

A new foray into the alien unknown

By Dana Kennedy
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When the screenwriter Leslie Bohem got a call from Steven Spielberg's office four years ago about a planned miniseries on the history of alien abduction, he thought that it was some sort of hoax.

Bohem, 51, is not inclined toward conspiracy theories, but he simply did not believe that Spielberg was considering him for the job of writing "Taken," a 10-episode, 20-hour series that begins Dec. 2 on the Sci-Fi Channel. In 20 years of writing screenplays, something he began doing part time during his music career, his major credits were "Daylight" with Sylvester Stallone and the volcano drama "Dante's Peak." He had not shown a particular taste for science fiction. In fact, he may still be better known as the bass player for the rock band Sparks in the 1980s.

His initial meetings with Spielberg went well, however, and a draft he wrote was enough to convince the director that Bohem should write the entire series. "This is really Les's show," Spielberg, who is credited as an executive producer, said in a telephone interview. "He wrote every word of it."

"Taken," which will be shown over 10 consecutive weekdays, follows three American families who have encounters with aliens over four generations. It may be the most ambitious example to date of the alien-abduction story, a film, television and literary genre that has become as dependable as the western once was. (M. Night Shyamalan's "Signs" has added another \$400 million to the genre's worldwide take this year.) But Spielberg and Bohem, who also served as an executive producer, were as interested in family drama as they were in science fiction.

"From Les's point of view, this was not going to be a cavalcade of special effects, not trying to top the 'X-Files,'" Spielberg said. "It was going to be a character story about ordinary people and how these amazing events impact on their lives."

But the task Bohem faced was a daunting one. He was writing for a master of the genre, after all, the creator of "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" and "E.T." "Steven wanted to be very true to this lore, he wanted it to be real," Bohem said by phone from Los Angeles. "He also said, 'If this isn't true, then why are all these stories the same?' So I said, maybe because of your movies?"

When Bohem started to research the subject, he said, he was a "skeptical agnostic." But he soon became caught up in the vast material he found. "It's overwhelming," he said. "It's not all people making stuff up. I go back and forth between thinking it is all mostly mythology to maybe this is what really happens. Where I want to come out is in some Jungian camp, that this is all part of the collective unconsciousness. But then I think these stories are all too detailed to be a dream."



Alan Zenuk, Sci Fi Channel/The New York Times

Fred Koehler, left, and Ryan Merriman in the fourth episode of "Taken."

Bohem focused on the event that has buoyed alien-visitation fans for half a century and has already spurred books, films and television series: the 1947 crash in Roswell, New Mexico, of what some believe was a flying saucer and the U.S. Air Force says was an experimental surveillance balloon.

"Taken," whose ensemble cast includes Dakota Fanning, Matt Feuer and Heather Donahue, begins around the time of the Roswell incident. The three families, the Keys, the Clarks and the Crawfords, represent different points of view about UFOs. "I wanted the aliens to be the fourth family in a way," Bohem said.

But Bohem also studied other extraterrestrial lore, from stories of people being spirited into hovering craft by strange beings in old Irish folk tales to the airship sightings of the 1890s, when people claimed to have glimpsed mysterious beings inside.

And he included a number of real-life reports of alien encounters in "Taken." The case of Betty and Barney Hill, two of the first people to claim that they were abducted by aliens, is mentioned in the series. (The Hills said they encountered a spacecraft on a New Hampshire road in 1961 and were taken aboard for several hours.) There are also references to the so-called Foo Fighters, the unidentified flying objects Al-

lied pilots claimed to have seen in the skies over Germany during World War II.

"There are also lots of references in the show about all the ways people are 'taken,'" Bohem said. "Love, lust, power, drugs, alcohol. One of the episodes takes place during the Iran hostage crisis, so you can hear guys on the TV in the background saying they've been taken."

Bohem said he still could not answer Spielberg's question about why so many of the alien-abduction stories are similar. "It is still a burning question," he said. "If the existence of extraterrestrials visiting our planet is true, that's amazing. But just think about living in Europe in 1480 and thinking the earth was flat and you were all that existed and then someone went ahead and found out that there was more out there than what you knew."

Bohem said he was most struck by one small detail that kept cropping up in his research. "People don't just say they were taken up into a spacecraft by beings," he said. "In a lot of cases they talk about being given stuff to eat — and it's usually baked goods, muffins or something like that. I think that's an odd bit of detail."

Before Spielberg directed "Close Encounters," he visited the astrophysicist and air force consultant J. Allen Hynek, who was

credited with coining the phrase "close encounters of the third kind" for alien sightings (as opposed to UFO sightings or discoveries of physical evidence). Bohem did not consult specifically with any of the legions of UFO experts or debunkers. But many of them are eagerly awaiting "Taken."

John Mack, the Harvard Medical School professor who has conducted controversial studies of hundreds of people who claim to have been abducted by aliens, sent a copy of his book "Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters" to Spielberg when he heard of his plans to produce "Taken." Mack said he no longer refers to people as "abductees," calling them "experiencers" instead. He said he did not doubt that the people he studied had had some kind of encounter with another form of intelligence, but he did not now believe that they were abducted by alien beings and taken into spaceships.

"There are all sorts of subtleties that are very hard to talk to a reporter about," he said. "We are all so literal. I believe these people have encountered some kind of intelligence by an opening of consciousness to a whole other level of reality. Philosophers are starting to think of a third zone — some kind of intermediate reality — that enters this reality. They are having an experience that is experientially real but the beings are not necessarily physically or materially real."

Mack took a dim view of how UFO's and alien abduction have been portrayed in entertainment. He said he had never seen a movie or television show that seemed accurate, based on his studies. "The tendency is to make it either comical, sinister, sensational or ridiculous," he said. "If it could awaken us, like a near-death experience, to a more open consciousness, something like 'Taken' could have a positive effect. But as it becomes an entertainment genre, it becomes silly and trivialized and people take it less seriously."

Bohem is more concerned about giving audiences a fresh look at what they appear to have a steady hunger for. "It's become a kind of religion in a world that clearly craves that," he said. "It goes to people's curiosity about whether we are alone. If they're out there, they're asking the same questions we are, which means that we're not alone and we're all in this together. It reflects our need for comfort and answers."

Spielberg, of course, is famously known for the benign, friendly aliens that populate his movies. The aliens in "Taken" are more problematic. "They do some really scary stuff, but they also do kind stuff," Bohem said. "Steven said one thing to me about aliens early on: he said they're not friends or foes. They don't think like us."

Whether Bohem himself believes that — or anything else he uncovered in his research about alien abduction — remains, by choice, unclear. "This is a waffly political answer," he said. "But unless I get abducted myself, I am not going to commit to an answer."