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The Literary Genius of Mr Mantle

From: **Peregrine Mendoza** <101653.2205@CompuServe.COM>
Date: 24 Nov 96 23:34:52 EST
Fwd Date: Wed, 08 Jan 1997 01:54:20 -0500
Subject: The Literary Genius of Mr Mantle

from Sharon and Tracey, Harlow, Essex

WITHOUT COMPREHENSION

review of
WITHOUT CONSENT
A Comprehensive Survey of Missing-Time
and Abduction Phenomena in the UK
Carl Nagaitis and Philip Mantle
Ringpull Press L16.99

I am glad I am not a fir tree. Not merely because I should never have known the extraordinary pleasure of those bottles of '59 Richebourg that I helped appreciate to the last potable drop on Elfride's 21st birthday that year in Marienbad (or was it Chard?), but because one would always run the risk of being chopped down and turned into a book like this.

There are those among us who suspect that the 'abduction phenomenon' is some what tainted by hoaxing. But this book is a kind of hoax. In the sense, that is, that it is not the 'comprehensive survey' of abductions and missing time its subtitle proclaims, and to the extent that the authors sometimes try to present as abductions experiences that would not normally be worth listening to on the third day snowbound in a Connemara pub. Oh, and it's worse than that, by the way. It is phenomenally badly written. And it even manages to publish at least one photograph upside down and another (though I only suspect this) possibly sideways as well.

The blurb would have you believe otherwise. Well, it would: it's meant to make the innocent feel glad to see the back of their money. But a blurb's come-on is as good a set of claims as any by which to judge such a book. 'Case histories have been thoroughly researched,' we are assured, 'witnesses interviewed and hypnotically regressed, and all the current theories to explain abduction phenomena gathered together into one comprehensive volume. The result is an extraordinary catalogue of the inexplicable, complete with photographs never before published.'

PICTURE OF INNOCENCE

When you have seen as many UFO photographs and declined to publish them as I have, you take a gander at those first, in a new book. And, yes, here are some we haven't seen before - mug shots of a few characters whose clones you could see in any rush hour in Scunthorpe. I suppose these are meant to reassure us that some of the characters whose stories are here are also real, and walk on two legs; certainly one or two do have nice smiles. The pictures of UFOs include that dreadful piece of post-Adamski hokum by Stephen Darbishire, discernible as a fake from 200 yards (and a damned bad fake at that, which only an idiot would

take seriously - writes welcome) and that has been doing the rounds for 40 years. But when, by the way, did this lame schoolboy prank ever have anything to do with an abduction claim?

There is the Jeff Greenhaw 'tinfoil man' (doing the rounds for only half the time). Greenhaw of course never claimed to have been abducted, and the authors call him 'Greenshaw' twice in one short caption. The 1979 Motunau picture from New Zealand is likewise treated to a misspelling, is undated, and is the one that's printed upside down. No details of the case are given, but I can reveal that there wasn't an abduction involved. This was one of those odd one-off shots, when the witnesses saw nothing in the sky at the time. Given the startling likeness of the 'UFO' to a lens flare, you can safely believe them. If you want a really cheap thrill you can peruse a photograph of George and Amanda Phillips' BUFORA sighting account form. They weren't abducted either, though.

The only pictures of interest are an original and four computer-enhanced derivatives taken in Voronezh, Russia, in 1989, but there is no indication of what the digitized images might tell us (even though they come from the usually voluble Ground Saucer Watch) about the reality or other wise of the UFO depicted. To me, the original looks as phoney as hell, even without a computer scan. Yes, the captions are a trifle uninformative.

Then you try to read the text. You have to put up with this sort of thing:

'Since 1947 when flying saucer entered the English language, a staggering FORTY MILLION UFO sightings have been logged. More than thirty UFO crash landings have been reported and abduction reports run into an astonishing TENS OF THOUSANDS.'

The questions begged by this kind of junk are hardly worth repeating, and (I'm not making this up) it sinks to an even lower level within five lines:

'In fact one observer calculated that some statistics suggest [did you get that?] that as many as ONE IN TEN Americans have had some sort of encounter with a UFO and a significant minority of those claim abduction experiences.'

If you can unclog the meaning from the stewed knitting of the prose, you suspect that our authors are talking about the infamous Roper Poll of 1991. That is worth taking on.

ASTRONOMICAL NUMBERS?

If they are referring to the Roper Poll, they are wrong. That found that 6 per cent of adults in the continental USA had seen a UFO once, and that 1 per cent (a statistically negligible figure, given the sample) had seen one twice. If you believe that answering Yes to five particular questions asked by the pollsters really does indicate the possibility of an abduction, the sample of 5947 produced fully 18 people (0.03 per cent) who may have been abducted and not known it. Which is a pity, because that kind of figure is also statistically useless in a survey with a margin of error of ? 1.4 per cent.

Those who commissioned the survey conveniently decided that a 'Yes' answer to only four of these questions indicated an abduction, and then were rather embarrassed to discover that 2 per cent of the sample, or 3.7 million Americans, had by their criteria possibly been abducted. I am not alone among persons experienced in analysing this kind of research in thinking that their criteria are in any case hopelessly inadequate, and that the research was incompetently designed for its purpose. The conclusions suffer from a fundamental flaw in logic that render them meaningless as an 'abductee indicator', although item by item the poll reveals some interesting data.

Nagaitis and Mantle don't tell you any of these things. Is that because they didn't put the Roper findings to a research expert, or didn't know how to analyse the figures themselves - or is it because it didn't suit them to question the poll? Since they exaggerate the figures wildly, one wonders if they've actually read the data.

The trouble with writing in a tabloid dialect is that it corrupts your thinking. How else can one explain the sentence that starts 'Twenty three year old Rohan Hinton was just seventeen when...' or this sample of the book's endemic near-English:

'Yet abductions, if true, are far more serious than lights in the sky. Many of these people are damaged psychologically if not physically. And it remains to be seen whether the reasons behind these events are sinister or otherwise.'

What? This almost matches my all-time favourite piece of ufologists' language-mangling, whose author my two regular readers will recognize at once: 'Policemen and others in a 24-hour situation...'

A style like this is intrinsically trivializing and therefore dangerous, because its emotional and intellectual vocabulary is so pitifully circumscribed - not to

say stunted. Claims of abductions by aliens are so outlandish and unlikely that they deserve scrupulous, thoughtful consideration. And that depends on articulacy as well as knowledge and wherewithal. There is a sobering reality in the dictum that you do not know what you mean unless (not until!) you can say what you mean. Real thought is impossible in the language spoken by this book and, worse, this is a language that presumes - and ultimately depends on - an incapacity for conscientious thought in the reader. By the end one feels faintly sullied, moderately insulted, and distinctly exhausted. One is also intrigued to find a lot of blank pages where an index ought to have been.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

The claim that here 'all the current theories to explain abduction phenomena' are 'gathered together' is, not to put too fine a point on it, c[lap]trap. There is a decent summary of Ed Bullard's now rather geriatric assessment of abductions-as-folklore, but no attempt to get to grips with his assumptions about folklore (which plenty of folklorists would question), the reliability of his data, or the nature of his conclusions. They show themselves very up-to-date by quoting Albert Budden at length, but then demonstrate their ignorance of the latest work by Michael Persinger or the esteemed Paul Devereux by squeaking: 'Even if [Budden's] theories prove correct... why do so many people see such similar things?' And you will look in vain for any mention of 'earthlights' in the book, or for a summary, let alone a reasoned critique, of Devereux's more elaborate speculations on abductions. That is really not good enough.

Nor is there any account of the insights provided over many years by what I'd say is the most persuasive and articulate group of ufologists anywhere, the contributors to the British magazine (this in a book about the UK!) Magonia, notably John Rimmer, Martin Kottmeyer and Peter Rogerson. Rimmer's intimations of the parallels between certain kinds of religious experience and abduction lore, and Rogerson's musings on the imagery and symbolism of the abduction scenario, are provocative and wise. But then they're not amenable to being regurgitated in the pre-chewed idiom that our authors have adopted.

The point can be demonstrated. The nearest Nagaitis and Mantle can bring themselves to considering the psychosocial aspects of ufology is to dismiss the 'fantasy-prone personality' hypothesis with: 'Well, like most psychological explanations for abduction phenomenon [sic], you can read into it what you will.' If you wanted to see intellectual dishonesty on parade with drums beating, banners flying, and a weasel for a mascot, it would be hard to improve on that sentence. And I say that as one who is not convinced by the hypothesis in question.

And then there are the 'thoroughly researched' case accounts. Some of these really do make the heart bleed for the fir trees, as our intrepid chroniclers seem to be incapable of picking apart the daftest statements made by 'witnesses' even before a UFO has peeped over the horizon.

HIS FINEST HOUR

Take poor old Albert Lancashire, who was supposedly guarding a radar station at Newbiggin-on-Sea, Northumberland, in September 1942. According to him, or our gullible authors, he performed this duty with loaded rifle and bayonet fixed so that he could fend off an attack by the Luftwaffe (honestly, that's what it says here), but standing orders were not to fire at enemy aircraft 'or you will only give away the position of the base.' Apart from the cracked logic, the idea that Fritz in the sky above would even notice a few rounds from a .303 SMLE gives rare pleasure. This flawless reasoning is stoutly maintained: 'Firing at night would be worse, he thought. Gerry pilots would soon spot them and that would be the end of the installation.' Oh, and - drat! - you'd doubtless miss the buggers too, sashaying by in the dark like that as they did at 250mph.

It doesn't seem to occur to Nagaitis and Mantle that this collation of doziness might cast a few doubts on the rest of Lancashire's tale. As it is, his 'evidence' for an abduction amounts to a few memories of dreams following a UFO sighting. If you discount his devouring 'every piece of UFO literature he could get hold of' in the years between his experience and his interview by ufologists, that is. Pity, really, about the 'thorough' research in this book. Did the authors even bother to find out if there actually was a radar station at Newbiggin in 1942?

Other cases - most others - in the book are retailed with a similar, habitual failure to consider the 'evidence' with any rigour - in Lancashire's case the authors don't even get to face value. In another case, which they call a 'classic', they take the 'total bag of nerves' the witness becomes every time his abduction is mentioned as a sure sign of his sincerity. This happens years after the alleged event, when the witness has put his experience firmly behind him - 'so firmly that he refuses to discuss the incident under any circumstances' (except he does, or else how do they know he turns into said bag?). I wonder why he gets so twitchy? It never crosses their minds that he might be embarrassed and afraid of being caught out telling an almighty great

porky for the 99th time.

Whether or not there is an abduction phenomenon, most of the evidence for it presented here is worthless. Basic information like key times and places within the accounts is often missing. Non-sequiturs, another product of the tabloid mentality that infests this book, abound. A UFO that blots out stars in one paragraph is glowing in the next. There are vacuous rhetorical questions like: 'Why would a Royal Navy commander concoct such a story?' Why not? is the answer. Navy officers must need a giggle pretty badly on occasion. It all gets a bit dubious, though, as at one point they refer to him as a major. Perhaps in real life he was neither. Did the authors check?

There is a constant insistence on the credibility of 'witnesses' and their lack of motive for hoaxing: the anxious ufologist's raddled old mantra. No question, some of these good folk are as sincere as larksong. The naive prose makes it easy enough to tell when eager investigators have steered their victims in the desired direction. Other 'witnesses' have created their own cocoon of belief. But there is no evidence anywhere in these pages that the investigators have made any determined effort to check the characters and backgrounds of the claimants, or (when 'witnesses' are not being contaminated by the investigators themselves) have even thought about possible impulses for lying, self-delusion, attention-seeking, and so on and on. The results read less like an 'extraordinary catalogue of the inexplicable' than a tidal wave of gullibility. Gestures toward common sense like 'Is she an over-enthusiastic sky-watcher with a well-developed imagination?' become rhetorical weasels, emptied of any force by the implacably agitated tone of the writing and the swift refusal to answer such potentially revealing questions.

YOU FEEL VERY SLEEPY

You do, however, get an occasional gem. There is an hilarious insight into the utter uselessness of material derived from hypnotic regression:

Investigator: Where are they from?

Witness: Distant galaxy.

Investigator: Where do they live?

Witness: Zircon, something like that.

Investigator: Will they show themselves?

Witness: They say they want to be like a friend....

Investigator: Are you important to them?

Witness: Yes, yes, yes. Oh yes.

Investigator: Because you are a woman?

Witness: It helps.

Investigator: Why?

Witness: We can communicate better.

Of course hypnotists don't ask leading questions. Just look at the evidence. No way are abduction 'claimants turned on by the notion of being plucked from the teeming mass for special attention by aliens. Why, all they get is ridicule - except, that is, from famous persons like award-winning artist and best-selling author Budd Hopkins, or Herr Professor Doktor David Jacobs, and persons unknown with letters after their name that spell something like BUFORA - but even the BUFORA boys and girls will do, they publish magazines, and they do keep coming round with more questions, and their friends come too after a while.

A bit later the witness quoted here started relaying messages from Zeus, just to liven things up. Our authors show no self-consciousness at their inability to fall about with squeals of girlish laughter at this waggish drivel. Instead they solemnly inform us that she said she hadn't read Erich von Danishbaken, as if they really and truly believe that that old lag were the sole source of information about a god called Zeus. 'The quality of the witness', they intone, po-faced as a pig in a charcuterie, makes the case 'worthy of serious consideration'. Truly, one does know the face of despair on occasion.

SAVE TREES

All this is very sad, and not only for conifers. There is both a gap in the market and a gap in the literature (more to the point) that deserves to be filled with a book that details missing-time and abduction experiences in the UK, puts them in a global context, and explores the consequences. It might do no

more than summarize the state of the evidence and survey the current hypotheses: Jenny Randles used to do this kind of thing almost bearably before she began churning out terminally fence-sitting pop sicles such as her recent title on crash retrievals, and Janet and Colin Bord (in "Life Beyond Planet Earth?" for instance) do it brilliantly. Better, it would try to get to grips with the 'evidence' and the speculations, throw the nonsense out along with the ETH and the dimension-hopping baggage, and try to drag some sense out of what remained.

For surely there is a sense there, just as there is in dreams of waltzing giraffes and in the domestic habits of serial killers. There are real questions to be asked and answered about the roles of folklore, of dreaming, of neural pathways, of altered states of consciousness, of electromagnetism, of self-image and of social conditions and of a dozen other factors in genuine (by which I mean hoax- and hypnosis-free) abduction experiences. There are as many more about what triggers those experiences and makes them so consistent from one person to another and, in some cases, produces apparent physical effects in the victims. The literalist abduction gang, the Hopkinses and Jacobses and Macks and now the Nagaitis-Mantle axis, seem to be incapable of hearing questions like these, let alone conceiving or addressing them.

Given what they adduce as evidence for their case, however, that should hardly come as a great surprise. What does come as something of a revelation is the poverty of the material in Britain. Nagaitis and Mantle provide details of 25 claimed cases. Of these, perhaps half a dozen could be considered genuinely strange, if one assumes that the victims are telling the truth and that their recall has not been contaminated by persuasive investigators and incompetent hypnotists. So much for those vaunted TENS OF THOUSANDS of abduction reports.

While the true scale of the 'unexplained' portion of abduction reports may be revealed here, it isn't the important point. The next step ought to have been to see what these witnesses and their accounts have in common. And after that, to see what links there may be with the Albert Lancashires and Rohan Hintons and David Thomases - the ones, in short, that you can't trust, but whose beliefs and circumstances may illuminate all sorts of aspects of the cases you've some respect for. And then you can get stuck into the theories, the hypotheses, and the speculations.

I have a sinking feeling that such a book will never be written. Who has the time and the resources to spend on a project like that? What publisher would front the kind of money you'd need to research and write a book that was almost guaranteed not to titillate? No matter. Nagaitis and Mantle could have done the subject some justice in the space they had, and they've blown it, comprehensively. Their book adds nothing to the sum of human knowledge; and it certainly isn't fair to trees.

PS: Could someone please remind me which comic strip/TV series/sci-fi book/movie features a place called Zircon? It's not in Donald Menzel's Field Guide to Stars and Planets - but then he was such a *terrible* skeptic about UFOs.

an edited version of this review appeared in "The Ley Hunter"

Mix to:

A LITTLE LATER...

It is a matter of record that shortly after issuing Mr Mantle's effusions, Ringpull Press, the British publisher, went comprehensively and irretrievably bust. One wonders if this is a mysterious coincidence of profoundly Fortean interest, or a more complex issue of cause and effect.

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