Visitors From Outer Space

An evenhanded observer reports from the U.F.O. and alien-abduction front.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE FOURTH KIND

Alien Abduction, UFOs, and the Conference at M.I.T.
By C. D. B. Bryan.
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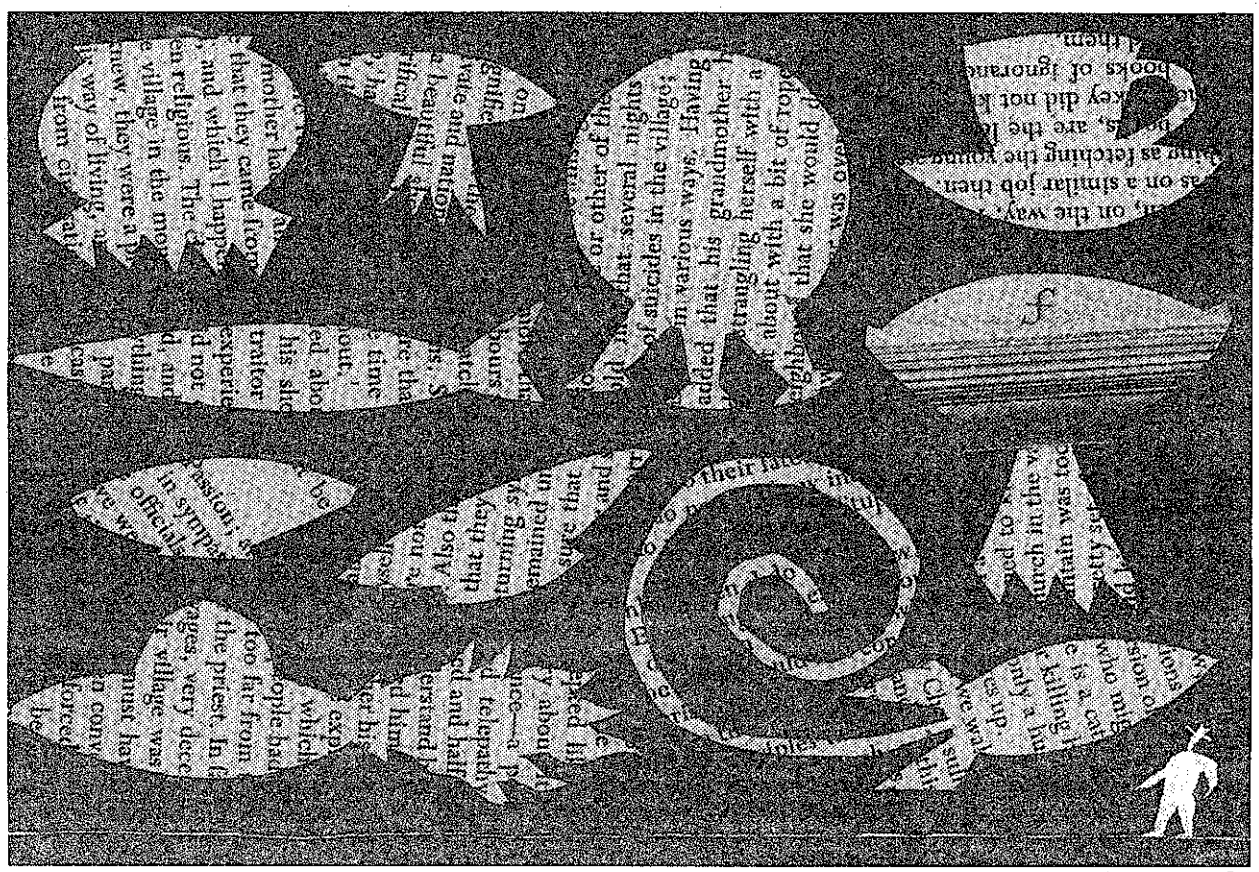

JEFFREY FISHER

By Dean Koontz

IN 1966, John G. Fuller published "The Interrupted Journey," Barney and Betty Hill's story of their 1961 abduction by alien beings, the first modern claim of such an encounter. By 1992, so many abductions had been reported that a conference was held that June at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to assess, in the words of the letter announcing the gathering, "the findings of various investigators studying people who report experiences of abductions by aliens, and the related issues of this phenomenon." C. D. B. Bryan, a novelist and the author of "Friendly Fire," a nonfiction work about the impact of Vietnam on one American family, attended the conference, intrigued that this two-headed-chicken story had become a subject for serious exploration.

At a time when many journalists have sailed off course on a sea of advocacy, how strange that such subjects as U.F.O.'s and alien abduction of average Americans should inspire Mr. Bryan to produce a book as scrupulously agenda-free as "Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: Alien Abduction, UFOs, and the Conference at M.I.T." Whether one is drawn to this material or not, the volume is a bracing read because of its uninflected reporting.

One is struck by the dedication with which these psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists and scientists from numerous disciplines have collected and analyzed the facts about U.F.O.'s and purported abductees, as displayed in the more than 100 reports given at the conference. The weight of their work, as described by Mr. Bryan, might convert even the most hard-boiled skeptic to grudging open-mindedness. Equally striking, however, is their gullibility and their failure to address — or even recognize — flaws in the "evidence" they most frequently cite as arguments in favor of the truth of alien-human contact. For instance, many abductees speak of beings who communicate telepathically and have no ears; earlessness is said to provide a convincing consistency to the descriptions. But telepaths would surely still find ears useful to avoid stepping on rattlesnakes, to leap out of the way of roaring avalanches and to listen to the Crab nebula equivalent of Beethoven.

As for gullibility, the researchers Mr. Bryan cites seem to have routinely accepted claims that the "abductees" have never read books about aliens, watched movies about aliens or discussed U.F.O.'s with anyone prior to their uncanny experiences, and thus could not have borrowed these details either from the works of science-fiction writers or from previous abduction reports. But in a popular culture saturated by books and movies featuring the U.F.O. motif for more than 40 years, it's hard to believe that so many of the claimants are utter naïfs when it comes to this subject.

Worse, when one of them casually reveals a previously existing connection to U.F.O.'s or to a history of paranormal experience, as frequently happens, the researchers never seem to investigate. We learn about a woman who calls herself Star, for example, who claims to have had no awareness of U.F.O.'s (or interest in them) before being abducted, but who had a friend so wired into the U.F.O. community that she immediately put Star in touch with the head of the Missouri Mutual U.F.O. Network. It's at least possible that Star's account was partly acquired through hearsay, but the researchers never follow this up. Another abductee discussed in the book had a mother who brought a priest to the family home every two weeks for many years to cleanse it of ghosts. Researchers saw this as evidence that aliens visited the family through generations — when it might more rationally be viewed as proof that an unstable household preconditioned the woman to fantasize later in life.

Furthermore, many of the presenters at the M.I.T. conference embrace such a wide array of beliefs in paranormal phenomena that their U.F.O. research seems less like a scientific commitment than like one facet of a New Age world view. Richard J. Boylan, a Sacramento-based psychologist, tells Mr. Bryan a riveting story of a six-state tour of military sites related to the Government's supposed cover-up of the U.F.O. story — and then casually mentions that he uses the services of a woman who is a "remote viewer" and who can clairvoyantly see inside places where she has never been. Joe Nyman, a Boston-area hypnotherapist, implies a belief in "health-making through crystals."

The most interesting figure involved with the conference is the co-chairman, John E. Mack, a charismatic professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Mack (who has been criticized by fellow scientists for the manner in which he has carried out his research) explains to Mr. Bryan that he was "raised as the strictest of materialists" in a "meaningless universe," yet speaks in terms of God and the soul, and tellingly refers to those unconvinced by abduction stories as "atheists." Although clearly an intelligent and dynamic man, Dr. Mack sets standards of proof that are more suitable to a theological debate than to a scientific inquiry.

He is deeply impressed with the fact that there are alleged to have been witnesses to some abductions, yet in the course of this conference no witnesses are produced. In the case of one woman in New York City who is said to have been floated out of the 12th-story window of her apartment to a hovering spacecraft while being observed by "two security agents" and a "senior political figure," we have nothing to confirm the existence of these men except the word of a longtime U.F.O. researcher who insists on protecting their identities.

Dr. Mack also argues that children who make abduction complaints similar to those of adults provide credibility for the whole phenomenon, because they're too young to have read the U.F.O. literature and are therefore untainted. This position can only be taken by someone who has no awareness of the sea of pop culture that exposes preschoolers to hundreds of stories involving aliens, flying saucers and abduction scenarios through Saturday morning cartoons and other television programs, comic books, movies, action-figure play sets and other toys. And when Dr. Mack suggests that such things as bruises, bloody noses, cuts and scratches from rough handling by aliens are "corroborative physical evidence," we can agree only if we refuse to consider the possibility that the injuries could have been self-inflicted.

AS portrayed in their own words in Mr. Bryan's book, a majority of those in the U.F.O. community — both abductees and researchers — regard the phenomenon in quasi-religious terms. They are, to borrow the words of a theologian speaking at the conference, "for the most part unchurched people," and this is presented as evidence that they are not on a religious quest. But one might understandably feel that churchgoers have reached a destination in their quest and that it is the "unchurched" who are, in fact, seeking meaning. Indeed, Dr. Mack and other abductee specialists feel that the aliens may want to save our ecologically endangered world, and they make reference with distinctly religious overtones to the Gaia hypothesis, which holds that the earth is a living entity.

Mr. Bryan's deliberately low-key reporting style sometimes cries out for more pointed questioning. He is impressed by unlikely details, as in an abductee's story of an alien trying on her high-heel shoes, but one thinks immediately of Steven Spielberg's film "E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial," in which the hapless alien is in one sequence dressed up as a woman. One wishes that the author would think of the reference as well. At other times, one badly wants to know what Mr. Bryan believes; he's almost maddeningly evenhanded. Yet if he had been more skeptical, or more forthcoming, the result would, perhaps, have been a less interesting book. The reader senses in him not only a refreshingly old-fashioned journalist — who believes in presenting the facts and the voices of his subjects without much comment — but also a man with a genuine affection for people. No one should want to trade his rare kindness for yet another tome written by a sarcastic cynic. Indeed, the power of his straightforward writing left me not merely with an open-mindedness toward the subject of alien abduction but with a hope that many of the abductees are in fact telling the truth and that we are not alone in the universe. □

Dean Koontz's most recent novel is "Dark Rivers of the Heart." His next novel, "Intensity," will be published this fall.