

Remembering Zimbabwe's great alien invasion

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Twenty years ago, 62 pupils at Ariel School said they saw an alien spaceship. It's still regarded as one of the most compelling events in UFO history.



Tracking down one of the Ariel School experiencers took some doing, but eventually I connected with Sarah* in what she referred to as “a most stubborn old Rhodie [white Rhodesian] bar” in downtown Harare.

Of the more than 110 children and staff who had been at the school, which sits just outside the small agricultural centre of Ruwa, when the aliens landed in 1994, she thought she was probably the only one still in the country.

“Everyone’s fucked off to Canada or the UK,” she said. “Or died.”

When it became clear to her drinking buddies that we were going to talk UFOs, eyes began to roll. “Christ, Sê, not ET again,” someone muttered.

She ignored him. “Whaddya wanna know? Actually, it’ll be simpler if I just shoot. It happened, OK. Sixty- two kids between the ages of about six and 12 saw the aliens land and get out of their little ships. When the kids returned to class they were completely freaked and couldn’t stop nattering about little men who looked a bit like Michael Jackson. The teachers told them to shut up, as teachers are wont to do, and classes proceeded. “But the next day the school received a bunch of calls from parents wanting to know why their kids were spooked. It got so that the teachers started to freak out, too, and a local UFO expert called Cynthia Hind was invited to speak to everyone. It was via her, I think, that we heard about a famous shrink who was coming from the US to assess the children. What was his name now ... Mack, Dr John Mack, who I heard was killed by a drunk driver a few years back.”

Dedicated investigator Hind, who died in 2000, had publicly acknowledged her own experiences with otherworldly beings in the past, and had dedicated the past decade and a half of her life to investigating UFO sightings on the African continent on behalf of the Mutual UFO Network, and then publishing her findings in the very collectable newsletter, UFO Afrinews.

I had brought along a printout of Issue 11, which I opened on the bar counter before Sarah on Hind’s article “UFO flap in Zimbabwe: Case No 95”. It begins:

“Wednesday, 14th September, 1994, was an exciting night for Southern Africa. Round about 20:50 to 21:05 hours, a pyrotechnic display of some magnificence appeared in the almost clear night skies of this part of the continent.”



An Ariel schoolchild telling her story of the alien who arrived.

Astronomers across the region soon reported that the “pyrotechnic display”, seen as far afield as Zambia and Botswana, had been a meteor shower. Hind, though, recorded receiving dozens of reports of a capsule-like fireball, trailing fire and flanked by two smaller capsules. She also received several reports of alien sightings around the same time: a young boy and his mother reported a daylight sighting; a trucker who had seen strange beings on the road at night. And then, on September 16, Hind received the report from Ariel School, which she records as Case 96, and describes as “one of the most exciting UFO stories of this or any year”.

Childhood recollection

Hind’s narrative closely mirrors Sarah’s recollection. At 10am, Hind writes, on a hot day, the children were let out for their mid-morning break. They were drawn to an area beyond their playing field of “long grass with thorn and other indigenous

bushes, trees growing higgledy-piggledy fashion, and undergrowth thick and heavy enough to hide a child should he venture there”.

The teachers had all entered the staff room for a meeting and the only adult outdoors was the tuckshop mistress, who was soon swamped by children claiming they had seen “three or four objects coming into the rough bush area ... disc-like objects coming in along the power lines and finally landing in the rough, among the trees. The children were a little bit afraid, although they were also curious.”

The UFO investigator goes on to record the testimonies of several of the children, who she says represented “a cross-section of Zimbabweans: black African children from several tribes, coloured children (a cross-breeding of black and white), Asian children (whose grandparents were from India) and white children, mostly Zimbabwean-born, but whose parents were either from South Africa or Britain”.

Although they all came from wealthy families (tuition at Ariel School was expensive), Hind believed their cultural differences gave rise to differing interpretations of the event, and that the differences in interpretation made the details that were common to all accounts very compelling indeed.

One of the white students, for example, “thought at first that the little man in black might have been Mrs Stevens’ gardener, but then he saw that the figure had long, straight black hair, ‘not really like [a] black [person’s] hair’, so he realised he had made a mistake!” Some of the black children thought the short little beings were zvikwambo, or tokoloshes – the evil goblins of Shona and Ndebele folklore – and burst into tears, fearing they would be eaten.

Guy G said: “[I] could see the little man (about a metre tall) was dressed in a black, shiny suit; that he had long black hair and his eyes, which seemed lower on the cheek than our eyes, were large and elongated. The mouth was just a slit and the ears were hardly discernible.”

Parent’s disbelief

Hind’s account ends with her outrage at the disbelief of the children’s’ parents.

“What a frightening indictment of our society that when we are confronted by something we don’t understand, we don’t even attempt to open our minds to the event.” After reading the article, Sarah ordered another Castle and said: “To be perfectly honest, I don’t think you would be here talking to me now if it wasn’t for

that woman [Hind]. “What happened at Ariel was certainly weird, so many kids coming back from break with such similar stories, but I doubt many people would have heard about it if Hind hadn’t made such a fuss. She was the first person to interview the kids, and got the news out to all sorts of important people, Mack included, as if, you know, finally here was some vindication.”

Hind’s descriptions of Mack from this time do indeed suggest she regarded him as something of a redeemer figure, a man who was “not only open-minded and prepared to listen, but an academic of some standing. And one who has risked his credibility with his colleagues to come out and say he believes the experiences of abductees are very real indeed.”

Who was this man, Mack, whose interest transformed a local curiosity into a study that continues to animate UFO chat rooms to this day? I’d been told a little of his biography by a relative of mine called Nicky Carter, who after hearing of the incident from a brother at Ariel School had been the first media respondent, covering it as a producer for an SABC current affairs program called Agenda. Prize-winning author Dr John E Mack, she said, had been a Pulitzer prize-winning author (awarded for his 1977 study of Lawrence of Arabia, *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of TE Lawrence*) and a professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School.

Highly regarded, Mack had nevertheless been having a tough year professionally when Carter met him. His problems stemmed from his interest in the alien abduction phenomenon, which he had begun researching in the early 1990s and about which he had written the bestselling book *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*.

Carter sent me Mack’s own account of the fallout. “In the spring of 1994,” he writes in his second book on the alien abduction phenomenon, *Passport to the Cosmos*, “one of the deans at the Harvard Medical School handed me a letter that called for the establishment of a small committee to investigate my work [on the alien abduction phenomenon].”



Dr John Mack was a Pulitzer prize-winner who came under fire for his UFO research.

“After explaining vaguely that ‘concerns’ had been expressed to the university about what I was doing (although he told of no specific complaint, nor was any offered in the letter), he added pleasantly – for he had been a friend and colleague – that I would not have gotten into trouble if I had not suggested in the book [Abduction] that my findings might require a change in our view of reality, rather than saying that I had found a new psychiatric syndrome whose cause had not yet been established.”

Another peer, Paul McHugh of Johns Hopkins Medical School, was less delicate, describing Mack in the Los Angeles Times as “a brilliant fellow who occasionally loses it, and this time he’s lost it big time”.

Mack’s standard rejoinder was to point out that, although alien encounters were “not possible according to the science of the times”, they might nevertheless “turn out to be real in some way that we do not yet understand ... as the bizarre reports of rocks we now call meteorites falling from the sky seemed [impossible] in the 18th century.”

Attempted ouster

By mid-1994 Mack had overcome attempts at an ouster by some of his Harvard colleagues, and was planning to expand the scope of his research to include African alien encounters and abductions. A flight was booked to South Africa, where Mack had organised to meet with experiencers such as the well-known traditional healer and author

Credo Mutwa (who was to tell Mack, according to Carter, who covered the interview for the SABC, about his rape by a golden-haired, blue-eyed alien female.) As he was preparing to depart for Africa, news of the Ariel School encounter broke, and Mack adjusted his travel plans accordingly.

These were the extraordinary coincidences by which the world's most newsworthy psychiatrist happened to land, meteorlike, in Zimbabwe. Hind recorded how he appeared on "two radio shows and one TV programme" before driving the 35km from Harare to Ruwa. "These days were filled with exciting revelations for him," wrote Hind. "John was able to get through to parents and teachers and convince them that, even if they did not believe the children, it was counterproductive to accuse them of lying." What interested Mack was how the children's accounts connected to things he'd been told by other of his "experiencer participants", namely that the aliens had communicated an urgent environmental message.

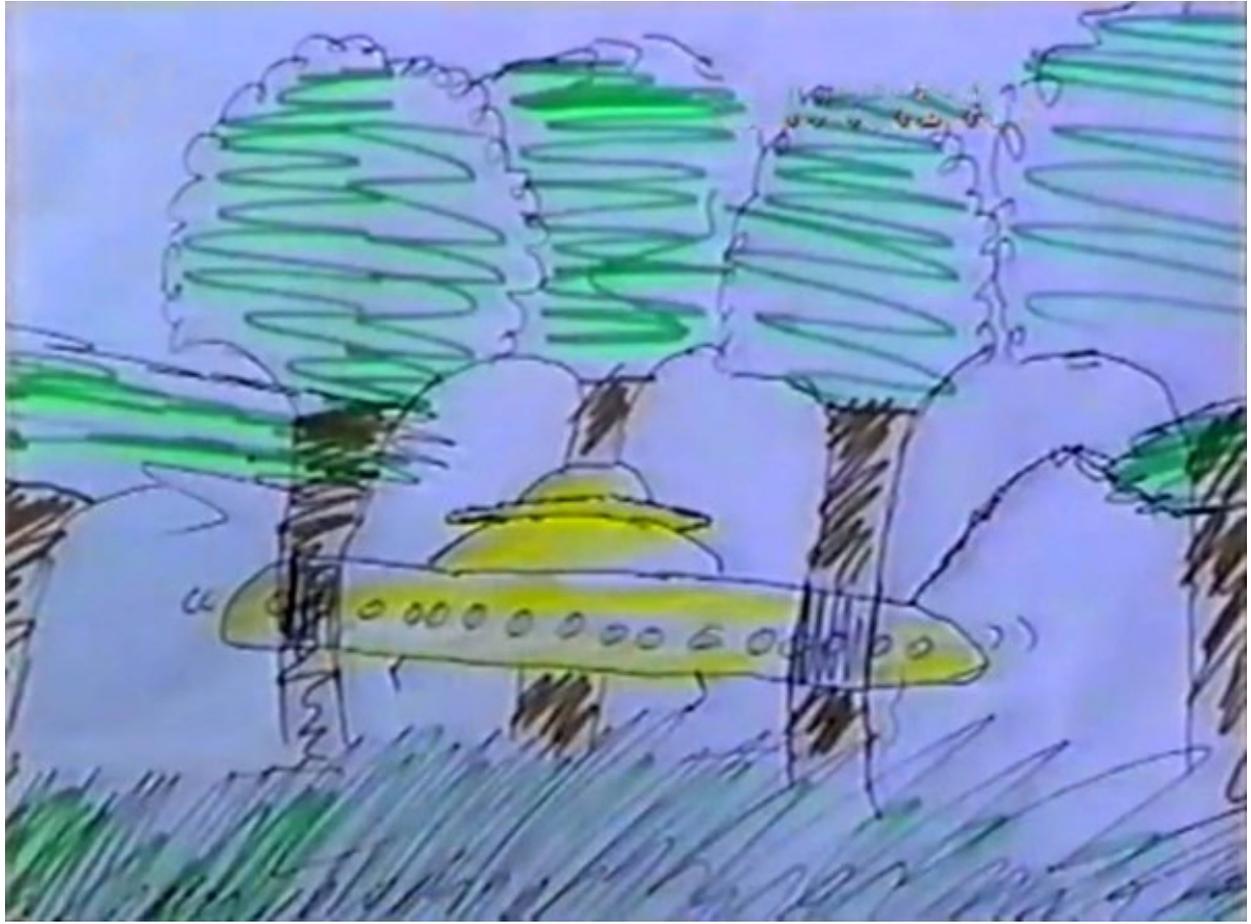
In *Passport to the Cosmos*, Mack records that after some years of research he was "astonished to discover ... in case after case, powerful messages about the human threat to the Earth's ecology were being conveyed to the experiencers in vivid, unmistakable words and images". He personally deemed it "quite possible that the protection of the Earth's life is at the heart of the abduction phenomenon".

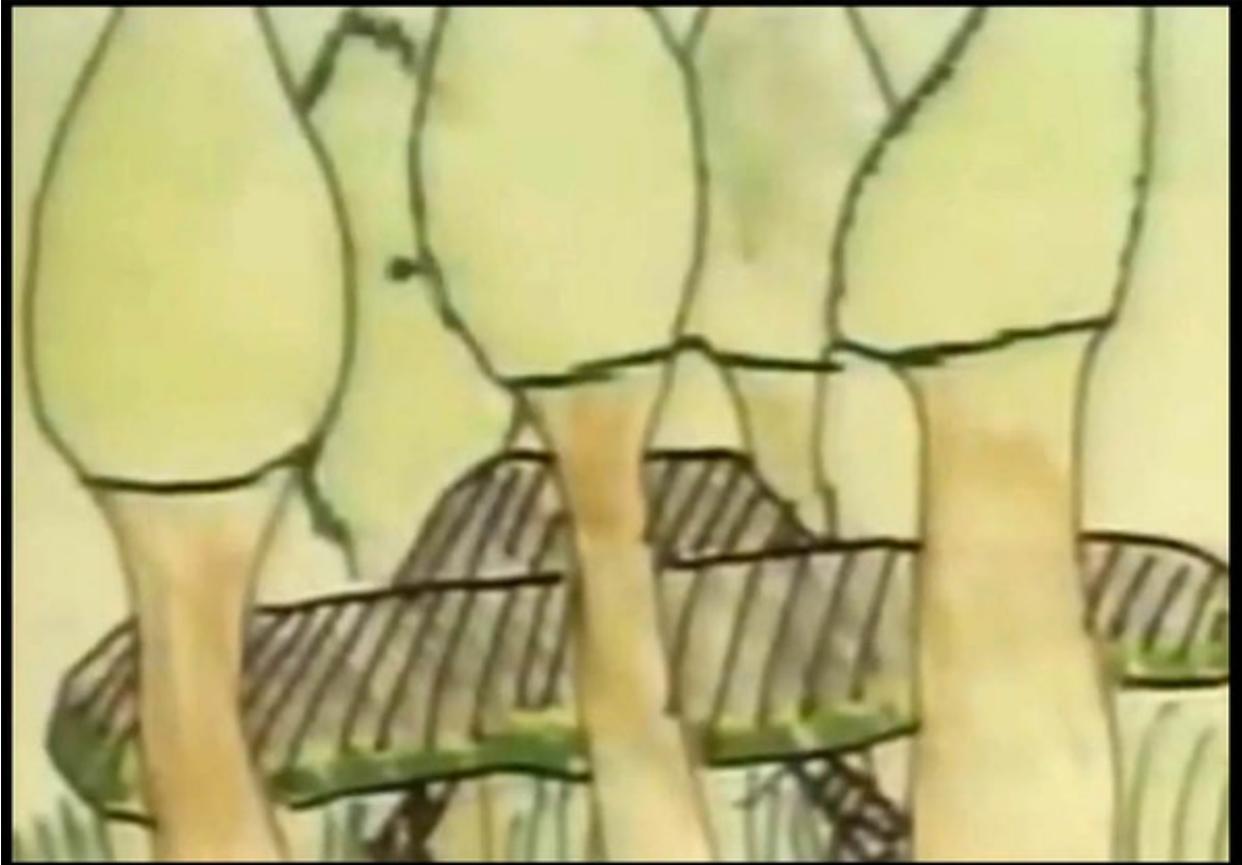
Original interviews

Snippets of Mack's interviews with the children can still be found on YouTube today. A fifth-grader called Francis tells the gentle-eyed psychiatrist he was warned "about something that's going to happen," and that "pollution mustn't be". Eleven-year-old Emma says; "I think they want people to know that we're actually making harm on this world and we mustn't get too technologed [sic]."

I cued up one of the clips on my phone for Sarah, but she waved it away. “I can’t, I can’t ... no, I’ve had too much of my own experience to want to relive somebody else’s.” After a long draw on her beer she said: “They weren’t wrong, though, about the environmental shit, were they? If you go out there now you’ll see the Miombo forests have disappeared for firewood.”







Drawings by pupils at Ariel School in Zimbabwe of the aliens' visit to their school in September 1994.

But during my first visit to the district, what had struck me was not the state of the forests but the fact that Ariel School had continued to grow in pupil numbers, and looked to be prospering.

The khaki uniforms, the red floppy hats, the break-time chirring – it all matched the YouTube clips, only there were no longer any white students, the white farming families having all moved elsewhere as a result of the government's radical land reform policies. The "rough area" beyond the playground had been stumped and mown into a second sports field, dusty for want of rain. I asked a few teachers I bumped into about the events of 1994, but it seemed that aspect of the school's history had left with the farmers. "There was his documentary being made about it at one point," said Sarah, getting a little shaky on her stool. "An American chap. What was his name now ... Randall, Randy. Ha! Anyway, that was about seven or eight years ago now, and I haven't heard anything since."

Exploring the frontiers

I knew a little more than she did, again courtesy of my relative, who had provided local assistance to the documentary-maker. After Mack was killed in a car accident in London in 2004, some of his supporters and family members had founded the John E Mack Institute, with a mission to “explore the frontiers of human experience, to serve the transformation of individual consciousness, and to further the evolution of the paradigms by which we understand human identity”.

In 2007, to further these rather grandiose aims, a young filmmaker called Randall Nickerson had signed on to do something with the Ariel School footage. “Geez, he was sooo handsome,” said Sarah, slapping her palms against her jeans. “I could hardly concentrate when he was interviewing me. Not only that, he understood the thing on a different level, because he was an experimenter himself, who had been quite open about his encounter. I think he even appeared on Oprah!”

I had contacted Nickerson in 2008, and because he happened to be in Cape Town running former Ariel students to ground, we arranged to meet and talk about his project. He cancelled at the last minute, though, saying he didn’t feel quite ready. From time to time I checked the Mack Institute webpage for updates, but after a few years it seemed the project had run into financial difficulties. Then, in late 2013, two hours of footage tagged with Nickerson’s name surfaced on YouTube. I can recognise the carcass of a creative albatross when I see one, and the amorphous video dump showed every sign of being just that. As an accidental historical record, though, it is fascinating: a trove of rural school scenes from the eve of irreversible societal change; the last generation of khaki uniforms, freckled noses and colonial English accents; and Cynthia Hind, already an anachronism in a series of pre-independence floral print dresses, and wearing what was described to me as a “Bulawayo perm”.

Tacked on at the end of the video are some snippets of interviews Nickerson conducted with former students. “It really does stick with me that something happened, something was out there,” says a young man. “I think something definitely happened,” says a young woman.

‘Amazing experience’

A former teacher says “We met up on many occasions after that and hugged and shook our heads and said that was the most amazing experience of our lives”, whereas another former student says he hasn’t talked about the event to anyone, “because they’d probably think I’m nuts”. When I told Sarah about the video she became very agitated. “Can I see it? Oh God no, I don’t want to. What do they all say? Am I on it?” she cried. “Ok, just show me.”

We watched the relevant part of the video, Sarah with a hand over her mouth. “God, their accents,” she said at one point, of the now American, Australian and English tones that contrasted so sharply with the voices she had known. It crossed my mind that the truly galvanic event in all of their lives was not the UFO landing but the policy from upon high that had turned them into aliens in New York, London, or wherever.

Then again, what did I know? When the clip ended Sarah stubbed out an Everest Menthol and shook her head. “You want to know the real message here? The real message is that this stuff can brand you for life. It undermined Mack’s credibility, became this huge unending thing for others, and it certainly fucked me up. I mean, try telling people that you live in permanent fear of these things returning one day. Try telling them that you can actually sense when they’re back in our atmosphere. They’ll think you’re a kook. All this lot do,” she said, casting mock-angry eyes down the bar at a fellow boozier, who raised his glass and said: “True, but we love you anyway, Sê.”

Despite her patently thick skin, a look of extreme sadness entered Sarah’s eyes for a moment, as she pretended to watch her fingers pulling the label from a beer bottle. “Christ, and to think I told the family I was just popping out to Bon Marche.”

*Not her real name.