

John E. Mack

The psychiatrist and biographer addresses human encounters with aliens

BY MISSY DANIEL

"Nobody could have been more surprised than I was that the book aroused so much interest," claims Harvard psychiatrist John E. Mack. Seated in his modest office in the Cambridge Hospital, where he has been affiliated with the department of psychiatry for over 25 years, he defends himself against those who have said that the man who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1977 for his biography of T. E. Lawrence (*The Prince of Our Disorder*; Little, Brown, 1976) has succumbed to the lure of sensationalism and big money with *Abduction: Human Encounter with Aliens*, published this month by Scribners (Non-fiction Forecasts, Feb. 7). Of his \$250,000 advance Mack says only that "it's been one of the more interesting publishing experiences in my life. I'm used to the publisher saying, 'We'll take a chance. Here's \$5000. Go to it.' Apparently this book touches some kind of nerve."

"This" is Mack's presentation of 13 alien abduction case narratives selected from those of the dozens of abductees or "experiencers" he's interviewed and in some cases hypnotized over the last four years. Spaceships, little gray beings, pods with glass bubbles and an astonishing amount of sex with aliens permeate the descriptions of extraterrestrial-human encounters.

None of Mack's previous books has suggested that he might enter alien territory. In addition to the acclaimed Lawrence biography, he's written on nightmares (*Nightmares and Human Conflict*; Little, Brown, 1970); suicide (*Vivienne: The Life and Suicide of an Adolescent Girl*; Little, Brown, 1981); and the Holocaust (*The Alchemy of Survival: One Woman's Journey*; Addison-Wesley, 1988) as

well as clinical studies, articles and reviews.

Abduction came about after Mack was introduced in 1990 to UFO abduction movement guru Budd Hopkins (to whom the book is dedicated), who in turn introduced him to "these wonderful, interesting people who had experiences I just could not explain psychiatrically. They had no emotional disturbance that could account for what they were talking about. I felt it would be valuable, from a straight clinical point of view as a physician and psychiatrist, if I could document what these unusual cases were like and present information that would show that this was not something that could be explained as a delusion or some displaced form of abuse," Mack says.

When he tried talking with the editors of several established medical and psychiatric journals about publishing his arguments and findings, Mack got what he characterizes as "a rather emotional mixed response. By that time I had a 100-page manuscript documenting what I was finding from these people, and I shared it with Thomas Kuhn, who wrote *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, a classic monograph about how ideas and science change, how paradigms shift. He told me not to worry about science and to watch out for the traps of language: real/unreal, inside/outside, psychological/external, happened/didn't happen."

Mack showed the manuscript to Tim Seldes, who has been his agent since 1965. He also wrote Seldes two letters setting out how he would expand the manuscript into a book, and making the case for its importance. "I said that there seems to be some kind of intelligence entering peoples' lives, and it can't be explained just in a psychological way. It also has a significance for human consciousness and identity, for who we are in the cosmos." On the basis of the letters, Seldes sent the manuscript around and, says Mack, "Bill Goldstein at Scribner's was first out of the gate when the bidding started. He was very enthusiastic from the beginning. Editors vary enormously," Mack says,

"but Bill has had a fairly light touch with me and accepted my style of writing pretty well.

"Some editors crowd you, and I have been crowded. But I haven't had that many really strong, serious relationships with editors. I liked Llewellyn Howland at Little, Brown [who edited the Lawrence book]; he knew how to play me—when to push and when to lay off. And Merloyd Lawrence was very sensible and active. She helped me through some rough places in *The Alchemy of Survival*. An editor's relationship with a writer is a very strong psychological matter, you know. They are like midwives."

Mack has several possible explanations for why *Abduction* has touched a publishing nerve. "One is purely commercial. Publishers realize that a Harvard professor is going out on a limb saying that this [phenomenon] is not psychiatric. I am putting my credentials on the line, and that's saleable. Some editors intuit that there are a lot of people out there who want to believe in something universal—that we are not alone in the universe, and that somebody from within the medical/scientific establishment is saying yes, there are other entities, whatever their form. People feel cut off and isolated, so the idea that we are not alone is exciting.

"The third possibility, which may be my wish more than anything else, is that we are on the edge of some kind of real advance in science, in knowledge of ourselves and the universe, and the culture senses this. If you put it together with UFOs and near-death and out-of-body experiences, and the fact that many quite healthy mainstream people are having spiritual explorations of consciousness and the world beyond themselves—that the purely material, physical interpretation of all reality as reducible to the physical world is simply wrong—it is not wish fulfillment. A kind of political restriction has been imposed on our ontology by whoever decides what's real in a culture—a mix of scientific, political, religious and media elite, I suppose.

"There is even a sense in some of the scientific community that we may

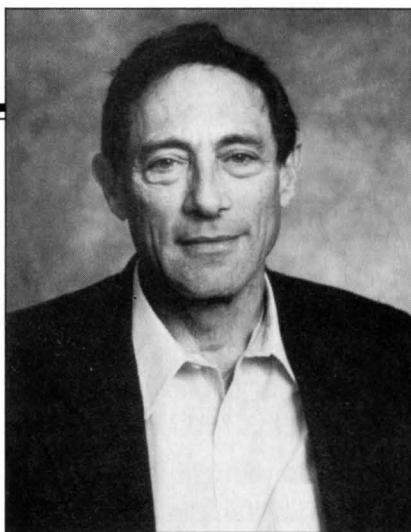
Daniel writes frequently for PW.

be on the edge of a shift in world view that is open to a larger reality and sense of ourselves," Mack suggests. "We just need a few small pushes to get us out of this constricted material box we are in—this Newtonian/Cartesian structure that says the world is mechanism and material—and into a world that reopens us to the cosmos, to the sacred, to the divine, with a reverence for nature. There is a realization that we have cut ourselves off from the multiple realities that are experienced in the abduction phenomenon."

Mack says he has seen 87 abductees who have convinced him they are not lying or mentally ill or distorting reality or suffering from overactive imaginations. "Some of them are very unimaginative," he counters. "They have all experienced very similar realities that are talked about with appropriate feeling, and the realities match, one case to another. The only thing that behaves like that is real experience. Based on this data, I don't feel that saying something real is happening that is not explainable is particularly risky. Yes, it's somewhat risky because nobody wants to hear it. If somebody says something nobody wants to hear, the tendency of the culture is to shoot the messenger. But we don't kill people anymore for unpleasant messages. We try to attack their reputations."

Or perhaps we just put them on talk radio. After pausing to take a call about appearing on *Larry King Live*, Mack tries to explain what his fascination with alien abductions has to do with the rest of his life's work. In the book's preface, he suggests that "the connection resides in the matter of identity—who we are in the deepest and broadest sense." Alien abductions force us all to reexamine our perception of human identity, he maintains, to "expand our sense of ourselves, our understanding of reality, and awaken our muted potential as explorers of a universe rich in mystery, meaning and intelligence."

While identity may be the touchstone that gives coherence to the body of his work, Mack admits that *Abduction* is an undeniable departure. "But it's a lot clearer than peering into the future. I have always had this curiosity: Who are we in the deepest, fullest sense? Is there some core of ourselves connected at a cosmic level, some core identity that is more mysterious and that mystically connects us? Apparently that's what has concerned me. But I wouldn't have said that until I



Karen Rosenthal

'Apparently this book touches some kind of nerve'

was forced to look back after having written this book."

Mack's ruminations about identity put him in a reflective state of mind. "George Bernard Shaw always said that doctors profit from the misery of others," he observes. "I think psychologists learn and profit from the identity confusions of others. Erik Erickson's work is all about psychosocial identity confusion. In much of my life's work Erik was my mentor. I consulted him about my Lawrence book, about what heroism was, what a sense of the ideal was. Lawrence was very introspective. He said he wrote *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* 'to show the unlovely backside of a commander's mind,' instead of self-justifying self-promotion. He was the absolute epitome of someone who was confused about his identity. He was illegitimate; he had all kinds of sexual confusions, and he had confusion about what he was really enacting when he was whipping up the Arab revolt against the Turks. On one hand it was heroic: he was trying to create freedom and autonomy for the Arabs. But what was the relationship of that to his own inner sense of not knowing who he was? That theme runs through the book. It is the theme of the stranger, the person who is marginal in a culture and thereby can be open to possibilities that someone who must fulfill some slot in the corporate hierarchy may never get to ask about."

Mack himself does not fit an outsider's profile. Now 64, he was born in New York City, came to Harvard Medical School after graduating from Oberlin in 1951 and has remained in the Boston area ever since. He is tall and lean, and punctuates his earnest discourse by occasionally donning the

pair of half-glasses hanging on a cord around his neck, his dark, penetrating eyes peering over the rims. He speaks slowly, deliberately, carefully, even a little warily. He seems to want very much to be believed, to be taken seriously.

Reminded that in his biography of T. E. Lawrence, he wrote that one's choice of books to write "derives from the author's own psychological makeup," Mack is quick to say, "As far as I can tell, I have had no encounters with UFOs or abductions." He has, however, experimented with holotropic breathing techniques, exploring levels of the unconscious and entering realms of what psychiatrist Stanislav Grof calls transpersonal relationships. In workshops on non-ordinary states of consciousness, people claim to travel through mythic and historical realms not part of their own biographical experience. "Everybody can have that kind of experience if they are just willing to do it," says Mack, who told *Esquire* last month that in one past-life experience he was a 16th-century Russian who had to watch a band of Mongols decapitate his four-year-old son.

"Once you take the step and separate consciousness from the brain so it includes spirit entities that can enter and materialize in our world, then it doesn't have to be ruled out *ipso facto* that there could be beings out there who could develop a technology that would allow them to transcend the requirements of physical laws and enter people's homes or cars or even bodies," says Mack. "If the whole universe is conscious, then all kinds of things are possible. When I changed my world view, however reluctantly and with whatever difficulty, and accepted that it is possible for consciousness to exist separate from our bodies and for us to break out of our perceptual straitjackets, it opened up the possibility that when I heard about these abduction phenomena I could at least listen.

"It's not like I rushed out to embrace this," Mack says earnestly. "What hit me so hard was the fact that people all over the world have very similar detailed experiences, reported with very strong feeling. The people themselves don't want to believe it. It's a club nobody wants to belong to. It struck me as a clinician then and there that the only thing that can act like it is real experience, if lots of people have it. Something real is going on. And if it is real, then what is it?" Perhaps Mack has found the answer. □