

Meeting men from Mars

Have some people REALLY encountered aliens?

By Fannie Weinstein
Gannett News Service

John Mack is used to being ridiculed.

It comes with the territory when you're an eminent Harvard psychiatrist and you write a book arguing that people who say they've been abducted by aliens may be telling the truth.

But when critics start attacking the abductees themselves, Mack the mild-mannered academic becomes Mack the Knife, cutting down their arguments and their motives.

"What they're doing, in their desperation, is attacking people who are a vulnerable minority," says Mack, 64, whose recently published "Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens" (Charles Scribner's Sons, \$22) has proved to be the hot book-of-the-month for the likes of "Oprah," "48 Hours," "Dateline," Newsweek and Time.

"It's a cruel tactic. They think if they can intimidate the experiencers themselves, then they won't want to come forward and that will attack this in a more basic way."

"Abduction" is based on Mack's work over the past 3½ years with more than 100 experiencers — UFO parlance for abductees — whose recollections are a combination of conscious recall and memories achieved through hypnosis. In it, he argues that "the abduction phenomenon . . . forces us, if we permit ourselves to take it seriously, to re-examine our perception of human identity — to look at who we are from a cosmic perspective."

Does this mean Mack actually believes his subjects have been abducted by aliens? Not exactly.

"What I say is that these are people who as best as I can tell have no reason to be distorting this phenomenon, who have nothing to gain personally, who have come forward reluctantly, who do not remotely demonstrate a form of mental disturbance that could account for what they're saying and who, with or without hypnosis and with intense feeling, describe what (sounds like) real experience," he says.

"So I say these people are speaking authentically, genuinely and that

it's a mystery I can't explain."

Skeptics abound

One thing Mack's critics can't dispute are his credentials.

Mack received his M.D. from Harvard in 1955 and has been a professor of psychiatry at Cambridge Hospital, an affiliate of Harvard Medical School, since 1972. He has written numerous critically acclaimed books and is perhaps best known for his 1977 Pulitzer Prize-winning psychoanalytic biography of T.E. Lawrence.

But it's these credentials, some critics say, that are creating a smoke screen when it comes to analyses of Mack's work.

"Mack is a rather charismatic personality, and the fact that he comes from Harvard seems to give his views more authority," says Philip Klass, publisher of the Skeptics UFO Newsletter. "It's as if Gen. (Norman) Schwarzkopf were to make some crazy pronouncement dealing with defense matters. People would say, 'Gee, he's a military man. He must

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know what he's talking about.'"

Especially disturbing to Klass, a journalist who has written about space technology for more than 40 years, is the lack of what he calls scientifically credible evidence for extraterrestrial life.

"After spending more than a quarter-century investigating UFO reports, I have yet to find a single such case."

Klass is as dismissive of the so-called abductees as he is of Mack.

"They live humdrum lives," he says. "Nobody would ask them to appear on a talk show on the basis of their normal lives. But all they have to do is read a book or two about abductions, concoct a somewhat similar story, and they're a local celebrity. And who knows? Maybe they can write a book and become a millionaire."

It's not just laymen, though, who are troubled by Mack's latest direction. Even some of his colleagues question its validity.

"People respect his other achievements," says Dr. Malkah Notman, acting chairwoman of Cambridge Hospital's psychiatry department. "But the perception is that this is not a productive area."

Of course, some professionals don't share that perception. Among them is Suzanne Kessler, chairwoman of the psychology department at Purchase College

in Purchase.

"I see this as part of a larger issue, and that issue is, how do you substantiate anybody's claims?" Kessler says. "How does any outsider differentiate someone else's memory from wishes, fantasies or fears?"

It's the issue at the heart of such controversial topics as early sexual abuse, Kessler says. "For instance, are we to take his claims seriously that he takes their claims seriously?"

That aside, however, Kessler agrees with colleagues who think Mack's time could be better spent.

"In a finite amount of time, with a finite amount of money, is this the project that should be done? No," she says.

You'll never convince Mack of that. He talks about the abduction phenomenon with the kind of enthusiasm usually limited to eager young professionals.

For the most part, he is philosophical about the stir his book is making.

"My work seems to have stimulated a kind of polarization in the media," says Mack, who speaks as much with his hands as with his mouth. "On the one hand, you have people who are somewhat open. They may be nervous, but they've allowed themselves to walk through my process and they see that something's going on here that's mysterious."

"The other end of the pole is people who simply say this is not

possible. They completely dismiss the association with UFOs, they completely dismiss the fact that the phenomenon occurs in children as young as 2 or 3 years old, they completely dismiss the fact that the experiences are consistent among thousands of people all over the country, and they dismiss the fact that I say there isn't mental illness here.

"Then they become snide, nasty and personally attack me."

Mack's interest

Mack became interested in the abduction phenomenon after a colleague introduced him to Budd Hopkins, a New York artist who is considered the father of the abduction-awareness movement.

At first, Mack says he was as skeptical as the next guy.

"The idea that there could be some kind of alien beings taking people from their homes and doing things to them was totally preposterous," he recalls thinking at the time.

The pair met in January 1990, and Hopkins told Mack about people from all over the country who had told him about their experiences. A month later, Mack met with four abductees and became intrigued by the philosophical, spiritual and social implications of what they said.

Most significantly, Mack writes in the book's introduction, the phenomenon calls into question the basic Western belief that

reality is grounded only in the material world or in what can be perceived by the physical senses.

It's this intellectual dilemma, Mack says, that explains why people are so disturbed by the phenomenon.

"We like to believe we are in control of our world," he says, "that we can bulldoze it, blow up the enemy.

"That illusion of control is deeply built into the Western psyche. This phenomenon strikes at the core of that and says not only are we not in control, that some kind of intelligence can break through and do threatening things to people for which there's no defense, it also shatters another belief — that we are the pre-eminent intelligence, if not the only intelligence, in the cosmos. It makes a mockery of our arrogance."

For his part, Mack is less concerned with battling his critics than he is with opening a public dialogue about the phenomenon.

"I want people to ask themselves, is it possible that something they don't understand is going on here?" he says. "My role, my responsibility, is to open a serious conversation in this culture that maybe there are dimensions and realities and something going on here that we don't understand, and that it might be more useful for us to acknowledge this than to shoot the messengers."

Staff writer Mitch Broder contributed to this report.