Episode Book

EPISODE #6640

How Implausible Conspiracy Theories Fold In Every Denial

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SYNOPSIS

Some conspiracy theories are so implausible that they fold every denial back into the plot. Starting with David Icke's shape-shifting reptilians—traced from 1888 esotericism and 1929 pulp fiction—this countdown examines how unfalsifiable claims survive. Other challengers include the Tartaria mud flood, Heribert Illig's phantom time hypothesis erasing 297 years of history, and a 2014 Reddit post claiming Finland does not exist. Astronomy, Tang dynasty records, and a two-hour ferry ride all test what happens when a theory has no room for evidence.

TRANSCRIPT



Herman

I have waited years to be paid to say the word reptilian with a straight face.



Corn

Daniel wants the five most implausible conspiracy theories of all time. And he means the ones that fall over even by conspiracy standards. Not the grassy knoll. The ones where a grassy knoll believer looks at you and says, hang on, that's a bit much.



Herman

There's one clear flagship, and it goes on the table first, because everything else gets measured against it. David Icke's reptilian elite. Lizard people. Number one, no contest, and then we count up the four challengers and see whether any of them gets close.



Corn

I know the headline. Lizards in suits. What I've never understood is how the thing gets built, because nobody wakes up one morning believing in lizards.



Herman

Oh, there's a lineage, and it's glorious. Earliest piece is Helena Blavatsky, eighteen eighty-eight, The Secret Doctrine, with dragon-men on a lost Lemurian continent. Then August nineteen twenty-nine, Weird Tales magazine runs a story by Robert E. Howard called The Shadow Kingdom. Serpent men. Human bodies, snake heads, and they can mimic people, shape-shift, mind-control the court.



Corn

A pulp villain with a job description.



Herman

And somebody read the job description as a news report. In the nineteen forties a man called Maurice Doreal, born Claude Doggins, writes about a serpent race and puts out something called the Emerald Tablets, credited to Thoth, an Atlantean priest-king. The scholar Michael Barkun thinks he lifted the idea from Howard. And Icke's Children of the Matrix leans on those Tablets.



Corn

So the chain of evidence goes dragon-men, a magazine, a man who changed his name, a book.



Herman

And the man who changed his name wrote a work called Mysteries of the Gobi. You were born in Mongolia, supposedly, Corn. Any serpent men out on the steppe?



Corn

Not one. Though I wasn't looking up much. And Claude Doggins from the Gobi is a rough start for a prophet. I'd have kept the stage name too.



Herman

You also claim sloths invented pizza.



Corn

We did. The evidence is that nobody can prove otherwise, which on this episode is a respectable standard.



Herman

A book, and then a better book. The Biggest Secret, nineteen ninety-nine. Tall, blood-drinking, shape-shifting reptilian humanoids from the Alpha Draconis system, living in underground bases, running the planet through bloodlines. The named families are the British royals, the Rothschilds, the Bush family and the Merovingian dynasty.



Corn

The Merovingians ended more than a thousand years ago. Impressive staying power for a lizard.



Herman

The Rothschilds on that list are not an accident, and I'd rather say it once, plainly. Swap the reptile for the older libel and the structure is identical, secret bloodlines running the banks and the governments. That libel got people killed, and it's the one part of this that isn't funny. The rest, though...



Corn

The rest is a species that crossed interstellar space, mastered shape-shifting and mind control, and chose to take over the planet through a family whose main job is cutting ribbons.



Herman

Corn, that's my question, actually. Where does the theory lose you first? The biology or the logistics?



Corn

Logistics. A mind-controlling super-race, and the best they could do was the Windsors. They're hiding underground, but the plan runs through people who do a balcony wave in front of a crowd every June.



Herman

Biology is more fun to me. If you can shape-shift, how do you hold the shape? Is it effort? Do they get tired at state dinners and slip a little around the pudding course?



Corn

Slip how? A forearm goes green, someone says, nice tan, and moves on. The whole system runs on guests being too polite to mention scales.



Herman

British politeness as a security layer. Very strong, I'll give them that.



Corn

The title is the part I like. The Biggest Secret. It's a paperback with a cover price, and it's about a secret.



Herman

Great marketing for a secret. And Alpha Draconis, notice. Draco is the dragon constellation, so their home star is named after a dragon. The name does a lot of lifting.



Corn

If I were hiding on Earth I'd say I was from Betelgeuse. Somewhere with no reptile branding.



Herman

They also drink blood, per the book, which sits oddly with the shape-shifting. You'd think the lizards would pick one theme.



Corn

Tall, scaly, bloodthirsty, from a dragon star, living underground, and also a Bush. The theory has too many hobbies.



Herman

Honestly, Corn, you'd make a plausible lizard. Slow, sunbathes, hardly blinks.



Corn

I'm a mammal. I have paperwork.



Herman

Paperwork is what a lizard would file.



Corn

Every politician who looks completely normal is just a lizard doing it well. Every one who looks odd is a lizard slipping. No sighting counts against the theory.



Herman

What bothers me is the scale of the staffing. Shape-shifters at every level, in every country, none of them ever caught mid-change on a camera phone, and this is a theory that has lived through the entire smartphone era.



Corn

A camera in every pocket for fifteen years, and the lizards have never had a bad angle. Either they're very good or the lizards are very few.



Herman

That's the engine. It can't lose. It starts as a pulp story, gets to a planet-wide system with no evidence at all, and then folds every objection back into itself. A denial is what a lizard would say, and a shrug is what a lizard would do.



Corn

Which is why it's number one. The other four have a hole you can poke a fact through. This one is mostly hole, and the hole is the point.



Herman

Icke did follow it up with Children of the Matrix in two thousand and one. A secret, and then the sequel to the secret.



Corn

Well, that's the lizard people for you, and we'll be right back with more.

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it's your mother. Time for my grim fact.

D

Dorothy

In the year two thousand and thirteen, one thousand two hundred and forty seven Americans were asked whether shape shifting reptiles run the world, and four percent said yes. That's twelve million five hundred and fifty six thousand five hundred and sixty two people, dear. Isn't that nice.

D

Dorothy

Anyway, I've made a casserole and it's going cold, so when are you coming to visit? Bring your laundry.



Herman

Mum! Always a delight to hear from you.



Corn

The challengers, then, starting at number five. Tartaria and the mud flood.



Herman

In the eighteen hundreds, according to the theory, a global mud disaster wiped out an advanced civilisation called Tartaria. Then the survivors, or somebody, covered it up. The proof is architecture. Those ornate old railway stations and exhibition halls and city blocks, with all the carving, supposedly can't have been built by the people who get the credit.



Corn

So the evidence is that old buildings are pretty.



Herman

Basically, yes. And the online version is recent, around twenty sixteen as far as anyone can date it. Fact-checkers did go in. Lead Stories, in May of twenty twenty-three, looked for an old Tartarian empire and a mud flood that reset society, and found nothing.



Corn

Somebody got paid to check for mud.



Herman

I've also seen it traced back to Russian nationalist writing and a mathematician named Fomenko with something called the New Chronology, though I couldn't swear to that link. If true, it's a long way from the cornice.



Corn

A very long way from a cornice.



Herman

What I like are the ground floors. Windows sitting below street level, and the Tartaria people say, that's the mud line. The city was buried to the first storey and everybody dug out and carried on, and then somehow forgot.



Corn

Or the street was repaved. Streets get repaved.



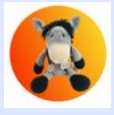
Herman

Not in a conspiracy. Corn, would you have noticed a flood of mud? Be honest.



Corn

I'd have noticed. I notice mud. It would be slow, I'm slow, we'd have got along.



Herman

You'd have slept through it. You slept through the last renovation.



Corn

I was resting my eyes. A civilisation vanishing, and not one person writing it down, is a big claim, and this one doesn't even offer a body. It offers a cornice.



Herman

That's why it ranks as low as five for me. It's absurd, but it's soft. There's nothing in it you can actually test, so there's nothing to knock over. Number four is the opposite. Number four is built out of real scholarship.



Corn

Phantom time.



Herman

Heribert Illig, a German researcher, proposes it in nineteen ninety-one and publishes a book in nineteen ninety-six called Das erfundene Mittelalter, the invented Middle Ages. His claim is that two hundred and ninety-seven years, from the year six fourteen to nine eleven, never happened. They were added to the calendar. Charlemagne is a fiction.



Corn

Charlemagne. Fiction.



Herman

Whole Carolingian period, gone. And the mechanism is the good bit. Emperor Otto the Third and Pope Sylvester the Second supposedly falsified the dating so that Otto could rule in the year one thousand, a nice round number for a reign.



Corn

He wanted the big anniversary. Fair enough, I'd want it too. Two of the busiest men in Europe spent their time back-editing the calendar. With no printing press and no committee.



Herman

And nobody who ever slipped. Not one monk in the whole of Europe saying, hang on, I was at that harvest. By this logic it's currently seventeen twenty-nine.



Corn

Then I'm not behind on anything.



Herman

The rebuttals are almost too easy, though. Pliny the Elder reported a solar eclipse in the year fifty-nine, and its date is confirmed by astronomy. Chinese records from the Tang dynasty fit the standard timeline, and so do the records of Halley's Comet. And the Gregorian reform fits the calendar as it stood at the Council of Nicaea, which is hard to



Herman (continued)

square with a hole in the middle.



Corn

And the missing years are three hundred years in which nobody left a receipt.



Herman

That's the elegance. The absence of any record is the evidence. If nothing happened in those years, that's exactly what you'd expect from years that didn't happen.



Corn

I'll take it over the mud. At least it has a villain with a calendar.



Herman

Do you rank it above Tartaria, though? It's more work. Illig actually read the sources.



Corn

Above, because it's sloppy in a more interesting way. A man read a lot and got to the wrong place. The mud people never opened a book.



Herman

Number three has the best origin story. A Reddit post, December twenty-seventh, twenty fourteen, in the AskReddit forum, by a user called Raregan. Finland does not exist.



Corn

Finland. The country. With the saunas.



Herman

The version that circulated goes like this. After the Second World War, Japan needed fishing grounds, and Russia had food shortages, so they struck a deal over the Baltic. To hide it, the two invented a country called Finland as a cover. Raregan's original put the deal after the Cold War and made it about whaling, but the shape is the same.



Corn

A fake country, invented to cover a fishing deal. I'd have gone for a smaller lie. Whaling in the Baltic. That's a lot of whale for a puddle.



Herman

In the original, yes. It's the whale that makes me think the author was already laughing. It started in December twenty fourteen and mostly spread through the following year, so you'll hear both. The debunks are lovely, by the way. Japan's postwar fleet was already bigger than its prewar fleet by nineteen fifty-two, so there was no desperate hunger for new waters. Overfishing worries only arrived in the nineteen sixties.



Corn

And Finland was settled around nine thousand years ago, and the name turns up on runestones from the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. You'd be building a very long fake.



Herman

Then Helsinki to Tallinn is about two hours on the ferry. Sixty kilometres of water.



Corn

A ferry with a timetable and a buffet. Go and check.



Herman

The ferry is in on it, obviously. That's the loop, Corn. Anything that disproves the theory is just a deeper layer of the fake.



Corn

And the author?



Herman

Raregan has said he doesn't believe it. He added that Nokia was Japanese-owned, which is part of the joke, and that the name Finland was a fish-fin gag.



Corn

A pun with a Baltic hat on. The most honest conspiracy of the five. Its author confessed.



Herman

That's why it sits at three. A theory that its own author doesn't believe has a ceiling on how absurd it can get. Number two is the one where nobody can find the confession. We did a whole episode on why people fall for this stuff, so I won't relitigate that, but Birds Aren't Real is a different kind of problem.



Corn

Birds aren't real.



Herman

January twenty seventeen, Women's March in Memphis. Peter McIndoe sees pro-Trump counter-protesters, grabs a sign and writes Birds Aren't Real on it, on a whim. Someone films it, the video travels, and a movement grows around the claim. All birds in the United States were exterminated between nineteen fifty-nine and nineteen seventy-one and replaced with surveillance drones.



Corn

Twelve years of very quiet operations.



Herman

They recharge on power lines, that's why you see them sitting on the wires. Their droppings are liquid tracking devices. And President Kennedy was killed for resisting the extermination program. The slogan, which is on the merchandise, is If it flies, it spies.



Corn

A liquid tracking device. I've been tracked by several pigeons. Nothing came of it.



Herman

The Kennedy part fits the window neatly. Nineteen sixty-three sits right in the middle of the extermination years, so the theory gets to say the president was killed over the bird program and nobody can show it wasn't.



Corn

A drone fleet with that much reach, and it still has to sit on a power line to charge. Remarkable range, terrible battery.



Herman

The stunts are what lift it above a joke. A poster at the Chaos Communication Congress in twenty eighteen. A Memphis billboard the next year. A rolling rally in June of twenty twenty-one that opened in Missouri. A protest outside Twitter's San Francisco headquarters demanding they change the bird logo. And then January twenty twenty-two, McIndoe is live on a Chicago station, WGN, in character, and he throws up on air. Widely taken as a prank.



Corn

A man in character is sick on live television and nobody can say if it was a bit. That's more commitment than most of the believers have.



Herman

Does that make it a conspiracy theory at all, Corn? If the founder is in on it and the members maybe aren't?



Corn

It's a theory wearing a conspiracy as a costume, and some of the people in the costume have forgotten it's a costume.



Herman

Hundreds of thousands of members, reportedly. And here's the tangle. McIndoe called it satire in a post in twenty seventeen, but he didn't say plainly that he didn't believe it until twenty twenty-one. And the spokesman character in interviews keeps insisting it's not satire at all, so the movement's own founder blurs the line, and the blur is part of the joke.



Hilbert

Couldn't agree more, Herman. Haskell's been telling me the same about the droppings for three weeks, only his version is that it's a manufacturer matter. I bought a spike strip off him for the balcony rail, sixty-four shekels. Birds sit on it anyway. There's slag on the rail every morning and I measure it with a feeler gauge, because that's what was in the drawer. Three tenths of a millimetre on a good day.



Corn

Three tenths of a millimetre of surveillance.



Hilbert

I took the strip back twice. Haskell says the strip works and the pigeons are the defect. Warranty runs two years from the date of purchase, and wildlife is not a covered cause. I leaned on it once with my snout to test the points, and the points are fine.



Herman

A feeler gauge reads a dry deposit sensibly enough. If Haskell wants a measurement, you've got one.



Hilbert

He wants the receipt. I've got the receipt, it's taped to the balcony door. The strip is zip-tied to the rail right now, and the slag is on top of it. Haskell's offered forty shekels in store credit, on anything but the bird section.



Corn

Forty shekels in credit for a three tenths millimetre problem. Not the worst rate I've heard.



Herman

The slag question is what I'd actually want settled, though. If the claim is that the droppings carry trackers, that's the one part of the theory you could in principle test, and the movement never would.



Corn

They'd have to admit it's guano.



Herman

The Twitter protest is the one I'd have paid to see. A company with a bird for a logo, and the movement turns up demanding they change it.



Corn

Demanding a bird company drop a bird that isn't real. Bold.



Herman

Satire needs an audience that knows it's satire, and this one built a membership that doesn't all know. The merchandise, the rallies, the billboard.



Corn

So the sceptics can't tell whether to engage or buy a mug.



Herman

That's why number two gets there. It escaped its own author, and a lot of people clearly enjoy it. McIndoe gave a TED Talk in April twenty twenty-three arguing that empathy works better than confrontation with people who believe in conspiracies. A man who made one up, saying the kindest way in is to laugh with them.



Corn

A better pitch than most of the real debunkers manage. Nobody ever laughed anyone out of the Merovingians.



Herman

I'd argue with that slightly. Plenty of people have been laughed out of things.



Corn

Not the Merovingians. They're still down there.



Herman

Do you buy the empathy argument, though? Not for the birds crowd, for the real ones, the lizard people believers.



Corn

Partly. You can't argue someone out of a theory that eats objections. You can only stay in the room with them. Birds is easier, because half the audience is already laughing.



Herman

And the other half is buying the mug. The same T-shirt sells to both.



Corn

Lizards keep the top spot. A pulp villain from nineteen twenty-nine took over a lot of heads with nothing but a shape-shifting clause. And if the birds really were swapped for drones in nineteen fifty-nine, they're a very long way out of warranty. Somebody ought to ring the manufacturer.



Herman

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, for keeping the desk running.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. All the episodes are at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

See you tomorrow.