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## A Discussion of the origins of the issues and subject matter present within the video 'She used to bake me cookies'.

Judy McClenning

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**"A discussion of the origins of the issues and subject matter  
present within the video 'She Used To Bake Me Cookies'. "**

**Thesis paper submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the Master of Fine Arts Degree  
in Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute  
of Technology, Rochester, NY**

**Judy McClenning**

**077-54-7369**

**September, 1995**

**Thesis Committee:**

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**Jeff Weiss, Chair**

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**Dr. Tina Lent**

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**Cat Ashworth**

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Sincerely,

Judy McClenning  
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2002 W. Girard Avenue 2F  
Philadelphia, PA 19130

Judy McClenning  
MFA candidate  
Imaging Arts  
October 25, 1995  
077-54-7369

"She Used To Bake Me Cookies", a seventeen minute video done as my thesis project, was the culmination of my work begun during the completion of a Master of Fine Arts Degree at the Rochester Institute of Technology. This project was the logical outgrowth of my previous life experiences in social work and law, and the progression of my photographic and video work. Moving from the problems of sexual harassment, & the pressure to conform one's behavior and appearance to a feminine ideal, I began my examination of the familial roots of the nature of feminine identity. After dealing with issues of parental role models, and outward anger within the family in both photographic and video work, this thesis video brought closure to my examination of family dysfunction. Doing this work in Rochester also brought me full circle in my education. Although I had gone to college in Rochester, NY, I never imagined I would return. However, ten years brought about a great deal of change. After graduating with a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Rochester in 1985, I immediately enrolled in Villanova Law School in suburban Philadelphia.

Raised in the small farming community of Argyle, NY it was a struggle for me to even attend college. Having no real life role models, I chose television, which has always been included in the

blurred boundaries of my experience. I went to law school to be Joyce Davenport on "Hill Street Blues", and defend the underdog. I thought becoming a lawyer would give me control over my life, financial security and choices. It would be years later before I realized the person I wanted to defend was myself.

Much to my dismay, my discomfort with the legal world was immediate. Having grown up in a difficult family, school had always been a safe haven for me. I found within literature and writing classes my permission to express the wide range of emotions I experienced. This was not the case in law school. Here I was trained to strip away all feeling, in both my writing and actions, and to become highly cerebral and focused. This conflict was traumatic for me. Since that time I have always been asked why I stayed in law school and the truth is, I was too afraid to leave. After years of familial programming that my sensitivity was an indication of weakness, and that I should take a "practical" course in life, I was unable to see alternatives for myself. I felt ashamed that I didn't have more control over myself, and that I had made the wrong choice in career. Under the theory that "education can never hurt you", I remained and finished my course of study. I had hoped that with each new semester, or with the "right" job, I would feel comfort.

Working in Philadelphia in criminal law, legal aid, and employment discrimination, I found many issues and people that captivated me. What I could not tolerate was the process of being an

attorney. After eight years of struggle, I could not fight the inevitable conclusion; I hate to argue.

During those eight years I attempted to discern how I had arrived at this place. Although I had wanted to pursue photography from an early age, it had been deemed frivolous and the materials were considered luxuries. I grew up in a home decorated in snapshots, and crafts made in 4-H. I believe my interest in photography as opposed to any other medium was due to its familiarity. At an early age I would lie in the grass and compose pictures in my head, longing to place my hands in control of the family instamatic. I think even then though I certainly wouldn't have been able to articulate it, I wanted a camera to validate my existence/experience in much the same way that I use it now.

My photographic education began when I graduated from law school in 1988 and gave myself permission to buy my first camera. I found that photography provided me with the emotional and creative outlet I had been seeking. I took classes at community arts centers, and at Temple University prior to enrolling in the MFA program at RIT in September 1993. During these early years I began exploring the nature of feminine identity in my work.

In my first quarter at RIT I sought to create a bridge between the legal and photographic parts of my experience. My first series was loosely based upon case histories of sexual harassment I had encountered as an attorney. This series, set to function as a

narrative of an incident of harassment, consisted of six 20" x 24" color photographs of a man and a woman in an office setting, interspersed with text panels from the first person point of view of each character. Through this work I tried to evoke discussion on the mixture of power, anger, frustration, propriety, lust, and shame that circulates these incidents. The work of Eileen Cowen was my influence in using the tableaux style.

I also created three short videos, one of which displayed a young woman making a complaint of harassment to her office manager. This piece was the most convincing to others as they were unable to tell if it was "real". I also believe that in addition to the "documentary feel" of the piece, viewers also found the nature of the incidents of inappropriate touching she recited to be plausible. Although I had learned of outrageous and highly offensive incidents in the work place regarding pornography, and other lewd acts, my audience at RIT seemed unable to accept this as realistic.

By the winter of 1993 I began to more successfully integrate both the cerebral and intuitive perspectives into my work. I created a "Dysfunctional Family" Greeting Card, which incorporated an old family snapshot. My initial desire to create the card originated out of a feeling of malaise over the impending Christmas holiday; a time of great card exchange intending to invoke a sense of well being, comfort and love. Most often the images and statements included in the cards made reference to warm and loving idealized families, something I felt dissociated from. So I decided to create a card that

questioned this portrayal of the family and would hopefully open an honest dialogue.

I found the process of recontextualizing images of my childhood with my adult voice liberating. Once I broke the taboo of speaking publicly about private family issues, I found that I had tapped into a large reserve of unspoken remarks and unacknowledged feelings. I found influences for this work in the images of Lorie Novak and Ann Turyn.

I eventually created a series of cards for events ranging from birthdays to anniversaries. The voice I used here spoke of unhappy, frustrated marriages, argumentative, hostile siblings and angry, neglected children. In the spring of 1994 I utilized the "Thinking of you" format to create a series which focused specifically upon abuse and neglect. These were placed within an installation inside of a trunk also containing female clothing, a scrapbook, and a recipe box, all of which was open for the viewer to discover.

The response to all of this work was extremely positive and empowering for me. I found that the use of the snapshot allowed others to enter the work and contemplate their own familial relationships. The similarity in posturing, occasions documented and a sense of nostalgia pushed the viewer to contemplate the truthfulness of the documentation, and in a larger sense, the nature of memory.



Also given that the language used in the cards was direct, and often angry it was such a marked change in the nature of the card that it questioned the truthfulness of many of our communications in this socially sanctioned medium. In the first series it seemed that almost every one could identify with the expression of hurt feelings and unspoken anger. The second series accomplished what I had intended; it made people very uncomfortable thinking about a subject that is usually kept secret.

The idea of working in a small, disposable, inexpensive format was very appealing to me. The concept of art crossing class lines into common, accessible venues was important to me in my decision to use the card format. It helped free me from some of the restrictive notions of what I had considered to be art.

My decision to continue with video also evolved out of this concept. Video cameras have become an everyday item in most homes, along with the television. I wanted to play around with the issue of authenticity with regard to home video as I had with the snapshot. I made several videos using my journal entries, family snapshots and videotape that dealt with the aftermath of my mother's death. Working directly in the first person on issues of memory, dream knowledge and their affect upon my identity was liberating in the same sense as the cards. However, by the end of the year, it also left me feeling highly vulnerable.

Upon my advancement to thesis at the end of 1994, I decided to move away from the directly autobiographical into fiction. I decided to learn screen writing and direction, writing "She Used To Bake Me Cookies" (herein after called "She Used To") over the fall of 1994. The plot covers one evening in the life of Emily, a 30 year old single female. Emily, an elementary school teacher, comes home from work to find a letter from her sister Rose informing her that her Aunt Joan has committed suicide. Devastated, Emily consoles herself in alcohol and calls her mother for more information. Through conversation, memory and dream elements we eventually learn that Joan's mother also committed suicide and that the Grandfather had sexually abused Joan, Emily's mother Alice, and eventually Emily.

Writing this piece was an extremely intuitive process for me. I wanted to speak about the hidden secret of sexual abuse that many women carry around. <sup>1</sup> For the past five years the topic had been a popular subject covered in the news, talk shows and magazines. The more the subject was brought up, it seemed that more people were coming forward. As I entered my 30's it became much more personal as a number of my acquaintances revealed their secrets, thereby jogging my own memory.

I was fascinated with the protective aspect of memory which allows us to block out trauma. The lawyer in me wanted concrete proof, but my intuition suggested it was a matter of personal trust. I had come to realize that with little or no objective evidence, survivors are left with fragments of mental snapshots, dream

imagery and intuition. Given the highly sensitive and disturbing nature of the memories, it often seemed easier to pretend.

I began reading Carl Jung. In Man And His Symbols, Jung states that there are a number of temporarily obscured thoughts, images and impressions in our unconscious that can influence our conscious minds.<sup>2</sup> In addition, unconscious aspects of events can take the form of symbolic images in our dreams.<sup>3</sup> Through further research I uncovered a study reported in 1994 conducted with 129 women with previously documented histories of child sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup>

Seventeen years later, 38% of the women did not recall the abuse.<sup>5</sup> Linda Meyer Williams found in conducting her study at the Family Research Laboratory of the University of New Hampshire, that having no memory of sexual abuse as a child is a common occurrence.<sup>6</sup> What Ms. Williams' study suggests is that the sexual abuse of a young child, with a close relationship to the perpetrator, is more likely to go undetected. <sup>7</sup> Guilt, betrayal and confusion can be felt by the child, especially when the abuse is ignored or hidden by other family members.<sup>8</sup> This study also suggests that the failure to recall traumatic events that occurred at an early age can be due to cognitive development, language acquisition, the degree of psychological trauma suffered, their ability to understand the seriousness of the abuse, and the resources available to the child. <sup>9</sup> In writing "She Used To Bake Me Cookies", I wanted to focus on the division between conscious and unconscious truth and what a woman

would experience in attempting to construct a bridge between the two.

Maya Deren's 1942 film "Meshes Of the Afternoon" was my most significant influence in constructing my thesis. The opening scene of the woman's shadow carrying a flower, was for me reminiscent of Giorgio de Chirico's 1914 painting, "Melancholy and Mystery of a Street". I was captivated by the symbolism. There was something familiar about it. Perhaps it was the use of common dream imagery. It may also be influenced by the subjective movement of the camera, imitating the woman's vision.<sup>10</sup> With no full figure shots I felt gently lulled into her point of view, observing the repetition of imagery.

Maya Deren wrote, "This film is concerned with the interior experiences of an individual."<sup>11</sup> While writing "She Used To" I felt unsure of how to visually represent my own dreams and flashes of memory. After viewing "Meshes" I was inspired by Ms. Deren's use of a key, a knife, and a flower interchangeably to represent innocence, anger, and truth, as well as a phone and a record player symbolic in their off or on capacity.

In my video I used cookies as the symbol of nurturance Emily remembered about her Aunt Joan. While on the surface they may represent a stereotypical, maternal gesture, the use of sweetness to console a small girl, especially one who has been sexually abused, can suggest many other interpretations. I also carefully chose the items

Emily received in the suicide box from Joan: a baby shoe, a lock of child's hair in a ribbon, a card Emily had made for Joan, and an old family snapshot. Collectively, they were meant to be symbolic of lost childhood, memory, and physical representations of love.

In "Meshes" the dark cloaked figure which leads the woman up a path, suggests that the viewer is witnessing a dream or memory. The figure seems too mysterious to be real, and possesses what appears to be a mirror for a face. Through an out of focus lens in "She Used To" a dark male figure appears in Emily's doorway as she lays sleeping. There has been nothing in the story that would suggest a man lives with Emily so the viewer is meant to see this figure as a dream symbol, or an actual perpetrator in her home. The male figure leads her down the hallway in a child's footed pajamas to the bathroom where she finds water running in the bathtub full of stones and floating photographs. Here Emily hears the sound of her Grandfather giving her a bath as a child and making sexual gestures with her bath toy.

I chose to use dialogue in "She Used To" to convey more concrete information on the roots of the dysfunction in Emily's family. My decision to fill the tub with photographs and stones was meant to play with the concepts of photographs documenting reality and the ways in which they provoke memory. It was also meant to be suggestive of the randomness of what we remember, and where we place information in our subconscious. (See Illustration I.)

The reflected image in a mirror, and in the side of a knife is used in "Meshes" to suggest several versions of the self. While a knife and shaving mirror reflect the image of her male companion, it is the same broken mirror that is found to have slit her neck and killed her at the end. Throughout Meshes the woman keeps seeing different versions of herself acting in another space. At one point a key comes from her mouth and immediately turns into a knife as she passes through a door to see two versions of herself seated at a table.<sup>12</sup>

In "She Used To", Emily looks into a mirror after reading Joan's suicide note and sees the silhouettes of her Aunt Joan, her Grandmother and her mother, Alice. The silhouettes are used again later in another dream sequence involving her Grandfather and Joan. These scenes are meant to be suggestive of events Emily experienced in the past, events she has heard of from other family members, as well as answers she is seeking to explain what has happened. Later Emily directly interacts with the silhouette of Joan, finally confronting in her unconscious what she could not face in her conscious life.

Maya Deren explained that her intention in "Meshes" was to suggest that the imagined reached such a force that it became reality for the woman.<sup>13</sup> In "She Used To" I wanted to push the boundaries between dream knowledge and conscious knowledge. Are the dreams playing out fears of imagined events or are they providing

the only evidence Emily will ever have in questioning whether she was sexually abused? (See Illustration II.)

While "Meshes" has been called a surrealist film, P. Adams Sitney in Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978 considers "trance" film to be a more accurate description.<sup>14</sup> In "Meshes" the heroine undertakes an interior quest, where her encounters of objects and sights are meant to suggest answers. However in surrealist cinema, the film is meant to imitate the irrationality and horror of the unconscious.<sup>15</sup> Under this definition I would also call "She Used To" a trance film. While outside events have intervened to precipitate this quest, Emily does venture inwardly to find the answers to the horrors of her conscious life. As Jung states, in addition to memories, completely new thoughts and ideas can come from the unconscious.<sup>16</sup> I found in Jung, validation for my instinctual belief that dreams function to restore our psychological balance.<sup>17</sup> After a night of traumatic, and yet revealing dreams, Emily resolves to bring some closure to these family wounds.

Through my experience of writing the script, directing a crew and cast, editing and showing the video I learned that it is an elaborate journey from concept to tape. As with any significant artistic project, I learned as much through the "process" of making this video, as I did from showing and defending it. What was different for me about this project was its collaborative nature. Once I learned to trust others in the process, the project took on a life of

its own. It began to simulate dream experience for me, inciting unimagined feelings and experience.

I am inspired by the process and fascinated by the intricacy of combining the cerebral and intuitive; the verbal and the visual. While it has been exhausting, I am very glad that I did my graduate work in Imaging Arts, at RIT in particular. Having just completed a fellowship with The American Photography Institute at New York University this summer, I've come to realize how unique my experience was in relation to other graduate programs in photography. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with individuals who challenged me and yet gave me the freedom to find my own way. I know that many new avenues of communication have been opened for me and have enriched my life.

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Judy McClenning





Illustration I

Untitled Film Still from "She Used to Bake Me Cookies" ©1995 Judy McClenning

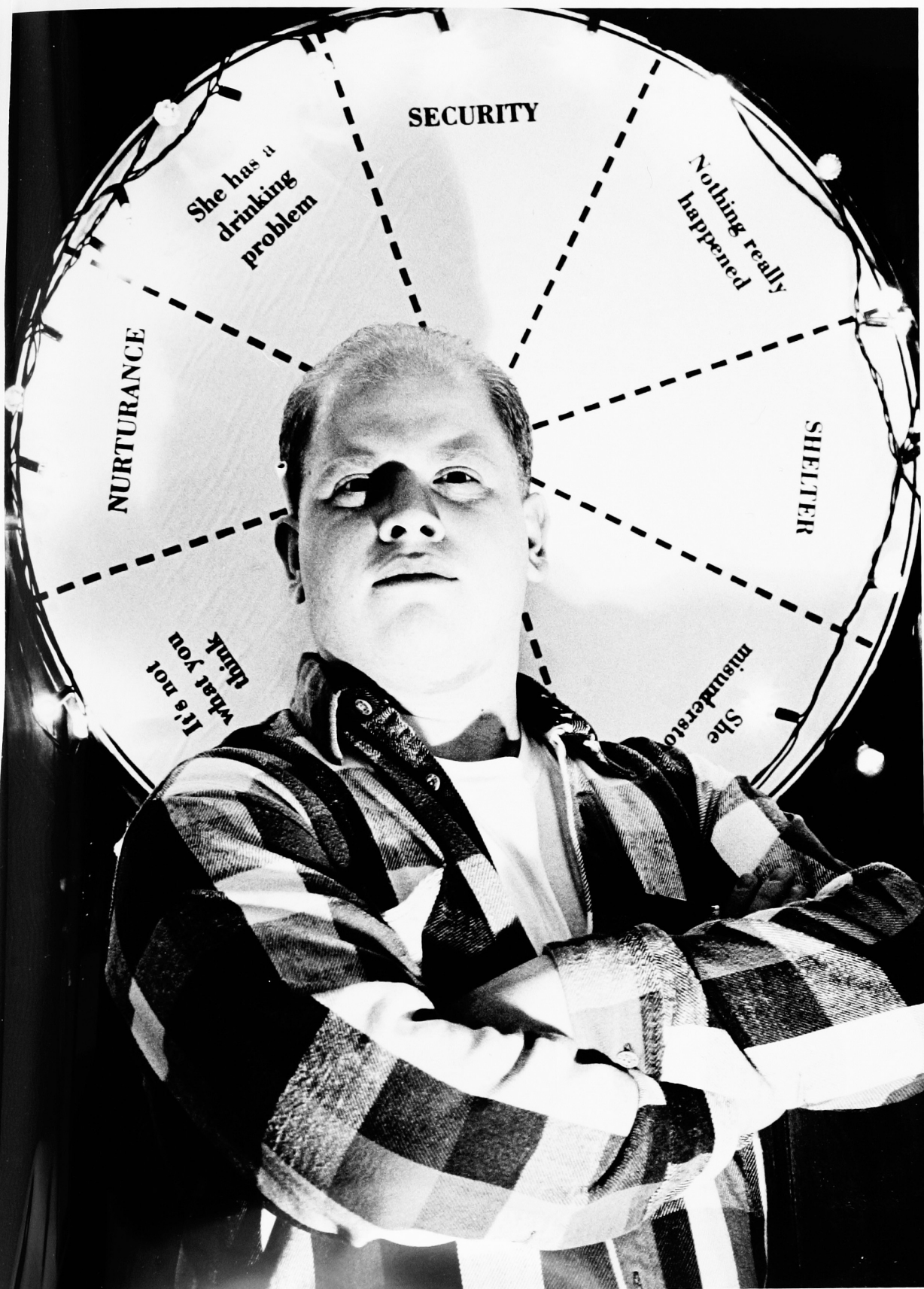


ILLUSTRATION II.  
Untitled Film Still From "She Used To Bake Me Cookies" ©1995 Judy Mcclerning

## Notes

1. Linda Meyer Williams, "Recall of Childhood Trauma: A Prospective Study of Women's Memories of Child Sexual Abuse", Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 62,6 (December 1994): 1167.
2. Carl G. Jung, and others, eds., "Approaching The Unconscious", chapter in Man And His Symbols, (London: Aldus Books Limited, 1964), 32.
3. Jung, pp. 34, 43.
4. Williams, "Recall of Childhood Trauma", p. 1169.
5. Williams, p. 1170.
6. Williams, p. 1173.
7. Williams, p. 1174.
8. Williams.
9. Williams, p. 1171.

10. P. Adams Sitney, "Meshes of the Afternoon", chapter in Visionary Film, 2nd Ed., The Avant-Garde 1943-1978, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.9, citing Maya Deren, "Notes, Essays, Letters", "Film Culture", 39 (Winter 1965), p. 1.

11. Sitney.

12. P. Adams Sitney, "Meshes of the Afternoon", chapter in Visionary Film, 2nd Ed., The Avant-Garde 1943-1978, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 8,9.

13. P. Adams Sitney, "Meshes of the Afternoon", chapter in Visionary Film, 2nd Ed., The Avant-Garde 1943-1978, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.9, citing Maya Deren, "Notes, Essays, Letters", "Film Culture", 39 (Winter 1965), p. 1.

14. P. Adams Sitney, "Meshes of the Afternoon", chapter in Visionary Film, 2nd Ed., The Avant-Garde 1943-1978, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 11.

15. Sitney.

16. Jung, p. 37.

17. Jung, p 50.

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1. Jung, Carl G., Von Franz, M.L., Henderson, Joseph, Jacobi, Jolande, and Jaffe, Aniela, eds.: "Approaching The Unconscious". Chapter in Man and His Symbols. London: Aldus Books, 1964.

2. Sitney, P. Adams. "Meshes of the Afternoon". Chapter in Visionary Film, 2nd Ed., The Avant-Garde 1943-1978. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

3. Williams, Linda Meyer. "Recall of Childhood Trauma: A Prospective Study of Women's Memories of Childhood Sexual Abuse." Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology , 62, 6(December 1994): 1167-1176.