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^BOOK REVIEW!<

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<THEY FLED E.T., THEN TOLD MIT!<

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<BY JOSEPH P. KAHN!<
<(C) 1995, THE BOSTON GLOBE!<

THE QUESTION AT THIS STAGE OF THE FREE THE UFO-ABDUCTEES MOVEMENT IS NOT "ARE THEY FOR REAL?" STORIES OF SPACESHIP KIDNAPPINGS AND EXTRATERRESTRIAL OPERATING ROOMS HAVE BEEN AROUND (AND IN PRINT) FOR YEARS NOW, AND ARE A STAPLE OF NEW AGE MYTHOLOGY. TELEVISION AND FILM HAVE LONG SINCE CLIMBED ABOARD FOR THE RIDE. THE NUMBER OF HUMAN SUBJECTS SAID TO HAVE BEEN WHISKED OFF AND EXPERIMENTED ON BY BUG-EYED NONEARTHLINGS IS UP TO 3 MILLION OR MORE. IF THAT IS PURE POP-CULTURE LUNACY, IT IS LUNACY ON A GRAND SCALE INDEED. <

IN 1992, A CONFERENCE AT MIT ON THE ABDUCTION PHENOMENON BROUGHT TOGETHER AN ODD AGGLOMERATION SCIENTISTS, UFOLOGISTS AND ABDUCTEES. IF ANY EVENT COULD VALIDATE THE INTEREST IN REPORTS OF LITTLE GRAY BEINGS AND NOCTURNAL SNATCHINGS - SHORT OF AN ACTUAL SAUCER LANDING - IT WAS THE PRESENCE OF SUCH A SYMPOSIUM ON THE CAMPUS OF AMERICA'S LEADING RESEARCH UNIVERSITY. EVEN IF MIT DID NOT OFFICIALLY SPONSOR THE COLLOQUIUM. <

AMONG THOSE IN ATTENDANCE WAS C. D. B. BRYAN, AUTHOR OF "FRIENDLY FIRE" AND OTHER CAREFULLY MODELED WORKS OF NONFICTION. BRYAN, A SKEPTIC ON THE SUBJECT OF ET'S AND UFOS, WAS INTRIGUED ENOUGH BY WHAT HE SAW AND HEARD TO GO BACK AND EXPAND UPON THE CONFERENCE AGENDA. OVER THE ENSUING MONTHS, BRYAN INTERVIEWED MANY PARTICIPANTS AT LENGTH, INCLUDING TWO WOMEN WHO ARE SAID TO HAVE UNDERGONE MULTIPLE ABDUCTIONS. THE RESULT IS "CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE FOURTH KIND," A BOOK THAT IS LAUDABLE FOR ITS FAIRNESS AND THOROUGHNESS, IF LITTLE ELSE. <

THE QUESTION SEEMS TO ME TO BE "DO WE REALLY NEED ANOTHER BOOK LIKE THIS?" ONE THAT SIFTS THROUGH THE TESTIMONY OF "MISSING TIME" EPISODES AND HYPNOTICALLY RECOVERED MEMORIES, WEIGHS ALL THE EVIDENCE OF NOSE IMPLANTS AND GOVERNMENT COVERUPS, STRIKES ALL THE APPROPRIATELY SKEPTICAL NOTES AND WINDS UP CONCLUDING THAT, WELL, WHO CAN SAY FOR SURE? MAYBE THEY ARE REAL, MAYBE NOT. <

THIS, I SUBMIT, IS A DIFFERENT MATTER. <

TO REPHRASE. IF YOU WERE TO COMMISSION SUCH A BOOK - AFTER BUDD HOPKINS, AFTER WHITLEY STREIBER, AFTER JOHN MACK, THE HARVARD PROFESSOR CURRENTLY UNDER FIRE FOR PSYCHIATRICALY MINISTERING TO THE RECENTLY BEAMED-ABOARD - WHOM WOULD YOU NOMINATE TO WRITE IT? A SCRUPULOUSLY NEUTRAL, SCIENTIFICALLY LITERATE JOURNALIST LIKE BRYAN? OR, SAY, TOM WOLFE? MARK LEYNER? GONZO FABULIST HUNTER S. THOMPSON? PERHAPS NORMAN MAILER, WHO WOULD SURELY SACRIFICE EVENHANDEDNESS IF HE COULD INJECT A LITTLE OTHERWORLDLY POETRY INTO THIS BEEN-THERE, DONE-THAT MIX OF PERSONAL HISTORY AND THEORY. <

I DON'T MEAN TO DISMISS THE PEOPLE BRYAN PROFILES AS BORES OR CRAZIES; THAT SEEMS POINTLESS. AS MACK HAS ARGUED, AND BRYAN TENDS TO CONCUR, THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT ABDUCTEES SUFFER FROM ANY RECOGNIZABLE MENTAL ILLNESS. NOR ARE THEY OSTENSIBLY IN THIS FOR THE MONEY OR NOTORIETY. IN THE VIEW OF MOST WHO HAVE DEBRIEFED THEM BACK ON PLANET EARTH, THESE PEOPLE ARE FRIGHTENED, RELUCTANT WITNESSES WHO ARE FAR MORE LIKELY TO GET RIDICULED THAN RICH. IN SHORT, THEY HAVE LITTLE TO GAIN - AND MUCH TO LOSE - BY GOING PUBLIC WITH THEIR STORIES. <

HOWEVER - AND HERE'S THE PROBLEM - THEIR STORIES ALSO HAVE A DEPRESSING SAMENESS TO THEM, A NARRATIVE CONSISTENCY THAT IS BOTH HAIR-RAISING AND CURIOUSLY BANAL. TO RESEARCHERS LIKE HOPKINS AND MACK, THAT IS GOOD. CONSISTENCY EQUALS CREDIBILITY. FOR BRYAN'S PURPOSES, IT IS NOT SO GOOD. WE HAVE SEEN THESE LITTLE GRAY CREATURES BEFORE, MOST RECENTLY IN A CBS MINISERIES. WE KNOW WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE AND WHAT THEY'RE ALLEGEDLY UP TO. AT THIS JUNCTURE, IT WOULD BE NEWS ONLY IF THE ALIENS SAT DOWN FOR A DIANE SAWYER INTERVIEW OR BUZZED THE WHITE HOUSE. <

BRYAN TRIES HARD TO BREATHE LIFE, IF NOT SUSPENSE, INTO HIS SHOPWORN MATERIAL. THE FIRST HALF OF THE BOOK, ALMOST WHOLLY DEVOTED TO THE MIT GATHERING, IS A SOLID OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD FOR READERS WHO HAVE NOT YET DIPPED INTO STANDARD TEXTS LIKE HOPKINS' OR MACK'S. IT PICKS UP MOMENTUM WITH THE INTERVIEWS THEMSELVES AND IN THE END IS REASONABLY FAITHFUL TO THE THEORIES OF THOSE WHO, LIKE MACK, OFFER A THEOLOGICAL OR METAPHYSICAL UNDERPINNING TO THE PHENOMENON. YET THE OVERALL ACHIEVEMENT IS LESS THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS. <

BRYAN SERVES AS AN ABLE STAND-IN FOR THE SKEPTICAL INQUIRER IN ALL OF US. BUT IT ISN'T ENOUGH. WITHOUT COMPELLING PHYSICAL EVIDENCE OR UNIMPEACHABLE EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY, ABDUCTION STORIES ARE MORE LIKELY TO WIND UP IN BEST-SELLING BOOKS AND TABLOID TALK SHOWS THAN ON THE FRONT PAGES OF MAJOR NEWSPAPERS. CALL THEM CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE FROTH KIND. <

AND CALL ME WHEN TOM WOLFE SIGNS ON FOR THE MISSION. <

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<CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE FOURTH KIND!<
<ALIEN ABDUCTION, UFOS, AND THE CONFERENCE AT MIT!<
<BY C. D. B. BRYAN!<
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<(PROFILE!<
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<(PLAYER:CDBBRYAN)!<
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