



BOOKS

I LOST IT IN THE SAUCER

Strange but true: Ph.D.s get serious about U.F.O.s.

BY JAMES WOLCOTT

TWO years ago, I opened my own X-File and began investigating a rumored upsurge in alien abductions. In the past, U.F.O.s and extraterrestrial activity had remained in the realm of freak sightings: lighted craft executing impossible zigzags; burn marks and crop circles; cattle mutilations. But in recent years, U.F.O. watchers contended, alien visitors weren't just barnstorming the night skies; they were dropping by to help themselves to human specimens. Their vehicles were flying research labs, their insides as bright and shiny as a 7-Eleven. The popularity of Whitley Strieber's 1987 best-seller, "Communion," and the telefilm "Intruders," which was based on a book by Budd Hopkins, inspired more and more people to testify that, like the characters in those works, they, too, had been rendered inert, taken aloft, etherized upon a table, and poked by aliens, who came to be known as Small Grays. (Often there was a Tall Gray—a managerial type—on board to supervise.) The victims underwent mind scans; blood, semen, and fetal tissue were extracted from them by medical instruments almost medieval in their primitive force. Some had monitoring devices implanted in their sinus cavities. Many abductees—or "experiencers," as some preferred to be called—underwent regressive-hypnosis therapy to recall the trauma in full Technicolor, and joined support groups.

In 1991, *The Atlantic* published an article about an annual gathering of abductees in Wyoming—an article that hovered over their huddled figures with an almost ghostly deference. (It was like reading about a family reunion in Purgatory.) If a pillar of sweet reason like *The Atlantic* took the phenomenon seriously, I figured, surely it was worthy of study. I was further intrigued to learn that the special-projects director for *The*

Atlantic, Karen Wesolowski, was leaving the magazine to work on a project for the study of extraordinary phenomena which was run by Dr. John E. Mack, a professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School and the author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of T. E. Lawrence. Dr. Mack was said to

Like the character in Evelyn Waugh's "Put Out More Flags" who couldn't venture anywhere without hearing reports of the poets Parsnip and Pimpernell, I kept bumping into the same name. Every source I consulted inevitably said, "Do you know C. D. B. Bryan? He's writing a book about all this." I abandoned the piece I was writing, but Bryan persevered. His "Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: Alien Abduction, UFOs, and the Conference at M.I.T." (Knopf; \$25), a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, is an unignorable book, because of the standing of the author, the clarity of his journalism, and lots of other stuff.

Like Dr. Mack, with his Harvard pedigree and his distinguished head of hair, C. D. B. Bryan confers quality and class on the abductee phenomenon by



C. D. B. Bryan puzzles over the new alien-abduction phenomenon: why would anyone make this stuff up?

be to alien abduction what R. D. Laing was to schizophrenia: the magnet, the rebel visionary, the throbbing brains.

Through Wesolowski's assistance, I interviewed Dr. Mack in his office, in Cambridge; interviewed members of his abductee group (including one who described cradling his space baby in his arms, then gave me his business card); and acquainted myself with the books Dr. Mack and his associates recommended—not only the standard U.F.O. texts but metaphysical gumbos like Stanislav Grof's "The Holotropic Mind" and "Beyond the Brain." I soon realized that mine was not a fresh incursion.

his establishment credentials. He tones up what could be a tacky field of bush-league paranoia. Bryan isn't a professional booster, like Mack, Hopkins, or Strieber, but an honored reporter, whose best-known book—"Friendly Fire," a classic account of an official coverup of a battlefield death in Vietnam and its effect on an American family—appeared in its original form in this magazine. (He has also written the official history of the National Geographic Society.) His starting point for this study was the Abduction Study Conference held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1992. Seated



"Hey, you've still got a job and I still get my can of food every night—what's all the whining about?"

high in the M.I.T. lecture room and looking down at the blackboards, Bryan is the sort of old-fashioned journalist Tom Wolfe dubbed the Gentleman in the Grandstand—a courtly observer with a fixed gleam in his eye. His role is not to judge but to maintain an intelligent murmur. Bryan reports and summarizes the testimony of the experts and experiencers, occasionally raising an eyebrow (as when a hypnotherapist from California claims that one of her clients who had previously tested positive for H.I.V. tested negative following an alien exam), but generally remaining as dryly absorbent as MacNeil/Lehrer. A model of neutrality, he's Mr. Mildly Inquisitive, a rational humanist galumphing from the lecture hall to the hotel restaurant, where the conferees have been given a group rate. The disjuncture between the cosmological talk and mundane reality has its comic moments, as when a pair of abductees explain over dinner the composition of the alien space council, presided over by a being named Zar—only to have the waitress interrupt, "Who's got the haddock?"

As the conference proceeds, the documentary screen of Bryan's attention begins to dissolve into a more personal reception: he picks up a tangle of oth-

erworldly possibility. It isn't the official speakers at the conference who excite him—historians and researchers with their anthropological head counts of how many types of humanoids there are. (Lurking among the Small and Tall Grays are shifty, Iago-like reptile-men.) It's the abductees themselves who tantalize his imagination—average citizens who found themselves wriggling between invisible tweezers and treated like lab samples. The frozen fear that a couple of female abductees display in his presence strikes him as unfakable: "Their terror was heartfelt, real, and so palpable and raw I am concerned for their emotional well-being." Bryan's big revelation comes when he hears a woman describe how an alien tried on her high heels: "Her comment undoes me!" And he thinks, in a burst of italics, "*What possible reason could the woman have to make up an incident like that?*" The down-home nature of the detail strikes him as a convincing point in her favor. It isn't so much that he believes the abductees' stories as that he believes that they believe. They pass the sincerity test:

During the days immediately following the conference, I am struck by how my perception of the abduction phenomenon has changed: I no longer think it is a joke. This is not to say I

now believe UFOs and alien abductions are *real*—"real" in the sense of a reality subject to the physical laws of the universe as we know them—but rather that I feel something very mysterious is going on. And based as much on what has been presented at the conference as on the intelligence, dedication, and sanity of the majority of the presenters, I cannot reject out-of-hand the *possibility* that what is taking place isn't exactly what the abductees are saying is happening to them. And if that is so, the fact that no one has been able to pick up a tailpipe from a UFO does not mean UFOs do not exist. It means only that UFOs might not have tailpipes. As Boston University astronomer Michael Papagiannis insisted, "The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

Wolfe accused the Gentleman in the Grandstand of being reluctant to whip out his notebook and do actual reporting. Bryan isn't guilty on that count. He fills his notebook, then fills his pages. He does his homework, if you want to read homework. After Bryan's initial rush of enthusiasm, the book levels off into lengthy interviews with abductees and abduction experts, many of whom have polished their cosmic spiels into a routine. Dr. Mack, because he has either given too many interviews or indoctrinated his own mind, sermonizes in thick chunks of guruspeak. ("I think the whole notion of 'extraterrestrial' is a notion of dualistic thinking anyway. *We* are extraterrestrial in a sense: our psyches are not confined to Earth.") Lengthier and more troubling are the accounts of hypnotic sessions conducted on abductees by Budd Hopkins in his Manhattan studio. One woman dissolves into her memory pool to resurface with the suspicion that it wasn't her father who raped her on a fishing trip when she was twelve—it was an alien. After Lawrence Wright's "Remembering Satan," it's impossible to read accounts of recovered-memory cases without seeing the quicksand potential for misery and miscarriages of justice. Someone like Budd Hopkins, who frequently hypes abduction stories to the press (he's been pushing a doozy about a woman being whisked past the Brooklyn Bridge: a story so implausible that even the pop-science magazine *Omni* was highly dubious), really ought not to be bumbling around in other people's psyches.

What of the aliens themselves? Who are they, what do they want, and why do they keep taking our cattle? Are they gods? Colonizers? Energy blips? Next-door neighbors in a parallel universe? "Philosophers, physicists, psychologists, neurologists, neurosurgeons, biochem-

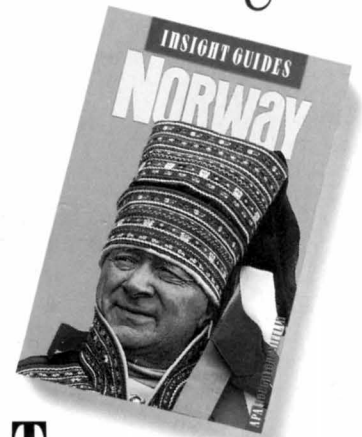
ists, researchers, scholars, folklorists, abductees, and journalists alike circle this issue like dogs circling a spot on the rug, searching for a warm and comfortable place where they might set their intellects down," Bryan writes in his concluding chapter, before rattling off a roll call of names and hypotheses: "Keith Thompson suggests it is 'a prod to our next level of consciousness'; "Carl Jung wrote that UFOs behaved 'like weightless thoughts'; "Jacques Vallee asks whether UFOs are 'windows' rather than 'objects'; "Peter Rojcewicz explains . . ."; and on through "Fred Allan Wolf suggests . . ." and "Julian Jaynes reports. . ." Even Václav Havel gets a sound bite, intoning something significant about Gaia. When it's the author's own turn at bat, he seems dazzled by so many choices and opts for "heart," telling us how much he *wants* the abductees' stories to be true. "I care," he writes. His generosity of spirit has earned him praise. In the *Times Book Review* Dean Koontz chimed in, "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." It's as if we were all supposed to fan our fingers around our faces like Doug Henning and flower with a "sense of wonder."

As one of those sarcastic cynics Koontz deplores (why should Fran Lebowitz have all the fun?), I found my own sense of wonder shrivelling like dead leaves when I started researching the abduction phenomenon. It was easy enough to pick the logical holes in abduction lore, in the bodily hysteria. (Why would entities capable of transcending space-time and wafting people through walls be conducting rudimentary Roto-Rooter rectal exams and siphoning semen?) The lack of corroboration was also telling, especially when the abductions were purportedly carried out in busy daylight. But, like Bryan, I was swayed by the abductees themselves. They bugged me. I came to feel that I was dealing with a quasi cult of deluded cranks. The abductees I interviewed, far from being people plucked out of the ordinary workday, had browsed the entire New Age boutique

of reincarnation, channelling, auras, and healing crystals. They seemed to be testing how far they could take their personal narratives. Their confessions didn't need to be wrested from them; they were eager to expound their ardent monologues—so full of fetal imagery, from the womblike interiors of the spaceships to the baby-headed aliens, and so similar to accounts of being "born again." They felt similarly "chosen." For them, the aliens were agents of spiritual growth, guardian angels zooming around like the Jetsons. (This is the tack taken by Whitley Strieber in his latest opus, the breathtakingly vacuous "Breakthrough: The Next Step.") Beneath the spiritual growth spurt of the abductees was a pinched righteousness; the ones I met tended to be classic pills of passive aggression. Anger and distrust brooded beneath the surface. And they were touchy about their belief systems, however nebulous. Dr. Mack himself told me that he generally declined to appear in any TV debate with debunkers, because discounting the abduction experience was like denying the existence of the Holocaust, and he was not going to validate that point of view.

Dr. Mack recently underwent a peer review at Harvard for what some colleagues viewed as his questionable methodology. This June, he was also one of the targets at a meeting of some two hundred scholars at the New York Academy of Sciences, which deplored the rising tide of mush washing over the public mind, from astrology and religious fundamentalism to the blithe disregard of truth in postmodern epistemology; some participants urged that a hard line be taken against all this drivel. In his defense, Dr. Mack might be defined as a Third Wave thinker, for whom—according to Alvin and Heidi Toffler—there are no facts, only interpretations. Interpretations run roughshod over reality in times like these. Indeed, the one explanation for the outbreak of alien abductions which Bryan fails to cite in his closing chapter is the approach of the year 2000. That's a major omission. The historian Hillel Schwartz documents in his book "Century's End" how the fin de siècle uncorks a sense of reckoning and lets loose visions of damnation, salvation, natural disaster, chaos, and barbarism. Since we're coming to the end of not only a century but a millennium, no doubt

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even more daemons and phantoms are about to flood the portals. A liberal soul, C. D. B. Bryan welcomes this influx of diversity, which suggests happy hour at the bar in "Star Wars," and he offers an antidote to this prevailing fear of the future: "I am beholden to those people I met in the course of this book for having so richly populated the universe, our little 'blue pond,' and my imagination with 'the most marvelous of beings'—be they Small Grays, Tall Grays, Nordic-types, reptilians, John Mack's aerially adept 'Merry Tricksters,'

or Carl Jung's 'materialized psychism.'"

But can we really afford to shut off our bullshit detectors and indulge every emanation of the occult? Superstition is no substitute for the salience of what's actually before us. It isn't as if the skies weren't already thronged with presences. In the words of Edward Abbey, in "Desert Solitaire," "I'd sooner exchange ideas with the birds on earth than learn to carry on intergalactic communications with some obscure race of humanoids on a satellite planet from the world of Betelgeuse. First things first." ♦

BIKER DAYS

Notes from the road to revolution.

BY PAUL BERMAN

IN 1952, when Ernesto (Che) Guevara was twenty-three years old—still a medical student at home in Argentina, still two years from his first serious political commitment, still a long way from becoming the revolutionary comrade of Fidel Castro—he embarked on a tour of South America with his friend Alberto Granado. The two men stopped at a bar in Peru and cadged some much needed sandwiches and beers from a merry police sergeant, who proposed a hair-raising bet. If Granado would kindly stand twenty metres away with a cigarette in his mouth, the sergeant would light the cigarette with a single shot from his gun or else pay fifty Peruvian soles. Che's journal of this trip, never before published in English, has been given the title "The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey Around South America" (Verso; \$19.95), but in reality the motorcycle was a luxury that quickly broke down and was replaced by hitchhiking and rafting and sundry other travel methods suitable for a couple of nearly penniless vagabonds. So those fifty soles would have come in



Che Guevara

handy. But Granado wasn't tempted. The sergeant upped the offer. How about a hundred soles? Not enough? He laid two hundred soles on the table. That put a gleam in Granado's eye. But when the answer was still no, the sergeant took off his cap, tossed it in the air, took aim in a mirror, fired—and the bullet slammed into the wall. A complete miss! Then the woman who owned the bar blew her top, another policeman rushed in, Che and Granado fled, and those

precious sandwiches and beer were lost forever.

The vagabonds went on to Cuzco, an ancient city—or, rather, two or three different cities piled one on top of another. The first of those cities, in Che's description, is the Cuzco of the Inca Empire, still visible in the ruins of its fortress. He writes, "This Cuzco invites you to turn warrior and, club in hand, defend freedom and the life of the Inca." Next comes the Cuzco of harmonious red tile roofs and Andean costumes. This Cuzco invites you to become a tourist. And there is a third Cuzco, "a vibrant city which bears witness to the formidable