

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Stories are powerful. We all know that. But is it possible for a story to be so powerful that it takes over your life? And could that story be like a contagion where everyone who hears it can't stop thinking about it or talking about it, even if they're not sure if it's true?

That's the story of Betty and Barney Hill.

The Hills were the first alien abductees – or at least the first ones that the American public had become aware of in the 1960s. Today we're all familiar with the tropes of the alien abduction narrative thanks to pop culture – down to the alien and UFO emojis on our phones. But most people don't know it all started with one couple. Tracing this narrative back to its origins can reveal a lot about how a culture can grow and develop to the point where we don't know anymore what's the real story or just a story.

To help tell the story of Betty and Barney Hill, I talked with Kathleen Marden. She wrote a book about the Hills called "Captured!" And this subject is very personal for her.

KATHLEEN: Well, Betty and Barney were my aunt and uncle. We saw one another one or two times a week. They were also wonderful family members who appreciated other members of the family and especially the children.

Another important fact about the Hills -- they were an interracial couple. Not surprisingly, for an interracial couple at that time, they were politically active. Betty was white. She worked in the welfare department in New Hampshire. Barney was black. He worked with their local chapter of the NAACP.

On the night of September 19, 1961, Betty and Barney were driving home after a vacation in Montreal. They wanted to drive straight through because Barney was nervous about what where they would stop without being harassed.

As they were driving, they noticed craft following them in the sky. It didn't move like an airplane or a helicopter. They were concerned and confused. Eventually Barney stopped the car.

KATHLEEN: Barney stepped out. He was still trying to identify it as a conventional craft. Um, he was looking up at it through binoculars and saw the row of windows, as did Betty -- saw the lights inside this craft. Then the craft moved -- Barney followed it into an adjacent field. He held the binoculars up to his eyes. It had now come in even closer.

And then they blacked out. The next thing they knew, they were back in the car – driving home – with no memory of what happened.

KATHLEEN: As if only a moment had passed. They found themselves 35 miles down the highway with very little recall for what had happened -- they expected to arrive home at two. It was five o'clock when they arrived home and there was physical evidence that something unusual had occurred of the tops of Barney's. His best dress shoes were so deeply scraped that he had to buy new shoes. Betty's, good dress that had been in fine condition when she'd put it on the previous morning, was now torn in several locations.

UFO sightings were widespread during this time, although contact with aliens was usually reserved for science fiction movies like The Day the Earth Stood Still.

Betty was already a believer in UFOs. So was her sister. I asked Kathleen if she remembered the day her Aunt Betty called to tell them what happened.

KATHLEEN: I absolutely do. It had a huge impact upon my life. I was 13 years old. I had returned home from school, and Betty was on the phone with my mother and I overheard their conversation. She was very concerned about a contamination or possible contamination from this unidentified flying object that she and Barney had seen.

Now Barney did not believe in UFOs. But after the incident, he felt massive anxiety. His ulcers acted up. Betty was having nightmares. Eventually they were referred to a psychiatrist in Boston named Benjamin Simon.

Dr. Simon specialized in hypnosis. He put them each into a trance. This is real audio from their first hypnosis session. Barney's memories pick up right after he blacked out.

BARNEY: I believe Betty is trying to make me think this is a flying saucer

DR. SIMON: Was it light enough to see?

BARNEY: It was just light moving through the sky.

Barney remembers seeing the craft land in front of them. They're greeted by humanoid figures with bulbous heads and large slanted eyes. They're not grey or bald, like the classic image we have today of aliens today. But they look inhuman enough to terrify Barney as they're lead aboard the spacecraft.

BARNEY: I try to maintain control so Betty cannot tell that I am scared. God I'm scared.

DR. SIMON: It's all right; they will not hurt you now.

BARNEY: I got to get back up. (PANICKED SCREAMS)

DR. SIMON: All right! All right! Just relax. Be calm now. Relax. Deeply relaxed.

I should mention here that hypnosis is very controversial. Some people swear by it, and believe that hypnosis can unlock hidden memories. But there's evidence that hypnosis can also implant memories. There are several famous court cases around that issue. But listening to the tape, I couldn't ignore the fact that Barney's terror feels real.

Dr. Simon agreed that Barney's terror was real but he did not believe in aliens. In later interviews, Dr. Simon said that he thinks something traumatic happened to the Hills that night, but the alien imagery probably came from Betty's dreams, and Barney overheard her talking about them.

When Betty went under hypnosis, her story was the same as Barney's up to a point, although she says Barney was so scared, he closed his eyes when the aliens brought them aboard their ship. So he missed the most frightening part – when the aliens strapped them down to separate tables and performed medical experiments on them.

BETTY: And he has a long needle in his hand, it's the biggest needle I've ever seen. I asked him what he's going to do. I ask him why, and he said he just want to put it in his navel, and it's a simple test. I tell him it will hurt. Don't do it! Don't do it!

In case the audio wasn't clear, the aliens inserted a giant needle into her navel, similar to the cutting edge reproductive technology of the time.

But after the aliens finish their experiments, Betty felt relaxed. She even had a conversation with one of them.

BETTY: So I asked him where he was – where was his homeport? And he said where are you on this map? And I looked and I laughed and I said I don't know. So he said well then, if you don't know where you are, there wouldn't be any point in my telling you where I am.

I have to say one of the reasons why I'm so fascinated by this story is that I'm from New England, and these accents hit a soft spot for me. In that clip, Betty sounds like she could be one of my aunts. And I love that she asks the alien where his "homeport" is, which is something you'd call a New England town with a harbor.

The hypnosis turned Barney into a believer. Now he and Betty were now on the same page. But they had no intension of going public. In fact, I think they would've been mortified to know those tapes are out there for anyone to hear. But they did tell a few friends -- and one of those friends told a reporter named John Luttrell.

Luttrell was a hardnosed journalist. He usually covered crime for an old newspaper called The Boston Traveller. And he had never thought much about UFOs, but after hearing the story of the Hills, he became obsessed with it. Their mutual friend didn't give him Betty and Barney's information. So Luttrell used detective skills to track them down.

KATHLEEN: He said that he wanted to meet with them and he promised if they would meet with him, he would not commercialize their story in any way. They refused to meet with him. They thought they would lose their jobs, their very good, uh, standing in their community and in the state of New Hampshire, there was a lot to risk and they did not want anyone at set for a select group of individuals to know what had happened to them. Uh, unfortunately it was carried to the public in five newspaper articles.

Turns out he didn't need their cooperation to tell their story, or permission to publish their names.

I found a radio interview with John Luttrell. It was aired right after his articles came out. I expected him to come across as an opportunist, so I

was surprised by how sincere he was. And he said he was captivated by the story of the Hills because it reminded him of the science fiction he grew up with.

LUTTRELL: Knowing that these rather strange things that have happened since the advent the space age, nothing now is impossible Alan.

ALAN: That's true. I have my own thoughts

LUTTRELL: Let us quickly go back to our own childhood. And, uh, we sat for hours in this little dream world that we've created reading Buck Rogers, reading Flash Gordon, and here within the span of our own lifetime. And these things that were so far, far away have now achieved reality.

ALAN: Oh I agree, 100%

LUTTRELL: So now nothing is impossible!

He admitted that the Hills didn't want to talk to him, but he believed that the public had a right to know – as if they could be in danger. He even used the Hills' fear of publicity as proof that they're credible witnesses.

LUTTRELL: Frankly they thought they would be laughed right out of their own communities and this they couldn't afford to do that. Mrs. Hill was a professional person, a person of great capability, a person described by his supervisor of the New Hampshire State Department of Health and Welfare, as one of the more talented, the most dedicated women he's ever had, and a person whose emotional stability is, is just unquestioned. You know, this woman is solid and her husband too is very much a pillar of his community, of his church. They had to be willing to gamble if people wouldn't laugh at them.

ALAN: I don't think anyone has laughed, John.

LUTTRELL: No.

Stephanie Kelley-Romano is a professor at Bates College who studies UFO culture. She says there was another reason why Betty and Betty Hill seemed like credible witnesses.

STEPHANIE: They were an interracial couple in a time of segregation. And so they weren't necessarily the type of couple who was seeking attention. Right. Barney talked over and over about the fact that when they were traveling, if, um, places were not hospitable to interracial couples, he didn't ever want to cause a scene. He didn't ever want to make a big deal out of anything. The idea that they would seek any type of publicity, I think was easy for them to refute.

So how did all that publicity affect Kathleen's aunt and uncle?

KATHLEEN: It was very distressing to Betty and Barney. I recall how they came to my grandparents' house, how distressed they were. The whole family met and made a decision about what to do next. We all agreed that since this story had already been released, they should make their first public statement. And they did that in Dover, New Hampshire at the Universalist Unitarian church.

That went well. They thought maybe they could weather this thing. And then Barney took a major hit.

KATHLEEN: Barney had been appointed to the US civil rights commission. This was a huge appointment politically for him. That was something that, uh, changed when the information about his UFO abduction was released to the public. Barney was so committed to his civil rights activities. It was something he didn't want to give up, but he lost his position when it became public. He was very, very concerned about his upstanding public image. No way did he ever want to be thought of as some UFO kook. And it bothered him terribly when people perceived him in that light.

Eventually, they were approached by an author named John G. Fuller – who was also a UFO investigator. He wanted to write a book about them with their full cooperation. He said if you can't escape this story, you might as well own it. They decided he made a lot of sense. What else did they have to lose?

The book was called The Interrupted Journey. When it came out in 1966 – it was an even bigger sensation than the newspaper articles. The book was serialized in magazines. Their publicist got them on talk shows. Barney even appeared on a game show called to Tell The Truth, where he and two similar looking guys told the same story. The contestants had to guess which man was the real Barney Hill.

HOST: Let's start the questioning with Orson Bean

ORSON: Thank you, well whoever you are, I read every word of the story that was printed in the magazine about you, and I believe it! It's impossible to disbelieve. Number one, what physical symptoms did you later notice, I'm referring physical things that appeared on you?

BARNEY: Warts.

ORSON: Warts?

BARNEY: Hmmm!

Eventually, the book was adapted into a TV movie starring James Earl Jones as Barney.

BARNEY: How do I know this thing happened? How I do I know I wasn't just seeing things?

And Estelle Parsons played Betty.

DOCTOR: Did they have a uniform or ordinary clothes?

BETTY: I can't say, I don't know, I can't remember. I'm not supposed to remember!

I asked Kathleen if her aunt and uncle were surprised by how huge this became.

KATHLEEN: I think they were very surprised. It was more than they had anticipated. Barney, of course, who was so dedicated to politics and to the civil rights movement was being framed in a different way, it did have an impact upon him that, uh, he was not very happy about but they had committed to this without being fully aware of where it would lead I think.

It would have been interesting to see how Barney handled his new public persona over, but tragically, he died of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 46.

Betty lived for many more decades. And she became a celebrity in the UFO community.

Joseph Baker is a professor at East Tennessee University who studies support groups around paranormal experience. He says what happened to Betty happens with a lot of people who go public about their encounters.

JOSEPH: Once you step out into the public like that, there's kind of no going back. You're forced to either disavow your own experience or to own up to it and try to, as best you can in public defend what has happened to you and explain what you believe has occurred.

But Betty eventually fell out of favor with the UFO community.

CHRIS: What happened with Betty afterwards is that she started claiming lots of other experiences.

Chris Bader is a professor at Chapman University. He and Joseph Baker co-author a book called Paranormal America.

CHRIS: Originally, the idea of Betty and Barney Hill that was quite popular was that this was a couple that was in the wrong place at the wrong time. And if you had been there on that road at that time, it would have happened to you instead. But when Betty started claiming other experiences later in life, it, it made her more into someone who was supposed to be special, someone who the aliens specifically wanted to be in contact with. And for some people that led them to doubt her story, just to lead them to say, well, Betty is someone who either is just fantasy prone or wants to feel special.

In the 1990s, Betty was diagnosed with a slow growing brain tumor. That may have contributed to her visions of seeing UFOs everywhere. But at that point, it was too late. She was isolated between believers and non-believers.

She died in 2004 at the age of 85. She never re-married. To the end, she was telling her stories to anyone who would listen, especially what happened on September 19th, 1961.

And that's the story of Betty and Barney. But that's not the end of the story itself.

THEME: X-FILES

The story they introduced to the world – of humanoid aliens that abduct people out of the blue -- that story was just beginning to take root in our culture.

There's a lot more after the break.

BREAK

As I looked at the reaction people had to Betty and Barney Hill, I kept wondering something. Why did this story become so huge? Why did it capture the public's imagination? Why did it go viral?

Joseph Baker says it's important to note that before the Hills became household names, the story of UFO encounters used to be very different.

JOSEPH: So before this, the most popular form of alien contact narratives were one of two things. There were kind of the movie versions of invasions, but the one where people were actually say, going aboard spaceships and having contact, uh, with aliens was what we would call contactee narratives where people were claiming these positive experiences, um, where they were being enlightened or they were having these encounters with extremely intelligent advanced beings who were bringing them new information. Um, in some cases people were having a positive sort of sexual encounters with aliens, and so those tended to be the narratives that if they were out there were around. The abduction against your will narrative, um, was not there popularly until Betty and Barney story. So that is what makes it different and new. Again, it contains a lot of elements that are, um, frankly in sort of the horror genre of narrative.

Although Susan Lepselter thinks the story taps into another genre.

SUSAN: I think this as a foundational American story. I mean it really is a story about power in America.

Susan is a professor at Indiana University, and she wrote a paper about how the story of alien abductions – starting with the Hills – bears a striking resemblance to stories of Native Americans abducting white settlers on the frontier. That was a very common trope in Western dime novels and movies. And Susan thinks it's no coincidence that the story of the Hills captured the public's imagination in the 1960s.

SUSAN: That kind of old dominant story of how the West was one of, you know, the total triumph and the kind of unquestioned morality of what, you know, what we now see as a genocide. That master narrative starts to crumble kind of late in the 20th century, you know, and around the same time, a lot the people I was talking to in alien abduction worlds were saying things like to, in order to make sense of it, they would say things like, well, this is just like when the Indians met the Spanish or the English for the first time, those people from Europe came over, they had superior technology and you know, the Indians didn't understand

what was going on and that's the same thing that's happening to us now. So they, they started to put themselves in the kind of empathic position of a native group who were being colonized from another world with greater technology.

She also thinks it's interesting that Barney was a World War II veteran who he said under hypnosis one of the aliens reminded him of a Nazi.

SUSAN: There's also, of course, it's not very long since images from the Holocaust have circulated. Um, and those, you know, those directly tap into, um, scientific racism of course, which is sort of what the aliens seem to be expressing in some way. So to have these aliens who, one of them looks like a Nazi doing, um, reproductive experimentation on human beings well, in that scenario Betty and Barney stop either black or white, they become human.

But it seems like to some extent, what you're saying is that there was almost a weird feel good aspect of it. Like, yes, they're a biracial couple, they may have a lot of trouble, but under the microscope of these aliens, they were just people. Yeah. No, like you and me.

SUSAN: Yeah. And that does seem to be kind of the effect of this.

Stephanie Kelley-Romano is a professor at Bates College who also studies UFO culture.

She thinks the story of the Hills also tapped into a another kind of anxiety at the time. And it had to do with the test the aliens performed on Betty, where they inserted a giant needle into her navel.

STEPHANIE: It's the early '60s, if we want to talk about reproductive freedoms, and we want to talk about reproductive technology, and many of the scholars who write about Betty and Barney Hill and about the fact that for many authors, the reason for the extraterrestrial visitations is this vast program of hybridization and kind of this creation of this alien human hybrid race. It revolves around, you know, women's bodies, powerlessness and reproduction. And so to think about these stories as the articulation of anxieties or fears or concerns over those issues make sense to me.

And after the story of Betty and Barney Hill was spread far and wide, more and more people showing up to UFO support groups were claiming to have alien encounters that were very similar to theirs.

And the details of the Hills' story become standard like the terrifying medical experiments, missing time, and the idea that lost memories could be brought back through hypnosis. Even little details like the fact that the aliens spoke to Barney into his head without moving their mouths.

Although Chris Bader thinks the images of the aliens themselves in the story of the Hills became like a game of telephone where as more people retold the story or claimed to have similar experiences, the aliens stated to lose a lot of details to the point where they were hairless and grey. In fact it's become an urban legend that Barney and Betty introduced the idea of the grey alien, but the aliens they saw had noses, clothes, even hats.

CHRIS: Because there's what's actually described and then there's the image that comes and comes out of it. And when, when they describe it, there are some discrepancies there from what we see today, including the fact that they were wearing baseball caps. All the creatures were wearing black baseball caps. That, um, what you tend to find with, um, all alien abduction narratives is that there tends to be this sort of, um, standardized image that people coalesce around and things that don't quite fit that image. Like when someone sees an alien with a big nose or a lot of hair or a different color that just tends to be sort of swept under the rug or forgotten.

The perceived realism of the Hills story also inspired a lot of debunkers. There are entire sites dedicated to picking apart their story. Many of the debunkers have argued that Betty and Barney were influenced by specific episodes of The Twilight Zone or The Outer Limits, although Betty claims they never saw those episodes.

Either way, the question of whether alien abductions stories influenced by science fiction or vice versa is like the question of the chicken and the egg. And in later years, you could see the influence of Betty and Barney's story in everything from Close Encounters to Independence Day.

CLIP: X-FILES THEME

But the biggest pop culture phenomenon inspired by the Hills was The X-Files.

Stephanie Kelley-Romano was a huge fan of The X-Files. In fact the show inspired her to study UFO support groups.

STEPHANIE: The X Files really did kind of take that narrative and made it, made it popular and kind of popularize the dominant themes, even including many of the things that were in Betty and Barney Hill.

I mean, my favorite episode is Jose Chung's from outer space.

STEPHANIE: Oh my gosh. Me too!

(Laughs) So many tropes from Betty and Barney and yet it's also all about this Rashamon who do you believe?

STEPHANIE: The unreliability of the narrators in that show really make it kind of this postmodern piece of genius television.

Jose Cheung's From Outer Space is about a journalist who goes to a small town to write a book about a couple who claim they were abducted by aliens in the woods. They're not an interracial couple but otherwise, it has all the aspects of the Hills story, like missing time and hypnosis.

DOCTOR: Can you recall where you are?

GIRL: I'm in a room on a spaceship, surrounded by aliens

DOCTOR: What do the aliens look like?

GIRL: They're grey, bulbous heads and eyes.

DOCTOR: Are you alone?

GIRL: No, Harold's on another table but he seems really out of it. Like he's not really there.

The story is present from so many different perspectives you don't know what's real or what's a fantasy that someone believes is real. And that's the point.

MULDER: The description of the aliens, the physical exam, the mind scan, the presence of another human being that appears switched off, it's all characteristic of a typical abduction.

SCULLY: That's my problem with it, Mulder. It's all a little too typical. Abduction lore has become so prevalent in our society that you can ask someone to imagine what it would be like to be abducted and they'd concoct an identical scenario.

MULDER: If it were only person, Scully, but we have two individuals verifying the other's story.

Chris Bader actually agrees with Scully on this – but he blames The X-Files, or credits The X-Files for amplifying the abduction narrative.

CHRIS: With the advent of The X-Files and other similar shows, what was very prevalent within a certain subculture of the UFO subculture went, went mainstream. I try this experiment every semester now. I asked my students to go up to the board and draw an alien and for the most part there's always an exception or two. But I am just absolutely astonished that not only can they draw a perfect gray on the board, they can also tell me exactly what a UFO abduction would be like. They can walk me through the experience to the extent that if one of them was to express this experience to someone who's a UFO abduction researcher, it would sound authentic to them.

But things are changing. These days the abductee narrative has become such a cliché, the only place I see it on TV is the reoccurring Saturday Night Live sketch where Cecile Strong plays a contactee and Kate McKinnon plays an abductee. They're both talking to researchers and the joke is between the two of them, the abductee got a seriously raw deal -- especially the way aliens were poking and prodding her body.

I wonder if it's some sort of anatomical study.

Nah, I don't think any of these guys were working on their master's thesis.

And this summer the meme to storm Area 51 was also considered a huge joke. But that doesn't mean people aren't taking UFOs seriously. With cell phone cameras and social media, videos of alleged UFOs are all over the place. In fact, one of those videos became international news.

CLIP: The US Navy has finally acknowledged that videos of what appears to be UFOs are real, they don't call them UFO, they call them....

And scientists are looking further than ever into other galaxies to find planets that could support life. Susan Lepselter says all these news reports are having an effect on our collective imagination including science fiction.

SUSAN: And I think now, um, what I've been noticing is the way in which the fragility of the earth itself, and the sense of the possibility that the Earth is fragile, that we are perhaps in something we can't explain in, in danger in some way seems to me to be very resonant at the moment. And we're seeing a lot of

upsurge in UFO interest right now. And it seems to me the lot of it taps into that sense right now too, which is something I think we should pay attention to.

So if the alien abductee narrative is fading away – at least in pop culture, not in UFO support groups – and a new narrative is starting to emerge, I asked Chris Bader why it's important for people to know that it all started with Betty and Barney Hill.

CHRIS: It's important to understand that whatever paranormal experience people are they morph and change and grow, and Betty and Barney Hill are the beginning of a certain narrative that's on its way out and one will replace it and that narrative will grow and change. It's important to understand that whatever what ever experience people are claiming, it is impacted by what they knew before by their culture, by what they've seen in the media. That doesn't mean there's not a real experience there. Perhaps Betty and Barney Hill had a real experience that they interpreted and colored in frames of what they knew and what they'd seen before.

To me the most poignant aspect of their story is that the people at the center of it got lost, and I find that really ironic because that's what makes their story so frightening in the first place -- their loss of control, their loss of dignity, and eventually the loss of their reputations.

But we can give some of it back to them with a new story about a couple that was faithful to each other, to their ideals, and to their sense of the truth.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Kathleen Marden, Chris Bader, Joseph O. Baker, Stephanie Kelley-Romano and Susan Lepselter.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. The show's website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.

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