



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ALIEN NATION

Illustration by Paul Slater

At the Sixteenth Rocky Mountain Conference on UFO Investigation, things are getting weird. Edward Fox braves the strange new world of alien abductees

It had to be the strangest conference I had ever attended: the Sixteenth Rocky Mountain Conference on UFO Investigation, held on the campus of the University of Wyoming in Laramie. It was a conference for people who believe they have been abducted by aliens, or if they aren't sure they have been, want to believe they have. (Personally, even if I had been abducted by aliens, I wouldn't want to believe it.) A regular fixture on the university's conference calendar for sixteen years, this year it overlapped with "women's basketball camp", a gathering of about 300 twelve-year-old girls in big T-shirts who kept breaking the elevators in the dorm I was staying in by overcrowding them, jumping up and down in them *en masse* and pushing all the buttons at once.

Laramie is a small, peaceful college town. Pick-up trucks with big wheels and throaty engines glide placidly down the wide streets. There is one taxi. Butch Cassidy was in jail there about a hundred

years ago, but the worst thing that could happen to you in Laramie nowadays is to get sprayed by a rotating lawn sprinkler. The dorm buildings on the campus, each twelve storeys high, are the tallest buildings in the state.

The basketball women decamped, and the dorm filled up with UFO people. I found myself in the elevator with a man in Western-style clothes who wore a pendant with a picture of an alien on it: big forehead, spooky, almond-shaped eyes. "I like your pendant," I said, to break the tension of descent. "Anybody you know?" he shot back in a gravelly voice, with a knowing squint. No, it wasn't. I would have been very worried if it was.

For sixteen years, the conference has been presided over by Dr Leo Sprinkle, professor emeritus of counselling psychology, a tall, gangly man of 65, with a shiny cranium and a corny sense of humour. He retired from the University of Wyoming in 1989 after 25 years



**BOBBIE
AMMONS**
Summoned
aliens to
North Carolina
by telepathy



**LOUIS S
ACKER**
Believes he is
channel for
advanced
extraterrestrial
technologies



**MIESHA
JOHNSON**
Met her own
human-alien
hybrid child in
spacecraft

on the faculty, as a result of pressure from the administration to stop talking about UFOs, alien abductions and “reincarnation studies” during office hours. But he didn’t stop. Now he has an office near the campus, and has become one of the gurus of the alien abduction movement. People come from all over the United States to be hypnotized by Leo as a means of “uncovering” hidden memories of alien abduction, and to hear Leo’s inspiring lessons about how the aliens are leading us to a higher level of consciousness.

Things are going his way. Alien abduction is now being taken seriously in America. “Anomalous trauma”, as it is sometimes called, is establishing itself as a legitimate branch of psychotherapy. The latest sign of respectability is the publication of a book by *New Yorker* writer CDB Bryan called *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: Alien Abduction, UFOs and the Conference at MIT*, about a 1992 conference on the abduction phenomenon. Intellect-

ually overwhelmed by the claims of the abductees and their gurus, Bryan uncritically records with wide-eyed earnestness everything that passes before him, right down to where he sat in the conference room, and what people had for dinner, for nearly 500 pages, in the hope that some sort of solution to the mystery may emerge from the sheer accumulation of data. Something very strange, he and a lot of others before him have written, is going on.

The aliens tend to abduct people when they are in bed and about to go to sleep (in a hypnogogic state), or often when they are driving a car late at night. Imagine the scene: a rainy night, a monotonous road, the windshield wipers going slish-slosh, slish-slosh. Blurry lights are whizzing past you in the darkness. Anyone who’s done this knows how easy it is to slip into a dreamy mental state. That’s when the aliens appear out of the chthonic depths of the subconscious, or (if you prefer) out of a parallel universe, or (if you

prefer) from the star Zeta Reticuli, beam you up into their luminous, featureless spacecraft, lay you out – helplessly and in terror – on a table, and perform weird sexual experiments on you, extracting sperm from men and eggs from women, before sending you back, disoriented, with a couple of hours of “missing time”

to explain to your spouse, and your pants on backwards. Sometimes they implant something up your nose, a tracking device of some sort, that never shows up on X-rays, and always seems to get lost behind the sofa whenever you want to show it to anyone. The experience is strangely similar to everyone who undergoes it, yet it always seems subjectively, intimately tailored to the individual.

Before the conference began, Leo Sprinkle conducted hypnosis sessions with people who wanted to “uncover” their suspected abductions. It is an article of belief in the abduction subculture that the aliens make you forget about the experience of being taken into an alien spacecraft, but the memory can be uncovered in detail through hypnosis. It was by this means that Leo Sprinkle himself found out about his own abduction experience in 1980. If ever there was a case of socially constructed memory, this is it. Hypnosis is the baptism ritual of the abduction movement, an initiation. They believe hypnosis reveals a wealth of suppressed detail, as if the human memory were like a videotape (it isn't). There are close parallels between the abduction phenomenon, in all its various manifestations, and the epidemic of ritual child abuse cases that erupted a few years ago. Families were torn apart by narratives of childhood abuse that were fabricated under hypnosis.

If the individual patients agreed, Leo said, I could sit in on their hypnosis. Leo Sprinkle tells patients at the outset, in a well-rehearsed speech that is near verbatim every time he says it, that he believes in reincarnation and in flying saucers and in abduction experiences. He believes the aliens are trying to teach us something, albeit in mysterious ways. Clinical literature on hypnosis and memory speaks of the danger of hypnotists leading patients into making up narratives they unconsciously think the hypnotist wants to hear. Benign, kindly, avuncular old Leo Sprinkle does just that.

One of the most high-profile converts to the abduction church is Dr John Mack, a Harvard Medical School psychiatrist who wrote a book called *Abductions: Human Encounters with Aliens*. One of Mack's most frequently repeated assertions, which he uses to imply the reality (however mysterious that reality may be) of the abductees' stories, is that the people the aliens choose to abduct generally have no prior interest in UFOs. Another is that they are distinctly unwilling to talk publicly about their experiences. Another is that they seem so sincere they couldn't possibly be lying.

No doubt Mack's abductees are like that, but most of the people at Leo Sprinkle's conference, as far as I could tell, were regular customers in the New Age restaurant, and had tried everything on the menu, especially UFOs. Abduction is the newest item on this menu, so now there are a lot of people who want very hard to come up with an abduction story of their own, to give themselves a new role in the cosmos, one they haven't tried before. And no one I met had any reservation at all about telling me their abduction experience in detail; they positively wanted the world to know about it. That's why they had come to this conference. They had



LEE 'RUSTY' YOCUM Blind, saw UFOs after car crash

DR LEO SPRINKLE Quit job as university professor under pressure to cease abduction, UFO and reincarnation studies



read all the bestsellers on the subject – Whitley Strieber, Budd Hopkins, John Mack – and seemed to be emulating the experiences of

the people described in the books. Only in America do you find religious experience (for that is what it is) that claims to have no traditional antecedent – except perhaps in science fiction.

For instance: the first person who came in for hypnosis was an old hippie named Louis Acker. He was from Woodstock, where he eked out a living as a “telephone psychic reader”. He was 54, and was accompanied by a girl in her early twenties who was more interested in where they were going after the conference, a hippie pow-wow in New Mexico called the Rainbow Gathering.

He fumbled for the handle at the side of the green La-Z-Boy recliner in Leo's office, tilting himself back in readiness to withstand the g-forces of the launch into inner space. Leo began his hypno-spiel, talking Louis into an altered state of consciousness.

“Let yourself repeat mentally the phrase ‘relax deeply’, letting the muscles relax... ankles, calves... arms, shoulders, neck,” he intoned, smooth as a voice-over.

The girl curled up on Leo's couch for a nap.

“If you like, imagine a golden light in your solar plexus.”

While this was going on, I sneaked a look at Louis's answers to the questionnaire Leo Sprinkle asks his clients to complete. Louis had written, “I suspect that many of my ideas on gravitation interdimention common node points electrical energy fields, anti-gravity or directed falling UFO propulsion systems parapsychology parapsychology higher harmonics of the speed of light etc are ET-inspired or are soul memories of past embodiments [sic].”

Having entered a hypnotic state, Louis began to describe ramblingly what he saw. “It seems to be like a bright light outside the window... I feel a little bit like I'm being sucked up into the bottom of something... and I can't actually see it, but there's this sensation of weightlessness, like dreams about flying. I'm being dragged down a hallway, into a room, maybe there's a chair in the room, perhaps not unlike this chair. There are devices that are used to monitor bodily functions, brainwave functions. They're putting some kind of signal through my brain... It's a disadvantage, because I already know too much about abductions and UFOs...”

Then, unexpectedly, he rose and said, “I feel like I need to go to the bathroom.” He groggily stumbled out of the room, promising to re-enter a deep trance when he returned. While he was away, the girl said, “I think he's making it up.”

“You do?” Leo laughed nervously. “So? So? So what does it matter?” Leo seemed taken aback by this, but he has a defence against every kind of sceptical dart. Whatever you think is true, is true.

Louis came back and described in detail how the propulsion system worked in the spacecraft in which he was abducted. A lot of it was very technical and over my head.

The next day, a guy named Rusty came in for hypnosis. He was from central Pennsylvania. He said he'd seen a few UFOs.

I don't know if it's a problem, your honour, but he was legally blind. He had his sightings after a near-fatal automobile accident in which he suffered a severe head injury. After the accident he started talking about a thirteenth planet. He could cure people's headaches



DEREK DUNSMOOR Saw flying saucer while working on Space Shuttle; later quit his job

and put pets to sleep instantly. But his wife made fun of him, so he stopped. He had come to see Leo to see if he might have been abducted by aliens. He had an open mind.

Every time a person told me about their abduction experience they would reveal one crucial fact which put the whole thing into a rational perspective: I'm epileptic, they might say; or, I'm schizophrenic; or, I had a nervous breakdown either before or after I began seeing flying saucers. That didn't make any of it any less strange, though.

For instance: a 46-year-old company secretary from Las Vegas, Nevada, named Miesha, bottle-blonde, good-looking, sobbed over my cassette machine as we sat in a student recreation room, head to head, and she told me about how she was taken up into an extraterrestrial spacecraft and united with her freakish human-space-alien hybrid child. I listened in appalled fascination while a noisy game of table football went on nearby. Naturally, this child existed nowhere except in a hypnotic trance.

"I walked into a dimly lit room that was full of little kids. A lot of them had big heads, big eyes, small limbs and jagged teeth. Some looked really human and some looked really ugly. There were tanks along the walls containing babies suspended in amniotic fluid. The kids were just standing around, looking listless and unemotional."

She instinctively recognized her own child at the back of the room. "He had a little snout and was brownish-green in colour," she said. "I immediately got repulsed by it, then I realized he was mine, so I wanted to hold him... They don't show emotion, that is really the sad thing about it."

She had been made pregnant by a being that had come to her in a dream and raped her. It had fiery red eyes, and she thought she had been possessed by the devil. Around this time she had a nervous breakdown. Miesha was brought up in the Pentecostal church, a charismatic sect whose members practise glossolalia ("speaking in tongues") and believe in possession by evil spirits. She thought she was going to be damned to eternal fire as a result, because not only was she being repeatedly raped by the devil, she was enjoying it: it gave her a "cosmic orgasm", more intense than any she had experienced. "You can feel it in every cell of your body," she said.

It was a great relief to her to discover, through hypnosis, that the being was not the devil but an extraterrestrial. Her husband left her. "The UFO stuff had a lot to do with it. He just couldn't handle it." Her Pentecostal pastor was no help either. "I vowed never to set foot in a Pentecostal church again," she said.

Miesha now described herself as a "third-generation abductee", meaning that not only had she been taken up into alien spacecraft, but her father (a Pentecostal minister turned stage magician) and her children had as well. She now ran a support group in Las Vegas for children and teenagers who have been abducted by aliens. They draw pictures of the ETs (small beings with large black eyes) and talk about them. Making sense of human contact with aliens had become her crusade. It seemed to fit exactly into the space in her life originally occupied by Pentecostalism.

It was amazing to me that although these abduction stories were fragmented and dream-like, without clear narrative sequence, people had integrated them into their lives, rearranging their sense of themselves and even their careers around a

conviction that what had happened to them was true.

The next day, a mother and daughter came in for hypnosis, agitated and a bit mad. I got static electric shocks when I shook hands with them. They sit alone at home at

night in New Jersey and weird things happen. Elsa, the mother, is the first to know when the aliens are coming. They see things out of their windows: lights and strange forms circling the house.

Elsa said, "I have flashbacks, I have conscious memories, I have lost time. I have a lot of serious stuff. And see, I've been a little bit upset with the government. If they would just say that something exists, we wouldn't be called crazy people. Maybe we could get together and do some real serious work. I'm really angry at that. That's where my anger is. I'm not angry with them up there."

Their narrative was a jumble of flashbacks, nightmares, flying saucer visions, missing time, memory lapses, flashing lights, spasms of terror. They would finish each other's sentences and interrupt each other so that it was impossible to follow what they were saying. Close encounters of the worst kind. If I were an alien spacecraft commander, I would deeply regret abducting these two. You'd be sure to catch one of them with her fingers in the quantum propulsion system, trying to figure out how it worked, or trying to steal a piece of silverware to take back to earth as proof.

They weren't really interested in hypnosis at all. So Leo offered to go into a trance and "channel" for them: allowing previous incarnations to speak through him.

At the drop of a hat, he started speaking in a strange, staccato voice, conducting a dialogue with a disembodied being. His face went skull-like, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he stretched out his fingers like wavy antennae. "In a past life I was born in a family of Turkish guards. My father had been accepted into the king's guard. I trained and trained well. Not only was I a strong man skilled in weaponry but also I was intuitive, knowing when there was danger, preparing myself and my men in case of danger..." The women loved it.

Then the conference started, and a fantasia of strangeness unfolded. The testimonies were enough to make your head spin. You weren't supposed to take notes, but every now and then I would take down something too extraordinary to pass by.

"I went camping with this guy I'd just met. He told me he was from Venus. It felt like the right thing to do at the time."

"At the moment I'm dealing with a tall white being that has wings and red eyes."

"My son was born hydrocephalus. It was a sign that he came from a water planet."

On the second night of the conference, a group of us drove in a convoy of vehicles to a hill in a national park outside Laramie to hold a "UFO watch". The idea was that if we stood there for long enough and sent acceptable telepathic messages out into space, and beams from a searchlight, a UFO might appear. We stood in a circle. Some of the group began to intone a single-note "Om". Someone played a tape of theta-wave music. The night began to expand with mystery. After a while I would have believed that anything that stirred was from outer space. But nothing appeared that night except some distant headlights.

Louis Acker saw an orange glow.



DR JOHN E MACK Harvard psychiatrist and author of bestseller 'Abduction'

FRANK HANNAFORD Intercepted alien radio communication while on spying mission in Turkey. Says data was suppressed



Nobody talked about temporal lobe lability or epilepsy at the Rocky Mountain Conference on UFO Investigation. Nobody talked about mass delusion either, or psychosis, or false memory, or sleep paralysis, or the effects of fondue taken late at night. People didn't go there to debate the existence of flying saucers. They went there to "validate" each other's experiences. Like born-again Christians at a tent revival telling how they struggled but finally made their decision for Jesus, they would stand with a microphone before the assembled conferees sitting attentively on their hard metal chairs, and talk about how the trauma of being abducted by aliens had made them better people.

For those of us ontologically challenged beings who insist on finding a rational explanation for the phenomena described here, temporal lobe lability has a lot going for it. Temporal lobe lability means surges of electricity in the temporal lobes of the brain. Mystical, psychic or out-of-body experiences are effects of this kind of cerebral activity, and some people are more prone to it than others, just as some are more inclined toward spiritual experience than others. Dr Susan Blackmore, a University of Bristol psychologist who has made several sceptical studies of the paranormal, has described having an experience similar in most particulars to alien abduction while wearing a helmet which surrounded her head with an electromagnetic field which stimulated the temporal lobes of her brain.

Severe instances of temporal lobe lability are a kind of epilepsy. At the conference, I met a petite woman from Colorado who worked as a holistic psychotherapist. She told me she had had abduction experiences all her life, and I asked her to tell me about one of them. "I can't," she said. "I'll have a seizure if I do." She was medically diagnosed as having "emotionally induced epilepsy", but her own diagnosis was that her numerous inexplicable health problems, and her spirituality, derived from the fact that she was from another planet, which she described to me with a real sense of yearning and homesickness. She said the planet had vortices of coloured energy moving across its surface. On earth, the aliens treated her like a "white lab rat". Otherwise, she seemed pretty normal.

But she was not normal. Nor is anybody who believes they have been abducted by aliens.

Invoking temporal lobe lability is what William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, called "medical materialism": taking refuge in the argument, for example, that "William's melancholy about the universe is due to bad digestion – probably his liver is torpid", thereby dismissing the meaning this torpor produces. However torpid your liver may be, it doesn't make the universe any less depressing. However squelchy your temporal lobes, it does not make any of this any less strange or mysterious.

In the abduction phenomenon, it seems to me, one is seeing a primary form of religious experience, raw, wild and unmediated: ordinary people have an experience of the supernatural, of a power superior to themselves, outside the earthly reality of everyday life,

above it and beyond it and mostly invisible to it, and they translate this experience into a moral code. These self-described abductees include a



PAT MADDEN SULLIVAN Has communicated since 1993 with a one-eyed being named Z who comes 'from future time'

majority of self-publicizing frauds, psychotics and a bandwagon of imitators.

Dr John Mack would not agree with this. His book, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*, describes the cases of a dozen abductees he has treated psychiatrically, and he continues to work with abductees. He has even established an organization in the Boston area to deal with them, called PEER – Program for Extraordinary Experience Research. Mack believes there is an objective reality to the abduction phenomenon, a belief largely based on the judgement that abductees seem entirely sincere in their accounts, and react to their experiences with entirely appropriate emotion.

Mack is familiar with Susan Blackmore's explanation but thinks it leaves out "90 per cent" of the phenomena associated with abduction. "What I often say to critics who come up with every possible explanation – sexual abuse, sleep paralysis, mass hysteria – anything but that it is what it is – is that none of these explanations remotely comes to terms with the complexity of the consistent narrative people report when they have had abduction experiences."

Mack believes that abduction is more than a religious experience because of the force of its physical impact on people – the mysterious scars, the disappearing pregnancies that some abductees report – although no one has managed to bring back so much as a cigarette lighter from an alien spacecraft. He is frustrated by the narrow-mindedness of the rest of the world that refuses to believe in the reality of the phenomenon, which he believes is an intrusion from some parallel universe in a way explainable only in terms of tentative and obscure quantum physics.

Mack believes treatment should involve not freeing these patients from the error of the idea that they've been abducted by aliens, but confirming it. To Mack, the experiences they report seem so real, and "they report this emotion that's so totally appropriate for what they're talking about", that there must be a kind of reality to it.

Alien abduction is a natural development for John Mack, who was always a radical psychiatrist in a country where psychiatry has always been at the cutting edge of defining how Americans see themselves. In the Sixties and Seventies, psychiatrists were the priest-confessors of American life. In those days, figures like Timothy Leary and Carlos Castaneda were flinging open the doors of perception, unscrewing the doors themselves from their jambs. "Blowing the traditional Western mind", to use the title of one of Mack's articles, in those days was as American as apple pie. Now it is no longer respectable. But Mack is still at it.

Mack wants to reconfigure the whole of reality around the abduction phenomenon. He wants it to serve as the pivot for a change in our perception of ourselves and our place in the cosmos as fundamental as the revolutions wrought by Darwin or Einstein or Freud.

Meanwhile, back in Laramie, as the conference wound down, I looked through my notebook and saw a remark by Leo Sprinkle: "We may all be wrong," he said, "but at least we're all having similar experiences."

If you ever see a flying saucer, start worrying. ☹