

PLACES

By Robin Vaughan

Close Encounters

On Wednesday evening, a crowd of about 300 people is packed into the Raab Lecture Hall at the Boston Public Library for a close encounter with John Mack, the featured speaker in tonight's installment of the Harvard Book Store Author Series. Mack, a respected psychology professor at Harvard Medical School's Cambridge Hospital and a Pulitzer prize-winning biographer, is the author of the recently published "Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens."

The audience to whom he addresses his remarks about spaceships

that change form and intergalactic cross-breeding experiments is not the gathering of kooks and crackpots skeptics might expect to find mulling over such paranormal subject matter. Rather, they fit Mack's description of the 100 self-reported abductees he interviewed in the course of his research: students, academics, business professionals, service workers — "strong, highly functioning, normal people with every possible kind of job."

The crowd also includes some crusty old men laden with shopping bags — one of whom interrupts the question-and-answer session by falling out of his seat into the aisle — but these few appear more interested in copping a nap than contemplating the mysteries of the universe.

The most popular question this evening is about government cover-ups — Mack says he's not an expert but does offer that the text of most of official documents is submerged in blackout ink.

Mack's own favorite subject seems to be the media's reaction to

his work, which deals with the theory that alien intruders are here to save the planet by showing abductees scenes of ecological destruction. "Newsweek said, 'Isn't it interesting that the aliens have green politics, just like Mack?'" he relates, along with anecdotes about his tussles on shows like CNN's "Crossfire."

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The book-signing portion of the program takes place in the Harvard Book Store Cafe. A line of fans with hardcovers tucked under their arms mingles over plastic cups of wine as they wait their turn with the author.

A pair of bearded intellectuals agree that "a spiritual focus is more relevant than negativity."

An Englishwoman who has not yet read her copy listens to a capsule summary from a queue mate: "September 13, is it?" she chats. "A reckoning day — how interesting." A woman in a batik skirt tells a friend, "Supposedly they are the elite race."

Paul and Arthur, two fortyish men hovering near the wine table, offer their take on extraterrestrial

visitations. "I don't trust them," says Paul. "These aliens have slowly been gaining people's confidence, and reputable people like Mack are only going to play a part in (the aliens') bigger scheme."

Arthur says he hasn't formed any judgments. "I tend to think they're here and the government's hiding the evidence, and I guess their intentions would be to breed with humans. But I'm open-minded."

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Outside in the bookstore's sidewalk cafe area, where diners and drinkers enjoy the remains of a perfect spring day, conversations are strictly mundane. Businessmen and women discuss promotions over French-bread sandwiches; Euro-scenesters recount social encounters at Club Nicole and Zanzibar.

But the familiar Newbury Street scene — a mix of urbanites relaxing under Evian umbrellas and potted trees strung with white pin lights — will end soon. Due to failed lease renegotiations, the bookstore-cafe will close at the end of June.