

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Believer: Alien Encounters, Hard Science, and the Passion of John Mack** by Ralph Blumenthal. High Road Books, an Imprint of the University of New Mexico Press, 2021. 330 pp. \$29.95 (hardcover). ISBN 9780826362315.

### REVIEWED BY THOMAS E. BULLARD

Bloomington, Indiana

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I remember the golden era of UFO abduction research. In 1966 John G. Fuller published *The Interrupted Journey* and suddenly everyone seemed to know the strange story of Barney and Betty Hill taken from their car by aliens and subjected to medical examinations aboard a flying saucer. The whole town talked about it, so did the whole country. Only ufologists held back, having learned the hard way that the more sensational a UFO story sounded, the more likely it stood on evidential legs too slender to support it. UFOs enjoyed newsworthiness and unaccustomed respect this year; it was no time to puncture the swelling goodwill by falling for a fake, fantasy, or honest mistake (Bullard, 2018).

Still, this case was different. The Hills were highly respected in their community, Fuller was a *Saturday Review* columnist, and Dr. Benjamin Simon, the psychiatrist who recovered memories of the Hills' period of missing time by means of hypnosis, was a pillar of his profession. Incredible as the story sounded, it unfolded with credible verisimilitude. It told us more about the aliens and their spaceship than any previous trustworthy report. It even made sense according to the prevailing conception that aliens arrived as explorers like our astronauts, their mission to observe, collect soil samples, and doubtless to study the numerous large mammals having the technology to ride around in four-wheeled machines.

At first a curious one-off, the Hills' encounter soon acquired

companions. A search of past files uncovered several accounts with comparable features, while a slow trickle of new cases picked up speed in 1973 when the alien kidnap story of Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker and in 1975 when Travis Walton's five-day absence aboard a UFO made national headlines. In-depth investigations by Ted Bloecher, Jerome Clark, Ann Druffel, Raymond Fowler, Leo Sprinkle, David and Walter Webb added American cases to the literature, with further examples coming from Canada, Europe, Australia, and South America.

Abductions had leaped to the forefront of ufological interest by 1980 thanks to Budd Hopkins, an established New York artist whose own sighting first piqued his interest in UFOs. While apprenticed to Ted Bloecher as an investigator of close encounters, he soon discovered that missing time followed by acute anxiety often marked the witness as an abductee. Hopkins teamed with a clinical hypnotist to follow up this clue and discovered an "invisible epidemic" of cases, which he documented in his 1981 book *Missing Time*. A little later an Indianapolis woman contacted him with an abduction story that took a sensational new turn. She related a succession of abductions as aliens removed ova from her, implanted a fertilized egg, stole the fetus during her pregnancy, and finally introduced her to a frail little girl with wispy hair and large eyes, her hybrid alien-human child. Hopkins told this thrilling story in *Intruders* (1987) and replaced the old narrative of aliens as explorers with the dark alternative that they had come here to exploit humans for purposes of their own.

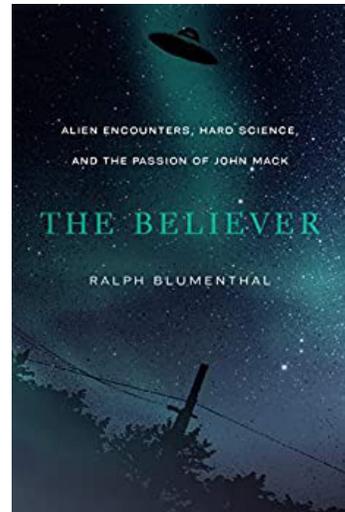
Hopkins acted as a tireless advocate for the abduction phenomenon. He was a spellbinder in speaking and writing who transformed the incredible into the plausible, a non-scientist who nevertheless recognized the importance of physical evidence like distinctive cut marks on the bodies of abductees and small hard bodies implanted by alien examiners. He exercised a magnetic attraction on people who would become his informants, supporters, followers, colleagues, and patrons. When famous horror-fiction novelist Whitley Strieber suspected he had experienced abductions, he turned to Hopkins. Temple University history professor David Jacobs, initially skeptical but soon converted, became a close and avid co-worker. Hopkins won the support of wealthy donors for conferences and research, enabling increasingly sophisticated meetings that drew academics and professionals willing

to consider there might be something to this abduction business after all.

The year 1987 saw publication of Hopkins' *Intruders* and Strieber's *Communion*, a book long on the best-seller list. Together they pulled abduction out of the shadows of the UFO subculture and into the center of popular awareness. The public took interest and cases emerged by the hundreds, even to the point that local support groups for abductees organized around the country. Artists and actors flocked to Hopkins, academics and professionals to Jacobs, truck drivers, housewives, and

farmers to a ufologist in southern Indiana, the abductees reflecting the demographics surrounding the investigator and representing a cross-section of society. Standard psychological tests affirmed that most abductees were normal, free of mental pathology, likely to share some characteristics of people known to have suffered a traumatic experience. Abduction stories maintained a similarity in plot and details that belied the variety expected of imaginary narratives, down to obscure elements present before the story became familiar and seemingly unavailable from mass media influences. The surge of clues that this phenomenon was real, widespread, and unearthly swept up many proponents in expectations of a climactic and world-changing epiphany.

As the subject rose in popularity, skeptics amplified their attacks on its credibility, the alleged evidence, and the hypnotic techniques used to recover the memories. The phenomenon needed a stamp of approval from official science to validate its reality, a recognition that ufologists had long craved for anything about UFOs. The next best thing would be for someone famous to step forward as an abductee and Strieber gave cause for celebration, though skeptics doubted that the writer could separate his imagined from his alien horrors. "Why couldn't Carl Sagan get abducted?" became an insider joke. With no sign that Sagan had any secrets to spill, an alternative tactic hoped the available evidence, suitably presented, might win over high-level



scientists to investigate the phenomenon. And where would better suit such a presentation than the Boston area's neighboring high bastions of academia, MIT, and Harvard?

This dream began to materialize early in the 1990s as David Pritchard, a distinguished research physicist at MIT, became intrigued with abductions and settled on a large-scale conference for exchange of ideas among active researchers. Pritchard sought to balance his expertise in physical science with an expert to represent the psychological aspects of the phenomenon and engaged John Mack, a professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School, who joined the venture as co-chairman. The Abduction Study Conference Held at MIT came to fruition June 13-17, 1992, a professionally organized conclave that met in a campus auditorium filled with abductees, ufologists, psychologists, sociologists, medical professionals, religion scholars, folklorists, select members of the press, and a skeptic or two swimming against the tide (Pritchard, 1994).

I well remember John Mack—tall, striking, slightly stooped, prone to gestures as he spoke with a clear voice and informal eloquence. His quiet authority owed little to position or reputation, much to instant respect freely given as his agile, far-ranging mind convinced us that he saw more and understood more of this phenomenon than anyone else in the room. He did not so much command attention as win it from a willing audience, the cavernous auditorium hushed and still as he told how a friend introduced him to Budd Hopkins two years before, how he thought anyone who believed in abduction by aliens must be crazy. He came away so impressed with Hopkins, the experiencers, and their accounts that he undertook his own investigations and they convinced him that something real had happened, something with momentous meaning for the world. Most of us arrived at the conference in agreement with those words. Many of us departed with certainty because we had John Mack's word for it.

He would continue his exploration of the meaning of UFOs, writing two books on his abduction research, discussing the subject with the Dalai Lama, visiting Zimbabwe to interview school children who shared an encounter, and establishing the Program for Extraordinary Experience Research (PEER). His efforts came to a sudden and shocking end in 2004 when a drunken driver in London killed him. Though I met

him face to face only a few times, his death came as a heavy blow. I felt that a rare and beautiful soul had departed, that the world had dimmed a degree and faded a shade with his passing.

So who was John Mack and why did he leave such a deep impression? I knew of his involvement with UFOs and that he won a Pulitzer Prize, but I did not appreciate the breadth of his remarkable career until I read Ralph Blumenthal's *The Believer*. Blumenthal holds credentials of his own with the UFO story. Along with Leslie Kean and Helene Cooper, he co-authored *New York Times* articles in December 2017 that revealed the Pentagon's Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program and familiarized the public with the U.S.S. *Nimitz* sightings from 2004—and in the process, inaugurated a renaissance of attention to UFOs (Cooper 2017). He took an interest in the Harvard psychiatrist whose espousal of the discredited subject of UFO abductions led to a passion in two senses of the word, one a driving quest to understand the meaning of this mystery, the other an academic trial for heresy. With the cooperation of family, friends, and colleagues, Blumenthal gained access to Mack's papers, notes, and journals for a thorough overview of the life of the man, a record of his thoughts, and insights into the motivations that drew his ever-questioning mind toward heterodox ideas.

Blumenthal outlines Mack's career as a dizzying whirlwind of activity: A stellar medical student who rose quickly to prominence in his chosen field of psychiatry, Mack stood out even in the Harvard faculty where outstanding was the norm. He published a stream of papers and books as befits a Harvard professor, ranging across subjects like nightmares, adolescent suicide, Holocaust survival, self-esteem in childhood, and the impact of nuclear fear on children. His psychiatric study of Lawrence of Arabia resulted in *A Prince of Our Disorder*, the biography that earned him a Pulitzer Prize in 1977. In Mack's successful practice treating patients for anxieties and disorders, his coworkers praised him for his innate empathy and humanity.

Along with his work as a clinician, teacher, and scholar, Mack was also an organizer and activist. He established the Center for Psychological Studies in the Nuclear Age (later the Center for Psychology and Social Change, still later the John E. Mack Institute), PEER, and the Group for Research and Aid to Abductees (GRAA), among others.

Harvard's medical facilities were of the finest, but not so those of the neighboring Cambridge City Hospital until Mack spearheaded a drive to create psychiatric and mental health services that not just met basic needs of city residents but won prizes for excellence. He entered informal diplomacy for peacemaking between Israel and the PLO that culminated in a meeting with Yasir Arafat and he acted in an international physicians' group to protest nuclear weapons, delivering impassioned defenses of physicians entering an arena usually reserved for politicians. He was arrested along with Daniel Ellsberg, who released the Pentagon Papers, and Carl Sagan in peace protests outside a Nevada nuclear test site. For him there was no hard line between advocacy and the academic.

Budd Hopkins marveled that Mack succeeded in everything he attempted and accomplished so much with seeming effortless and self-confidence. Others close to Mack saw less the superman and more a vulnerable human wounded by the death of his mother when he was eight months old and driven for the rest of his life on a quest to recover that loss, to reestablish the primal connection that fate had denied him. This need led him to a "succession of passionate enthusiasms"—health services, world peace, UFO abductions, and finally life after death, a sequence of causes he believed in with emotion and intelligence but, in the case of UFOs, with impractical rashness.

It comes as no surprise that a psychiatrist would explore his own motivations, and Mack found sources for his affinity with T. E. Lawrence in certain parallels of their biographies. Lawrence needed to act heroically, so did Mack, manifested in his strivings to help the emotionally damaged and save the world. In his life he acted out the mythic journey of the hero as described by Joseph Campbell—leaving behind the familiar to journey into the unknown, undergoing an initiation of transformative trials and ordeals, becoming a new person with powers and wisdom that he brings home to benefit his people. The experiences reported by UFO abductees shared many aspects of the initiation of the hero or the shaman, similarities already important to Mack. Strange as they were, abduction stories beckoned him at once with their familiarity and significance, cosmic significance. The stars aligned—and Mack set off on a new hero's journey.

Though UFO abductions entered Mack's purview late in his career

and occupied him only for the last fourteen years of his life, this episode was fraught with such exotic and dramatic qualities that Blumenthal understandably centered his book around it. Here was Mack at his most characteristic, the passionate pursuer heading off on a quest for meaning, this time as a modern Don Quixote tilting at consensus science. He was in many respects an irrepressible optimist who saw in the abduction phenomenon an opportunity to punch through established dogma and reach new understandings. Perhaps he also envisioned this crusade as the climax of his life's work, but his euphoria blinded him to the practical consequences which would in fact provide a climactic moment in his biographical story, only not a triumphal one.

After their meeting in early 1990 Mack absorbed the abduction work of Hopkins and began his own sessions with experiencers. Fellow psychiatrists tried to dissuade him; Sagan reasoned with him against the reality of these accounts. Thomas Kuhn, a fellow Harvard professor who had literally written the book on scientific revolutions, warned him that scientific authorities would resist any challenge to their established paradigms with a fierce resolve, and advised him to proceed with constant self-criticism and always triple-check his evidence (Kuhn, 1970). He plunged onward instead, working with a growing number of abductees as more haunted people learned of his interest and sought his help, buoyed by his excitement despite the emotional strain. A quick conviction that physical and clinical evidence converged to confirm a real phenomenon sustained him, while his ideas of what abductions were all about evolved into increasingly panoramic forms.

Mack had no temperament to keep silent about his strange subject. He went public to the Harvard community in 1991, presenting his work-in-progress to an informal faculty meeting where responses ranged from doubt to hostility, then to a packed audience where revelations of fetus-stealing aliens and tapes of abductees screaming in terror bombed out the heads and hearts of listeners and sent them reeling from the auditorium. The credibility of UFO abductions reached high tide with the 1992 MIT conference. Abductees received respectful attention as normal people recounting extraordinary yet genuine experiences. Mack defended their accounts as consistent, backed by physical evidence, and reported by children too young to be delusional or influenced by popular culture. Speaker after speaker tossed further

bits of support onto the growing pile. Many participants carried home a sense that, against all odds, this evidence and its leading proponents carried the momentum to overwhelm all doubters and deniers.

Meanwhile back at Harvard, friends and colleagues worried that Mack had lost it, stepped over the edge, gone crazy. Yet few negative consequences had befallen him so far. The optimist in him counted the professional criticisms he had received as a rite of passage that freed him to continue and he imagined he faced no enemy but his own hesitancy. He did acknowledge the need to publish his work in the professional literature and submitted an article on the “abduction syndrome,” rejected for its hundred-page length and inadequate treatment of methodology. The editor of another major journal replied that the subject matter made the article unpublishable and returned it unread. Mack was too impatient for revisions and expanded the article into a book which appeared in 1994, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*, heralded by publicity and TV appearances including the *Oprah Winfrey Show*.

Most of his utterances on abductions had occurred within the confines of Harvard, within the UFO community, or in private conferences (the proceedings of the MIT conference also appeared in 1994). Now with his research and thoughts exposed in a book from the popular press, all the world could read and comment—and many influential commentators were unkind. The *Wall Street Journal* had taken digs at Mack and his work even before the MIT conference, but now the knives came out in the *New Republic*, *New York Times*, *Psychology Today*, *Time*, and even the local *Harvard Crimson* with descriptions like “mystically detached and certain that he is right,” “high priest,” and “Pied Piper” of the abduction phenomenon, and an honorable man with a “halo of perfection” who should therefore be held to higher than average standards. These attacks also reflected badly on Harvard, until at last institutional authority rumbled into action.

Blumenthal delivers a gripping account of Mack before the faculty inquiry—how only matters like research protocols and informed consent of his abductee patients were supposed to be at issue and not his controversial views. How he anticipated a collegial exchange but faced a panel of accusers chaired by Arnold Relman, with whom he had clashed earlier over the propriety of physicians participating in anti-

nuclear activism. Grilled on whether he acted as therapist or researcher, Mack insisted the two were often inseparable. When Relman pressed him on how he could treat abduction accounts as real, he argued that they felt clinically like something happened, and because some physical evidence supported them; but Relman insisted there was no evidence. In fact, UFO abductions could not be real because UFOs did not exist.

Though Relman denied the inquiry was an inquisition, friends saw that Mack was being set up and advised he needed lawyers at his side. The lawyers pushed back against apparent efforts to portray him as shoddy in research, careless of the well-being of abductees, and too committed to a belief in aliens to entertain alternative explanations. Abductees, co-workers, and academics defended his work through more than two dozen sessions of the year-long inquiry, but the panel's final recommendation ignored most supportive testimony, repeated the same litany of accusations, and concluded that Mack's actions did not meet Harvard standards.

After all this drama, higher administrators overturned the panel with an affirmation that Mack was free to explore his own interests and needed only to uphold the high standards of the university. This anticlimax cleared him of any wrongdoing or unethical practice, but it did not expunge the stain on his reputation or reassure less-famous colleagues that they could defy orthodoxy with impunity. In fact, a similar case unfolded in 2021 when one critic among many declared that Avi Loeb, chairman of the Harvard Department of Astronomy, "used to be" a good scientist until he proposed that an asteroid-like object named 'Oumuamua might have been an alien space probe passing through the solar system. He stated his case in the professional literature and wrote a popular book (Loeb, 2021), but the response is unmistakable: Publish 800-plus papers and you are a fine scientist, co-author a paper with Stephen Hawking and you are an outstanding scientist, but speculate just once on an alien spaceship and you are out of the club faster than a ten-year-old boy caught speaking a kind word to a girl. Were it not for Mack's bulldog lawyers, his outcome might have been dire indeed. May Loeb and others be spared.

His Harvard ordeal behind him and undeterred by his critics, Mack continued to investigate UFOs during trips to Australia and Brazil, met with some 200 experiencers during the 1990s, and continued

to discuss abductions in public appearances. He undertook with his PEER colleagues the kind of research his critics wanted, like a study of the psychology of experiencers which found no evidence for fantasy-proneness or any other personality differences that might explain their experiences; Relman complained that the research was imprecise. A conference attended by psychologists, psychiatrists, hard scientists, a philosopher, and a theologian met with Relman's disappointment in the "limited range of attendees." A published and peer-reviewed article critiqued psychological explanations for abductions and concluded that they did not work; that, in fact, the "parsimonious" solution had to admit scientific reductionism failed to find a solution. Whatever abductions were, science did not know.

Here, in Mack's contention that science does not have the answer for mysteries circling in the darkness just beyond the light of the rationalist campfire, lies a thematic constant in Mack's life and thought, and an issue that runs under and through Blumenthal's entire narrative. If we seek the cause of friction between Mack and Relman, Mack and Harvard, Mack and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we find it in Mack as rebel against a scientific-rationalistic worldview that drew narrow limitations then excluded experiences that did not fit as unreal and unworthy of inquiry. By the recurrence of this theme Blumenthal underscores it as the motive behind many of the paths, passions, and risks that Mack chose throughout his career.

Mack had the upbringing and training of a scientific materialist, but Blumenthal uncovered a penchant for unconventional subjects and unorthodox understandings before UFOs ever crossed his horizon. He sometimes used hypnosis in his therapeutic work, and in search of a better technique he learned breathwork from Stanislav Grof, a method of relaxation that could also induce altered states of consciousness. These experiences included primal memories with visions of incubators that would later tie in with abductions. His interests extended to astrology, yoga, LSD, Amazonian hallucinogens, non-Western worldviews, reincarnation, and life after death, his mind more eclectic than systematic as he assimilated diverse influences into the framework of his thinking. Sometimes a chance meeting provided him with clues to the ongoing puzzles that occupied him—one such meeting happened on his African trip to interview the Ariel School

children when he met Credo Mutwa, a Zulu shaman who shared native lore and understanding of otherworld beings that influenced Mack's thoughts throughout his book, *Passport to the Cosmos*. Another was the meeting with Hopkins that he almost turned down but then credited with setting his life on a whole new course.

For all his immersion in the rational Western mindset, Mack wrestled with its restrictions throughout his life. Conventional religion held no appeal for him, yet he took a keen interest in religious experiences and entertained ideas of Source, Creator, or the Divine as an ultimate cosmic consciousness. He found a mindless, amoral, desolate universe to be inadequate and rejected it in favor of order, purpose, and benign agency in the cosmos, though what was wrong with the materialistic concept was clearer in his thinking than what the right alternative should be. His readiness to accept that elusive otherworlds surrounded us, usually experienced only in altered states of consciousness but as real as the material realm and liable to intrude with mental and physical consequences, prepared him to accept UFO abductions as one of the ways intelligences from the spiritual sphere interfaced with the everyday to tutor, warn, and guide us.

It hardly needs saying that these unconventional ideas ill-equipped him for life in a stronghold of materialistic science. Mack was a psychiatrist in a field oriented toward patient treatment and understanding human psychology in terms more humanistic than scientific. His approaches threw him out of step with modern psychological research that tested behaviors in a laboratory or profiled personalities according to standardized scales, but the two sides could coexist peacefully enough so long as one did not trespass into the other's territory. Mack risked overreach when he speculated on the nature of the cosmos; but when he dared suggest that aliens really abducted humans, he started a war against community, reality, and truth.

Like Carl Jung before him, Mack accepted the physical reality of UFOs (Jung, 1959). Also, like Jung, he cared little about their physical reality. It was there but of secondary importance; what mattered about abductions were their human meanings and transformational potentials. His lukewarm commitment to nuts-and-bolts UFOs caused a rift with Hopkins and Jacobs, who regarded abductions as

compensation for the aliens' lost reproductive abilities or even as an *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* scenario where progressive hybridization prepared a takeover of the earth by a new species, human in biology and appearance but alien in mind. Abductions were physical events that endangered humanity (Hopkins, 1987; Jacobs, 1998).

Mack knew that abduction had undeniable negative effects. It often caused terror and resentment and left his experiencers disturbed, anxious, even traumatized. One woman did not want to have children for fear the aliens might take them. But he looked to the positive side—some abductees felt the experiences were beneficial, developed an affinity for the entities, gained psychic powers, knowledge, purpose, openness, wisdom. They sometimes described apocalyptic scenes, sometimes idyllic, heavenly visions. He interpreted these sights as warnings against ecological destruction of the earth and glimpses of a harmonious future, perhaps helpful guidance from alien sages or an intervention of spiritual powers crossing into the physical realm. Despite harmful side effects the experiences were overall beneficial, even necessary shocks to complacent materialism and an alarm to reform our consciousness before it was too late.

By 1999 when he published *Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters*, he had largely disencumbered himself of the physical aspects of abduction accounts. Experiencers still reported examinations and missing fetuses, but these occurrences, like other paranormal phenomena, might occur in other vibrational dimensions, or represent an evolution of consciousness to recognize planetary peril, a transformation away from materialism toward older, wiser modes of knowing, to rediscovery and reconnection with the living mind of the cosmos. He remained happy to speak of abductions as real events, but the reality he meant diverged from the foursquare universe of established science.

This idiosyncratic cosmology of Mack's caught him between two camps: On one side Hopkins and most ufologists insisted that abductions happened in physical reality though the aliens imposed mental controls on their victims. On the other side Relman and other skeptics drew a sharp dichotomy between real and unreal and exiled all UFOs to the latter, where they existed only as mental phenomena or errors. These antagonists over facts shared the same understanding

of reality. Mack's reality combined physical effects with mental and emotional consequences in a broad and imaginative proposition with intriguing possibilities, but it remained hazy speculation without clear mechanism or principle, evidence, or demonstrability. His vision of a reality beyond established science developed year after year but his ability to explain his new science never caught up with his vision. Sometimes this divergent path led to comical turns, like a discussion of whether the abductee's body remained in bed or transported in some parapsychical state, that recaptured the tenor of a Medieval theological dispute.

If Mack was happy enough to stray from the consensus and pursue his own dreamy thoughts, he also isolated himself from the mainstream of academic discourse to become a lone voice. In all fairness, many criticisms levelled at him had merit. The physical evidence for abductions had already begun to unravel with the MIT conference, where David Pritchard admitted that a supposed alien implant consisted of human organic material and two pro-UFO physicians reported no evidence that any fetuses went missing. Budd Hopkins described a sensational abduction in Brooklyn observed by several independent witnesses, but the story and the witness testimony soon fell apart. A Roper Poll that suggested several million Americans might have experienced UFO abduction received sharp criticism for its design from multiple sources. Relman was right that Mack had none of the hard evidence that science demanded.

While hypnosis recovered the supposedly repressed memories of traumatic abductions, a broader controversy over recovered memories had shaken the country through the 1980s and early 1990s. Thousands of adults "remembered" sexual abuse by their parents or ritual abuse by cults, while young children implicated their daycare providers in similar ongoing acts. High-profile trials ensued and dozens of the accused went to prison. Supporting evidence was dubious or nonexistent and convictions rested on lurid memories revealed through hypnosis or high-pressure suggestion from overzealous and underprepared therapists. Noted psychologists like Elizabeth Loftus demonstrated that fictitious stories based on suggestion and solidified by reinforcement resulted in false memories that carried the same emotional weight and feel of genuine memories. This entire social panic amounted to

delusions confabulated by believing therapists and patients (Loftus, 1994). Though Mack was probably more circumspect than ufologists in his dealings with abductees, his confidence that he guarded against leading or influencing his witnesses does not seem to have taken account of the research findings and excesses exposed during the “repressed memories” epidemic.

Consensus science serves as both the practical avatar and the gatekeeper of scientific truth. Scientists sometimes—now more than ever, so it seems—find themselves called upon to resist ignorance, pseudoscience, irrationality, and propaganda. The repressed memories epidemic made criminals out of elderly parents and traumatized victims out of people with minor depression or trouble sleeping. The harm was real while the alleged causes never happened outside the minds of subjects and facilitators. Here was a clear example where scientists had a professional obligation to defend the truth of evidence and investigation for the common good, and, more generally, to protect hard-won scientific knowledge against contamination by doubtful claims and half-baked theories. His scientific critics may have acted with brutality to tear the wings off his speculative butterfly, but had he lived to see the past few years, no one would experience more anguish at the corruption of truth than John Mack.

Readers of *The Believer* feel from beginning to end the author’s respect and admiration for his subject. The man who left an impression on everyone who met him, heard him speak, or read his books works similar magic on his biographer. Ralph Blumenthal’s selfless account lets Mack tell his story largely in his own words and the words of others close to him, chosen with a deft hand to highlight the varied themes, aspirations, tensions, conflicts, and character traits that rigged the sails and set the courses of this complex man. Fortunate for Mack’s legacy, fortunate too for we readers, Blumenthal is a masterful writer who crafts a story rich in detail, rigorous in organization, and attentive to complicated ideas, yet tells it in prose like music, vibrant with the personalities of the characters, and paced as engagingly as a thriller. This is a book that conveys both understanding and delight in generous measures and shares with readers the sense that with John Mack we have entered the presence of a special light. I can only think he would approve.

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