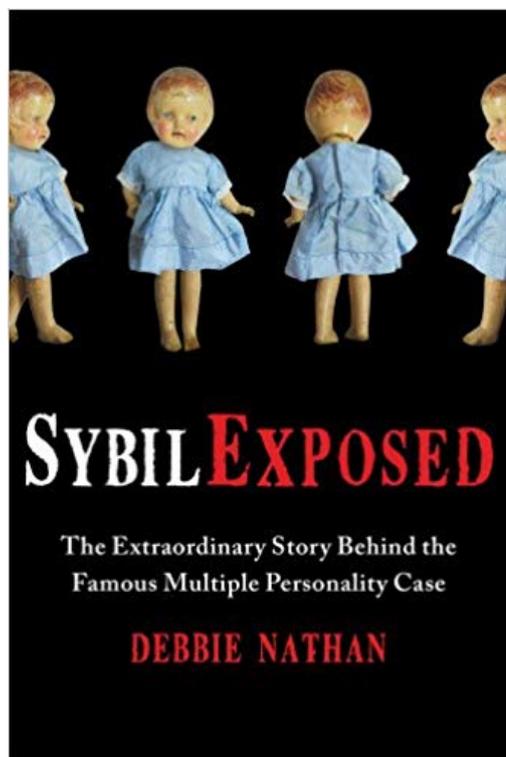


## Sybil Exposed: The Extraordinary Story Behind the Famous Multiple Personality Case *by* Debbie Nathan



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Sybil: a name that conjures up enduring fascination for legions of obsessed fans who followed the nonfiction blockbuster from 1973 and the TV movie based on it—starring Sally Field and Joanne Woodward—about a woman named Sybil with sixteen different personalities. *Sybil* became both a pop phenomenon and a revolutionary force in the psychotherapy industry. The book rocketed multiple personality disorder (MPD) into public consciousness and played a major role in having the diagnosis added to the psychiatric bible, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. But what do we really know about how *Sybil* came to be? In her news-breaking book *Sybil Exposed*, journalist Debbie Nathan gives proof that the allegedly true story was largely fabricated. The actual identity of Sybil (Shirley Mason) has been available for some years, as has the idea that the book might have been exaggerated. But in *Sybil Exposed*, Nathan reveals what really powered the legend: a trio of women—the willing patient, her ambitious shrink, and the imaginative journalist who spun their story into bestseller gold. From horrendously irresponsible therapeutic practices—Sybil’s psychiatrist often brought an electroshock machine to Sybil’s apartment and climbed into bed with her while administering the treatment— to calculated business decisions (under an entity they named Sybil, Inc., the women signed a contract designating a three-way split of profits from the book and its spin-offs, including board games, tee shirts, and dolls), the story Nathan unfurls is full of over-the-top behavior. Sybil’s psychiatrist, driven by undisciplined idealism and galloping professional ambition, subjected the young woman to years of antipsychotics, psychedelics, uppers, and downers, including an untold number of injections with Pentothal, once known as “truth serum” but now widely recognized to provoke fantasies. It was during these “treatments” that Sybil produced rambling, garbled, and probably “false-memory”-based narratives of the hideous child abuse that her psychiatrist said caused her MPD. *Sybil Exposed* uses investigative journalism to tell a fascinating tale that reads like fiction but is fact. Nathan has followed an enormous trail of papers,

records, photos, and tapes to unearth the lives and passions of these three women. The *Sybil* archive became available to the public only recently, and Nathan examined all of it and provides proof that the story was an elaborate fraud—albeit one that the perpetrators may have half-believed. Before *Sybil* was published, there had been fewer than 200 known cases of MPD; within just a few years after, more than 40,000 people would be diagnosed with it. Set across the twentieth century and rooted in a time when few professional roles were available to women, this is a story of corrosive sexism, unchecked ambition, and shaky theories of psychoanalysis exuberantly and drastically practiced. It is the story of how one modest young woman's life turned psychiatry on its head and radically changed the course of therapy, and our culture, as well.



## Reviews of the **Sybil Exposed: The Extraordinary Story Behind the Famous Multiple Personality Case** by **Debbie Nathan**

Dellevar

Just kidding. There is only me. I am glad this book was written. I too swallowed the Sybil story when it first came out. Then again, I believed A Million Little Pieces was true as well. In a world where lives have been ruined by accusations of ritual sexual abuse of workers at a daycare center based on false memories, we need somebody keeping the mental health profession honest.

Gavinranara

I am a Masters level Licensed Mental Health practitioner with 30 years of experience. In my early career, I attended numerous workshops and presentations focused on MPD, DID and so-called ritual abuse complete with lovingly rendered and explicitly gory details. I sat through impassioned speeches about the unfailing accuracy of recovered memories and the incapacity of children (who often live as though their and caregivers' fictions are fact) to tell anything but the absolute truth. I even believed it for a time. And that's the rub. Facts don't require belief. We don't have a scientific, objective, factual and observable measurement for personality, singular. Let alone multiple. Let's stop giving people more problems than they have.

Dangerous

As a former Psychiatric research nurse, I've studied historical cases of abuse in research but am truly shocked that this went on in the 60s and 70s without anyone questioning it.

The story of Sybil has been around for decades and the validity of the story went unchallenged until all of those involved were dead. Aside from the travesties done to Shirley at the hands of Dr. Wilbur, I am appalled that it has taken this long to expose the fraud and abuse and that there were even people who helped keep this hidden to protect the legacy of Dr. C. Wilbur.

Coiwield

Ms. Nathan confronts the Multiple Personality Disorder community, or as it is now known, the Disassociative Disorder Community, or DID community, by trying to unravel the strange and unique behavior of the personalities involved in the case of "Sybil", a well known DID whose case was celebrated as a breakthrough when it first came out, and then became the subject of questions.

While reading this book, many things appeared to me to be uncertain. Many of the thoughts of those involved in Sybil's case were written as if verbatim, yet these thoughts do not have notes attached as to where they came from. Others have footnotes that indicate that they were taken "in context", but whose context were they taken in? I am sure that there is a lot of information of which I am not aware that would back Ms. Nathan up on some of this, but her discussion of homosexual behavior between some of the participants is, at best, a reach.

While there might have been (all of the subjects are dead now, so we cannot ask), what reason is there to bring this up in a book that is written about what is purported to be a fraudulent agreement between people involved? It bears no purpose other than to bring a haze of mystery onto the scene, with a thin layer of innuendo that reeks, to me, of someone saying "If they had an affair, they must have made this stuff up".

I believe that this book could have been made better with less fictional conversation (at least conversation and thoughts that seem fictional) and more facts. Ms. Nathan's subjects, many of whom were third and fourth hand (a friend, a cousin, someone who knew someone who knew Sybil, Dr. Wilbur or Ms. Schreiber) seemed to not lend a tone of veracity to the book, as the information seemed to be passed from person to person rather than heard first hand.

I understand that the relationship between the three was strained and, in some ways, very codependent, but at the same time, I also feel it could have been handled differently. This, of course, is just my opinion.

FLIDER

Great read! Very insightful, total page turner!

Wetiwas

The author makes a number of valid points about this case and the analysis of Sybil. However she has her own bias against the Dissociative Identity disorder and it shows. Her concerns and conclusions about the Sybil case should not be generalized to the disorder as a whole.

Dammy

You do a great job!! I am a satisfied customer.

Very interesting book, the beginning is hard to get through.. very factual (resembling three chapters or so worth of a Wikipedia page) but necessary to understand the individuals discussed in the book.

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