

# Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend

Contributed by Jeffrey L. Victor  
Tuesday, 02 May 1995

Buffalo News, 02/05/95

## Professor Honored for Book on Satanism Sociologist Studied 'Panic' Bred by Cult Scares

For Jamestown Community College sociology Professor Jeffrey L. Victor, the work that won him the Free Press Association's H.L. Mencken Award was the result of being the right researcher in the right place at the right time.

"It was like being a meteorologist when a tornado's going through," he said. "I knew I had a story, but I didn't know how far it was going to go."

It took him four years to write "Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend," a study of satanic cult scares in dozens of communities. He submitted it to 50 publishers before it was accepted by Open Court Publishing Co., a small scholarly publishing house in Chicago.

The award, given by an organization of journalists concerned with First Amendment rights, has been won in previous years by such prominent writers as Seymour Hersh, Robert Caro and P.J. O'Rourke.

"I was very surprised to get it," Victor, 53, said. "I hope it helps sell a few books."

Victor was in the center of a satanic cult rumor that swept the Jamestown area in 1988. His son Mathieu, who was 16 at the time and favored a punk look, was receiving telephone death threats from people who believed he was a satanist.

"He's an artist," Victor noted. "He was the only white kid in town with dreadlocks. I needed to know what was going on, so I called the police.

"The police said there was nothing there. Journalists said it was only a rumor. But rumors can feed anxieties. A hundred cars went to a place that was thought to be a ritual site. People were breaking into warehouses. People were downtown with baseball bats, and there was no baseball game. It was a bizarre scenario.

"Twenty-five percent or more of the elementary-school students were kept home from school by their parents because the cult was rumored to be planning the kidnap or murder of a blond child. It developed in midwinter and it reached a peak on Friday the 13th. It was classic."

After Victor published some articles on the scare, he learned of 62 communities across the United States that also experienced such incidents.

"There were similar stories in other towns," he said. "It happened in Cuba, N.Y., and Ridgeway, Pa. I came to realize it was very widespread. But no one ever found any satanists, any more than people found witches in the Middle Ages.

"Some dangerous things occurred," he continued. "In Cobleskill, N.Y., people saw people in costumes with swords and candles in the woods. Police came in with guns and found a group of students from Cobleskill Technical Institute having a Halloween party. But what if they had started shooting? In other places, people have been arrested."

Victor said one of the biggest panics took place outside Toledo, Ohio, where police brought in bulldozers to dig up land where bodies were rumored to be secretly buried. Working under the eyes of the national press and satanic experts from across the country, all they found was trash.

"There are some real funny ones," he added, "like the one in New Hampshire which involved half the state. There were rumors of animal sacrifices and a place where animals were hung up, supposedly for sacrifice.

"A journalist went out there and found a state road crew. They were picking up road kill and dumping them behind a storage shed."

Victor noted that satanic cult rumors have declined from the peak they reached in the late 1980s, when television personality Geraldo Rivera was the host of shows on the occult. He said the cult rumors that prove most harmful are those originating with psychiatric patients and children who regard their parents as satanists.

As a result of "Satanic Panic," Victor is called regularly as an expert commentator. He will appear on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "The Shirley Show" on Feb. 15 to discuss incidents of exorcism and devil possession.

Victor grew up on Long Island and did his undergraduate studies at Oneonta State College. Married to his French-born high school pen pal, the former Michele Honore, who teaches French at Fredonia State College, he joined the Jamestown faculty in 1965.

He commuted for nine years to earn his master's degree and doctorate in sociology from the University at Buffalo. In 1988, he received the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Trained as a specialist in marriage and the family, he previously wrote a textbook on human sexuality and currently is engaged in two new book projects.

One, a collaboration with a popular writer, tackles the way pop psychology blames parents unnecessarily for their children's problems.

"It's more of a practical thing for parents," he said. "There are a lot of behaviors in children that aren't produced by what parents do."

The other is a scholarly study on the repressed memory syndrome, where people in psychotherapy invent false memories of abduction by space aliens, events in past lives and childhood experiences of satanism and sexual abuse.

"It explores what happens in psychotherapy that brings out these incidents that never occurred," Victor said.

The Mencken Award should give a belated boost to "Satanic Panic." The book sold about 5,000 copies during its first year of publication in 1993, Victor noted, "which is considered good by my publisher. The philosophy books they publish sell 200 copies."

It's unlikely that "Satanic Panic" will ever realize a profit for its author or publisher, however, because of the legal costs involved in a \$1 million libel suit by two people mentioned in the book.

"This is a very controversial area," Victor explained. "Passions are heated, and some of the people I wrote about are angry as hell, two of the people, therapists of sorts. One is in England. One is in St. Louis.

"They've filed against me and my publisher, who's already spent more on my defense than the book will ever make. But they're very nice about it. They think (the lawsuit) is totally ridiculous. Everything I wrote was fully documented in complete scholarly detail."