



The Day Care Ritual Abuse Moral Panic

By Mary De Young

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In the United States during the early 1980s, hundreds of day care providers were accused of sexually abusing their young charges in satanic rituals that included blood drinking, cannibalism, and human sacrifice. The panic surrounding the ritual abuse of children has spread quickly to Canada, Europe, and Australasia, and its rapid dispersion has been unimpeded by international investigations that found no evidence to corroborate the allegations and warned that a moral panic was thrusting them into professional public attention. This work is a sociologically based analysis of the day care ritual abuse panic in America. It introduces the concept of moral panic and analyzes its relevance to the ritual abuse scare, explores the ideological, political, economic, and professional forces that fomented the panic, discusses the McMartin Preschool case as the incident that brought attention to satanic menaces and children, and examines the dialect between the various interest groups that stirred up and spread the moral panic and the day care providers accused of ritual abuse. Also covered are the popular culture representations of day care ritual abuse, the diffusion of the scare to areas overseas, the institutionally symbolic and ideologically contradictory social ends of the panic, and the outcomes of the panic in various settings. The book ends with a discussion of moral panic theory and how it needs to be changed for a complex, multi-mediated postmodern culture, and what lessons can be learned from the scare.

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Mary de Young, a professor of sociology at Grand Valley State University, lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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