

Ruth Shalit Barrett sues Atlantic for \$1 million over retraction of viral article, allegations of inaccuracies

By [Bryan Pietsch](#)

Yesterday at 11:02 a.m. EST



Ruth Shalit Barrett, the freelance writer whose widely read 2020 story the Atlantic retracted after saying it had lost confidence in her credibility, is suing the magazine for \$1 million in damages. She alleges that the retraction of the article and a lengthy editor's note that disavowed her and mentioned incidents of plagiarism in her past "destroyed her reputation and career."

Barrett said in a [lawsuit filed Friday](#) in federal court in D.C. that the Atlantic "unlawfully smeared" her "for acting in accordance with the law and ethical precepts of the profession of journalism." She alleges defamation and breach of good faith and contract, among other claims. Don Peck, the Atlantic's former print magazine editor and current editor-at-large, is also named in the suit.

The Atlantic ran Barrett's story, "The Mad, Mad World of Niche Sports Among Ivy League-Obsessed Parents," in its November 2020 issue and published it online in October that year. The article offered a look into the posh mania of competitive youth sports such as fencing and lacrosse, focusing at first on a Connecticut mother who was referred to by her purported middle name, Sloane, to protect her anonymity.

Barrett wrote that Sloane had three daughters and a son, and described one of the daughter's fencing injuries as a being part of a "Fourth of July massacre" after she had been "stabbed in the jugular." She also wrote that some Connecticut families had built "Olympic-size hockey rinks" in their backyards.

But those details and other elements of the story began to fall apart after Erik Wemple, The Washington Post's media critic, [examined](#) Barrett's story, speaking to a fencing expert who cast doubt on the likelihood of such a gruesome injury. The founder of a company that builds ice rinks for the affluent in the area said he knew of "nobody who's built an Olympic sheet, not even the hedge-fund guys." Wemple [reported](#) that people close to the family said the woman identified as Sloane did not have a son.

Wemple also noted that the Atlantic story appeared under the byline "Ruth S. Barrett," obscuring the name "Shalit," which was Barrett's byline in the 1990s when she wrote and edited for the New Republic and New York Times Magazine. Under that name, she had been accused of plagiarism multiple times. (In response to those incidents, she has said she made errors in attribution because of "[carelessness](#)" and "[sloppy work methods](#).")

Amid the scrutiny of the article, the Atlantic redid its fact-checking and found that Sloane did not have a son, as Barrett had stated. Sloane told the Atlantic that Barrett had proposed inventing a son as a way to shroud her identity: Barrett

replacing it with a PDF of the print edition of the article “for the historical record.”

Despite her prior “journalistic malpractice,” the editor’s note said, “we took into consideration the argument that Barrett deserved a second chance to write feature stories such as this one. We were wrong to make this assignment, however. It reflects poor judgment on our part, and we regret our decision.” It also said that her byline was changed to Ruth Shalit Barrett “in the interest of transparency.”

“We cannot attest to the trustworthiness and credibility of the author, and therefore we cannot attest to the veracity of the article,” the note said.

In the lawsuit against the Atlantic and Peck, who was the print magazine’s editor at the time and had written a staff memo about the incident, Barrett called the Atlantic’s actions “character assassination” that had “destroyed her reputation and career.”

Barrett said in the lawsuit that the fabrication of the son was “a minor masking detail” meant to protect Sloane’s anonymity.

She said that the Atlantic had done essentially the same thing when its editors allegedly altered a lacrosse coach’s quote — typically a malpractice in journalism — to reference “multiple high-end players” instead of “my own captain.” The change was “a legal request to make him less identifiable,” a fact-checker told Barrett, according to the lawsuit.

Barrett’s charge that the Atlantic changed a quote drew attention in journalism circles, though some noted that it fell flat considering Barrett’s past. “This would be pretty damning for the Atlantic if it were coming from someone without a long history of making s--- up,” the journalist Tom Scocca wrote on Twitter.

Anna Bross, a spokeswoman for the Atlantic, said in a statement: “We stand by our full retraction and editor’s note from November 2020. 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.”

The lawsuit also criticizes Wemple’s scrutiny of the story — his reporting is cited repeatedly in the complaint — but it does not name him as a defendant. Wemple said in an email Saturday evening: “I was doing my job as a media critic, and I stand by what we published.”

By Bryan Pietsch

Bryan Pietsch is a reporter covering breaking news for The Washington Post from its hub in Seoul. He previously covered breaking news for the New York Times in Colorado. [!\[\]\(c50c8b7b2cc2cf9ff925edec0ee94c0d_img.jpg\) Twitter](#)



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