

Freelance Writer Accuses The Atlantic of Defamation

A lawsuit by Ruth Shalit Barrett centers on the magazine's retraction of her article in 2020 about wealthy parents seeking Ivy League admissions for their children through sports.



By Katie Robertson

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A freelance writer, Ruth Shalit Barrett, accused The Atlantic of defamation in a lawsuit that centers on the rare retraction of a magazine article.

Ms. Barrett was the author of “The Mad, Mad World of Niche Sports,” an investigative article about wealthy Connecticut parents pursuing Ivy League admissions for their children through various athletic endeavors. The Atlantic published the article online in October 2020 and in its November 2020 print issue.

After questions were raised by The Washington Post's media critic, Erik Wemple, The Atlantic took the highly unusual step of retracting the entire article. In a lengthy editor's note, the outlet said that “new information” had emerged that cast doubt on the accuracy of the article and the “trustworthiness” of Ms. Barrett. The Atlantic also said Ms. Barrett had encouraged a source to lie to its fact checkers and noted details about Ms. Barrett's background, including plagiarism accusations against her in the 1990s when she was a reporter at The New Republic.

In her lawsuit, Ruth Shalit Barrett accused The Atlantic and Donald Peck, its top print editor at the time, of smearing her reputation.



In a lawsuit filed on Saturday in the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., that asks for \$1 million in damages, Ms. Barrett accused The Atlantic and Donald Peck, its top print editor at the time, of smearing her reputation.

The Atlantic had caved to pressure from Mr. Wemple, she said, who, in a series of columns, had questioned both the veracity of some of the details in the article, including the description of a fencing injury, and whether The Atlantic had deceived readers by not including Ms. Barrett's maiden name, which she used at The New Republic.

Ms. Barrett stated in the lawsuit that the only "falsehood" The Atlantic had uncovered was the addition of a nonexistent son to the family of "Sloane," a central character in the article. Ms. Barrett said she had added the son at the request of the anonymous source to help disguise her identity.

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Ms. Barrett also said in the suit that The Atlantic's editors had employed a similar tactic by changing a quote in her article to shield the identity of someone, which a fact-checker said in a text message was because of "a legal request." A spokeswoman for The Atlantic, Anna Bross, said in an email: "Our lawyers have never, in this case or any other, advised editors to alter direct quotes. This is a basic journalistic principle; of course, we do not alter quotes."

Ms. Barrett argued that the inclusion of the son was necessary to protect her source and that she was “acting in accordance with the law and ethical precepts of the profession of journalism.” She also said in the suit the two factual inaccuracies regarding the town one person was from and the size of backyard hockey rinks were “so trivial and insignificant as to hardly warrant correction — let alone the full retraction of a serious and meaningful piece of journalism.”

The Atlantic, in a nearly 1,000-word editor’s note, said that its fact-checking department had gone through the piece and spoken with more than 40 sources, but that Ms. Barrett had misled the fact checkers and lied to the editors.

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“It is impossible for us to vouch for the accuracy of this article,” the note said.

In the lawsuit, Ms. Barrett also accused The Atlantic of misrepresenting her background and destroying her journalistic career through what it publicly said about her.

Ms. Barrett was a rising star in political journalism in the 1990s, when she was in her 20s and wrote under her maiden name Ruth Shalit. She was accused of plagiarism in 1994 and 1995 over several passages and sentences in some of her work that resembled the work of other journalists. She left her job at The New Republic in 1999, and has had few articles published in the last 20 years.

The Atlantic said in the editor’s note that it had originally used the byline “Ruth S. Barrett” at Ms. Barrett’s request “but in the interest of transparency, we should have included the name that she used as her byline in the 1990s.” The note said that Ms. Barrett had been assigned the story because “more than two decades separated her from her journalistic malpractice at The New Republic” but that editors regretted the decision.

In the lawsuit, Ms. Barrett accused The Atlantic of folding to pressure from Mr. Wemple and misrepresenting her background. She said that she had an “antagonistic relationship” with the Post journalist leading back to the 1990s when he worked at the Washington City Paper.

Mr. Wemple said in an email that he did not recall meeting or interacting with Ms. Barrett before 2020, when he wrote his columns about her Atlantic story.

“I was doing my job as a media critic,” Mr. Wemple said.

Ms. Bross, The Atlantic’s spokeswoman, said the publication stood by its retraction and editor’s note.

“We completely reject the allegations and believe the suit is meritless, will be filing a motion to dismiss, and are confident we will ultimately prevail,” she said in a statement.

Ms. Barrett’s lawyers offered in early December to settle the case before they filed the lawsuit. In a letter sent to The Atlantic that was obtained by The New York Times, Ms. Barrett’s lawyers said they would not sue if The Atlantic agreed to make corrections to its editor’s note, surrender intellectual property rights to the article and pay Ms. Barrett’s legal fees, which at the time were nearly \$120,000.

“Any post-suit settlement would require monetary compensation, which Ms. Barrett is willing to forego at this point in order to attain some minimal repair of her journalistic reputation,” the letter said.