

# Letters

Dear S&S,

I was mystified by your contradictory editorial dismissal of the recent BBC programme, *Inside Story* on 'false memories' (July 1994). Far from it 'digging up' unrepresentative 'black and white stories of crooked therapists, gullible clients and wronged carers', both the American False Memory Syndrome Foundation with 15,000 members and the year-old British False Memory Society with 500 families can testify that dubious and destructive therapeutically 'recovered memories' are an extensive problem. There is also evidence to show that their production is aided by mainstream psychologists and psychiatrists. One result is a steady stream of wrongful prosecutions and, in some cases, convictions with long prison sentences, brought about because the 'memories' are impossible to disprove.

The Ramona case, which you seem to imply was tiresome and vexatious, was important not in establishing the truth or falsity of the daughter's 'memories' — but in establishing the principle of the responsibility of therapists not to encourage or endorse claims of uncorroborated crimes by vulnerable clients, and to discourage reckless, retrospective inference from adult symptoms. These points are well rehearsed in the article by John Rowan, which followed.

Unfortunately abusive childhoods are all too common, but just how common or credible the stories of 'blocked out' or 'repressed' memories of years of incestuous rape hidden behind a wall of outward normality are, is a moot point. Whether

therapeutically suggested or the product of fertile imaginations, they have been overwhelmingly delivered with the aid of therapists. What is clear from the experience in the United States and Britain is that such 'histories' have proliferated against a backdrop of widespread publicity, a mounting cultural anxiety, survivor case histories and tendentious self-help books.

If you are looking for distorted 'black and white' case stories I suggest you trawl through the archives of fifteen years of consciousness raising about sexual abuse survivors, examine the standard techniques of 'recovered memory therapy' and consider the reliability of their findings.

As for the balancing of alarm, what are you implying by saying a father stating that his daughter was previously 'perfectly happy and normal', was 'worrying'? Are you saying she could not have been normal, or hinting that the father is in some form of denial about his daughter's childhood happiness?

Of course false memories have causes and antecedents, but are you inferring that for an accusation to have been made, some form of abuse must have occurred? Surely this is dangerous and unwarranted territory which should be guarded against, not least because it is the kind of flawed logic which can lead juries to convict defendants in abuse cases because they presume that an allegation, however flimsy the evidence, must be caused by some action of the defendant.

Unfortunately this presumption of guilt

is now all too commonly espoused by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service. In fact there are many reasons why people may become the chosen target of a false accusation, but in these cases it is all too easy for the complainant to assume the mantle of victim when it is not even certain that a crime has been committed. Blaming the accused without a full knowledge of the facts is as unwise as it is unjust.

It is no good fudging the issue behind platitudes about messy realities and varieties of 'truth'. There is a perfectly good term for narrative 'truth', which deviates from factual or historical truth — that is 'fiction'. This is a modality which of itself is neither true nor false, but contains elements of both. In the virtual reality of therapy, fact and fiction are easily confused, a process known as 'confabulation' which is again usefully described by John Rowan. And if it is a 'symbolic' truth, what does it symbolise? How strange that the mundane 'messy' realities have to be euphemistically cloaked in unspeakable barbarities! For the truth is, far from being 'unspeakable', the indulgence of prurient, obscene fears and fantasies has become an acceptable and mutually mesmeric form of therapeutic discourse.

Media information about the ease with which 'false memories' of abuse can take hold is not only timely, but long overdue as a corrective to the new mythology which has grown up around child abuse.

There are many who seek to gag or minimise the dissemination of information about the nature of memory under the emotive guise of protecting children. It is not an easy issue to resolve, but if misinformation continues to guide welfare professionals and the criminal justice system, the danger is that real cases will go unrecognised, whilst falsely accused parents and carers of adults and children will continue to be indiscriminately persecuted in a twentieth century witchhunt

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*The British False Memory Society*

The debate about false memory syndrome will continue with at least two articles in the January issue prompted by our recent coverage. *Ed.*

Dear S&S,

I feel I must write to correct Earwig's double slight on the work I do. Earwig states that 'even the dustman has headed letter paper'. First of all, women now do this work and I am known as a cleansing operative, so please use 'dustperson' in future. Secondly, I resent the stereotyping of dustpeople as uneducated. I am proud of the way I mix my early morning refuse collection with my teaching an afternoon WEA course '20th century culture — path to individuation or alienation?'. I trust you will be more careful in future.

*Meg McKenzie, PhD*