

Primal Hooting

Whitley is back! Those who treasure the more exotic forms of untruth will need no further prompting.

Communion, Whitley Strieber's 1987 account of his abduction by aliens, was a primal hoot. Its sequel, *Transformation*, recycles the same whoppers with only minor variations, but it offers generous portions of the same shameless charlatanry and page after page of Whitley's patented prose with its peanut-butter-and-jelly mix of penny-dreadful horror and saccharine sanctimony. Here's a taste of the peanut butter:

Andrew [his seven-year-old son and coabductee] started screaming. The shock that went through me this time was absolutely explosive. . . . His screaming filled my ears, my soul. Listening to it, I wanted to die. . . . I thought I was going to suffocate. My throat was closed, my eyes were swimming with tears. The sense of being injured was powerful and awful. It was as if the whole house were full of filthy, stinking insects the size of tigers.

And here's the jelly:

The visitors are sweeping up from where we buried them under layers of denial and false assurance to deliver what is truly a message from the beyond. . . . They have caused me to slough off my old view of the world like the dismal skin that it was and seek a completely new vision of this magnificent, mysterious, and fiercely alive universe.

UFO stories are generally not accorded serious media attention, but Strieber was a special case. He had already published best-selling horror novels that had gone on to become movies. Here was a bankable Name Writer willing to go on record as a UFO abductee. "It's rather doubtful that a non-writer could spark the kind of enthusiasm that you find in this book," his editor at *Morrow*, James Landis, confided in the August 14, 1987, *Publisher's Weekly*. Whitley got a million-dollar advance for *Communion*. *Morrow* and *Avon* aren't ballyhooing what they're paying for the

Review of *Transformation*, by Whitley Strieber.

sequel, for such publicity might confirm doubts among those inclined to believe that Whitley's motivation is mercenary rather than his declared desire to seek a completely new vision of our mysterious universe. Surely it is hard to account for Whitley's and his publisher's conduct on any other basis. Read as a factual account of alien contact, *Communion* and *Transformation* have the verisimilitude of a Paul Bunyan legend. Taken as a strategy for commercial and psychological self-aggrandizement, however, they make perfect sense.

Consider only the internal chronology and publishing history of the two books. *Communion* tells of Whitley's encounters with the aliens on October 4 and December 26, 1985, events the aliens had made him forget until the memories were retrieved via hypnosis in March of 1986. Between March and the fall of that year, Whitley must have made and sold the book proposal and written the book, which appeared in bookstores promptly in January 1987. Meanwhile, on April 2, 1986, Whitley now reports in *Transformation*, his seven-year-old son, Andrew, underwent his own UFO abduction, which was the source of the paternal anguish quoted above. Readers of *Transformation* won't learn much about little Andrew's sufferings at the hands of the aliens, since Whitley is extremely respectful of his son's privacy in this matter. For the inside story on that one, we'll probably have to wait another couple of years until Andrew is old enough to appear on talk shows to sell his own searing account. Does it not seem strange that Whitley would not have mentioned these latest tricks his aliens were up to in the book he was then writing? This is a question not addressed in *Transformation*, but I can hypothesize two answers: (1) Andrew's abduction was held in reserve for *Transformation* because of its can-you-top-this, sequel-making value; or (2) Whitley did not want to expose his boy to the merciless scrutiny of the press at that time, but then, coming to realize the awesome significance of his revelations, decided that he would sacrifice these paternal scruples in the interest of the Truth.

Transformation differs from *Communion* in several significant ways. Whitley no longer accesses his abduction memories via hypnosis. Indeed, he is now critical of the practice and of his fellow UFO expert Budd Hopkins, whose competing and more lurid account of abduction—and rape—by aliens, *Intruders* (Random House, no less), appeared in bookstores shortly after *Communion*. "I feel," Whitley warns, "that the present fad of hypnotizing 'abductees,' which is being engaged in by untrained investigators, will inevitably lead to suffering, breakdown, and possibly even suicide." Hopkins's book reported that women were being impregnated by aliens, returned to earth, and then reabducted for the

harvesting of the fetuses, and while Whitley wisely refrains from questioning the literal truth of such claims, he does take Hopkins to task for his view of the aliens as a destructive force:

I cannot agree with this. Certainly it is clear that our response to an encounter is often one of fear and terror. Our perceptions are distorted by panic at the high level of strangeness we observe.

But it is premature to assume that our experiences are actually negative in content.

Whitley is now promoting an upbeat UFO abduction experience. Fear is to be a key that opens up a cosmic funhouse:

We must learn to walk the razor's edge between fear and ecstasy. [The visitors] made me face death, face them, face my weaknesses and my buried terrors. At the same time, they kept demonstrating to me that I was more than a body, and even that my body could enter extraordinary states such as physical levitation.

In *Communion* Whitley solicited readers to come to the front of the church and testify about their UFO experiences, an invitation that yielded a brief fad of abductee support groups. In *Transformation* Whitley extends a more enticing possibility, a form of transcendence that doesn't depend on the whims of aliens, who are notoriously undependable, never appearing when they're invited. How about out-of-body travel? It's safe, it's cheap, and it's semi-reliable, if, like Whitley, one uses the methods developed at the Monroe Institute in West Virginia, where Whitley went to learn methods for entering a "mind awake/body asleep" state that allows the wakeful sleeper to shuffle off this mortal coil and visit friends in a discorporate but not imperceptible condition. Two people Whitley tried to contact in this way didn't receive his vibrations, but then, in February of 1981, Eureka!

A friend in Denver called me to report an odd experience. She had awakened and seen the outline of my face across the room from her. Later she wrote me, "What I saw exactly was the impression of your face wearing the glasses you wear amid the leaves of a plant hanging near the door of my bedroom for about three seconds in the dark. I turned on the light and nothing was there."

I probably would not have mentioned the incident had it not kept happening. Chicago radio personality Roy Leonard awakened on the

night of June 7, 1987, to find my presence in his bedroom. He reported that he could “almost” see me.

That night I had an extremely strange dream of moving like a ghost through an endless, dark woods and entering a little room that was so dark I couldn’t see a thing. How Roy Leonard ended up on the receiving end of that dream I do not presently understand.

What Whitley’s out-of-body capabilities have to do with his UFO experiences is never precisely spelled out, but it makes good sense intuitively. To paraphrase Judy Garland, “If UFOs fly beyond the rainbow, why, oh why can’t I?” In any case, there is no need to speculate about Whitley’s intentions and supernal powers, for I have been able to discuss all these matters in confidence with Whitley’s disembodied spirit! Only last night—October 13, 1988—Whitley’s ecoplasmic, night-wandering self visited me in my bedroom, and this time it was no mere three-second, now-you-see-him-now-you-don’t fugitive vision. His pale, tormented visage hung around for several minutes, and though I lacked the presence of mind to tape-record our dialogue, you can take my word for it that what follows is substantially what Whitley confided to me. Whitley himself may not recall our conversation, just as he seems to have forgotten his visit to Roy Leonard; he may even deny that it took place, but I am entirely persuaded it was Whitley I spoke to and no one else, though a skeptical friend has suggested to me that what I perceived as Whitley was only a product of my own overheated imagination. Or then again, it may be, as Hamlet surmised:

The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil: and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy
As he is very potent with such spirits
Abuses me to damn me.

I had just laid aside the volume of Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* with which I had been beguiling the sleepless hours when I began to feel a curious sensation, not unlike one recounted by Whitley: “It felt as if I had come unstuck from myself. The experience was strange in the extreme—almost beyond description.” At the same time I heard an unearthly mewling sound that seemed to come from outside the window screen. It was inconceivable that a cat could have made its way to my window ledge, eleven stories above ground level, for there is no fire escape, and yet I

could distinctly see a dark shape on the ledge—a shape that, even as I watched, dumb with horror, proceeded to drift through the screen and to hover above a spider plant in the far corner of the room. Slowly the dark cloud coalesced into the mirthless face I had seen on so many television talk shows.

“Whitley!” I gasped. “Is it possible?”

His face trembled as though molded of colorless Jell-O and solidified into a sneer. “Of course not. You must be one of those fantasy-prone personalities I’ve read about. You must be having a hypnopompic hallucination.”

Whitley was undoubtedly referring to Robert A. Baker’s discussion of *Communion*, which had appeared in the winter 1987–88 issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer*, a journal put out by CSI-COP, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, an organization devoted to the thankless task of debunking all the varieties of supernatural and pseudoscientific fraud. According to Baker, Whitley’s UFO stories are textbook cases of hypnopompic hallucination:

complete with the awakening from a sound sleep, the strong sense of reality and of being awake, the paralysis (due to the fact that the body’s neural circuits keep our muscles relaxed and help preserve our sleep), and the encounter with strange beings. Following the encounter, instead of jumping out of bed and going in search of the strangers he has seen, Strieber typically goes back to sleep. [All these patterns are repeated in *Transformation*.—T. D.] . . . Strieber, of course, is convinced of the reality of these experiences. This too is expected. If he was not . . . then the experiences would not be hypnopompic or hallucinatory.

Until this moment I had been skeptical about Baker’s theory, which seems designed to give Whitley and other self-styled abductees the benefit of the doubt with regard to their good faith. The internal evidence of *Communion* suggests to me that even if Whitley’s aliens had their origins in his waking dreams, they have long since been assimilated into a wholly conscious hoax. Whitley can bring passionate conviction to the defense of his lies; he even boasts of how he breezes through lie-detector tests (while enjoining “‘debunkers’ intent on twisting the facts” from contacting his front man, Dr. John Gleidman). But liars characteristically evidence a passionate commitment to their lies. Witness such recent bearers of false witness as Oliver North, Kurt Waldheim, President Reagan, and Jim and Tammy Bakker. The list could be continued for many column inches. The 1980s are the Age of Isuzu. Lying has become a form

of entertainment. Surely a large part of Whitley's readership approaches his books in a spirit of connoisseurship rather than credulity, relishing the spectacle of his effrontery as one might the penitential tears of Jimmy Swaggart.

But there is no need for me to frame an indictment against Whitley. He did so himself with unforgettable (and uncharacteristic) eloquence on the night of October 13.

"Must you come visiting me in my dreams?" I grumbled at the phantasm of Whitley. "Why can't we just declare a truce?"

"You started this, Disch," it hissed. "No other respectable writer thought it worth his while to attack a book about UFOs. There's a gentleman's agreement in the book trade that crackpot ideas are not discussed in highbrow journals."

"Right. Only on *The Tonight Show*, and then only if there's no one there to contradict you."

The disembodied head nodded. "Exactly. I am in the business of founding a new faith, and faiths are, by definition, beyond criticism. It's quite simple, really. In a world of systemic corruption, we must all look the other way. If every Watergate conspirator had had the reticence and decency of G. Gordon Liddy, children might still have some respect for constituted authority."

"Oh, Liddy had great team spirit, I'll give you that. The thing is, Whitley, I'm not on *your* team."

"That makes no difference when religion is at issue. Meeting a Mormon socially, you would not cross-examine him about his honest opinion of the revelations Joseph Smith received from the Angel Moroni. And I claim the same exemption from criticism. As I see it, there's not much difference between the books I've written and the synoptic gospels. Like the witnesses of the resurrection and the other miracles reported in the gospels, all I am saying is that *I saw what I saw*. Impeach my honesty and that of those who have colluded in one or another of my fancies, and you impeach the honesty of all true believers, and so my first priority is to take the moral high ground, along with the author of Proverbs, who wrote, 'Smite a scorner, and the simple will beware.' Or, a verse I like even better, 'Judgments are prepared for scorners, and stripes for the backs of fools.'"

This had the ring of the Whitley whose first, fictional exploration of ufology, a short story called "Pain," had taken the form of soft-core S&M porn; the Whitley who witnesses, in *Transformation*, the following cautionary tableau:

. . . a stone floor with a low stone table in the middle of it. The table was a bit more than waist high, and on it there was a set of iron shackles. A man was led down some steps and attached to these shackles. He was right in front of my face, not two feet from me, looking directly at me with eyes so sad that I almost couldn't bear it. . . . Behind him was a taller person wearing black. . . . The next thing I knew this person was beating the poor man with a terrible whip. Before my eyes this man was being almost torn to pieces by the fury of the beating.

Somebody behind me said, "He failed to get you to obey him and now he must bear the consequences."

"There's one thing I still don't understand," I confided to Whitley's head. "I can see *your* incentive to pile it on. You earn a fortune, and it makes you a kind of celebrity, and there must even be a kind of high-wire thrill to see how far you can go with it. But what's in it for the other Johnny-come-lately abductees? They won't have bestsellers or movie sales; they won't be interviewed by talk-show hosts."

"Ah, but as Jesus said at some point, every little bit counts. Bruce Lee, for instance. His testimony wasn't required of him. He isn't even my editor at *Morrow*. He simply saw there was an opportunity to do something for his employer, and for me, and pitched in. Talk about team players!"

Whitley was referring to one of the drollest tales in his book, concerning the night that Bruce Lee, a senior editor at *Morrow*, visited a bookstore on Manhattan's Upper East Side on an evening in January 1987 and witnessed two aliens in winter coats, their faces muffled with scarves. The aliens were paging through the newly released *Communion*, "turning—and apparently speed-reading—the pages at a remarkable rate." Mr. Lee noticed that "behind their dark glasses both the man and the woman had large, black, almond-shaped eyes." Lee, a former reporter and correspondent for *Newsweek* and *Reader's Digest*, "felt decidedly uneasy, deeply shocked." Later, Lee would take a lie-detector test administered by Whitley's own polygraphist, Nat Laurendi, and when asked if he thought the beings he saw in the bookstore were aliens—or, as Whitley prefers, "visitors"—Lee replied yes. Then: "He was asked if I had offered him anything of value to tell his story. He answered 'no' and this answer was evaluated as true."

"Yes," Whitley went on, "Bruce is a peach. But really, *everyone* at *Morrow* has been wonderful. Sherry Arden, who is the president and publisher, has been quoted in *Publisher's Weekly* as saying, 'We truly believe this happened to Whitley.' And Rena Wolner called me 'one of the most

creative people I know.’ And then there’s Phillipe Mora, who’ll be directing the movie of *Communion*: he came out to the cottage and met one of the aliens . . . oops, excuse me, visitors, right there where it all began.”

“But none of them are exactly disinterested witnesses, are they? I’m surprised that everyone at *Morrow* isn’t required to declare their belief in UFOs as a condition of continued employment. The people I can’t understand are the people who imitate you for no obvious mercenary reason.”

“Every abductee, within the smaller public sphere of his or her own social circle, is a mini-celebrity, a person important enough to have been taken up into the high-tech heaven of a genuine flying saucer. That should be inducement enough for millions of people—once I’ve got this thing rolling.”

“Even though everyone knows they’re bull-shitting?”

“And who isn’t these days? Why should the right to lie and be respected for one’s lies be reserved for televangelists and the highest officials of our government? Indeed, in that regard the situation nowadays is strikingly close to that of the Roman Empire in the early Christian era, when the emperors were officially divine. Caligula claimed to have enjoyed sexual congress with the moon-goddess in a manner not unlike my own spicier moments aboard the UFOs. What could have been more personally satisfying for an ordinary Roman citizen, confronted with such poppycock, than to declare an equivalent demi-divinity? If not God-head, at least co-immortality with the crucified and resurrected God. So much for the divine pretensions of Caligula, or Pat Robertson, or Nero, or Nixon, or Heliogabalus.”

“Whitley, are you trying to suggest that your potboilers are on a par with the gospels?”

Whitley smiled a sly smile. “Did I say that? No, no, you’re putting words in my mouth.”

Before I could ask him any more questions, Whitley laid a pseudopod aside of his nose, and, with a wink, he disappeared. But I fully expect he will return, in a year or so, with new spiritual revelations from his hand-puppet aliens.

Postscript

The attentive reader will have noticed a curious feature in the transcript of Whitley’s dialogue with me. Repeatedly he paraphrases or exactly quotes phrases and whole sentences that appear in my essay “UFOs and the Origins of Christianity.” At first I could not imagine why he would do this,

until it dawned on me that he might have intended these as “evidence” that I was cannibalizing my own writing and not giving an actual transcript of his visitation! How could he have accomplished this? I had to ask myself. The essay in question had not yet appeared in *Foundation*, a British magazine he would be unlikely to have read in any case. Then I realized that he must have made earlier night-journeys and seen me at work on that essay. The force of its argument had, in effect, etched my words on his consciousness, and he was able, perhaps unwittingly, to repeat them in the course of the visitation recorded above.