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CONTENTS

ARTICLES

- Editorial Stuart Appelle 1
- Psychotherapy for the UFO Abduction Experience David A. Gotlib 5
- The Abduction Experience: A Critical Evaluation of Theory and Evidence
..... Stuart Appelle 29
- Anomalous Images on Videotape from Space Shuttle Flight STS-48:
Examination of the Ice-Particle Explanation Jack Kasher 80
- The University of Colorado UFO Project: The "Scientific
Study of UFOs" Michael D. Swords 149
- A Reference Guide for the Condon Report Willy Smith 185
- Donald E. Keyhoe and the Pentagon: The Rise of Interest in the
UFO Phenomenon and What the Government
Really Knew Michael D. Swords 195
- Fewer Sightings in the National Press: A Content Analysis of
UFO News Coverage in *The New York Times*, 1947-1995
..... John C. Hickman, E. Dale McConkey II, and Matthew A. Barrett 213

COMMENTS AND RESPONSES

- Robert R. Young, John S. Carpenter 227

BOOK REVIEWS

- Alien Discussions*, ed. by Andrea Pritchard, et al., and
Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind, by C. D. B. Bryan Thomas E. Bullard 231
- Encounter at Buff Ledge*, by Walter N. Webb Richard F. Haines 248
- The Gods Have Landed*, ed. by James R. Lewis Charles F. Emmons 251
- Watch the Skies!*, by Curtis Peebles Mark Rodeghier 254

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Book Reviews

Alien Discussions: Proceedings of the Abduction Study Conference Held at MIT, Cambridge, MA. Edited by Andrea Pritchard, John E. Mack, Pam Kasey, and Claudia Yapp. Cambridge, Mass.: North Cambridge Press, 1994. 683p.

Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: Alien Abduction, UFOs, and the Conference at M.I.T. By C. D. B. Bryan. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. 476p.

UFO abductions made their debut in the public eye almost 30 years ago. The mystery came, and came to stay. Since John G. Fuller told the story of Barney and Betty Hill in his 1966 book *The Interrupted Journey*, the phenomenon has snowballed into an imposing mass of reports and investigations, theories and speculations, disputes and controversies. An inherent allurements draws a steady stream of talent to the subject, as people of diverse backgrounds and training who never took such outlandish stories seriously pause once to look seriously at them, then stay ever after to look and look again.

In the first decade of abduction history, reports were rare finds; their discovery and field investigation fulfilled the ambition of researchers. In the second decade reports grew numerous and investigators strove to trace the scope of the problem. By the late 1980s the sheer volume of reports proved both an embarrassment of riches and an embarrassing backlog of uncoordinated data. The urge to consolidate and overview dominated research efforts, with comparative studies and scholarly conferences answering the call for a provisional reckoning with the evidence on hand. These efforts culminated in June 1992 with the Abduction Study Conference held at MIT.

This conference originated with MIT physicist David E. Pritchard. The phenomenon piqued his curiosity and almost immediately frustrated it, since he found an extensive literature but not the review, synthesis, and critical analysis necessary to set the subject on even an elementary scientific footing. He joined with Harvard psychiatrist John E. Mack, another recent convert to curiosity about abductions, to organize a meeting with the ambitious goal of establishing abduction research as a serious field of scholarly inquiry.

MIT provided the facilities and generous private donors funded the five-day conference. It drew some 150 invited participants, about one-third of them abduction investigators and researchers, the rest scholars from other disciplines, members of the press, and a contingent of abductees who joined in panels to discuss the phenomenon from the experiencers' point of view. Rather than allowing the experts to unload their thoughts in one long paper, a scheme of topics set the agenda and a qualified speaker addressed each topic as it arose, presenting a brief paper followed by discussion from the floor. The procession of topics guaranteed a wide range of coverage, while the tyranny of a timer held the conference to a well-oiled schedule.

The organizers also wanted a permanent record of the conference. They foresaw this collection of presentations and discussions as a solution to the long-abiding, long-unfilled need for an advanced introduction to abduction research. The result is *Alien Discussions: Proceedings of the Abduction Study Conference Held at MIT*. These proceedings reflect the conference in a way that is at once faithful and improved. They bring together both the presentations and floor discussions, but rather than offer the papers in raw form, the editors begged, persuaded, or bullied the participants to rewrite their contributions for publication. These efforts were a notable success. The participants responded with enough concise and readable papers to fill a large, two-column volume of 683 pages. It mounts a teeming expedition into darkest ufology, and like diaries of Victorian exploring parties, it brings back more insights than the reader ever expected, along with more details than one reader can or wishes to absorb.

About one-quarter of the volume establishes a descriptive baseline for the experience, as abductees describe it in their reports: How does an abduction begin, how do beings capture humans, what happens aboard the ship, what events characterize the examination, how do captives return, and what consequences does the experience have on their lives? In what ways do witnesses describe their physical sensations, the craft, and the beings?

The gut-level fascination of abduction lies in personal accounts. They command attention because they speak with the sincerity of a harrowing or wonderful experience straightforwardly described, and with a directness of emotions few novelists ever achieve. Casual readers looking for a good story will find this book a disappointment. The abductee panelists relate some gripping personal experiences, but reports go largely unheard in these pages. Generalizations supplant the individual case as bean counts and percentages preoccupy the speakers—cold, dry substitutes for the human drama of abduction stories, but necessary to set the phenomenon in perspective. Yet even within this cerebral museum of collective facts, the emotional vitality of the phenomenon kicks back to life from time to time. Presentations on how children describe abduction experiences, and how experiencers first come to recognize or acknowledge that they were abducted, remind readers that this phenomenon changes lives and not just statistical tallies.

The speakers consider descriptive content both from a normative standpoint—what happens in the majority of cases—and in light of the exceptions. An arresting pattern of events and descriptions recurs throughout the body of reports. Short humanoid beings with vast, unsettling eyes, a floating sensation on the way to the craft, and sexual examinations while aboard repeat in an overwhelming majority of cases, but speakers acknowledge the differences as well. Not all occupants are cold, efficient humanoids—some people meet tall, blond, and friendly “Nordics,” others see sinister reptiles. Not all captures are involuntary, as some people accompany the beings willingly, and many abductees depart feeling happy rather than abused, even rapturous and afire with a sense of mission. Especially noteworthy are some international inconsistencies, for example the short gray humanoids so common in North

America prove scarce in a British sample, where Nordics predominate.

Compelling as they are, reports are anecdotal testimony and weak in probative value. They need evidence to shore them up. A section devoted to evidence includes inquiry into the danger and effectiveness of hypnosis to explore hidden memories. The use of hypnosis has long been a flashpoint of controversy, with experts warning that memories recovered by this technique mix truth and falsehood in a hopeless jumble. The speakers recognized a potential for distortion, confabulation, and creation of false memories, but found that abductees related their stories with unexpected imperviousness to investigator bias or expectation. In fact abductees often stuck to their version in spite of leading questions. Efforts to estimate the number of abductions occupy discussions of a Roper Poll as well as other presentations, and the phenomenon seems extensive, with perhaps as much as 2% of the U.S. population affected.

Some of the most challenging evidence for a literal abduction phenomenon comes from multiple-witness reports, where two or more individuals describe a shared experience in extensive detail. Three speakers treated this type of case, and pointed out that the stories of people abducted together correspond with one another and with other abduction accounts, as though these people related similar experiences. On the other hand, two promising avenues of proof led to dead ends as claims of missing fetuses and unusual implants recovered from abductees' bodies proved to have mundane explanations.

The conference steered into little-known territory when speakers described abductee psychology. Efforts to profile the mental traits of abductees suffered from small samples, but a recurrent theme was lack of evidence for fantasy-proneness or excessive suggestibility, at least in a strict clinical sense. These findings shut the door on oft-repeated but otherwise unsupported claims of skeptics that abduction is simply the fantasy of imaginative, pliant people under the influence of investigators and media publicity. At the same time the descriptions portray considerable psychological complexity among abductees. Experiencers divide into subgroups, some stable, "normal" people, others with distinctive psychological characteristics. Indications of trauma, dissociation, and post-traumatic stress disorder cluster around some abductees, along with self-reported backgrounds of physical and sexual abuse. The current stage of research and the intricacy of the issues foreclose any determination of what is cause and what is effect, whether abduction memories screen out memories of abuse or vice-versa, whether people suffering perhaps both abuse and abduction become more vulnerable to trauma and dissociation.

Abduction loses some of its aura of psychological and phenomenological uniqueness in a comparison with other unusual experiences. Stable content and similar psychological responses also characterize near-death experiences, the Old Hag encounter, or accounts of Satanic Ritual Abuse. Speakers pointed out the extensive parallels as a necessary wakeup call against treating abduction as an isolated phenomenon, or assuming its internal characteristics prove the literal truth of abduction reports.

What are abductions? One segment of the conference tackled this question and allowed some cautious speculation. A skeptical speaker followed up the parallels between abduction and other strange phenomena to argue in favor of a psychosocial origin. Science fiction, traditional folklore, and the witchcraft mania of Reformation times include a host of abduction motifs. The phenomenon is therefore nothing new, but an age-old cultural theme once again updated and refurbished for contemporary consumption, this time with a big helping hand from Hollywood. Against this negative view, several presenters drew inferences by paring away the conventional explanations: Abductees show no overt psychopathology, while the psychological consequences and physical signs recurrent in the reports point toward an objective rather than a subjective reality. Recall of abductions resolves phobias with an effectiveness uncharacteristic of mere fantasy. Abductions lack the traits of mass hysteria, or the typical dynamics of folklore. An experiment with non-abductees produced a wide variety of adventures and descriptions, not the similar stories of abduction claimants. The likely candidates for a conventional solution lose their likelihood on close inspection, and the phenomenon slips away with its mystery intact.

Another set of speakers left aside the question of whether abductions are evidence for extraterrestrial visitation and debated the probability of such visits. Interstellar travel requires too much energy to be feasible, yet less extravagant means might accomplish similar goals, and an a priori assumption about the limitations to getting here from there is unwise. In any case if aliens ever did arrive in this solar system, they might choose to be furtive, and remain quite adept at hiding themselves. Intellects advanced enough to get here would not likely lose their edge on arrival.

A tension between the demands of investigation and the demands of therapy pulled participants in opposing directions throughout the conference, but a session on the ethics, goals, and procedures of investigation highlighted the problems of these conflicting, even incompatible undertakings. Such an emotionally charged phenomenon demands exceptional sensitivity and care from the investigator—on this much the participants agreed. How best to satisfy the needs of the abductee as well as the needs of knowledge remained in dispute. Several investigators offered descriptions of their procedures or suggestions for improved techniques, while a panel of experiencers discussed what worked and did not work for them. No consensus or resolution settled disputes over the evidential value of testimony obtained in the context of therapy, or the appropriateness of treating abduction as necessarily traumatic, even if the abductee doesn't feel that way. One positive outcome of the conference was formulation of a code of ethics to guide future abduction investigation and treatment (see *JUFOS* 5, 55–81, 1994).

The conference ended with a look at where to go from here. Before abductions can enter the scientific mainstream, abduction researchers must act like scientists. They must establish rigorous protocols for their work and publish their findings in reputable journals. Claims that fetuses disappear or ESP increases as a result of abduction are testable and need to be vigorously pursued. The trancelike and amnesia

effects of abduction suggest dissociation is a psychological attribute of abductees. Exploration of this lead could help both therapy and research, since dissociation does not happen out of the blue, but has its origins in a traumatic experience. The similarities of abduction to accounts of ritual abuse and contactee stories deserve closer investigation, while the spiritual message of the phenomenon and its transformational influence on established ways of thinking may express the ultimate meaning of abduction experiences.

From practical details of investigation procedures to airy speculations about the origin and meaning of the phenomenon, this conference covers a great deal of ground in a hurry. Discussions over such a wide range hold something to interest—and bore—everyone. The appeal of one part or another will vary with the inclinations of the reader, but in such diversity lies the intellectual strength of the proceedings.

This same diversity challenges, maybe even intimidates the reader. The book is not easy going. It will not serve for a bedtime thriller or make sense to rank beginners. Its papers are serious writings, the lean, concentrated (often to the point of being dogmatic) pronouncements of experts on the phenomenon and related research, offered with the assumption that readers bring a basic familiarity with abductions and the speakers' scholarly turf. The reader had better come prepared. Anyone who opens the book without having read abduction case histories or followed the ongoing debate will soon wander lost in the woods. Neither are the presentations worded to convince and persuade. The speakers leave their usual pulpits behind and expect the audience to understand already why so strange a subject merits careful attention. This is a book for thinkers, not enthusiasts, and sure to bewilder the uninitiated.

If the discussion begins in the middle of things, it ends there as well. The speakers present, the audience comments, but the participants do not argue issues to a resolution. The proceedings offer a multiplicity of thoughts about the phenomenon, without the dutiful synthesis of a textbook. In place of a single author's gentle guiding hand, the conference format provides a greater variety and depth of individual contributions than one writer could provide, but at the cost of a proportionally higher demand on the readers. They must organize and pass judgment on this necessarily fragmented and incomplete picture. The reader has no choice but to dive in as an active participant.

One irony amused some critics from the start: The backdrop was MIT, the heart and mind of objective science; but the conference rested firmly in the hands of abduction proponents. Some participants, like Budd Hopkins, David Jacobs, and John Mack, are outspoken in favor of an event with earthshaking consequences. Others may hedge their suppositions, but all of them take the subject seriously if not literally, and most suspect something more than familiar psychological causes at work. Critics might well shake their heads over how much bias lurks just around the corner from such an unapologetic "pro" stance, and insist the proper question from the present state of murky evidence is not who or why, but whether. Without this

initial answer, all else is tilting at windmills.

The critics express by-the-book skepticism and it holds true enough in theory. Where the real irony lies is in the fact that there would be no conference at all, no voice to ask "whether," without the proponents. In the past (all right, perhaps only in the idealized past of schoolbooks), science was an adventure of open-minded investigation, set afoot by nothing more than the discovery of an anomaly and simple curiosity. Conclusions followed inquiry, and if doubts arose, they were informed doubts. With abductions, times have changed and science seems to have entered its pontifical age. Most scientists and scholars refuse to touch abduction, except with untested, even untenable pronouncements fired off from a distance, in apparent determination to demolish the subject rather than study it. Under these circumstances, advocacy appears to be the lesser evil.

A concern for balance and scope raises some legitimate reservations about the conference, all the same. The chosen speakers favored certain ideas and ignored others worthy of a hearing. Michael A. Persinger, a Laurentian University psychologist, has built up an extensive scholarly literature to implicate electromagnetic radiation generated by tectonic stress as the source for many UFO sightings and abduction experiences. No representative of this theory spoke at the conference. Robert Sheaffer was the sole participating skeptic, when surely more dissent leads to a healthier debate. The issues he raised about the influence of mass media and cultural beliefs deserve far more discussion than they received. Representatives from Australia, Brazil, and Britain contrasted the abduction story as it thrives in North America with reports from their countries, and noted some intriguing differences. Still more international perspective would have been invaluable.

Psychological matters surely deserved more attention. What could we learn—and did not hear—from research into altered states of consciousness or anomalistic psychology? A primer in memory research could settle many issues left to supposition, since many participants were unfamiliar with the capabilities and limitations of human memory in normal as well as stressful situations. The recent recognition of False Memory Syndrome and the alarming memories of abuse created in recovered memory therapy waves a red flag of warning before abduction investigators, cautioning them against taking any testimonial evidence for granted. Several speakers introduced these issues, but they passed to the side before cultivating a deep acquaintance. Discussants to referee the presentations and separate accepted fact from controversial theory would have provided another help to the psychologically uninitiated.

Sins of omission may have riddled the conference, but in all fairness, its five days were filled to the brim. In the end the topic overwhelms its students. Abduction is simply too big a subject to encompass in one conference or one book. Another truth is that this meeting of proponents was no love feast, even if it disappointed anyone looking for a brawl. Some of the most trenchant criticism of physical evidence, sample bias, investigative flaws, and scientific reasoning in this field came from such sympathetic researchers as John Miller, Ann Druffel, David Gotlib, Jenny

Randles, and Mark Rodeghier. They proved once again that friendly fire is often the deadliest.

Despite its shortcomings, the Abduction Study Conference comes closer to the goal of an academic-level introduction and overview of abduction research than any previous attempt. Never before have researchers addressed so many facets of the phenomenon from so many points of view. Still more needs to be said, but *Alien Discussions* draws a worthy starting line, and marks the standard of reference for future discussion. These proceedings carry the academic clout to command attention from anyone who pursues the abduction mystery. No one who wishes to be taken seriously can ignore them, no one can claim to be informed and remain unversed in them. *Alien Discussions* is far from the last word on abductions, but it is a first word of respectable stature.

For readers scared off by so formidable a document but still fascinated by its subject matter, C. D. B. Bryan opens a more accessible door to the conference in his book, *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind*. Bryan, a distinguished journalist and novelist, attended as an observer and offers the perspective of a self-described "sympathetic unbeliever." For about half the book he reports the goings-on of the conference day by day, then follows up with interviews of several principal speakers, such as David Pritchard and John Mack. Running throughout the book is an account of his relationship with two abductees he met on the first day, Carol and Alice (Clare and Diana in the proceedings). Their story occupies over a hundred pages as he trails them from Cambridge to their home in Maryland to the studio of Budd Hopkins in New York City, while they explore a series of experiences through conscious recollections and hypnosis.

Bryan was a rarity at the conference. He arrived without any apparent commitments, agenda, or axe to grind, even without extensive grounding in UFO history. Though his father served on the NICAP Board of Governors, Bryan seems to have had no kind of prior encounter, close or distant, with the UFO field. He brings a clean slate to his duties as observer and reporter, remaining nonpartisan through the arguments raised for and against an anomalous abduction phenomenon, and evenhanded when fissures rend the research community over abduction evidence, explanation, and meaning. Amid an audience steeped in UFO lore, he listens with freshness of mind and writes in the spirit of someone who discovers remarkable things for the first time.

Above all else, Bryan is a capital listener. He hears out the speakers and summarizes the key points of their presentations without drowning the reader in a flood of details, or turning a report into a harangue once the participant is no longer present to respond. Bryan makes no attempt to cover every speaker. He does not interrupt an engrossing dinner conversation to hurry back to the lecture hall on time. Yet he follows the primary thematic threads from beginning to end and advises the reader of what is important, what surprises him or gives him pause to scratch his head.

Some reviewers have chided Bryan for his restraint and wished he would pass

sterner judgment on what he hears. In fact he injects some barbed asides into his coverage, not through direct address but by more potent means, using the novelist's technique of a dramatic scene that speaks for itself. Several times he presents rather loopy dinnertable or hallway conversations with abductees and researchers—legitimate selections from his experiences, but loaded scenarios when singled out, since they threaten to impress the reader that all the participants are ripe and flourishing crackpots. Had he stopped with these reflections, Bryan would have misrepresented the conference and joined the skeptical throng in a flippant gesture of dismissal.

To his credit, Bryan does not drop the matter there. He can highlight the eccentric along with the serious and still let his curiosity win out over inclinations to enjoy a joke at the subject's expense. He has doubts and never loses them, but they fall as heavily on the pat answers as on the otherworldly musings. His interest lasts beyond the farewells at MIT as he visits several participants for further talk, then deepens his acquaintance with the abductees themselves. In coming face to face with them and spending the time to form more than a superficial impression, Bryan goes boldly where few skeptics have gone before or since. He wants to understand.

An impatience with uncertainty seldom troubles him. He feels no shame that puzzles stack up faster than solutions, no urge to rush to judgment. When he offers solutions, he offers them in lists; some ideas are provocative enough to linger over, but they remain possibilities among others for consideration and not conclusions chiseled in granite. It is what a solution must explain that sticks uncomfortably in his mind: The consistency of reports, the stories of young children, the character and intellectual quality of the experiencers, their emotional commitment despite reluctance to accept their own memories, the failure of conventional psychology to explain the phenomenon—these and similar problems haunt him the more he listens and learns.

Bryan's commitment to follow Carol and Alice through their investigation rounds out his journey of curiosity, and complements the proceedings with the case history they lack. This is his pilgrimage to the source of the mystery, the starting point for all scholarly disputes. Here the statistics reduce to personal terms and explanations cease to matter—he leads us to a primal moment when everyone falls silent to listen, at least for a little while. In his treatment the story often rivets attention. The chaos, pain, and struggle as these women remember their alien encounters is palpable; the occasion when a hypnotized Carol recalls herself at age four, looks toward her bedroom window in terror, and cries out, "The *cats* are coming in," is positively electric. The old questions surge back, sooner or later, but Bryan scores an indelible image of how volcanic is the human emotion seething underneath this phenomenon.

Readers already committed pro or con and jaded by too many accounts of mid-night junkets aboard spaceships may grow impatient with this lengthy treatment, but it is not aimed at them. Bryan speaks to the middle ground, those readers who share his curiosity, who know little and assume little but remain open to learn more. He has positioned himself where he probably can't win. Proponents will disregard

him as a popularizer, opponents will disparage him as gullible, reviewers of the respectable press will toy with his interest to crib a laugh.

In the end this awkwardness doesn't matter. The story Bryan gives us is really his personal story as much as the story of the conference and abductions. He doesn't tell it that way; he prefers to retire out of sight and almost succeeds, but readers sense him there behind their shoulders, watching and listening, curious and puzzled, sometimes moved. Abduction casts its slow and subtle spell over him. Like Pritchard, Hopkins, and Mack before him, Bryan joins the odd assortment of people from scattered corners of occupation and discipline who converge on the subject, lured to its eerie light.

This book is not the confession of a convert. He begins as an unbeliever and ends that way, his life and worldview unchanged in his encounter with abduction. Yet the contact jars him. His configuration of certitudes shakes a little, not so much that he embraces every word from Carol and Alice as literal truth, but enough to stop him from casting them aside as cranks or delusional. Where he was ready to laugh at first, he wonders at the finish, and so do his readers. In his hands the mysteriousness of abduction prospers.

To be fair, Bryan cannot qualify as the most seasoned guide through the abduction labyrinth. He betrays his outsider status with such elementary blunders as misdating the Nicholas Mariana UFO film from 1950 to 1960 or the Delbert Newhouse film from 1952 to 1950, and retailing farmer Alexander Hamilton's 1897 "calfnapping" hoax as genuine. His knowledge of general ufology is shallow and his familiarity with abduction issues no better. He forgets all too soon the eccentricities and conflicting claims that first preoccupy him. He welcomes aliens, archetypes, and alternate universes as worthy solutions, but never weighs the possibility that false memory or confabulation under hypnosis could be the answer. Conventional solutions never enter into his thinking; in fact they simply vanish in the soft and fuzzy glow of his wonder. A qualified abduction agnostic might have introduced him to reasonable doubts and plausible alternatives, but he never spares a moment for nonbelievers. In these complicated waters he swims naive, always facing straight ahead, with too few glances up, down, or aside. The result is one-sided reporting on a many-sided problem.

Flawed as it is, the book serves as a humanizing companion to the conference. Scholarly functions often earn their reputation for life-threatening dullness, but in this case Bryan comes to the rescue. Through his eyes the conference ceases to be a shadowy sequence of cerebral exercises and becomes a drama of intellectual pursuit, the lecture hall a stage for humor and emotion, the participants excited and exciting as he coaxes them to step out from behind impersonal academic prose to reveal faces and personalities. At the conference and among the abductees he proves a gracious and lucid host, always humane, open and curious throughout. If he finishes with questions rather than conclusions, he still keeps sight of the wonder of it all. Among so many uncertainties, a position in the middle of curiosity and wonder may be just the right place to settle.

Where does abduction research stand in the aftermath of the conference at MIT? Thin ice comes to mind. The abduction reports are as impressive now as they have ever been, the abductees just as compelling when they tell their stories with undeniable sincerity and emotion, but such testimony remains anecdotal evidence and bottom of the ladder for scientific purposes. Human commitment cannot substitute for objective proof. After all, recovered memories of sexual and Satanic Ritual Abuse also ring with emotion and sincerity, even when the claims are demonstrably false. For 30 years abduction reports have been with us. In three decades we should expect more, expect the backup and background to wrap our understanding all the way around this phenomenon, if it truly happens every day to people in the flesh. An evaluation of the state of abduction research must look beyond the reports, and face the question of why there's little else to see.

Abduction, after all, is not a metaphysical claim. It says the experience is as real as a dental appointment, the pain as physical as a root canal. A claim about reality imposes certain obligations and limitations on the phenomenon, or at least on how we can talk about it. The experiencer may spend the encounter in a dreamlike state, but the encounter itself is no dream, and a hard physical core awaits investigation behind the hazy veil of memory. Reality means we meet with the aliens on one spot of familiar ground, where the needles they poke into captives are sharp and draw red blood, where the craft goes clang if we kick it. Aliens too technologically magical to leave traces in the physical world are simply not "real" in the everyday sense of the word.

By all means let's allow the aliens some surprises. What's the point of traveling tens or hundreds of light years only to behave as the natives expect? Sure, the laws of physics hold sway from one end of the universe to the other, and on a good day for hubris we can believe that 20th-century science has them nailed down tight. But everyday experience also tells us that technology based on universal physics can still amaze us, that biological adaptation is full of unexpected turns, and that the diversity of culture and values on our planet should brace us for even more variety elsewhere. The critics who consult their parochial standards of what is reasonable and possible, then set those same limits on what aliens can or cannot do, have merely drawn a line in water. Equally reasonable critics transported from the last century would argue that an absence of smokestacks and coal cinders prove airplane sightings are illusory. We should expect genuine aliens to dazzle us now and then.

For all their unearthliness, even alien visitors ought to leave some sort of physical calling card behind. The stories say so; they portray the aliens as imperfect, even unconcerned to erase their tracks completely, and bound to certain recurrent procedures. Abduction reports lay out a road map to significant physical effects. Ufologists have pursued and prized this supposed evidence, the implants, ground traces, missing fetuses, and body scars that figure into the literature with a certainty somehow lost on the way to the laboratory. Ground traces and body scars prove ambiguous, while conference testimony demonstrates how the most circumstantial fetus and implant claims evaporate on close examination. Granted, an alien implant might be

hard to identify. It would not oblige with "Made on Mars" written on the side. What should give pause to any proponent is the ease with which a conventional bodily artifact or gynecological condition insinuates its way into the story and becomes an integral part of the abduction. This looks like the work of human imagination, not aliens.

The fall of this evidence from dramatic proof to conventional misinterpretation charts a trajectory characteristic of pseudoscience. The canals of Mars, N-rays, poly-water, and cold fusion looked promising at first, a flood of evidence ran in their favor; but careful, critical examination reversed the current and left the proponents high and dry, clinging with stubborn insistence to their crumbled illusions. Is history repeating itself in abductions? As things now stand, not just rabid skeptics might arrive at this verdict.

Rather than wait for extraterrestrial leavings, investigators could take a more active approach and try to catch the aliens in the act. Opportunities for an ambush are almost too abundant. Some people claim a truly startling frequency of abduction; the average refrigerator gets more rest than the aliens allow these unfortunates. If the abductions are real, a video camera stakeout should not have long to wait before taping a record of the visitation. A few trials have ended with power failures, deflections of the camera, or a seemingly sleepwalking abductee turning off the camera at the crucial moment, but a more creative effort might include cameras in crossfire or stationed outside the house rather than in the bedroom. Either the researcher gets some good evidence one way or the other, or the aliens give up in frustration and the abductee gets a good night's sleep. It seems like a no-lose arrangement, but seldom tried.

These failures to pursue physical evidence when the pursuit is feasible may recall some speculations that, down in some instinctual depth, people acknowledge that UFOs are immaterial. To push this line of thought further, we might imagine that no one takes abduction literally, rather most everyone embraces it as a modern revival of the supernatural or a belief system with built-in satisfactions too heartfelt to challenge with the messy realities of evidence. Ufology is ultimately a quest for faith, not truth.

A personal impression from the conference leaves me doubting these psychological qualms. The failure to pursue physical evidence seems to owe more to the disorganization of abduction research than to defense of a belief. Compare the Abduction Study Conference with a conventional scientific conference and the contrast pops out with painful clarity: Abduction research has been amateur hour all along. Quality efforts are few, limited, and tentative. This is not to detract from the dedication, skill, toil, and intelligence of abduction researchers, but the fact remains that they work in their spare time using their own money and without an institutional base, often outside their training or educational background, isolated from colleagues they can consult or even trust to take their work seriously. No organization, coordination, or leadership guides abduction research, and the result is an inquiry stuck pretty much where it began.

The conference marked a hopeful attempt to discipline the scattered, unstandardized efforts of these amateurs into a united front. Whether this tenuous order will gather strength or disintegrate remains to be seen, but ideology rather than a fair trial shapes any conclusions about the realness of abduction at this point. One bogus implant cannot disprove all implants, only analysis of a series of samples can settle the issue. Efforts to detect intrusions by a variety of approaches must have a chance before we decide whether the patter of little gray feet in the night comes from an alien or a human source. Still, the current string of failures must raise doubts. A physical phenomenon requires physical proof, yet the claims of abduction overdraw its account of evidence by far.

A scarcity of physical clues has led proponents to seek consolation in indirect evidence for a genuine anomaly. This approach rewards them with abundant comforts. A surprising consistency in abduction stories and descriptions baffles any effort to dismiss the reports as fantasies or hoaxes. Too single-minded to reflect cultural influences, too impersonal to serve individual psychological needs, the stories resemble nothing so much as reports of a similar experience seen through the eyes of a diverse assortment of people. The story properties of abduction reports best suit the description of an objective event.

Not even this time-honored pillar of support escaped the conference intact. British abductees seldom reported the short gray humanoid so common in North America until a media blitz set them straight. Why should aliens respect international boundaries, or the Nordics stake out one part of the world while the Grays lay claim to another? Surely these differences spring from earthly rather than extraterrestrial cultures. Listen to some speakers and learn that descriptions of the aliens are not so monotonous after all. In fact a multitude of races has converged on the earth, our once lonely little island in the universe has become an interplanetary crossroads for visitors with differing appearances and purposes.

The monolithic unity of abduction stories fragments in the versions some researchers hear, among them Eric Jacobson and Joanne Bruno, who classify four distinctive types. One finding is the classic abduction, but it shares its turf with florid narratives incorporating all sorts of paranormal experiences, serialized epics detailing lifelong and elaborate encounters, and odd accounts blending standard abduction phenomenology with bizarre imagery. Along with differences arrive the doubts: As the story spins out of control and threatens to break into increasingly chaotic claims, did those eerily similar descriptions once so prevalent in the literature mirror the real abduction story? Or is the truth an unruly mess left behind by fantasy in overdrive, and consistency a selective fiction of researchers who show the Grays and hide the weirdies?

Where, oh where, does the abductee fit into all this? The sessions on psychological research presented some intriguing clues but not enough of them, and thanks to a long legacy of neglect, even these additions amount to bare bones and starvation in the midst of plenty. No grasp of the phenomenon is possible without understanding the people who describe it. Bits and pieces, glimpses and insights have accumu-

lated, but not the integrated, systematic study necessary to learn who the abductee really is. As long as he remains a stranger, researchers match speculations against speculations and all dispute over abductions amounts to mere shadow-boxing.

We thought we knew the abductee. Researchers have long introduced a sane, stable, functional Everyman, indistinguishable from our friends, neighbors, coworkers, or kin, and assured us that only a strange story and the probable aftereffects of an unsettling experience set him apart as something special. The psychology of the abductee is not a variable in shaping the abduction, but clay to be reshaped by it. This impression of simplicity grew a little more complicated in the course of the conference. No major revolution occurred. Most abductees still pass "go" as responsible, psychologically able people without exceptional proneness to fantasize, but psychological researchers also recognized that a homogeneous image oversimplifies reality.

Life would be easy if all abductees lighted up like Christmas trees with psychological aberrations. Of course life is not so obliging. The people who tell abduction stories exhibit a wide range of psychological characteristics, with some individuals rock-solid in their normalcy while others scatter well outside its bounds, the two psychological clusters quite distinctive even though both memberships claim a similar type of experience. Research findings drop this fact in our laps. What it means awaits further exploration. Does a margin of psychological difference make room for the barminess to fantasize a night with the space doctors, or rather mean that the aliens are equal-opportunity kidnappers and unconcerned with human differences? Have we tested for the right things, would the tests even register confabulation or false memory? The questions pile up, the old verities crumble. Only more complexity among abductees is certain, and no longer can we ignore psychological factors as variables, or take for granted that psychological peculiarities always tag along as consequences of an experience.

Hints of subjectivity bubbled up throughout the conference and not just during the psychological sessions. A case in point was how abductees polarized in their attitudes about the experience. Abduction looks like a painful, frightening, unpleasant ordeal, and most published accounts depict it that way. Some abductees at the conference echoed this negative attitude, yet others insisted the experience was uplifting, even ecstatic. The positives actually appeared to outnumber the negatives. Such opposite emotional responses to a similar experience come as a counterintuitive surprise. The fact that some people react favorably is not outlandish in itself—the human spirit often rises through adversity to the stars. What rouses some due suspicion is an apparent correlation of attitude with investigator. In past comparisons this relationship appeared not to hold, but in wake of the conference this question again opens wide—do some investigators lead their abductees to a sense of anger and abuse, others to feelings of beaming peace and joy? Some abductees also declared they started out with resentment, but grew into a favorable frame of mind with time and understanding. The place of attitude is therefore too complicated to pinpoint, but any hint of investigator influence is troubling, and so is any

discovery that parts of the phenomenon slipped by unnoticed in the previous literature.

Merely to enter the halls of MIT obliges a certain seriousness of mind. Afterimages of equations and formulae fill the blackboards, reminding all comers that here if anywhere belongs the clarity and discipline of scientific thinking. The conference groped toward this obligation, by and large, despite the subject at hand. Yet it was here as nowhere else that participants confronted a phenomenon that is in some aspects quite irrational and unscientific. Abduction has always presented the double face of a joker. Researchers have emphasized the sober and respectable side, focusing on the hard edge of physical description and downplaying the bizarre underside of the phenomenon; yet abduction is high weirdness as well as high strangeness, the two parts seemingly one and inseparable.

What are we to make of the few abductees who reported that they were taken during the course of the conference itself? Even more disturbing are people who report themselves aboard spaceships when witnesses confirm that these claimants remain at home, asleep or in a trancelike state. Can the aliens ply their trade over Boston any day or night of the week, can they grab an old acquaintance for a quick tuneup no matter where he may be, or how many witnesses surround him? Throw in telepathy, flotation, ghostly passage through solid walls, and memories of an alien existence before birth, and proponents who insist these claims are literal events have a lot of explaining to do. These bizarre assertions leer so grotesquely out of the files of (relatively) staid reports of physical encounters that even a sympathetic mind begins to rebel. Can such things be? Who can remain reasonable and think so? An apologist might explain the surreal experiences as illusory images relayed through an implant, though all but the most dogged phenomenon-saver would blush from such excuses. Confronted with so many strange claims, the mind suffers explanatory vertigo and credulity collapses in favor of psychological causes for the entire abduction story.

Even a look out the window as I flew home from Boston testified in favor of doubt. Millions of people are abductees, according to various estimates, and the program operates round the clock. The skies should have twinkled with UFOs coming and going, a visible rush hour of aliens hastening to fill their daily quotas—so many abductees, so little time. Instead I saw blue skies and far horizons, with nary a UFO in sight.

Meeting to solidify the respectability of abduction, proponents may seem to have shattered its mystery instead, at least as a physical phenomenon. In fact nothing about abductions is ever just open-and-shut. If the answers were simply this or that, we could have settled the questions long ago. The doubts and uncertainties exposed under the light of an academic lecture hall are the same that have festered throughout the history of abduction inquiry, and they are not so simple. They are habitually inconvenient, essentially difficult, and inveterately double-sided, ready to cast doubt on the doubters as well as the proponents with an impartial hand.

Lest we forget while dwelling so long on the negatives, conference speakers

raised many good reasons to think there's something remarkable going on: Multiple-witness cases are hard to dismiss, fantasy-proneness is not lending a hand to imagination, and failure to mix in familiar medical or media imagery confounds the most reasonable answer for where abduction ideas originate. Any blanket psychological explanation must reckon with the diversity of claimants. If some of them are eccentric, some are also psychologically normal, responsible, well-functioning individuals. People who "recover" memories of abuse often endure years of therapeutic brainwashing before they recall or admit the therapist's scenario, but many abductees require minimal prodding to remember. The memories often burst forth into an extensive narrative without the hypnotist having to drag them out piece by piece. Many abductees keep full consciousness of all or parts of their experiences and never need hypnosis at all. Suspicion of an abduction does not lead with mechanical inevitability to discovery of abduction memories, and people without memories of the experience show little talent for imagining a typical story. Young children and people with diverse interests and backgrounds, some of them apparently unfamiliar with abduction reports, continue to tell stories with intricate and surprising similarities. With these complications in mind, funeral rites for the phenomenon seem premature.

Some criticisms are less fatal than they first appear. Efforts to prove that abductions are simply modern versions of age-old folkloric themes draw clever parallels between modern reports and fairy legends or witchcraft beliefs. Such similarities are plentiful, at least when the motifs are torn loose from their full traditions, abstracted and shaped into a convincing fit. But why are these resemblances significant? The discoverers never tell us. They point out the likeness and sit down confident that it proves the mythical nature of abduction. What they leave out is the mechanism underlying the similarities, the causal or genetic relationship that makes them meaningful. Intimations of an archetype stirring in the unconscious depths depend as much on unproven assumptions as aliens, and without any better understanding of how old legends of supernatural kidnap create the new, the similarities themselves amount to superficial analogies, good for a classroom exercise but powerless to explain abductions.

Other criticisms are simply misplaced. Sample bias figured as a long-running theme of the conference, and rightly so. Too selective a choice of reports may favor an appearance of consistency when, as some speakers argued, the stories are really much more diverse. Yet abductions may be only one among a crowd of UFO close-encounter types. The stories may spread out in a broad spectrum, one kind shading into another in a standing invitation to confusion. If abduction is truly a coherent phenomenon, it should have its own unique signature of traits. Finding if there is such a pattern requires comparison on level ground. The stories must bear a similar ontological status, apples to apples and not apples to oranges, or the effort guarantees an exercise in self-defeat.

Sifting the sample need not mean stacking the deck. One way to gather a useful body of reports calls for a few reasonable selection criteria: limit abduction to cases

of involuntary capture and/or examination, insist that the reports undergo some creditable investigation, and eliminate claimants if they show overt psychological peculiarities or an inclination to hoax. If possible, diversify the pool of investigators to head off consequences of investigator bias.

This conservative selection leads to some artificial exclusion, but the purpose is to weed out non-abductions rather than to encompass every encounter report ever filed. Accounts where conversation predominates may conform to a separate pattern; where fantasy runs rampant any pattern may dissolve into the narrator's idiosyncrasies. What matters is isolation of a potentially coherent story type, the mainstream abduction, by means that depend as little as possible on its key content traits. The characteristics of involuntary capture and examination carve out a sizable body of reports and yet remain too general to predetermine the rest of the story. An examination is slated, true enough; but its procedures are open for fantasy to fill in, if fantasy creates the content. Examiners are implied, but likewise in a way that leaves blank how they look and act. Researchers can question the sample for a great many elements of sequence and description with confidence that selection bias lends a minimum of tilt to the answers.

Comparison plays a fair game with such relatively unbiased samples. When they are available and the final scores check in, we also find some genuine surprises. The stability among these complex narratives far outstrips any expectation for fantasy or urban legends circulating by word of mouth. The similarities seem independent of abductee attitude, specific media influence, or even that usual suspect, investigator impositions. Reliable reports show tighter consistency than reports from questionable or psychologically unstable sources. Elements of variety wedge their way into the sample, but that variety itself becomes remarkable for its constancy of proportion. For example, not all aliens are small gray humanoids. Nordics and reptiles also man the ship even in North American samples, but these types join the crew in low percentages that are themselves consistent. Some reporters at the conference and reviewers of the proceedings dwell on the variety in abduction reports and conclude that the exception disproves the rule, but in this narrow focus they commit a selection bias of their own, and in the first degree. They never reckon with the proportions, yet those proportions imply a recurrence of content out of place in fantasy and difficult to explain unless some kind of experience binds the stories together. Here as usual, numbers remain the curse of the humanistic classes.

When Bryan describes Carol's hypnosis, the reader may sense that her abductors are too omnipresent, too diligent in their pursuit. They have more in common with personal demons than with aliens. Some of the questions put to her during hypnosis seem demanding and directional enough to confirm the critics' worst fears. Her ability to assume a little girl's voice when regressed to age four reveals that she fails easily under hypnotic influence and plays a role adroitly. All in all, her case looks like a textbook example of confabulation and fantasy.

Then the cats come in. What are we to make of this startling scene? It is tempting to think she relived a fearful childhood experience with cats, but in fact she likes

them and nothing in her life history supports the direct cause and effect of this hypothesis. Neither does Bryan record anything in the hypnotist's suggestions to lead her toward this oblique description of an alien press gang in action. Anyone familiar with abduction lore knows that large-eyed animals—deer, owls, and the like—may serve as screen memories for large-eyed aliens. At the same time these stories are not common, everyday fare. I cannot recall cats as the culprits in any well-known case. She might have picked up an example from her reading or conversations, but this appeal sounds thin and desperate.

How much perceptible distance separates a fantastic true story from a fantasy? A hair's breadth at best, a space too narrow to insert anything wider than Ockham's Razor. By Ockham's rule we ought to dismiss the possibility of truth, but Carol's story opens the gap a little too wide for such automatic confidence. Her story exemplifies a peculiar talent widespread among abductees. They tell a story that by all rights should be a fantasy—dresses impeccably for the part; but then they spoil the entire appearance with an out-of-place detail. Carol's cats belong in this category. They haunt the reader because they are at once appropriate and obscure, right for the story but wrong for the fantasy. She announces cats instead of aliens, and her visitors remain cats in her mind, though her description of their size and actions makes clear that this childlike metaphor veils something else, and veils it thinly. The investigator has seen this diversion before, but the lay public has not, Carol probably has not. Yet here it is again, a thread drawn from the larger fabric, hard to come by and harder still to weave into her personal story as deftly as she does. We must believe that she fantasized a scene distinct from standard issue and it just happened to fit. When we realize that too many other fantasizers score similar hits. Ockham's Razor begins to pare away at so much good fortune and we begin to wonder if luck has anything to do with it.

What matters at this point is not the answers, but simple recognition that many questions beg for answers. Abduction research today has more in common with a debating society than a scientific enterprise. For all the time and passion burned in speculation about what abductions are or what they mean, scholarship remains shallow and the available evidence provides too wobbly a platform to uphold any grandiose theories, much less firm conclusions.

Now is the time to get our hands dirty. The conference highlighted some imperatives to guide the immediate research effort—a hunt for physical evidence, systematic psychological testing of abductees, further exploration of international differences, experiments into how far confabulation and false memory syndrome explain the content and dynamics of abduction reports. Of special importance for claims of consistency will be the search for correlations between psychological qualities and story types. If stable claimants tell consistent stories and the weirder tales come only from the mentally different, chances rise that some reports echo a shared experience. If anybody can tell an unstandardized story, all bets are off; the phenomenon is more likely to be subjective and consistency an artifact. We also need to track abductees through their social networks and media habits to see if these paths lead to unus-

pected sources of information and imagery. Until we have firm evidence relating to these basic issues, we truly stumble in the dark.

Only very young and very old disciplines know all the answers. The young ones are fated to discard their answers in the process of learning the questions. So it may be with abduction. The Abduction Study Conference was a showcase of growing pains and awkwardness, a showdown that proved we knew less than we claimed and deceived ourselves with illusions of progress made. At the same time the conference spread the need for humility all around, showing that no one, pro or con, understands all we need to understand. Perhaps the most worthwhile legacy of the conference was its reaffirmation that abduction is a worthy subject of inquiry and a continuing source of puzzlement. When all the shouting, arguing, and posturing quiets, abduction remains a phenomenon to inspire curiosity, a human phenomenon even if not a physical one, and deserving scrutiny from many disciplines and perspectives. Abductions are a human problem for the experiencers, who need answers for their own peace of mind. It is an anomaly and a challenge, whatever the phenomenon proves to be.

THOMAS E. BULLARD
Indiana University

Walter N. Webb. *Encounter at Buff Ledge: A UFO Case History*. Chicago: Center for UFO Studies, 1995. 306p.

In general, the more fantastic a story told, the more extensive must be the supporting evidence before it is accepted as true. This is especially the case in the field of alleged alien abduction (AAA). To me, this phrase refers to the reported transport of one or more humans from one location to another and (usually) back again through the actions of allegedly nonterrestrial beings. Having conducted my own research in this area for many years, I know about some of its pitfalls and traps. And I have come to greatly appreciate those who have the courage and the intellect not only to study the subject but also to share their findings with others in a clear and detailed manner. Walter Webb has truly done this in *Encounter at Buff Ledge*. The reader will find all the elements of a mystery novel here—real-life characters, a plot of sorts, motives, means and, most of all, surprises that will stretch one's existing belief system to the limit.

Because thinking seriously about the possibility of human abductions by some kind of alien life form is accompanied by a variety of fear-producing elements in human society, we humans have found many ways to simply avoid the subject; indeed, we are very creative in how we do this. Those of us who study and write about AAA are usually subjected to a special array of prejudicial behavior and ridicule. Walter Webb, an old friend and colleague, unfortunately is not going to be spared these responses for his efforts at Buff Ledge either. But because of the careful and thoughtful detectivelike approach he used, his critics will have greater diffi-