

Space watcher in wet-look shoes

By STUART
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THE MARTIANS are coming . . . This "UFO" is, in fact, the spiked holder from a Continental vegetable slicer, supported by an invisible strip of Sellotape. An example of a flying saucer hoax—which scientist Brian Ford describes in his book *The Earth Watchers*.

TODAY sees the publication of a new book about flying saucers. It is called *The Earth Watchers* (Leslie Frewin: £2.90) and according to the dust-jacket it sets out to answer the questions: "Do flying saucers really exist? Are there undreamed-of beings on other planets? Are we being watched?"

Ho hum, you might think—yet another sci-fi extravaganza about little green men and bug-eyed monsters from Mars.

But *The Earth Watchers* is not quite like that. Despite its sensational packaging, it is bound to be taken seriously in some quarters.

Its thesis? That it is statistically certain that life exists elsewhere in the universe (on 12,000 of the planets in our galaxy alone); that, although many "sightings" have been blatant spoofs, UFO's cannot be explained away; and that intelligent beings could well be monitoring our civilisation.

Furthermore *The Earth Watchers* contains some intriguing speculation about how, and which, planets could support life.

The book is the work of Cardiff scientist Brian J. Ford and, however it is finally assessed, it seems certain to further contribute to his reputation of being something of a phenomenon himself.

Ford is a strange mixture of the scientist, the



journalist, the broadcaster and the academic. Now 33, his career has been chequered. He has contributed to *The Times* and the *New Scientist*; and also to *OZ* and *Private Eye*. He has written a textbook on microscopy; but also a satiric book about science entitled *Nonscience*.

Furthermore his interests are extremely catholic. At the last count his work included a book on German secret weapons, a textbook about microbiology and food, a chapter about the analysis of human skeletal remains, as well as scores of articles for specialist journals on things as diverse as museum technology and the coagulation of blood. And now flying saucers . . .

Ford lives in Roath with his four children and wife, Jan. In no way does he resemble the usual identikit picture of the academic scientist; favouring wet-look shoes, extravagantly flared trousers and figure-hugging shirts and never displaying the slightest sign of scholarly reticence.

"Being a scientist," he says, "is too much of a specialisation for anyone. The dogma of specialisation is superfluous, unworkable and absurd. The fact that people spend their whole lives immersed in the sexual acts of a particular species of seaweed is a dinosaur-like relic of medieval alchemy.

"Perhaps it's partly because we train people to believe that their minds are small and their horizons narrow."

Nor does his background fit the formula; he says he was labelled the star pupil of his year

while at University College, Cardiff, but left before taking a degree—"because I consider universities a waste of time and their teaching an insult to the intelligence."

At that time he set up a laboratory in Penarth and made a living doing a varied collection of things: contributing to *Good Morning Wales*, lecturing at Newport College of Art, acting as consultant to industry. Then came 1968 when, with a flourish, he announced his intention of retiring—at the time he was 28—to enjoy himself and, in between, to write books.

"I don't work hard in the least. In fact, it's a fatal mistake to work at all. Retirement has taken the form of doing exactly what one wants—which means spending one's time relaxing, making love, enjoying a good wine and savouring the taste of a good cheese."

Ford gives the impression that he finds writing his books ridiculously easy. His textbook on microbiology and food, he says, took only five days; *The Earth Watchers* "took a couple of months, but it was in my spare time."

So far sales of his books have reached 300,000 and Ford says, "I don't have any ambitions of any kind to achieve anything more."

"In fact I never wanted to achieve any of the more notable things I have achieved. I had a phone call from a very eminent man of science the other day who said, 'You are one of the great men now, one of the big names.'"

"I said 'gerroff,' or words to that effect."