



went on lecture circuits, and they motivated a lot of people who came to believe that we're probably being observed, and that the government knows it and they're not being straight with us—also informed by World War II and secrecy, espionage, and spies. Back then, people were not being kidnapped, they were just meeting these aliens, who were nice to humans and looked like humans. They're often described as amazingly beautiful. Like they're better-looking than us, in fact.

**PS:** Oh, nice.

**EGHIGIAN:** Yeah. But if you fast-forward to the hey-day of alien abduction in the '80s and '90s, all that stuff that the aliens are our friends, they're nice and look like us, that's all gone. The stories seemed to shift as the culture shifts. People start to make sense of it through the language of trauma, through the language of abuse and even sexual abuse.

**PS:** Because that's when those subjects were starting to be more talked about, televised on talk shows?

**EGHIGIAN:** Exactly. People start to use hypnosis to extract recovered memories. Remember, the '80s and '90s is the period of scandals about supposed Satanic ritual abuse, children in nursery schools being abused. So all of these things are feeding off one another, and it leads both skeptics and believers to seek out ways to make sense of it all.

**PS:** You mentioned the Cold War, which ended in the early '90s. How does that factor in?

**EGHIGIAN:** Among other things, the Cold War made people look upward. When people got scared in the '40s and '50s, they were hearing about the development of new rocket technology, of ICBMs. Some of us are old enough to remember being readied for civil defense, running to the basement in case the Soviets launched missiles. The end of the Cold War stops all that. When I began this project, I was writing about it as something that appeared to be ending—that we were witnessing the death throes of the UFO thing—partly because media coverage had declined. And I think the end of the Cold War, which had always fueled the UFO phenomenon, is another reason for this downturn.

But veteran researchers in the UFO community will tell you the internet is what undermined the once robust UFO groups and magazines. The internet made people say, "I don't need to go to a meeting. I can look this up on my own." There used to be several thousand periodicals published across the world that focused on UFOs. By around 2010, there were 50.

**PS:** So in the beginning you're researching its decline, but then you've written about an upswing in interest that happens in December 2017, when *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* reported that the Pentagon had funded a secret program from 2007 to 2012 to investigate reports of unidentified flying objects. Which of course wasn't the first such endeavor.

**EGHIGIAN:** Yeah, those articles in 2017, with that video footage that comes out from the Navy pilots, seemed to bring about this revitalized interest. Now, again, it's not an accident. People like to talk about the spike in interest that started in December 2017 like it just happened, but waves of interest in UFOs don't work that way. I use this phrase a lot, but it gets across my point that UFOs don't make history. People make UFOs make history. You need people to do it. There have always been people trying to get everybody's attention, saying, "This stuff is serious. This stuff is aliens!" The question is, that's always going on, so why does that message sometimes work and sometimes not work? It has come and gone in waves.

You can actually see pretty clearly that the people who really want to push it, promote it, are always looking for something, some event, some scenario that captivates people. In the case of that story, they were two journalists who have had a long history of being very interested in UFOs and alien contact. So you have the interest shown in it, and then you've got a whistleblower [Luis Elizondo] with a charismatic personality, so this renaissance gets going. You've also got the other thing you typically need—some politicians to support the idea. You had [Nevada senator] Harry Reid and [Florida senator] Marco Rubio. So all of a sudden it has legs in Congress.

The media has always been such a critical player in all of this. Plus, the fact that the Navy and the intelligence community were saying, "This stuff is real. And we're not sure what it is."

**PS:** What would you say about the culture of alien contact and UFO belief today?

**EGHIGIAN:** In a lot of ways, I feel like we've fast-forwarded to the past. We're back to that period from '47 to '52, when all the focus was on the equipment. You're not getting the kind of intense focus on alien contact that really dominated the '80s and '90s. Ever since those articles came out in 2017, it's become this focus on the evidence of pilots and instrument readings from the military, and the intelligence community saying, "These things are actual objects. We have some footage.

## Greg Eghigian's Sci-Fi Faves



**MOVIES**  
*Alien*,  
*The Thing*,  
*Communion*



**TV SHOWS**  
*Resident Alien*,  
*People of Earth*  
(series),  
*The X-Files*



**DOCUMENTARIES**  
*Heaven's Gate: The Cult of Cults*,  
*Codename Rendlesham*,  
*UFO* (Showtime, 2021)



**PODCASTS**  
*The Paracast*,  
*Weird Studies*,  
*The Folklore Podcast*,  
*Moonrise*



One of the things I think you're seeing with endeavors like The Penn State Extraterrestrial Intelligence Center [PSETI], and the one that Avi Loeb is leading at Harvard, is that people who maybe want to lean into the UFO thing say, "Our emphasis is no longer on witnesses. People are flawed as eyewitnesses. What we are placing our faith in is starting to develop instruments that are reliable, that are consistent, that aren't biased." And that has come to alienate some of the UFO community whose bread and butter has been for so long witnesses.

**PS:** But if they're furthering the research, isn't that ultimately the same goal?

**EGHIGIAN:** Yeah, and that's what I hear from some of the veteran UFO people who have been doing this for years on their own. They say, "[Loeb] is on the right side of things. We need him. He's an ally." But I think what they believe is that the methodology is flawed, because you're discounting so much evidence that came from witnesses.

**PS:** And observation has always been a part of science.

**EGHIGIAN:** Well, yeah, but certainly modern science developed in part

with a great deal of skepticism about the human eye, the human ear. We've needed to augment it, right? Telescopes, microscopes, and then ways to measure. If we can start to take it out of the realm of our intuition and put it into this other model—at least this is the story that science will give you—then we're making it more objective. We're making it less colored by culture.

But even using instruments doesn't end the importance of the human being. We make instruments for our senses. We read instruments with our minds and our analytics. You haven't filtered out the human being, and you never will. So one thing I think is interesting about this is that UFOs always hold up a mirror to ourselves, in part to say, What do we know? How do we know it? *Can* we know it?

**PS:** Why has the government shifted from UFO to UAP, "unidentified aerial phenomena"?

**EGHIGIAN:** It's a deliberate attempt by people in the intelligence

We don't know quite what they are. We're working on that." That's really where I think most of the interest is right now.

**PS:** Meanwhile, an entirely different world has existed in academia, where for so long nobody has acknowledged that some UFOs seen here could be indicative of intelligent life elsewhere in our universe. There seems to be a stark divide.

**EGHIGIAN:** I think that divide is an intriguing one. My conversations with astronomers and people in the natural sciences say that what bothers them is, from their standpoint, we don't have any substantial evidence to even entertain this possibility of aliens having visited us, or [that they] are visiting us. And second, the conversation is so colored by what they often refer to as "cultural baggage"—the conspiracies, the sci-fi, the kidnappings, you name it. All of that stuff they find at best distasteful, and at worst, it just makes for a biased body of data that seems untrustworthy.

COURTESY