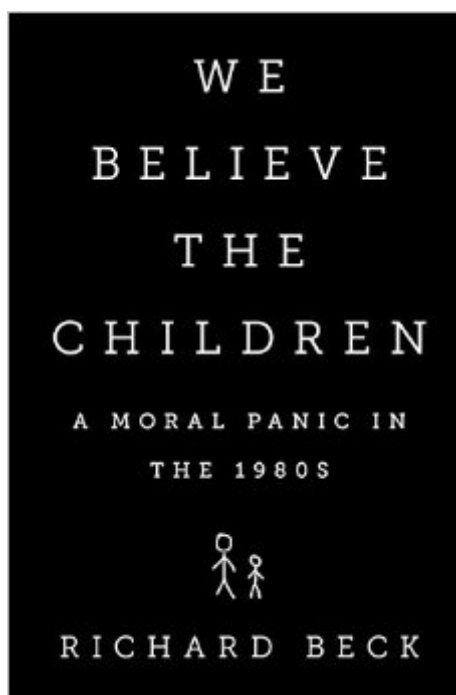


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# We Believe The Children: A Moral Panic In The 1980s



## Synopsis

A Wall Street Journal Best Book of 2015 A Boston Globe Best Book of 2015 A brilliant, disturbing portrait of the dawn of the culture wars, when America started to tear itself apart with doubts, wild allegations, and an unfounded fear for the safety of children. During the 1980s in California, New Jersey, New York, Michigan, Massachusetts, Florida, Tennessee, Texas, Ohio, and elsewhere, day care workers were arrested, charged, tried, and convicted of committing horrible sexual crimes against the children they cared for. These crimes, social workers and prosecutors said, had gone undetected for years, and they consisted of a brutality and sadism that defied all imagining. The dangers of babysitting services and day care centers became a national news media fixation. Of the many hundreds of people who were investigated in connection with day care and ritual abuse cases around the country, some 190 were formally charged with crimes, leading to more than 80 convictions. It would take years for people to realize what the defendants had said all along—that these prosecutions were the product of a decade-long outbreak of collective hysteria on par with the Salem witch trials. Social workers and detectives employed coercive interviewing techniques that led children to tell them what they wanted to hear. Local and national journalists fanned the flames by promoting the stories' salacious aspects, while aggressive prosecutors sought to make their careers by unearthing an unspeakable evil where parents feared it most. Using extensive archival research and drawing on dozens of interviews conducted with the hysteria's major figures, n+1 editor Richard Beck shows how a group of legislators, doctors, lawyers, and parents—most working with the best of intentions—set the stage for a cultural disaster. The climate of fear that surrounded these cases influenced a whole series of arguments about women, children, and sex. It also drove a right-wing cultural resurgence that, in many respects, continues to this day.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Throughout the 80s and 90s I clipped articles on the various fantastic sex and satan arrests and trials that suddenly became the norm. It filled a folder to the point where I had to split it into cases. We Believe The Children is a summary of those cases, the background and tangents to them, and what happened to those accused. Not a single one of them should have been jailed. A plague of madness passed over the country, in which adults came to believe vast numbers of children were being sexually abused in their daycare centers. No amount of testimony, no lack of any evidence whatsoever, could dissuade them. Daycare workers were international pornographers, perverts and Satanists. Period. Parents pestered their children until they parroted back what the adults wanted to hear and the adults turned them over to police and therapists who pestered them harder and further in order to bring charges. The children learned the only way to make this annoyance stop was to tell them what they wanted to hear. Often they made up totally unbelievable stories the authorities took at face value. Animal sacrifices, secret rooms under concrete slabs, wild costumes, sexual games, airline flights to other cities, deaths - nothing was too crazy in support of these cases. The other driver was prosecutors in search of fame and fortune. Their personal agendas kept the cases alive long after it was clear they were not just unwinnable but farcical. Beck tries to make the case that change in society was at the bottom of it all. The breakdown of the 1950s family, the rise of preschools and programmed activities, both parents working - all meant that adults felt guilt and fear over children's upbringing.

We Believe the Children by Richard Beck is an account of the hysteria that arose in the 1980s around allegations of daycare child abuse and associated satanism. Those of us old enough to remember this will find some of the details familiar, though they are presented well. It seems the issue with this book, based on some reviewers, is that Beck tries to understand and explain the "perfect storm" that created this hysteria and part of what he finds offends their love of Reagan and the conservative 80s. I found the portion of the responsibility placed on conservative politics to be but part of Beck's entire argument and it is not misplaced. To oversimplify part of the argument: if the places taking care of children can be demonized then women will go back to being housewives

and mothers and men can get back to being in charge. That statement is both true and false, in that Beck does not claim that Reagan or conservatives (with the possible exception of the "moral" majority since they were willing to subvert facts for their goals) actually thought and advocated for the hysteria with these goals in mind. He is saying that the backlash from feminism's gains had made many conservatives want the 1950s version of the family back and part of the concern, all along, was how would children handle spending part of their childhood in daycare. This was a concern from those opposed to feminism's advances as well as every parent who made the decision to work and wondered if it was the right thing to do. So yes, that aspect of society at that time, as represented by Reagan and the "moral" majority, did indeed see this as a reflection on liberals having the audacity to think that every person, male or female, should be able to choose whether to work or not.

Richard Beck is 28 years old, and as a writer for the journal *n + 1*, was involved in a research group that looked into the history of radical feminism. Thus he was introduced into something he had never heard of before, the child abuse panics of the 1980s. Those of us who are older remember the sensational stories that children at kindergartens had been sexually and satanically abused, and everyone began wondering how safe it was to entrust your child to others for pay. Beck realized that he wasn't the only one who didn't know about the panics; he could hardly find anyone under thirty who knew about the events, and when he told people he was writing a book about the subject, they thought he must be working on a novel. *We Believe the Children: A Moral Panic in the 1980s* (PublicAffairs) is no novel, but it is a serious account of horrifying incidents when reason went to sleep and monsters were produced. Beck is good at recounting the episodes, concentrating on the McMartin Preschool case in Manhattan Beach, California, but he is far from the first at telling it. His book is especially good for those who did not live at the time of the case as it is comprehensive and puts the events into the sociological and psychological context of the time. It also shows that we are still dealing with the aftereffects of the panic. It all began in the summer of 1983 with one dubious report of a child with a medical problem; because it might have been a result of abuse, the police sent out a letter to parents requesting them to ask the kids about specific sexual acts at the kindergarten.. The setup was in place; the panic took over and reigned for years.

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