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# Remarks on *Fatal Vision*

Joe McGinniss

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Whenever I talk about *Fatal Vision*, which I don't do all that often because in truth, the subject does remain quite painful to me, I feel the need to get any humor out of the way at the start because once I begin discussing any aspect of this, as you will see, it leaves laughter a long way behind.

It's been six years now since the jury verdict, since Jeffrey McDonald was convicted, but the story just does not stop. Toward the end of the book, I wrote, "As long as there is money to pay them, the lawyers and private investigators will be

able to keep busy for years and there will always be new witnesses and new leads." I quoted Brian Murtagh as saying "He's never going to accept his guilt, he's never going to just sit in jail. There's a temptation to say 'the end, this is it, finished.' But no, not really; the case is never going to be in a posture where he just quietly sits and lets the years roll by." Well, Mr. Murtagh certainly called that one right. In fact, as some of you may be aware, Mr. Murtagh will be in court on Monday, in Richmond, along with lawyers for Mr. McDonald. I say "Mr." because as you may be aware, he is no longer a doctor. He has had his medical licenses revoked, so it is no longer necessary to call him Dr. McDonald. They'll be in court in Richmond arguing his latest appeal of Judge Dupree's latest denial of the latest motion for a new trial. I have no doubt that the fourth circuit will find that Judge Dupree has ruled correctly, but I'm also quite sure that even after that we'll have petitions to Congress and we'll have bids for presidential pardons and we'll have new appeals based on "new evidence" and so on and so on, etc. etc. ad infinitum, which, incidently, exhausts my supply of conversational Latin.

In the last chapter of *Fatal Vision*, I proved myself to be a lot less smart than Brian Murtagh, for I begin that chapter by saying, "It is over for me though, I have reached the end." Well, that was written in the fall of 1982, and here in the fall of 1985, which seems to be about three years later, I'm standing before you about to talk about Jeffrey McDonald and some of the things I went through while writing the book. To tell you the truth, it is McDonald himself who is making it impossible for me to call this over. For as long as he sits in his Texas prison and sends out newsletters and gives interviews and files law suits and attempts to mislead and deceive the public about me as well as the facts concerning his crimes, I feel, really, both a moral duty and a professional obligation to respond and to continue to articulate the truth as I have come to understand it.

You know, it's a terrible thing, really, to believe, to be convinced, that a man you know, a man toward whom you once felt friendship, did



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Joe McGinniss, author of *Fatal Vision*, made this presentation at the Public Library Section Meeting at NCLA.

with his own hands beat and stab to death his own little daughters and his wife and his unborn son. A terrible thing. My life would be a lot more comfortable today, and it would have been a lot more comfortable these past six years if I had not grown convinced of the fact that Jeffrey McDonald murdered his family. It would be a lot more rewarding and satisfying emotionally to work to get an innocent man out of jail than to keep a guilty one in. Of course, it is not my task to keep Jeffrey McDonald in prison, nor did I have anything to do with putting him there; although he wouldn't agree with that I'm afraid, he seems to think that somehow ... He did an interview last week in which he said that there have been three great tragedies in his life. The first of course was the night of February 17, when at least four intruders slaughtered his family. The second was the conviction in 1979 and the third was the publication of *Fatal Vision*. So, we now have the book equated in his mind with the murders themselves, which is an interesting insight into the way his mind works. My task is not that of the criminal justice system, my task was simply to work as hard as I could for as long as it took to learn the truth about what happened to Colette and Kimberly and Kristen McDonald at Fort Bragg on February 17, 1970; and when I had then learned all that I could, to write about it the best way I knew how. That is what I did in *Fatal Vision* and there's nothing in my professional life of which I'm more proud.

But I did not come here this morning to congratulate myself; rather I came to explore with you for the next half hour or so some of the implications of the question I have been asked most frequently in the two years since *Fatal Vision* was first published, mainly, "When did you become convinced that Jeffrey McDonald had murdered his wife and children?" That's a logical, sensible question but any adequate answer to it is bound to be somewhat complex, involving as it does the intellect and the emotions and a great deal of other assorted psychological baggage. It is not, in short, the sort of question that can be answered with surgical or even legal precision. But I have, over the past couple of years, given it a great deal of thought and this morning I would like to share some of those thoughts with you in the hope that they might give you, librarians, who deal with the end product—the neatly packaged, finished work—might give you some insight into the confused and turbulent and even contradictory process of thinking and writing about events of such dreadful magnitude.

When did I become convinced that Jeffrey McDonald had killed his wife and children? The truth is, I knew it with absolute certainty in my heart as well as in my head only when I finished writing *Fatal Vision*. The act of writing was the final step of my quest for knowledge and understanding. It was through that process that I unlocked the various closed doors at different levels of my consciousness and unconsciousness to discover what it was that I truly and irrevocably believed. Indeed, the process was not simply one of discovery, but one of creation. And it was not simply creation of a book, the words on paper, but creation of the very belief, the very conviction, that McDonald had committed these murders. We almost here flirt with epistemology. What is the nature of knowledge? What do we mean by words such as "know," "believe," "become convinced"? I will not drift too far into those treacherous philosophical seas this morning but will say that as a writer, as a creative artist struggling with the most difficult question I have ever had to face, I found myself appreciating the wisdom of the remark once made by Flannery O'Connor. She said "I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say." Think about that remark for a moment and its implication. I suggest that it

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is entirely apt that the complex interrelation of the various components of the creative process which it implies is exactly what governed me and my attitudes during the period of evolution necessary to produce that book.

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**When did I become convinced that Jeffrey McDonald had killed his wife and children? The truth is, I knew it with absolute certainty in my heart as well as in my head only when I finished writing *Fatal Vision*.**

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At what moment did I become forever convinced that Jeffrey McDonald was a killer? It is not a question, as I say, that can be answered with mathematical precision. There were too many sleepless nights, too many terrible dreams, really, too many blank dull mornings spent staring out the back window of my house, cold coffee in hand, postponing for another minute, another five, another ten, the task of going back upstairs and again confronting the chilling realization which, against my will, was forming itself: that Jeffrey McDonald had in fact fractured the skull of his pregnant wife with a club; that he had broken both of her arms with a club; that he had sixteen times stabbed her in the neck, in the chest with a knife; that he had shattered the skull of his five year old daughter with the same club, stabbed her—you know the details, I don't have to go through all he did. But I lived with the man for seven weeks, three meals a day, seven days a week with few exceptions. I liked the man, I liked him enormously. Everyone who met him did. I laughed with him, jogged with him, drank beer with him, browsed through bookstores with him, listened to music with him, talked sports with him. And I also came to know and like his friends, lawyers, his brother and his mother. I saw him surrounded by dozens of those friends, people from high school, college, the Army, the hospital where he worked so well for eight years, all of them—people who believed totally in him and in his innocence. So it can't be a surprise, I don't think, that I found myself wanting to believe the same thing. I had to look at those crime scene photographs which depicted what had been done to Colette, Kimberly and Kristen and then within the hour I would be looking at him. This happened a number of times

during that summer of the trial, and every time it happened my reaction was the same: "This man could not have done that to those people. He is not capable, it cannot be."

However, I sat in court every day and saw the evidence slowly build up, saw the evidence slowly build to a point where by the end of the trial I suppose I felt, as the jury did, the concrete physical evidence was just too clear, too unambiguous. It could not be, yet it was. He could not have, yet he did, and if he did then he was so sick and so twisted and so horribly far from what he appeared to be that there was no way of confronting the real man, the one who did that. It was only this alluring surface personality, and thus there was no way of sitting down with him and attempting through candid conversation to reconcile what could not be true with what in fact had to be true. I was confronted with what I later learned the eminent psychiatrist, author and teacher Dr. Hervey Cleckley has described as a "convincing mask of sanity." There is something else Dr. Cleckley wrote regarding the psychopathic personality which seems apt. He said, "Only very slowly and by a complex estimation or judgment based on multitudinous small impressions does the conviction come upon us that despite intact rational processes, normal emotional affirmations and their consistent applications in all directions, we are dealing not with a complete man at all but with something that suggests a subtly constructed reflex machine which can mimic the human personality perfectly." It's a frightening notion when you think about it. I think I read that,—read Dr. Cleckley's entire book, in fact—sometime in the summer of 1980, the first summer after the trial. Maybe it was the fall. What it did, in conjunction with other reading I was doing in the psychiatric literature, was to make me aware that such a pathology existed; that it was possible that Jeffrey McDonald could be, as I knew him to be, a warm and charming and apparently caring person and at the same time, a man possibly suffering from a personality disorder known as pathological narcissism, the type of person who is described by Dr. Otto Kernberg as "... an enraged, empty self, a hungry wolf out to kill, full of impotent anger at being frustrated."

We see the impotent anger in McDonald expressed even today in various ways: newsletters, lawsuits, the continuing protestations of innocence and attacks upon the government and all who have come to believe him guilty. But what I was confronted with, starting in the fall of 1979, but really getting serious in the summer of 1980, after I had done that kind of reading was the



question, the central question which haunted me, (and that's not too strong a word ... I think haunted is an appropriate word there) haunted me throughout the entire process of writing this book: "How *could* he have, how could he have done that?" And only very slowly and by a complex estimation or judgment based on multitudinous small impressions did the conviction come upon me that there was a satisfactory explanation, if not entirely satisfactory, at least sufficiently plausible to allow me to accept what the cold hard objective facts, "the things that do not lie," as Jim Blackburn had said at trial. These facts had been screaming at me since 1979: "He did it." But how could he have? Jim Blackburn said at trial, "If we prove he did it, we don't have to prove he's the kind of man who could have done it." For me it was different though; I could not fully accept that he had, despite the evidence, until I could begin to understand how he could have.

I guess by the spring, certainly by the summer of 1980, I had done enough independent work to convince myself that the facts presented at trial had not led the jury to an erroneous conclusion, but still there was the question, "How could he have? How could he have? How could he have done this?" This was a struggle, an internal struggle which I waged continuously for a period of months, even years. A struggle, I suppose I could say, between my head and my heart, as it were. You know, I had to believe it, yet I couldn't. It certainly did create, to put it mildly, a certain confusion. But three years later, when the book was published, I was asked, sometimes eight, sometimes ten times a day, "When did you first think he did it? When did you first become convinced?" Of course, I tended under those circumstances to minimize this process or state of confusion. My answers in those interviews were oversimplified. I

think there were two reasons for that. The first is that on interviews, whether it's broadcast or print, the format is one in which answers, and I learned this from watching Richard Nixon in 1968, answers had best be kept brief and focused and unambiguous. Neither a ninety second television spot or a 600 word newspaper story is a proper or even a possible forum for the offering of an answer which would encompass the multitude of factors that went into my struggle to accept the fact that McDonald had done this thing. So, to be effective, as one must if one wants to sell books, as one must if one wants to keep writing books, you have to, in a sense, behave almost like a politician to try to oversimplify to reach people. It is a necessary part of communicating through the media.

But the second answer is one that makes me a little more uncomfortable, the second answer to the question, "Why did I make something so complicated seem so simple?" In interviews there is a tendency to want to appear a little smarter than you really are. By the fall of 1983, when *Fatal Vision* was published, the fact of McDonald's guilt was so obvious, it seemed so obvious to me then, so easily demonstrable, that it was embarrassing to admit publicly that it had taken me as long as it really did to come irrevocably and finally to that conclusion. It was difficult for me to admit that he had done such a good job of conning me. I was angry that I had been so gullible, trusting, supportive, all those things, during the time I was with him and during the six to nine months that followed. He was writing me letters from jail and I was writing him letters saying "Gee, hang in there, I hope things are going to be okay," you know, feeling some very genuine sympathy for this man even while at the same time my head said, "My God, he must have done it." Very difficult thing to



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sustain, a hard way to live. I really felt later, I really felt like a dope. I didn't want to give McDonald credit for anything at that point, least of all for having conned me so successfully for as long as he did. So, when asked the question, "When did you first suspect or when were you first convinced or when did you come to believe?" I would seek the earliest moment at which the cumulative power of facts assembled as evidence outweighed the strength of my desire to believe him innocent, so I would say, "By the time the jury returned its verdict."

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**Within a week of arriving home from the trial, I received my first letter from McDonald written eighteen hours after his conviction, begging me for support, begging me to believe in him. It brought tears to my eyes. I feel like a sap for admitting that now. But it's true. I said 'Oh my God, he couldn't have done this.'**

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That was an accurate answer to the question but not fully comprehensive, for doubts returned, lingered and held sway for months afterward. I didn't want to sound like a gullible dope and it was true that by the time the jury came in, I had been persuaded that he was guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, at least at that moment. But the next day, I might not have been so sure. The situation for me was not static, I was not a juror, I had not rendered my opinion, I could not now walk away, I had to walk further in. Things were fluid, changing. Within a week of arriving home from the trial, I received my first letter from McDonald written eighteen hours after his conviction, begging me for support, begging me to believe in him. It brought tears to my eyes. I feel like a sap for admitting that now. But it's true. I said "Oh my God, he couldn't have done this." I had dinner a couple of weeks later with the editor-in-chief of Bell Publishing which was then my publisher, showed him that letter and discussed some of the facts and wound up saying, "I don't know, I just don't know," when he asked me. I wrestled with this, as you can imagine, constantly, all day, every day. It obsessed me, "Did he or didn't he? How could he have. He couldn't have, but then if he

didn't, where is the flaw in the evidence that proved he did?"

I was in a position where I knew enough facts from both sides so that by assembling a set of pro-McDonald arguments or facts I could convince anyone in fifteen minutes that he hadn't done it. Likewise, I could do the opposite, but there I was in the middle, torn, turned upside down and inside out trying to figure my way through the most awful set of circumstances I'd ever been confronted by. And all the while being constantly beseeched by this terribly charming, terribly persuasive man to believe in him. Well, most of me didn't, and couldn't, as a result of what I had seen presented in court, but part of me could and did, for months. How much, I don't know. I really don't know. How do you measure the degree of love and degree of hate in a love/hate relationship. This was not quite that intense, but the nature of the ambivalence was the same. Whichever conclusion I came to left me feeling unsatisfied, still disturbed. Gradually, over the next year, as his personal magnetism faded, and hard new facts piled up along side of what I already knew, I grew less ambivalent, but still I could and did and had to for my own emotional survival suspend my growing sense of awful certainty.

It's hard now, really, to convey how totally consumed I was by what I had gotten involved in, but I'll give you one brief story that might illustrate it. It was the winter of 1980, which was the first winter after the trial. It was February, in fact, around the middle of February. I was in bed, woke up, middle of the night, didn't know quite what time it was, with a runny nose and I didn't have any Kleenex by the side of the bed, so I got up and walked down the darkened hallway to my bathroom and was fumbling around for the Kleenex and was standing at the bathroom sink, wiping my nose on the back of my hand and I turned on the light and then I saw that it wasn't just a runny nose, it was a bloody nose, and I was standing at the sink in my hall bathroom with blood all over my hands. Then I realized it was February 17, 1980 and that it was 3:30 in the morning, which was ten years to the minute from the time Jeffrey McDonald, by whichever version of events you believe, stood at his hall bathroom sink with blood on his hands. Now, I've never had a bloody nose before that or after that. I don't know what that story means, but it scared the heck out of me. Really, I did not go back to sleep that night.

That gives you, I think, I hope, some sense of the intensity of my psychosomatic involvement. Then for three years after that, almost every

night, I would awaken within minutes of 3:00 in the morning, almost every night wake up at 3:00 in the morning and lie there, imagining, thinking, wondering, feeling, trying to come to some kind of terms with what had gone on inside of that apartment at that hour on that night. I very seldom would get back to sleep before dawn. These are things which at the time I could not talk about to anybody but my wife, really. It was not a question of saying, "Oh well, I guess he's guilty so probably I ought to let him know what I think" We're talking about a psychological crisis here for me.

I wasn't just passively locked into some nightmare, which would have been bad enough, I had to write a book, I had to do something about all this. I had to deal with this question: "Did he or didn't he, how could he, how could he have?" I had to deal with this every working hour which was for the most part, those years, every waking hour. It never went away. I wrote because I needed to write, because I needed to find out what I thought by reading what I had said. I could go for a week, for a month with almost no ambivalence at all. Finally, I'd say, "I've come to accept it; I can deal with it now, terrible though it may be," and then like the change in the weather some new dust of doubt would sweep over me. Really, it was like a blue sky turning gray, it would just be something over which I had no control. The thing is I just felt so awful all this time. There was such pain, especially after meeting the Kassabs, after they showed me Colette's letters and after they talked about the kids in the feeling, grieving way that McDonald himself could not begin to emulate. I'm not hardened to human suffering. I could feel the anguish on all sides. All I could fall back on was that which I most strongly believe, that for a writer, any experience can be validated in the writing.

So I persevered. I could not survive unless I could lay this to rest, and the only way I could lay it to rest was by writing about it. I had to understand, I had to know, way down deep; way down deep where it really matters, I had to know. Finally, I got there but it was through the act of writing, that's when I figured out what I thought. By December of 1982, when I sent the completed draft off to my publishers, even though there was more cutting and rewriting and adding to be done later, by December of '82, my creative work, my quest for understanding was essentially complete, which is not to say that it was entirely successful. I don't know if any of you saw the August 1985 issue of *Harper's Magazine* where the philosopher David Kelley comments in a lengthy article called "Stalking the Criminal Mind," an article which is really based primarily on his reading of

*Fatal Vision*. Professor Kelley writes "If the various explanations of the crime in *Fatal Vision* are finally unsatisfying, the problem is not literary, but metaphysical. We expect the relation between cause and effect to be both necessary and intelligible. In the case of a human act physiology can give us the first, and psychology the second, but we cannot put the two together until we can understand (and we do not) the causal intercourse between mind and body, matter and spirit." I would submit that the causal intercourse between what I felt about McDonald at any given moment and my sequence of action from the time I met him until the time I finished writing the book is equally difficult to define, and likewise, I would say, is essentially a problem of metaphysics. In that same article, Professor Kelley discusses the findings of Yochelson and Samenow in their book, *The Criminal Personality*, regarding some aspects of a psychopath. The psychopath's greatest fear, Yochelson and Samenow found, was that of the "zero state." This sense of complete and profound worthlessness was something all of their patients had experienced and went to great lengths to repress. They protected themselves against it by a kind of grandiosity, a conception of themselves as supermen, as effortless heroes, able to achieve great ends by unconventional means. Their chief method of sustaining this self image was to exert control over others. By forcing others to bend to his will, intimidating them, manipulating them through lies and cons the psychopath makes society affirm a view of his potency that he cannot affirm by looking within.

Conversely, anything that suggests a lack of control over the world threatens to bring on the zero state. According to Samenow, "The threat of being less than top dog, the possibility that he won't achieve unusual distinction, the chance that things will not go as he wants, constitute a major threat to the criminal, almost as though his life were at stake. From his standpoint it is, because the puncturing of his inflated self concept is psychological homicide." Professor Kelley then writes, "Anyone trying to understand the case of Jeffrey McDonald should find that a chilling observation." His reference, of course, is to Colette's beginning to challenge McDonald's view of himself as superman, and the consequences to her of her insight. I think it also applies to McDonald's extraordinary rage against me which exists today. What I have committed through the publication of *Fatal Vision* is in a sense psychological homicide. It's not that I said he did it. Heck, the jury said that, and he's really not that mad at them. It's that I showed up his inflated self con-



cept as a sham.

Well, I'd like to summarize where all this took me and where it leads me in one or two cogent statements, but I really don't know that it can be summarized. The whole process is so confusing, so difficult. You know, authors shouldn't stand up here and cry about how hard it is to write a book. You know that before you begin. There are lots of other lines of work that are a lot harder, probably even being a librarian. There are some days when I think it's easier to be a writer than a librarian. But this particular book, unlike my book about Alaska, unlike my book about Richard Nixon, unlike any of my other books or any other writing I've ever done, was just so terribly painful because of the subject matter, because of this dreadful nagging question of "How could he have done this? And if he did do this, how could it be that I found this sort of man to be so attractive and so pleasant, and so charming?" You know, if he did this, and he did, then he is the personification of almost absolute evil. To commit an action like that, such a terrible, terrible crime and to go on for ten years, for almost ten years, successfully denying to others any involvement, this is evil. Yet, at the same time, as I said, he was a very attractive, charming, personable man. It sort of scares me when I ask myself how I can find something so evil and to at the same time be so appealing. I don't know, I don't know what that says about me or what that says about any of the other people who have been close to Jeffrey McDonald at any time of his life.



Linda Fowler, School Media Programs Coordinator, Region 8 and Dr. James Benfield, Superintendent of Polk County Schools and recipient of the NCASL School Administrator of the Year Award.

It comes back to the question of how or when I finally came to believe that he had done this thing. I think that question is so inextricably intertwined with the mysteries of the creative process that it simply can't be answered in one or two sentences. It also seems to me that lying very close to the heart of the question is the fact that that belief, that this man with whom I had shared so much had bludgeoned and stabbed his wife and two little daughters, was so horrendous in nature, and thus difficult to sustain that it was obviously impossible for me to confront him, to discuss this with him. I wouldn't be talking, as I say, to the real person, I wouldn't be talking to that source of that raw fury that is responsible for this, I would be talking only to that alluring, charming, evasive, deceitful surface.

And so, it was a very private problem that I wrestled with for those three years of writing the book. I felt that I was wrestling with the demons inside his soul at the same time that I was wrestling with the torment inside my own. And in the end, as I finished the book, I found that however imperfect my understanding of him may have been and still is today imperfect, I had come to accept that dreadful fact which I had fought so hard to deny, that Jeffrey McDonald had killed his wife and children. It goes back to what Flannery O'Connor said, "I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say." Well, I have written, I have read what I've said, and I do know this morning what I think. I think this entire affair is the worst personal tragedy that I have ever encountered and I continue to feel, every day, some small trace of the immense and ongoing pain endured for all these years by Freddie and Mildred Kassab who had to face this awful truth long before I even knew who they were. You know, even though he's been unsuccessful in his attempts to have his conviction overturned and to silence me through the threat and now the fact of litigation, and to prevent my book from reaching readers, to prevent NBC from broadcasting their miniseries, McDonald has succeeded in one thing. He has succeeded in focusing our attention upon himself, rather than on his victims.

But now, this morning, as I close here, I would like to call your attention once more, to the words of Jim Blackburn, delivered in that eloquent and memorable summation to the jury right here in Raleigh in 1979, when he said: "Ladies and gentlemen, if in the future after this case is over you should think of it again, I ask you to think of and to remember Colette, Kimberly and Kristen. They have been dead now for almost ten years. That is right now around 3,500 days

and nights that you have had and I have had and the defendant has had that they haven't. They would have liked to have had those. And, so if in the future, you should say a prayer, say one for them. If in the future you should light a candle, light one for them. And, if in the future, you should cry a tear, cry one for them."

And now, as I close, I'd like to ask now fifteen years and more than 5,000 days and nights since their deaths, that you join me for just a moment in thinking, remembering, briefly, that brave young woman and those two little girls. I would ask you to contemplate, here at the close, for just a few seconds, those words that Mildred Kassab, Colette's mother and the grandmother of Kimberly and Kristen wrote in her diary in 1971 after coming back from putting fresh flowers on their graves: "Oh the beauties of the world that they would never see, and the music that they would never hear." For just a moment, let us remember them and their short lives and their tragic and violent deaths.

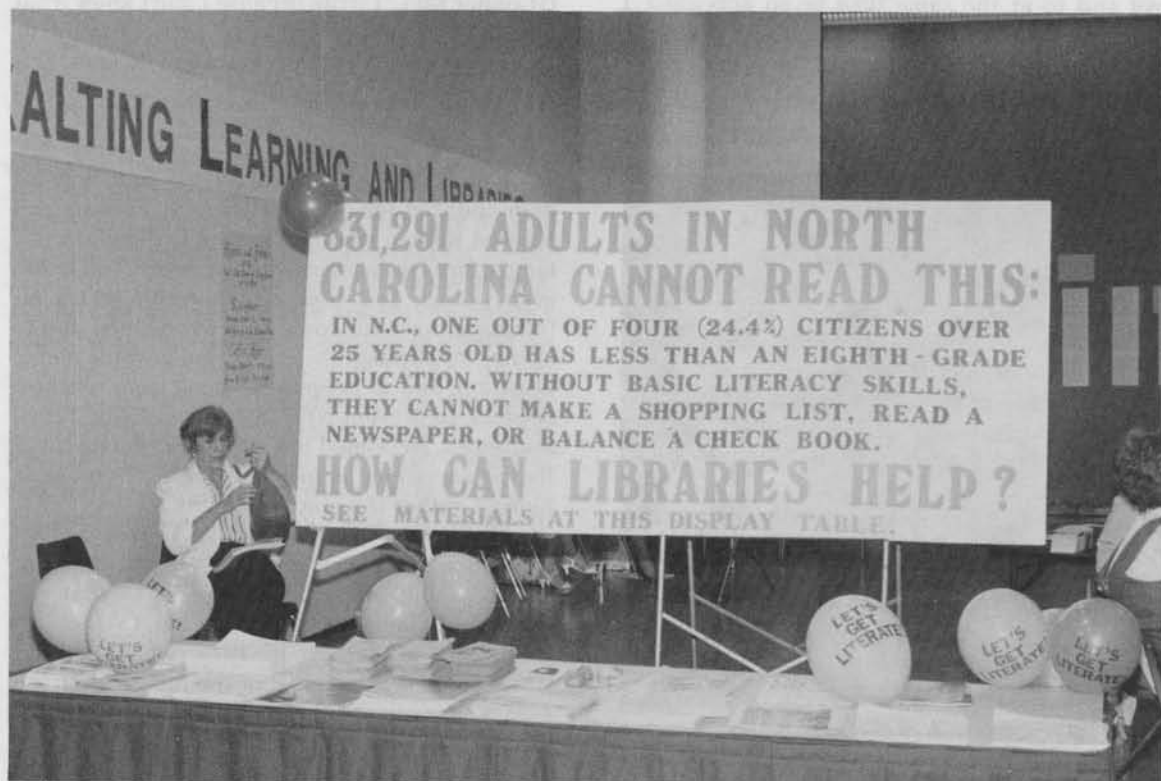
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