

PSYCHIATRY

Sybil, Inc.

Ben Harris

In 1972, incorporation papers for Sybil, Incorporated, were drawn up by a patient, her therapist, and a journalist who had just finished writing a book about her case.

Flora Rheta Schreiber's *Sybil* (1) told the story of a young woman who was cured of having her consciousness split into 16 separate personalities. The corporation's purpose was to share the profits from the book, a planned film, and spin-offs that included T-shirts, dolls, a jigsaw puzzle, and a board game. Although the corporation did not last and the ancillary products did not materialize, the book sold millions of copies. It was dramatized twice in made-for-television movies. In the first, Sybil's psychiatrist was played by Joanne Woodward, who had previously won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her performance in the role of a patient with multiple personality disorder in Nunnally Johnson's 1957 film *The Three Faces of Eve*.

The most notable product of Sybil, Inc.'s principals was the epidemic of multiple personality disorder that swept the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Unlike most previous cases, these late-20th-century variants featured personalities stuck in various stages of childhood. The patients' "alters" revealed memories of childhood sexual abuse—often horrific—elicited by hypnosis. Today, researchers and clinicians are skeptical about most cases of multiple personality disorder, which has been reconceptualized and renamed dissociative identity disorder.

Over the past two decades, revelations have emerged to raise doubts about the validity of the case of Sybil. First, a clinician who had met the patient disputed the diagnosis promoted in the book. Then, tapes left by the book's author suggested that she colluded with the therapist to create symptoms to fit their diagnosis.

In *Sybil Exposed*, journalist Debbie Nathan chronicles the rise and fall of *Sybil*

as the paradigm-setting case of multiple personality disorder. She does so in three intertwined biographies, beginning with that of the patient, Shirley Mason. Mason's upbringing

was strict (Seventh Day Adventist), and although her mother was odd and subject to mood swings, she was not the sexual sadist depicted in *Sybil*. Starting at age 22, Mason was treated by Cornelia Wilbur, an ambitious psychiatrist who progressed from treating traumatized World War II soldiers with hypnosis and sodium pentothal to inducing traumatic memories

in Mason with the same tools. This she did on and off for more than two decades, first in Nebraska and then in New York City. In New York, Wilbur often saw Mason daily, making house calls in the evening with a satchel of drugs and a portable electroconvulsive therapy machine. Beginning in 1963, the patient and her therapist collaborated with Schreiber, a journalist with a tendency to make her magazine stories more salable by massaging biographical details.

Sybil Exposed

The Extraordinary Story Behind the Famous Multiple Personality Case

by Debbie Nathan

Free Press (Simon and Schuster), New York, 2011. 328 pp. \$26, C\$29.99, £16.95. ISBN 9781439168271.

Nathan offers a compelling account of the creation, packaging, and selling of this case of medical and journalistic malpractice. Her sources include transcripts of therapy sessions, letters by the patient to childhood friends and former roommates, and interviews with acquaintances and colleagues of all three women. Nathan's credentials suit this topic well, as she coauthored an earlier book (2) that helped reverse the flood of false memories implanted in children by prosecutors and therapists inspired by *Sybil*. As a feminist, she was dismayed that a segment of the women's movement channeled its social concerns into a hunt for psychosexual demons that unjustly targeted teachers and day care workers.

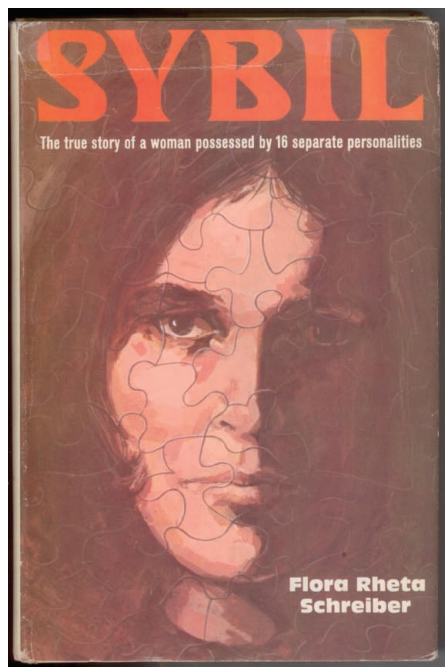
Analyzing the significance of *Sybil*, Nathan shows how the dilemmas faced by post-World War II women helped shape that case and gave it cultural resonance. Wilbur, she explains, saw herself as a psychiatric Betty Friedan, encouraging female patients to try out new social roles and, indeed, even new personalities. Similarly, journalist Schreiber saw Mason as a country girl from a stifling background who found a new identity in the big city. Both Wilbur and Schreiber had struggled to find acceptance in male-dominated professions and reveled in the status and remuneration that *Sybil* brought them.

Looking beyond the three women who created *Sybil*, Nathan explores the institutional and professional context of both that case and the epidemic that followed. With its shifting boundaries and history of diagnostic uncertainty, psychiatry was a medical specialty with little resistance to the faddishness and yearning for breakthroughs that fueled the multiple personality disorder fervor. Adding to clinicians' enthusiasm was the embrace of multiple personality disorder by celebrities, journalists, and television producers.

In concluding her "cautionary tale of this great American multiplicity," Nathan regrets that desire for personal change went awry at a "fractured moment in history." The result was that "women and their social struggles were reduced to a bizarre illness. The cure was not critical inquiry or protest marches or efforts at the polls. Instead the cure was drugs [and] hypnosis." Reading *Sybil Exposed*, that conclusion seems warranted.

References

1. F. R. Schreiber, *Sybil* (Regnery, Chicago, 1973).
2. D. Nathan, M. R. Snedeker, *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (Basic, New York, 1995).



The account that made the story famous. The cover of the first edition of *Sybil*.

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10.1126/science.1212843