



STATEMENT DS462

SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT RECOVERED MEMORIES

We've all heard the stories – dramatic tales of people who assumed they had happy childhoods, only to discover they actually grew up victims of horrific abuses. These life-shattering discoveries are linked to graphic “recovered memories,” which are believed to have been repressed into the unconscious from decades or, in some cases (past-life regression therapy), centuries before. Patients have recovered these memories in the course of a phenomenally popular form of psychotherapy, *recovered memory therapy* (RMT).

Having its roots in early Freudian theory, the rebirth of RMT in the early 1980s gave rise to an entire cottage industry of trauma experts, inpatient treatment programs, victim support groups, lectures, seminars, books, and videos. Each extolled RMT as the pathway to healing from a myriad of ailments and promised true self-actualization. RMT has developed into five focus areas of memory recovery: forgotten incest, satanic ritual abuse (SRA), past-life regressions, space alien abductions, and regression into the womb. Proponents of RMT have made for an awkward alliance, with feminists, Christians, New Agers, and science fiction enthusiasts joining forces in their affirmation of its authenticity.

In the initial excitement, it was assumed by many that RMT's dramatic, scientific-sounding claims were true. In the early 1990s, however, professionals started asking some basic questions: “Are Freud's earlier beliefs about the theory of repression valid and is repression as widespread as RMT proponents claim?” “Can hypnosis really unlock hidden memories?” “Is it possible that at least some of the hypnotic images are confabulations?” The uproar that ensued is arguably one of the hottest debates in the history of psychology, and increasingly RMT therapists are finding themselves in court facing former clients and family members who are claiming malpractice.

If you're wondering what all the controversy is about, some excellent books critiquing RMT have come out in the past few years. Told from varying points of view and insight, each has compelling stories of RMT abuse, presentations on how memory actually works, and cogent critiques of RMT theories, techniques, and research. The following six books provide a sampling to consider.

Confabulations: Creating False Memories, Destroying Families

Eleanor Goldstein and Kevin Farmer
(SIRS, 1992)

True Stories of False Memories

Eleanor Goldstein and Kevin Farmer
(SIRS, 1993)

Social Issues Resources Series (SIRS) provides information on pertinent social phenomena to over 30,000 institutions worldwide. (Incidentally, SIRS was one of the first to publish on the AIDS crisis.) SIRS cofounder Eleanor Goldstein and researcher Kevin Farmer were the first to publish on the false memory crisis and the dangers of RMT, and their writings remain as relevant today as when first published. In *Confabulations*, the authors share powerful stories of families victimized by RMT and present interviews with therapists who promote recovered memories. *Confabulations* traces RMT's influences from various sources, including the recovery movement, New Age doctrine, feminism, and satanic hysteria. They provide a critique of *The Courage to Heal*, which is known as the “Bible” of RMT, but which has since been soundly debunked in a number of publications. Their follow-up book, *True Stories of False Memories*, shares stories of siblings of RMT patients, explores how people can come to believe traumatic fantasies, and gives extended accounts of three well-known retractors — former patients who have rejected their RMT experiences as coercive and false.

The strength of *Confabulations* and *True Stories* lies in the authors' style of permitting participants in RMT, both critics and proponents, to speak with little interruption. This allows the reader to experience the injustices done, the zealous tenets of RMT

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believers, and the incontrovertible evidence that is mounting against them. The stories are compelling, and whereas stories supporting RMT lead readers from reason into the fantastic, stories critiquing RMT lead one back from the fantastic to reason. Because of the authors' focus on stories and dialogue, however, scholarly references are few. Despite this, *Confabulations* and *True Stories* are a must for those seeking a complete understanding of the false memory crisis.

Making Monsters

Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters
(Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994)

Richard Ofshe, an expert in the dynamics of cults and thought control, and Ethan Watters, an investigative writer who pioneered the initial questioning of RMT, bring a passionate indictment against the movement, charging RMT practitioners with mental health fraud. *Making Monsters* examines the spectrum of RMT, from recovery of incest memories, to its expansion into images of satanic ritual abuse, and its final culmination in a plethora of diagnoses of multiple personality disorder.

Monsters provides a revealing interview with Ellen Bass, coauthor of *The Courage to Heal*, and examines the fallacy of "effort after meaning" — the idea that there is someone to blame for every ailment a patient suffers. It strongly criticizes RMT's "symptoms lists" (depression, drug use, etc.), therapists advocating narrative truth over historical truth, and the construction of irrational belief systems in vulnerable clients. There are chapters on hypnosis and its key role in inducing and reinforcing delusions, SRA beliefs and their parallel to earlier witch hunts, and multiple personality disorder revealed as a therapy-induced disorder. Ofshe played a leading role in the well-known Paul Ingram case, which is shared with the reader in convincing, behind-the-scenes detail. The book ends with moving stories of families that have been victimized by RMT and a summary critique of the recovery movement within the context of history and present culture.

Monsters is one of the more strongly worded and decisive reviews of RMT. Ofshe is not one to mince words. This is an engaging resource for the layperson looking for a concise and readable overview of RMT.

The Myth of Repressed Memory

Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham
(St. Martin's Press, 1994)

Elizabeth Loftus is recognized as one of the world's leading memory experts and, given her academic roots, she has created a surprisingly compassionate and readable exploration of RMT. The weight of *Myth's* message rests on the author's extensive understanding of the malleability of memory, showcased by her involvement in dramatic, high-visibility court cases (Eileen Franklin and Paul Ingram), which gives the reader an insider's view of these proceedings. The RMT stories are shared at length, yet with easy readability.

Myth offers a strong review on the workings of memory, with the exploration of "historical truth" as compared to "narrative truth." It includes a review of pro-RMT literature that promotes the undocumented ideas that "incest is epidemic, repression is rampant, recovery is possible." It also explores RMT literature's influence in misleading gullible patients and contributing to the creation of false memories. Of the books reviewed, *Myth* offers the most compassionate voice, seeking a middle ground of reconciliation between both sides of the RMT debate. The reader is left without black and white answers, but instead must confront an uncomfortable gray area of uncertainty regarding RMT.

A resulting weakness of *Myth* is the lack of a firm position on RMT, with a bit too much discussion by Loftus about being caught in the middle. At times the book rambles, with the reader not quite sure where it's headed. Loftus is clearly hesitant to criticize feminism, which provides the underpinnings of much of RMT belief and practice, and she doesn't offer a critique of commonly cited pro-RMT research. In addition, she fails to address the religious aspects of RMT, and ignores RMT for past lives and space aliens as well.

Overall, *Myth* is one of the more "user-friendly" books reviewed, allowing the reader a smooth, engaging reading experience and bringing him or her into a compassionate dialogue about complex, important aspects of the debate.

Suggestions of Abuse: True and False Memories of Childhood Sexual Traumas

Michael Yapko
(Simon & Schuster, 1994)

Recognized as a leading authority on hypnosis, Michael Yapko brings a convincing critique of the misuse of trance-induction techniques in *Suggestions of Abuse*. He shares fascinating results of a survey he conducted with therapists across the nation which

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reveals many serious misconceptions therapists hold, and in turn pass on to, their clients. Mistaken assumptions include: “If someone doesn’t remember much about his or her childhood, it is most likely because it was somehow traumatic” (43 percent agree), Hypnosis counteracts the defense mechanism of repression (83 percent agree), “Hypnotically obtained memories are more accurate than simply just remembering” (43 percent agree), “Hypnosis can be used to recover memories of actual events as far back as birth” (54 percent agree), and “Hypnosis can be used to recover accurate memories of past lives” (28 percent agree). Interestingly, as an advocate of hypnosis, Yapko is arguing that hypnosis itself is not bad, but that it is being misapplied and consequently creates believed-in delusions in clients.

Suggestions examines RMT in the context of a culture that encourages victim identity and freedom from responsibility. Yapko gives a good review of how memory works, examines claims of past lives and space aliens, shows how therapists influence clients to create traumatic fantasies and reinforce them as real, and examines why we tend to accept traumatic fantasies as true. Guidelines for selecting a therapist are provided, as well as how the falsely accused can cope with the crisis. *Suggestions* offers a text that is shorter and more engaging than most. However, citations are not as scholarly and little critique is offered of pro-RMT literature, leaving the professional looking for more.

Victims of Memory: Incest Accusations and Shattered Lives
Mark Pendergrast
(Upper Access Books, 1995)

If you’re looking for one definitive book on the RMT controversy, this is it. Pendergrast brings his expertise as an investigative writer and couples it with a passion drawn from having lost both of his daughters to RMT. *Victims* offers in-depth, readable explorations of pro-RMT literature and its influence, a concise critique of research on repression, and an explanation of how one can come to believe the unbelievable. Pendergrast reviews multiple personality disorders, claims of satanic ritual abuse, child abuse hysteria, magical thinking in psychology, and victimization and survivorship as a religious dynamic. Separate chapters expose the beliefs of therapists and survivors, and shed light on RMT-advocate abuse of retractors and accused families. *Victims* concludes with excellent summations of where RMT is headed and the subsequent crisis for therapists.

One of the unique aspects of *Victims* is that each chapter is designed to stand alone, so its readers can pick through the chapters they want to peruse, in any particular order that they choose. The book offers the most in-depth, overall exploration of the various subtopics that I read, and references are extensive and well presented. The author has informed me that he is completing a revision of *Victims* that will incorporate more recent developments and include an examination of the role that Christian therapists play in promoting RMT.

— Paul Simpson

Paul Simpson, Ed.D., is a psychologist, professional family mediator, and founder of Project Middle Ground (520) 751-0101 — the first program in the nation that provides education, mediation, and restoration for those impacted by RMT. He is the author of the forthcoming *Second Thoughts: Understanding the False Memory Crisis* (Thomas Nelson, Fall 1996).