



# Multiple Personality and the Media

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The publication of *Sybil* in 1973, and a made-for-TV movie in 1976, told the purportedly true story of a woman with multiple personalities.

The film *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957) portrayed a real woman, Chris Sizemore, who showed signs of at least three separate personalities, the primary two of which are referred to as Eve White and Eve Black. In the film, Eve White is portrayed as a timid wife and mother with headaches. During treatment, a fun-loving personality appears, Eve Black. Eve Black knows about Eve White, but Eve White does not know about Eve Black. Her therapy sessions explored the traumatic events from Eve's childhood, which were believed to be the source of her developing different identities, or "alters." Although the film was fairly melodramatic, there has been little controversy concerning the fact that Sizemore experienced DID. However, that was not the case with *Sybil*.

The book *Sybil* (Schreiber, 1973) was published as the purportedly true story of a woman with multiple personalities. Her story is that of a person who had difficulty functioning in day-to-day activities. The basic idea was that to cope with trauma, including abuse by her mother, Sybil developed multiple personalities—as many as 16. Sybil experienced "blank spells" in which she had no idea what had happened to the time, which could last from a few minutes to a couple of days. It was during these periods that other personalities appeared who were unknown to Sybil. By the end of the book, Sybil was able to integrate her personalities and become a functioning individual, thanks to a caring therapist. It was both a book and movie that fascinated the public, especially since it was sold as a "true" story.

Sybil was the name the author used for a real woman named Shirley Mason to initially protect

Dissociative identity disorder (DID), commonly called multiple personality in the media, became popular through films, television shows, and books. One movie was *The Three Faces of Eve*, released in 1957. The book *Sybil* was published in 1973 and sold in the millions. It was followed by the made-for-television movie *Sybil* in 1976, which was watched by millions of people. These brought further attention to the concept of DID.

her identity. She grew up in the Midwest in a strict Seventh-day Adventist family. Feeling emotionally unstable, she sought help from mental health professionals. The psychiatrist, Dr. Connie Wilbur, was interested in multiple personality disorder.

One suggestion is that to gain more attention, Shirley Mason said "I'm not Shirley—I'm Peggy" in a childish voice and started acting like there were other people inside her. Soon other personalities followed and were seen during therapy.

According to a 2011 expose, *Sybil Exposed*, by the journalist Debbie Nathan, Shirley Mason wrote a letter to her psychiatrist Dr. Wilbur to say that she did not have multiple personalities. She admitted, "I do not really have any multiple personalities. . . . I do not even have a 'double.' . . . I am all of them. I have been lying in my pretense of them. . . . as trying to show you I felt I needed help. . . . Quite thrilling. Got me a lot of attention." Wilbur believed that Shirley Mason had other motives for recanting her claims of multiple identities, and dismissed the letter. Based on the papers and letters available at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice concerning those involved, however, the story of Shirley Mason having 16 personalities is now considered to be a fake.

Dr. Herbert Spiegel, a New York psychiatrist who treated Shirley Mason when her psychiatrist was on vacation, suggested that she did not have DID. Rather, she was a highly suggestible person. Another psychiatrist, Dr. Paul McHugh, who has worked with DID individuals at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, said, "I don't believe she had identity disorder, multiple personality or anything. I think she did have an intensely suggestible personality, and she was in a situation where she was open to the suggestions—looking, as she was, for help for the conditions that she suffered from."

At this point, the general consensus is that *Sybil* does not represent a true portrayal of DID. Rather, through a complicated situation in which a suggestible person with close connections to her psychiatrist becomes involved in a plan to write a book by her psychiatrist and a writer, storytelling became more important than truth. The original broadcast of *Sybil*, like the book itself, led to a huge increase in the reported incidents of DID. According to a National Public Radio report, the number of cases reported went from fewer than 100 to thousands.

**Thought Question:** If you were a mental health professional, how might you determine if a person was experiencing DID or following the suggestions of others?

Source: Exploring Multiple Personalities in "Sybil Exposed." NPR. <http://www.npr.org/2011/10/21/141591185/exploring-multiple-personalities-in-sybil-exposed>