



Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt

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Communities throughout the United States were convulsed in the 1980s and early 1990s by accusations, often without a shred of serious evidence, that respectable men and women in their midst—many of them trusted preschool teachers—secretly gathered in far reaching conspiracies to rape and terrorize children. In this powerful book, Debbie Nathan and Mike Snedeker examine the forces fueling this blind panic.

Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt Details

Date : Published July 16th 2001 by Authors Choice Press (first published 1995)

ISBN : 9780595189557

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Format : Paperback 336 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Psychology, Crime, True Crime, History, Religion, Sociology

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From Reader Review Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt for online ebook

Joseph says

[Note: The Kindle version of this book has some terrible OCR, maybe track down a hard copy]

For a solid decade, everyone *knew* that shocking numbers of children were being subjected to the most horrific sexual and physical abuse at the hands of parents, teachers, or caretakers who were satan-worshipping cultists. Children testified to horrors one could scarcely imagine, medical professionals found tell-tale signs of abuse written into their bodies, those accused confessed and were sent to prison for life. But the scope of the problem kept growing. More and more children came forward, and it seemed that Baphomet and Moloch were behind every corner.

Until it was shown that literally none of this happened. That although psychologists were acting in good faith and thought they were recovering memories hidden by trauma, the children were all too eager to say what authority figures wanted to hear because they only received good feedback for confessing abuse, not for telling the truth. That the inconsistency of their testimony was excused because obviously their trauma left them in a broken mental state, and couldn't *possibly* be an indication that their testimony was false or coerced. That what medical professionals diagnosed as "clear signs of abuse" came from a shockingly unscientific and unsupported list of tests partially drawn from a pseudoscientific 19th-century researcher who wanted a simple test to identify "sodomites" for prosecution. That the accused confessed based on tried-and-true psychological pressure that police used for generations to extract confessions when the physical evidence wasn't quite there (or, in these cases, where the physical evidence didn't exist at all). And through it all, where a culture of horror at the spectacle of child ritual abuse set up a chilling effect where skeptics couldn't speak out.

Even though the abuse didn't actually exist, this book is horrifying throughout, and a good reminder of the limits of forensic evidence and the role that social pressure plays in shaping reality.

Egenartet says

When children are at stake, it's only natural for panic to arise. Especially when they're being exposed to things such as ritual and sexual abuse. Is it all just a mother's panic? Are the the accusations to be taken lightly? This book will discuss both and all specters of what's wrong and complicated about child abuse and child testimonies. Without a doubt are children imaginative, but does that mean they shouldn't be taken seriously? Luckily some people are better with children than others, and even have jobs that can help them calmly and peacefully interrogate the children in a safe environment. Some people in this book have been righteously convicted, others have spend their time in prison due to, not the imaginative mind of the child, but the incompetence of the adult to properly unravel the mystery that is a child's imagination.

I highly enjoyed this book in terms of information and a broad point of view, rather than just one opinion on the matter. 4/5 stars.

Kirsten says

Beginning in the early 80's, the US was rocked by several large-scale (and many more smaller-scale) sex abuse scandals. Teachers and aides at preschools and day care centers were being accused of sexually abusing their charges. This alone is frightening enough, but as the cases developed, horrific charges of sadism, Satanism, and ritual abuse and sacrifice emerged. These sparked literal witch hunts, with increasing numbers of community members accused of participation in what was eventually labeled by some as a world-wide conspiracy.

What exactly happened here? How did hundreds of children (some of whom were younger than two) come to make such grotesque accusations, when there appears to have been so little forensic evidence?

Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker do an excellent job of outlining the changes in the way cases of sexual abuse of minors were investigated and prosecuted, beginning in the 1970's. Many of the changes are acknowledged as extremely positive; prior to these reforms of the 70's, cases of sexual abuse, particularly incest, were almost impossible to prosecute -- assuming they made it so far as the courtroom. Unfortunately, many of these reforms were twisted to such an extent that in many cases the new philosophy of "believe children who say they have been sexually abused" became "if we [parents, child advocates, law enforcement:] believe children have been abused, we must get them to admit it." It resulted, in some cases, in investigative techniques that were incredibly traumatic to the children involved, and led to false convictions.

Nathan and Snedeker calmly (occasionally a little bit repetitively) describe how this occurred, the outcomes of the cases, and the ways in which (as of the writing of the book in 1994) child advocates, feminists, and law enforcement officials have changed or not changed their policies to avoid such cases in the future.

Both the sociological and real-life implications of these cases are fascinating and enraging, and this is a very well-thought-out book on the subject.

Romany says

Watched a bad doco about the Ritual Abuse scare of the 90s which dissolved down into the individual neurosis and dysfunction of a particular family. This book was a good antidote in that respect, though I don't necessarily agree with all the conclusions.

Mike Bevel says

(In lieu of a traditional review, I'm just going to share an email I sent to a friend who asked, "Mike, are you okay?" Actually, here is literally what she wrote: "Hi Mike—As you may know I can't deal easily with Facebook but I do want to know what inspired that last posting with the weird sentences about ritual abuse. Huh? What context, what book what point of view? Just like that all the visible full sentences could do was make me extremely angry. PLiz explain...or ampify." The passage she's referencing in her email is this, from *Satan's Silence*: "Ritual abuse thus helped women disengage from unsatisfactory marriages without feeling guilty about being bad wives or mothers." When I shared it on Facebook, I commented, "Like, what if Munchausen by Proxy, but empowering?")

So -- I found myself DEEPLY interested in the "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s, and have read three books

about it:

Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt

Remembering Satan

We Believe the Children: The Story of a Moral Panic

The first and third books really tried to get at an understanding of what would cause parents to believe wilder and wilder stories proffered by their children in cases of alleged sexual abuse. One reason that was cited: the kids were pressured into providing evidence that they knew wasn't true, but they knew would make the adult asking the questions happy.

But why were adults so eager to accept that there was a seemingly limitless ring of Satanic cultists abusing children? That's where there still isn't a lot of very satisfying answers. Both books point to women being empowered to enter the workforce again, and how this destabilized the patriarchal concept of what a family should look like. This would have caused a lot of moral anxiety -- "Is it good for women to not be home with the children?" -- and then these cases of day cares abusing children would have fit into this anxiety very well.

(It's akin, I think, to the Invasion Literature that sweeps through England towards the end of the 19th century: English writers imagining an England where England herself is colonized and ruined by outsiders because England had done so much to destabilize much of the world around her.)

Another point the book mentioned -- and this is directly related to the quotation I shared -- is that mothers, more than fathers, were the likely family member to go to therapy sessions and police questionings with their children. Some of this is because women were more likely to be home during the day than men were, so they had the free time. But, especially in, Satan's Silence, this argument is suggested: mothers in families where ritual abuse had been alleged found themselves in a unique position of power: caretaker, advocate, after-the-fact protector. It gives an eldritch, horrifying shape to the day, but a shape nonetheless. And, in a society where divorce was only starting to be the norm, it provided a no-fault avenue of release for women looking to get out of their marriage. That comes out more mercenary in my description than I think is fair. It's not that women were manufacturing claims; but it might explain why they fought so hard for those claims in the face of either impossible or contradictory evidence.

One of the problems I found as a reader of these three books (I ended with Satan's Silence) is that it can start to seem like all the writers are suggesting that no children are ever sexually molested or abused. And I don't think that's ever the intention of these books; but they spend so much time developing systems that undermine the very idea of child sexual abuse.

Somewhere in between these books and the claims of Satanic Ritual Abuse is the truth, I think.

Dan Sharber says

great book! if you are looking for some sort of lurid account of the ritual sex crimes going on in the 80's this book is not it. the focus here is on the 'witch hunt' aspect of what went on. you do get a ton about some key cases that work as examples referred to throughout the book as well as key figures that played various parts in all this. but what makes this book great is that it is a political history of this phenomenon and as such paints a very engaging picture of a perfect storm of the rise of reaganism and the assault of the gains of the sixties and the interplay of a fracturing feminist movement as well as the rise of conservative, right actors

bent on both demonizing public day care as an assault on the nuclear family and keeping women in the home. also the junk scientists who, along with conviction-happy district attorneys, came up with all sort of false claims and methodologies play their part as well. lastly throw in a very strong class component (the 'victims' families were often white upper middle class people with connections and social prestige why the 'perpetrators' were almost always working people) and it all came together to cause and further one of the most improbable and curious criminal justice witch hunts ever. i was an adolescent in the 80's so i remember some of this but overall things were way worse and way more complicated than i thought. this book is very interesting while also chilling and there has really been no accounting of consequences on this period. people are still in jail falsely and kids are still scarred by having been convinced they were severely sexually abused and further, the real work of trying to prevent child abuse has suffered. children will still be victimized until a real solution in the form of anti-poverty efforts and a movement of people fighting for real equality in society and especially within the family.

Emma Drummond says

This book deals with the Satanic Panic, a period in the 80s and 90s where there was an epidemic of caretakers of children abusing them in bizarre ritual scenarios. This book does a really great job of explaining what happened and the kinds of faulty forensic technology that led to so many false accusations, and led to them seeming credible.

I will say, I don't know if this is true for all of the editions, but I got the book on kindle, and there were a decent number of typos. At first that made me distrustful of the quality of information, but it seems to be well researched and well-reasoned.

Overall, this was a fascinating look at the happenings and causes of a truly bizarre period in recent American history.

Aleš Jánošík says

A very disturbing read, especially with the current #metoo panic.

Angie says

As I was unpacking all my books, I found this one. I totally forgot about it. I read it right after graduating from Drury. I remember being saddened by it. The book delineates one of the modern day witch hunts with child predators. It was controversial when it came out and I vaguely remember news commentaries on tv discussing the cases in the book. As long as there are stereotypes, racists, bigots, idiots, sexists, and the such, witch hunts will occur.

C D Simpson says

Fascinating

This was an excellent account of the moral panic which gripped the world, but particularly the US, in the 80s and early 90s. The parallels with some of our modern preoccupations are startling. I will be referring to this

work many times as a clear exposition of what can happen when critical debate is silenced.

John Dillard says

An amazing source for those planning to write about the satanic panic of the 80s, and how elements of both the 2nd wave feminist and conservative religious movements of the decade helped put America down the path of a Salem style witch trial in the last decade of the previous century.

Jon says

Very scary, very judicious account of how an assortment of social trends and tendencies contributed to the "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s, in which child care workers were accused of various unspeakable practices and unnatural acts, and children ended up terrorized--not by the day care providers, but by the social workers, cops and prosecutors who tried, often successfully, to brainwash the poor kids into thinking they'd been molested when they hadn't. Among the revelations: the panic was partly caused by a law requiring disclosure of abuse allegations, sponsored in the Senate by none other than kindly, genial Fritz Mondale. Told by a witness that curtailing poverty would help kids more, Mondale replied, "This is not a poverty issue." This book must be read, even when it leaves the reader hating the human race in general and American sexual attitudes in particular. (Other countries had similar panics but on a smaller scale, in the US we do everything big.)

John says

Debbie Nathan and her co-author do a great job rounding up all of the major ritual abuse cases of the 1980s and giving this period of hysteria its proper context. Especially interesting is how Nathan highlights the alliance of right and left-wing causes that encouraged this bizarre craze and the country's fascination with it. Bravo to Nathan for standing up on the record against a diverse collection of groups and individuals who clearly dislike being called out.

The scene-setting of the first portion of the book is tightly written. Once Nathan and her co-author get into the actual meat of the cases, there's a little bit of jumping around that sometimes gets confusing, so perhaps some organizational improvements could have been made. However, it's a sprawling story to tell, and Nathan has done an excellent job of both small and big picture storytelling.

Frrobins says

A very thorough examination of the social and cultural context of the ritual abuse panic that swept the country in the 1980s. It also manages to navigate the difficult tightrope between two extremisms, and ends on the note that the best way to tackle child abuse is to prevent it. This was an engrossing, albeit scary read, and the parallels between what happened in the 1980s and during the Salem witch trials were fascinating.

Jason says

While this is arguably the definitive work on the "satanic panic" ritual abuse hysteria of the 1980s and the book that finally put this embarrassing era of unreason to rest, it's clear that a more focused and removed look at this phenomenon is needed. Maybe now, 30+ removed from the McMartin fiasco, is the time for someone to tackle this topic and offer a work that is just as exhaustive but less prone to long digressions into feminist theory and now-dated views of both science and sociology. This is an important period in modern US history--a modern witch hunt worthy of 1690s Salem--and we owe it to ourselves as citizens to remember these times when religious fundamentalism and pseudoscience conspire to undermine rationality to keep it from happening again.

Nathan herself deserves admiration for practicing skepticism and critical thinking at a time when the country had gone mad with moral panic over satanist pedophiles infiltrating the child care industry. Far from an armchair quarterback, Nathan's work in this book stems from her articles written at the height of the panic defending the wrongly accused and questioning the lack of evidence, something even the highly educated at the time were unwilling or unable to do. Nathan's subsequent career has been similarly impressive: refuting the link between pornography and sexual violence and debunking the famous multiple personality disorder case that spawned the book and film *Sybil*.

Still, the book is neither timeless nor perfect. Some of it is tough to read. The suffering of the unjustly accused who lost their families, freedom and livelihood is harrowing, as I'm sure it is meant to be. At the time of this book's publication, some of these people were still serving lengthy prison sentences based only on the coerced testimony of children. More troubling is a chapter on physical evidence that consists of about twenty pages of description of children's genitalia. I eventually skipped ahead at the fourth mention of "anal winking". The bigger problems, however, are the with the book's organization. Much of it is repetitive, belaboring the point of what not to do when interviewing child witnesses. Worst of all are Nathan's long contextual asides into feminist theory. Nathan, a feminist herself, seems to assert that this moral panic was simultaneously a reaction against feminism and a consequence of overreacting feminists. I didn't get it necessarily since it seems more likely that this was the result of Reagan's neoconservatism--a combination of religious fundamentalism and anti-intellectualism--than anything else.

Overall, it's a flawed but important work, yet it's hard to escape the notion that a better, more exhaustive and less ideological account is waiting to be written. Until then, this is the best place to learn more about what happens when people become so swept up in fear that they ignore reason altogether, a continual danger in cultures all over the world.
