

## Science Musings

CHET RAYMO

## Are you reading this, aliens?

**P**ROFESSOR JOHN MACK IS GOING big time.

This month, Scribners will publish "Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens," a book by the Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard psychiatrist in which Mack lays out his views of a massive operation on the part of alien beings to infiltrate and perhaps genetically modify the human race.

Mack bases his belief on more than a hundred interviews, often involving hypnosis, with men and women who "remember" having been forcibly taken aboard space craft for bizarre sexual experiments, involving sperm-taking, artificial insemination, removal of embryos, surgical implantation of "tagging" devices and probes of body cavities.

Presumably, the purpose of these procedures is to create a hybrid race of half-humans, half-aliens who will be the salvation of an otherwise hopelessly flawed planet Earth.

Some time ago, I pointed out in this column striking similarities between the so-called "alien abductions" of today and the witchcraft hysteria of the late-Middle Ages. I suggested that psychology may provide a more likely explanation for both phenomena than either demonic spirits or visitors from space.

In both cases, the victims are often awakened in the night and taken away by strange beings for encounters of a sexual nature. Victims are sometimes afflicted with puzzling scars and injuries. And so on.

Why go searching for bug-eyed aliens from space, when the cause of the abduction reports may lie closer to home – in the mysterious

complexities of the human psyche?

When that column was published, John Mack called me up and we had a chat. He is thoughtful and sincere. I liked him immediately. Of course, neither of us convinced the other of the correctness of our views.

Some time later Mack gave a public lecture in which he referred to our conversation. He said: "Finally, in exasperation, I said to him – 'Look, Chet. A UFO could land on Boston Common. Channel 5, Channel 7 and Channel 4 could all have films on the nightly news to show us. The Boston Globe, the Boston Herald could have big articles about it, and you still wouldn't believe it, would you?' – And Chet said, 'No, I wouldn't.'"

Big laugh from the audience.

I don't remember the details of my conversation with Mack, but I suspect he exaggerated a bit for dramatic effect. That's OK; what he says is a fair representation of my view.

The arrival of a UFO from space would be an event so far beyond our experience that any sensible person should ask for compelling, irrefutable

evidence. After all, there are other possible explanations for TV and newspaper reports of a Boston Common landing: a concerted media April Fool's joke, an elaborate hoax, an episode of mass hysteria.

I'd want to go to Boston Common and see the ship with my own eyes.

Mack believes he has compelling evidence that thousands, perhaps millions, of Americans have been abducted by extraterrestrials. But he fails to follow one of the bedrock principles of science, Ockham's razor: Don't make your explanations any more complicated than what is required to explain the phenomenon.

Obviously, any phenomenon can have any number of explanations. Scientists have traditionally chosen the explanation that involves the least number of causes that fall beyond that which we already know.

Newton said it this way: "We are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearance."

Einstein said: "The grand aim of science

is to cover the greatest possible number of empirical facts by logical deductions from the smallest possible number of hypotheses of axioms."

This is not to say that the science practiced by Newton and Einstein is infallible, but it has served us well. And the fact that more than half of Americans are willing to admit the likelihood of UFO visitations hardly matters; the scientific search for truth is not a matter of taking a vote.

Most scientists believe there is a more economical way of explaining "abductions" than by invoking the literal kidnapping onto spaceships of millions of humans; namely, psychological explanations of one sort or another.

John Mack rejects this. He suggested in his lecture that the reason many scientists, such as myself, are unsympathetic to his evidence is that we are not open to explanations that run counter to conventional wisdom. He's right. We should "run counter" only when we need too; that's the essence of science.

Mack, of course, thinks the time is now. However, I insist on more convincing evidence. Tell you what, John. Pass the word through your abductee contacts. I'll be waiting on the college quad at midnight a week from tonight. I volunteer myself for alien abduction experiments.

I doubt if anyone will show up to spirit me away – but I'm prepared to be astonished.

*Chet Raymo is a professor of physics at Stonehill College and the author of several books on science.*