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Review: A Hazardous Inquiry: The Rashomon Effect at Love Canal

By Allan Mazur

Reviewed by [Mary Beth Fortunato](#)
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Mazur, Allan. *A Hazardous Inquiry: The Rashomon Effect at Love Canal*.
Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England
1998. 272pp. US\$27.00, hardcover. ISBN 0674748336.

A Hazardous Inquiry: The Rashomon Effect at Love Canal uniquely relays the "facts" of Love Canal from the perspectives of the key players. Located in Niagara Falls, NY, Love Canal, now infamous in the environmental community, was an empty canal, used as a chemical disposal site in the 1940s and 50s. After hazardous chemicals were dumped in the canal, it was filled in and given to the city of Niagara Falls by Hooker Chemical Company. The city used the land to build housing and an elementary school. By the late 1970s, hazardous chemicals were leaking from the canal and rising to the surface. Families were evacuated from the area in 1978, and by 1980, "Love Canal" (formerly known as the LaSalle region of Niagara Falls) was considered a national emergency by President Jimmy Carter.

Allan Mazur borrows from the structure of the classic Japanese film *Rashoman*, as he attempts to come to some resolution about what actually occurred at Love Canal by allowing those individuals involved to tell their side of the story. Hooker Chemical Company (the party that buried the chemicals), the Niagara Falls Board of Education (the party that built on it), Lois Gibbs (housewife turned environmental activist), local reporter Michael Brown, and homeowners read and approved Mazur's versions of what they told him. Mazur acts as a mediator of sorts, taking the accounts that he hears and reconciling them.

Mazur comments that "reality is in the mind of the beholder" (p. 5). As outsiders of Love Canal, we are left to discriminate between separate realities and to decide how factual each of these realities is. This leaves us bogged down in an "irresolvable morass of claims and counterclaims" (p.5). Can Mazur's objectivity free us from the irresolvable morass of Love Canal? In *Rashoman*, a woodcutter attempts to give an objective account of what "really" happened between a bandit, samurai, and the wife of the samurai. His account is accepted as the most truthful account, because he is an outsider and appears to have nothing at stake. Later, we discover that the woodcutter found and kept the woman's expensive dagger, so his account is not as pure as we first believe. Greed or want does not drive Mazur, but he is driven by his belief that there is an ultimate truth, and this drive could be his weakness.

When he finishes the re-telling of the story of Love Canal from the six different perspectives, he appears to be left frustrated because the truth is so evasive. Mazur resents and refuses to accept a constructionist perspective, which says that there is no absolute truth. He instead seeks the ultimate truth by accepting those points from all of the parties that agree and then identifying those points of disagreement, looking for resolution through thorough evaluation.

Mazur's reconciliation can best be described as much ado about nothing. There is no villain; there is no hero. He achieves what he sets out to achieve—an objective analysis of the facts. He concludes that no one is to blame but rather that the blame should be spread out evenly across all involved parties. He believes that these parties did not set out to do wrong, but rather that their actions produced unexpected consequences. He draws a safe, sterile conclusion that does not help us in any way to avoid such tragedies in the future. We finish Mazur's account feeling as helpless as we did when we began. There is no explanation. There is no blame. And as a result, we feel no resolution. Mazur's preoccupation with objectivity leads to a conclusion that excuses those corporations that dump chemicals and makes it easier for institutions to avoid responsibility for irresponsible behaviors. It may be inappropriate to be objective when the one truth that is blatantly obvious is the one truth that Mazur ignores, perhaps because this truth cannot be neatly explained, verified and justified.

The one glaring truth that Mazur ignores is the "inordinate misery" (p. 212) caused to those closest to the tragedy of Love Canal, those individuals being the (former and current) residents. In his attempt to avoid taking sides, Mazur neglects these individuals who may not care about "the truth", but only about their reality. Mazur's approach, although logical and thoughtful on the surface, is as tainted as the woodcutter's account. The woodcutter was motivated by the worth of a dagger. Mazur is motivated by the worth of truth, which has no value if it does not lead to the support of those who are most affected by the deception.

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