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ORTHODOXY

HAS COMMUNISM FOUND ITS REPLACEMENT?

BY JAMES H. BILLINGTON



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MAY 30, 1994

FOUNDED 1914
WASHINGTON, D.C.
ISSUE 4,141

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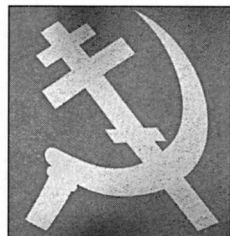
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THE NEW REPUBLIC, Vol. 210, Number 22, Issue 4,141 May 30, 1994. (Printed in the U.S. on May 11, 1994.) Published weekly (except for combined issues dated Jan. 10 & 17, July 18 & 25, Aug. 22 & 29, and Sept. 19 & 26, 1994) at 1220 19th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036. Telephone (202) 331-7494. The New Republic Advertising Sales Office (212) 702-4882. Yearly subscriptions, \$69.97; foreign, \$99.97; Canada, \$84.97. Back issues, \$3.50 (includes postage & handling). © 1994 by The New Republic, Inc. (ISSN 0028-6583). Second-class postage paid at Washington, DC, and additional mailing offices. Indexed in Readers' Guide, Media Review Digest, Microform, CD-ROM, issue and article copies are available through University Microfilms Intl., 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Telephone 1-800-521-0600. Internet mail address: editors@tnr.com Member, Audit Bureau of Circulations. Unsolicited manuscripts can be returned only if accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Subscribers: Please send all remittances, changes of address, and subscription inquiries to Subscription Service Dept., The New Republic, P.O. Box 602, Mount Morris, IL 61054. For subscription problems call 800-827-1289.

to a used condom. The scene features the same kind of charming Tuscan high jinks that vitalized Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado about Nothing*. They are even more infectious and engaging here, enhancing a production distinguished more by its pastoral interludes than by its serious plot, largely because

the comics are so accomplished.

It is impossible to pay homage to all of this huge cast ("The world must be peopled," says one character, and it is, with an army of actors). I'll simply say that Noble's production of *A Winter's Tale* is a demonstration of theater at its most joyous and exhilarating. •

The Doctor's Plot

BY JAMES GLEICK

Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens

by John E. Mack, M.D.

(Charles Scribner's Sons, 432 pp., \$22)

In the world of professional wrestling, fans fall into two categories, known as the Smarts and the Marks. The Marks believe that they are watching spontaneous contests of strength and skill. The Smarts know that they are watching a fascinating, highly plotted, roughly scripted form of dramatic entertainment—a sort of sweaty soap opera. The Smarts and the Marks have a lot to talk about, though their conversation sometimes seems at cross-purposes. They have both developed an enthusiastic appreciation for the phenomenon, but on different levels. In the world of unidentified flying objects, John E. Mack (or, as his book jacket labels him, "John E. Mack, M.D., the Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard psychiatrist") is a Mark masquerading as a Smart.

Mack believes that little gray aliens have been abducting Americans in large numbers and subjecting them to various forms of unwilling sex. (Yes, that again.) Mack also believes that, for a bunch of cosmic rapists, these aliens are a pretty benign bunch. They're trying to bring us in touch with our spiritual sides, or trying to remind us how important it is to care about the planet, or otherwise trying to help our consciousness evolve. But you already know this—unless you've missed him these past few weeks on "Oprah," in *The New York Times Magazine*, on "48 Hours" and in supermarket tabloids, talk shows and news programs across the country.

Alien-abduction mythology has been one of this country's tawdry belief manias since the 1960s. It is a leading case of the anti-rational, anti-science cults that are flourishing with dismaying vigor in the United States, and with dismayingly little counterbalance from peo-

ple who ought to know better. UFOs in general, paranormals who bend spoons, parapsychologists who sense spiritual auras, crystal healers, believers in reincarnation, psychic crime-solvers—all of these natural descendants of tarot-readers and crystal ball-gazers get uncritical television time and newsprint. It's a dangerous trend. The blurring of distinctions between real knowledge and phony knowledge leaves all of us more vulnerable to faith-healers and Holocaust-deniers of all sorts.

The new wave of marketing the abduction myth has been grotesquely effective. *The New York Times Book Review* chose to give Mack's new book a major illustrated review written by another psychiatrist who has spent time interviewing supposed abductees. This reviewer, James S. Gordon, criticizes some of Mack's methods, but hails him for giving "visibility to a phenomenon that is ordinarily derided," and concludes that Mack "has performed a valuable and brave service, enlarging the domain and generosity of the psychiatric enterprise."

Let's stop right here and consider, hypothetically, for the first and last time in this piece, the possibility that Americans really are being kidnapped by aliens in vast numbers. All right. We're undergoing a large-scale invasion by gangs of alien sex-abusers. There are hundreds of thousands or millions of victims, according to Mack and his fellow abduction proponents. To begin with, is this a matter that should be handled by psychiatrists? Wouldn't astronomers and physicists have some interest in the matter as well? Shouldn't these kidnappings be reported to law enforcement authorities? (They virtually never are.) Wouldn't they be of interest to the FBI, the military and, say, world leaders?

The publisher, Charles Scribner's Sons, promotes the book with a dust jacket claiming that these are "alien encounters reported in no previous book on UFOs," that they are "real experiences," that Mack's book is "above all authoritative." Do the editors believe this? According to the hype they are pushing on the public, one in fifty of their own friends and family has been abducted by these little gray rapists. Are they, in real life, worrying about it? Similarly, do the editors of the *Times Book Review*, or the television news directors who are helping promote this book with equal foolishness, seriously believe these claims? No, they do not. All these people are Smarts, at heart. Their news departments aren't wasting any time investigating the alien onslaught, though surely a galactic sex crime of this magnitude would be worth assigning at least as many reporters to as the question of whether the president's wife once made a killing in commodities.

"Statistics show that 4 million Americans have been abducted..." began a Fox T.V. news item about the Mack book the other day. (It continued with unidentified footage of realistic-looking aliens, from a science fiction movie, of course. There are no standards left, it seems, in the world of television news.) We'll all be hearing this statistic incessantly in the next weeks, so it's worth showing once and for all where it comes from. It is the product of a 1991 study conducted by the Roper Organization under the sponsorship of abduction buffs, who mailed their interpretation of the results—titled *Unusual Personal Experiences: An Analysis of the Data from Three National Surveys*—to tens of thousands of mental health professionals.

The Roper pollsters read a list of experiences to 6,000 people and asked them whether they had undergone these experiences, as a child or an adult, "more than twice," "once or twice" or "never" (a construction that routinely generates more positive responses than the straightforward "ever" or "never"). The relevant experiences were:

- waking up paralyzed with a sense of a strange person or presence or something else in the room;
- experiencing a period of time of an hour or more, in which you were apparently lost, but you could not remember why, or where you had been;
- seeing unusual lights or balls of light in a room without knowing what was causing them, or where they came from;
- finding puzzling scars on your body and neither you nor anyone else remembering how you received them or where you got them;

• feeling that you were actually flying through the air although you didn't know why or how.

Most healthy people can answer yes to a few of these. I certainly can. They are all well-known feelings and dream types. Even the sinister-sounding scar question is an easy yes for many people (take a moment to examine your body carefully and you'll see what I mean). The answers to these five questions form the entire basis for the alien-abduction statistic. Are you wondering how a respectable survey organization could take this data and produce a claim that "one out of every fifty adult Americans may have had UFO/abduction experiences"? Easy. The authors had only to make a single fraudulent assumption: "Based upon the data we have collected, we decided to regard only [!] those respondents who answered 'yes' to at least four of our five key indicator questions as probable abductees." That was 119 people. Hence—simple arithmetic from here on—4 million Americans.

Perhaps Mack is embarrassed enough by the absurdity of this exercise not to rely on it heavily. He mentions it only once in his book. But he did put his Harvard Medical School imprimatur on the original report, writing the introduction and enclosing a helpful mail-in card for his readers.

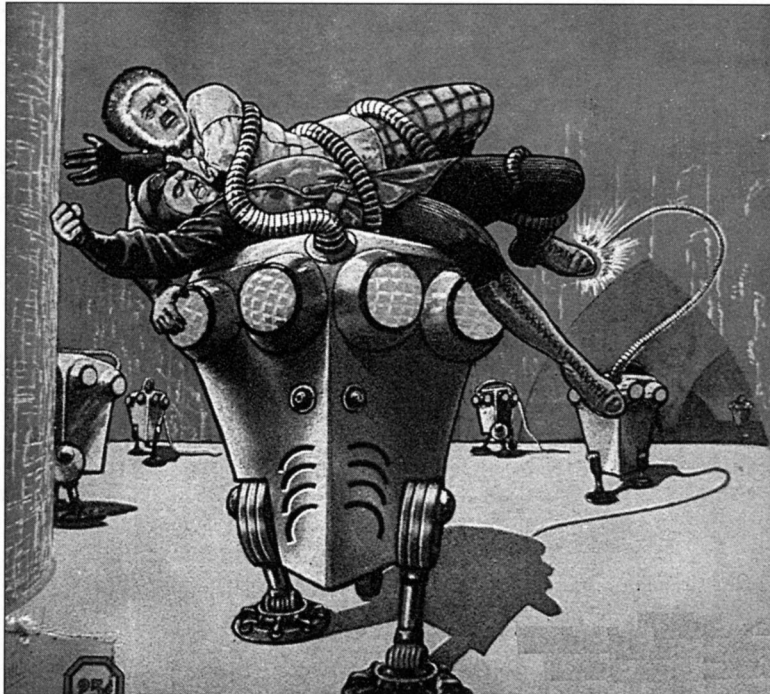
The alien-abduction phenomenon began in 1966 with the case of Betty and Barney Hill. They were a New Hampshire couple who—years after having gotten lost one night in the White Mountains—read some UFO literature (the flying saucer craze was already two decades old), spent a fair amount of time with psychiatrists, finally underwent hypnosis and "remembered" having been kidnapped by aliens and subjected to various indignities. Scores of books, movies and television docudramas followed as the genre evolved—Barney Hill himself was portrayed by James Earl Jones. For the entertainment industry, this isn't a cultural nuisance; it's a cash cow. And every few years some author finds a new way to cash in, as Whitley Strieber did with his 1987 fiction-posing-as-nonfiction best-seller, *Communion*.

Mack has a new angle. "None of this

work," he writes,

in my view, has come to terms with the profound implications of the abduction phenomenon for the expansion of human consciousness, the opening of perception to realities beyond the manifest physical world and the necessity of changing our place in the cosmic order if the earth's living systems are to survive the human onslaught.

Of course, what really makes Mack different from the standard flying-saucer nut is that he's got authority. "Ordinarily," Oprah declared, "we would not even put people on television, on our show certainly, who make such bizarre claims. . . . But we were intrigued by this man. . . . Dr. Mack is a respected professor who teaches at Harvard University.



COVER OF THE MAGAZINE *WONDER STORIES* (1933)

He is an eminent psychiatrist. . . ." The promotion surrounding his new book leans heavily on his professional trappings. There is his status as a medical doctor and psychiatrist. There is his Pulitzer Prize (won not for anything to do with UFOs, of course, but for a biography of T.E. Lawrence published seventeen years ago). There is Harvard University, where Mack enjoys the comfort of academic tenure.

Mack's publicists—besides Scribner's, he uses a New Jersey firm, P.R. with a Purposive Inc.—are combining and recombining these elements in sleazy ways. A press release begins: "Abduction by aliens was not a topic taken seriously at Harvard University, until John E. Mack, a medical doctor and professor of psychiatry. . . ." (Of course, it is still not a topic "taken seriously" at Harvard,

except to the extent that Mack and fellow gulls happen to be on campus.)

For readers, *Abduction* will seem a cross between the Strieber genre and the Nancy Friday sort of one-sexual-fantasy-after-another-as-told-to-me genre. Ed has sex in a "pod" with a silvery-blond alien and finds it "fulfilling" and "great." Catherine is forced to lie on a table naked and spread her legs while an alien with cold hands inserts an instrument into her vagina. Eva is fondled by three "midgets." And so on. It's all excruciatingly unpleasant and incoherent. Just about everyone gets painful needles in the brain or the leg, and just about everyone gets a lecture about pollution or global consciousness on the way out.

The core of Mack's belief is the following cocktail-party syllogism:

People think they were abducted.
They don't seem crazy.
We're experts on mental illness.
Therefore people were abducted.

It sounds more respectable in psychiatrist talk, naturally: "Efforts to establish a pattern of psychopathology other than disturbances associated with a traumatic event have been unsuccessful. Psychological testing of abductees has not revealed evidence of mental or emotional disturbance that could account for their reported experiences." Ergo . . .

No one, of course, remembers their abductions right away. These

aliens, clumsy as they are about anesthesia and scars, have a way of making the experience vanish from the conscious minds of all 4 million of their American victims. (Why is abduction such a peculiarly American phenomenon, by the way? Our national borders aren't visible through the portholes of those spaceships. Mack, of course, has an answer: abductions are global, but it's only in the United States that we are lucky enough to have large numbers of UFO-obsessed therapists to help people uncover their suppressed experiences.) Abduction psychiatrists like Mack need a method of helping people "remember," and that method is hypnosis.

You are getting sleepy . . . when you awake you will remember . . . Hypnosis is all about suggestion. It has always been a fringe practice, as useful to carnival magicians

Courtesy Stellar Publishing Co.

and moviemakers as to clinical psychiatrists, and for every genuine buried memory unearthed by hypnotists, many more false memories have been implanted. At its best, the process is a conspiracy between hypnotist and willing subject. *Time* magazine has quoted one of Mack's subjects as saying that she was given UFO literature to read in preparation for her sessions and was asked obvious leading questions. Garry Trudeau has shined his own form of common sense on the process in a Doonesbury sequence that has a hypnotized subject saying, "Now I see a . . . a blinding light." "It's a vehicle, isn't it? Some sort of space vehicle?" the hypnotist prompts. "I . . . I can't tell. It has Nevada plates."

From a scientific point of view, Mack's anecdotes are grossly lacking in respectable methodology. He doesn't provide information about his hypnotic techniques, though he does give the impression that there's a lot of breathing involved. He provides no data from psychological tests. These are "time-consuming and expensive," he notes—gosh, right, in that case, why bother? There is nothing remotely resembling a control or a negative case. There is no explanation of how he selected *Abduction's* thirteen case studies from his total caseload of seventy-six, except for the following: "... there are abductees I have known longer or worked with in greater depth. If I have chosen not to tell their stories here it is because I could not do justice to the richness of their experiences in a sufficiently clear and concise manner." (In other words, there's even better stuff in his files—he just couldn't squeeze them into these 422 pages.)

It's never clear where Mack finds his subjects or who they are. They seem to be shuttled to him by the UFO/abduction network, and particularly by Budd Hopkins, author of two 1980s best-sellers on the phenomenon. It was Hopkins who introduced Mack in 1990 to his first four supposed victims and then began a regular series of referrals. Mack's anecdotal descriptions give only a cardboard sense of who they are: despite the torturous physical detail, there is little to flesh out his sweeping claim that "they seem to come, as if at random, from all parts of society." It seems safe to say that there's one kind of patient that Mack never sees: a person suffering from vague and unexplained feelings of anxiety or trauma who, without any familiarity with UFO books or movies and without any suggestion whatsoever on the part of psychiatrist or hypnotist, then remembers an abduction experience. If he had any of

those, it would be interesting to see the transcripts. In reality, though, by the time Mack sees them, his patients know very well what they're in for and have been well-prepped.

As for his own biases, Mack claims he began as a skeptic, but this he is clearly not. He's a firm believer, for example, in auras—"the energy fields around us that some especially sensitive people can see." He is certainly (much like his aliens) among the many people who began talking a lot over the past decade or two about saving the planet, protecting the environment, understanding spirituality and so forth. Mack seems to have been a '60s late-bloomer, falling belatedly and hard for Werner Erhard, Carlos Casteneda, est, Esalen and so forth. It's really no wonder his abductees find themselves getting such a warm dose of mind expansion along with the extraterrestrial sex abuse.

Mack never manages to discuss the world's most widely shown piece of popular entertainment on his subject, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, though surely many, if not all, of his patients saw Steven Spielberg's lovable little bug-eyed aliens long before they came up with their own memories of virtually identical aliens. In fact Mack's whole new mood about abductions isn't new at all. It's all there in *Close Encounters*: the Eastern mysticism, the spiritual save-the-planet denouement. (Remember the closing sound track of the original version? "When you wish upon a star, / Makes no difference who you are, / Anything your heart desires will come . . . to . . . you.")

The entire issue of contaminating influences is constantly being swept under Mack's rug. He writes at one point, "Eva had written in her journal that she had started to read Strieber's *Communion*, but discontinued it so as not to be 'influenced by anyone or anything.'" Oh, sure. Anyway, all this scientific, methodological criticism rolls off believers like water off a duck. It's merely "rational" or "empirical" or, worst of all, "Western" (generic terms of dismissal). Mack *knows* his hypnotism sessions are a collaboration, and he's unrepentant: "I cannot avoid the fact that a co-creative intuitive process such as this may yield information that is in some sense the product of the intermingling or flowing together of the consciousnesses of the two (or more) people in the room." He adds:

Something may be brought forth that was not there before in exactly the same form. Stated differently, the information gained in the sessions is not simply a remembered "item," lifted out of the experiencer's consciousness like a stone from a kidney. It may

represent instead a developed or evolved perception, enriched by the connection that the experiencer and the investigator have made.

From a Western perspective this might be called "distortion"; from a transpersonal point of view the experiencer and I may be participating in an evolution of consciousness.

Arguing with someone who uses language in this blousy manner is like dancing with smoke. It is useless to find errors in reasoning or logic. Logic? What a beggarly, earthbound affair. There are moments when you find yourself wondering whether even Mack knows what he's claiming. With all his harrowing descriptions of rapes and torture, he's still capable of retreating to, "... we do not know what an abduction really is—the extent, for example, to which it represents an event in the physical world or

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to which it is an unusual subjective experience with physical manifestations." This sounds almost sane. I would translate it into my boring kind of English as "we don't know whether abductions are real events or fantasies." And "physical manifestations" is a nice little addendum; it glides right past the fact that there are no physical manifestations, if this means tangible evidence the aliens might have left behind. They're wonderfully tidy about their needles and handcuffs.

Mack continues: "A still greater problem resides in the fact that memory in relation to abduction experiences behaves rather strangely." Why, yes! "... the memory of an abduction may be outside of consciousness"—translation: *nonexistent*—"until triggered"—translation: *created*—"many years later by another experience or situation that becomes associated with the original event." Such as, maybe, going to the drive-in and watching *Close Encounters*? Mack continues (and by the way, does Harvard offer its professors any course in remedial English?): "The experiencer in a situation such as this could be counted on the negative side of the ledger *before* the triggering experience and on the positive side *after* it." In plain language: it's hard to count the people who have been abducted, because if someone says he hasn't been abducted, he may just not remember—yet.

Though Mack is in all the machinery surrounding his book as true a believer as can be, still, in the actual text, he engages in a slippery form of rhetoric—as if somehow he still wanted to hedge his bets. He writes of "the actual experience (whatever the source of these experiences may ultimately prove to be)." What does John Mack really believe (assuming, of course, that the whole thing isn't just a calculated scam)? Does he have any curiosity about the technology of this species, on the one hand capable of passing through walls and beaming people about on rays of light, and on the other hand sometimes reduced to flagging down cars? Does he believe that creatures from another planet are grabbing our fellow humans, pinning them down and engaging in weird sex with them? Literally?

Well, yes—and no. Certainly he writes as though he does, but he also manages to avoid answering such tacky direct questions. Sometimes he switches over to writing in terms of "the abduction phenomenon" (Smartspeak) instead of "abductions" (Markspeak). Mack says, "Our use of familiar words like 'happening,' 'occurred' and 'real' will themselves have to be thought of differently,

less literally perhaps." It's a sickeningly corrupt style of hiding behind language. His writing is full of phrases drained of all meaning: "the collapse of space/time"; "the alien being opened Ed's consciousness." And there is always the ultimate hedge: "the problem of defining in what reality the abductions occur."

We know some realities in which they aren't occurring. They aren't occurring in the reality Mack calls "the ontological framework of modern science." This is the reality where we might be tripped up by things like "accepted laws of physics and principles of biology." They aren't occurring in "the Judeo-Christian tradition." Jews and Christians have become such stick-in-the-muds compared to (no surprise here) "Eastern religions, such as Tibetan Buddhism, which have always recognized a vast range of spirit entities in the cosmos. . . ." Things that, after all, could have really happened, are constantly happening in "converging time frames" or "another dimension." The game of let's-find-another-reality turns someone like me into such a party-pooper, having to fall back on the common-sense idea that reality is in fact . . . reality.

But it's not just a game. Mack is a practicing psychiatrist, and he's toying with real people. There is "Ed," who first got in touch with Mack in 1992 and "recalled" having been abducted, raped (not Mack's word) and lectured to about "the way humans are conducting themselves here in terms of international politics, our environment, our violence to each other, our food and all that"—all this having supposedly occurred thirty-one years earlier, in 1961, though Ed didn't begin to recall it until 1989.

In a chilling aside Mack writes that Ed and his wife, "Lynn," have had "a number of fertility problems, which may or may not be abduction-related, including three or four spontaneous terminations of Lynn's pregnancies." It's a reminder: this man is practicing medicine. He is telling patients that their miscarriages may be due to imaginary aliens. Why do the medical licensing boards permit this?

If Mack has any particular therapeutic goals for his patients—apart, that is, from raising his own consciousness—it's hard to see what they are. He's obviously the wrong person to help someone come to grips with the underlying causes of UFO fantasies and hallucinations, so what kind of therapy can he offer? Does he want to help patients adjust to the aftershock of a trauma akin to rape? Maybe, but he has bigger things in

mind—"personal growth" and "transformation," meaning becoming a better citizen of the planet, getting in touch with one's transcendent spiritual nature, etc. And why stop there? He finds that "abductees seem, especially once they confront and integrate their experiences, to be especially intuitive; they sometimes demonstrate strong psychic abilities, including clairvoyance or the ability to perceive at a distance."

Mack represents the most visible agent of an especially disturbing trend in the UFO landscape: mailings and publicity targeted specifically at psychologists and psychiatrists. Private organizations financed by abduction devotees are spending money to persuade these professionals that there is something clinically respectable about looking for UFOs along with, say, child abuse in their patients' troubled histories. Mack's own tax-exempt funding source is his Center for Psychology and Social Change. He also has a Program for Extraordinary Experience Research. These organizations want clinicians to look for abduction cases whenever they encounter such telltale symptoms as (I'm quoting from a 1992 Mack mailing to mental health professionals) "fears of the dark and of nightfall."

Sadly, in the age of depth psychology and transpersonal psychology, hypnotherapy and psychic healing, willing professional dupes are in ready supply. It seems that anything goes these days in the mental health business. Even more sadly, psychiatrists are exactly the people who should be treating the scores of people who think they have been abducted by aliens and who should be trying to understand the phenomenon.

For there is an abduction phenomenon, of course, and it's worth studying. Cultural historians might think fruitfully about the shared details of the mythology, at least to the extent that they can be disentangled from the influences of the self-referential movies and books to which victims have been exposed. Carl Sagan has pointed out similarities with old (pre-space-age) stories of incubi and succubi, witches and fairies. "Is it possible," he wrote,

that people in all times and places occasionally experience vivid, realistic hallucinations, often with sexual content—with the details filled in by the prevailing cultural idioms, sucked out of the zeitgeist? When everyone knows that gods regularly come down to Earth, we hallucinate gods; when everyone knows about demons, it's incubi and succubi; when fairies are widely believed, we see fairies; when the old myths fade and we begin thinking that alien beings are plausible, then that's where our hypnagogic imagery tends.

The problem is that, by and large, the Smarts aren't interested in arguing with the Marks. It seems unprofitable, when no amount of rational discourse can change the mind of a believer. A few worthy organizations devote themselves to this sort of thing, most notably the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, publishers of the *Skeptical Inquirer*. But most astronomers, physicists and paleontologists have better things to do, though they are the sorts of people best equipped to explain just how infinitely unlikely it is that our corner of the universe should be receiving alien visitors in such strikingly near-human form at just the eye-blink of history when we have discovered space travel. Outside of hard science, all too many academics have fallen into the literary conceit that anyone's version of reality is as valid as anyone else's, and here in the real world, it's a conceit with bad consequences.

Not that mental health workers have nothing to contribute to understanding phenomena like the abduction myth. On the contrary, scores or perhaps even hundreds of people do "remember" having been kidnapped by aliens, and this needs

to be understood. There is an explanation. As with so many belief manias, the explanation is unwelcome to many people: we are not fully rational creatures. Our minds are not computers. We see people, we hear voices, we sense presences that are not really there. If you have never seen the face of someone you know, in broad daylight, clear as truth, when in reality that person was a continent away or years dead, then you are unusual.

Our memories cannot be trusted—not our five-minute-old memories, and certainly not our decades-old memories. They are weakened, distorted, rearranged and sometimes created from wishes or dreams. With or without hypnosis, we are susceptible to suggestion. The painful irony is that of all the people—the Smarts—who should know these lessons and articulate them for the rest of us, none are better placed than professors of psychiatry.

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in its own right to the entities behind those prizes, worth protecting for the value it confers on the prizes themselves. The more often the National Book Award spawns a best-seller, the more valuable that sales record makes the National Book Award, and the more important it thus becomes to bestow it upon books that will live up to everyone's expectations so the value of the prize isn't diminished.

"There is no doubt that people like to see their names in print with a little pat of butter attached," wrote Bernard Darwin, Charles's grandson and a Dickens scholar, and these bookish prizes are as close as the literary establishment comes to the Academy Awards—the night of the living pats of butter. It isn't too cynical, nor is it necessarily a discredit to the talent involved, to believe that the deliberations of literary prize-givers are no more governed by purely artistic considerations than are the profound and inevitable ruminations of voting members of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences. I mention this because *The Shipping News* is an out-and-out crowd-pleaser, a book that will certainly not diminish the commercial value of the National Book Award even as that award (and the Pulitzer Prize) increases this book's sales.

The Princess of Tides

BY VERLYN KLINKENBORG

The Shipping News by E. Annie Proulx

(Fireside/Touchstone, 337 pp., \$12 paper)

There is always, of course, a distinction to be made between a successful writer and the gravy that is ladled over that writer by the literary press. Recently, E. Annie Proulx (pronounced "proo") has been served up hot. Her first novel, *Postcards*, won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 1993—the first time a woman has won that prize. Her second novel, *The Shipping News*, won the 1993 National Book Award, and it has just been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Proulx herself is a copywriter's dream: a survivor, a jack-of-all-trades, an independent cuss, a backwoods literatus, a fisherperson, a hunter, a woman who writes with the wolves, longhand. When quoted by reporters she sounds a little ursine, and it can be hard to tell—given the gravy—how much of that is the bluntness of a writer caught unaware in the midst of

her private life and how much is good staging.

As the press ladles praise upon her, it praises itself, as it always does, for knowing a good thing when it sees one. The articles that have been written about Proulx, who is nearly 60, tend to celebrate the blush of fame, the transforming power of the media gaze, as if Proulx's main achievement were to have lived long enough to warrant attention at last. "These days," one reporter writes in *The Washington Post*, "the roughest thing in Proulx's life involves learning the myriad duties of a budding literary celebrity." Welcome to Valhalla.

You hear a lot of talk about the marketing value of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize (and the Booker Prize, too, which Proulx was deterred from winning by not being British). That kind of talk makes you wonder whether marketing value hasn't become an asset

The *Shipping News* is the story of Quoyle, a lumbering, prognathous ne'er-do-well who finally does do well when he leaves behind his dreary, incommensurable life in Mockingburg, New York, and returns to his ancestral country, the coast of Newfoundland, in the company of his young daughters, Bunny and Sunshine, and his quietly efficient, quietly lesbian aunt, Agnis Hamm, a yacht upholsterer. Quoyle is freed from Mockingburg by the death of Petal Bear, his sexually incandescent wife, whose light shone equally upon all men, and by the double suicide of his parents, who left their suicide note—cut off by the beep—on Quoyle's answering machine. In a town called Killick-Claw, Quoyle finds competence and the respect of his neighbors and a good wife. The book's final sentence is this: "And it may be that love sometimes occurs without pain or misery." If this were the first sentence of the novel, the reader would know from the start what at first he only suspects: that *The Shipping News* is a fairy tale, a book that doesn't just happen to turn out happily but that plainly intends to turn out happily all the way, a book that is unstinting, almost, at times, forced, in its good cheer.

In Killick-Claw, Quoyle goes to work for a newspaper called *The Gammy Bird*, a "forty-four-page tab printed on a thin