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Someone to Watch Over Us

A psychiatrist looks for the real message of those Americans who think they have been abducted by aliens.

ANDRZEJ CZECZOT

ABDUCTION

Human Encounters With Aliens.
By John E. Mack.
432 pp. New York:
Charles Scribner's Sons. $22.

By James S. Gordon

JOHN MACK is respectfully trying to describe and explain a wildly sensational and much derided experience, one that he suggests hundreds of thousands of Americans believe they have had. For four years this noted psychiatrist, a professor at the Harvard Medical School's Cambridge Hospital and the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of a biography of T. E. Lawrence, has been recording the strange and striking stories of ordinary men and women who believe they have been abducted from their homes and cars and transported, through walls and on beams of light, to spaceships.

Nothing in Dr. Mack's conventional psychiatric and psychoanalytic training had prepared him to hear such stories from the people introduced to him by an experienced U.F.O. researcher, Budd Hopkins. These articulate, sensitive and well-educated men and women were not, it seemed to Dr. Mack, psychotic, delusional or self-promoting. They were troubled, but their experiences with U.F.O. abductions seemed to be the source, not the symptom, of their troubles. As Dr. Mack listened, he began to believe that their experiences were in some sense quite "real" and that "the abduction phenomenon has important philosophical, spiritual and social implications" for all of us.

In Dr. Mack's consulting room the abductees recalled repeated visits, often from large-eyed, short, gray beings who commanded mysterious and powerful technologies and displayed a telepathic omniscience. In isolated spots on the ground and in the curved confines of their unearthly vehicles, these visitors, sometimes under the direction of an authoritative figure — who appeared male to some, female to others — sampled the humans' semen and ova and pressed them into interspecies breeding projects.

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Dr. Mack's informants said that at first they were paralyzed, terrified and recalcitrant. In time, however, they came to feel they were willing participants in the intruders' experiments. The aliens seemed to have a wider and wiser perspective than ours. They wanted to wake us all up to the ecological and political disasters that threaten our planet. They were instructing their abductees to sound a warning to the rest of us, and they were also using them to create a race of hybrid survivors.

Some of the 13 abductees whose case histories Dr. Mack presents in "Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens" (he has interviewed more than 100 people who claim to have been abducted) came to him, he says, because they consciously recalled fragments of encounters with aliens. Others were plagued by dreams of U.F.O.'s or had sensed that there were "entities" in their rooms while they slept. Several had had frequent and inexplicable nosebleeds or had found surprising scars on their bodies, while others, like Sheila, a 44-year-old social worker, had experienced fears, black moods and bodily sensations that traditional psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy had not alleviated. Some were referred to Dr. Mack by mental health professionals, but most came because they had heard through the grapevine about his work or had seen a fictionalized composite of him and Budd Hopkins in "Intruders," a 1992 television mini-series about abductions.

Dr. Mack says he found that once his patients were under hypnosis, their fragmentary memories became crystals around which complicated scenes of abduction, violation and instruction formed. Three mysterious motorcyclists whom Dave, a 38-year-old health care worker, remembered from a childhood walk turned out, under hypnosis, to be "beings" who "floated" him behind a bush and removed his shorts, "checking him out," and told him that he had been sent to earth "to do something." Some of Dr. Mack's patients said they believed they had been left with "implants," extraterrestrial devices that would "track" them as naturalists do wild animals; others, like Paul, a young businessman, felt they had been surgically "adjusted" by the aliens so they would be more open to change and less destructive.

As Dr. Mack notes, the experiences are not precisely physical — no unequivocally convincing material evidence of an implant, let alone of a spacecraft, has been produced. On the other hand, it is not certain that these are simply psychological phenomena. The frequent occurrence of U.F.O. sightings at the approximate place of the abductions, the scars and nosebleeds that self-reported abductees suffer, the hours mysteriously missing from their lives are all, according to Dr. Mack, suggestive of something beyond ordinary reality.

Dr. Mack believes that the very nature of the abduction experience eludes categorization. Whatever it actually is, he thinks, it serves as a goad to us — inviting us to dismantle our conventional notions of subjectivity and objectivity, of the real and the imaginary. For Dr. Mack, as for his subjects, this loss of certainty is the beginning of an education about higher truths. Dr. Mack, a founder of the Center for Psychology and Social Change, believes that aliens are calling us to participate in the wisdom of a larger, more generous reality. They are, it seems to him, offering us a way out of the psychological, ecological, political and social traps in which we have ensnared ourselves.

As his book reveals, the accounts of self-reported abductees led Dr. Mack to make other connections — between abductions, near-death experiences and "past-life regressions." All of these experiences are, Dr. Mack suggests, vehicles for recovering perennial wisdom about our connection to "a universe or universes that are filled with intelligences from which we have cut ourselves off." This is fascinating, suggestive and even inspiring. Unfortunately, the text on which this prophetic message is based — the abductees' accounts — lacks the weight of authority that Dr. Mack and a sympathetic reader would like to give it. It is not so much that Dr. Mack doesn't prove his case as that he doesn't offer some of the crucial data he might have collected, or present the critical and self-critical analysis that such provocative material demands.

DR. MACK does remind us, citing the historian of religion Mircea Eliade, that "the motifs of flight and ascension" have always been part of human experience, particularly among shamans and saints, and he does nod toward the folklorists who have studied accounts of kidnappings by earth spirits in other cultures. But he does little to follow up on these historical and cross-cultural threats. Are Americans' supposed encounters with the gray beings really the modern equivalent of Irish peasants' meetings with fairies? Are these archetypal experiences of transformation or are they encounters with aliens from other galaxies?

Dr. Mack also neglects to acknowledge that the current avalanche of reported abductions is part of a larger modern phenomenon. Uninformed readers need to understand that abductions (often called "close encounters of the fourth kind") are only one aspect of the strange and confusing tapestry of modern "ufology," the study of such disparate experiences as U.F.O. sightings; supposed physical evidence of spaceship landings; gray, brown and white aliens, and theories about Government cover-ups and intergalactic alliances and conflicts.

Readers need to know as well that the experience of abduction seems to have changed in the last several years. People used to report that they felt that their germ plasm had been extracted. Now it is almost as common for them to say they are "remembering" hybrid babies that have been "presented" to them. Others, among them several who have spoken at length with Dr. Mack, have become convinced that they themselves are part or all alien, strangers left here in this strange land of Earth, sleeping prophets now awaken-

Continued on next page

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To Watch Over Us

Continued from preceding page

ing to alert us to the visitors and their message of transformation. Does the change in accounts of alien abduction mean the phenomenon is evolving, or that the aliens are allowing the abductees to remember more, or that the abductees are in the process, consciously or unconsciously, of elaborating a satisfying and ennobling fantasy? And how can we tell the difference?

DR. MACK has omitted more complete consideration of these issues, partly, it appears, to focus on the abduction phenomenon and the case histories that illustrate it. And it is here, precisely on the clinical and scientific ground to which Dr. Mack has the strongest claim, that his book is most vulnerable to criticism. The case histories are often absorbing, powerful and touching, but they are not nearly comprehensive enough, particularly not for a work that gains its authority from the author's psychiatric experience and scholarship. Fewer cases, presented in greater depth and detail, would have better served his book and his readers.

The cases Dr. Mack offers don't provide some of the information that a skeptical reader or, indeed, anyone who wants to seriously examine his thesis, would need: How much did these people know about U.F.O.'s and abductions before they came to John Mack? He suggests that the youthful interest of some of his subjects was the result of actual early childhood abductions rather than the source of later memories, but we'd certainly like to know more — from their parents and their siblings, for example. And what were these people's childhoods like? We don't have enough information to accept Dr. Mack's assertions that they weren't abused (some clinicians have theorized that abduction memories are disguised memories of sexual or physical abuse). Are the people who say they have been abducted simply "histrionic" and prone to fantasizing, as some clinicians have suggested? Could these experiences be instances of sleep paralysis, a clinical condition characterized by physical immobility and disturbing images? We really should have data from psychological testing. But only one of Dr. Mack's informants seems to have been extensively tested, and we are given very little material even on that.

Equally disturbing is the dearth of material about Dr. Mack's methodology. He doesn't say exactly how he induces a hypnotic trance or how he questions his subjects under hypnosis. He mentions only in passing the "breathing" and "centering" techniques that seem to be very much a part of his work with reported abductees. His discussion of his own biases is sketchy, and there is no description of the beliefs of his clinical assistants or of their roles in his work.

These are not simply matters of academic interest. They are central to our understanding of how Dr. Mack collected his data and to our evaluation of whether the abductees' accounts may have been contaminated by the overt or unconscious cues and expectations of him and his co-workers. Dr. Mack's assertion that he was not able to influence the abductees' memories is in part contradicted by his statement that he and the abductees are "co-creating" their reality. Nor does he address more fundamental issues that are part of any interactive process and particularly of hypnotic work — the subtle shaping by the clinician of the patient's response and the possibility that the abductees use imagination rather than memory as the engine for elaboration.

My own experience in interviewing reported abductees for a 1991 article in The Atlantic Monthly confirmed a number of Dr. Mack's observations — and those of such earlier investigators as Jacques Vallée, the Frenchman fictionalized in Steven Spielberg's movie "Close Encounters of the Third Kind"; R. Leo Sprinkle, professor emeritus of counseling services at the University of Wyoming, and Keith Thompson, the author of "Aliens and Angels." All of us, like Dr. Mack, were impressed by the absence of gross psychopathology in people who believed they were abducted and by the elusive nature and transformative character of the abduction experience. We also noted that after their ordeal these people tended to become far more altruistic and more concerned with preserving the planet. On the other hand, my interviews also suggested that this understanding — and perhaps even some of the memories themselves — may have been shaped by interactions between abductees and those who were helping them deal with their experience. Indeed, the accounts of abductees often seemed to reflect the character and concerns of those in whom they confided. The abductees counseled by Leo Sprinkle, a deeply spiritual and optimistic man, saw their experiences as transformative. Other people whose mentors were less sanguine about the phenomenon tended to focus on their physical violation and on impending interplanetary conflict.

John Mack could have done his homework better and written a far more informative and authoritative book. Still, in giving respect to people who have been misunderstood and mocked, and visibility to a phenomenon that is ordinarily derided, he has performed a valuable and brave service, enlarging the domain and generosity of the psychiatric enterprise. Whatever future research may reveal about the abduction experience, and however much it may be alloyed with individual psychodynamics and observer bias, it is also, as Dr. Mack understands, an aspect of something bigger — an emblem of our longing for connection to the greater universe in which we live and a sign of an urgently needed individual and collective transformation. ☐

Daddy's Little Girl

The narrator of this novel looks for the roots of her marital problems in her painful childhood.

THE FAVOURITE

By Meredith Daneman.
163 pp. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf. $19.

By Phillip Lopate

LUBA LUKOVA

THIS brief novel — novella-like in its concentrated feeling and focus — hums with rare intelligence, perception, humor and style. Still rarer, it has a moral beauty that issues from its sardonically appealing narrator's ability to reflect on her experiences and take full responsibility for her own misdeeds and complicities.

If contemporary literature is filled with what Robert Hughes has called the culture of complaint — the self-righteous testimonials of self-proclaimed victims — it has also inspired works of fiction in which the opposite is true, and the reader encounters a breathtakingly adult and unfooled self. I am thinking particularly of first-person fictions narrated by mature women, often middle-aged, who look back with rueful, hard-won wisdom at the ambivalences of daughterhood, clumsy first affairs, clumsier marriage, childbearing, adultery, the death of a parent, the estrangement of grown-up children and other challenges to the soul. Alice Munro, Grace Paley, Lynne Sharon Schwartz, Shelby Hearon, Rosellen Brown and Beverly Lowry spring immediately to mind as writers who talk to us from that deep place of knowing. Of course there are others. "The Favourite," Meredith Daneman's fourth novel (her previous works include "A Chance to Sit Down" and "The Groundling"), might serve henceforth as a prototype of the genre.

The rules for this kind of fiction require that insight be kept percolating through the prose at a steady rate. The narrator has already reached high ground — maturity — so the panic of vulnerability is gone; but she has got to remember that confusion vividly and fondly enough to bring it back to life so that we can enjoy it with her. The deep attraction of the form is its sentence-by-sentence intelligence. The pitfall is that this equilibrium itself will act as a brake on the plot's momentum, causing the narrative to drift after a while into a cozy, static dailiness, pleasant in itself but without sufficient drama.

Ms. Daneman keeps the pressure up by alternating between two stressful situations and two time frames: 1950's Sydney, where the narrator undergoes childhood, and 1970's London, where she is a wife and mother. In the chronologically earlier material, we see the child Roz's loyalties torn between a charismatic, often absent, philandering father and an affectionate, depressed mother. It is Roz's pride and curse that she is her father's favorite. On her is placed the psychological burden of keeping the straying father from leaving entirely. The precocious 10-year-old child, used as a confidante by her mother, sees, "with my unanswerable child's authority," that her father's offer to live with him alone makes no sense. "I'm 10, but I can't understand how a man of 40 can't see that I *am* my mother: it's me he's really leaving when he leaves her, it's she whom he really loves when he says he loves me."

The narrator's Electra complex, if you will, is discussed with all the cards face up. "They talk a lot these days about the lust men feel for their daughters. But they forget the nature of a little girl's love for her father." Naturally, she also feels considerable guilt for unseating her mother. The girl who is excited by the shame of her father's spanking her becomes the teenager who lets herself be fondled by an older man. She is

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