

SKEPTICISM IS A VIRTUE: That's the slogan under which *Brill's Content*, the media-watchdog magazine, wages war on bias, cant, and sloppiness in the press. The magazine can be tough on journalists whom it deems credulous, so it came as a surprise to open the current issue and find an ad for the magazine's sister company, Contentville, in which a professor hawks books about . . . alien abductions.

Contentville, a sort of mini-Amazon.com, offers books, magazines, dissertations, and other content. An eight-page ad for the Web site in the February issue of *Brill's Content* introduces readers to an array of editors and advisers—including "academic experts"—whose recommendations appear on the site.

Featured prominently on a page devoted to "Recent Professors' Picks"—along with Jack Zipes, a professor of German at the University of Minnesota (who recommends books on fairy tales), Robin Lakoff, a linguist at the University of California at Berkeley (books that explore the power of words), and Michael W. Zuckerman, a University of Pennsylvania historian (American bestsellers since 1776)—is none other than John E. Mack, the controversial Harvard Medical School psychiatrist. Dr. Mack believes—unskeptically, some have dared to assert—that alien abductions take place, more or less.

Dr. Mack plugs some classics: Whitley Strieber's *Communion: A True Story*, for example ("makes a persuasive case for the reality Strieber was forced to confront," the Harvard professor writes on the site). And *Intruders: The Incredible Visitations at Copley Woods*, by Budd Hopkins, who believes that an intergalactic, cross-species breeding experiment is being conducted on humans.

Dr. Mack's comments on the site are brief, but in the past he has said he believes that alien visitations represent "something not of this world that enters into this world" and that can't be explained psychologically. In his 1999 book, *Passport to the Cosmos*, he argues that "the Western world may be poised to embrace notions of a world filled with spirits, beings, and intelligences that can cross the barrier we have built up between the material and immaterial worlds." (That language comes from the Web site for the Program for Extraordinary Experience Research, Dr. Mack's nonprofit research center.)

A spokesman for the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the

Hot Type

Paranormal, Kevin Christopher, calls it "sad" that Contentville has enointed Dr. Mack as an expert. "People who think they are getting an academic or unbiased opinion are being misled," he says.

"We trust our readers to develop their own opinions," counters Robin Hutson, a senior vice president for product development at Contentville, in an e-mail message. "We represent a whole spectrum of political views, even within the academic expert roster, and do not endorse, naturally, any of them." (The sticklers at *Brill's Content*, however, don't let others get away with such explanations: In the February issue, they make a *Larry King Live* staff member look very foolish indeed for defending, in language almost identical to Ms. Hutson's, Mr. King's interviews with psychics who claim to solve crimes.)

A staff member who returned a call from Dr. Mack's research center says she does not assist reporters who seek to "slander" his work, but says that as a Pulitzer Prize winner (for a biography of T. E. Lawrence) and a member of the Harvard faculty for 45 years, Dr. Mack is a more-than-reputable source. "He recommended these books as ones that helped him to understand the phenomenon initially," she says. "It's not that they are on the top shelf of his library."

A SPECIES ARGUMENT: Darwin caused a scientific revolution in 1859 when he published *On the Origin of Species*. But the field of biological classification still hasn't caught up, argues Matt Ereshefsky, an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Calgary, in Alberta.

Biologists still use an 18th-century classification system that you probably memorized in high school: ranking all life forms in an ascending hierarchy of species, genus, family, order, class, phylum, and kingdom. Mr. Ereshefsky says the system ought to be junked.

In his new book, *The Poverty of the Linnaean Hierarchy: A Philosophical Study of Biological Taxonomy* (Cambridge University

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perform certain types of calculations, such as factoring large numbers, much faster than machines using classical bits.

information to another computer, and save that information in the spin orientation of atoms—which could serve as the memory of the quantum computer;

ahead of the code-breakers by the tricks of the quantum world. / to the principles of quantum mechanics the very act of trying to measure