

They're small, dark-eyed and a pain when they fly in.

JOHN PRESTON on a lucrative encounter.

WHITLEY STRIEBER has written a true story. In case you doubt this it's printed in italics at the bottom of every page of his book—recently topping the best-seller charts in the States—as well as on the jacket and the fly-leaf.

As Strieber writes in the introduction, his book *Communion* is the story of "one man's attempt to deal with a shattering assault on the unknown". Or, to put it another way, Strieber has had what appears to be a series of close encounters with extra-terrestrial beings. Yes, they're out there after all. And Strieber has met them.

What makes Strieber's book different from other reported contacts with Martians, Venusians, Klingons and assorted aliens, is that he is a determinedly regular guy, a sceptic, not in the slightest bit given to exotic flights of fancy. At least not in non-fiction. He's the author of a number of horror stories as well as a couple of more serious works.

Paranoid

What's more he is—and this is the important part—completely sane. If you have doubts about this too, there are testimonies from psychiatrists in the book confirming that he is not suffering from paranoid delusions, plus the results of lie detector tests which bear out his story.

Strieber's not even saying for sure he has met up with "visitors", only that he's had a series of weird experiences and we would all

The night E.T. came for Whitley Strieber

be better off if we kept open minds about such things. All in all, he's being entirely reasonable about the whole thing.

"Oh God, he's a loony," muttered the photographer as Strieber strode across the lounge of his hotel. In the flesh, Strieber certainly looks as if he has just stepped off the bridge of Fireball XL5, but this surely is no discredit at all. What he is though, is very earnest indeed. British journalists, he has found, have been giving him a rather rougher ride than he got in the States.

"In America I am a well-known author," he says a little huffily, between sips of weak camomile tea. "No one imagines for a moment that I would come up with a fraud."

Over here he has already seen off one "wittily sceptical" interviewer. "I told him to get lost," he says. "I couldn't think what else to do. After all, I am sceptical myself, not in a thoughtless way though, but in a thoughtful way."

Why, you may wonder, should the visitors have picked on Strieber as a subject for study?

He's as much in the dark about this as everyone else. But judging by the book, it's because of his complete absence of any sense of humour. This is the bad news. They may be out there. They may be more or less intelligent than us. When it comes to mirth though, they're complete non-starters.

Probes

But, as Strieber tells it, this was a seriously non-humorous experience. It all started—or seemed to start—one night when he woke up to see a small figure standing at the end of his bed. The figure had two dark holes for eyes, another dark hole where its mouth should be, and it appeared to be wearing some sort of breastplate. Strieber's first reaction, being a non-fanciful sort of



GARRIED AWAY... Strieber the "sceptic" —and best-seller.

fellow, was to put this down to a "hypnopompic hallucination." But then he began to have his doubts.

The next thing he knew he was being carried along by a group of figures and taken into a small circular chamber in the middle of a wood. There he was submitted to some sort of medical examination, with probes being stuck into the sort of places where probes have no business going. When he woke the next day he had a pain in his bottom and was in a state of understandable confusion.

In the weeks that followed he thought he was going mad. Eventually he decided to go and see a therapist. He toyed with the idea of going to see someone called Dr Aphrodite Clamar, but decided against it (wisely, one can't help thinking) plumping instead for someone at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. Under hypnosis he remembered other encoun-

ters with the visitors stretching back to his childhood.

What's more he came to realise that he was not alone. Plenty of other people, apparently quite sane, had had similar experiences. In no case though was there any direct evidence of abduction.

As far as Strieber was concerned this made it all the more fascinating. Were the visitors from another planet? Were they figments of his imagination, dead people swirling around in the void, results of "electromagnetic anomalies"?

And so on. And so on. Some people had emerged from their experiences hopelessly traumatised, others had come out enriched.

As for Strieber, if he really was carried off by aliens, they don't seem to have done much for his prose style. Someone, reputedly of earthly origin, is quoted on the book jacket as saying that it's beautifully written. This is pushing it. In fact it's a grindingly literal account of the minutiae of what apparently happened to him, full of tedious transcripts of hypnosis sessions and meetings with other abductees.

Sequel

But that hasn't stopped it from selling like wildfire in the States. Turned down, with contempt, notes Strieber) by nine publishers, it sold out as soon as it hit the shops. The reprints have kept rolling ever since. And there's more to come. Strieber has had further visitor experiences since completing the book and intends to write a sequel detailing his recent escapades.

The most notable of them involved his being transported once again by the visitors, although this time he decided to walk rather than be carried. He had hoped to take a camera. Regrettably this proved impossible. So he took his cut instead.

Communion by Whitley Strieber is published by Century at £10.95.