



ALIENS LAND AT HARVARD!

ABDUCTION

Human Encounters with Aliens.
By John E. Mack, MD. Scribners.
434 pp. \$22.

By Milo Miles

The sound-bite summary is irresistible: Top Harvard psychiatrist claims alien abduction stories are true! There is more to Dr. John Mack's "Abduction," but not nearly enough. Mack is among the most prestigious authors to champion extraterrestrial visits as factual. His studies of nightmares are revered among professionals. He founded the psychiatry department of Cambridge Hospital, now affiliated with Harvard. His biography of T. E. Lawrence, "A Prince of Our Disorder," won a Pulitzer Prize in 1977. And his new book follows the stan-

John Mack lends his reputation
to a dubious starship enterprise:
the study of UFO abductions

dard arrangement of sober research. Mack provides a description of the phenomenon under study and its background, followed by 13 case histories from diverse patients and a summary of implications. And he relies on no more valid evidence than a supermarket tabloid would.

Mack immediately tosses logic and science overboard in his preface. "In this context, thinking of memory too literally as 'true' or 'false' may restrict what we can learn about human consciousness

from the abduction experiences." This escape clause is necessary because although "Abduction" uses admirably low-key presentation of patients' accounts, Mack's method of recovering memory through hypnosis is a flashpoint of furious controversy. Recently, court cases challenging recovered memories of incest and child molestation have exploded into headlines. Mack breezes past the issue in a paragraph that argues that the veracity of important recovered memories is not

been disproved, yet. Consensus reality is going to be overturned with this thin reed?

"It is the intensity of recovered emotion that lends inescapable authenticity to the phenomenon," says Mack. He notes the parallels between alien encounters and shaman trances, Christian ecstasy, journeys into fairyland, sleep paralysis, hypnagogic hallucination and other altered consciousness that have been pointed out by Jacques Vallee and others. Every firsthand report of a tussle with an incubus, a flight to a witches' sabbath or a transformation into a wolf underscores how in-

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tense and actual these experiences feel. Many earthly explanations are out there, and plenty intriguing, but Mack brushes them aside.

Most annoying, Mack does not accept his patients' more routine impressions of what happened to them. "When abductees call their experiences 'dreams,' which they often do, close questioning can elicit that this may be a euphemism" for a real event, even if in another dimension. It also may reveal a hypnotist badgering his witness. A very explicit example of what Mack means by "close questioning" should be a minimum requirement here. Mack assures us he takes pains to avoid leading questions, then adds that a "co-creative intuitive process" that blends his consciousness with his subject is unavoidable and no big deal, though "from a Western perspective this might be called 'distortion.'" Details, details.

In another display of how eager he is to believe, Mack fails to perform even the simplest control experiments, such as asking hypnotized volunteers with no abduction history to fantasize a meeting with aliens to see if their stories differ significantly from the purported genuine experiences. An article on Mack in the current *Time* magazine reveals that a Boston writer named Donna Bassett ran just such a test on him surreptitiously. She faked her way through hypnosis sessions, concocting childhood visitations from "little people" who miraculously healed her scalded hands, and a trip with JFK and Khrushchev aboard a flying saucer. Mack reportedly fell for everything. His patients have complained about the lack of therapy following their traumatic bouts under hypnosis. Bassett says Mack tainted sessions by giving her UFO literature in advance and even billed insurance companies improperly. After such disclosures, Mack's credibility should be ground to pixie dust. At any rate, in offering evidence for what would be the most colossal event since the Stone Age, uncorroborated anecdotes, no matter how sincere and fervent, are simply insufficient.

Anecdotes might be enough to further a particular agenda of mystical ethics, however. Alien encounters are a fascinating blank screen on which to project various fixations, Cold War paranoia being a standard. Depending on which poll you read, several hundred thousand to several million Americans have reported being snatched away from their sleep,

most often by gray midgets with huge, scary eyes who subject them to strangely crude medical tests with sexual overtones. What different species playing doctor might mean is the subject of gaseous debate in UFO circles. "Abduction" emphasizes the more transcendent feelings that sometimes accompany the confrontations. Mack's favorite notion about the human condition is that global industry has pushed nature into a crisis and the little grays are messengers from higher realms come to help us mend our ways and get in touch with transpersonal awareness. A surprising number of his patients concur with his thesis. To demonstrate the extent of human psychic evolution, aliens also collapse time to reveal their captives' past lives, which only confirm once more that all the ditch diggers in history never seem to get reincarnated.

One wonders whether Mack is probing the sources of unexplained psychological experiences or simply filling his patients' "missing time" with his own, admittedly amiable, ecology-harmony philosophy. If so, it is more a task for a guru than a psychiatrist. Then again, Mack makes little distinction between those roles and often plays mind games, crossing and recrossing his trail of thought as to whether alien events happen in the physical plane. His ultimate argument is that the interactions are uniquely subtle and cannot be proved or disproved, and that exploration of the phenomenon is a glorious end in itself. Sounds more like playing tennis without a net.

"Abduction" could merely mark the mainstream triumph of New Age aliens, but perhaps Mack's eminence will force more measured study until a consistent, useful psychological paradigm of meetings with aliens emerges. It would break an impasse that has lasted decade after decade, as UFO skeptics dismiss everything as meaningless mirages while reverent supporters swallow uncanny kidnapping and ancillary oddities without a twitch. Trying to bridge the polarities, Mack insists that the West is hampered by too much dualistic logic and science, and too few opportunities for full-throttle encounters with the spirit world. He is surely correct about the latter, but the former is a perilous delusion.

The secular world and the spirit world must be kept as separate as church and state in a free society, because of the potent tendency for one to overwhelm the other. Lucid reasoning is endangered nowadays, not mystical speculation. Although Mack assumes nonjudgmental, non-

linear thinking to be intrinsically benign, the post-scientific subjectivity he advocates is so slippery it could just as easily become a tool of fear and violence as of spiritual unity.

Consider this modest proposal. Numerous reports claim that aliens interbreed with humans in order to replace us as pollution and AIDS wipe out whole populations. Contactees are therefore dangerous entryways for an invasion, and those who admit meeting aliens should be rounded up, others with suspicious tendencies should be made to confess, and all of them should be burned at the stake to protect humankind. Outrageous, of course, but it has happened before. Mack should beware that if rationality and objective truth are thrown out the door, no one can predict what will rush in through the opening.