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Journalist who helped break Pentagon UFO story writes biography of John E. Mack, Harvard psychiatrist who studied alien encounters

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Dr. John Mack, a professor at Harvard Medical School who worked with patients who said they had been kidnapped by aliens, is the subject of a new biography, "The Believer." SUSAN WALSH /Associated Press

One day in 2004, Ralph Blumenthal, then The New York Times' Southwestern Bureau chief, recalled, "a slim paperback fell into my hands" in a used bookstore.

It may have been in Archer City, he said, because he was an admirer of the late author Larry McMurtry, who owned a sprawling used bookstore there.

The book that fell into his hands was “Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters” by Dr. John E. Mack, one-time head of the department of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the subject of Blumenthal’s new book, “The Believer: Alien Encounters, Hard Science and the Passion of John Mack” (University of New Mexico Press, \$29.95).

Mack did not start out his distinguished career writing about alien abductions. He also was the author of “A Prince of Our Disorder,” a biography of Col. T. E. Lawrence — better known as Lawrence of Arabia — that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1977.

“I was amazed there was this Harvard psychiatrist who was interested in aliens,” Blumenthal said in a recent interview. “I wasn’t particularly interested in UFOs myself, but I think every journalist could see the appeal of a story of a Harvard psychiatrist who risked his career to investigate alien abductions.”

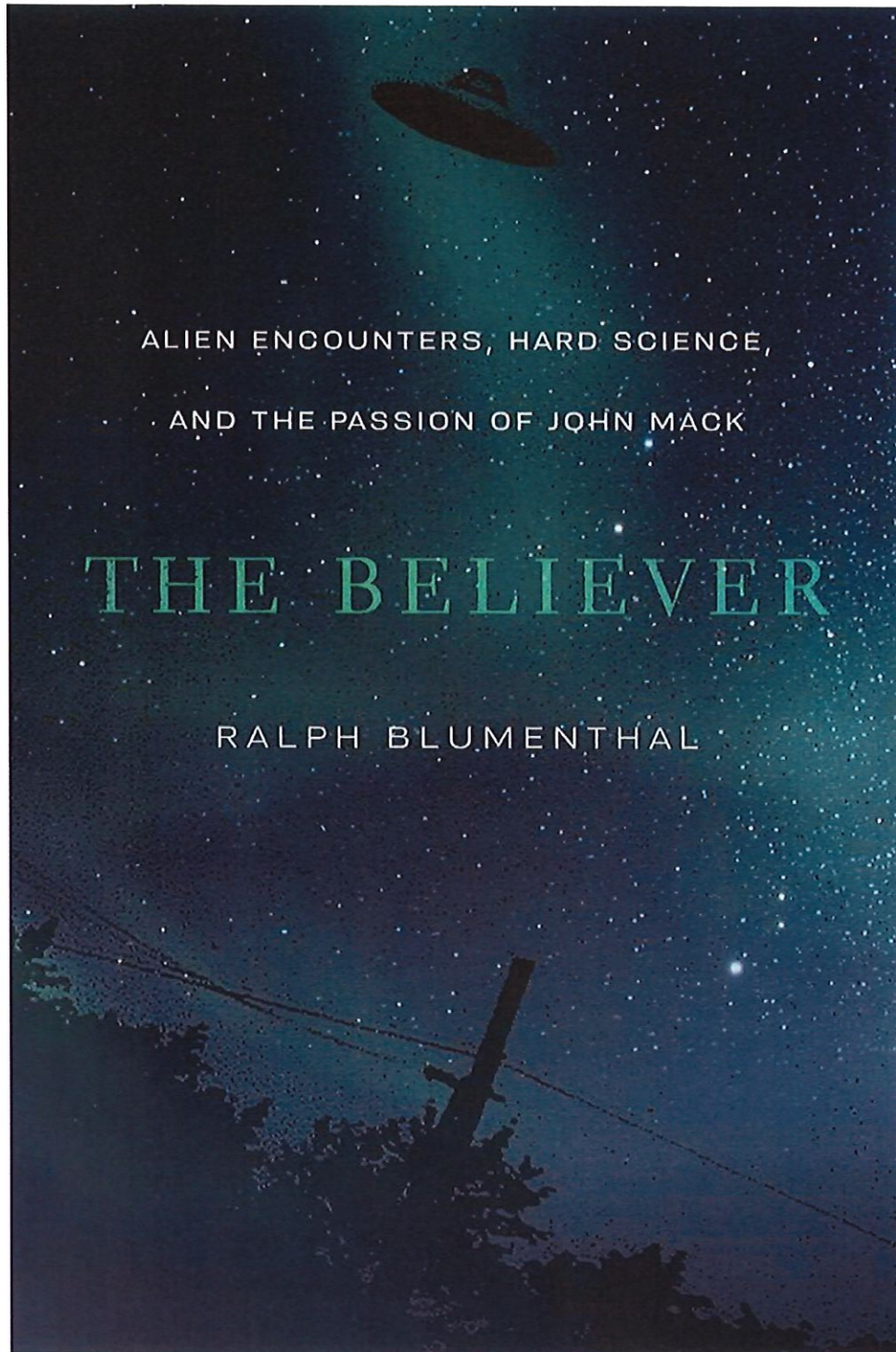
Blumenthal, of course, is now known for his interest in UFOs. Along with Leslie Kean and Helene Cooper, he broke the story in The New York Times of the Pentagon’s Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, a secret unit that investigated unidentified flying objects.

That 2017 story, and others that followed on close encounters and revived military efforts to study UFOs, paved the way for the recent release of a report by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence titled “Preliminary Assessment: Unidentified Aerial Phenomena.”

“There is no evidence that any of the episodes involve secret American weapons programs, unknown technology from Russia or China or extraterrestrial visitations,” Julian E. Barnes wrote in the Times on June 25. “But the government report did not rule out those explanations.”

It’s fair to say Blumenthal’s nearly 20 years of research and reporting on John Mack, through which he got to know many experts on the subjects of UFOs and

alien-human encounters, put him in a key position to report on those developments.



"The Believer" by Ralph Blumenthal
University of New Mexico Press

Following his discovery of “Passport to the Cosmos,” Blumenthal was so intrigued by Mack’s status as the first noted American academic figure to study the experiences of people who reported encounters with aliens that he wanted to write a profile of him for the Times.

At the time, he said, he was enjoying his “dream assignment,” living with his family in Houston, writing about Texas, where “you could throw a stone in any direction and hit a great story.”

Those stories included coverage of the flight to Oklahoma of the Democrats dubbed the “Killer Bees” to avoid a legislative vote in Austin and the opening of the Museo Alameda in San Antonio, which he calls “the most soulful city in Texas.”

“I tried to call Mack for an interview,” Blumenthal said, “only to find out he had been run over and killed in London. I originally thought I had kind of discovered him, but I soon learned he was already pretty famous — in fact, he was very famous.”

While some journalists might have dropped the idea of a profile, Blumenthal said he realized “Mack’s life had come to an end, and it was time to look back in a biography.”

He was caught by the paradox of a noted, socially active psychiatrist — Mack protested with his family against nuclear weapons, advocated for peace in the Middle East and helped found a mental health facility for people in one of Boston’s poorest neighborhoods — who also apparently took seriously the idea that aliens were visiting human beings with sometimes traumatic, sometimes ecstatic results.

Mack was, in fact, in tune with his times. From the late 1980s and well into the early 2000s, the concept of “alien abduction” was very much alive in the American media. In addition to Mack’s books such as “Passport” and “Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens,” there were San Antonio native Whitley Strieber’s bestselling book “Communion: A True Story” as well as books like “Missing Time” by Budd Hopkins, a pioneer in the investigation of people describing anomalous experiences with apparent aliens and an influence on the Harvard psychiatrist’s work.

In pop culture, human-alien encounters were a central theme of the TV series "The X-Files," which debuted in 1993 on Fox.

Mack's family eventually gave Blumenthal's project their blessing — and gave the journalist access to everything they had from his extensive personal records.

"I had all his movies, his lectures, his therapy sessions, which he taped, and his journals, all on a hard drive," he said, "and so I really had a very privileged entrée."

After 15 years of research and extensive interviews with family members and contemporaries, Blumenthal has produced a biography that focuses on Mack's life as a whole. In addition to the self-professed alien abductees and the organization Mack created to study them, that includes his family, his colleagues at Harvard, other UFO researchers such as Hopkins and the numerous women in his life, about which, Blumenthal says, Mack "was quite open."

One of the highlights of "The Believer" is a captivating account of what Blumenthal calls "the inquisition" at Harvard.

Mack was called to defend himself against a panel of his peers from other disciplines who were questioning his abduction research — funded in great part by Laurance Rockefeller — and the viability of his career at Harvard Medical School.

Mack and his career survived with expert legal counsel from Danny Sheehan and Eric MacLeish, who represented hundreds of victims of alleged sexual abuse by priests in Boston — the subject of the movie "Spotlight."

"Believer" also provides insight into Mack's character through its account of his research into the life of T.E. Lawrence, upon whom, Blumenthal said, "he patterned himself ... fascinated by the interplay between Lawrence's inner life and his life of action."

Blumenthal admits he was captivated by Mack in the early stages of his research.

“The hardest part was to separate myself from him because he was such an overwhelming figure, really powerful and charismatic,” he said.

While chronicling all of Mack’s accomplishments, Blumenthal also leaves the reader with the sense that Mack could have done much more with his research into extraordinary human experience had he lived longer, and had he gone about his business differently.

“There was something cavalier about the way he didn’t seem to care much about what the consequences were of what he was doing,” he said, “and that was both a blessing and a curse.”

Ed Conroy is a freelance writer in San Antonio.