

# The Debunking of a Myth

Contributed by Denna Allen & Janet Midwinter  
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Why the original "ritual abuse" victim may have suffered only from her childhood fantasies

Michelle Pazder is a plump, middle-aged woman with one daughter. She has an ordinary nine-to-five job working as a receptionist in her husband's surgery in the Canadian provincial town of Victoria, British Columbia. Yet, incredible as it seems, Michelle Pazder is a key figure in the current Satanic abuse controversy to whom the extraordinary happenings in England can be directly linked.

Thirteen years ago she lay on a psychiatrist's couch and poured out tales of such unimaginable horror that the Vatican launched an investigation and Hollywood offered her a film contract. Michelle described how, as a five-year-old, she had been offered to Satan. From deep inside her mind came memories long buried: How she had witnessed debauchery, murder and the sacrifice of babies, the mutilation of snakes and kittens. How she was made to drink blood at the altar of Satan. Her torment was to last nearly two years. And she named the person guilty of giving her to the Devil Ñ her own mother.

The psychiatrist who recorded all this in many months of therapeutic sessions was Dr Lawrence Pazder. Both were married to other people. He is now her husband. The Pazders' book, *Michelle Remembers*, was an immediate international best-seller. But, more importantly, many child care experts believe it was the "seed work" which began the current wave of hysteria about Satanists. Robert Hicks of the U.S. Justice Department said: "Before *Michelle Remembers* there were no Satanic prosecutions involving children. Now the myth is everywhere."

The book was pounced upon by fundamentalist Christian groups, interest spread like wildfire across the States, and the crusade crossed last year to England. An important conference at Reading University, attended by social workers from all over the country, heard "experts" describing Michelle's experiences.

It was Dr. Pazder who coined the phrase "ritual abuse", which has been used by the Rochdale Social Services Department to justify their drastic action in taking 16 children into care.

But did Michelle, now aged 40, tell the truth? Did these things actually physically happen to her? Is *Michelle Remembers*, published in this country by Michael Joseph and now being treated with such respect by a powerful child welfare lobby, fact - or fiction? For the past two weeks *Mail on Sunday* reporters have been investigating.

Dr. Pazder, who has since been consulted in more than 1,000 "ritual abuse" cases, was reluctant to speak to us at length. He would not allow us access to Michelle, his wife and star witness. He said: "For Michelle to go on talking about these things is too painful. She is totally free of Satan today. She is a wonderful person, full of freedom and love."

But every other witness we have interviewed described these happenings as "the hysterical ravings of an uncontrolled imagination".

Some, including a Roman Catholic bishop, give Michelle the benefit of the doubt; that she did genuinely \*believe\* these things happened to her. But they are firmly convinced that, in real life, they did not, and have to be explained as the workings of her subconscious.

In the book Michelle says she was introduced to the Satanic ring by her mother in the basement of her home in 1955. She was just five.

Dr. Pazder conceals the family's true identity and home address. But we discovered she was the daughter of Jack and Virginia Proby, who lived with Michelle's two sisters at 2078 Newton Street, Victoria, a white-painted house, set among neat hedges and suburban lawns.

The first witness is Michelle's father, Jack Proby. Mr Proby, now 74, admits he was not the perfect father, and it was a difficult marriage. But he is outraged at what Michelle and her psychiatrist have done to the memory of his wife, who died in 1963.

"It was the worst pack of lies a little girl could ever make up. The book took me four months to read, and I cried all the time. I kept saying to myself: 'Dear God, how could anyone do this to their dead mother?'

"\*There never was a woman on this earth who worked harder for her daughters. There was no hanky panky or devil-worshipping.\*"

"I asked my lawyer if I could sue them. He said I would win, but it would cost me \$5,000. So instead I took out a Notice of Intent against their publisher, which meant if they ever went beyond a literary contract I would sue. That meant they couldn't get their movie deal."

Mr. Proby itemized, as examples, three specific points where he says Michelle lied:

Book: Michelle said she had no religious upbringing.

Father: "She went to church every Sunday with her mother and sisters. The three of them were confirmed together."

Book: Michelle said she was twice poisoned during Satanic rites.

Father: "She was treated for poisoning, but it had nothing to do with devil-worship. Once she drank turps and paint mixture while I was cleaning my brushes. Another time she ate shoe polish."

Book: Michelle describes a horrible car accident which was re-lived by the devil-worshippers in which Satan himself appears.

Father: "What I do recall was us once coming across a fatal crash in our car. We saw two cars smashed together, and a woman lying in the road bleeding to death. Her intestines were hanging out, and it was a horrible sight. Michelle started to scream, and we could not stop her for ages."

Mr. Proby's testimony is backed by several independent witnesses. Dr. Andrew Gillespie, who was the family doctor, said: "I believe it was something she pictured in a lot of conversations with Dr. Pazder and an over-active imagination."

"I remember her mother as a kindly woman. She died of cancer when Michelle was 14. There were several poisoning episodes in which the children got into mischief, but they were not serious."

A neighbor, Alice Okerstrom, agrees. "I dismissed the book as crazy. The mother was a nice, gracious lady. A little girl could not have been tortured without someone hearing."

Diana Lockyer, whose husband was head of the cancer unit at the local hospital, was a close friend of the Probys. She too was "outraged" at the book. Her daughter Gillian was Michelle's best friend. Gillian said: "Virginia was like a second mother to me. I certainly never had a bad feeling about her."

The next important witness is Michelle's first husband, Doug Smith, a chartered surveyor. Although he would not speak to us directly, a close friend said he was extremely bitter. Not once during their marriage or the birth of their daughter did Michelle ever mention her experience, which included such hideous psychological torture as being imprisoned in a cage with live snakes and being forced to eat a soup of worms.

Michelle went to Dr. Pazder for therapy sessions and eventually left her husband. Dr Pazder was also married, with four children.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police says there has never been one prosecution in Victoria for Satanic practices. And a Canadian author who is an expert on the occult, Jean Kozocari, said: "There was never any Satanism in Victoria in the 1950s. The most interesting group there were wife swappers."

Finally the conclusions of the Roman Catholic Church: When the book first appeared, Bishop Remi de Roo spent many hours interviewing Michelle and listening to tapes of her therapeutic sessions. He then arranged for her to fly to the Vatican to meet Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, then head of the Secretariat for Non-Christians.

When the book was published in 1977, the Bishop wrote in a preface: "I do not question that for Michelle the experience was real. In time we will know how much of it can be validated. It will require prolonged and careful study. In such mysterious matters hasty conclusions could prove unwise."

In the meantime "ritual abuse" became a buzz-phrase among social workers, who believe that Michelle and her doctor bravely lifted the lid on practices which had going on for years without outsiders realizing it.

So what does the Roman Catholic Church now believe? Bishop de Roo's office told us: "He wants to distance himself from these people. More than ten years ago he asked the couple to provide him with details, but they never supplied all the information he required."

Dr. Pazder himself admits he is working in areas that are difficult to define. "It's an area where if you jump in too quickly, you get hysteria. People start seeing Satanists around every corner."

He says \_Michelle Remembers\_ gave victims a voice to be heard and not be labelled crazy.

We then asked Dr Pazder: "Does it matter if it was true, or is the fact that Michelle believed it happened to her the most important thing?"

He replied: "Yes, that's right. It is a real experience. If you talk to Michelle today, she will say, 'That what I remember.' We still leave the question open. For her it was very real. Every case I hear I have skepticism. You have to complete a long course of therapy before you can come to conclusions. We are all eager to prove or disprove what happened, but in the end it doesn't matter."

One wonders what the parents of Rochdale would have to say about that!