

NATIONAL

Remembering Zimbabwe's great alien invasion

Sean Christie 4 Sep 2014



Tracking down one of the Ariel School experiencers took some doing, but eventually I connected with Sara as “a most stubborn old Rhodie [white Rhodesian] bar” in downtown Harare.

Of the more than 110 children and staff who had been at the school, which sits just outside the small agric when the aliens landed in 1994, she thought she was probably the only one still in the country.

“Everyone’s fucked off to Canada or the UK,” she said. “Or died.”

When it became clear to her drinking buddies that we were going to talk UFOs, eyes began to roll.

“Christ, Sê, not ET again,” someone muttered.

She ignored him.

“Whaddya wanna know? Actually, it’ll be simpler if I just shoot. It happened, OK. Sixty-two kids between saw the aliens land and get out of their little ships. When the kids returned to class they were completely nattering about little men who looked a bit like Michael Jackson. The teachers told them to shut up, as the classes proceeded.

“But the next day the school received a bunch of calls from parents wanting to know why their kids were teachers started to freak out, too, and a local UFO expert called Cynthia Hind was invited to speak to even that we heard about a famous shrink who was coming from the US to assess the children. What was his name Mack, who I heard was killed by a drunk driver a few years back.”

Dedicated investigator

Hind, who died in 2000, had publicly acknowledged her own experiences with otherworldly beings in the

past decade and a half of her life to investigating UFO sightings on the African continent on behalf of the then publishing her findings in the very collectable newsletter, *UFO Afrinews*.

I had brought along a printout of Issue 11, which I opened on the bar counter before Sarah on Hind's article "Case No 95". It begins:

"Wednesday, 14th September, 1994, was an exciting night for Southern Africa. Round about 20:50 to 21:00 a display of some magnificence appeared in the almost clear night skies of this part of the continent."

An Ariel schoolchild telling her story of the alien who arrived.

Astronomers across the region soon reported that the "pyrotechnic display", seen as far afield as Zambia, was a meteor shower. Hind, though, recorded receiving dozens of reports of a capsule-like fireball, trailing fire and leaving behind capsules.

She also received several reports of alien sightings around the same time: a young boy and his mother reported a sighting, and a trucker who had seen strange beings on the road at night. And then, on September 16, Hind received the report which she records as Case 96, and describes as "one of the most exciting UFO stories of this or any year".

Childhood recollection

Hind's narrative closely mirrors Sarah's recollection. At 10am, Hind writes, on a hot day, the children were playing during morning break. They were drawn to an area beyond their playing field of "long grass with thorn and other bushes growing in a higgledy-piggledy fashion, and undergrowth thick and heavy enough to hide a child should he venture there."

The teachers had all entered the staff room for a meeting and the only adult outdoors was the tuckshop manager who was swamped by children claiming they had seen "three or four objects coming into the rough bush area ... disappearing along the power lines and finally landing in the rough, among the trees. The children were a little bit afraid but very curious."

The UFO investigator goes on to record the testimonies of several of the children, who she says represent Zimbabweans: black African children from several tribes, coloured children (a cross-breeding of black and white) (whose grandparents were from India) and white children, mostly Zimbabwean-born, but whose parents were from Africa or Britain".

Although they all came from wealthy families (tuition at Ariel School was expensive), Hind believed their accounts led to differing interpretations of the event, and that the differences in interpretation made the details of the accounts very compelling indeed.

One of the white students, for example, "thought at first that the little man in black might have been Mrs. G. But when he saw that the figure had long, straight black hair, 'not really like [a] black [person's] hair', so he realised it was not Mrs. G."

Some of the black children thought the short little beings were *zvikwambo*, or tokoloshes – the evil goblin-like creatures of Zulu folklore – and burst into tears, fearing they would be eaten.

Guy G said: "[I] could see the little man (about a metre tall) was dressed in a black, shiny suit; that he had large eyes, which seemed lower on the cheek than our eyes, were large and elongated. The mouth was just a slit, hardly discernible."

Parent's disbelief

Hind's account ends with her outrage at the disbelief of the children's parents.

"What a frightening indictment of our society that when we are confronted by something we don't understand, we refuse to open our minds to the event."

After reading the article, Sarah ordered another Castle and said: “To be perfectly honest, I don’t think you me now if it wasn’t for that woman [Hind].

“What happened at Ariel was certainly weird, so many kids coming back from break with such similar stories people would have heard about it if Hind hadn’t made such a fuss. She was the first person to interview them to all sorts of important people, Mack included, as if, you know, finally here was some vindication.”

Hind’s descriptions of Mack from this time do indeed suggest she regarded him as something of a redeemer “not only open-minded and prepared to listen, but an academic of some standing. And one who has risked colleagues to come out and say he believes the experiences of abductees are very real indeed.”

Who was this man, Mack, whose interest transformed a local curiosity into a study that continues to amaze today?

I’d been told a little of his biography by a relative of mine called Nicky Carter, who after hearing of the incident at Ariel School had been the first media respondent, covering it as a producer for an SABC current affairs programme.

Prize-winning author

Dr John E Mack, she said, had been a Pulitzer prize-winning author (awarded for his 1977 study of *Lawrence: Our Disorder: The Life of TE Lawrence*) and a professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School.

Highly regarded, Mack had nevertheless been having a tough year professionally when Carter met him. His interest in the alien abduction phenomenon, which he had begun researching in the early 1990s and resulted in the bestselling book *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*.

Carter sent me Mack’s own account of the fallout. “In the spring of 1994,” he writes in his second book on the phenomenon, *Passport to the Cosmos*, “one of the deans at the Harvard Medical School handed me a letter establishing of a small committee to investigate my work [on the alien abduction phenomenon].

Dr John Mack was a Pulitzer prize-winner who came under fire for his UFO research.

“After explaining vaguely that ‘concerns’ had been expressed to the university about what I was doing (all complaints, nor was any offered in the letter), he added pleasantly – for he had been a friend and colleague – gotten into trouble if I had not suggested in the book [*Abduction*] that my findings might require a change rather than saying that I had found a new psychiatric syndrome whose cause had not yet been established.”

Another peer, Paul McHugh of Johns Hopkins Medical School, was less delicate, describing Mack in the journal as “a brilliant fellow who occasionally loses it, and this time he’s lost it big time”.

Mack’s standard rejoinder was to point out that, although alien encounters were “not possible according to science” they might nevertheless “turn out to be real in some way that we do not yet understand ... as the bizarre reports of meteorites falling from the sky seemed [impossible] in the 18th century.”

Attempted ouster

By mid-1994 Mack had overcome attempts at an ouster by some of his Harvard colleagues, and was planning his research to include African alien encounters and abductions. A flight was booked to South Africa, where he would meet with experiencers such as the well-known traditional healer and author Credo Mutwa (who was to be interviewed by Carter, who covered the interview for the SABC, about his rape by a golden-haired, blue-eyed alien female).

As he was preparing to depart for Africa, news of the Ariel School encounter broke, and Mack adjusted his plans.

These were the extraordinary coincidences by which the world’s most newsworthy psychiatrist happened to be in Zimbabwe. Hind recorded how he appeared on “two radio shows and one TV programme” before driving back to Ruwa.

"These days were filled with exciting revelations for him," wrote Hind.

"John was able to get through to parents and teachers and convince them that, even if they did not believe counterproductive to accuse them of lying."

What interested Mack was how the children's accounts connected to things he'd been told by other of his namely that the aliens had communicated an urgent environmental message.

In *Passport to the Cosmos*, Mack records that after some years of research he was "astonished to discover powerful messages about the human threat to the Earth's ecology were being conveyed to the experienced words and images". He personally deemed it "quite possible that the protection of the Earth's life is at the phenomenon".

Original interviews

Snippets of Mack's interviews with the children can still be found on YouTube today. A fifth-grader called eyed psychiatrist he was warned "about something that's going to happen," and that "pollution mustn't be says; "I think they want people to know that we're actually making harm on this world and we mustn't ge

I cued up one of the clips on my phone for Sarah, but she waved it away.

"I can't, I can't ... no, I've had too much of my own experience to want to relive somebody else's."

After a long draw on her beer she said: "They weren't wrong, though, about the environmental shit, were now you'll see the Miombo forests have disappeared for firewood."

Drawings by pupils at Ariel School in Zimbabwe of the aliens' visit to their school in Sep

But during my first visit to the district, what had struck me was not the state of the forests but the fact that continued to grow in pupil numbers, and looked to be prospering.

The khaki uniforms, the red floppy hats, the break-time chirring – it all matched the YouTube clips, only white students, the white farming families having all moved elsewhere as a result of the government's race. The "rough area" beyond the playground had been stumped and mown into a second sports field, dusty for teachers I bumped into about the events of 1994, but it seemed that aspect of the school's history had left

"There was his documentary being made about it at one point," said Sarah, getting a little shaky on her stomach. What was his name now ... Randall, Randy. Ha! Anyway, that was about seven or eight years ago now, and since."

Exploring the frontiers

I knew a little more than she did, again courtesy of my relative, who had provided local assistance to the center. Mack was killed in a car accident in London in 2004, some of his supporters and family members had founded the Institute, with a mission to "explore the frontiers of human experience, to serve the transformation of individuals to further the evolution of the paradigms by which we understand human identity".

In 2007, to further these rather grandiose aims, a young filmmaker called Randall Nickerson had signed Ariel School footage. "Geez, he was sooo handsome," said Sarah, slapping her palms against her jeans.

"I could hardly concentrate when he was interviewing me. Not only that, he understood the thing on a different experiential level himself, who had been quite open about his encounter. I think he even appeared on *Oprah*

I had contacted Nickerson in 2008, and because he happened to be in Cape Town running former Ariel school arranged to meet and talk about his project. He cancelled at the last minute, though, saying he didn't feel

From time to time I checked the Mack Institute webpage for updates, but after a few years it seemed the difficulties. Then, in late 2013, two hours of footage tagged with Nickerson's name surfaced on YouTube. of a creative albatross when I see one, and the amorphous video dump showed every sign of being just th

As an accidental historical record, though, it is fascinating: a trove of rural school scenes from the eve of i the last generation of khaki uniforms, freckled noses and colonial English accents; and Cynthia Hind, alr series of pre-independence floral print dresses, and wearing what was described to me as a "Bulawayo pe

Tacked on at the end of the video are some snippets of interviews Nickerson conducted with former stude with me that something happened, something was out there," says a young man. "I think something defir young woman.

'Amazing experience'

A former teacher says "We met up on many occasions after that and hugged and shook our heads and sai experience of our lives", whereas another former student says he hasn't talked about the event to anyone, think I'm nuts".

When I told Sarah about the video she became very agitated. "Can I see it? Oh God no, I don't want to. W it?" she cried.

"Ok, just show me."

We watched the relevant part of the video, Sarah with a hand over her mouth.

"God, their accents," she said at one point, of the now American, Australian and English tones that contr voices she had known. It crossed my mind that the truly galvanic event in all of their lives was not the UF from upon high that had turned them into aliens in New York, London, or wherever.

Then again, what did I know? When the clip ended Sarah stubbed out an Everest Menthol and shook her

"You want to know the real message here? The real message is that this stuff can brand you for life. It unc became this huge unending thing for others, and it certainly fucked me up. I mean, try telling people that of these things returning one day. Try telling them that you can actually sense when they're back in our at you're a kook. All this lot do," she said, casting mock-angry eyes down the bar at a fellow boozier, who rais but we love you anyway, Sê."

Despite her patently thick skin, a look of extreme sadness entered Sarah's eyes for a moment, as she prett pulling the label from a beer bottle.

"Christ, and to think I told the family I was just popping out to Bon Marche."

**Not her real name.*
