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Review of: Allan Mazur, *A Hazardous Inquiry: The Rashomon Effect at Love Canal*

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Erratum

The citation for this review is *9 RISK 291 (1998)* in most commercial databases.

Allan Mazur, *A Hazardous Inquiry: The Rashomon Effect at Love Canal* (Harvard University Press 1998). Abbreviations,, appendices: Chronology and The Basics of Toxicology, bibliography, chronology, figures, index, photos, references. LC 97-44639; ISBN 0-674-74833-6 [255+xiv pp. \$26.00 Cloth, 79 Garden Street; Cambridge MA 02138.]

The first chapter of *A Hazardous Inquiry* is entitled, *Rashomon*. There Mazur, a Professor of Public Affairs at the Maxwell School, Syracuse University, describes a classic Japanese movie of that name in which four participants describe an event “in a way that justifies his or her own behavior while casting blame on the others.”¹ He then says:²

... Love Canal has become an emblem of technological disaster in the modern industrial age. The canonical version... is well put by the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, which I quote....

But since there were conflicting interest groups at Love Canal... there must be conflicting accounts of what happened. This book describes and contrasts alternative stories....

Rashomon has only four characters..., so it is easy to tell the story from every person’s viewpoint. This procedure is impractical for a real event where many people and organizations are involved. I treat six key accounts in detail.

An equally brief second chapter entitled “Love’s Canal,” completes the background part of the book. In it, Mazur provides, with a map and aerial photograph, a brief history said to be accepted by all parties.³

The second part of the book is entitled “Accounts” and contains five chapters articulating the views of particular entities, such as Hooker Chemical, or individuals, such as Lois Gibbs who was a key player in getting President Carter to declare a state of emergency at Love Canal in 1980, permitting use of federal funds for relocation.⁴ Also, Chapter 6 offers an account of *several* people whose homes were closest to the site; they are collectively called “Ring 1.”⁵

1 At 4.

2 At 6.

3 At 15.

4 At 87.

5 Their collective interests are best appreciated by viewing the map at 12.

Moreover, Chapter 5, “Digression: Growing Concerns about Trace Poisons,” a revision of *Why Do We Worry About Trace Poisons?* 7 Risk 35 (1996), appears here.

Rashomon leaves its viewers to piece together the “true” story from the four inconsistent accounts. Mazur, however, does not leave readers dangling. Perhaps he should, but, in the final part of this fascinating and fastidious book, he provides four chapters and a postscript. There, he observes:⁶

My apportioning of blame is fairly equitable. I have spread it around..., and few are exempt. I believe that most parties... acted reasonably well, under the circumstances, and despite some blatant lapses. Love Canal was a tragedy in the classic sense... because actions that were — for the most part — personally moral or professionally acceptable combined in unexpected ways to produce inordinate misery.

Professor Mazur’s title, *A Hazardous Inquiry*, may contain a conscious pun. If not, there is much irony in it. Each person he mentions was given a preliminary draft; those one might expect to be most prone to protest approved.⁷ A few did not,⁸ and Mazur has been at least threatened with suit by some unhappy party.⁹ That, too, is ironic in light of his providing the opportunity to comment.

As citizen and scholar — particularly as a lawyer — I find such a threat chilling, more than even the worst spin on a disaster which Mazur describes as “the paradigm example of a community poisoned by toxic industrial waste.”¹⁰ Without the capacity to report on such events unfettered by the need to worry overmuch about tort liability, the *entire country* is sure to suffer “inordinate misery.”¹¹

Thomas G. Field, Jr.†



⁶ At 212.

⁷ At *ix*.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Personal communication. The identity of the party was not revealed, so readers are free to speculate about who it might be — at least pending a published report.

¹⁰ At 6.

¹¹ See quotation *supra* at note 6.

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