

It's going to be OK; Elenin won't destroy Earth

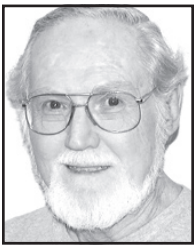
With my bachelors, masters and doctorate degrees in the behavioral sciences, one would think I should have greater insight into a certain perplexing human behavior, one that overlaps with my vocational field of astronomy.

In the two decades I've been writing "Stargazer" and presenting astronomy programs, I've been asked numerous times about "threats" to us and our planet, mostly relating to things from outer space. And some people continue to accept uncritically what they read on the Internet.

One of the latest is Comet Elenin which, according to various Internet stories, might not be a comet at all but rather a "rogue planet" larger than Jupiter, or maybe a brown dwarf star which has entered our solar system. And it's going to rain all kinds of havoc on us Sept. 26 – or is October, or maybe November or sometime in 2012? Depends on which crackpot you read.

Some claim it might crash into Earth. Others say even if misses, its gravitational pull will cause earthquakes and tsunamis. And if that doesn't happen, then its powerful magnetic force will bring about changes in Earth's tilt, and perhaps even cause a pole shift. And why aren't we reading more about this in the mainstream media? Because there is a government conspiracy to keep it hushed lest the masses – that's us – panic.

Wow, that's a lot of worry about Comet Elenin which is, in fact, a small chunk of rocky ice less than three miles in diameter that will pass 21 million miles from Earth Oct. 16. The worry is all the more remarkable given the fact that Venus, which is close to Earth's size, regularly passes nearly that close to us, and nothing happens – no earthquakes, no tsunamis, no pole shifts – nothing beyond giving us a



Paul Derrick

• Stargazer

beautiful "evening star" or "morning star."

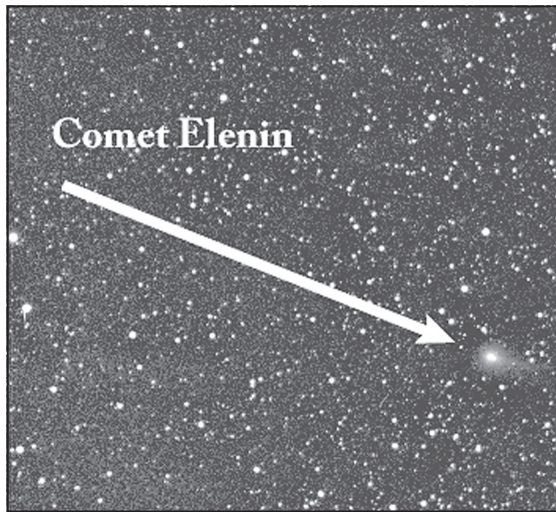
Elenin is just the most recent of such fables. Perhaps you've heard of Nibiru, Planet X, the aliens who crash-landed near Roswell, N.M., or the 2012 Maya prophecy, to name but a few. And while I find no credible evidence to support any of these, I recognize that such stories hold a certain fascination – even for me.

As a teenage in the 1950s, I was captivated by amateur hypnotist Morey Bernstein's book "The Search for Bridey Murphy," about the woman who under hypnotism was "proving" the existence of reincarnation. And there were the countless UFO "sightings" that always made my ears perk up.

Then in the 1970s I was attracted to Erich Von Daniken's books, especially "Chariots of the Gods?" in which he set out to prove that many seemingly mysterious occurrences were the work of ancient astronauts thousands of years ago. But as much as I wanted to believe these things, they simply didn't hold up to critical scrutiny.

Most of the Internet-based fantasies in recent years seem deal with threats to our planet – asteroids, rogue planets or whatever on paths to destroy poor, hapless us.

That's not to say there is no chance of a large space object impacting Earth – it's happened many times



in Earth's history, and will happen again, although probably not in our lifetime. There are efforts underway to find and track all near Earth objects that might pose a threat; to date none have been found that justify serious worry. If and when any are found, it is unlikely our government would try to keep it secret, or be able to if it tried.

Even though these Internet-fostered imagined threats can almost always be dispelled by scientific evidence, they still attract some folks. Many seem to want so strongly to believe them that no evidence can budge their thinking, and my behavioral scientist self has trouble coming up with a satisfactory answer to "Why?"

Perhaps these stories simply entertain us, just as we're entertained by science fiction – even when we know the stories aren't true. But that seems only a partial answer; it doesn't explain why many people

apparently really want to, and do, believe these fictions.

If they are attracted by ideas of drastic and dramatic threats to us and our planet, they need look no further than the real threats we face, like wars, or the maldistribution of wealth, or global warming, or our depleting the finite resources of our planet. These are real horror stories, so why aren't there more Internet warnings about things that are truly threats? Why does there seem to be so much denial about these dangers?

Ah! Denial. Maybe that explains the curious behavior of our gullibility to fanciful dangers. Perhaps by dreaming up and preoccupying our thoughts with imagined threats, which in our subconscious we know or strongly suspect aren't real, it makes it easier to ignore those threats which we fear are real.

Maybe this explains our curious behavior, or maybe it doesn't, but there's no denying we'd be better off applying our mental energies to dealing with real perils rather than imagined ones. That, of course, is a no-brainer, but how to make that happen – well, that's something else again. And while my college degrees still don't give me the satisfying answers I'd like, they helped me learn to think critically and inoculated me from the gullibility and magical thinking that afflict so many of our fellow sojourners on planet Earth.

Paul Derrick is an amateur astronomer who lives in Waco, Texas. His website (www.stargazerpaul.com) contains an archive of past Stargazer columns and other basic stargazing information. Contact him at paulderrickwaco@aol.com or (254) 723-6346 or write 918 N. 30th St., Waco, Texas, 76707.

On the Beat

COLBY POLICE

Thursday

1:07 a.m. – Security at Twist-er's.
6:28 a.m. – Unlocked building at Fike Park.
7 a.m. – Helped ambulance crew.
8:35 a.m. – Warrant arrest made.
9:21 a.m. – Spoke to subject on phone about subject taking things out of dumpster.
10:11 a.m. – Accident at Casey's.
3:09 p.m. – Report of possible phone harassment. Not harassment; was possible phone scam; information provided.
5:39 p.m. – Subject reported possible harassment via Facebook. Spoke to reporting party, not a criminal matter. No report.
6:14 p.m. – Caller reported three juveniles hitting metal trash can at

Fike Park. Spoke to subjects.

7:59 p.m. – Anonymous caller reported female juvenile driving a vehicle with expired tags. Not found

8:07 p.m. – All OK with subjects picking up broken beer bottles in the 600 block of N. Franklin; provided traffic control.

9:20 p.m. – Caller reported four subjects were yelling at each other; felt male in vehicle might cause more problems. Extra patrol ordered.

THOMAS COUNTY SHERIFF

Thursday

7 a.m. – Caller hit a deer on K-25 10 miles south of Colby. Deputy advised just south of mile 189.
9:50 a.m. – Released Jason R. Davis.
10:06 a.m. – Booked Colby Phillips Poage.
2:28 p.m. – Spoke to subject on

phone about civil matter.

4:31 p.m. – Booked Grant Lane Kahle.

6:04 p.m. – Caller reported subjects who have been served eviction notice still at residence. Spoke to subjects; they left.

7:03 p.m. – Caller reported two teenagers had a flat tire; were at residence at 985 County Rd 20. At 7:22 reporting party called back. All was OK; they were from Oakley.

8:35 p.m. – Two callers reported sheep near roadway in the 2100 block of U.S. 24. Police officer left message for owner to handle.
8:51 p.m. – Traveler's aid.


Ohio jail tour gets no takers

CANTON, Ohio (AP) – Officials at a northeast Ohio jail say no one showed up for a public tour intended to demonstrate why voters need to approve a sales tax that will be on the Nov. 8 ballot.

Chief sheriff's Deputy Michael McDonald oversees the Stark County jail and says he was "pretty disgusted" by the lack of

turnout. He tells the *Repository* newspaper of Canton (<http://bit.ly/qa122T>) officials want to educate people about the need for the 0.5 percent sales tax for criminal justice services.

McDonald had wanted to show how the jail currently has 300 inmates guarded by a staff of seven. He says that ratio concerns him.



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