

BOOKS

Hubbard: A writer who founded a religion

BARE-FACED MESSIAH: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard
 RUSSELL MILLER
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By Patrick K. Lackey

You've probably seen television commercials for the book "Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health," by L. Ron Hubbard. They show a volcano erupting.

Ten million copies of the book have been sold since a large portion of it appeared in the April 1950 issue of the pulp publication "Astounding Science Fiction." It remains on the best-seller lists even today. Yuppies are said to love it.

Hubbard, who died in 1986 at age 74, was already one of the best-selling science fiction writers of all time when he wrote "Dianetics." He subsequently founded the religion "Scientology," which apparently prospers to this day, despite numerous lawsuits against it, some successful.

Late in his life, Hubbard led a three-ship convoy of his followers for 10 years, as several countries barred them as undesirable. They sailed hither and yon, supposedly looking for treasures he had buried in previous lives. He was waited on by prepubescent girls who relayed his orders to lesser crew members.

British journalist Russell Miller has written a biography of Hubbard titled "Bare-Faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard."

"Bare-Faced Messiah" obviously is a play on "bare-faced liar." And the book is an expose that makes only feeble attempts to understand Hubbard and his followers. It's always worth remembering that any religion seems cockamamie to non-believers. In fact, a religion isn't a religion unless it's farfetched. Reli-

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gious belief requires a leap of faith.

This book, though shallow, is a good read, mainly because Hubbard was so bizarre, both in real life and in the life he made up for himself and swore was true.

Hubbard lied constantly to promote himself, says Miller. He claimed his grandfather owned half of Montana. Actually, his father was a small-time veterinarian.

As a young penny-a-word writer for the pulps, Hubbard traded yarns with other writers over beers, except he claimed his stories were true. Once a fellow writer named Frank Gruber told Hubbard, "Ron, you're 84, aren't you?" Gruber had added up the years Hubbard had claimed to have done different things.

Miller was greatly helped in writing his book by the discovery of boxes full of Hubbard's early journals. For example, Hubbard exaggerated war-related injuries and ailments in an attempt to increase his veterans' disability payments. He wrote in his journal, "When you tell people you are ill, it has no effect upon your health. And in Veterans Administration examinations you'll tell them how sick you are; you'll look sick when you take it; you'll return to health one hour after the examination and laugh at them."

One of his claims as a Scientologist is that he healed himself from horrible war-related afflictions.

No claim was too bizarre for him to make it.

He wrote once that he learned "Igoroti, an Eastern primitive language, in a single night."

In a May 1963 bulletin, Hubbard wrote that he had twice visited heaven, 43 trillion and 42 trillion years earlier. The first time the place was nice, he said, but the second time it was deserted and shabby.

And thousands, if not millions, of



L. Ron Hubbard

people believe him. Scientology claims 6 million members.

Hubbard indisputably was one of the better pulp science fiction writers. One of his early fans was Isaac Asimov. Several of the best-selling science fiction books of all time were by Hubbard. He wrote "Battlefield Earth" and "An Alien Affair." In his heyday, he churned out several novels a year.

Poorly educated, he was as bad at science as he was good at writing, though he claimed to base his scientific assertions on painstaking research. In "Dianetics," he presented pure malarkey with the absolute assurance and sincerity of the insane.

"The ability of the fetus to repair damage is phenomenal," Hubbard wrote. "Brain damage can ordinarily be repaired perfectly regardless of how many foreign substances were introduced into it." That is 180 degrees wrong.

He wrote that abortion attempts seldom succeed. What?

A main contention of the "Sci-

ence" of Dianetics is that fetuses record images called engrams; many of them frightening. According to the book "Dianetics," "a large proportion of allegedly feeble-minded children are actually attempted-abortion cases whose engrams place them in fear paralysis or regressive palsy and which command them not to grow but to be where they are forever."

Needless to say, the new biography has not been well-received by Scientologists. When I asked Scientologists in California what they thought of the book, they mailed me an inch-high pile of documents that they said refuted it.

They did seem to catch the author in a couple of errors: Hubbard did, in fact, have a Purple Heart; and a person the author said didn't exist apparently did. But basically the book withstands the Scientologists' attack.

Miller wrote that Hubbard once said the way to make big bucks was to form a religion. The Scientologists say Hubbard never said that. They mailed me proof that George Orwell wrote that. But the fact that George Orwell wrote something does not constitute proof that Hubbard never said it.

Miller says Hubbard told incredible lies about his naval service in World War II. Scientologists say Hubbard didn't lie. His stories are not supported by government documents, they say, because Hubbard served in intelligence. The official records of intelligence officers typically are changed to keep secrets, the Scientologist explain.

Scientologists say Hubbard was a brilliant explorer, philosopher, drug rehabilitator, musician, educator, administrator, artist, humanitarian and fiction writer. To this non-believer, they are one-ninth right. Miller wouldn't give Hubbard that much credit.