
Introduction

According to a claim that has been promoted for more than a decade by preachers, police, prosecutors, psychotherapists, child-protection workers, and antipornography activists, there exists in this country—and, indeed, around the world—a massive conspiracy of secret satanic cults that have infiltrated everywhere into society, from the CIA to police stations to judges’ chambers and churches. The devil worshipers have even secreted themselves in day-care centers and preschools, the story goes, where they pose as teachers. This prospect has been particularly frightening, for it is said that satanists consider youngsters attractive prey for rape and torture and easy recruits for their faith.

In late 1994, as the last chapters of this book were being written, a research team under contract with the federal government announced, after studying the matter for almost five years, that they had made a determination about this claim, which has terrified many people in America. The study, which cost taxpayers $750,000, determined that the rumor of satanic conspiracies was unfounded and that there was no evidence of any organized incursions into public child care. Even so, during the same year the research findings were publicized, it was possible to go to the juvenile section of the public library in many U.S. cities and find colorfully illustrated copies of *Don't Make Me Go Back, Mommy: A Child's Book About Satanic Ritual*
It was also possible to turn on the radio and hear Joan Baez performing "Play Me Backwards," her song about a youngster who witnesses a diabolical ceremony in which adults dressed as Mexicans slaughter a baby, remove its organs, and make other children play with them. One could stand in a supermarket checkout line and read the women's magazine Redbook, with its survey indicating that 70 percent of Americans believed in the existence of sexually abusive satanic cults, and almost a third thought the groups were being deliberately ignored by the FBI and police. If one sought out a psychotherapist, the chances were good that he or she believed these cults were organized into a vast conspiracy whose crimes were responsible for many patients' emotional problems. And if one were to examine the files of district attorneys' offices throughout the country, there was a considerable likelihood that some would contain allegations of ritual sex abuse.

When these cases proceeded to indictment, the accusers were often young children and the accused preschool teachers or the youngsters' own parents. The trials that resulted were lurid, yet tedious in their similarity. As the defendants, many of them women, sat looking dazed, distraught, or scornful, children—or adults speaking for children—recited litany about brutal and grotesque assaults committed against them. Testimony typically included accounts of being raped and sodomized with weapons and other sharp objects while camera shutters clicked and videotape machines rolled, of participating in the slaughter of animals and human infants, of being kidnapped in vans, boats, and airplanes, and of hearing threats that their parents would be killed if the abuse was disclosed, and of suffering these tortures while the perpetrators engaged in devil-worshiping rituals.

Defense lawyers would protest that there was no evidence to support these claims: no adult witnesses, no pornography, no lacerations on youngsters' genitals, no blood, no dead babies—and virtually no talk of abuse from the children until investigators and their parents pressured them relentlessly to disclose.

To this, prosecutors would inevitably counter that the defendants had terrorized the children to keep them quiet. Expert witnesses would take the stand and explain that the youngsters' silence was a sign of abuse. So were many behaviors that common sense might suggest were benign, but which child-protection workers understood as signs of trauma: bed-wetting, nightmares, and masturbating, for instance. Sometimes an expert would explain that organized satanists look like nice people but are geniuses at concealing evidence, and have been doing so for hundreds of years. In fact, as one prosecution witness was wont to point out, the Caribbean servant Tituba, who cared for the girls who were responsible for the seventeenth-century Salem witch trials, was herself a ritual child abuser.

After this kind of testimony, some trials resulted in acquittals, but others produced guilty verdicts. In El Paso, Texas, in 1985, Gayle Dove, a popular middle-aged preschool teacher and community volunteer, was charged with sexually molesting both boy and girl students, inserting sharp objects into their genitals, making pornography, and threatening the children with masks, wild animals, and vows to kill their parents if they disclosed the crimes. A fellow teacher, also a seemingly well-adjusted woman, was also charged. Both were convicted and sentenced to life in prison. In a case that surfaced in New Jersey during the same year, bright, outgoing Kelly Michaels, a woman in her early twenties, was accused of similar crimes and found guilty, even though there was no record of illegal sexual activity or of psychopathology in her past.

In North Carolina in 1993, day-care operator Robert Kelly was convicted on ninety-nine counts of sexual abuse and punished with twelve consecutive life terms. The cook at Kelly's center, twenty-seven-year-old Kathryn Dawn Wilson, was found guilty on five counts and sentenced to life in prison. In Austin, Texas, a middle-aged couple named Daniel and Frances Keller got forty-eight years apiece. They joined a growing population, which may now number in the thousands, of people whose lives were shattered by allegations of "ritual sex abuse." The lucky ones were tried and acquitted or, if not indicted, only bankrupted by legal fees. Others were fired from their jobs, ran out of their communities, or had their children taken away from them. Dozens more, including the El Paso, North Carolina, and Austin defendants, were convicted and imprisoned for crimes whose only substantiation was words.

Those words seemed to come from children, and they were first uttered in the early 1980s, when cases like Los Angeles's McMartin Preschool scandal erupted. McMartin dragged through the courts during most of that decade, and when it ended, it had transmogrified into the longest and costliest trial in American history. By then, the mass media was publishing skeptical reports about copycat cases that had left dozens of men and women languishing in prisons. Most of these accounts criticized the unreliability of small children's words. "Out of the Mouths of Babes," one article was titled. "Do Children Lie?" asked another.

Downplayed in this work was that at the beginning of each ritual-abuse case, the children had been eminently reliable, but what they communicated was that they had not been molested by satanists. Indeed, it was only after an investigation started, after intense and relentless insistence by adults, that youngsters produce criminal charges. By then, their utterances had nothing to do with their own feelings or experiences. Rather, what came from the mouths of babes were juvenil renderings of grownups' anxieties. For the young accusers in ritual-abuse case the acts of speaking constituted a profound irony, because the more they said, the more their efforts to describe their reality were silenced by adult projections as fantasies.
Those fantasies exercised an irresistible hold on American society during the 1980s and 1990s. Belief in ritual-sex-abuse conspiracies was the stuff of moral panic, not unlike the crusades of the McCarthy era. During the conservative Reagan and Bush administrations, there was another eruption of tension, over changes in gender relations that had been brewing for a generation. Between the early 1960s and the early 1980s, many middle-class adolescents stopped keeping their premarital sexual experimentation a secret from adults. Abortion was legalized, the proportion of unwed teenage mothers more than quadrupled, the divorce rate tripled, women with young children streamed into the workforce, and day-care centers proliferated. The swiftness of these changes unsettled many Americans, and society's new villain became the satanic child molester.

This image cast a wide swath of fear over the political and cultural landscape. To right-wing Christian fundamentalists steeped in lore about devils and stewing with hostility toward public child care, it was not hard to embrace the notion of satanists infiltrating day-care centers. Indeed, in the early 1980s, belief in ritual sex-abuse conspiracies extended from a host of concurrent rumors that were promoted by law-and-order conservatives and the Christian media: satanist livestock killers, devil-worshiping corporate executives, and rock musicians who dubbed their songs with subliminal, demoniacal messages.

To secular-minded, educated American liberals, claims about satanism sounded as ludicrous as a Mark Twain or an H. L. Mencken spoof on holy rollers, and commentators chuckled in bemusement. There was no smiling, though, at other, related rumors: about rinses of stranger-abducted children, countrywide kiddie porn manias, or, later, satanist couvnnance in day-care centers. Although these apocryphal stories were also promoted by conservatives, they struck as deep a chord in people who watch public television as they did among Geraldo Rivera's and Oprah Winfrey's audiences.

Feminists were particularly susceptible to sex-abuse conspiracy theories. Indeed, the alliances women's activists struck with conservatives around these claims often turned bizarre: as when Gloria Steinem contributed money and public support to a ritual-abuse proponents' group whose coordinator later claimed that it was the U.S. government, and not an ultraright militia movement, who bombed Oklahoma City's federal building in 1995.7

This book examines how such alliances coalesced and how belief in ritual abuse subjected hundreds of people to state-mandated persecutions that in many ways compare with the Salem witch trials. It attempts to explain how a public library could offer little children a picture book about torture in day-care centers, how the airwaves could reverberate with the voice of former antiwar activist Joan Baez now intimating that immigrants are satanic, how dozens of blameless people are still lan-

Guiding in prison on such charges—and, above all, how this irrationality could endure for more than a decade and provoke only a murmur of protest. In a culture as heterogeneous as ours, so extensive a moral panic can be achieved only by concerted efforts at institutionalizing it.

Indeed, this is the way belief in ritual abuse spread: via an impassioned, nationwide crusade conducted by social workers, therapists, physicians, victimology researchers, police, criminal prosecutors, fundamentalist Christians, ambitious politicians, antipornography activists, feminists, and the media. It was a powerful effort that did not come together overnight. But as it took shape, a veritable industry developed around the effort to demonstrate the existence of ritual abuse. In the absence of conventional evidence, the proof became words obtained via suggestion and coercion and the most ambiguous of behaviors, from both youngsters and the accused. Verbal "disclosures" about events that never happened were obtained from children using interviewing techniques that cognitive psychologists have subsequently discredited as dangerously coercive and suggestive. Additionally, prosecutors introduced new forms of therapeutically induced "evidence"—such as pre-school-age children's play with toys and with dolls that have genitals, their vague scribbles and drawings, and parents' retrospective accounts of their children's nightmares and masturabation—to show that the youngsters had been traumatized by abuse.

In the name of saving children, meanwhile, prosecutors exploited popular anxieties about sex to perform character assassinations on defendants. Testimony was given and innuendo spread about the promiscuity of the accused, about their purchases of Playboy magazine, their homosexuality, even their fondness for 1960s counterculture music. Bolstering these appeals to the public's worst prejudices, prosecutors such as Mijami's Janet Reno, a self-styled women's advocate who would later become head of the Justice Department under the Clinton administration, encouraged the use of sophisticated psychotherapeutic methods, such as hypnosis and "guided imagery" exercises to obtain confessions from defendants. In other cases, the venerable tradition of the jailhouse snitch was revived as informants were trotted out to offer perjured testimony about defendants' confessions in their cells.

Although these efforts convinced many jurors that children in ritual-abuse cases had been violated, there were still skeptics in the courts, the media, and the public who were suspicious of the evidence and who demanded harder proof. Often they were convinced by novel medical evidence, produced with recently developed examination techniques that appeared reliable. Actually, they were technologically updated versions of the medieval preoccupation with scrutinizing female genitalia for signs of sin and witchcraft, and of nineteenth-century forensic medical campaigns to detect promiscuity and homosexuality by examining the shapes of lips and
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modern physicians' diagnoses in ritual-abuse cases were until the late 1980s; in the meantime, the word of these ants to prison.

findings bore at least a superficial resemblance to evi
d to criminal trials, there was little or no precedent for
terviews, closed-circuit television testimony, hearings speaking for children in court, or expert testimony about their drawings, and sexual-abuse behavioral syndromes.

this problem, child-protection advocates borrowed from rape law as they successfully introduced the new sex.

Their triumph, however, was highly problematic, not just the integrity of the justice system and for the children in the validity of the new evidence were based on positions rather than empirical research, and they undermined justice through fact finding rather than emotion and intui
tion communicated and assumptions about children's traditional ideas about "good" women—and cour
e of evil-doing females like the accused in day-care abuse.

...as a political attempt to give children a civic voice, and
e for women. The irony of this rhetoric is that the young were indeed silenced, but by prosecutors rather than per
testimony made during the early cases show that when
t freely, either they had nothing to say about abuse or suffered to them. Once it became obvious that these
i verdicts, prosecutors began advising investigators not
tes of their work. This silencing of youngsters was rein
d exculpatory evidence from defense lawyers and
f in the name of protecting the child victims.

"...of the cases of ritual abuse became so quickly and monolithically surprising that the first skeptics were friends and family of
dly dismissed as disreputable, and who sometimes then being child molesters. By the mid-1980s, a few child
minalists, and prosecutors also began entertaining doubts, many were censured by their colleagues and discouraged
terms. Doubt gradually coalesced, however, and just as cases had a moral conservative tenor, so did much dis

cipents of state involvement in family life were using

ritual-abuse accusations as a warning about the dangers of child protection and therapy, and issuing across-the-board condemnations of feminism and feminists as predatory wreckers of happy homes. Ritual-abuse proponents responded by dismissing every criticism as antifeminist and antichild backlash, all while ignoring their own complicity in discrediting child protection and the women's movement.

Believers also mounted their own backlash, by developing ever more articulated arguments to make the incredible sound reasonable. Their latest effort involves resurrecting "dissociation theory," a body of psychological thought dating from nineteenth-century theories of female hysteria posing that victims of sexual abuse shield themselves psychologically by banishing their traumatic memories from con
sciousness. With dissociation theory, ritual-abuse proponents explain children's silence as the result of amnesia, and this, they claim, further proves that the young
were horribly abused. The diagnosis used to advance this rationalization is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a relatively new psychiatric label whose origins lie in the 1960s-era protest movement against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war. With its implicit condemnation of violence—particularly male violence—PTSD has become an attractive illness for feminists and child-protection advocates, and claims that ritual-abused children suffer from the malady have provided fresh ammunition with which to justify their obsession with the devil.

What follows is a history of that obsession, and an analysis of what has been said—and not said—to promote it. Our aim is to explore what the children in ritual-abuse cases were actually communicating before their utterances, behaviors, and bodies were reinterpreted through the language of cultural panic. We restore the voices of defendants before they were transmuted by false confessions and guilty verdicts. By examining the ways in which many child-protection leaders and organizations profited by building and justifying ritual-abuse cases, we reveal the real message behind their current warnings that skepticism will hurt women and children.

There are many silences to be broken here. Perhaps the biggest one emanates from thoughtful women's advocates and child protectionists who doubt the logic of ritual-abuse claims but hesitate to speak out because they lack an analysis with which to articulate their skepticism. In offering them words, we hope to open a forum for rational discussion about a terrible episode in our country's history.

Such discussion is sorely needed, because during a time when it has become fash
nable to speak of evil, if there is anything that can be called satanic about ritual
use, it is the cacophony of media and scholarly prurience that has silenced
thoughtful exploration of its roots and meanings. By challenging that silence, we give voice to our culture's deepest fears and yearnings. By listening, perhaps we can find real ways to protect our children and empower ourselves.