

NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

Review by KATHRYN HARRISON

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Ann Fessler was nearly 56 when she first met her biological mother, who was 75. By then Fessler had already collected more than 100 oral histories for "The Girls Who Went Away." She knew that those girls — pregnant, frightened and coerced into surrendering their babies for adoption — never came back from the experience, not really. None of the women who agreed to be interviewed by Fessler were able to follow the advice of parents, pastors and social workers who told them to put their "mistakes" behind them and move on, pick up their lives at the point at which they'd hurriedly exited them to wait out their confinement in a maternity home. Whatever private fantasies Fessler may have attached to the idea of reunion with her birth mother, they were informed by what she'd learned from other women who, like her mother, had suffered what one called "a horrible, horrible, horrible loss."

The language of adoption makes it clear: Babies are surrendered. They're given up. Relinquished. Mothers, even very young and panicked mothers, don't usually part from their babies without a struggle. But while many books, articles and television shows in recent years have focused on the often overwhelming experience of adopted children who as adults find themselves helplessly pursuing their biological parents, less has been said about mothers' separation from their infants — mothers as opposed to mothers and fathers, as biology grants males the freedom to move on, especially in the absence of DNA tests to establish paternity. A legacy of shame and guilt surrounding the circumstances that forced young women to surrender their babies has effectively silenced them from sharing the emotional fallout of that loss.

Between the end of World War II and the legalization of abortion nationwide in 1973, 1.5 million babies were given up for adoption in the United States. This turbulent era for young women, whose sexual independence preceded their access to birth control (and their exposure to sex education), produced "an explosion in premarital pregnancy and in the numbers of babies surrendered for adoption." Unmarried girls in the 1950's and 60's may have felt increasingly liberated to have intercourse (Helen Gurley Brown's "Sex and the Single Girl" was published in 1962, identifying a revolution that was well on its way) but the babies they bore were still considered illegitimate, and pregnancy outside of marriage was still a disgrace. A girl who found herself "in trouble" had virtually no means of resisting the forces that conspired either to push her into a speedy marriage or to hustle her out of town to have her baby far from the sight of all who would condemn her. "In one of the strictest forms of banishment," Fessler writes, "high schools and most colleges required a pregnant girl to withdraw immediately." And this was only an institutionalized form of the rejection she encountered wherever she turned, insisting she withdraw from all social interaction.

Mothers and fathers went to what now seem ridiculous lengths to conceal their daughters' shame, "disappearing" them before they sent them away to deliver their babies. For a 21st-century reader, accounts of a girl scurrying upstairs to hide in her room each time the doorbell rings, or of a mother insisting that as soon as she pulled the car out of the garage her daughter duck down below sight, come as a shock; some of us don't even remember when an unwed pregnancy could provoke a genuine scandal. A month or so before her due date, the girl was put on a bus or escorted by a parent to a necessarily distant maternity home, where she waited out her last weeks feeling abandoned, as she in fact had been.

Many of these homes, though conceived in the name of charity, didn't extend much to the young women they took in. "Write down on this side of the paper what you can give your baby. Write down on the other side what the adoptive parents have to offer," one nun instructed her charges. Against the presence of a father, of money and all it could buy — house and clothes and food and a good education — what could a girl give her baby, other than "love," as one wrote? And love could seem very little to a teenager who had been made to feel so small herself, reminded constantly of the trouble and shame she'd inflicted on her family. If she really loved her baby she'd make sure he'd have a better life than what she could give him. "Tearing you down and breaking your spirit," was how one woman described the process.

Fessler's thorough analysis of the social context of adoption in America between 1945 and 1973 demonstrates only too well how good intentions can produce disastrous outcomes. "The Girls Who Went Away" is a remarkably well-researched and accomplished book, especially considering that its author is not a sociologist but a professor of photography at the Rhode Island School of Design. She does, of course, have her vested interest in the topic. Fessler was adopted during the 50's, and she explores the era's glorification of the conventional nuclear family, along with the power of a cultural institution like Life magazine to create and disseminate comforting myths, as it did in its Feb. 19, 1951, cover story. Beginning with its title, "The Adoption of Linda Joy" infuses a sense of serendipity into an experience that virtually all birth mothers seem to have found irreparably damaging. The article, Fessler writes, not only implied that Linda Joy's mother made "an uncomplicated decision that was not influenced by outside forces," it also presented the case of Linda Joy as if it were typical. In other words, it was so misleading as to be propaganda.

Such discussions provide the background necessary for readers to fully appreciate the many profoundly sad and disturbing oral histories in "The Girls Who Went Away," and it isn't fair to compare Fessler's measured tone to the raw emotion of these bereft birth mothers' stories — unfair and unavoidable, as they are juxtaposed throughout the text. "I think of my life as before and after, sort of like B.C. and A.D.," one woman says of the impact of losing her baby. "Guilt was always such a pervasive part for me. Not that I was sexual, or not that I was pregnant, but that I let somebody take my child," confesses another. It's not possible to overstate the despair, rage, loneliness and unrelieved anguish represented here. "I associated death and pain and loss with sex." "It's as if I was the

unwilling accomplice to the kidnapping of my own child." Even an impassioned academic can't compete with the immediacy of these voices.

"Why are you traveling around the country collecting the life histories of all these surrendering mothers, but not your own?" one subject demands upon learning that the author had not yet met her own biological mother. "A legitimate question," Fessler concedes. As much as each interview must have provided a kind of surrogate for learning her own mother's story, it's easy to imagine that once the chorus of voices came to an end the silence they left in their wake demanded Fessler discover just how it was for the woman who lost her. By then she would have been aware of all that was held in common by the girls who went away, and of the importance of hearing each separate voice.

THE GIRLS WHO WENT AWAY

The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade.

By Ann Fessler.

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