Observations

Close Encounters of the Harvard Kind

Samuel McCracken

OVER THE last 50 years, the skies of popular culture have been alight with flying saucers—disk-shaped interplanetary craft operated by small beings of vaguely humanoid (if decidedly nonstandard) physiognomy and ambivalent intentions toward us earthlings. Until comparatively recently, though, these flying objects remained a fringe phenomenon—in the sense that, generally speaking, those who took them seriously were not themselves the sorts of people likely to be taken seriously. This has begun to change.

In 1994, John E. Mack, M.D., a well-regarded professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School and the winner of a Pulitzer prize for his 1977 biography of T.E. Lawrence, published a book, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*, in which people asserting they had been kidnapped by alien creatures in spaceships were considered to be sanely reporting on actual experiences. Now, in *Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters*,* Mack has taken another step; such alien encounters, he argues, are an expression of a large and hopeful truth about our age.

When an individual with Mack's credentials promulgates ideas normally found at the grocery checkout stand, it is worth paying heed.

BEFORE WORLD WAR II, interplanetary and intergalactic travel, bringing the possibility of extraterrestrial visitors to earth, was the stuff of science fiction. Although prewar cognoscenti understood that building gravity-escaping ships was a problem merely of engineering, not until Werner von Braun helped Hitler demonstrate rockets-in-being did the idea of visitors from elsewhere begin to assume plausibility.

Coincidentally, World War II also taught Americans (with the aid of books like the 1942 *What's That Plane: How to Identify American and Jap Airplanes*) to scan the skies for intrusive objects. As thousands spent their spare hours scrutinizing the heavens, it was inevitable that spotters in, say, western Kansas would report sightings that conformed to no filed flight plan and that, given geographic realities, could not be hostile aircraft. In fact if not yet in terminology, these were unidentified flying objects (UFO's).

After the war, the government turned its attention to such continued sightings, identifying nine out of ten as mundane entities like helicopters or weather balloons. But that left 10 percent, some of them reputedly saucer-shaped spacecraft manned by little green (later to become gray) men. Perhaps most famously, one was said to have crashed at Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947, killing its crew. The bodies, allegedly, ended up in the possession of the federal authorities; when the air force persisted in denying the entire episode, charges of cover-up predictably ensued.

In short order, UFO's and their crews provided the stuff for a cottage industry, engendering sensational books and forming a staple of supermarket tabloids and paperbacks. Among the latter was John G. Fuller's *The Interrupted Journey* (1966), the tale of a New Hampshire couple,

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Betty and Barney Hill, who claimed to have been abducted by space aliens while driving through the White Mountains. The Hill abduction case established the format for many subsequent narratives whose elements typically included little gray men with huge eyes that wrapped around their heads from front to side and who told their abductees that they were here to help; various invasive, quasi-medical procedures; and the abductees' "recovery" of these and similar memories through hypnosis.

In 1977, the theme of alien abduction crossed over from nonfiction to fiction in Steven Spielberg's immensely successful movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind.* This is the tale of a group of humans who singly and severally observe UFO's and develop an obsession with drawing or modeling a mound-like structure. It emerges that space aliens have implanted in them an image of the Devil's Tower, a striking geological formation in Wyoming to which they are meant to travel to attend a public appearance by an alien ship. When the ship duly lands, the aliens disembark a number of U.S. aviators missing since 1945, as well as the child of one of the psychically implanted humans. In appearance, the aliens conform to the little gray (or blue) stereotype, complete with frail bodies and oversized eyes.

Another landmark appeared ten years later in the form of a nonfiction book entitled *Communion: A True Story*. Its author, a novelist named Whitley Strieber, had been known principally for high-quality thrillers on pacifist and environmentalist themes. Now Strieber claimed to have been mysteriously transported from his upstate New York hideaway into a space ship where he was examined intrusively and then just as mysteriously returned to his bedroom. This proved to be only the first of many encounters with the creatures Strieber called "the visitors," and whom he divided into four separate types. The predominant species would have been familiar to the Hills: about three-and-a-half feet tall, with distended heads, large black oval eyes, rudimentary noses, and thin mouths. The cover art for *Communion* provided what is now the standard iconography of these creatures, including the gray cast of their skin and their jumpsuit-like clothing.

Since *Communion*, Strieber has produced a series of books elaborating upon his ongoing contacts with the visitors—plus his "recovery" that, as a child, he was educated in a secret school near San Antonio, Texas, where he learned to detach his soul from his body and visit such locales as Mars and ancient Rome. He believes that the visitors implant objects of unknown purpose in the bodies of humans, and has detailed his own somewhat ambiguous attempts to remove such an implant from his left ear. The subject of these implants takes up a large part of *Confirmation* (1998), in which Strieber alleges that their existence confirms the truth of the experiences he and others have recounted.

Considering the sensationalist fabric of his claims, Strieber's tone is remarkably calm. (Many of his fans appear to treat him as a kind of engaging and benign fabulator, a sort of latter-day Wizard of Oz.) He agreeably supplies possible mundane explanations for the tales he tells, while also reporting that he has successfully undergone psychological testing to explore his sanity and polygraph testing to explore his veracity. His website (www.strieber.com), however, tells a somewhat different story, replete with complaints of persecution by his bankers and railings against the media. A posted entry from his journal for December 4, 1999, conveys the essential flavor:

> I am about to suffer from the same press torments that have dogged me since I published *Communion*. I am routinely punished for writing that book, either by false and unfair reviews, or by being ignored. . . . I am hurt as much as possible short of legal limits in order to limit my impact and, in the best of all possible worlds, destroy me.

WHETHER OR not Strieber is sane, to him belongs the distinction of having formulated and widely disseminated the standard version of the alien-abduction phenomenon. For nearly a decade, moreover, he occupied the *moderate* position on the spectrum, the extreme being held down by tabloids enlivened by such matters as the First Lady's plans to adopt a space-alien child. But then, in 1994, the whole debate acquired a certain *gravitas* with the arrival of Harvard University's John E. Mack.

Abduction, Mack's first book on the subject, was superficially structured like many popular psychiatric works—that is, as a series of case studies. We learn that a number of particularly interesting people had been consulting him professionally since 1990. They were a diverse group—including, among others, a waitress and an immensely successful venture capitalist—but what they had in common was the suspicion or the belief that they had been through exactly the sort of experience reported by Whitley Strieber. Mack customarily hypnotized these people, with the goal of recovering painful memories they might have repressed.

But here the resemblance to psychiatric case studies ended. For Mack did not *treat* his subjects; in fact, he did not believe they were in need of treatment, or consider them patients. In his new book, *Passport to the Cosmos*, he refers to them instead as "fellow researchers," and he begins this book by announcing that, since the recollections of his clients did not fit his previous worldview, it came to seem reasonable to him to alter that worldview rather than "continue to force my clients into molds that clearly did not suit them."

There are, Mack tells us, a num-

ber of common elements in abduction narratives. Typically, the "experience" begins with bright light, and experiencers see the aliens themselves as "beings of light." They also report powerful and unfamiliar energies: things shake, and experiencers "feel" their bodies, their very cells, vibrating at a higher rate. As for the aliens' "program," or message, this usually has to do with the natural environment—namely, that we on earth are heading for trouble if we do not get serious about curtailing pollution. Sometimes experiencers are shown images of a desolated planet: either a future earth or what the aliens did to their own planet and want us to avoid. (In general, Mack's evidence seems to suggest that the aliens have been profoundly influenced by Vice President Gore's *Earth in the Balance*.)

For purposes not entirely clear, the aliens have often collected samples of semen or eggs aboard their ships, and many female experiencers say they have been impregnated with fertilized eggs containing alien genetic material. These impregnations appear to be accomplished by thoroughly clinical means, the fetuses being removed by the aliens during subsequent abductions. Some experiencers report having seen large incubator installations (remarkably similar to those depicted by Aldous Huxley in his dystopian novel, *Brave New World*), while others, evidently having been granted visitation rights, recount ongoing relationships with their hybrid children either aboard ship or in other, unspecified, locations. These sundry activities comprise what Mack calls the Hybrid Project.

In working his way to a set of conclusions from all this reportage, Mack invites us to consider the role of the shaman—the medicine-man figure in primitive cultures who undergoes rigorous training to allow spirit travel into other realities. He discusses the work of three shamans known to him—an American Indian, a Brazilian Indian, and a Zulu (the first of these is a former Green Beret, the second has a Ph.D. in anthropology), the point being to show us that in other cultures, contact with otherworldly beings is routine. "Indigenous people," to use Mack's term, retain knowledge of the "original instructions" of the Creation, and are therefore more in touch with reality than nonindigenous people, who suffer under the burden of the millennia of miseducation otherwise known as civilization.

This brings Mack at last to God—or, to use the term favored by experiencers, to Source—and the big cultural news he wants to tell us. Many of Mack's informants have come to believe that they are not from here, but rather from There. "The ship is my home," one of them says. "I miss my home." Though raised in a rigorously rational and secular Jewish home, Mack himself has arrived at the conviction that we are in a period of spiritual transformation, of which the abduction phenomenon is a powerful engine. Although the aliens (he concedes) are not God, they are nearer to God—to Source—than even the most religious among us; making contact with them, and through them with Source, may thus be the real meaning of the entire phenomenon. He ends by quoting a certain Karin, one of his prize experiencers, as she addresses a meeting of the Friends of the Institute of Noetic Sciences:

> Perhaps it is that we have found ourselves at a fork in the road, and we are once again faced with making a choice. Couldn't we, this time, make the right one? Couldn't we simply reach out and embrace this experience and all that it brings with it, including the terror, as well as the truth, questions and beauty? . . . Please, can't we just this once choose the path that will finally set us free?

MANY A psychiatrist, dealing with a patient who claims to have been kidnapped by space aliens and to have had a second personality implanted in his body, might open the diagnostic manual at "S," for schizophrenia. Mack—not for nothing is he a professor of psychiatry at Harvard—is well aware that he must show his experiencers are not crazy. To this end, he diverts us with expositions concerning the workings of his research institute, the testing methods followed by his clinical associates, his screening procedures, and the extent of his erudition as evidenced in multitudinous citations of scholarly sources. Unfortunately, his research procedures evince flaws that even a nontenured alien intruder would recognize.

Mack asserts, first of all, that his own strong suit as a therapist has been the talent for distinguishing the sane from the insane—and that, besides, his experiencers perform well on standardized intelligence and Rorschach tests. Next, he states that as experiencers relate to him their astonishing and sometimes terrifying memories, their "affect" is perfectly appropriate to the narrative: they are deeply emotional, and they evince great physical tension. Moreover, since the story they recount is generally the same, with much circumstantial agreement among individual versions, they must be describing a common reality. Finally, and just to bring things around again, these matters cannot be examined by traditional methods: in the words of the anthropologist Jeremy Narby, quoted approvingly by Mack, "To change what we see, it is sometimes necessary to change what we believe."

Should we take John Mack's word for it that he knows a madman when he sees one? What if he is himself mad, or perhaps under the influence of an implant? That, at least, might explain the tenacity with which he clings to the notion that emotional affect—"sincerity"—validates the tales told by his experiencers.

In 1692, the adolescent girls of Salem cried out that they had been bewitched by their neighbors; clearly they were possessed by something

very important to them, and they manifested all the physical tensions that Mack finds so authenticating. Cotton Mather, the most distinguished American intellectual of his day, was hardly alone in being impressed by the suffering of the "afflicted children" as they confronted their "tormentors" in the courtroom. But no one believes in the spectral persecutions for which the good burghers of Salem went to the gallows.

The Salem "experiencers" are relevant in another regard as well. They all told a remarkably congruent story, leading to the possible conclusion that they, too, were describing a common reality. But the fact is that within days after Betty Parris and Abigail Williams made their first accusations, every teenaged girl in Salem knew what sort of narrative, if told in the courtroom with the right effects, would make her an instant celebrity. It is not necessary to believe that the girls consciously and deliberately fabricated their accounts to understand that the mere fact they told the same story says nothing at all about whether the story was true.

Indeed, considering how long the theme of alien abduction has been available in sources both literary and cinematic, it is odd that a Harvard professor boasting of his analytical acumen should have failed to inquire into the possible *non*-experiential roots of his clients' narratives. Consider, in this connection, the case of the Zeta Reticulans.

Betty Hill, the 1961 "abductee" who with her late husband was, so to speak, the patient zero of the phenomenon, reported that one of the aliens aboard ship showed her a star map indicating his home area, and she later made a sketch of it from memory. Several years later, an amateur astronomer named Marjorie Fish applied herself to finding an actual piece of space corresponding with Hill's map. One that satisfied her lay in the vicinity of Zeta Reticuli, a fifth-magnitude double star in the southern constellation known as the Net. Fish's work was taken sufficiently seriously to have generated a 1974 article in the popular journal *Astronomy* averring that her match was very unlikely to occur randomly. Other commentators, including the late Carl Sagan, disagreed rather sharply.

From this beginning, the alien-abduction community has since produced manifold detailed accounts of the lives and loves of the Zeta Reticulans, many of them "channeled" from Zeta Reticuli itself. (A "channel" is a sort of medium who transmits personalities from places and times to which physical travel is not yet available.) A quick search of the Web turns up over 650 hits for the topic, many containing dozens of links to other sites.

What the Zeta Reticuli phenomenon illustrates, in other words, is the immense fertility of minds that truly believe. From a small hint in one abduction narrative there has grown a vast deposit of "fact" about an alleged home planet of the "grays" and about the life they lead there. It is tempting to wonder whether a star with a less allusive name would have been so effective. Snodgrass 242, for example?

But the Hill abduction is the locus of an even more illuminating example of "life" imitating art. The wraparound eyes that are the distinguishing mark of the "grays" first appeared to the world in John G. Fuller's 1966 account of the Hill abduction. It turns out, however, that Betty Hill's notes, written down within days of the event itself, described quite a different alien, with different and less menacing eyes. The wraparound eyes surfaced much later, in a hypnosis session involving her husband on February 22, 1964—as it happens, twelve days after the broadcast of an episode featuring just such wraparound eyes on the science-fiction television show, *The Outer Limits*. It thus seems highly probable that these large and deep orbs, soon to become icons of narrative after narrative of alien abduction, were first created as fiction and only then obligingly if unknowingly confabulated into "reality" by Barney Hill and his hypnotist.*

Close Encounters of the Third Kind similarly disseminated an image of little, big-headed, frail-bodied, strange-eyed men, as well as the notion of alien abduction and manipulation of human thought. By the time Whitley Strieber became well-launched into his own series of memoirs, every aspiring abductee with the price of a paperback had the drill down pat.

IN THE end, despite all these various attempts to establish the "scientific" credibility of his witnesses, Mack's principal device is simply to lower the bar of credibility itself. Throughout both his books, he pushes the idea that the things they report to him happened not as we may understand "happened" but in another dimension, on a different—but no less real—level of reality. Impossible in this world, the experiencers' experiences may be possible in another.

This argument is a perversion of the perfectly sound scientific practice of specifying your environment. All sorts of physical constants, for example, are defined in terms of sea level; if you experiment in Denver, you will not get the "right" values, but you can validate your figures by indicating the altitude at which they were read. Thus, if we knew of another reality whose ground rules permitted alien abductions, Mack would be within his rights, as a scientist, to bring it into account. To his detriment, alas, he has no such reality. Although one can readily imagine one or another means by which aliens might successfully attract our attention—landing on the field at halftime during the Superbowl, for example—sadly, public relations seems to be an undeveloped art on Zeta Reticuli.

* I owe this reconstruction to an article by Martin Kottmeyer in the September 1994 *Skeptical Inquirer*.

Which is to say that, when it comes right down to it, Mack can offer no persuasive evidence against the proposition that his experiencers are either deluded or fraudulent. And if he, a licensed physician, steadfastly refuses to help them shed their delusions or their mendacity, that is because his modal view of them is that they *have* been through the various extraordinary and improbable experiences they claim, and that alien creatures regularly do visit earth, abduct human beings, impregnate them, harvest their fetuses, and implant foreign objects in their bodies.

It needs to be appreciated that most of these experiencers do not possess fully developed memories of abduction *before* they come to Mack. Those memories emerge in the course of so-called regressions, or hypnosis sessions, as well as through less dramatic techniques of relaxation. Although Mack maintains that he takes great care not to implant memories where there are none, we have seen how easy it is for some people to conflate memories of different orders of experience, personal and vicarious, not to speak of the vast reservoirs of circumstantial detail ready at hand through the subconscious memory of literary works and movies. No matter how superficially methodical Mack may be, his own status as a believer in the reality of alien abduction cannot but be a potent influence on his clients. In short, he is an enabler.

Passport to the Cosmos is rife with the jargon of New Age "spirituality." Mack has high praise for something called Holotropic Breathwork, a system for inducing "no-ordinary" states of consciousness through controlled breathing and listening to music, and he cites approvingly a quintessentially New Age institution that teaches Brennan Health Science, also known as Hands of Light. There is, one supposes, nothing in principle to stop a New Age physician from taking unhappy people and sending them home with grandiose delusions, especially if they feel less unhappy as a result. Still, one wonders whether the American Psychiatric Association—even in its present, degraded condition—would agree. After all, adopting the rule that the doctor's is the perspective that needs to be altered can lead to putting the lunatics in charge not merely of the asylum but of the psychiatrists, too.

All of which is why, ultimately, John E. Mack of the Harvard Medical School is a much more interesting and distressing phenomenon than any of his poor "fellow researchers." That he, too, shows every outward sign of sincerity is hardly a comfort.