

BOOKS

Close encounters of a psychological kind

By Anthony Storr

ABDUCTION: Human Encounters with Aliens
by John E Mack, Simon & Schuster £16.99

JOHN MACK is a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, a faculty member of the Boston Psychoanalytic Society, president of the International Society for Political Psychology, and the author of a prize-winning biography of T E Lawrence, *A Prince of Our Disorder*, which I read with admiration. Since many people will find this new book incredible, it is important to emphasise that the author's credentials are impeccable.

Mack claims to have interviewed more than a hundred people who say that they have been abducted by aliens. Of these, 47 females and 29 males, including three boys of eight and under, have convinced Mack that their accounts of being abducted are genuine. In this book, he presents 13 selected cases, eight men and five women.

The usual pattern of an abduction is that the abductee is at home or in a car. He or she sees a bright light, sometimes blue, which emanates from a spacecraft or UFO to which the abductee is taken by "floating" through walls or the roof of a car. Further transportation to a larger spacecraft follows. "Communication between aliens and humans is telepathic, mind to mind or thought to thought, with no specific common learned language being necessary."

Most victims describe aliens as small, grey, and hairless, with large heads and long arms. The captive usually feels unable to move any part of the body except the head. The aliens then conduct experiments on the abductee's body, often using

instruments which remove eggs from females and sperm samples from men. These experiments are usually felt as intrusive, but there are also reports of rewarding sexual intercourse with aliens. Many abductees believe the aliens have an interspecies breeding programme, and say they have seen hybrid infants in spacecraft.

Aliens are generally regarded as "more advanced spiritually and emotionally than we are", which makes it hard to understand why they should want to interbreed with humans, whose misuse of the earth they usually condemn as wicked or stupid. For not all the habits of aliens are nasty: they also issue timely warnings. When in the spacecraft, the captives are given information about the fate of the earth, which may include scenes of devastation following a nuclear explosion, lifeless polluted landscapes and "apocalyptic images of giant earthquakes, firestorms, floods, and even fractures of the planet itself". Some lucky abductees are given

glimpses of their previous incarnations, as, for example, a tomb-painter in ancient Egypt.

Abduction experiences often run in families. Mack states that his subjects are free from psychiatric illness or psychological or emotional conditions which could account for their abductions. Yet examination of his 13 cases reveals that all reported strange experiences, neurotic symptoms or preoccupation with the paranormal from early childhood onward. One subject had been seeing a psychia-

trist for seven years. Another had seizures, migraine-like headaches, visual hallucinations and a temporarily abnormal electroencephalogram. Some have been searching for enlightenment in a variety of sects throughout their lives.

Mack used hypnosis to induce regression to childhood and recover memories of abduction experiences. He states that "abductees are peculiarly unsusceptible". If so, one would expect that they would be hard to hypnotise. Yet he also

writes that "abductees seem to move readily into trance" and shares with readers his impression "that the reports provided under hypnosis are generally more accurate than those consciously recalled".

Mack's technique of inducing the hypnotic state includes deep, rapid breathing. He reports that, at the end of the session, his subjects often experience cramps in the muscles of the hands. Overbreathing interferes with calcium metabolism and may cause such cramps, which are known as tetany; but Mack does not mention this. Nor does he consider the possibility that his form of therapy is creating a new, crazy sect whose members try to outdo each other's fantasies. We have enough interplanetary societies already.

Mack learned the breathing technique from the work of a psychiatrist called Stanislav Grof. It is said to facilitate travel through history and the establishment of "transpersonal relationships". Mack told *Esquire* that, when he practised it himself, he found that in one of his past lives he had been a 16th-century Russian who had to watch a band of Mongols decapitate his four-year-old son.

I wonder if aliens are as credulous and gullible as human beings? They could hardly be more so. John Mack, of course, realises that he has put his reputation as a professor of psychiatry on the line. If he is eventually professionally discredited, his \$250,000 American advance will hardly constitute sufficient comfort.

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