

# THE SUNDAY STAR

Cloudy; scattered flurries. High 1C

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## Beware of false prophets peddling false-memory hype

**R**ECOVERED MEMORIES of incest — and the charge that those memories are false — may seem to be an obscure topic. But judging by a torrent of letters to The Star, for and against my two recent columns, this subject is dynamite. And, just as I predicted a couple of weeks ago, it's beginning to explode right in the face of its inventors.

The accused parents who created the False Memory Syndrome Foundation argue that unscrupulous therapists are implanting completely false recollections of incest in the malleable minds of previously happy young women.

The reception given to this rickety idea by the media — hundreds of uncritical articles, radio broadcasts, TV specials, documentaries and news reports — should give us pause.

That the public might be conned by a highly aggressive media campaign is not unprecedented. But that journalists themselves should so unquestioningly peddle inflammatory, often luridly worded, attacks on incest survivors is very disturbing. News reports, echoing the foundation's propaganda, frequently mention "aliens, witches, fairy tales,

### MICHELE LANDSBERG



UFOs" in the same breath as the agonizing memories of people who were raped in childhood.

True, some therapists may be inept and some accusations are surely mistaken or false. Researchers estimate that about 5 per cent of any criminal allegations are false. That small number, however, can't justify the huge publicity given to the proponents of "false memory syndrome."

Dr. Elizabeth Loftus is another case in point. She is a prolific research psychologist — with no clinical experience and no expertise in child sexual abuse or traumatic memory — who crisscrosses the continent as a highly paid

witness for the accused. A current *Psychology Today* profile practically drools with admiration, not least over her cream-colored Mercedes and fancy home. Some observers estimate that, according to her own boasts, Dr. Loftus must have earned between \$3 million and \$5 million as an expert witness — for hire — she even testified on behalf of mass murderer Ted Bundy.

She's also a much-quoted and admired researcher into ordinary memory. Why, then, after 20 years of active commitment to the American Psychological Association (APA) — most recently as a member of the task force on recovered memories of childhood abuse — did Dr. Loftus suddenly quit the APA in January? Her resignation letter accuses the association of moving "far from scientific thinking and more toward therapeutic and professional guild interests."

Only weeks earlier — in November and December of 1995 — two separate ethics complaints had been filed with the APA against Dr. Loftus. Jennifer Hoult, a concert harpist and former software engineer from New York, and Lynn Crook, a Washington state education consultant, had recovered memo-

ries of severe childhood sexual abuse, found corroborating evidence, sued their fathers, and won. Hoult's father appealed the case as far as possible, losing each time. She was awarded \$500,000 in damages and her father is now an active member of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation.

Both women challenge the way Dr. Loftus wrote about their court cases.

The rule of the APA is that no member is allowed to resign while an ethics complaint is being investigated.

Now the APA claims that Dr. Loftus did not know about the complaints when she coincidentally resigned soon after they were filed. Therefore, the APA has accepted her resignation and will not investigate the allegations. The senior ethics investigator admitted to Hoult and Crook, in identical letters, that it's "unusual" for a member to resign in "the window of time" between a complaint and its resolution.

"Unusual" is hardly the word. Many members have voiced astonishment and anger over the association's conduct.

In last Sunday's column, I also referred to The Amazing Randi, a magician, and a member of the False Mem-

ory Syndrome Foundation's scientific advisory board. A couple of readers took me to task for apparently sneering at someone because he is a magician.

No. What I had hesitated to mention is that the colorful Randi has been involved in a number of lawsuits. Part of the evidence brought against Randi was a tape of his telephone conversations, of explicit sexual content, with teenage boys. Randi has at different times claimed that the tape was a hoax made by his enemies to blackmail him, that he made the tape himself, and that the police asked him to make it.

Whichever version is true, it's amazing indeed that such a person could be taken seriously as a scientific adviser in an organization dedicated to denying claims of child sexual abuse.

Are these *ad hominem* arguments? If so, I'll accept the blame. It strikes me as urgent and necessary to talk about the character and motives of those who are causing so much harm to people who have already been grievously wounded.

Michele Landsberg's column regularly appears in *The Star* Saturday and Sunday.