A Bad Trip Down Memory Lane

After Susan Clancy's study at Harvard on recovered memory, she was accused of promoting child abuse. Then she was vilified by alien abductees. Now she just wants to forget the whole thing. By Bruce Grierson

It is not considered good judgment to wade into the issue of recovered memories without skin as thick as permafrost and caller ID on the phone. Rare is the academic field in which colleagues on opposite sides of a debate — people with international reputations — dismiss the very foundations of one another's work, sometimes not so privately, with common barnyard epithets; in which two of the most prominent reference books are almost Jesuitically contradictory; in which more than a decade of fairly sound research has done little to settle a debate that has raged ever since Freud popularized the term "repression."

Yet this is just where Susan Clancy found herself eight years ago when she joined the psychology department at Harvard University as a graduate student. At one end of the field of "trauma memory" were people like her new professors and future co-authors, the clinical psychologist Richard McNally and the cognitive psychologist Daniel Schacter, chairman of the Harvard psychology department and one of the world's leading experts on memory function. At the other end were Harvard-affiliated clinicians, including Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk and Daniel Brown, whose scholarly writing on the psychological effects of trauma remains highly influential.

What the two sides disagree on is whether painful memories of traumatic events can actually be repressed — completely forgotten — and then "recovered" years later in therapy. Many clinicians say yes: it is how we instinctively protect ourselves from childhood recollections that would otherwise be too dire to bear. Most cognitive psychologists say no: real trauma is almost never forgotten; full-blown, traumatic memories dredged up decades later through hypnosis are almost invariably false.

Clancy, now 33, wasn't fully alive to the schismatic politics back then. She simply saw a puzzling, inviting gap in the data. "You had two groups in opposite camps that were battling each other out" over the validity of recovered memories, Clancy says. "But nobody was doing research on the group that was at the center of the controversy — the people who were reporting recovered memories. Memory function in that group had never been examined in the laboratory."

So she decided to devote herself to that task, which would end up occupying her pretty much full time for the

Photomontage by Sacha Waldman

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next seven years. Interview subjects, mostly women but some men, all with recovered memories of child sexual abuse, would come to her office in William James Hall — a 15-floor concrete cracker stack among the brick heritage buildings of Harvard. They would settle in and, shifting their gaze from Clancy's blue eyes to the John Hancock Tower in the distance, tell her their stories as the tape in her recorder unspooled.

The stories were troubling. Often she found herself, somewhat inappropriately, tearing up. Clancy's upbringing — feminist, lapsed Catholic — had prepared her to believe what she was hearing. But as her interviews went on, she came to the conclusion that many of the most elaborate, most terrifying tales she was hearing had an air of confabulation about them. "There was a moment where I said, 'Oh, my God, I'm not sure this really happened,' " she recalls.

Though the term "false memory" is slippery and inadequate, there is now little doubt that the phenomenon exists. A rash of satanic ritual abuse claims in the 1980's and 90's — claims that were never substantiated but destroyed families and ruined reputations — demonstrated fairly conclusively that both adults and children sometimes report things they think happened that didn't.

Still, genuine memories of real sexual abuse are often prosecutors' only tools to combat what remains a significant social problem. To distinguish, in some definitive way, then, true memories from false memories is a trick with enormous personal and political and public-policy implications.

Clancy guessed that there was a category of people who are prone to create false memories and who might demonstrate this tendency when given a standard memory test. Her strategy was to present a list of semantically related words, like "candy," "sour" and "sugar," to those who purported to have recovered memories. Then she would test their recall of those words. On the test, she would throw in words that weren't on the list but were *like* the words on the list — "sweet," for example. Her hypothesis was that these people would be especially inclined to "remember" seeing the word "sweet" — in effect creating a recollection out of a contextual inference, a fact from a feeling. In the end, the data strongly supported her thesis. She published her findings in 2000 in the scientific journal Psychological Science.

But her work was criticized by some, in large part because it contained a hidden snare: even if Clancy's "false memory" recoverers *were* prone to fictionalizing memories of abuse, that didn't necessarily mean that their specific memories of abuse were made up; there was no way to know whether these people were actually abused. Clancy had anticipated this cavil while still in the design stage of the study, and so she rounded up a second control group — people who had incontrovertibly been abused and had always remembered that abuse, in contrast to the "recovered memory" group. When people in this group took the word-recall test, they tended to "remember" words that weren't on the list with no greater frequency than the average person, and she was sure she had cracked the nut.

The critics, though, had another objection. What if the traumas that the recovered-memory group had experienced were horrific enough not only to repress the memory but also to cause cognitive impairment that showed up as memory distortion in the lab?

Meanwhile, hate mail started pouring in, in quantities Clancy would eventually measure "by the ton." The reaction was not altogether surprising. The moral dimension of research on child sexual abuse makes it uniquely explosive in psychology, and almost from Day 1 Clancy had, beyond the safe zone of her own department, taken heavy flak for even suggesting that memories of abuse can be faulty. The simple act of conducting research into the matter struck some as an enterprise "designed to cheer on child molesters," as one anonymous letter writer wrote, "and ridicules the suffering sustained by children who are abused as well as therapists who are knowledgeable about the effects of trauma on children's minds and bodies." Clancy was a "bad person," according to another letter writer, to question such reports. Yet another suggested that she was probably an abuser herself.

In 2000, when Clancy was invited to give a lecture at Cambridge Hospital, the chairman of the hospital at the time told her that several members of its psychiatric department had protested her appearance. Her colleagues told her that she had probably ruled herself out of future academic positions in any psychology department, Harvard pedigree or no.

Clancy says she thought she could fix the problem by fixing her word-recall test. She was close, she reckoned, but she needed to find a different, methodologically cleaner, subject group than victims of child sexual abuse — people whose memories virtually everyone could agree were false. But whom? She considered options: people who remembered their own deaths? People who recalled past lives? No, there was just enough doubt in those instances to taint the results. She would have to go further afield.

"HAVE YOU BEEN contacted or abducted by space aliens?" read the ad that ran in a number of Boston-area newspapers. "You may be eligible to participate in a Harvard memory research study." Clancy's new plan — and it seemed unimpeachable — was to round up folks who thought they had been beamed aboard spaceships, or who actually recalled the experience, and give them the same memory test she had given the others. If they, too, got high scores, it would establish that there are indeed people who are prone to false memories — which might eventually help scientists better understand how false memories are created. Finally, she figured, she had the makings of a sound study. Out she went into the community to recruit.

For two years, Clancy advertised in bookstores, visited Internet chat rooms and haunted U.F.O. conferences, handing out fliers for her memory study. At one point, in pursuit of appropriate subjects, she spent three days at a meeting of a group of supposed alien abductees at an old seaside Victorian inn in Newport, R.I. She sat in the hot tub with them as they cheerfully told her their stories — an astonishingly consistent set of narratives involving bright light through bedroom windows, inexplicable time blackouts, encounters with bobble-headed small gray people with large black eyes and, often, invasive sexual medical experimentation. Among themselves, the experiencers talked business. There was a consensus about how stupid and misguided scientists were not to believe their accounts. Someone related a skeptic's theory that the explosion of U.F.O. sightings in New Jersey the previous year was caused by migrating birds, and the crowd exploded into guffaws. Clancy smiled through gritted teeth.

Finally, she scraped together 11 willing subjects, ran them and a control group through a battery of tests and collated the data, which demonstrated, in her view, that "individuals who are more prone to develop false memories in the lab are also more likely to develop false memories of experiences that were only suggested or imagined." She submitted her study to the notoriously stringent Journal of Abnormal Psychology. It sped through the review process and, to her great relief, was published. Her problems looked to be solved.

"I thought, Thank God, man," she recalls. "With alien abductees, I'm never going to have to deal with the criticism that it might have actually happened."

In a mustard-colored suit — the only suit he owns — John Mack stands on the stage of the theater inside Boston's Museum of Fine Arts with a light shining on his face, like a museum exhibit of the moon. The documentary film "Touched," by Laurel Chiten, a Boston filmmaker, has just received its world premiere, and Chiten and Mack, her main subject, are up there to field questions. Through interviews, the film conveys what it's like to be coerced into sexual congress with alien beings — and, in at least one case, to become an unwitting participant, apparently, in a kind of intergalactic hybrid breeding program.

Mack, a quiet and erudite man, is a veteran of the Harvard medical faculty whose blue-chip career took something of a William Jamesian turn toward the mystical in the 70's. In 1994, he pub-

Bruce Grierson last wrote for the magazine about nutrigenomics.

lished the book "Abduction," which immediately piqued interest because Mack seemed to accept the abduction phenomenon as literal fact. The book was a huge best seller. Mack's Harvard imprimatur jacked the credibility of abduction accounts into another orbit. Chris Carter, creator of "The X-Files," used Mack's work to help sell his show to Fox.

Clancy still seems genuinely surprised, almost awed, at the breadth of controversy her work has caused. 'Every academic talk I give,' she says, 'someone raises their hand and says, "Who the hell are you to say these stories aren't true?"'

Clancy's study was, of course, a clear rebuke of the abductee experience — and it was met with derision at Mack's nonprofit organization, the Center for Psychology and Social Change. Clancy had drawn a number of her test subjects from the institute's ranks, and they may have felt poleaxed by the disarmingly genial researcher who seemed to listen so nonjudgmentally to their tales. The campaign to discredit Clancy began in earnest.

"Obviously there's a mammoth leap of faith involved in generalizing from a mistake on a word list to the assumption that whole memories for extended, anomalous events can be created more or less arbitrarily," wrote a doctoral student named Catherine Reason on an Internet discussion group. Just who was Susan Clancy, asked another, to challenge the work of people whose theories of memory and trauma were cited by the United Nations when discussing whether recovered memories of torture were admissible as testimony in an international war-crimes tribunal? Some simply viewed Clancy's 11 "abductees" as too small a sample size.

Mack and Clancy seem to have nothing against each other personally, though the gulf in their worldviews appears unbridgeable. Clancy describes Mack as "good-hearted," an "old-school gentleman" who was insufficiently aware of the memory-distorting effects of the hypnosis he used over the years to expand upon abduction memories in many of his more than 200 patients. Mack is sanguine about the Clancy study, but blunt. "I smell a rat," he says in his light-filled Cambridge home a short walk from Harvard Yard. "Not that Susan's the rat, but in that a small word-association test gets to be used, by whomever, to say, 'This is simply memory distortion.'"

The abductees, in some ways, posed a more bewildering challenge to Clancy than her previous memory-recoverers. "Very few of them endorsed the repression hypothesis," she says. They don't believe their conscious minds repressed the memories of abduction trauma out of self-protection. Rather, she says, "you'd get extraterrestrial interpretations." The reason they had no memories of those terrifying events until years or decades later, the abductees usually say, is that the aliens, for everybody's protection, erased or otherwise controlled them.

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Not long ago, Clancy appeared as a guest on a nationally syndicated radio show that takes a broad-minded view of the paranormal. For nearly 20 minutes, she was called on that very question. The host pressed: "Why do you think that the only life forms are on earth?" Clancy said she could feel her blood pressure rising.

"I don't necessarily believe that we're the only life form out there," she said. "I can entertain the possibility that there are other life forms out there without accepting your story that a spaceship picked you up!"

Many scientists have offered a simple explanation for the phenomenon: abduction experiences, they maintain, are all about the mind pumping for meaning after a bout of sleep paralysis — a scary but fairly common experience in which the part of the brain that inhibits motor messages during REM sleep fails to disengage as the sleeper wakes up. The sensation is of being pinned to the bed, often accompanied by hallucinations of some spectral entity at the bedside.

Some three million Americans believe they have had some kind of encounter with space aliens. If everyone who experienced sleep paralysis came to that conclusion, the number would be a hundred or so times as high. What you have in an abductee, Clancy suspects, is someone who is predisposed to believe. "Here's someone who reads science fiction. They watch 'The X-Files.' Then one night they have a sleep-paralysis experience. It's weird and it's scary, and it becomes one of a multitude of events that create that wonder."

As the subject tries to remember what happened, "source" errors creep in. "You think you're recovering your own memory, when in fact it's something you pulled out of a movie," Clancy said. "Memory's tendency to be reconstructive, combined with the desire to believe, combined with a culturally available script, leads to a false memory. The content of that memory is dictated by the society you live in." The warnings that experiencers report receiving from aliens, the Australian sociologist Robert Bartholomew has pointed out, have changed over time — from nuclear destruction during the cold war to, more recently, ecological doom. These are simply stories, he says, that give shape to our fears.

TEN YEARS from now, Susan Clancy may remember 2003 as a year of agreeable spadework in the trenches of academic inquiry. But if she does, it will be a false memory. The truth is that Clancy's research, which she hoped might mend fences — at least partly vindicating both sides' positions — has managed to tick off just about everyone: sexual-abuse survivors, therapists, experiencers, even a creationist or two.

Daniel Brown, the trauma therapist, is convinced that there's a "political agenda" to Clancy's abduction study. As he told one reporter, "It's all about spin." Her own brother — a corporate lawyer for a top New York firm — has ripped into her about the abduction study for assuming outright that none of the abductions occurred.

From his vantage point a few dozen feet away in the Harvard psych department, Richard McNally has watched Clancy, his former grad student, face trial after trial. "She's very thick-skinned, certainly for someone at her stage of her career," McNally told me. But inside, it was getting to her.

When we first spoke, about six months ago, Clancy said she believed she could weather the storm. "I don't think so anymore," she said recently. "When I was on the phone with lawyers two weeks ago and had to be concerned that I was going to get brought up on ethics charges, it really caused me to rethink what I'm doing here."

She seemed immensely relieved, therefore, to be getting out. Clancy has accepted a visiting professorship at the Harvard-affiliated Central American Business Administration Institute in Managua, Nicaragua, and will leave later this summer. There she will continue to study how trauma affects people, but the trauma will be verifiable life-threatening events: diseases, hurricanes, land mines.

Oh. And she will do a little cross-cultural research on . . . abductees. It turns out, just as John Mack has said for years, that this is a truly universal phenomenon. "Supposedly it's extremely common through Central America," Clancy said.

When she returns, she will shop around her résumé. She hopes people will still remember her. ■