

A NEW FILM BY LAUREL CHITEN

TOUCHED



A documentary about people who think they've had contact with aliens, and the Harvard psychiatrist who believes them.

A few years ago, Harvard psychiatrist John Mack, a leading researcher of the alien encounter phenomenon, approached me after seeing my recent film The Jew in the Lotus. He wanted me to consider making a movie about contact with alien life forms. I told him no. I knew next to nothing about the subject, had no interest and thought it was all rather foolish. Then, he invited me to meet some of the people who claim to have had these experiences. I expected some weird people who would tell the classic horror stories of being taken against their will for intrusive examinations. But these people seemed rather normal and spoke about their feeling of connection and the longing for these uninvited intruders to return. Their stories moved me... Don't we all long for connection? A partner, a soul mate, God? I'd stumbled into a world filled with people who have been "touched" by something — and had their lives blown apart because of it. When a person is confronted by something that is so powerful, so indescribably outside the realm of everyday life, it forces a reexamination of everything previously taken for granted. The experience redefines every relationship: with one's self, family, and reality itself. I was mesmerized. I feel that I was abducted by John Mack.

This started my journey into the lives and minds of alleged abductees around the world, and into my own personal journey through skepticism, fear, insomnia, fascination, confusion and led to many, many questions.

These "experiencers," as many of them call themselves, bring with them reports of missing time, bodily probing, sperm extraction, impregnation, a strange project to create a hybrid alien/human race and apocalyptic warnings. As there is no conclusive physical proof, the debate as to whether these stories are true or not could go on forever. Instead, I became more interested in the people — those who have had their lives both torn apart and transformed by this experience.

What happens when the unexplained intrudes into our lives, and how do lives and relationships respond when credulity is strained to a breaking point? This is the question I set out to explore.

Following the lead of those like Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, the audience will witness an archetypal "Hero's Journey." For the subjects of our film, this experience has resulted in a kind of Holy Grail search for truth. Beneath the sensational aspects of alien abduction, these are real people looking for answers. This is a film about human experience — about longing for connection and fear of separation. Touched follows a human quest to solve a mystery — perhaps only to find that the answer is the quest itself.

I now call myself agnostic. I am not convinced that these people have been visited by "aliens," but I do believe that something profound has happened to them. And maybe, just maybe, everything they have described is, in fact, completely true. •

Produced and Directed by Laurel Chiten
Director of Photography and Co-Producer:
Andy Abraham Wilson • Editor and Co-Producer:
Sabrina Zanella-Foresi • Music by Jake Trussell
Animation and Title Graphics: David Eells
Featuring: Karin • Peter • Jamy • Dr. John Mack • Dr. Arnold Relman

WWW.TOUCHEDFILM.COM
WWW.BLINDDOGFILMS.COM

Laurel Chiten (617) 308-8500
info@blinddogfilms.com

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"*Touched* offers a uniquely contemplative perspective on the alien abduction phenomenon [and] presents the 'experiencers' and their stories with sensitivity and without judgement."

—Boston's Weekly Dig

"*Touched* opens up questions about the complexity of human psychological experience, human relationships, and scientific investigation. It does all this with sensitivity, humor, and impressive cinematic flair."

Highly recommended for a lively classroom discussion."

—Anne Harrington, Ph.D., Prof. of the History of Science, Harvard University

Close Encounters with Laurel Chiten

By Erin Trahan
Imagine Magazine

One snowy Boston evening changed the course of things for director Laurel Chiten. "I feel like John Mack abducted me," she laughs.

"I don't know what was going on that night, I was being so goofy, making everyone laugh." The snow prevented a colleague from introducing her film, *THE JEW IN THE LOTUS*. So she arrived at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, appealingly disheveled, to take his place. It was her sense of humor and her edge that prompted John Mack to seek her out after the film. "I didn't even know who he was. He wanted me to make a film about alien abductions."



So who is John Mack? Though a professor of psychiatry at Harvard and a Pulitzer Prize-

winning biographer, his celebrity is arguably more attached to his research on alien encounters than more "suitable" subjects for a person of his ilk. Since publishing the best selling book *Abduction* in 1994 (and outing him as a presumed extraterrestrial "believer" on shows like *OPRAH* and *THE TODAY SHOW*), Mack grew frustrated, even bored by the predictable questioning of whether accounts of abductions were true or false. His next book on the subject, *Passport to the Cosmos* (1999), was meant to move beyond the question of "if" and to a question that he believes is more relevant to earthly life: "what do alien abductions mean for us?"

Chiten's immediate reaction to exploring the topic of alien abduction was to push

the project away. "I knew absolutely nothing about the subject, and more importantly, I didn't care about it." Her other films like *TWITCH AND SHOUT* and *THE JEW IN THE LOTUS* came from her kitchkes, they were personal to her. When she finally started sifting through the first-person accounts of missing time, bodily probing, sperm extraction, impregnation, and apocalyptic warnings, Chiten reacted like most first-time abductees: she was frightened. She acknowledges that the topic called up her deepest fears, fears she cannot necessarily name. "I was emphatic about not making this film," she reiterates.

But Mack's persistence led to an encounter at the Harvard faculty club, where Chiten first heard "experiencers" (as they call themselves) speak. She was struck by how sane the speakers appeared. "One woman reached out her hand to describe how it felt to be touched by an alien . . . and she started to cry. Forget aliens, it was so human to me, this longing to connect." It is the translation of ostensibly inhuman experiences into unavoidably human terms that Chiten explores in *TOUCHED*.

TOUCHED is Chiten's third documentary. For someone who never set out to be a director, she's developed an impressive niche. She started with two series: *TWO IN TWENTY*, a five-episode satirical soap and a ten-part video series based on Robin Casarjian's book, *House of Healing*. Would-be-directors may not want to hear Chiten's thoughts about joining her ranks. "Don't become a filmmaker unless you have to. It is extremely hard work." And has she made money from her films? Not really. Yet every time she engages a new subject, she falls in love, only to revisit the stress and anxiety of wondering if the film will ever be seen or appreciated once completed. Since she is just wrapping production on *TOUCHED*, in preparation for its debut at the MFA, she admits

to being stretched a little thin.

Fortunately, she surrounded herself with a great crew: "I attract people who are much smarter than I am, they make me look really good." Perhaps too modest, Chiten has had colleagues claim that it is her credibility as a filmmaker that will get them through the door of seeing her latest, potentially controversial film.

TOUCHED has been unique for Chiten because it essentially has three coproducers: Chiten along with editor Sabrina Zanella-Foresi and DP Andy Abraham Wilson. Even with their camaraderie, the crew approached the subject matter with differing philosophies. "Let's just say I was Scully and Andy was Mulder. We actually called each other that." Apparently "Mulder" was eager to experience his own UFO ride.

One unexpected (and still highly confidential) occurrence dramatically affected the film at its zero hour. Let's just say something happened to a character that in Chiten's words "had a ripple effect on the entire film." She promises the newly integrated material makes for an even more intense ending.

"*TOUCHED* is really the most provocative film I've done." Chiten wishes the film could tour the world, with she and Mack answering Q & A. Not that the film is about answers. But it opens up questions about the reorganization and reevaluation of strongly held beliefs about the cosmos, the divine, and the ever-pressing need for human connection. Chiten calls it a "launch pad" for discussing the pain and healing of transformation, inevitably and ultimately human.

Chiten chalks up her chance meeting with Mack as serendipitous. But when asked about how she chooses her next film project she says, "Most of the time I don't pick a project, they pick me." Maybe *TOUCHED* will explain exactly who "they" are. Or maybe it's more exhilarating not to know. •