

The Latest Cult Hero -- Dr. J.R. (Bob) Dobbs

By Stephen G. Bloom  
Dallas Morning News

DALLAS -- First there was the Gilgamesh, then the Bible, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, Dianetics, "I'm OK, You're OK," and now, "The Book of the SubGenius."

Or so says Doug Smith (a.k.a. Ivan Stang) who -- along with three Dallas friends, Lamont Duvoy (Dr. X), John Hagen (Satellite Weavers) and Philo Drummond -- has collected the thoughts of a strange and bizarre messiah, Dr. J.R. (Bob) Dobbs.

Pipe-smoking Dr. Bob, who bears an uncanny resemblance to both Beaver Cleaver's father, Ward, and comic strip hero Mark Trail, may or may not exist. But that's not important says Smith, 30.

"Dr. Bob is too busy to be interviewed," Smith says defiantly. "He's off communing with the elder gods of the universe."

Dobbs is the leader of a New Wave cult group called the SubGenius, whose principles first were espoused in a 1978 pamphlet that has become an underground classic. The Dallas-based cult's newest offering is the best-selling "Book of the SubGenius" (MacGraw-Hill, \$9.95).

The transition from pamphlet to a professionally produced book wasn't anything planned by Smith and the rest of Dobbs' disciples. Last year, McGraw-Hill contacted Smith with a book offer after one of its editors had been slipped the pamphlet at a company picnic. That, along with news of the peculiar First World SubGenius Convention actually held at Dealey Plaza on Nov. 22, 1981 was enough for publishers to think money could be made by spreading Dr. Bob's gospel.

Smith hired a Chicago agent he describes as a "very sane, 50-year-old woman not addicted to drugs or anything," who started a bidding war for the book, which doubled the hefty advance money. McGraw-Hill's Tim McGuinness sold the publishing company's marketing division on the idea of the book.

"I had this gut feeling it would do well," he says. "Word-of-mouth advertising that this was a comic, underground satire has sold the book for us. Not everyone picks up on the spoof. It's on a frequency only dogs and select humans can hear."

Enough people have bought Bob's 184-page philosophy for MacGraw-Hill to commission a second printing only five weeks after the book was released -- highly unusual for a first book written by an unknown.

But then again, Bob and his disciples are not very usual. One has to have watched the "Addams Family" to appreciate the strangeness of Dr. Bob's world headquarters, Smith's East Dallas home. Vintage comic books are stacked on a stand in the living room; posters of Idi Amin and Captain Beefheart decorate the upstairs; a green and red papier-mache dinosaur decorates the foyer.

Meanwhile, Smith's wife, Shelby, a petite woman wearing a skimpy purple bikini, extols the virtues of broccoli to their two young children, who wander around the house naked.

Smith, who wrote most of the book and is probably the most knowledgeable of Dr. Bob's scribes, graduated 12 years ago from St. Mark's School, which he calls "one of the conspiracy's (translation: establishment's) most important bastions, composed of twisted and bizarre minds."

He became an independent film maker in Dallas, doing animated wacko movies. His most celebrated, shown in art houses throughout the United States: "Reproduction Cycle," a 15-minute short about sex among microbes on Mars, and "Let's Visit the World of the Future," an X-rated, punk travelogue.

By April, 1978, Smith and his cohorts had cooked up the idea of writing about Dr. Bob. As Dallas journalist David Seeley, who has followed the cult's mysterious exploits since its beginning, has written, "People out there were watching 'Laverne and Shirley,' reading Reader's Digest and chewing 32 times before swallowing, and it seemed to Drummond, Smith and Duvoe that they were the only ones who knew how screwed up the world really was."

The three began collecting pamphlets from UFO cults, Atlantis aficionados, John Birch Society chapters, Scientology freaks, white supremacy groups and Hare Krishna devotees. "We realized it would be easy to mmx them up in one pile and come out with something better," Smith says.

Whether the world was ready or not, Dr. Bob was introduced through an appropriately demented, 16-page pamphlet. His disciples sold the pamphlet for \$1, recommending that converts spread the gospel by leaving it in laundromats and restrooms.

But just who is Dr. J.R. (Bob) Dobbs, the man with that obnoxiously self-assured smile?

Only this much is known: Bob is about 60 years old. His father was a Mayan pharmacist, his mother the relative of an Irish revolutionary. Bob became a millionaire at age 6, and while in high school received a degree in law through a correspondence course. He did top-secret intelligence work during World War II, then became an author (his 'Sleeping for Fitness' was a best seller). Finally, he went into business and became an awning salesman extraordinaire.

He leads a motley assemblage of family: wife, Connie (his first-grade sweetheart), his five sons (Bubba, Bobby Jr., Adam Kadman, Shem and Shaun) and his daughter (her name has never been released for fear of her being kidnapped).

Bob, his disciples say, is everywhere. "He might be infiltrating the Austral Plane(CQ) or be on Skid Row giving a bum a haircut or tumbling in bed, extracting secrets from some conspiracy wench," according to "The Book of the SubGenius."

What has garnered such a following for Dr. Bob is his carefree philosophy, which is a cross between Alfred E. Newman's and Ozzy Osbourne's.

His motto is "Slack off!" which translates to doing what you want to do whenever you want to do it. "The world is a turkey," according to "The Book of the SubGenius," "and Bob gives you the carving knife."

No religion would be complete without a prescribed death ritual. Bob's recommendations are not for the queasy. "The great honor for any SubGenius is to have his head mounted on Bob's rumpus room wall, or his skull made into one of Dobbs' ritual ashtrays. Give of yourself and you will be assured of special treatment on The Other Side."

Interested readers who wish to become Dr. Bob devotees should know how to salute fellow parishioners. Put an index finger to the throat, run it up and down over the Adam's apple fast and gurgle "EYIYIYI."

Actual churches of Dr. Bob followers have been established. Active congregations exist in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Austin, Minneapolis and Boston -- but not in Dallas. "It's too straight a city," says Smith.

In Berkeley, there is even a weekly Dr. Bob radio show. Scribe Smith estimates about 30,000 followers adhere to the cult.

Abandoned 1950's motels, gas stations and hamburger stands are recommended as potential sites of worship. Typical Dr. Bob ceremonies start with congregants screaming at the top of their lungs, followed by a general pelting of the self-ordained minister with coins. The donations are not tax-deductible, however; the SubGenius Foundation is a profit-making business incorporated within Dallas County. Even Dr. Bob's face is protected with a registered trademark.

All the writing of "The Book of the SubGenius," as well as most of the production work, was accomplished at Smith's house. It took six months to complete the manuscript for McGraw-Hill.

The last thing Smith wants is for the cult to be swallowed up by an egocentric leader. "If we get too big, were going to have to kill Bob. I'd hate to do it. But he doesn't need the money. I want it."

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