

THE NERVE

BY KATHRYN ROBINSON



Patricia Grace

My favorite Martians

Mysteries: Alien abduction stories are impossible to explain, but they shouldn't be dismissed.

The other night I was reading along in *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*, the much-discussed new book by the Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard psychiatrist John E. Mack. I was at the part where Mack explains that right before people are abducted by aliens mysterious electrical malfunctions often occur. It being nightfall, I reached up to turn on a lamp. Sparks flew and the lamp suddenly burst into flames.

I am not making this up.

Careful to keep an eye on the clock (abductees often report large, unaccounted-for chunks of time), I blew out the little blaze and sat very still. Was I about to be abducted by aliens? Whooshed up to the mother ship and anally probed, like nearly every one of the 100-some claimants Mack interviewed over the past four years? Or maybe I had just *then* been abducted, perhaps relieved (as women abductees almost always report) of a partially incubated hybrid fetus. (The aliens are famous, after all, for erasing memories.) And what was that . . . *smell*? (Oh, the lamp.)

Outlandish testimonies like these fill the pages of *Abduction*, a book most notable for the fact that its author believes them. For his credulity Mack has been skewered by *The New Republic* and (o humiliation!) *Dateline*, and has become the laughing stock of the scientific and academic communities—even, *The New York Times* reports, his own department at Harvard.

But now that I've finished his book—outdoors, under natural light—I find myself with a good deal more respect for Mack than for the skeptics who keep lobbing conventional wisdom at him. Why is that? It's certainly not the quality of his book, an overlong and confusingly written (how did this guy win the Pulitzer?) succession of case studies chronicling his hypnotic retrieval of people's really disturbing memories of sex with aliens. Though Mack claims to have started out a skeptic, spending "countless hours" trying to find alternate explanations for these stories, he never details the alternate explanations

enough to convincingly refute them. The result is a book with too little of the critical distance a reader requires from an "expert."

That's because Mack has set out not to answer our skepticism, but to ignite our trust. These "abductees" have clearly been through *something*—a bottom line even Mack's harshest critics will allow—and Mack is simply here to testify as a trained psychiatrist that the consistent intensity and authenticity of emotional fallout from these people points to an experience that's real.

For many "abductees," Mack is the first person who has ever believed them. Mack elicits their "memories," gathers them into support groups, validates their experiences. I don't know if those of us who have never had our deepest-held beliefs dismissed as sick and ridiculous can begin to understand the overwhelming therapeutic value of simple respect. It's hard, indeed, to find a downside in Mack's trust: with nobody being sued or impugned (as in "repressed memories" of childhood abuse), his patients reportedly function better after their purgative sessions with him. If this is bad science, it may nonetheless be good medicine.

Yet, is it bad science? One of the most fascinating things Mack does is intentionally suspend his attachment to the Western scientific paradigm and the conventional divisions that separate "rational" from "irrational," "real" from "unreal," "material plane" from "spiritual plane." This receptivity to things metaphysical—no stranger, really, than common belief in God—amounts to handing buckshot to critics like *The New Republic's* James Gleick, who savages Mack for his blowzy disregard for material proof and his suggestion that abductions could be occurring within "another reality."

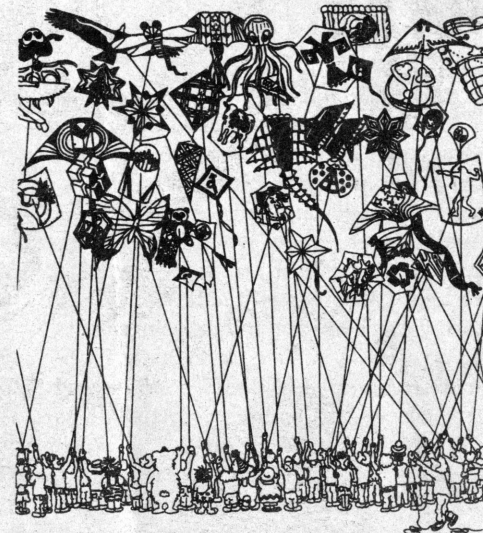
Mack is savaged, in short, for having an open mind—a fundamental prerequisite for scientific inquiry, not a disqualifier from it. As Columbus and Newton and Einstein would testify, scientific discovery is not a matter of jamming data into existing categories; it's about supposing new ones. It's about ad-

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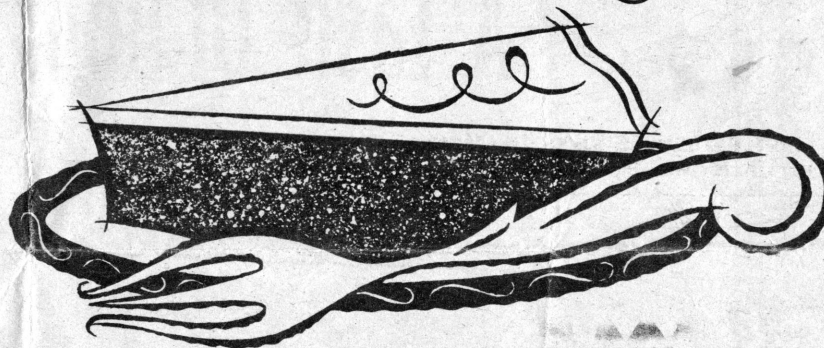
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| 6 oz. sugar (3/4 cup + 1 tbs.) | 1 tbs. instant coffee mixed with 1 tbs. |
| 4 eggs | hot water or 1/4 cup Kahlua |
| 1/3 cup cream | |
| Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Mix cream cheese and sugar in a bowl until smooth and creamy. Scrape down sides frequently to avoid lumps. Add eggs one at a time; mix well. Add cream, melted chocolate and coffee/espresso; mix well. Pour batter into pan and bake for 1 hr. and 15 mins. or until center is just firm. When done, cool at room temp. for 30 mins. | |
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THE NERVE

mitting how much we don't know—in marked contrast to the hubris of a rationalist such as Gleick, who argues that any phenomenon that's not available to his senses must therefore be a sham.

Gleick's arrogance would perhaps approach respectability if there were no mysteries left to science. But as we all know, there are innumerable mysteries left to science. A friend's theory that abduction experiences could be the doing of a fancy virus sounds as plausible as any other explanation, given how much scientists have left to learn about viruses.

Even if "abductions" turn out to be mere symptoms of some bizarre brain fever, would that then render the "ab-

duction" experiences any less "true" than if little gray aliens were *literally* snatching folks out of their beds on quiet nights? Mack is criticized—with good reason—for using hypnosis to "reenact" abductions, a means as likely to access imagination as memory. But isn't it significant—and rather taxing of the thin explanation that everyone's seen all the same alien movies—that every abductee is imagining virtually the same details? (Did you go see *Communion*?)

Another scientist who experienced derision in his day, C.G. Jung, believed there existed a higher plane of wisdom, a "collective unconscious," to which individuals had access through numinous dreams of a vivid, archetypal sort. It may be that "aliens" are the latest arrival from that ancient plane. But it's interesting to note that where one might

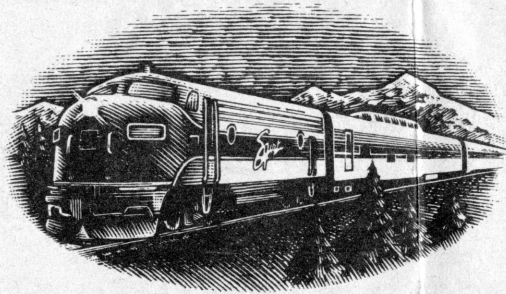
explain away such mythic visitations as cosmic projections of the human psyche's own extremes of goodness and evil—the current influx of angel sightings, for instance, or reports of satanic ritual abuse—Mack's claimants report a different, more chillingly authentic attitude toward their alien captors: ambivalence.

With intriguing consistency the abductees report feeling violated and exploited by the aliens' painful medical experiments and humiliating interspecies breeding campaign—even as they admit to simultaneous senses of protection, instruction, even guidance into higher states of consciousness by the aliens. In nearly every case, the abductee experiences a crisis of ego through his or her alien encounter, followed by a life-changing, often ecstatic, expansion of consciousness. Again and again, the

epiphany that kicks off this ascent is the same: the individual's acknowledgement at the hands of the aliens that he or she is not, in fact, in control.

That this triumph over ego also happens to be the essential ingredient of most religions, of Jung's concept of individuation—of 12-step psychology, for that matter—suggests that there may be something very like truth in what seems to be so much alien nonsense. Perhaps the aliens are literally zooming down in their spaceships, perhaps they're penetrating the veil of some parallel universe, perhaps they really are all in our heads, symptoms of some disease the conceits of Western science have—could it be?—hitherto failed to diagnose. But we'll never know, Mack wisely attests, if we persist in reflexively dismissing the folks who claim firsthand experience. ■

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