

IBQ

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Naughty but Nice

Once again it's time to consider
 that forbidden pleasure called Summer Reading.



PAUL STROEDE

BY TOM LASKIN

Summer vacation! With all the distractions that sun, sand, sea and verdant mountain peaks have to offer, it's a wonder that anyone ever cracks a book during that liberating season when the time clock shuts down and the school bell stops ringing in the hours. Let's face it, even those of us who have the mental fortitude to pack a few volumes along with the sunscreen and the extra roll of Kodachrome find plenty of ways to avoid rereading *Middlemarch*, delving into the collected works of Richard Nixon and studying up on the mysteries of that new database software that the boss is so keen on.

Which isn't to say that come Memorial Day we must banish everything but guide books and slick magazines from our backpacks. But it does pay to be realistic when choosing books for those lulling days filled with concession-stand Cokes and sweaty sportswear. As I see it, summer was custom-made for that slightly naughty class of printed matter known as "recreational

reading." That is, books that sink their hooks in deep before you've finished the first sentence and don't wilt and fade when the black flies start biting.

Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens, by John E. Mack, M.D.
 (Scribners, \$22, 432 pages)

Yeah, yeah, I know what you're thinking: They canceled "Star Trek: The Next Generation" for a reason. But wait a second—Dr. Mack isn't some whacked-out researcher of paranormal phenomena sporting a dubious degree from a privately funded institute and a rich history of personal encounters with space aliens. On the contrary, his M.D. (in psychiatry) is from Harvard, he's on the faculty of Harvard Medical School, and he won a Pulitzer in 1977 for a brilliant biography of T.E. Lawrence. So even if some of his colleagues have accused Mack of buying the notion of alien abduction a little too readily, it's easy to see why TV talk shows have flipped for his detailed case histories of 13 of the 76 "abductees" he's worked with during the last 3½ years. He has A-list credentials and he's using them to make scholarship boldly go where the stuffed

shirts and sticks-in-the-mud haven't dared venture before.

Abduction isn't apt to sway many skeptics. For one thing, Mack concedes early on that he believes that there's more to consciousness and what we call reality than the materialism of Western science allows. He's also convinced that everything from economic inequality to the decay of the environment behooves humankind to pursue new paradigms for understanding (and living in) the world. Finally, the fact that Mack met his first abductee through a self-styled abduction researcher/artist named Budd Hopkins will likely cause many doubters to conclude that he has been snowed by a group of cultists and true believers.

But that having been said, there's definitely something attractive (and, dare I say, convincing) about Mack's book. For one thing, using a fairly rigid therapeutic method that included—but wasn't limited to—hypnosis, Mack discovered that the abductees he has worked with have had very similar experiences. And like all arguments that gain weight through the accre-

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SUMMER READING

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tion of parallel details, Mack's seems more plausible once a half-dozen of his subjects have described strange lights appearing outside their windows, small beings with big, unblinking eyes sidling up to their beds and lost hours spent being probed and occasionally cut open in sleek, other-worldly surgical theaters.

But it isn't just the abductees' repeated (and come about case #10, rather repetitive) revelations of extra-human sexual experiences and encounters with "hybrid" human/alien children that are intriguing. Although he consciously tries to empathize with each abductee that comes to him, Mack generally behaves like a traditional therapist. Confronted with the post-traumatic stress and high levels of anxiety that unsettle many abductees, he takes pains to explain that these disorders aren't the result of some accepted psychological or neurological disorder nor do they appear to have their origins in repressed childhood experiences of the ordinary type. He also anticipates critics who would accuse him of merely reinforcing the delusions of abductees by noting that psychotic individuals whose delusions are reinforced don't generally improve. (On the other hand, after a course of therapy, his subjects have at least felt better about their experiences.)

More important, while Mack clearly believes that alien encounters are real, he doesn't try to force this view down the reader's throat. Instead, he makes a plea for open-mindedness, arguing: "All that those of us in the mental health professions can ask of ourselves at this time is that we keep our minds open when dealing with phenomena like the alien abduction syndrome that we do not understand, and resist providing explanations prematurely."

Not that you're obliged to approach *Abduction* as a groundbreaking piece of scholarship. Each case study is packed with enough creepy information to satisfy any science fiction or fantasy literature freak. My favorite narrative was co-written by an abductee/college professor named "Carlos," who says that he was reincarnated as a sixth-century monk after running into aliens on the island of Iona. But there isn't a case study in the bunch that doesn't make your flesh crawl a little bit—especially when a midnight wind whistles through the night sky and the light from a swaying street lamp jumps across the bedspread so fast that the darkness hardly seems broken.

Pulp, by Charles Bukowski
(Black Sparrow Press, \$13, 202 pages)

Bukowski had firsthand knowledge of a different group of aliens: the small-timers and hard-core losers who haunt the skid rows and SROs of every city in the country. When he died in March, this surreal parody of pulp detective novels was

already in the pipeline. Bukowski really wanted its clichés, platitudes and in-your-face attitudes as some kind of valedictory matter of debate.

Bukowski's private cynicism, a cynical habitué of Hollywood, on the track, knows a little about the history of modernism (for a time his irascible, mad figures in a case) and the cold-cocking bad guy about how crappy and pathetic he is. Belane's parched, dry, surprising or new nor is he. He's a Red Sparrow, a live one, Hammett's Maltese Falcon, the death and the paradise that lies beyond it. To tell the truth, Bukowski's mad narrative is also peopled by so many duplicitous babes (including Lady Death herself) and chuckleheaded heavies with arms the size of meat cleavers that it's hard to tell whether he's getting the best of Hammett and Chandler or being swallowed up by the genre that they helped to invent.

But that doesn't matter much. After the publication of *Ham on Rye* in 1982, no one read Bukowski for the taut, the taut. He still told a tale better than most, but in his hard-bitten quality that attracted everyone from college professors to beat philosophical sharp vulgarities and expressions that only a use convincingly, he experience into its routine elements in the cotence. That's a gift. And es on the pointlessness he's getting set to vider that Bukowski still has typing *Pulp*: "Poor E right. But everybody w and upside-down. But matter who screwed v all so drab. Fuck, fuck,

The Silent Woman, by
(Knopf, \$23, 208 pages)

Speaking of detective investigation of the life famous fame of Sylvia Pl one to come out this se all that interested in Pl at one point she dismi work, the *Ariel* poems,