

**L**ast spring Harvard's John E. Mack, MD, long a respected figure in the world of American psychiatry, made the acquaintance of a wider public.

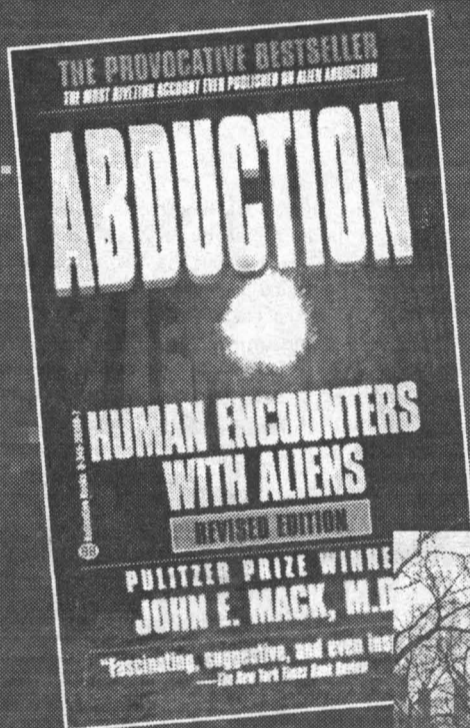
At the time, the quietly charismatic doctor and teacher, now 65, had written a new book, and he embarked on a round of interviews and radio and TV appearances to promote it. Actually, promote is too weak a word. It was a PR blitz conceived and conducted with extreme prejudice. For several weeks Mack

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# Harvard's hovering UFO controversy

by Peter Carbonara

Colleagues wonder if renowned psychiatrist John Mack is a nut.



# UFO

Continued from page 27

was inescapable: *Oprah*, *Larry King Live*, *Time*, *48 Hours*, *People*, *Newsweek*, and on and on.

What attracted *Oprah et al.* was not Mack's skill as a therapist. Nor was it the insight he had shown as the author of such scholarly works as *Nightmares and Human Conflict*. It was not even the Pulitzer Prize he won in 1977 for his psychoanalytic biography of Lawrence of Arabia. It was the fact that Mack, clear-eyed, reasonable — and from Harvard, for Christ's sake! — was willing to say in public that he believed in extraterrestrials.

The book he was hawking was *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (Scribner's). In it, Mack presents case studies of 13 people who told him of being taken forcibly aboard spaceships piloted by gray-skinned humanoids with enormous, penetrating eyes. These visitors from God-knows-where subjected their captives to a variety of nasty procedures, often of a sexual nature, before returning them to earth. Far from diagnosing some as yet-unnamed mental illness, Mack found the tellers of these tales utterly convincing.

"Nothing in my nearly 40 years in the field of psychiatry," he writes, "prepared me for what I have encountered in working with individuals reporting abduction experiences."

These abductees, or "experiencers," as he came to call them, were not psychotic or deluded. Neither were most of them victims of childhood sexual abuse or other earthly trauma. The best explanation for their nightmarish stories, Mack determined, was also the most outlandish: "I have no basis for concluding as yet that anything other than what experiencers say happened to them actually did." In other words, Mack stopped just short of saying, *They're real.*

Identical claims, of course, are to be found in countless schlocky paperbacks purporting to tell the "truth" about UFOs. None of them before *Abduction*, however, had been written by a full professor at Harvard Medical School.

Such a development was inevitable. The field of UFO research had long awaited the coming of a bona fide Ivy League intellectual like Mack. Here, at last, was the messiah: a credentialed eminence who would lift UFOs out of the past-lives/aromatherapy/I-saw-Elvis section of the bookstore forever.

A year later, though, it still hasn't happened. Mack's book and its attendant hype have met with widespread disdain, even within the UFO community. In the official psychiatric world, Mack's reputation is in tatters, and his peers express a combination of sorrow and embar-

assment at how this brilliant healer has become a laughingstock. And Harvard, which for the last five years has tolerated, if not exactly encouraged, his alien-abduction studies, is no longer amused.

In recent weeks, Harvard's reaction to Mack has begun to look like a particularly ripe campus scandal. A preliminary report by a confidential medical-school committee was severely critical of Mack and his research. In sporadic interviews, he has portrayed himself as a scientist whose work is too radical for the medical establishment. And professors, including some who think Mack is completely nuts, have begun to worry about the university infringing on his academic freedom or even revoking his tenure. Harvard Law's never-at-a-loss-for-words Alan Dershowitz has weighed in with a syndicated column denouncing the probe.

The medical school's just-completed investigation is unlikely to have any serious repercussions. Special-committee chairman Dr. Arnold Relman, former editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, declines to comment on the committee's work, except to say, "It was not an inquisition . . . and if it were, I wouldn't have participated."

The episode, however, ought to be a cautionary tale to any academic who may be tempted, as Mack was, to venture beyond his ivory tower into a world that is equal parts pop mythology, show biz, and science.

**Would you go to a doctor willing to consider that your problems were caused by aliens?**



Notman, who is tired of the whole subject of Mack and his aliens, says a remark she made to a reporter last year has become the consensus opinion at Harvard.

"I said something I've heard many times since then," Notman recalls. "I wish he would do something else."

Mack has heard that many times in his career. Originally from New York City, he graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1955 and became a professor there in 1972.

C.D.B. Bryan, a sober journalist and a UFO agnostic, interviewed Mack at length for his new book, *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: Alien Abductions, UFOs, and the Conference at MIT* (Knopf). Bryan says he came prepared to scoff, but instead found Mack a formidable intellect who throws out more information than a lot of listeners can handle. "I taped him, and I thought he was inarticulate. I was thinking, 'This is not the way I want it to go,'" Bryan remembers of their conversations. "Then I made the transcript, and it came out in sentences and paragraphs."

Mack has sometimes been out of step with his psychiatric colleagues. He alienated many at Harvard when he got interested in est, a controversial group-therapy program popular in the '70s. He joined the group's board of directors, and, in 1982, he invited founder Werner Erhard to speak at Harvard.

The episode revealed Mack's intellectual self-confidence and willingness to consider the unorthodox, even

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the heretical, but it also seemed to set the pattern for his subsequent alien misadventures. Mack is willing to give intellectual cover to people of dubious credentials eager for academic cachet. Mack's fans at Harvard think that makes him courageous; his detractors think it merely shows that being brilliant hasn't prevented him from being a sucker.

In 1983, Mack co-founded a research institute now called the Center for Psychology and Social Change. The Harvard-affiliated center is a non-profit, tax-exempt foundation that has done research and educational work on the psychology of conflict and nuclear war. The center's budget, \$500,000 this year, comes entirely from foundations and individuals.

The center's biggest project is Mack's Program for Extraordinary Experience Research (PEER). PEER's origins lie in Mack's 1990 meeting with Budd Hopkins, a New York artist and UFO maven who is the author of two books on the subject of abduction.

Hopkins had gathered people who told horrific, detailed, and amazingly similar stories of abduction and examination by slender aliens. Mack met some of Hopkins's abductees and became convinced that their stories could not be explained away as either hoaxes or hallucinations. The accounts were too powerful, too coherent. And there were just too many of them. Later, Mack began holding sessions in Cambridge with people who told similar tales. As word spread, dozens of abductees began seeking him out.

His work might have raised no more than the occasional Harvard eyebrow, except for Mack's willingness to go sensationally public with it. In May of 1992, Mack served as a consultant on *Intruders*, a TV miniseries about aliens, based in part on Budd Hopkins's book of

the same name. Mack and his Harvard affiliation were listed high up in the credits.

In June of the same year, Mack and MIT physicist David Pritchard chaired a conference of UFO and abduction researchers. Held at (although not sponsored by) MIT, the five-day seminar was bankrolled in

**Mack is maddeningly coy about whether he believes his abductees were literally kidnapped.**



part by Robert Bigelow, a Las Vegas real-estate developer. There have been similar conferences for years all over the world, but none of them had quite the aura of high seriousness found in Cambridge. The conference's proceedings — ranging from the sober to the completely hysterical — are chronicled at length in C.D.B. Bryan's new book.

**PC bores from outer space**

Getting involved with the abduction phenomenon seems to lead inevitably to a book contract, and Mack joined the parade last spring with *Abduction*. It was an immediate disaster. Although it earned a qualified nod in the *New York Times Book Review*, the reaction of science writer James Gleick, who eviscerated both Mack and the book in a forceful five-page assault in the *New Republic*, proved more compelling. Gleick is smugly dismissive of any possible explanation of UFOs

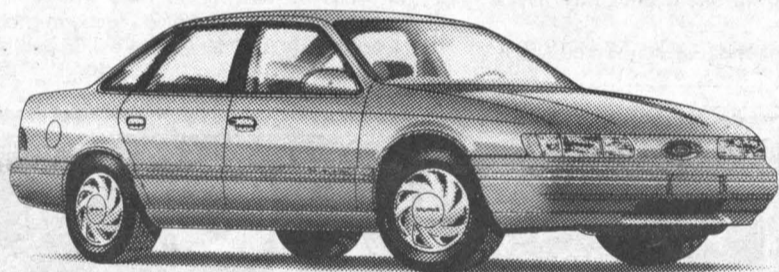
beyond fraud or mass hallucination. He is, however, right on the money when he takes Mack apart for his complete lack of anything like a methodology, his reliance on hypnosis for the retrieval of "lost" memories, and his impenetrable New Age philosophizing. Despite the come-on of the book's title, Mack is maddeningly coy about saying whether he believes his abductees were literally kidnapped or instead went on a metaphorical, spiritual voyage. Worse, many of the aliens in *Abduction* turn out to have much the same ecological preoccupations as Mack himself. Their experiments on mankind were apparently part of a cross-breeding project designed to produce hybrid creatures who will take better care of the planet than we have. In fact, once they pass through their feelings of terror, Mack writes, abductees experience "a new and altered sense of their place in the cosmic design, one that is more modest, respectful, and harmonious in relation to the Earth and its living systems."

Such a message, of course, is dreadfully familiar to those of us who have been offered a hit of blotter at a Grateful Dead show or seen the 1951 science-fiction classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still* ("Gort, Klaatu barada nikto," anyone?).

Psychiatrists and UFO skeptics were quick to accuse Mack of leading his subjects under hypnosis, a charge he vehemently denied. That the official scientific establishment responded to *Abduction* with jeers (when it responded at all) is no surprise. Interestingly, though, the UFO intelligentsia hated *Abduction* for just the same reason the PhDs did: instead of being a serious scientific book, they complained, it was, at heart, a lightweight metaphysical tract à la Carlos Castañeda. Some UFO researchers are

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# UFO

Continued from page 29

furious at Mack for missing a chance to further the field and stamp it with the imprimatur of Harvard.

Mack was in a unique position to throw light on an intriguing phenomenon. Why do some apparently sane people believe they've been abducted by aliens? The answers of the UFO cynics (mass hysteria, hallucinations) seem a little too pat. Mack's mystical conjectures are far less satisfying. All he offers as evidence of worlds, even dimensions, beyond our own are 13 people who say they've been abducted. He might as easily have found 13 people who believe the earth is flat, that Paul is dead, or that the CIA was behind the JFK assassination.

In response to the criticisms, Mack revised *Abduction* for paperback release this January. The new sections smack of either defensiveness (mean old James Gleick is the villain of the book's new introduction) or obfuscation. Still, Mack appears chastened. In the final interviews he gave this spring before clamping up, Mack sounded more concerned about scientific methodology than he had last year. He told a reporter about continuing his research, using a control group of 40 non-experiencers to test his data. He also said, "I don't say, 'Yes, you have been abducted.' I approach this with a skeptical and questioning attitude."

The real damage, however, has already been done. Mack has taken a place in the public consciousness beside LSD guru Timothy Leary and "orgone box" inventor Wilhelm Reich, i.e., the latest in a noble line of academic nut cases.

## Mack Agonistes

In April of last year, one of Mack's subjects (a woman named Donna Bassett, who was not featured in his book) announced that she had made up her particular UFO story. Bassett and her husband, Ed, both reporters, had read about Mack and decided to set him up. They wanted to see just how wild a story they could sell him. Donna Bassett participated in a number of hypnotic sessions with Mack and even became treasurer of an abductee support group he'd helped set up.

Not only did Mack buy the patently goofy abduction tale Donna told him, the Bassetts say, but he encouraged her in it. Furthermore, they accused him of conducting research on abductees without first obtaining their signed consent, and of billing insurance companies

for some of his research sessions. The Bassetts tried to freelance a story about Mack, but instead wound up telling it to a reporter from *Time*.

Mack denied any wrongdoing. People in the UFO world say Donna Bassett is unreliable. (Indeed, like practically everyone else remotely associated with alien abduction, Bassett and her husband have a book to sell, this one a supposed exposé of the entire UFO-research world.) Still, the publicity seemed to rouse Harvard.

About the time Bassett's charges became public, Harvard Medical School Dean Daniel Tosteson appointed a panel to look at Mack's work. The

**Mack has had the bad luck to become a celebrity shrink with a wild theory just when psychiatrists have fallen in the estimation of the public.**

membership of the five-person panel is secret, but it includes former *New England Journal of Medicine* editor Relman, a psychiatrist, and two Harvard lawyers.

Mack has said that Harvard is upset with him because his work is "a violation of a certain view of reality." His sins against the psychiatric establishment, however, are more complicated. Mack has had the bad luck to become a celebrity shrink with a wild theory at a time when psychiatrists have fallen lower in the estimation of the public than either politicians or journalists.

"Psychiatry is such an ideologically divided field, and there are problems with testing the limits," Johns Hopkins's McHugh says. "In Boston, more than any other place, those limits have been tested." Perhaps the most notorious example of ignored limits was that of Margaret Bean-Bayog, a Harvard-affiliated psychiatrist who surrendered her license to practice medicine after the suicide of a patient, with whom she'd allegedly had a sexual relationship.

Harvard is tight-lipped about the just-completed activi-

ties of Dean Tosteson's special committee, beyond calling them a form of peer review and not discipline. The matter had been under wraps until this spring, when one of Mack's then-lawyers apparently started making indiscreet e-mail inquiries. Before long, *Boston Globe* wiseguy Alex Beam was writing about the probe in his column.

The committee has met several times over the last year to hear from Mack and, reportedly, three disgruntled members of the medical-school faculty. It has also heard from several of the abductees, who defend both him and his methods. The committee has apparently not taken the accusations of would-be debunkers Ed and Donna Bassett too seriously. According to Ed Bassett, the committee expressed no interest in talking to him or his wife. Attorney MacLeish says the probe was "not initiated by any complaints that the quality of care was substandard." MacLeish also says his client has been completely cooperative and has handed over extensive files. Mack and his lawyers have also solicited letters on his behalf from a variety of supporters.

According to Dr. Edward Khantzian, a Harvard psychiatrist and longtime friend of Mack's, there is worry — even among professors who think Mack is stone crazy — over the medical school's poking into the work of someone with tenure. "Look," says Khantzian, "it's academic freedom. It's the right of a person to pursue their ideas to the nth degree."

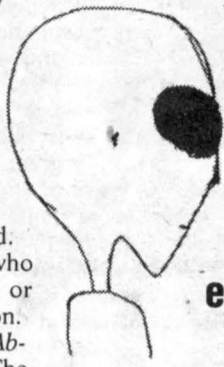
Committee chairman Relman insists that the probe was scrupulously fair. But he won't say what it uncovered. "The committee has completed its work, and our report is now in the hands of the dean," Relman says. "What he will do with it I don't know."

The answer may be nothing. Seriously punishing Mack seems out of the question. Rescinding his tenure would be a hideously complicated process that would inevitably produce lawsuits and headlines. Likewise, revoking Mack's medical license is highly unlikely

without a patient accusing him of serious misconduct. Mack's friend and collaborator Budd Hopkins says, "It's a tragedy for John, what's going on, and I think it's unfortunate for the field of UFO research. And I think it's unfortunate for the reputation of Harvard University. I don't know what good it does anybody."

Mack has had a long year. Last spring, before he became a public figure, he broke up with his wife of 34 years. Since then, he's ridden a remarkable PR roller-coaster. He does not, however, appear daunted. Bryan says Mack no longer needs Harvard for his UFO work and is unlikely to be dissuaded by anything the university might choose to do to him.

"He's riding it out," Bryan says, "and he's hanging ten." □



**Professors worry about the medical school's poking into the work of someone with tenure.**

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