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# ALTERNATIVE 3

ALTERNATIVE 3 (A3) WAS A 1978 TV DRAMA FEATURING A SCIENCE DOCUMENTARY TEAM'S INVESTIGATION OF A CONSPIRACY BETWEEN THE SUPERPOWERS TO PLANT COLONIES ON THE OTHER PLANETS. MANY VIEWERS TOOK IT FOR A FACTUAL DOCUMENTARY. A LATER NOVEL BY LESLIE WATKINS BASED ON THE SCREENPLAY, EXTENDED THE CONFUSION AND ENSHRINED A3 AS A MAJOR STRAND OF MODERN CONSPIRACY THEORY. IN FT64 (1992) WE PUBLISHED WHAT WE KNEW OF A3'S GENESIS; NOW **NICK AUSTIN**, WHO COMMISSIONED THE A3 BOOK, REVEALS HIS PART IN A CRANK CLASSIC THAT HAS FOOLED THOUSANDS.

Of course, Alternative 3 (A3) - the TV documentary and the book - was a joke, a hoax, a spoof, a put-on, whatever. No one in their right mind could have seen it as anything else, whether at the time of the original television transmission on 20 June 1977 or when the paperback book was published nine months later, in March 1978.

The TV company concerned - Anglia TV - had, after all, told the media in advance that this edition of Science Report had originally been intended to go out on 1 April. (Certainly the preview note that I had seen in the Sunday Times of the weekend before had made this point.) And the internal evidence of the programme itself - after the first few minutes - was pretty conclusive.

I was working at the time as editorial director of Sphere Books, the paperback imprint of the Thomson Organisation book-publishing operation that was subsequently sold on to Penguin Books. (In a later deal, Sphere was sold separately by Penguin to none other than Robert Maxwell: get your teeth into that, conspiracy theorists.) Before Sphere, I'd worked at Panther Books, an imprint of Granada Publishing which had a market-leading science fiction list and a nicely commercial non-fiction line in what we called, perhaps unkindly, 'crank cosmology': Ancient Mayans and Aztecs buzzing around in flying saucers, UFOs launched from huge subterranean bases beneath the polar ice caps - that kind of thing. While Sphere already had a respectable science fiction list at the time I joined, I was concerned to develop for the company a line of crank cosmology titles similar to Panther's. Then as now, they were useful and reliable money-spinners for publishers too often plagued by expensive marketplace uncertainties.

So when Murray Pollinger - the respected veteran literary agent - phoned me on the morning of 21 June 1977 to enquire whether I'd seen Alternative 3 the previous evening and, if so, whether I'd be interested in commissioning a book version, I jumped at the chance. On the face of it, this might have seemed a bit odd. After all, it was clear that the TV programme was going to be a one-off and that the tabloid furore it had predictably generated was going to be a three-day wonder at best. Even though the book would not have to be written entirely from scratch - there was already a TV

## Article Info

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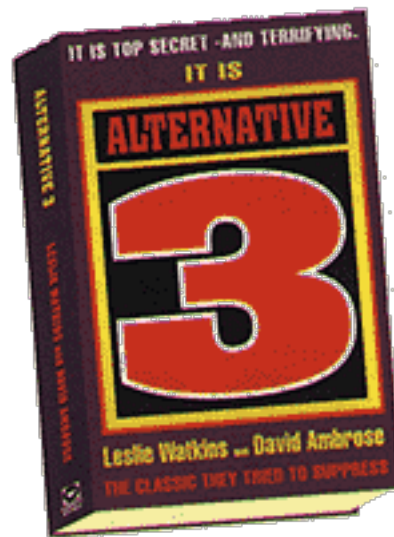
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## THIS ISSUE



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The terrible Griffin



script to provide a basic framework, obviously - it would have to be fleshed out considerably and written fast. To publish it properly would mean a nine-month gestation period between TV transmission and book publication.



On the face of it, I was looking at a TV tie-in to a one-off programme that had been transmitted nine months before publication. Hardly the stuff of cutting-edge pulp-biz commercial savvy, you'd think. And, in the normal run of things, you'd be right. But there was something definitely different about A3 as a book proposition: I was convinced that the sheer outrageousness of its concept gave it 'legs' that would ensure a viable and financially rewarding life for it in its own right. Fortunately, I was able to get my Sphere sales and marketing colleagues to agree and I duly entered into negotiations with Pollinger.

Mr. Pollinger - whose saturnine good looks and classy accent could have easily got him a part as a senior MI5 or MI6 agent in any of the classic espionage movies, or TV series - had lined up an experienced British journalist, Leslie Watkins, to do the novelisation of A3. Mr Watkins was then working on the Daily Mail and was already the author of several well-received thrillers. Once the deal had been struck, he set to work with consummate professionalism and delivered the text of the book version to me comfortably by the due date of early autumn 1977. As one might expect, his typescript needed the barest minimum of editorial work and went almost straight off to the typesetter.

The cover blurb and inside first-page copy was a joy to write: "Life on Earth is doomed... horrifying full story behind the explosive TV documentary... most astounding and frightening conspiracy ever... full awesome horror... the grim bite of terrible truth - a truth which is sure to be denied," etc. I realised at the time that the original back-cover categorisation - "World Affairs/Speculation" - was a bit cheeky but what the hell, I thought, why not get into the goddamned spirit of this thing?

At this point I'd better admit that my motives in taking on the book version of A3 were mixed. They weren't just commercial; ever since I'd first read the late, great Terry Southern's *The Magic Christian* in the mid-1960s I'd wanted a chance - just one chance - to take part in a Guy Grand-style prank. Those of you who've had the pleasure of reading *The Magic Christian* - a short novel with a natural built-in appeal to most Fortean Times readers, I'd imagine - will recall that 'Grand' Guy Grand is an outwardly gentle billionaire who loves to spend huge sums of money on 'making it hot for people' by staging a succession of truly outrageous large-scale practical jokes.

A3 seemed to me to offer the best chance I'd ever be likely to get to participate in a hoax of truly Guy Grand proportions - the best thing of its kind since Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast [see FT120]. How could I resist? I couldn't, of course.



March 1978 came and with it publication of the Sphere edition of *Alternative 3* at a cover price of just 95p - pretty standard in those days for a regular rack-size paperback, 240 pages long and with no illustrations. The most recent edition (1994) was published by Warner Books, the main paperback imprint of Little, Brown (UK), the company that acquired Sphere and a number of other Robert Maxwell publishing properties in the chaotic wake of Maxwell's disappearance. At the time of A3's original publication, no particularly special effort was made to promote it. Then, as now, publishers' big marketing budgets were reserved for major lead

titles and that spring Sphere had more than its fair share of bestsellers to look after - Close Encounters of the Third Kind (coincidentally - or was it? - the movie opened in the UK that same month) among them.

I had been looking forward with keen anticipation to a flood of letters from the green-and-purple-ink brigade in the weeks following publication of A3 and was disappointed and puzzled when, apparently, this failed to materialise.

I say 'apparently' because I learned, a few weeks later, that there had indeed been a deluge of letters and phone calls from 'concerned members of the public' but my zealously protective secretary - whose first job in publishing this was, God help her - had been concerned not to bother me. She considered, reasonably enough, that this was a bizarre overkill response to just one of our new titles in a busy season; so she fielded the input of impassioned queries, pleas for more information and suchlike with heroic patience.



Finally, the pressure had become too much for even this stalwart operator (who went on subsequently to a distinguished career of her own as a commissioning editor). She turned to me for some background detail on the book, the better to cope with the ongoing hassles of dealing with callers and correspondents convinced either that Sphere had daringly exposed a monstrous conspiracy by the government against its citizens or, somehow, was actually part of that same conspiracy. Or both at once. I was mightily relieved at this evidence of the desired response.

I was also delighted when, within weeks of publication, those rumours that have since become an integral part of the A3 mythology began to feed back into the Sphere offices. The lock-up garage "somewhere in North London" stuffed with printers' packs of the first edition... the pulping on government orders of that same first printing... the clandestine buying up from wholesalers and retailers by secret agents of all available unsold stock (new vistas of lucrative no-risk publishing began to reveal themselves to me)... wondrous stuff, all of it. Crazy, delusional - but pure magic, all the same - and, it cannot be too strongly stressed, genuinely spontaneous. Sphere had neither the time nor the resources to generate this kind of widespread whispering-campaign marketing effort. Anyway, there was obviously no need to.

The only unwelcome 'governmental' attention that came Sphere's way because of A3 took the mind-numbingly tedious form of a couple of (not very serious) threats of legal action from some provincial local authority Trading Standards Officers. These gents, acting as a result of protests lodged with them by members of the public who had failed signally to enter into the spirit of the affair, took exception to the use of the back-cover categorisation "World Affairs/Speculation". They claimed that this was a blatant misrepresentation of what was clearly a work of fiction. My basic publisher's reflex response - deny any and all liability - came swiftly into play here. But an even more basic reflex (to do with discretion as the better part of you know what) also kicked in: on future A3 reprints the categorisation was changed - in a deliberate attempt to confuse the issue still further - to "World Affairs/Fiction". (This has been changed again, sensibly enough, to plain "General Fiction" on the current Warner Books edition.)

My main attempt to enter, personally, into the spirit of things backfired badly and reflects absolutely no credit on me. A couple of months or so after A3's first publication, a letter on official headed paper from an address in Dublin arrived at the Sphere offices in Gray's Inn Road. Its complaint was essentially the same as that made by the Trading Standards Officers - namely, that the back-cover categorisation was grossly misleading. More seriously, the writer of this letter claimed, it (the categorisation) could cause alarm and distress to those of the proverbial nervous disposition - elderly folk, for example. Whereas the writer himself was (of course) able to see A3 for what it was - a clever piece of fiction - nonetheless he was concerned for those of his constituents who might not be able to make the same distinction and who therefore might become upset at the horrific 'facts' exposed.



And so on. Fair enough point, when you think about it. The trouble was, I didn't think about it. Not hard enough, anyway. I showed the letter around the office to my editorial colleagues. "What the f-- does he mean, 'my constituents'?" I asked. One of my long-suffering co-workers raised his eyebrows in mild disbelief at this (perfectly genuine) display of crass ignorance and pointed to the two letters - TD - after the writer's name. "Come on, Nick," he chided gently. "Surely you..." But I didn't know these initials stood for Teachta Dála; he was the Irish equivalent of a member of parliament.



"Live and learn, eh?" says I. "Well, looks like we've got a live one here. Pity he's not one of our own Westminster bastards but I guess he'll have to do."

I returned to my cluttered desk, tucked my tongue firmly into my cheek and drafted a reply in which I rejected the TD's assertion that A3 was a work of fiction. I wrote that, while Sphere had not received one word of complaint or denial from any British government source about the book concerned, this silence was in itself ominous. Could it not be that, even now, the covert agencies accused in A3 were preparing 'terminal retribution' (I was particularly proud of that phrase, for some reason) against those responsible for their exposure?



This was bad enough. Worse was to come. While my colleagues clustered nervously around, I borrowed a lighted cigarette from my secretary and burnt a curving row of carefully spaced 'bullet' holes across my reply to the TD. Finally, feeling that a crowning touch was required - dredging up hazy memories of Ian Fleming's Live and Let Die ("Which finger do you use least, Mr Bond?") - I nicked the tip of the little finger of my left hand with my

penknife and smeared a few drops of blood around the simulated bullet holes. My editorial team-mates backed nervously away to their own desks. "That should shut him up," I cackled, waving my reply around to dry the blood before folding up the mutilated document and sealing it into an envelope.

How wrong I was. The subsequent silence from that particular quarter was indeed ominous - and relatively brief. The next thing I knew, the affronted TD had written directly to the head of the Thomson Organisation, Lord Kenneth Thomson himself, to complain in surprisingly restrained terms about the gross lack of respect to his position that I had displayed. He was right: I had behaved excessively and there really was no excuse. (I'd have felt less contrite if it had been a Westminster MP on the receiving end of my 'wit', though.)

With a heavy heart, I drafted my letter of resignation, thinking of myself as the only genuine A3 victim and that by my own hand - or by my own little finger, at any rate. But I had not counted on the tolerance and friendship of Sphere's then managing director, the late and much lamented Edmund Fisher. Edmund would have none of my attempt to resign. He wrote directly to the TD concerned, explaining the spoof nature of the whole A3 business and presented my behaviour as an over-enthusiastic and sadly misguided attempt to carry its spirit over into real life, behaviour that warranted admonishment rather than dismissal.

The TD's reply to this civilised defence of the indefensible was wonderfully magnanimous. Accepting all Edmund's points, he went so far as to say that, on reflection, he took heart from the incident because it showed that there was room for a sense of humour within the outwardly impersonal and monolithic Thomson Organisation! A truly Irish response, in the best possible sense.



A3 has been through at least seven reprints. It remains in print over 20 years after its first publication - possibly because it is the only version available, since there appears never to have been a commercial video release. The original TV programme and the book have generated an article once before in **Fortean Times - FT64** (September/ October 1992) - and other pieces in journals as diverse as New Scientist and The Unopened Files. There has even been Jim Keith's Casebook on Alternative 3: UFOs, Secret Societies and World Control (IllumiNet Press, 1994).

Why a clever hoax, openly admitted to be such by its creators, should continue to exercise the fascination it so obviously does the best part of a generation after its first appearance is beyond my feeble powers of analysis and explanation. After my woefully misjudged attempt to add my personal touch to the developing A3 mythology, I just sat back and enjoyed the sales.

Additional material by **Jane Watkins** and **Mark Pilkington**.

READ THE FULL STORY OF A3 IN **FORTEAN TIMES 121**