

Introduction to "THE CAMPFIRE COLLECTION:
THRILLING, CHILLING TALES OF ALIEN ENCOUNTERS"
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I have never been abducted. There are no ominous gaps of "lost time" in my memory. Beyond the minor indignities of an annual physical, no probes have ever been jammed into my nostrils or other orifices. I bear no mysterious scars. The Men in Black have never knocked upon my front door.

And yet, I have seen a UFO. I'm sure of it. I have witnesses who will back me up.

When I was growing up in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, northern New England was reputed to be a hotbed of extraterrestrial activity. Few of us sensible Yankees gave much thought to this matter. Residents of a city whose main industry was building nuclear submarines, we were more concerned about being invaded by the Soviets than by any Martians.

One warm night in the early Eighties, my friends Tom, Ken and I were riding along the beach road in my parents' big, red Plymouth Satellite, staving off boredom with conversation and beer. We stopped at Odiorne Point State Park, just over the town border in Rye, a favorite late-night hang-out. We climbed a small hill that overlooked the parking lot and some service buildings. We sat and talked about the things that interest college students during their summer breaks.

At some point, Tom grabbed my arm and whispered, "What's that?"

"What?" I said.

"That light!"

I looked. There was a big, bright, white light just above the roof of the bath house. Presumably it had been placed there so no one would trip on the stairs in the dark.

I said, "That's the light over the bath house. What's your problem?"

And then the light suddenly dimmed to half its intensity -- and moved.

We certainly knew that mysterious light at Odiorne Point was Not Right. It moved in spooky silence, without even the whisper of any motor. It dipped and weaved at angles not likely for any kind of aircraft with which I am familiar. It was not a weather balloon. It was not swamp gas.

The light hovered over the bath house for a few minutes, then zigged and zagged through the air until it was out over the dark water, where it was joined by two other glowing, silent objects. Ken, Tom and I watched open-mouthed as these lights flew out to sea and then disappeared from view. We ran for the car.

From a restaurant pay phone, Ken called Pease Air Force Base in nearby Newington and asked if they had received any reports of strange lights in the sky. They claimed not to know what the hell we were talking about. (Although of course they would say that, wouldn't they?)

I have no explanation for what we saw that night. That's why I am confident in saying that it was an Unidentified Flying Object. It was definitely something that flew and that could not be recognized.

In each of the stories in this collection, there comes a moment when the characters realize that Something Is Not Right. A missile from Mars lands in a Texas pasture in Howard Waldrop's "The Night of the Cooters." In Ray Nelson's "Eight O'Clock in the Morning," a man awakens from hypnosis suddenly able to see the hideous visages of Earth's alien conquerors.

It's good to be reminded occasionally that not everything can be explained, that it is still possible to witness a genuine mystery. That's part of why I've always loved science fiction, from the time I first read a "Classics Illustrated" comics version of "The War of the Worlds" by H.G. Wells. As my tastes matured, science fiction brought to me a galaxy of tantalizing possibilities, not merely about the existence of UFOs, but about such topics as time travel, immortality, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and human space travel. Far more than just an entertainment for adolescents, it is a vital body of literature that keeps me captivated and astonished after nearly two decades as a professional reviewer.

Many of the genre's most influential and best-loved writers, from Stephen King to Philip K. Dick, from Kristine Kathryn Rusch to James Tiptree, Jr., are represented in this volume. Take this book with you to a quiet, dark place like Odiorne Point, gather your friends and read the words of men and women who can imagine more than what we can see right in front of us. Let the tales open your mind to the possibility that, for good or ill, we're not alone in the universe.

And keep watching the skies.