

Book Review: *The Mothman Prophecies*, by John Keel; *Mothman and Other Curious Encounters*, by Loren Coleman; *Mothman: The Facts Behind the Legend*, by Donnie Sergent and Jeff Wamsley.

Review by John K. Chidester, originally composed for the Mount Vernon News on March 12, 2002

If you blinked, you probably missed it. I'm referring to "The Mothman Prophecies," the paranormal psycho-thriller movie starring Richard Gere, among others. It was here and gone about as quickly as the elusive monster of its title. The movie poster said it was "based on true events," and the trailer said it was based on the novel of the same title by John Keel. Hmm, novel? I remembered reading that book some 25 years ago, and it was presented as straight, factual reportage (however much it may have strained credulity). "Is that book still around," I wondered, "and are there any others like it?" Ah, thereby hangs a tale.

Not surprisingly, John Keel's book, "The Mothman Prophecies," was reissued in paperback shortly before the movie was released. Its cover art precisely replicates some of the movie's promotional graphics. But it wasn't exactly the same book I'd read so long ago. Its copyright date was 1991 (the original was published in 1975), and it had an afterword that was clearly written in 2001. More interesting still, the verso of the title page bore the inscription, "This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously." Oh yeah? Does John Keel know this?

And what about the other authors, Loren Coleman, Donnie Sergent and Jeff Wamsley, who wrote their own books about the Mothman (published just in time for the movie!) and treated it all as fact? They even cite John Keel as a source. Fortunately for all you lovers of "cult classic" oddities, you can sort all of this out for yourselves. Your local public library (ever attentive to the needs and interests of all, including us oddballs) has the books available now and will stock the movie in VHS and/or DVD when it comes out. You have my word on it.

Mean time, here is my personal take on all of these things.

John Keel's book, "The Mothman Prophecies," was published in 1975, revised in 1991 and again in 2001. The original became a popular item among fans of flying

saucer lore, monster sightings, “men in black” (MIBs--and, no, not the ones portrayed by Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones in the movie of that title) and similar phenomena. Its central story concerns a whole spate of strange happenings that took place in and around Point Pleasant, West Virginia, in 1966 and 1967. It began with four young people’s encounter with a huge (6 to 8 feet tall, depending on who’s talking) creature with the body of a man, the wings of a bat and large glowing red eyes. Sightings of the creature multiplied and dovetailed with other creepy things, including UFO sightings, animal disappearances and mutilations, and oddball encounters with strange men who may or may not have been space aliens. The story climaxes with the disastrous collapse of the Silver Bridge, a structure that spanned the Ohio River, connecting Gallipolis (Ohio) with Point Pleasant.

What makes Keel’s book such a classic of the genre is that he spent 13 months visiting the area and interviewing the people before the collapse of the bridge, so he was an actual part of the story. And he doesn’t just confine himself to that story. The book is a nicely interwoven collection of strange stories (all of the weird creature-UFO-MIB type) covering more than a century and coming from all over the world. There’s no indication whatever that John Keel regards any of this as fiction, and many of the people and incidents involved are related in newspaper reports of the time. Which brings us to the other authors.

Loren Coleman’s book, “Mothman and Other Curious Encounters,” is largely a paean to John Keel and the whole subject of Fortean phenomena (of which all of these things are examples). It has extra material not found in Keel and makes for an absorbing read for those who are into this sort of thing.

But for my money, the neatest book of the group is Donnie Sargent and Jeff Wamsley’s “Mothman: The Facts Behind the Legend.” These two men are not professional writers or publishers by any stretch, yet they started their own publishing house, Mothman Lives Publishing, to create and market this book. They also own and operate the Criminal Records music shop in Point Pleasant, and they’ve had more tourists stop and ask them about Mothman than you could aim glowing red eyes at. What makes this book so special, besides the elemental, untutored crudeness of its composition (with phrases like, “a series of events like nothing else on the face of the

earth” and “take a journey back to that horror-filled night”) is that it reproduces (and I really mean “reproduces”) a mountain of the original source material.

Donnie Sergent interviewed Linda Scarberry, one of the four teenagers who first saw Mothman, and presents a verbatim transcript of the interview. To that he adds actual scanned copies of handwritten reports by those first eyewitnesses (mercifully accompanied by printed transcriptions) and page after page of photocopied newspaper clippings from Linda Scarberry’s personal collection. These were taken mostly from the Athens (Ohio) Messenger, the Point Pleasant Register and the Gallipolis Daily Tribune. The blurb on the book’s front cover says “Features eyewitness accounts, news clippings and previously unpublished material.” Yup, that’s what it is all right, and there’s a reason why some material stays unpublished. Some of it is just unbearably tedious.

But Sergent and Wamsley get my vote for the best intentions of the lot, and their book does bring the whole Mothman episode to life.

Odd things are perennially popular, and they don’t come any odder than the Mothman. If you can’t believe Richard Gere, you can at least give John Keel, Loren Coleman, Donnie Sergent and Jeff Wamsley a try. Then get back to reality.