

A Contactee Canon: Gray Barker's Saucerian Books

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Illustration by Chet Howells from *God of a Planet
Near the Earth and Others* [received by Adelaide
J. Brown]. *The Book of Space Ships and their
Relationship with Earth*. Clarksburg, West Virginia:
Saucerian Publications, [1967]. Author's collection.



In one of his final books, veteran flying saucer author and publisher Gray Barker presented a “remarkable Vision” that summed up his view of the universe, God, the flying saucer mystery, and/or the meaning of his own life: “In this vision an incomprehensible Being of enormous size and power—perhaps larger than our Globe itself—dangled huge cables from the sky. Like some gargantuan giant wielding enormous fishpoles, this Force cast bait consisting of disc-shaped objects not unlike modern UFOs.”¹ Barker’s ironic “vision” is of God as a hoaxer, or perhaps the hoaxer as God, dangling bait with which to capture earthbound explorers of the unknown. This image is an illuminating one, illustrating how Barker saw himself as he wrote, published, and popularized narratives of flying saucers, Men in Black, teleportation, monstrous aliens and mysterious Mothmen. Over a 30-year career, Barker was central in the development of all of these mysteries, and his publishing imprint—first known as Saucerian Publications and later renamed New Age Books—established itself as a home for the most outré saucer and paranormal narratives of the era.

¹ Gray Barker. *A UFO Guide to Fate Magazine*. Clarksburg, West Virginia: Saucerian Books, 1981, p. 79.



Saucerian Books catalog.
Clarksburg, West Virginia:
Saucerian Publications, [1973].
Author's collection.



Gray Barker. "The Monster and the Saucer." *Fate* no. 34, January 1953, pp. 12-17. Author's collection.

Gray Roscoe Barker was born May 2, 1925 in the farm town of Riffle, West Virginia. He later relocated to Clarksburg, where he became a booking agent for several movie theaters in the area. He was a masterful marketer of low-rent features in the 1950s, and by the 1970s was involved in the distribution of B-horror movies and pornography.²

Barker's involvement with flying saucer writing and publishing began on September 12, 1952, when a group of seven people sighted a saucer and a strange creature in the small town of Flatwoods, West Virginia, about 15 miles from Barker's home. Barker immediately traveled to the town to interview the witnesses and investigate the so-called Flatwoods Monster. He wrote a report on the sighting for *Fate*, a magazine focusing on bizarre occurrences published by former science fiction editor and flying saucer pioneer Ray Palmer. Barker quickly became fascinated with the growing flying saucer trend, and began publishing his own fanzine, *The Saucerian*, in 1953. The first issue contained an expanded report of the Flatwoods Monster sighting.

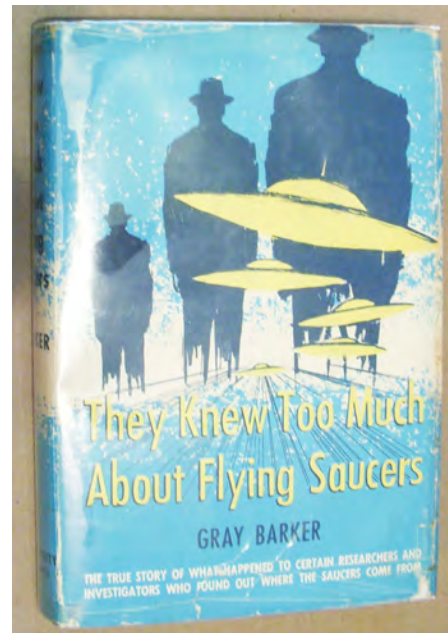
The Saucerian grew quickly, and Barker began to develop friendships with other saucer researchers, including James W. Moseley, publisher of the well-circulated saucer zine *Saucer News*, and Albert K. Bender, founder of the International Flying Saucer Bureau, one of dozens of saucer research organizations that served as clearinghouses of information on strange phenomena in the 1950s. In 1953 Bender claimed to have discovered the secret of the flying saucers, and stated in the IFSB's newsletter that he was preparing to announce his findings to the world. Shortly afterwards—and before publishing this secret—he abruptly dropped out of saucer research and shuttered the IFSB. He told his fellow researchers that he had been frightened away by an encounter with three men dressed in black suits who questioned him about his saucer research and conclusions. Barker became obsessed with Bender's "silencing" by these mysterious "Men in Black," and this incident formed the

nucleus of Barker's first book, *They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers*, which was published in 1956.

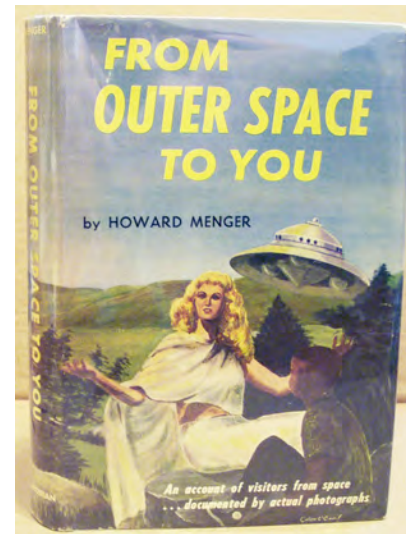
² The biographical material in this introduction draws on correspondence and autobiographical material in the Gray Barker Collection at the Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library and Bob Wilkinson's documentary film *Shades of Gray* (Seminal Films/Allegheny Image Factory, 2010).

Following the release of *They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers*, Barker became increasingly interested in the production of books related to the flying saucer phenomenon. He also became more and more attracted to the fringe beliefs that had been growing ever since Kenneth Arnold's first saucer sighting in 1947, like flying saucer contactees who claimed to have had in-person meetings with benevolent extraterrestrials and trance mediums who channeled psychic messages from space beings. Barker launched his publishing house in earnest in 1959 with the release of *From Outer Space To You*—the memoir of contactee Howard Menger. Saucerian Publications became a platform for those whose stories were too unusual, implausible, or crudely written for mainstream publishers of saucer books like Citadel Press. Published in small editions—generally 500 or 1,000 copies—Saucerian's books were marketed to the small core of true believers in the saucer mystery. Barker also operated as a book dealer, distributing a wide range of works on the paranormal and offering rare and out-of-print materials to his clientele. He had identified a niche market, and operated within for nearly three decades.

The open-minded spirit of the saucer field likely attracted Barker, whose homosexuality placed him in a difficult position in the West Virginia of the 1950s and 1960s. He wrote long, autobiographical letters to Moseley, under the guise of being installments in a work of fiction. In these letters, Barker writes about his business affairs, his personal relationships, and about gay life in Clarksburg. The last is discussed quite openly, if euphemistically—in one letter sexual activity is jokingly referred to as “Communist indoctrination”; in another, “UFO research.”³ Barker was arrested in 1962 and convicted of the similarly euphemistic charge of “contributing to the delinquency of a minor.” Barker was placed on probation and ordered to meet regularly with a court-appointed

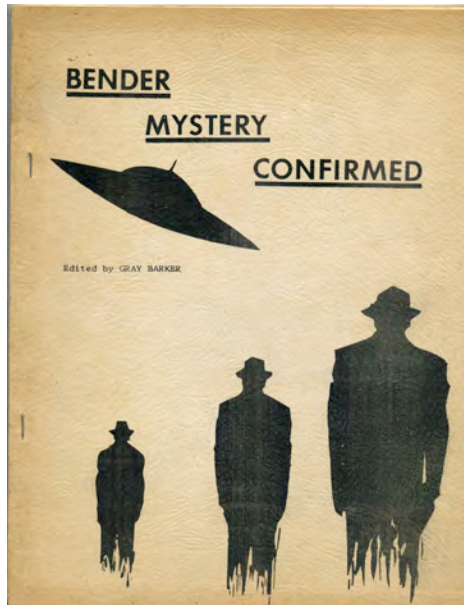


Gray Barker. *They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers*. New York: University Books, 1956. Author's collection.



Howard Menger. *From Outer Space To You*. Clarksburg, W.V.: Saucerian Books, 1959. Author's collection.

³ Gray Barker. “Mulberry Place” and “The Hearing” [Letters to James W. Moseley], undated [ca. 1963]. Gray Barker Collection, Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library.



Gray Barker, ed. *Bender Mystery Confirmed*.
Clarksburg, W.V.: Saucerian Books, 1962.
Author's collection.

psychiatrist.⁴ Around the same time, Barker declared bankruptcy—most likely due to difficulties in managing his theater, but perhaps also because of the amounts of money he poured into hardcover saucer publications in 1959-1961. But his bankruptcy didn't stop his publishing venture. In a letter to New Age author Dana Howard, he described the bankruptcy procedure as a means by which he would be able to stay in business.⁵

Following the bankruptcy, however, Barker's publishing formats shifted. He sold *The Saucerian Bulletin* to James Moseley, who incorporated it into his *Saucer News*, and began to focus on book publishing exclusively. He had discovered that his niche market cared far more for the content of a book than its appearance. The earliest Saucerian publications were relatively respectable-looking affairs, in

cloth bindings with painted dust jackets. These books display a certain striving for mainstream acceptance. But in 1962, Barker experimented with a new format for a compilation of letters he received from readers of Albert Bender's book *Flying Saucers and the Three Men*. The resulting compilation, entitled *Bender Mystery Confirmed*, was vastly different in format to the hardcover books Saucerian had issued to date. The contents of this book were typed on Barker's typewriter, printed on the small office duplicator he used to print flyers for his theater, and staple-bound in cardstock covers. Barker's margins for this kind of cheaply produced volume were slimmer than for the hardcover books he had launched his imprint with, and could be produced in editions just large enough to sell through. With very few exceptions, Saucerian's publications from the 1960s onwards were produced as inexpensively as possible. By the early 1980s he was photocopying and comb-binding most of his books. (Fig. 1)

Barker sought out strange and outlandish narratives. A 1963 solicitation letter for Laura Mundo's *Flying Saucers and the Father's Plan* contains a statement of purpose: "...we have received many manuscripts from authors who have interesting experiences and valuable information to impart. Heretofore these authors would not have been published, for their works were of such specialized UFO nature that no professional hard cover publisher would risk either the financial venture or popular ridicule and pressure

⁴ Documentary evidence of this was not seen, but it is attested to by David Houchin, curator of the Gray Barker Collection at the Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library (communication with author, August 21, 2014).

⁵ Gray Barker. Letter to Dana Howard, September 13, 1963. Gray Barker Collection, Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library.

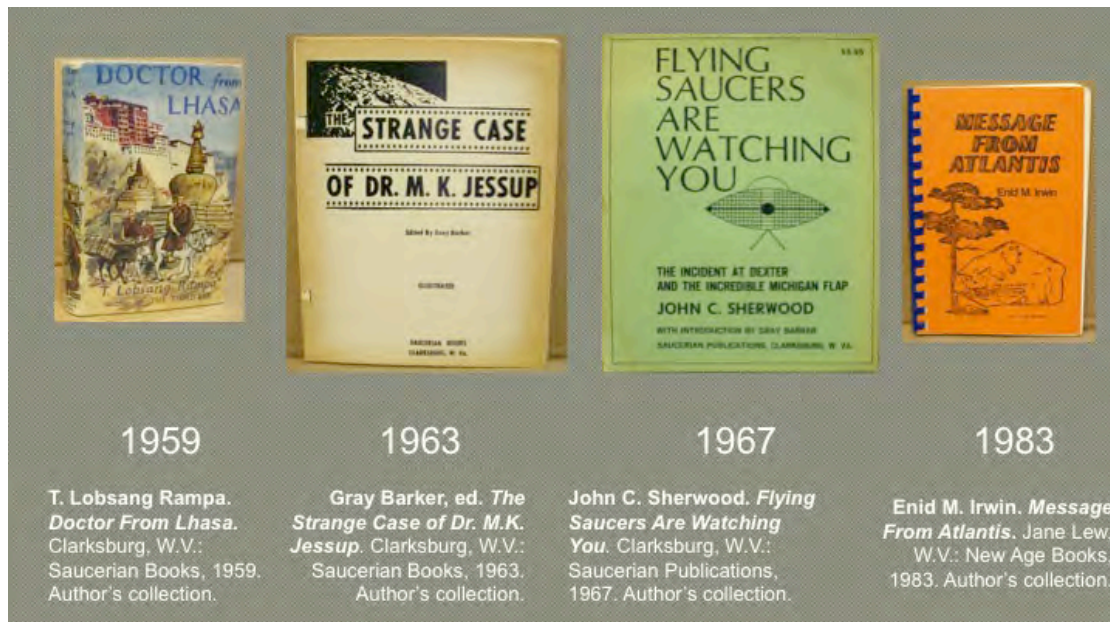


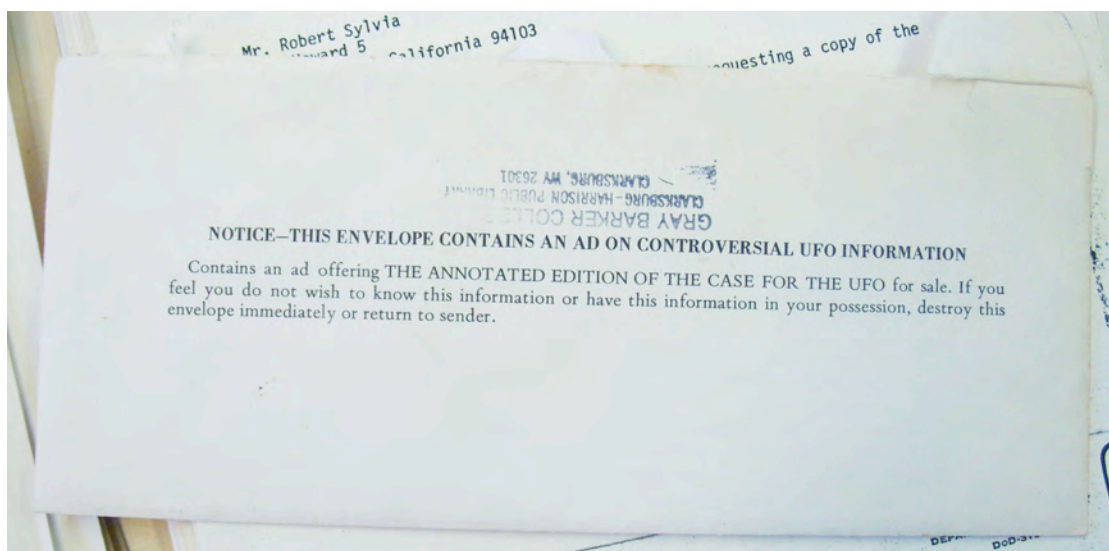
Fig. 1. The development of Saucerian’s printing and binding styles.

involved.”⁶ Barker was willing to take a chance on authors who were unlikely to find a mainstream publisher for their work, like John C. Sherwood, who was 17 years old when Barker published his account of Michigan saucer sightings under the title *Flying Saucers Are Watching You*. Barker occasionally agreed to publish a manuscript sight unseen, if he knew it contained material related to saucers and space men. As a result, many of Saucerian’s books represent the idiosyncratic beliefs of fringe figures in the world of UFOs, often published with minimal editing. In one letter to Sherwood, Barker referred to these as his “nut books,” noting that these tended to sell better than “objective type” books like Sherwood’s own.⁷

In addition to publishing strange materials, Barker was a master of conspiratorial hype-building. No publication illustrates this so well as the Saucerian edition of Morris K. Jessup’s book *The Case for the UFO*. This annotated book, known as the “Varo Edition,” has become a complicated ufological legend, and it is difficult at this point to know how much truth the accepted story contains. Jessup committed suicide in 1959, and conspiratorial rumors about his death soon began circulating in ufological circles. A major part of the mystery concerned an annotated edition of one of Jessup’s books printed in two-color mimeograph for the Office of Naval Research by the Varo Manufacturing Company. The annotations concerned in part an experiment in the Philadelphia Naval Yard in 1943, during which a naval vessel was allegedly rendered invisible and teleported. Barker’s 1963 book *The Strange Case of Dr. M.K. Jessup*

⁶ Gray Barker. “Flying Saucers and the Father’s Plan...” [solicitation letter]. Clarksburg, West Virginia: Saucerian Publications, ca. Summer 1963, p. 1. Gray Barker Collection, Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library.

⁷ Gray Barker. Letter to John C. Sherwood, February 25, 1967. Gray Barker Collection, Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library.



[Gray Barker]. Publisher's solicitation for *The Case for the UFO*. Clarksburg, W.V.: Saucerian Press, 1973. Courtesy of the Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library.

sketched the outlines of a conspiracy theory that grew when other writers, like Brad Steiger, began to explore it. By the 1970s, the Philadelphia Experiment was developing into a major subcategory of paranormal research.

After years of searching, Barker obtained a copy of the Varo edition in 1972, and he printed a facsimile edition the following year. Barker's solicitation campaign for the Varo edition played up the conspiracy angle. The initial flyer came in a sealed envelope containing a warning: "NOTICE—THIS ENVELOPE CONTAINS AN AD ON CONTROVERSIAL UFO INFORMATION... If you feel you do not wish to know this information or have this information in your possession, destroy this envelope immediately or return to sender."⁸ Those who ignored the warning and opened the envelope anyway found a message marking them as one of the fearless UFO elite: "...the fact that you opened this envelope tells me something about your personal character.... YOU ARE SERIOUSLY INTERESTED IN THE UFO MYSTERY, and you are NOT paranoid or crazy! ... AND YOU ARE NOT AFRAID OF THE IMPLICATIONS THAT THE 'FLYING SAUCER' MYSTERY might bring."⁹ These "select few" were offered the book at the discounted price of \$12.50 per copy, down from the retail price of \$25. Many ufologists consider the Philadelphia Experiment a hoax,¹⁰ but a plethora of

⁸ Gray Barker. [Solicitation letter for *The Case for the UFO*.] Clarksburg, West Virginia: Saucerian Press, Inc., [ca. 1973], outer envelope. Gray Barker Collection, Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁰ See Jerome Clark, "Allende Letters" and "Hoaxes Through 1959." In *The UFO Encyclopedia, vol. 2: The Emergence of a Phenomenon: UFOs From the Beginning Through 1959*. Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1992, pp. 39-42 & 197-198. Carlos Allende identified himself as the author of the commentary, and considered himself the co-author of the Varo edition. See Robert A. Goerman. "Alias Carlos Allende." *Fate*, Oct. 1980. Online: *Carlos Allende and his Philadelphia Experiment*, [undated]. Accessed Oct. 14, 2014. <<http://windmill-slayer.tripod.com/aliascarlosallende/index.html>>. Goerman implies that the copy Allende sent to his parents was the Varo original, but the post-1973 date and the reference to Saucerian's cover price implies that it may in fact have been Barker's reissue.

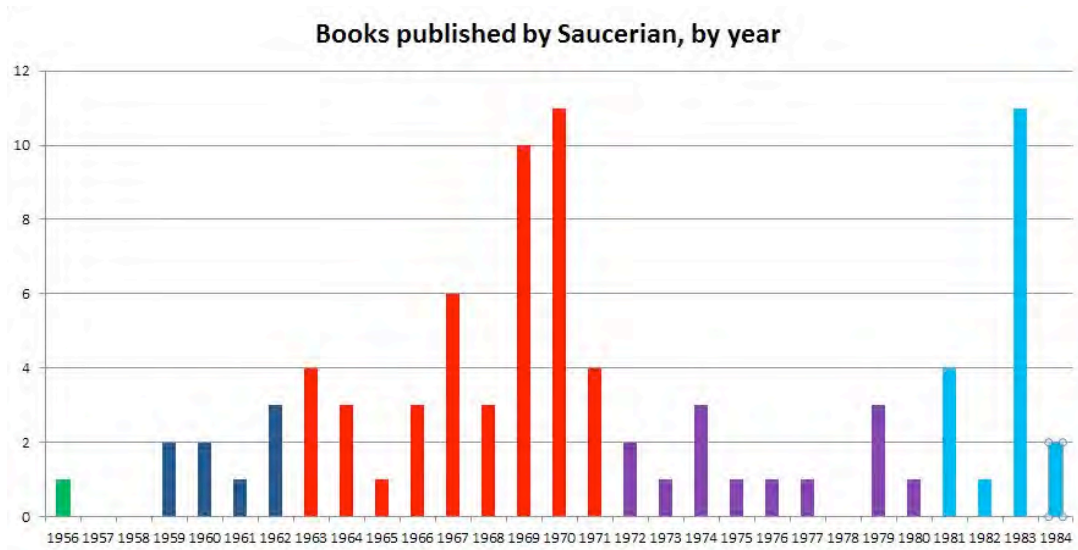


Fig. 1. Books published by Saucerian, by year. Items dated by year of first publication by Saucerian Publications/New Age Books. Later printings, periodicals, ephemera, audiocassettes, and print-on-demand publications not included.

websites and books still assert its historicity. Barker’s conspiratorial marketing campaign helped to turn the Philadelphia Experiment into the lasting mystery it has become.

Over 25 years, Barker issued 85 monographs under the Saucerian and New Age imprints. (Fig. 2, Appendix) We can break his publishing career down into five main phases: From 1952-1958, when he published periodicals almost exclusively; from 1959-1962, the “hardcover” phase of the Saucerian Books imprint, ending with his bankruptcy; 1963-1971, the “DIY” phase, when Barker was most active; 1972-1980, when Barker’s output of original monographs slowed; and 1981-1984, when he moved from Clarksburg to Jane Lew, WV and renamed the press New Age Books. Of the monographs published by Barker, many were either compilations of previously published material or outright reprints of books first issued by other publishers. Just under half of Saucerian’s titles were original monographs. (Fig. 3)

The subjects covered by Barker’s press were eclectic, but the large majority of the books he issued were dedicated to either flying saucer contactees or psychic channeling. Together, these two categories account for nearly half of the imprint’s output. Other topics include flying saucer sighting reports—more in the vein of “serious” ufology—books on Hollow Earth theory, Men In Black, New Age nutrition, the Philadelphia Experiment, and pseudo-scientific literature on free energy and saucer propulsion. (Fig. 4)

Who was reading these books? In 1977, researchers David Stupple and Abdollah Dashti conducted a survey of Saucerian’s customer base.¹¹ At their request, Barker sent a survey requesting information about the interests and beliefs of the 4,400 individuals on his mailing list. From the 399 responses, Stupple and Dashti found that very few of the

¹¹ David Stupple and Abdollah Dashti. “Flying Saucers and Multiple Realities: A Case Study in Phenomenological Theory.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 11:2 (Fall 1977), p. 479-493.

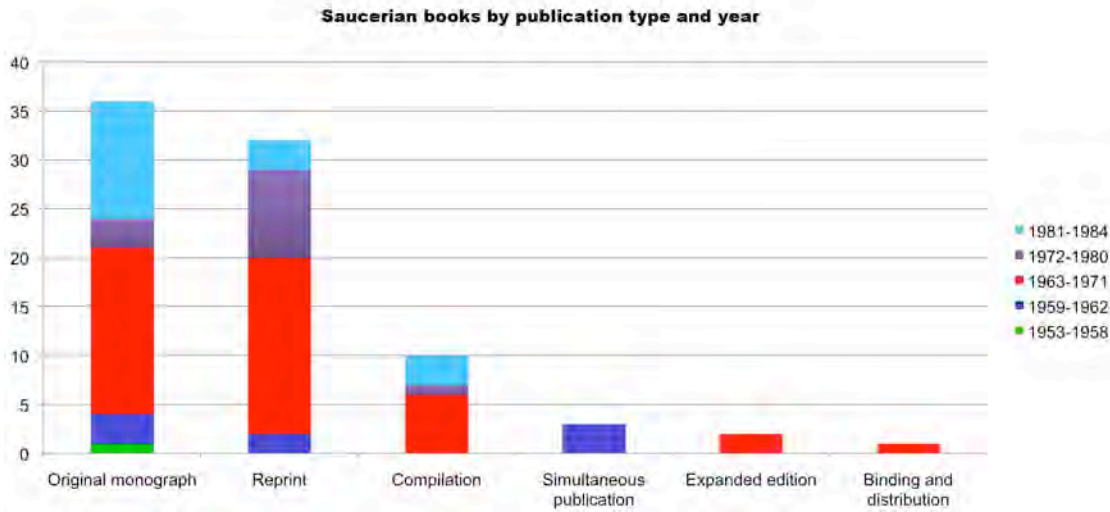


Fig. 2. Books published by Saucerian, by publication type and date of publication. Items dated by year of first publication by Saucerian Publications/New Age Books. Later printings, periodicals, ephemera, audiocassettes, and print-on-demand publications not included.

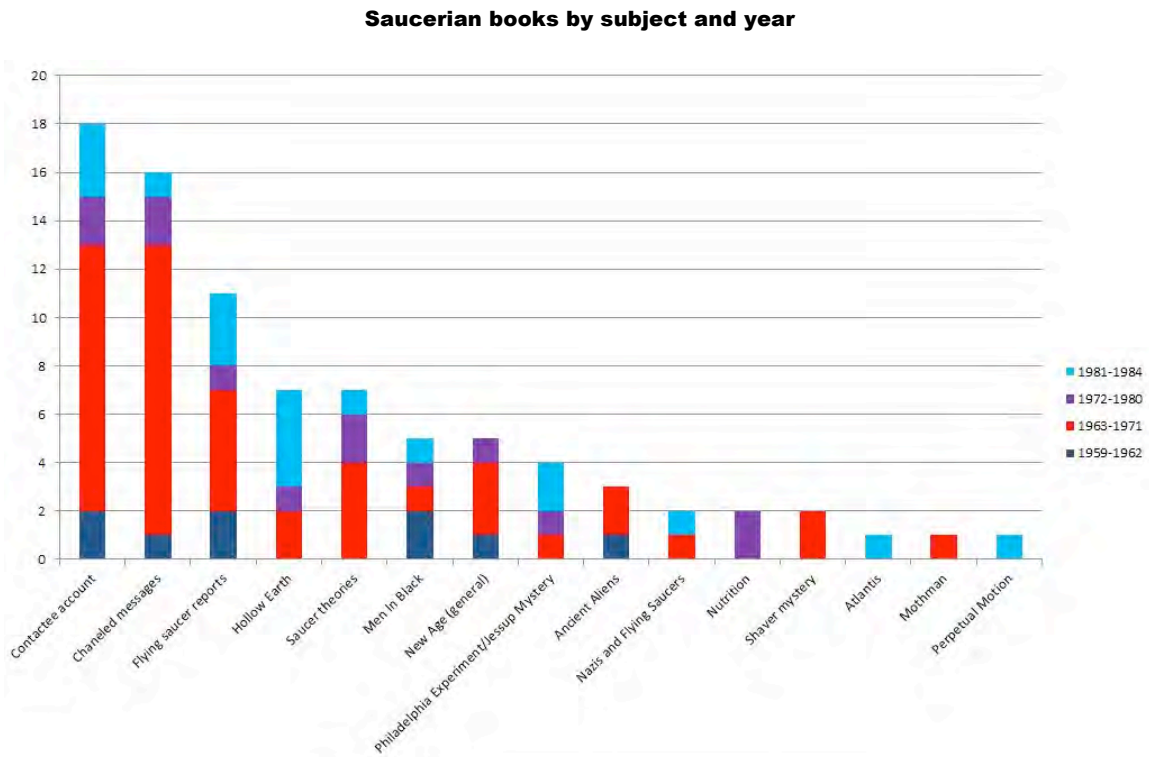


Fig. 3. Books published by Saucerian, by primary subject and date of publication. Items dated by year of first publication by Saucerian Publications/New Age Books. Later printings, periodicals, ephemera, audiocassettes, and print-on-demand publications not included.

respondents were members of either contactee religions or scientific UFO study organizations. Fewer than half reported having had psychic experiences or UFO sightings of their own, but an overwhelming majority expressed a primary interest in contactee stories. Stupple and Dashti concluded that Saucerian's readers related to the saucer mystery independently, without either scientific or spiritual organizations as intermediaries: "They are a *mass*, bound not together, but to a common source of information... This conclusion is consistent with our field work observation that believers in flying saucer contactees are generally ordinary people with ordinary lives who have *some* extraordinary beliefs."¹²

And what did Barker himself believe? According to Moseley, his initial enthusiasm for saucers may have been the result of belief in physical discs in the sky. And he seems to have been legitimately perplexed by Bender's sudden decision to drop out after his "three men" encounter—unless, that is, the affair was a hoax concocted by Barker himself, as some have theorized.¹³ But by the early 1960s, Moseley believes his belief had evaporated, likely as a result of Bender's outrageous men-in-black story. Moseley writes: "He thought of UFOs and ufology as he did motion pictures—make-believe, wonderment, entertainment, fantasy, fun and games."¹⁴ A more cynical expression of the same idea is spelled out by the title of a poem Barker sent to Moseley: "UFO is a Bucket of Shit."¹⁵

Barker stayed in the UFO business, likely because it was fun. But he certainly thought of himself, not as a scientist or researcher or prophet, but as an entertainer. And in this role, he was responsible for more than a few hoaxes, including sending a forged letter on stolen government stationery to prominent contactee George Adamski, and making a number of fake saucer movies to sell in super-8 format in the pages of *Saucer News*.

Barker's desire was not to investigate or prove the existence of strange physical phenomena, but to capture something of the personalities of those who believed in them. In his introduction to *Gray Barker at Giant Rock*, Moseley writes: "[Gray's] works are generally beloved not just for the hard information they contain, but for the realness of the people involved with UFO sightings and events."¹⁶ These personalities come through strongly in the books Barker published: the volatile psychic Ted Owens, who took credit for guiding hurricanes to punish America for not listening to the messages he brought from space intelligences; John W. Dean, who painstakingly collated and compared the

¹² Stupple and Dashti 491-492.

¹³ Specifically, Lonzo Dove, who wrote an expose of Barker's alleged involvement for *Saucer News*. See Jerome Clark. "Barker, Gray Roscoe." *The UFO Encyclopedia*, vol. 2. p. 72.

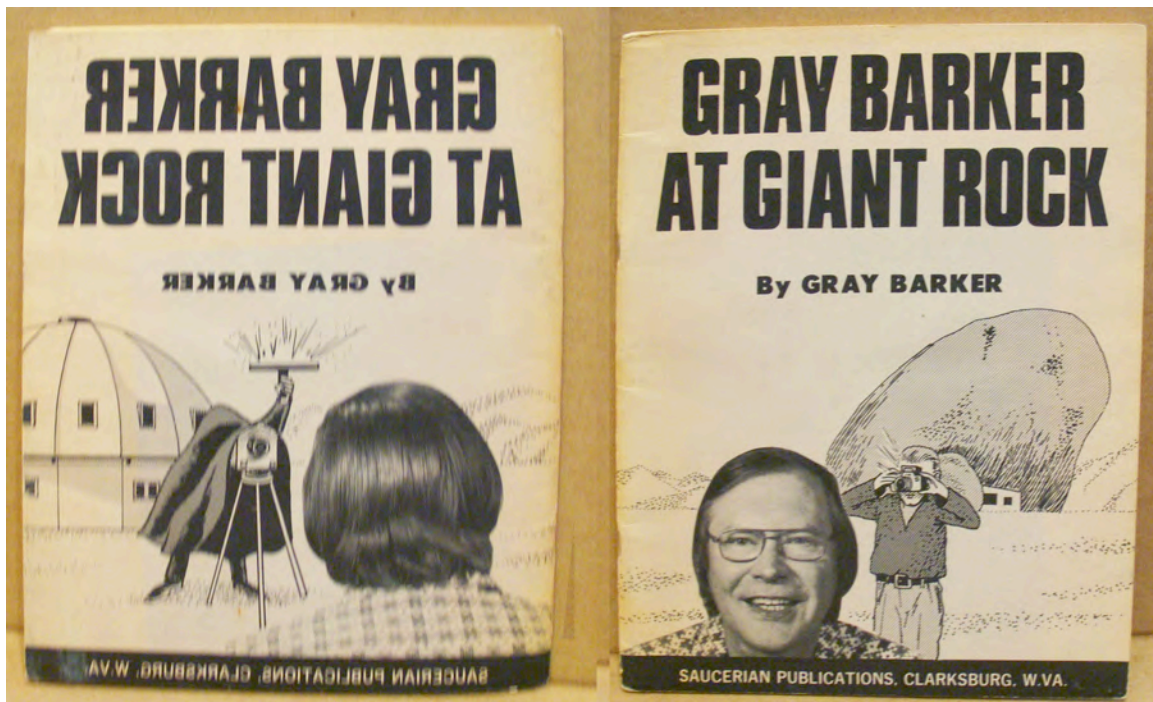
¹⁴ James W. Moseley, *Shockingly Close to the Truth! Confessions of a Grave-Robbing Ufologist*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002, p. 121.

¹⁵ [Gray Barker.] "UFO is a Bucket of Shit." Photocopy of typescript, 1 leaf, undated. Gray Barker Collection, Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library.

¹⁶ James W. Moseley. Introduction to Gray Barker, *Gray Barker at Giant Rock*. Clarksburg, West Virginia: Saucerian Publications, 1976, p. 2.

experiences of folksy, rural contactees; Truman Bethurum, who writes of his childhood in the last days of the American frontier before he met the beautiful spacewoman Aura Rhanes; and Howard and Connie Menger, whose shared contactee story includes reincarnation, a torrid affair, and love songs written on Saturn. As both author and publisher, Barker hoped to capture, not sightings or theories or truth, but *people*, the strange and unique figures that populated the saucer world of the mid-20th century.

Barker played a central role in the ufological world of the 1950s-1970s, and was a prime mover in lasting Fortean mysteries like the Men in Black, the Mothman, and the Philadelphia Experiment. And yet he has become scarcely more than a footnote in the history of UFO research. For sociological studies of the contactee movement, he is a mere publisher, not a contactee himself, and thus only of passing interest. For “serious” researchers, he is a hoax artist and a publicity hound whose role in history is to be downplayed—particularly in matters like the Philadelphia Experiment and the Men in Black, where his involvement at early stages of the narrative could prove an embarrassing weak point in a carefully assembled conspiracy theory. But Barker is far more than this: a publisher and a hoaxer, to be sure, but both of these are part of his grander role in the cultural narrative: that of myth-maker.



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Appendix: List of Saucerian monographs.

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