

Psychiatrist risks ridicule in study of alien abductions

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Five years ago, when a colleague asked Harvard psychiatrist John E. Mack if he wanted to meet Budd Hopkins, Mack replied, "Who's he?" Told that Hopkins was a New York artist known for his work with people who claimed to have been abducted by aliens and hustled aboard UFOs, Mack swiftly came to a professional conclusion.

"I assumed that either there must be something the matter with Budd Hopkins or that Hopkins was encountering a new form of mental illness," Mack recalls. "I wasn't prepared for what I found."

What Mack found when he finally met Hopkins was something so personally compelling that the veteran psychiatrist plunged into the field of abduction research himself. Over the next three years, as word of his interest in the abduction phenomenon spread, nearly 100 self-proclaimed abductees (or "experiencers") would contact Mack at his office at Harvard University's Cambridge Hospital.

The stories varied, but many abductees told of being taken from their homes by big-eyed extraterrestrials and borne aboard space ships; there, sperm or ova samples were extracted from their bodies as part of an ongoing earthling-alien hybrid breeding program.

After taking what he describes as thorough psychiatric histories of the subjects, Mack concluded that they were "solid people, of sound mind" and told several colleagues that he believed "something important" was going on.

It wasn't the first time the psychiatrist had flirted with what some might consider fringe fields or taken an alternative approach. The Center for Psychology and Social Change, the nonprofit research organization Mack founded in 1983, often funds projects that combine psychology with ecological or ethnic issues outside the psychiatric mainstream.

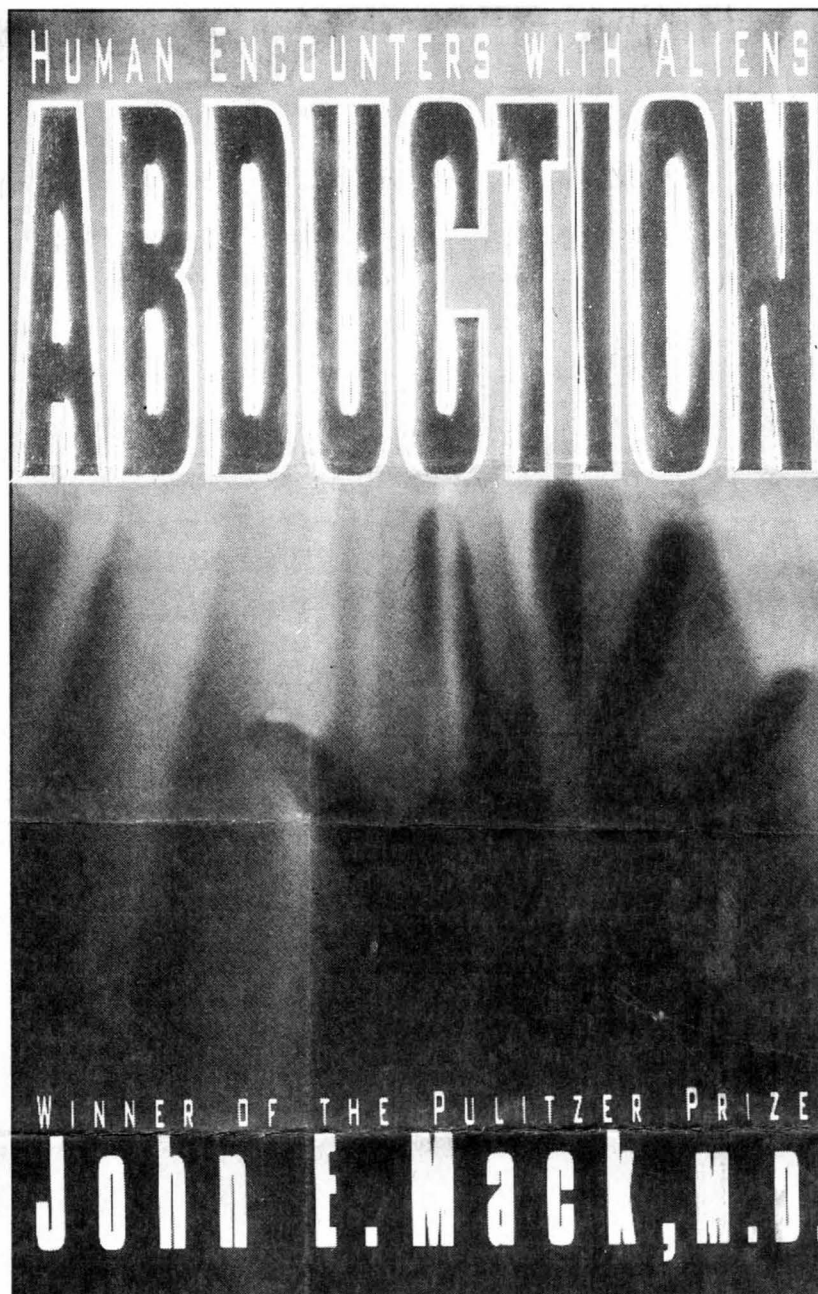
"He's never been afraid to take a stand or follow his intuition, even if it might subject him to criticism," says Douglas Jacobs, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard who has known and admired Mack professionally since 1975. "His whole career has been about blazing trails."

But for many of Mack's fellow psychiatrists, the abducted-by-alien study was just too bizarre. Dismissing abductees' claims as preposterous, colleagues respectfully cautioned him about pursuing the project.

"The difference between courage and foolhardiness is often subtle," Mack admits. "After a while, though, I reached the point where there seemed to be more to lose in terms of my own sense of integrity by keeping my mouth shut than I could lose by describing what I was finding."

In April, Scribners published Mack's "Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens," featuring 13 in-depth case histories drawn from his research. And now a lot of people assume there must be something the matter with John Mack — or at least something seriously awry with the 64-year-old professor's professional judgment when it comes to alien activities.

"There are people who think



he's an embarrassment to Harvard, that he's gone off the deep end," Jacobs acknowledges. "Many of my colleagues have rejected John Mack's research outright."

George Vaillant, a Harvard Medical School psychiatry professor who has known Mack for 25 years, provided a book jacket blurb for "Abduction" comparing it favorably to Frazer's "The Golden Bough." But he refuses to discuss his personal views on the validity of Mack's research or the professional risks Mack is taking. Accepting a reporter's phone call "out of loyalty to John Mack," Vaillant would comment only, "Let me say this. ('Abduction') is a very idealistic book that asks us to imagine a world or worlds better than the ones we have, and people who are idealistic take risks. The book is probably best understood as a metaphor."

Mack is hardly the first to write about alien abductions. A number of authors have chronicled the case of Betty and Barney Hill, an apparently stable New Hampshire couple who claimed to have been taken aboard a craft in the early 1960s by small, gray humanoids and subjected to sexual examinations.

Budd Hopkins' "Missing Time," published in 1981, chronicled abduction claims involving missing time, body scars resulting from invasive alien medical procedures and small metallic implants purportedly inserted in victims' bodies as tracking devices; the followup, 1987's "Intruders," focused on sexual and reproduction-related episodes that have come to be asso-

ciated with the abduction phenomenon. Whitley Strieber's "Communion" was a best-seller in 1987; and in 1992, Temple University historian and abduction researcher David Jacobs presented his findings in "Secret Life: Firsthand Accounts of UFO Abductions."

But whatever his colleagues may think, Mack's credentials — in addition to being a Harvard psychiatry professor, he is the author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of T.E. Lawrence — set him apart from the pack and lend a stamp of respectability to a topic generally relegated to tabloids. As a result, he has received mainstream news media coverage seldom accorded to just anybody who announces his belief in alien abductions, though Mack isn't crazy about invariably being described as a believer. He's even less crazy about an anonymous quote from a "friend" in a New York Times Magazine article that suggested Mack's UFO abduction "obsession" led to his recent separation from his wife after 34 years of marriage.

"You can make anyone look foolish, if that's your purpose, and I'm no exception," he adds. "But I guess what gets me most upset is getting pushed off in a category as a rigid believer. It's (presented as) 'This doctor believes in alien abductions.' That really isn't fair. I'm opening up an area that has some power to teach us something, an area that seems to have some implications for all of us, even though I don't know what it's about and where it's going. It's a mystery, and I want to stress my agnosticism."