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## Pseudoscience

During the last few years elements of the public and particularly of university students have turned increasingly to mysticism and to what I would call pseudoscience. The top sellers at campus bookstores have included such books as *Chariots of the Gods?*, *Gods from Outer Space*, *Limbo of the Lost*, *The Secret Life of Plants*, and others like them.

The recent pseudoscience books are in part a form of science fiction, but they have characteristics that make them different. The readers of earlier works generally understood that they were scanning fictional material, but the new books seek to create the impression of scholarship and verity. *Chariot of the Gods?* does this in several ways. It has a bibliography. In an introduction it acknowledges help from personnel of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, including Werner von Braun. The book also contains some respectable scientific material. But the author moves quickly and without warning from fairly solid facts to unsubstantiated speculations.

Another tendency of the pseudoscience books is to evangelize in behalf of fantasies and in the process to denigrate science. For example, in the best-selling *The Secret Life of Plants*, the authors state "what makes plants live, or why, does not appear to be the purview of science." They describe botany as being "reduced to a dull taxonomy."

This is, of course, untrue. One of the great scientific frontiers today is research in plant biology.

The scientists of the so-called establishment are berated because they did not accept the suggestion that plants were capable of emotions which "might originate in a supramaterial world of cosmic beings which, as fairies, elves, gnomes, sylphs, and a host of other creatures, were a matter of direct vision and experience to clairvoyants among the Celts and other sensitives."

In *Limbo of the Lost* the author devotes most of the book to an enumeration of disappearances of ships and planes in the general area of the Bermuda Triangle. In a concluding statement, the author gives his explanation for the information he has produced. He ties the disappearances to unidentified flying objects and concludes that a large ocean vessel and commercial airlines were "actually being taken away from our planet for a variety of reasons."

Much of the appeal of the new pseudoscience seems to relate to a deep-seated quirk of human nature—a predisposition to believe in the supernatural. Part of the appeal of these books is that they are entertaining, interesting, and even exciting. The danger from them is that uncritical and indiscriminating minds may accept imaginative speculation as fact. An optimist might take the view that the current craze for this new form of science fiction will go away, just as streaking departed. But already these types of books have been in demand for several years.

The popularity of pseudoscience books at universities should be a source of concern to academic people, particularly scientists. The new trend comes at a time when many universities have abandoned requirements that students be exposed to as little as one science course. It is not pleasant to contemplate a situation in which our future leaders are being steeped in fantasy and are exposed to a put-down of science without effective response. The university community has a special obligation which it has not been meeting very well. It should move toward providing antidotes to the new intellectual poisons. In meeting these challenges to rationality, we should all remember that although humanity is eager to accept mysticism, it is also capable of yearning for truth.—PHILIP H. ABELSON