

Whitley Strieber is not a liar, a drunk or an addict. Neither is he insane. But is his story of abduction by tiny extra-terrestrials really credible? Ann Shearer reports

A man who got carried away

WHEN Whitley Strieber went to bed on December 26, 1985, fortified by a supper of Christmas leftovers and a glass of seltzer and lime, family and burglar alarms in due place, he thought that his waking self would be abducted in the night by small beings with two dark holes for eyes and mouths that moved between lines and circles, was hardly on his mind.

But taken he was — first to the woods, then to a small circular room where, to his intense and utter terror, they inserted a needle into his head and a probe into his rectum before he blanked out until he found himself back in bed as if nothing had happened at all.

What he went through that night, he later discovered, had been logged by others over the years as "an archetypal abduction experience." The details of it, and others similar in his life, painfully reconstructed through nagging unease, discussion and eventual hypnosis, have been echoed by others too. So has the utter uncanniness of those small "visitors", insect-like rather than human, their occasional entirely comprehensible speech doing nothing at all to dull the terror at the paralysis of human will and body they seem able to induce.



Whitley Strieber: a great wonder

There was a time when Whitley Strieber thought he was insane. The eminent psychiatrist who examined him has put on public record that he finds no trace of psychosis or personality disorder. Nor, according to the tests, is Strieber suffering from temporal lobe epilepsy. Nor, according to the polygraph, is he a liar. Nor, by his own account, is he a heavy drinker or at all a taker of hallucinogenic or other drugs. The terror now "at least on the surface" abated, he is left with the experiences themselves and those separate ones of his wife and small son. "We are," he says with a sort of studied calm, "in the presence of a great wonder of some kind".

It is not one with which he has had previous truck. Of unidentified flying objects and allied topics he has made no previous study, his own line of business being the writing of books, including a rather serious prize-winner about the horrors of a nuclear winter. Time was when he feared that his reputation would be seriously tarnished by his account of his meetings with the visitors.

Not, perhaps, any longer, for it seems that his story has come for its time. Even his publishers, who shelled out a \$1 million as advance on it are astonished, he says, at how their investment has prospered. Already *Communion* has hit the top of the US bestseller list and looks set to go back there; since February, it has sold 200,000 copies in hardback.

What it has brought in its train is up to 50 letters a day, none of them hate mail, most of them highly articulate and very many recounting experiences similar to his own. For the first time, he says the professional classes are admitting to such strangenesses in their own lives. At the very least, he says, if a common

insanity is what they all share, then we are going to have to look again at our definitions of psychosis.

Those accounts, and the others which may come his way after *Communion* is published here tomorrow will eventually find their place in a properly docketed data base. For now, some common features can already be discerned. Most of the experiences of "visitors" have happened to people living, as he was, in isolated areas. Very often, they have found themselves "operated on," and sometimes too — as happened separately to his wife, his son and himself — they are left with physical scars or sorenesses that only underline the compelling sense of physical reality that characterises the experience.

Very often, too, there are associated electrical disturbances; to this day he is cursed by his unwitting bugging of his computers. And almost always and not perhaps surprisingly, people are left in the aftermath of that sheer terror with a need to make some very drastic reassessments of their intellectual and spiritual patterns.

If Whitley Strieber has discerned any purpose to the visitors' actions, that reassessment, for us humans at least, is perhaps it. Accounts of UFOs and visitors of non-human sort — which may or may not be related — have been recorded since antiquity; even the blue overalls of Strieber's visitors can find their antecedents in the medieval German kobbolds, a race of underground dwarfs who wore that characteristic, cobalt blue.

The last time there was a great surge of UFO-sightings, however, was in the 1950s — at a time when the West was shaken to its core by the realisation of the horror of the Holocaust and the reality of the atom bomb.

Now we are in the grip of an ever-increasing anxiety about the future of the planet itself. Have the visitors come, as dwarfs and other non-humans ever have in myth and legend, to bring a new sort of energy that can be creative if properly approached, destructive if not? Already the thoroughly sceptical psychologist who has been sorting through the accounts sent to Strieber has noticed that those from men, in particular, seem somehow "gentled," as if barriers of aggression and fear may be lowering.

That psychologist is one of a group Strieber has gathered to inquire into the evidence. The group also includes a psychiatrist, an astrophysicist and scientists various, including one with a very secret job for the US navy. Between them, they bring biases that range from a predisposition to believe in the visitors as an external reality, associated with UFOs, to an insistence that the only possible explanation will be found in a working of the human mind not yet understood. That, says Strieber, is as it should be: "It is a time not to believe, but to examine."

What he wants now is for more scientists to shed their prejudices about UFOs and to start taking seriously the proliferating accounts of visitors in a new respect for people who have for so long been fearful of mentioning those experiences at all. And he is very keen that reports from his group make their way to government. "Either this is a mental health problem of some significance, or the visitors are real or it is an extraordinary mental state which can be used for growth. Whichever it is, the whole body politic has a right to know what's going on."

Communion by Whitley Strieber is published tomorrow by Century Hutchinson, £10.95.