

NCAS Philip J. Klass Award May 2011

For outstanding contributions in promoting
critical thinking and scientific understanding.



National Capital Area Skeptics

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About Philip J. Klass (1919-2005)



Philip J. Klass was one of the original conveners of NCAS in 1987 and was an important long-time mentor to our organization. In 1976 he, along with Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, James Randi, Ray Hyman, Martin Gardner, Paul Kurtz, Sidney Hook and others, was a founding member of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), now called CSI, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. He was one of the world's foremost experts on UFOs.

Trained as an electrical engineer, Klass was senior avionics editor of *Aviation Week & Space Technology* for over thirty years. He received numerous awards for his work as a technical journalist, from such organizations as the Aviation/Space Writers Association and the Royal Aeronautical Society, and was named a Fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. He wrote one of the first books about spy satellites, *Secret Sentries in Space* (1971).

Klass was known for explaining UFO sightings with pragmatic explanations. Although his detractors styled him a "debunker," in fact, debunking was the consequence, not the purpose, of his efforts. He sought to investigate "flying-saucer" reports and thus convert UFOs (unidentified flying objects) to IFOs (identified flying objects) such as celestial bodies, research balloons, advertising planes, and even secret aircraft. His books on UFOs include *UFOs Explained* (1974), *The Real Roswell Crashed-Saucer Coverup* (1997), and *UFO Abductions: A Dangerous Game* (1989).

In 1999, the International Astronomical Union named Minor Planet (asteroid) 7277 "Klass" in his honor.

NCAS created the Philip J. Klass Award in 2006. Previous recipients were Michael Shermer, James Randi, Robert L. Park, Paul Kurtz and Ray Hyman.

2011 NCAS Philip J. Klass Award Recipient



Joel Achenbach

Author and *Washington Post* staff writer Joel Achenbach is a rarity among successful science journalists. Like others in that elite group, he can be reliably counted on to cover interesting and thought-provoking topics, identify the relevant experts, get the most out of them in interviews, and then accurately convey their knowledge to lay audiences. For this alone, NCAS could recognize Achenbach's excellence in promoting critical thinking and scientific understanding.

But it is Achenbach's willingness to skeptically probe the borderlands of science, into the fringes, and sometimes beyond, that especially earns his recognition through the 2011 Philip J. Klass Award. Paradoxically, those seem to be the realms that resonate most with general audiences, even in modern societies that are dependent upon genuine scientific methods and technological advances. Although some would prefer to ignore the fringe, many skeptics recognize the importance of publicly examining dubiously scientific claims that carry a wide and deep appeal. Ideally, Achenbach's skillfully conceived and researched works can serve readers as a conceptual pathway leading from pseudoscience to science.

More than most of his colleagues, Achenbach understands that skepticism is not synonymous with cynicism. Of particular note is his 1999 book *Captured by Aliens: The Search for Life and Truth in a Very Large Universe*, which provides a coherent view of otherwise disparate elements of the quest to understand humanity's place in the cosmos. Ranging from NASA, astronomy, Sagan, and the purportedly biological Martian meteorite, to Roswell, UFOs, and the Heaven's Gate cult (and with special assistance from Klass himself), this is a well-regarded but perhaps under-appreciated contribution to skeptical literature, leavened with Achenbach's insights and distinctive humor.

Readers probably first noticed Achenbach's talents through his *Why Things Are* newspaper columns, which ran from 1988 through 1996 and were compiled into three books. Achenbach's weekly column tackled an eclectic variety of subjects, including paranormal and other

extraordinary claims that typically received superficial or sensationally-slanted coverage elsewhere. In the modern Internet search-engine world, it may be hard to remember a time when good answers to unusual questions were hard to come by. Back then, that valuable service was regularly provided by *Why Things Are* (and antecedents like Ed Zotti's *The Straight Dope* column and David Feldman's *Imponderables* book series). Of those, it was probably Achenbach's column, which in its heyday was syndicated to fifty newspapers, that educated and entertained the largest audience.

Throughout his journalistic career, which began at *The Miami Herald* in 1982 and continued at the *Post* in 1990, Achenbach has contributed numerous feature articles and essays. He has been a commentator on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition," and also wrote a monthly science column for *National Geographic* magazine on such topics as dinosaurs, particle physics, earthquakes, extraterrestrial life, megafauna extinction, and the electrical grid. Achenbach started the *Post's* first online column (Rough Draft) in 1999 and the paper's first blog, Achenblog, in 2005. His writing was selected for one of the annual *Best American Science Writing* volumes edited by Timothy Ferris.

A 1982 magna cum laude B.A. graduate of Princeton University's Department of Politics, Achenbach has also been a visiting professor of journalism at his alma mater and at Georgetown University.

Of his Princeton days, Achenbach recalls that his freshman dormitory neighbor was David Duchovny, later to become famous for his role in the *X-Files* television series as FBI Special Agent Fox Mulder, the decidedly unskeptical protagonist who proclaimed, "I Want to Believe."

Now assigned to the *Post's* national desk, Achenbach writes on science and politics, and helped lead the coverage of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster, which is the topic of the newest of his seven books, *A Hole at the Bottom of the Sea: The Race to Kill the BP Oil Gusher*.

The National Capital Area Skeptics is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit, educational and scientific membership organization that promotes critical thinking and scientific understanding.

National Capital Area Skeptics
PO Box 8428
Silver Spring, MD 20907
www.ncas.org