

# Unmasking Sybil

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*Newsweek*, January 25, 1999

A re-examination of the most famous psychiatric patient in history

The last day of Shirley Ardell Mason's remarkable life was peaceful. She was at home, in the two-story gray bungalow on Henry Clay Boulevard in Lexington, Ky., that had been her refuge for 25 years. Her breast cancer had spread quickly, but she didn't like doctors and hated hospitals even more. So her friend Roberta Guy arranged for nurses to provide round-the-clock care. On Feb. 26, 1998, Mason must have realized time was short; she asked for Guy, who lived just a 10-minute drive away. But by the time her friend pulled up, it was too late. Mason was dead.

A few weeks earlier, Mason had finally divulged her extraordinary secret, confirming what Guy had long suspected: the 75-year-old former college art teacher was the world's most famous psychiatric patient -- the real-life model for "Sybil," journalist Flora Rheta Schreiber's 1973 best seller about a woman so abused as a child that she developed 16 personalities, including women with English accents and two boys. The book was made into a 1976 TV movie starring Sally Field and was largely responsible for popularizing multiple-personality disorder -- until then, a rare diagnosis.

Now, a year after Mason's death, the case is once again in the spotlight with three documentaries and at least as many books in the works. Some people close to Schreiber (who died in 1988), Mason and the psychiatrist who treated her, Cornelia Wilbur, now question the authenticity of Mason's condition. Before the publication of "Sybil," there were only about 75 reported cases of MPD; in the 25 years since, there have been, by one expert's estimation, 40,000 diagnoses, almost all in North America. The book had the blessing of great timing: it hit the public consciousness in the ascending days of feminism, when people were also beginning to grow concerned about child abuse. A quarter century later, by the time Mason lay dying in her bungalow, many experts were disputing the validity of the multiple-personality diagnosis and blaming the book for spawning a bogus industry of therapists who specialize in hidden abuse. At the same time, psychiatric historians and researchers have now begun to try to sort out the facts of the case that started it all.

Mason was raised in the small, conservative town of Dodge Center, Minn., the only child of Mattie and Walter Mason, a hardware-store clerk and carpenter; both were strictly observant Seventh-Day Adventists. When "Sybil" came out, dozens of the town's 2,000 residents recognized Mason. "Everything just fit -- the description of her mother, of the town, of the old brick schoolhouse kitty-corner from her house," says Wendell Nelson, 58, an antiques dealer. Residents recall a somewhat withdrawn, slender girl with a talent for painting. Betty Borst Christensen, 76, grew up across the street from the Masons. "Shirley was very protected," Christensen recalls. "Her mother didn't let her do much." Mason's second-grade teacher, Frances Abbott, now 93, remembers that Mattie Mason would grab Shirley's hand "in a vise lock" when they crossed the street. "Shirley couldn't get free even if she tried. She was a timid little soul always under Mother's care."

In the book, Sybil's mother subjects her to horrifying abuse; many people in Dodge Center say Mattie ("Hattie" in the book) was bizarre. "She had a witchlike laugh," recalls Christensen. "She didn't laugh much, but when she did, it was like a screech." Christensen remembers the mother walking around after dark, looking in the neighbors' windows. She apparently had once been diagnosed as schizophrenic. Still, no one claims any direct knowledge of the sexual and physical abuse described in the book. "There is strong evidence that [the worst abuse in the book] could not have happened," says Peter J. Swales, the historian who first identified Mason as Sybil.

In 1941 Mason left for what is now called Minnesota State University at Mankato, 60 miles away. She seemed to be on the fast track, says Dan Houlihan, a psychology professor at the school who has studied the case, and she's featured prominently in yearbooks for her first two years. Then she apparently suffered some kind of breakdown and didn't graduate until 1949.

She met Wilbur, the psychiatrist, in Omaha after another such collapse; in the early 1950s she moved to New York, where Wilbur then lived, and became her patient. Their therapeutic relationship lasted more than a decade. In the book, the story has a happy ending, with a dramatic breakthrough in 1965 that allows a fully integrated Sybil to emerge ready to begin an independent life. The real story is more complicated. According to Swales, the therapy ended in 1965 in part because Wilbur had decided to take a job outside New York. Mason did go on to hold several jobs, but she never strayed far from her former therapist. At that point, "Wilbur and Shirley virtually merge," Swales says. "She won't make a decision without Wilbur." Mason never married and had no children.

There's no doubt that Mason had very serious emotional problems, but how true was her story? She once recanted her allegations of abuse in a letter to Wilbur in the 1950s during therapy in New York -- although Wilbur believed the letter simply indicated her patient was in denial. She never recanted again; in fact, Mason told a psychiatrist friend just months before her death that "every word in the book is true."

But even if Mason was abused, did she really split into 16 identities, which Wilbur claimed to be able to summon at will? Some researchers say that Mason probably wasn't a "multiple" before she met Wilbur. A psychiatrist who worked with the patient he will refer to only as Sybil says that she was a "brilliant hysteric," highly hypnotizable and extremely suggestible. The doctor, Herbert Spiegel, still in private practice in New York, believes Sybil adopted personalities "suggested" by Wilbur as part of the therapy, which depended upon hypnosis and heavy doses of sodium pentothal. Eager to be helpful, Mason read the psychiatric literature on MPD, including "The Three Faces of Eve." "She didn't start out a spontaneous multiple, but she took on the clinical characteristics of one through the interaction with her therapist," Spiegel says, adding, "It was nothing fraudulent. They really believed this." Skeptics argue that in the dance of psychoanalysis between patient and doctor a kind of mutual delusion, a folie a deux, can develop. The full truth may not be known until Wilbur's archives are opened in 2005.

Whatever the course of the therapy, it does appear to have helped Mason. In 1973, thanks to profits from the book, in which all three women -- author, psychiatrist, patient -- shared, she moved to Lexington, where Wilbur had settled to teach at the University of Kentucky. Her home was near Wilbur's grander mansion. Sometime in 1990, Wilbur diagnosed Mason with breast cancer. Because of her fear of hospitals, she decided against treatment. The disease went into remission, but the next year Wilbur developed Parkinson's. Now Mason cared for her former therapist, moving in to do it. Guy worked for a nursing agency and was hired to help. Eventually all three became close, and Guy joined in crossword puzzles and the Scrabble games that Mason and Wilbur loved to play.

From time to time, other people working in the house would notice the many copies of "Sybil" in the library and speculate that Mason was the patient. They quickly lost their jobs. After Wilbur died in 1992, leaving her former patient \$25,000 and all "Sybil" royalties, Mason became even more reclusive. She had long since cut off contact with most of her old friends and her family. Guy took on her banking and shopping at a health-food store because Mason was a vegetarian. In her last few years, Guy says, Mason spent most of her time taking care of her cats, gardening and painting until arthritis made it too difficult to hold a brush. Despite painful memories of the repressive church in Minnesota, she remained devoted to her Seventh-Day Adventist faith. "She was happy," Guy says. In the summer of 1997, the cancer came back. Once again Mason declined medical treatment, telling Guy she had had "enough trauma in her life." She began giving away her books and paintings to friends and shredding her personal papers. She left most of the rest of her estate to a Seventh-Day Adventist TV minister.

"She was not afraid of dying," Guy says. Psychiatrist Leah Dickstein, a friend of Wilbur's and Mason's, spoke with her near the end. "She said she was at a point where she had forgiven her mother. She let that anger go." With Margaret Nelson in Dodge Center

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**Abstract**

Shirley Ardell Mason's complex life of multiple personalities was the basis for the bestseller and motion picture 'Sybil.' Mason was severely abused as a child, which led to her sixteen personalities, which she was able to summon at will.

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**Source Citation:**

Kantrowitz, Barbara, and Mark Miller. "Unmasking Sybil." *Newsweek* 25 Jan. 1999: 66.  
*Gale Biography In Context*. Web. 28 Nov. 2011.

Document URL

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**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A53612353