

Author risks ridicule to chronicle UFO mysteries

By STEPHANIE SCHOROW

Funny, C.D.B. Bryan doesn't look like a loony.

The gangly, bespectacled journalist who wrote the best seller "Friendly Fire" has also penned books on the National Geographic Society and the National Air and Space Museum.

But now Bryan has written a serious book

about UFOs. About people who say they have been beamed aboard alien craft, subjected to examinations that would make a gynecologist blush and returned to Earth without so much as a thank-you note.

Bryan takes these people very seriously. And that's the kind of attitude that has put Harvard psychiatrist John Mack on the hot seat for his research on alleged abductees.

"There was a certain amount of risk in my

writing about this," said the author of "Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: Alien Abductions, UFOs, and the Conference at MIT" (\$25, Alfred A. Knopf). "But I could diminish my risk by not taking a stand. And I don't know any stand I could take. I don't know what's going on. I don't think anybody does.

"But depending on the agenda of the investi-

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Author takes a serious look at tales of close encounters

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gator, they come up with quite different responses."

Pause for a reporter's note: I had to write that knee-jerk self-defense first paragraph with the word "loony." I mean, after all, we're talking UFOs here. If I didn't poke fun at Bryan's research, what would my editor say? I'd get strange looks in the newsroom. The bartender could ban me from Foley's. Bryan's already got another book contract on the history of the Mayo Clinic; I gotta work here.

Bryan hadn't always intended to write a "serious" book. When he heard about a conference on UFO abductees at MIT — that "high church of technology" as Steward Brand called it — he pitched the New Yorker on a tongue-in-cheek story on wonks vs. wackos.

But at the 1992 conference, he met Harvard's Mack, physicist David E. Pritchard and, more important, the alleged abductees. A few were, admittedly, one sandwich short of a picnic. And yet...

"It seemed to me to be inappropriate and irrespon-

sible to write tongue-in-cheek about some of these people, the abductees in particular, who were in real pain and terror and who I thought showed great courage in coming forward," he said.

Bryan examined the case of a woman levitated out of a Manhattan high-rise, an abduction witnessed by two security men, a U.N. official and a woman crossing the Brooklyn Bridge. He interviewed Carol and Alice, two "normal" women, who recount encounters with so many unlikely details — one alien wore a Stetson —

that it was hard to believe they could make up such stuff.

Bryan doesn't swallow the stories hook, line and zinger. He dismisses photographic evidence — if Tom Hanks can meet JFK in the White House in "Forrest Gump," what good is a grainy photo? He noted the lack of physical evidence; as one academic noted, no one's ever found a tailpipe from an alien craft. Bryan sees his role only as a recorder of data, in particular, the preponderance of abduction accounts with strikingly similar details that date back five to 10 years, before alien abduction became fodder for best sellers, TV shows and HMO advertisements.

"I don't know what's going on. But I do come away with the feeling that something is going on," said Bryan, who has never seen a UFO himself. "That this is something that should be investigated. This is not the Bermuda Triangle. This isn't even the Loch Ness monster."

Reporter's note: OK, I'm in trouble now. Bryan's not promoting any obviously crackpot agenda, he just says we should investigate this stuff. And I'm quoting him. Will I get bumped to the Weekly World News?

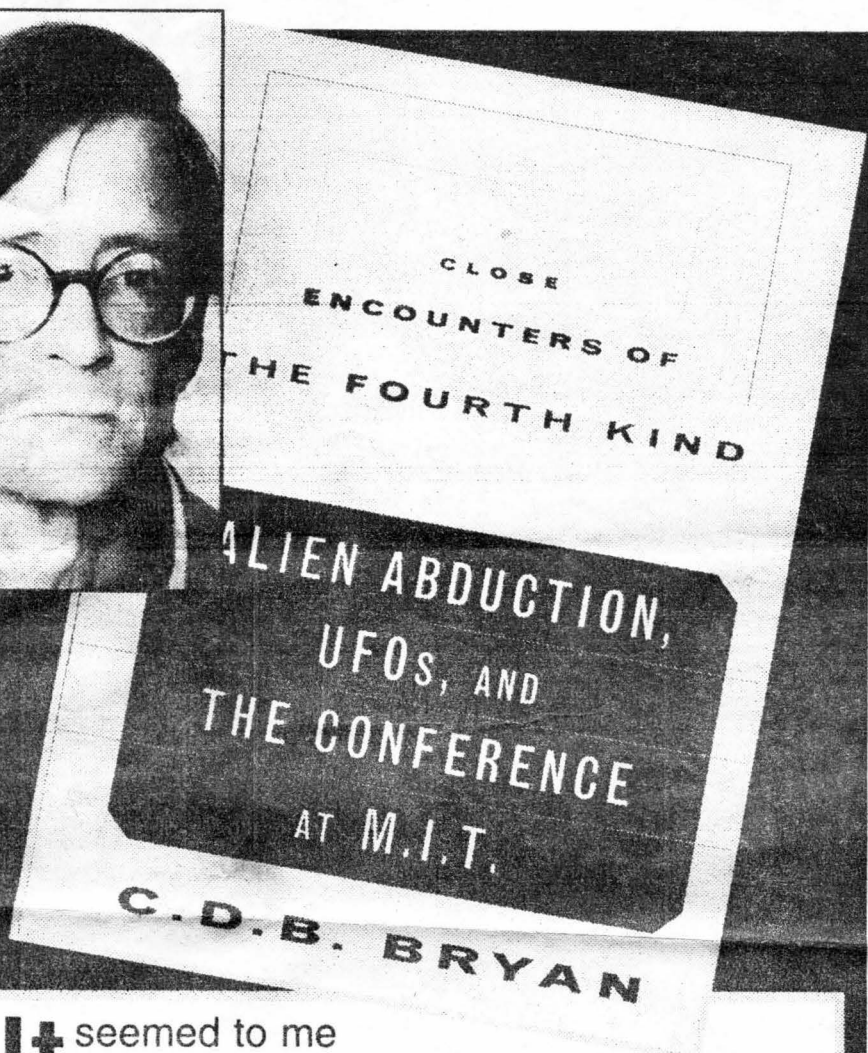
Still, isn't just putting one's name below the words UFO on a book jacket inviting ridicule?

"Yeah, yeah," Bryan admitted. And then with a wicked grin that transformed his serious pose into one of impish glee, he uttered a two-word expression that, in less profane translation, means: To heck with critics.

"I'm too old, too battered. I'm an old-fashioned journalist," he said. In other words, he calls 'em as he sees 'em.

"One of the abductees in Illinois called me while I was writing the book and said one of her aliens told me they were going to get in touch with me in October. I thought, what a terrific time for them to show up."

"Of course, they didn't."



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— C.D.B. Bryan