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APA 7th ed.

Frederick, Tracy. (1998). Spectral evidence the ramona case: incest, memory, and truth on trial in napa valley. Boston University Public Interest Law Journal, 7(2), 361-364.

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MLA 9th ed.

Frederick, Tracy. "Spectral Evidence The Ramona Case: Incest, Memory, and Truth on Trial in Napa Valley." Boston University Public Interest Law Journal, vol. 7, no. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 361-364. HeinOnline.

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BOOK NOTES

SPECTRAL EVIDENCE THE RAMONA CASE: INCEST, MEMORY, AND TRUTH ON TRIAL IN NAPA VALLEY

BY MOIRA JOHNSTON

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY 1997

In *Spectral Evidence*, award winning investigative journalist Moira Johnston examines the “recovered memory wars” battle through an in-depth analysis of *Ramona v. Isabella*, the seminal case that brought this issue to the nation’s attention. Through her analysis of the Ramona story, Johnston thoroughly considers arguments both in favor of and against the reliability of suppressed memory testimony. In cases of suppressed memory testimony, the alleged victim of sexual abuse does not recall the abuse until many years later, either through personal memories or with the aid of a therapist. Johnston points out that, although this “war” had been fought vigorously throughout the decade, the *Ramona* case shed new light on the conflict. Prior to the *Ramona* saga, the American public never thought that *their* families could experience this crisis. If a family in the Mondavi network had been affected, anyone was open to accusation.

Throughout most of the Nineties, the scientific and legal communities have been battling over the validity of “suppressed memories” of sexual abuse. Scores of adult women began suing men whom they claimed sexually abused them when they were children. Many of these women, however, did not recall their abuse until adulthood. In 1994, Gary Ramona, a man accused of and essentially ruined by allegations of sexual abuse made by his daughter, Holly, put this line of testimony to the ultimate test when he became the first nonpatient to sue a psychiatrist and a therapist whom he claimed planted false memories of sexual abuse into his daughter’s mind.

Prior to his daughter’s allegations, Gary Ramona’s life epitomized the “American Dream.” Through perseverance and dedication, Ramona literally went from rags to riches. After thirteen years of working construction jobs in order to finance and earn his B.A., his career eventually climaxed into a position as chief of global sales and marketing at the Robert Mondavi Winery in Napa Valley, California. Ramona met and married Stephanie Nye when he was nineteen. Stephanie shared in Gary’s successful climb up the Mondavi social ladder. Until the summer of 1989, everything appeared to be perfect for the Ramona family. Suddenly, the family that seemingly had everything began its tragic downward spi-

ral, which ultimately led to its demise. Napa Valley and the field of suppressed memory testimony would never be the same.

Johnston attempts to analyze the Ramona case from a neutral position by taking the reader through the story by means of both Gary's and Stephanie's sometimes diametrically opposed positions. Johnston's use of their dual viewpoints is particularly effective because it encourages the reader to consider not only the legal battles that ensued, but to also embrace the emotion and confusion implicit in suppressed memory cases. Although Johnston presents both sides of the Ramona story, it seems evident from her Salem Witch Trial analogy included in the prologue that the inspiration behind this book is based on her belief in Gary's innocence. Johnston writes, "Innocents dead, at the hands of hysterical young girls, on the strength of spectral evidence, 'that poisoned cloud of fantasy' that has stood as proof in court." Despite the author's apparent position, the intensity of the emotion raised in the reader by this book can only be attributed to Johnston's passionate portrayal of both sides of the story.

The opposing viewpoints are helpful in painting a complete picture of the Ramona trials, but Johnston's weakness lies in the limited insight provided directly by Holly Ramona, the alleged victim. The reader is, at times, at a loss in terms of truly getting in touch with Holly's plea of victimization when Johnston takes the reader through the trials and tribulations of Holly's youth only through her mother and Holly's testimony at trial. Stephanie is not portrayed as the "perfect" mother, and thus any portrayal of Holly based solely on Stephanie's testimony is somewhat suspect.

Johnston begins her analysis with Stephanie's story about the events leading up to Holly's memories and the eventual dissolution of Stephanie's marriage. Although Stephanie notes marital problems that included several separations, she never suspected that Gary sexually molested any of their three daughters during their marriage. Stephanie portrays the Ramona marriage as one in which Gary worked many hours and lived by his own set of rules, while Stephanie stayed at home and raised their daughters. The most disconcerting aspect of the Ramonas' lives, when the girls were younger, was the health problems that Holly faced as a young child, problems that Stephanie later attributed to Gary's sexual abuse.

Gary's portrayal of the early Ramona life was more positive than Stephanie's account. His story is supported by one neighbor's comment that the girls waited for Gary to come home from work each day, and that, most notably, Holly would run to him for a hug when he got out of the car. Despite Gary's positive depiction, however, he does not deny that he and Stephanie suffered marital problems. The major point of contention between the conflicting stories is that both Gary and Stephanie blame each other for their marital problems. Stephanie speculates that their sexual problems were rooted in Gary's abuse of the girls, while Gary hints that Stephanie's frigidity led to Holly's struggle with sexuality. Everything changed when Holly began recalling her "repressed memories" of her father's sexual abuse, abuse which she claimed occurred for twelve years of her childhood, but which she did not recall until she was nineteen years old.

Johnston carefully takes the reader through Holly's journey of her alleged recovered memories that eventually culminated in her filing civil charges against

her father. Johnston discusses how Holly first came in contact with Marche Isabella, a marriage, family, and child counselor ("MFCC"), while being treated for bulimia, an eating disorder. It was during this therapy that Holly's memories of child sexual abuse first surfaced. While telling the Ramona story, Johnston notes the facts and inconsistencies that developed on the road to and during trial. One such example of an inconsistency involves the introduction of sexual abuse into the situation. Stephanie claimed that Isabella raised the issue of sexual abuse with her, while Isabella claimed that Stephanie asked her if Holly might have been abused. Such conversations later proved to be critical in Gary's suit against Isabella.

Johnston provides the reader with an objective portrayal of some of Holly's flashbacks, and notes that Holly honestly believes that her father abused her. Once the allegations became common knowledge in Napa Valley, Gary Ramona's personal and professional descent began. Ultimately, he lost his wife, his three daughters, and his sole source of income, his position at Mondavi. Through Gary's insights and his mission to stop what he deemed to be "brainwashing," Johnston leaves the reader to reflect on the potential demise and havoc that such false allegations could wreak on the American family structure.

The author clearly portrays Isabella's medical incompetence, and directly addresses the MFCC field and the many questions that have been raised about the boundaries that some of these psychologists were overstepping. Perhaps no other prior case brought this issue to the forefront as did *Ramona v. Isabella*. Following the *Ramona* decision, psychologists must consider potential malpractice actions stemming from so-called "suppressed memories" brought forth from their clients. Amidst these concerns, the author provides candid consideration of Holly's perception of further victimization when the court permitted Gary to file suit against the psychologists for malpractice, and against Stephanie for slander. These actions, in some sense, deemed Holly's claim defective.

Overall, Johnston provides a superb analysis of the first nonpatient granted standing to sue psychotherapists over recovered memories, and who, in the end, succeeded in his undertaking. Johnston drafts a focused insight into the legal underpinnings that formulated this case, while also asking the reader to fairly consider both sides of the arguments. In the end, it appears that the author's references to the Salem Witch Trials and her brief note of the similarity between suppressed memory testimony and the child-care molestation craze of the 1980's are quite telling. At the very least, the reader is left speculating as to the validity of Holly Ramona's claims of sexual abuse. Although the author herself does not appear to discount repressed memory testimony, she presents an account documenting the legal and ethical concerns that one should consider before blindly accepting such testimony that many medical and psychology scholars have themselves rejected.

Tracy Frederick

