

Space-age shamans or shysters?

Dark White

by Jim Schnabel, *Hamish Hamilton*,
pp 304, £16.99

Abduction

by John Mack, *Scribners/Simon & Schuster*,
pp 356, \$20/£16.99 (May in Britain)

Dennis Stacy

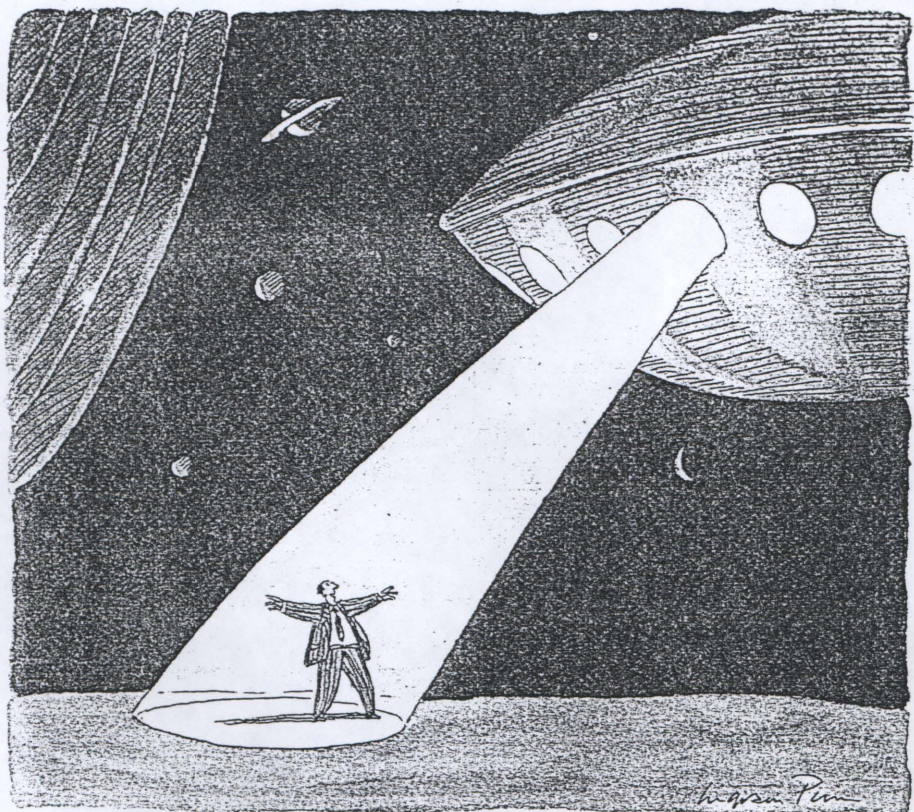
ALONE at night, an individual wakes to find him or herself paralysed, surrounded by diminutive grey-skinned beings. Aboard a beam of light, the person floats through walls and windows into a domed, evenly lit room where they are stripped and subjected to a series of invasive medical procedures. Needles are inserted and scoops of skin taken, leaving visible scars. Male abductees are milked of their sperm, females have their ova forcibly extracted. A genetically altered egg is then reinserted, and the half-human, half-alien fetus later removed well before term. Either parent may be reabducted, shown the body, and asked to hold or nurse it.

Such is the "typical" UFO abduction scenario, if anything about the alleged experience can be said to be typical. And, according to believers in the US, alien abductions are on the up and up. Proponents of the phenomenon, such as Harvard University's professor of psychiatry, John Mack, point to a 1991 Roper Organization poll of 6000 American adults and claim that as many as 3.9 million Americans—about one in fifty—may be alleging that they have undergone an abduction.

Of course, there are differing views. Jim Schnabel, a journalist and sociology student, believes there is much less to abduction mania than first meets the eye or ear. *Dark White*, his second book, is a mordant, often amusing romp through the American UFO community in general and abduction research in particular.

At one point Schnabel finds himself sitting in on a regressive hypnosis session (apparently the preferred method of investigation) while a female abductee recounts being taken aboard a flying saucer and encountering former Secretary General of the United Nations, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar. A few nights later, after a fruitless search for an underground cavern allegedly used as a staging point by the abducting aliens, he is parked on a lonely country road in West Virginia with the same abductee, waiting for something celestial to happen. But Godot never shows, and neither do the cosmic gynaecologists.

At the apogee of the abduction spectrum is Mack himself, a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in 1977 for his psychoanalytical biog-



Ingram Finn

raphy of T. E. Lawrence. It seems safe to say, however, that the Pulitzer jury won't be out long on *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*, which could rank as one of the most credulous books ever written, primarily because there is so little in the way of follow-up investigation and physical corroboration. The author apparently only has to hear one of his abductees say or emote something to accept it as gospel truth. And if testimony, typically recovered under hypnosis, is sometimes absurd, then we'll just have to overturn a few Western scientific paradigms to accommodate same.

Remarkably, such revelations, not to mention those of "missing fetuses" and alien "implants", do not raise any warning flags in the author's mind. Instead, we are assured that while "abductees are, with rare exception, highly hypnotizable", they are also "peculiarly unsuggestible". Try as he might, Mack just cannot mislead his subjects with misleading questions.

But a few pages on, when one of his hypnotised subjects balks at walking up a metal ramp leading into a spaceship, Mack suggests "a trick or game we might play in which she would stand at the base of the ramp and send an imaginary puppet-spy with his eyes closed up into the ship with

instructions to open his eyes upon our command and report back to her what he saw". The trick succeeds. The plodding style, alas, is typical.

Rack his brain as he may, Mack just cannot find any precedent for the abduction phenomenon in his clinical experience. The emotions relived under hypnosis, he argues, are just too raw and convincing. Something untoward and profound has happened to these people he claims. Unlike his fellow abductionists, who tend to equate alien body-snatching with the trauma of rape, Mack finds the experience ultimately positive and transformative in nature, comparing abductees to modern-day Dantes. Schnabel, however, surveys the available psychological and medical literature and finds many related alternatives that need full consideration before alien invaders are invoked, beginning with temporal lobe lability, sleep and paralysis. In the former, according to Canadian psychologist Michael Persinger, temporal lobe "microseizures" could arguably engender many of the sensations reported by abductees, since that part of the brain is so intimately connected with memory and a sense of self and can be a source of hallucinations, audio and visual.

In sleep paralysis, victims often report awakening, paralysed, with the sense of another presence in the room. And then there are your standard out-of-body experiences and even simple dream sensations of flying.

The problem is complicated by the cultural milieu in the US, which is famously top-heavy with therapies and therapists and awash with claims of physical and psychological trauma suffered at the hands of others—from sexually abusive parents to ritual satanic cults. Interestingly, as with abductions, many of these recovered “memories” are retrieved via hypnosis and immersion in support groups. Indeed, some practitioners have identified what they refer to as FMS, the false memory syndrome.

But patients may not be the only sheep led astray. Specifically, Schnabel cites Münchhausen syndrome, often difficult to diagnose because it involves convincing physical “symptoms”, including self-inflicted injuries, to elicit medical and/or other therapeutic attention. Sufferers from



J. Baum

Münchhausen's-by-proxy inflict the injuries on a child; usually the female parent is the one with the condition.

Overall, Schnabel writes “it seems plausible that some or all cases of alleged alien abduction, satanic ritual abuse, multiple personality disorder, spirit-possession, and demonic oppression might be understood not merely as ‘unusual experiences’ but as self-victimisation syndromes—that is, syndromes in which the goal of the symptoms or behaviour is the fulfilment of the role of victim”.

Mack pleads that if we are to understand the abduction experience we may have to first jettison our current, self-destructive paradigms about the nature of reality. But *Dark White* leaves the distinct impression that when it comes to UFO abductions, and much else about modern Western society, both Pogo and the old Baron would have been more than proud. It was Pogo, a popular American cartoon figure, who first said: “We have met the enemy and he is us.” □

Dennis Stacy is based in San Antonio, Texas. He edits a monthly UFO journal.