

ELIZABETH WAITES: MEMORY QUEST

A Splendiferous Presentation by Mike Margol

*Firstly, the article, in its entirety, is not as funny as the title might suggest. "Memory Quest" sounds like a board game to me, but on the whole, the article is mainly concerned with the intricacies, achievements, and failures of the human memory.

*The first example of memory that Waites gives is an anecdote involving Helen Keller and the mental affliction known as *cryptomnesia*, which is essentially the ability to accurately remember factual information without remembering the source. Waites writes, "Like Helen, so the argument goes, the rest of us who consider ourselves the authors of our own thoughts may be suffering from a failure of memory..." (2).

*This funny little story (well, funny to me, but then again, I'm callous and strange) typifies the main point of the essay: that memory is a difficult thing to understand, and an even harder thing to control. Waites emphasizes this point by noting that "the situation is even more confusing when there are deliberate attempts to subvert memory" (3), such as lies propagated by political institutions for their own aims, etc.

*Waites doesn't spend much time on the subject of trauma, but she does offer a few insights about the ways in which memory can be affected by certain traumatic events. For instance, there may be a subconscious memory that prevents a traumatized person from coming into contact with objects that remind him or her of the event, or the "troubling stimulus" might be purposely distorted or misinterpreted by the mind due to said memory. As an example, perhaps you were traumatized as a child when a clown with a butcher knife showed up at your birthday party; nowadays, a repressed memory of the event may subconsciously keep you away from circuses, mimes on sidewalks, and other people who habitually paint their faces.

*In the section regarding "autistic savants", Waites interprets Treffert's study in this manner: "...it points to the possibility that it is not just *what* is remembered, but *how* it is remembered, that characterizes exceptional memories..." (7). These people, who are essentially developmentally challenged, all possess incredible memories, possibly because their minds are somehow damaged and enhanced at the same time by alternative memory networks. But the more important point is that these memories are somewhat useless; they serve no real purpose. They are not what most normal people possess, memory known as *selective memory*. On a related note, did you know that Treffert was the psychiatrist who helped on the movie *Rain Man*? Yes, I actually had to research that fact. Applaud now.

*Interestingly enough, memory is a paradox; no matter how accurate it is, it can never be perfect. Each person has different facilities and means of forming memories, and in order for a memory to be actually useful, "...it must be relevant to the task or tasks at hand" (10). Similarly paradoxical, this means that people with useful memories often remember things that are partially untrue. The useful memory must be selective, and thus may leave certain details out, if judged unimportant to the main concept.

*I am running out of room now, but quick! One last note about trauma! Memory helps us deal with changes, but abrupt, traumatic changes "may produce a disjunction in memory systems" (13).