on the case. Late last year, the U.S. Air Force admitted, in essence, that it had lied to the American people. The Air Force conceded that the debris was not a weather balloon, but a top-secret airborne system for atomic-age spying, called Project Mogul.

Schmitt and Randle aren't buying the Air Force's new line. They're convinced there was a cover-up and that Roswell was a genuine case of a close encounter. Randle, who has written more than 70 other books - many of them science fiction and men's adventure stories and most written under pseudonyms - lives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, says his editor at Avon, John Douglas. The two met at a UFO conference and later decided to investigate Roswell together.

"Randle has a military background and has been trained in crash investigation," says Douglas. Schmitt is a medical illustrator who says he has worked closely with a number of different sheriff's departments and governmental agencies.

Schmitt's pursuit of the investigation, some say, borders on the obsessive - a charge he denies. "A devotion, yes. An obsession, no," says Schmitt.

Yet he rarely talks about anything else, says many of his colleagues. Even his fiancée, Deborah Greyson, 21, says "99.8 percent of our lives are devoted to Roswell. On the rare occasion when he is at home, he's always on the phone either talking to one of the witnesses or Kevin [Randle] or planning the next step in the investigation."

Though Greyson, a recent graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee film program and a part-time actress, speaks wistfully of a future when they will have the time to plant a garden, she seems awed by Schmitt's work. "Don has an important job right now, and that is to show the average person that there is something bigger out there... If people start to believe that UFOs exist... it will impact everyone in our society."

Others don't share her admiration.

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Hunting down flying saucers and exposing government cover-ups is serious business, but it's a field open to ridicule. Schmitt, however, never jokes about his work. Rarely prone to laughter, he bristles at the thought that he might not be taken seriously. "Did you see that? They called me a UFO buff," Schmitt said with indignant disgust when asked about a newspaper article that featured him.

Catching him in his comfortable Hubertus home is a rare occurrence. He's either on a speaking tour, plugging his latest book or off to Los Angeles, Roswell or the Pentagon. In the last six years, Schmitt says he has traveled across the country more than 160 times.

In an interview about his work, the tall and slender Schmitt sat defensively with his arms crossed tightly on his chest. He rattled off facts about the case as easily as a born-again Christian quotes scripture. As he talked about the number of news organizations interested in him - PBS, ABC, BBC - he insisted his goal is not money but a search for the truth.

Family members and colleagues maintain that Schmitt and Randle have not profited from the books or the film. "The work has not led me down the road to wealth or riches by any means," says Paul Davids, producer of the Showtime movie. "They've

told me many times that when they add up their costs of research, they would be happy to just break even."

Yet a question remains just how Schmitt earns his living. Not everyone believes he works as a medical illustrator. "I never really saw any samples of his work," says a former girlfriend who dated him for five years. Schmitt's studio shows little evidence of artistic activity, he is unable to provide many published samples of his work and he's not known in illustration circles.

Schmitt did study commercial art at Milwaukee Area Technical College, receiving an associate's degree. He also says he studied at or received degrees from other local universities or colleges, but many of those claims appear to be bogus.

In a 1990 biography he used to promote himself, Schmitt wrote that he has attended the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Marquette University, taking classes in criminology, theology, and sociology. During an interview - with his parents and fiancée present - he said he is currently "pursuing his doctorate in criminology from Concordia College." Schmitt also said he received a master's degree from UWM and a bachelor of arts degree from Concordia College.

However, an investigation by Lisa Soik of the Franklin Information Group of Milwaukee, a company that specializes in background checks, found several discrepancies in his claims. Schmitt has never been a student at UWM or Marquette and can't be studying for a Ph.D. because Concordia doesn't offer doctorate programs. Schmitt was enrolled at Concordia for two and a half years (He last attended class in 1993), but has yet to earn a bachelor's degree, according to Carolyn Stephens, liberal arts program director. She added that Schmitt is re-entering to complete his degree, with plans to continue on in a master's program. Schmitt has not returned phone calls about his educational background.

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Like his childhood hero, John Wayne, Schmitt often places himself in the role of the pursuer of justice. In the early 1980's he was introduced to undercover work when drug dealers came to Hubertus, and he and his father as private citizens helped police drive them out of town. "That's how my hair became gray," his mother says as she recalls how someone shot a bullet into their living room window.

Schmitt says he is reluctant to answer questions about his past because of the sensitive nature of the undercover work in which he was involved following the incidents in Hubertus. According to David N. Radermacher, a Washington County supervisor, Schmitt still remains under special protection.

When Schmitt was in the sixth grade, the book *Flying Saucers - Serious Business* peaked his interest. "If it was all true, he realized, "it had the potential to be the biggest story of all times."

The subject never lost its appeal. In 1977, when he was still in his early 20's, Schmitt contacted and eventually assisted Dr. J. Allen Hynek, who founded the Chicago-based Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS). In the hierarchy of UFO investigators, Hynek, who died in 1986, is considered a preeminent authority. He was a professor at Northwestern University and became involved with UFOs as a scientific consultant to the U.S. Air Force in Project Bluebook, which investigated UFO phenomena. It was Hynek who coined the phrase, "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," and acted as a technical director to Steven Spielberg on the movie of the same name.

Whenever Schmitt starts talking about Hynek, the intensity in his voice softens. "I'm one of the few people in the field that not only had the best teacher, the best mentor, but also had Hynek as a best friend," says Schmitt.

Under Hynek's tutelage, Schmitt began approaching UFO cases as a skeptic. Prior to Roswell, Schmitt says he solved more than 90 percent of the UFO cases he investigated, finding reasonable explanations for them.

Before Hynek died, he requested that Schmitt be appointed to CUFOS' board as the center's director of special investigators. In this capacity, Schmitt began investigating Roswell.

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When they first began researching the case in 1988, Schmitt and Randle set out to prove that the stories surrounding Roswell were fabricated. "I thought the notion that the government captured alien beings in a craft was absurd," says Schmitt. "I was a total skeptic...I couldn't believe that the government could contain it and keep it secret all these years."

Yet they returned from Roswell as believers, says Mark Rodeghier, CUFOS' scientific director and Hynek's successor. "They came back a few months later and said, 'Guess what? We think it's true,'" he recalls.

Schmitt says he and Randle recorded 500 interviews with retired generals, colonels, captains, intelligence officials, military police and civilians - more than 100 are first hand witnesses, the majority of them military personnel. "That's what is so positive about the book - we are able to name names. Unlike most UFO books, we have more than 50 pages of footnotes with backup statements; we have a brigadier general - Thomas Dubois - who told us that they were ordered to cover it up," says Schmitt.

At first glance, the cumulative evidence in Schmitt's books- the testimony, the documentation - looks convincing. If a brigadier general says that Roswell happened, who is to doubt him? But a closer look begs questions. Since some of the key witnesses aren't identified and most of the documentation refers to personal interviews, readers must rely on the authors' credibility. And that may be a problem. In addition to his false statements about his educational background, Schmitt embellishes reality. He constantly refers to his books as "bestsellers," but that is certainly stretching the facts since the books have never appeared on any bestseller lists. To date, Schmitt and Randle's first book has sold more than 160,000 copies, says John Douglas, Avon senior editor. While it doesn't compare to the bestselling *Communion*, a book about alien abduction by Whitley Strieber that sold more than 2 million copies, *UFO Crash at Roswell* is "a very good showing," says Douglas. *The Truth about the UFO Crash at Roswell* has sold more than 10,000 copies in a hardcover version released in spring 1994 by M. Evans, also a New York publishing house. Though no figures are available for the paperback, which was released in November, Avon has printed 50,000 copies.

The second book has sparked media interest, says Douglas. "While the general media don't pay attention to UFO books and don't think they are worth reviewing, books like these attract the fringe media - television shows that deal in this sort of thing and tabloid newspapers.... *The New York Times* is never going to cover this book, and generally, [Schmitt and Randle] are going to be treated like idiots in the mass media." Locally, the books appear to be all but ignored. By late fall, Harry W. Schwartz Bookshops' six stores have sold a total of six copies of the first book and 10 copies of the second.

Because the existence of UFOs can't be proved, there are few reputable people who can judge these books. But it's not hard to find critics of their work especially among others who study UFOs. Yet caution is imperative since few UFOlogists agree on anything, they harangue each other's research, credentials, credibility and conclusions.

Several of Schmitt and Randle's critics agree that there may have been a government cover-up and they laud the authors' hard work, but many say their books are filled with inaccuracies and exaggerate the number of witnesses they claim to have interviewed. "Most of them [witnesses] are irrelevant to the flying saucer business," sniffs Stanton Friedman, a nuclear physicist and co-author of an earlier book about Roswell.

Appalled by Schmitt and Randle's sloppy research techniques, Friedman adds, "In the wink of a typewriter key, they take information that might have been [and call it] what must have been." Claiming that Schmitt and Randle do not have the training to be investigative journalists, Friedman concludes: "Sloppy research might not bother a science fiction writer [or a commercial artist], but it is not good training for investigative journalism."

Referring to Schmitt's second book, Walter H. Andrus, Jr., international director of MUFON, a group that also investigates UFOs, adds: "They selected the word 'truth' because they had to compensate for errors they made in the first book. Just because they say it's the truth doesn't ultimately make it the truth."

Schmitt maintains that this criticism shouldn't be taken seriously. "You have to understand. [When you're talking about] MUFON people, you are talking about kooks.... Kevin and I are the only two professionals in the field. The rest are all amateurs."

Taking the attacks in stride, Schmitt suggests that such pettiness is an indication that he's reached the top of his field - a time when "everyone starts nipping at your ankles." Secure that he and Randle have written the definitive work on the Roswell incident, he chalks up the quibbling to professional jealousy. "We have the bestselling books. We have the motion picture."

Writer Gillian Sender lives in Milwaukee.

[Scanned 2/24/97 by Glenn Campbell. Original article contains one photo: a picture of Don Schmitt seated, apparently on the podium at a UFO gathering.]

[[Don Schmitt](#)]

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