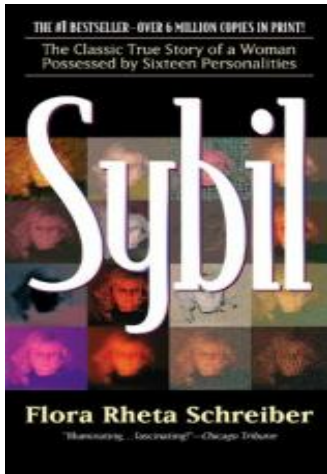


Sybil

by Flora Rheta Schreiber



About the Book

More amazing than any work of fiction, yet true in every word, it swept to the top of the bestseller lists and riveted the consciousness of the world. As an Emmy Award-winning film starring Sally Field, it captured the home screens of an entire nation and has endured as the most electrifying TV movie ever made. It's the story of a survivor of terrifying childhood abuse, victim of sudden and mystifying blackouts, and the first case of multiple personality ever to be psychoanalyzed.

You're about to meet Sybil --- and the sixteen selves to whom she played host, both women and men, each with a different personality, speech pattern, and even personal appearance. You'll experience the strangeness and fascination of one woman's rare affliction --- and travel with her on her long, ultimately triumphant journey back to wholeness.

Discussion Guide

1. In the book's preface, the author discusses her three-year friendship with Sybil before she committed herself to writing about the case. Do you think this relationship helped or hurt her ability to write this book?
2. Sybil's parents, Willard and Hattie Dorsett, are devoutly religious. How does religion play a role in the upbringing of their daughter? How do her mother and father use religion to justify their treatment of Sybil? Sybil wonders if it is a sin to go to a psychiatrist. Do you think your religion has any objection to this?
3. There is much debate in the mental health field about nature versus nurture as the cause of illnesses. Sybil suffers horrific abuse at the hand of her mother, Hattie, who shows signs of schizophrenia. Which do you think is the primary cause of Sybil's mental illness? heredity or environment? Why do you think so?
4. There is also debate in the mental health field about the recovery of repressed memories of abuse. Did you believe the

stories of child abuse that Sybil told? How could a person make up such stories? How would a therapist implant false memories?

5. Some mental health professionals believe there is a link between creativity and mental illness, and Sybil was an artist. Marcia is the most creative personality and also the most suicidal (p. 388). Why do you think so many famous musicians, artists, and writers commit suicide? Is it truly a greater number than in the general population? If creative people were successfully treated for their mental illness, do you think it would affect their creativity? Would it affect them positively or negatively?

6. Dr. Wilbur talks about Eve, a newly reported case of multiple personality disorder and the subject of the film *All About Eve* (p. 102). Have you seen the film? If so, how did it compare to Sybil's case? If not, did reading this book make you more or less interested in seeing the film?

7. In Chapter 15, entitled "Battered Child," we learn about the horrific abuse Sybil suffered at the hands of her mother. A gynecologist examines Sybil and confirms the abuse. And her father asks how Sybil got a black eye. Was this enough independent confirmation for you to believe Sybil's story? Do you think there should be more evidence? Or do you think it is understandable that a family would hide any abuse and there wouldn't be much independent proof?

8. Marcia wishes that her mother would die so she could have her father all to herself. She doesn't realize that this is a classic Oedipal fantasy (p. 243). Can you briefly describe the plot of *Oedipus Rex* and explain how it relates to Sybil's story? How did Freud explain the Oedipal Complex?

9. Dr. Wilbur explains that a psychoanalyst places a strong emphasis on the deterministic power of childhood (p. 264). Hattie's father did not love her. Does that explain Hattie's mental illness? Does that excuse any of her actions toward Sybil? Willard's father was a stern, pious man. Does that explain his actions toward Sybil? Does it excuse any of them?

10. In Chapter 19, "The Boys," we learn about the emergence of Mike and Sid and the issues they have with integrating the personalities. Do you think it was only natural for some of Sybil's personalities to be male, or did it surprise you? The appearance of Mike and Sid also gives Dr. Wilbur a chance to explain Freud's theory of penis envy (p. 290). What do you think about this theory? Do you think it was more relevant in Freud's time than it is today?

11. The book opened with the story of Sybil in Philadelphia without any idea how she got there. In Chapter 22, "The Clock Comprehensible," we reach the description of the Philadelphia trip in the chronological narrative. Do you think this was an effective opening for the book? Did it create any confusion as a literary device? How would you choose to open the book?

12. Sybil writes a letter to Dr. Wilbur where she denies not only the multiple personalities but also that her mother mistreated her. She says she had no reason to complain (p. 389). The doctor says that Sybil wrote these things because she was in denial and that it is a normal phase of psychiatric treatment. Who do you believe?

13. Sybil takes a job as a receptionist at a New York City hotel and begins dating her co-worker Ramon (p. 437). Sybil wonders if she is in love. Do you think this was love? Do you think Sybil should have confided in Ramon about her mental health? Do you think Sybil should have continued her relationship with Ramon Or do you think she did the responsible thing by ending the relationship?

14. At the conclusion of her therapy, Sybil tells that author that "[m]emories make a person mature emotionally" (p. 463). And finally, at age 42, Sybil is living a normal life and taking pleasure in ordinary, everyday things such as reading a book or talking with a friend. How do we define maturity? How do we define normal? Does the psychiatric profession have too narrow a definition of these words?

15. While treating Sybil, Dr. Wilbur diagnoses six other multiple personality cases, and the book provides a look at the psychological and neurological tests that supports these diagnoses (p. 473-474). Did this empirical data help convince you of the validity of multiple personality disorder?

Author Bio

Flora Rheta Schreiber was a college professor, having taught Speech and English at the New School for Social Research and the City University of New York 's John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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