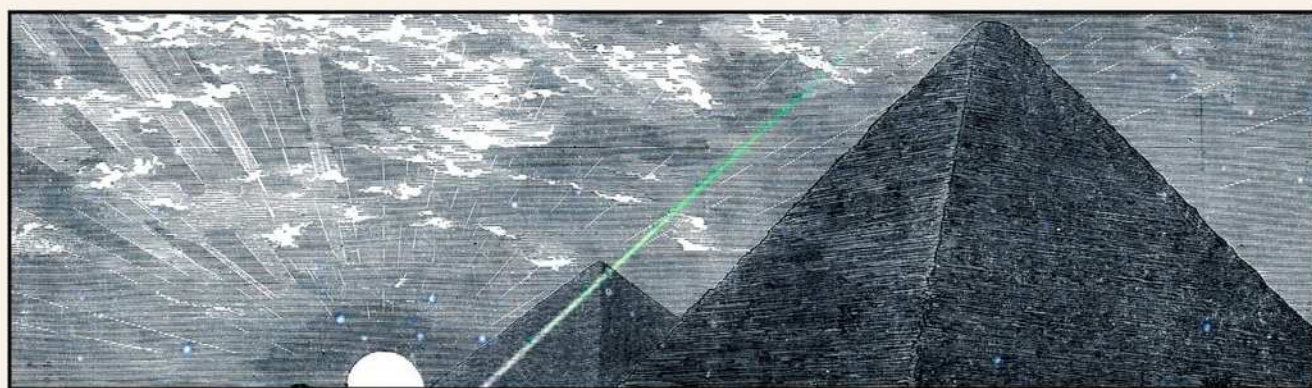


# THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING ELSE



## A VOYAGE INTO THE WORLD OF THE WEIRD

**Can Ancient Pyramids  
Improve Your Tennis Serve?**

**Are We Only Here  
Because of an Alien Picnic  
Gone Wrong?**

**Should Office Plants Be  
Investigating Murder Cases?**

**AND  
MORE!**

# DAN SCHREIBER

Cohost of the Hit Podcast **NO SUCH THING AS A FISH**

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# **DEDICATION**

For Fenella, Wilf, Ted and Littlestfoot  
*My four favourite weirdos*

## EPIGRAPH

What if a chicken is an egg's way  
of making more eggs?

*Anonymous*

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## Foreword

### **THE ROUGH CORNER**

There is a concept practised by Zen gardeners called ‘the Rough Corner’. The idea being that somewhere, in every beautifully tended garden, there should remain a patch of land left completely untouched, growing wild and chaotic so as to remind the gardener of how the universe intended it to look.

I believe we should all be cultivating a healthy Rough Corner in our minds. A small nook at the back of the brain that ensures we never fail to get goosebumps when we’re told a mad-as-hell idea, no matter how batshit it may be. It’s important to keep this Rough Corner ragged and free to grow as nature intended, because great things have been achieved by those who believe in weird ideas ...



# Disclaimer

## A WARNING

The author of this work does not accept responsibility for any overgrown Rough Corners the reader might end up cultivating as a result of reading this book.

All the theories in this book want you to believe in them. Don't even think of it. Read up on them, yes; discuss them with your friends, definitely; sit back and let the ideas alter your universe for just a few seconds, absolutely; but for God's sake, don't believe in a single one of them.

However, I know it's not up to me what you'll make of all these theories, no matter how much I warn you against them. Any idea you connect with that helps make sense of your place in this universe can develop into an unstoppable force.

To some extent all of these theories are alive; at least that's certainly the impression they give. They've been translated into multiple languages and are at this very moment being discussed at breakfast tables and dinner parties around the world. They crop up in innumerable school classrooms, are debated by the finest minds in the world's leading universities and have become the all-consuming obsession of amateur sleuths. They have their own websites, social media accounts and Netflix specials. One has even done so well that it has its very own soundtrack, written and performed by Stevie Wonder.

They're all incredibly successful at being talked about and will do their absolute best to make you think that they're true. But please remember, this isn't a book of facts; it's a book of 'facts'. None of the theories in this book are true.\* They're just ideas, speculations, beliefs and claims, begging to be accepted as truths. So, should you walk away at the end of this book believing that the only reason we became the dominant species on this planet is because predators found us too smelly to eat; or that the living descendants of Christ are a family of garlic farmers living in Japan; or that office plants should be employed as police detectives – well, that's on you.

\* Not yet, anyway.

## Introduction

### HELLO FROM THE ODDER SIDE

In 1956 archaeologist George Michanowsky was plodding his way through a remote region of the Bolivian bush when he stumbled upon a group of locals partaking in a festival of dance, drink and general debauchery.\* After making some enquiries, Michanowsky learnt that this was an annual event, and that every year, for thousands of years now, whole communities from hundreds of miles away would gather together to celebrate.

‘Celebrate what?’ asked the archaeologist.

‘Can’t remember,’ replied the Bolivians. Somewhere along the line, they’d all forgotten why they were actually doing this.

However, not ones to let a minor administrative error like that get in their way, they continued to meet up once a year to make sure to commemorate ... whatever it was they were supposed to be commemorating.

\* \* \*

I first spotted this anthropological puzzle a few years back while flipping through a 1973 edition of *Time* magazine as I browsed a secondhand bookshop in London. It’s a story I’ve thought a lot about since. Though it may sound trivial, for me the mystery of the dancing Bolivians perfectly illustrates something that’s at the very heart of this book: which is that no matter where you look in this world, you can guarantee that something bizarre, improbable and unexplained is going on. And, more importantly, no matter how small that mystery may seem, there’s most likely someone (or something) out there dedicating their time to solving it.

Right now, as you read these words, there are scientists in Silicon Valley who are spending their days trying to work out if the universe is actually just a giant video game; there are ornithologists in Australia who are attempting to prove their theory that there’s a species of bird singing pop songs from the 1920s in the wild; and in Poland there is a ghost hunter who continues to warn us of his belief that ghosts have become so annoyed by the recent rise of scepticism about their existence, that they’re threatening to go on strike. ‘If you’re going to have *that* attitude, we’re not going to bother haunting you anymore’ appears to be the message.

Everyone, it seems, has a theory they’re trying to prove – be it about something as big as the meaning of life, or as small as trying to work out

why Australians speak the way they do.‡ There's just so much we don't know. Why are we here? Do ghosts exist? Are we being visited by extraterrestrials? Are plants sentient? And why when you're in the shower does the shower curtain always billow in towards you?‡

We don't know the answers to any of these questions, but in this book I'll be introducing you to some people who think they've more or less figured them out. Along the way you'll learn the word for 'thank you' in plant language from a leading botanist; you'll be invited by conservationists to help save an endangered species from being shampooed out of existence; and you'll discover why you should probably try to avoid winning a Nobel Prize in the Sciences. Most importantly, though, you'll learn that pretty much everyone in the world harbours their own little bit of batshit.§

Even the most unexpected people turn out to have odd beliefs. For example, take Nicholas Witchell, the current BBC Royal Correspondent, and a man who has covered virtually every major royal news story since 1998 – who would have thought this serious, plummy journalist would be a former Loch Ness Monster hunter?

But it turns out that for six months in 1972, a 19-year-old Witchell lived on the banks of Loch Ness, in a self-built wooden hut, staring at the water every day with a pair of binoculars and a long-lensed camera.

Nessie has been a big part of Witchell's life. It's in fact thanks to Nessie that Witchell pursued a career in journalism at all. After his six-month stint looking for the monster, he headed to Leeds to study law, but when an opportunity to pen a book on Nessie arose, it forced him to reconsider his future career choice. Two years later, Witchell published his book, *The Loch Ness Story*, which today is still considered one of the finest books of its genre.

*Nicholas Witchell, BBC Royal Correspondent and former Nessie hunter. (Jeff Overs/BBC News & Current Affairs via Getty Images)*

I can understand how Witchell might have been lured into spending six months staring into its waters, having visited the Loch myself a few years ago. When you start looking at it, you can't help but search for Nessie. It was honestly hard to tear my eyes away from the water for fear that the second I did, it might be the moment the beast surfaced.

'Yeah. The first decade's the hardest with that,' veteran Nessie hunter Steve Feltham told me over a Zoom call recently. 'But you get used to it after about ten years.' Feltham, who has been living on the banks of the loch looking for the monster from his Nessie hunting mobile home for the last 31 years, holds the Guinness World Record for 'Longest continuous vigil seeking the Loch Ness monster'.

## WHAT'S YOUR BIT OF BATSHIT?

So before we begin, let me ask you an important question: what's your bit of batshit? Do you believe in ghosts? Think you can sense when someone is staring at you from behind? Superstitious? Feel that coincidences have meaning? Have you spotted a UFO?

Perhaps you're not aware of what your exact bit of batshit is. Throughout the writing of this book I've found that most people were unable to immediately identify what their weird beliefs are, largely because to them they're not weird beliefs but part of their everyday reality. But don't worry, you'll realise what it is once you think about it long enough.

Or maybe you know exactly what your strange belief is but are just too afraid to say it out loud. I appreciate that too – people can be pretty unforgiving towards people who say things like, 'I believe in the Mongolian death worm!'¶ It can affect your work life, your relationships, everything.

In the course of writing this book I've met three people who believe they've discovered the meaning of life; had one friend ask me in total sincerity to break character and confirm that I was an actor in his own version of *The Truman Show*; drank a beer with someone who claimed to be half-reptilian; and listened intently as another recounted waking up early one morning to find the Virgin Mary standing at the end of their bed. That last person was my wife, Fenella.

Fenella is a bit of a weirdness magnet, and will feature periodically throughout this book. Unlike me – who spends countless hours rummaging through hidden bookshops, tracking down lost documentaries, and attending odd shows and conferences – the weirdnesses just seem to come directly to Fenella. For some inexplicable reason people reveal a whole host of random odd things about their life within moments of meeting her.

Just recently we had a plumber over to fix a leak in the bathroom. After saying a quick hello I wandered off to make him a cup of tea, leaving Fenella to show him where the problem was. A few minutes later she joined me in the kitchen.

'What an interesting guy,' she said. 'He was just telling me that when he was a baby in Kazakhstan, he was sitting in a field when an eagle swooped down from the sky, grabbed him by the shoulders and flew off with him.'

Most would assume this story to be the ramblings of a mad plumber with an overactive imagination. But as it happens, I had met a 'Children stolen by eagles' expert a few years back, and so instead of quickly

ushering him out of my house, I got him to down tools so I could note down his story.

‘Fortunately,’ he told me, ‘as the bird was flapping away and struggling to gain height, my mother was able to chase after us and beat the eagle with a big stick until it dropped me back down.’

Fenella was eight months pregnant with our second child when she saw the Virgin Mary at the end of our bed. To be fair, it was March 2020 and the country had just gone into its first national lockdown. Earlier that evening, before the divine visit, we’d sat goggle-eyed on the sofa and watched the TV as an uncharacteristically stern Prime Minister told us that it was now dangerous to leave the house, and that pregnant women were particularly at risk. Fenella was terrified.

Mary appeared not long after this. At first Fenella was scared, and thought she had come to take our unborn child. However, after extensive googling, she learnt that Mary was actually there to tell her that everything was going to be OK. I wasn’t awake to see her, but to this day, Fenella insists it happened.

We inherit a lot of our weirdness from our family, that’s for sure. Fenella comes from a religious family, and her visit from the Virgin Mary was greeted with excitement by many of them. I too have not escaped this conditioning from my own parents, and I now realise they are absolutely the reason for my interest in the wilder shores. It all really began for me at the age of 13, when, following a childhood in Hong Kong, my hairdressing parents shut down their salon and relocated our family to a sleepy suburb in the Northern Beaches of Sydney, Australia, called Avalon. Avalon is named after the mythical resting place of King Arthur and, when I first arrived, rocked a very New Age feel.

I knew we had arrived somewhere *different* when, not long after we moved in, our friends, Mike and Rebecca, sold up and moved sixty miles inland because Rebecca had had a dream that Avalon’s coast was going to be hit by a tsunami sometime soon. Two decades later, it is yet to hit.

Another time, years later, my parents got a call from our neighbour Sharon, who asked if they could pop over to help out with a tech problem she was having: she needed to unfriend someone on Facebook but didn’t know how. When my parents arrived, Sharon explained that she’d recently learnt through a spiritual healer that this so-called ‘friend’ of hers had actually killed her in a previous life in Ancient Egypt. ‘I don’t want to be friends on Facebook with someone in this life who killed me in a previous one,’ she told them.

Just like Fenella, my parents have a gift for attracting weirdness, and I

would often experience wonderful nights listening as dinner guests would drunkenly wax lyrical about esoteric matters – everything from ghosts to UFOs – before slipping me copies of books by authors like ancient alien theorist Erich von Däniken as they stumbled out the door.

While this fascinating life in Avalon was instrumental in feeding my ‘Rough Corner’ perhaps my real leap into the world of batshit began when I started at my new high school.

## **THE MISEDUCATION OF DAN SCHREIBER**

I was educated at a school founded by a descendant of Atlantis. I didn’t know this fact until I started researching this book, and it was news to my parents too.



*Rudolf Steiner, philosopher and Atlantian. (GL Archive/Alamy Stock Photo)*

Glenaeon Rudolf Steiner School is located down the backroad of a tiny suburb seven miles north of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Built into the surrounding four and a half acres of bushland, it had the feeling of a mythical getaway. Imagine if *The Celestine Prophecy* had set up its own Hogwarts and made *The Secret* author Rhonda Byrne headmistress.

The establishment was the first Steiner institution in Australia, based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher, architect and hippy-like character who set out to create a school that didn't believe in competition; where classes would be taught in eccentrically built rooms that excluded any right angles in their design; and where students could be guided to flourish not as academics but as creatives. At least that appeared to be the official position. What they didn't mention was that Steiner was also a world-leading occultist, mystic, holistic doctor, clairvoyant and Atlantian.

Steiner was not a good guy, a fact I learnt from a podcast called *Behind the Bastards*. He held horrible ideas about racial superiority and was also the creator of anthroposophical medicine, which proposes that your illnesses may have been influenced by your past life, and that in some cases – tough luck – no prescription can be given, as it's just your karmic destiny playing out. Today at anthroposophical hospitals in Austria, cancer patients are treated with mistletoe and patients with Covid-19 are reportedly given homeopathic pellets said to contain the dust of shooting stars.

For me, though, Steiner was a world away from my more academic primary school in Hong Kong and I loved every second of it. I can't speak for how it is today, but 20 years ago, the oddity of it was immediate and unavoidable. When I first arrived, my homeroom teacher was away being treated for cancer. His treatment didn't involve chemo or any other Western medicines; instead he'd decided to meditate his way back to health, which he successfully managed with guidance from a bunch of monks. And it worked. He was back at school halfway through my first term, and as a result of his experience we'd start the day by doing 15 minutes of group meditation, followed by 10 minutes of the songs of The Beatles and Simon & Garfunkel.





The curriculum itself was very similar to other schools, though the teachers were perhaps a bit eccentric in their marking. I was genuinely once given top marks in History for a presentation I decided to give on how the secret passages below the Great Pyramids of Giza were said to contain ancient crystal computers from the lost city of Atlantis. (I now understand why I did so well.)

After graduating from Steiner, I decided to move to the UK to try and pursue a life in comedy. It was at this point that I shed my beliefs in all things conspiracy theories, and fell madly in love with the world of science (where the theories and speculations were often far more wild and exciting than those of the pseudoscientific world) building a career that was more focused on facts rather than ‘facts’. However, though I’d like to say that these recent years have changed me and that I’ve become a font of scientific knowledge and renounced my early miseducation, the truth is I’ve never stopped loving the fringes and the many people who embody it.

## **PERSISTENCE, PERSISTENCE, PERSISTENCE**

This is a book about those people who ask big questions and investigate them, no matter how much ridicule is piled upon them. And they’re not few in number – they’re everywhere. Just look around you. We’re a multitude of realities. Every day, as you go about your life, you’ll be walking among people who think very differently to you. Next time you look up at the sky at night and see the moon, just remember that some see it as a natural satellite of the Earth, while for others it’s completely artificial, built by aliens. Some believe we landed humans on it, others that Stanley Kubrick filmed a hoax landing in a Hollywood studio. Some believe it influences the tides, others that it influences humans to grow fur and howl. Occasionally, one of these off-piste thinkers will be proved right, and their lifelong persistence to show that things are not quite as they seem will win out.

And that’s what it’s about: persistence. Persistence in getting to the bottom of a matter – regardless of how long it takes, and even if it only reveals a mundane truth – is paramount. Take the Parkes Observatory radio telescope in Australia, a hugely important dish. It was the telescope that enabled the world to receive TV signals from Neil Armstrong as he stood on the moon, and it’s currently one of the few telescopes being used as part of Operation Breakthrough Listen, the most comprehensive search for alien communications to date. But it’s also where, behind the scenes, astronomers had been persistently trying to crack a long-unsolved mystery.

Their problem was this: for 17 years the Parkes dish had been picking up strange interference, absolutely befuddling the scientists trying to work out why. Over the years multiple theories were thrown up. In 2011 a scientific paper was published speculating that the cause could be lightning strikes or solar bursts, but further investigation discounted both of these.

In the end, their near-two-decade lesson in why persistence pays off ended when the in-house astronomers finally discovered the culprit: the microwave oven in the observatory kitchen. Seventeen years of speculation, and the puzzling signals turned out to be the cleaning staff heating up their ready-made lasagnas. Mystery solved.

This wasn't the only mystery in which an Australian observatory played a role. While discovering a pulsar in a far-off constellation, astronomers at Molonglo Observatory noticed a curious wisp of gas. It looked very much like the debris left by a star after it exploded. If it had been a star, at only 1,500 light years away it would have been the closest-ever supernova explosion to our planet and would have lit up the sky for months, day and night – a hundred times brighter than Venus and brighter, possibly, than the moon. (One wild theory has it that its influence may even have been greater – perhaps showering Earth with enough dangerous radiation to cause significant mutations to our planet's lifeforms.) So why then, asked the astronomers, were there no historical records of it?

Only four other supernovas had been recorded at this point, including one witnessed in China, which, thanks to the astronomers of the time, we know occurred in the year 1054. Scientists wanted to date the supernova detected by Molonglo, but without any historical records they had no way of doing so – it could have occurred at any time between 15,000 and 6,000 years ago. And so in 1972 the journal *Archaeology* published an unusual request from three NASA astronomers, asking archaeologists for their help in identifying the age of this celestial gas cloud. There must have been, they suggested, some primitive witness who felt compelled to mark this event by scrawling a record of it on a rock or carving it on a wall. If they could find that artist's rendition, they could date the supernova.

This request was eventually spotted by a member of the Explorers Club in New York: the eccentric, controversial veteran archaeologist George Michanowsky. Casting his memory back years, he remembered an interesting carving on a large, flat rock he'd seen on one of his many adventures. The carving consisted of six circles, five of which, Michanowsky noticed, matched the brightest stars in the night sky. However, the final and largest of the circles carved in the rock was nowhere to be seen.

This curious rock belonged to an unusual group of Bolivian Indians, who, for reasons unknown to them, kept getting together once a year to do some dancing. Michanowsky asked them whether this rock was intrinsically connected to the dancing. Yes, they said. So did they at least know what the carvings on the rock meant? Nope. No idea. They'd forgotten that too.

Undeterred, Michanowsky continued to investigate. His research led him to study the Mesopotamian records, and learn to read cuneiform. It was while reading one particular cuneiform tablet that Michanowsky discovered a reference to a giant star in a part of the sky that we know doesn't have any stars to match its description. The coordinates, noted Michanowsky, corresponded to the exact spot where the supernova was said to have been. With that, Michanowsky developed his hypothesis. According to him, in the millennia that followed the supernova, the impact of this incredible event could be detected in cultures all around the world. He believed that when the ancient Sumerians witnessed this celestial wonder, they started developing astronomy, mathematics and writing, and the keeping of record books. The supernova, and the mind-expanding wonder it inspired, speculated Michanowsky, might just have been the catalyst that led to the birth of civilisation.

So, why were these Bolivian locals dancing? After 18 years of pondering, Michanowsky believed he finally had his answer. They were commemorating what was quite possibly the single most important event in human history, a moment that turned our brains on to the awesomeness of the universe and expanded human consciousness in the process. 'Next to the sun,' Michanowsky said, 'it may have been the most important star in the history of mankind.' What those Bolivian locals had forgotten, was that they were dancing to celebrate a moment never to be forgotten. At least, that was his theory ...

\* Orgies.

† No one is quite sure how the Australian accent developed. One theory has it that, due to Australia's vast fly population, Aussies were forced to talk with their teeth gritted, otherwise they'd end up with a mouth full of the insects.

‡ As it stands there are four competing theories, the most recent of which comes from scientist David Schmidt of the University of Massachusetts, who ran a simulation and had his computer spend two weeks crunching 1.5 trillion calculations in attempt to prove his theory. As of writing, no theory has been accepted as conclusive and the hunt for a grand unified theory of shower curtains continues. Interestingly, there is a theory that we have our best ideas while in the shower. So, it may be possible that the solution will come to someone mid-wash as the curtain slowly creeps in towards them.

§ In this book, I will be using the term batshit a lot. It is used affectionately. Just like how my dad calls me 'dickhead', it is said with love. To be clear, all my favourite people are a little bit batshit.

¶ A mythical animal that is said to attack humans by shooting acid out of its mouth and