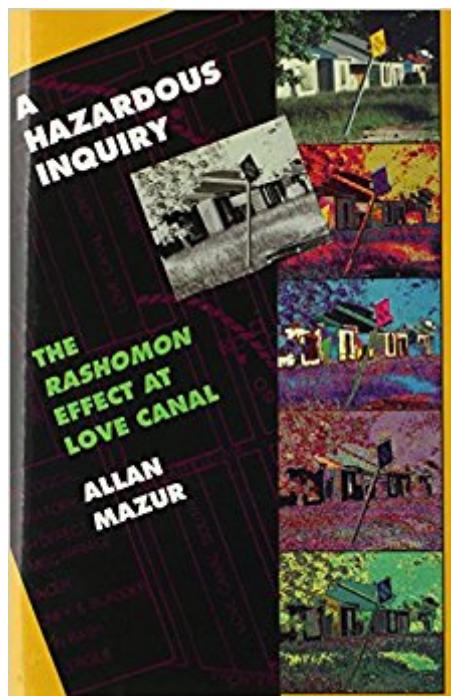


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# A Hazardous Inquiry: The Rashomon Effect At Love Canal



## Synopsis

Love Canal. We hear these words and quickly recoil, remembering a community poisoned by toxic waste. Twenty years after the incident, Allan Mazur reexamines the circumstances that made this upstate New York neighborhood synonymous with ecological catastrophe and triggered federal "Superfund" legislation to clean up the nation's thousands of hazardous waste sites. But is there only one true story of Love Canal? Borrowing the multi-viewpoint technique of the classic Japanese film *Rashomon*, Mazur's book reveals that there are many--often conflicting versions of what occurred at Love Canal. Hooker Chemical Company, which deposited the toxic wastes, explains why it subsequently donated the dump as the site for a new school. Lois Gibbs, whose son attended the school, tells of organizing the community to fight both the chemical threat and the uncaring state bureaucracy. Then there is the story of David Axelrod, New York's embattled commissioner of health, at odds with the homeowners over their assessment of the hazards and the proper extent of the state's response. We also hear from Michael Brown, the young reporter who developed the story in the *Niagara Gazette* and eventually brought the problem of toxic waste to national attention. If *A Hazardous Inquiry* succeeded only in making us understand why one version of the events at Love Canal gained precedence over all others, it would be invaluable to policy makers, journalists, scientists, environmentalists, lawyers, and to citizens caught up in technical controversies that get played out (for better or worse) in the public arena. But the book moves beyond that to evaluate and reconcile the conflicting accounts of Love Canal, giving us a fuller, if more complex, picture than ever before. Through gripping personal tales, *A Hazardous Inquiry* tells how politics and journalism and epidemiology sometimes mesh, but often clash, when confronting a potential community disaster.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Allan Mazur has taken an interesting approach to laying out the issues at Love Canal: the Rashomon effect, referring to viewing the same situation from multiple perspectives. In this case the perspectives are the company involved, the school board that built the school, the public health community, and the local citizenry. As might be expected, each has a different view, and some entities seemed more forthcoming with information than others. The author has not only laid out the facts of the case and the perspectives of key players, but has, with virtue of hindsight, clarified, to as great an extent as seems possible, the 'truth' of the situation...There are several natural audiences for this book. For those interested in the history of the environmental movement, this is an excellent background for understanding the earlier days of concern. For those interested in environmental science and medicine, this book will reinforce the understanding of why and how science must be of the highest quality, just as much for environmental issues as for trials of new vaccines or antibiotics. For classes interested in risk communication, the media, or the crassness of the political area, this book has much to recommend it, though the lessons learned may well make one unhappy in their learning. (Arthur L. Frank Journal of the American Medical Association)Mazur invokes the classic Kurosawa film Rashomon as an emblem of just how difficult it is to tease the truth out of a tangled human event that pits contending participants, interests and accounts against each other...His analysis of the state and presidential politics that provided the context for the local victory at Love Canal is intelligent and useful...Anyone interested in the politics of the environment will find A Hazardous Inquiry a useful and challenging read. (Tom Sandborn Vancouver Sun)Much has been written about Love Canal...A recent addition to this literature is Allan Mazur's compelling book...Mazur gets each of the actors--Hooker Chemical Co., now part of Occidental Chemical Co.; federal, state, and local governments; the various factions of Love Canal residents; and a then local journalist--to tell the story of Love Canal. Each, of course, relates a different tale of events...Mazur's 'Rashomon' method forces the reader to wade through repetitious tales. This repetition...compels the reader to review and to reconsider the events. Mazur's technique forces some clarification of incidents that were misted in chaos when they occurred...Just when you think that the Love Canal saga has been mined out, along comes a book like Mazur's to dispel that thought. His book is a good read--and you'll have to read it to find out where he assigns culpability. (Lois R. Ember

Chemical and Engineering News) Risk disputes are difficult to reconcile because of the diverse and often inconsistent perspectives of the parties involved. Science, looked upon as an arbiter of truth, is often less than helpful. In this excellent book, Allan Mazur presents six accounts of the Love Canal dispute to demonstrate the complex interplay of scientific evidence, political biases, economic interests, and personal anxieties involved. He has contributed significantly to the understanding of policy controversies. (Dorothy Nelkin, New York University) Mazur's story is interesting and well told. While he does not tilt in the same direction as I do, we get a quite balanced account of this very significant event, and the review of the issues involved is illuminating. (Charles Perrow, Yale University, author of *Normal Accidents*) A revealing and disturbing account of how the Love Canal episode was bungled, with ordinary homeowners getting the short end of the stick! Beautifully written and meticulously documented. (John D. Graham, Harvard University, coeditor of *Risk vs. Risk: Tradeoffs in Protecting Health and the Environment*)

Allan Mazur, a sociologist and engineer, is Professor of Public Affairs at the Maxwell School, Syracuse University.

This book provides a systematic, balanced account of the history of Love Canal as it concerns various interested groups--Hooker Chemical, Love Canal Homeowner's Association, Niagara Falls School Board, press, etc. It is unique in that it does not lean toward any one side in its recounting of the various sides of the story. Its analysis of the impact of the events and the where the responsibilities might rest is certainly one of the best I've read. Also a terrific book on EPA response to a policy crisis--it provides a springboard to further discussion of the media's role in public policy as it concerns environmental issues.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part tells the "story" of Love Canal five times, each from the perspective of a different interest group: the chemical company that produced the wastes, the homeowners affected, the New York Health Department, etc. These stories are different, often inconsistent. The second part reconciles, so far as is reasonable, the conflicting claims. Like peeling the layers of an onion to finally get to the core, we get an unusually cogent view of what really happened at Love Canal -- and what did not happen.

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