

COVER REVIEW: NON-FICTION

## Delivering up their babies

By **Maureen N. McLane**

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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

Penguin, 354 pages, \$24.95

Despite ongoing controversies about abortion, RU-486 (the abortion drug), parental notification and other such issues, it is hard to recall just how things were before Roe vs. Wade and before the sexual revolution of the '60s that made Roe possible. In "The Girls Who Went Away," Ann Fessler lays out an aspect of that grim prehistory, those days in which non-marital motherhood was almost unimaginable for middle-class white girls, contraception highly regulated and cloaked in shame, and abortion illegal.

Fessler's wrenching, riveting book reveals some of the heavy and still-lingering costs of the mid-20th Century socio-sexual regime, in which "good girls" (i.e. largely white, largely middle-class) who got pregnant were encouraged, coerced, or sometimes forced into surrendering their babies. Fessler's subjects came of age during a massive transformation of socio-sexual mores: More young people were having sex in the '50s and '60s, yet "access to birth control and sex education lagged far behind." Interviewing women who gave up their babies from 1945 to 1973 (when Roe was decided), Fessler shows, largely in the words of these women, how parents, social workers and health-care professionals combined to render them mute.

With its powerful collage from more than 100 oral interviews of birth mothers, this book is an extended keening in the guise of soberly distilled research. This is not to fault the book's research or method, but rather to emphasize its emotional impact and commitment to narrative. Repeatedly we hear of girls surprised to find themselves pregnant, struggling to hide behind girdles and tent dresses; parents enraged and sorrowing; the pregnancies and births undergone in states of delusion, torpor, shock, or horror. (This was a pre-Lamaze as well as pre-Roe era.)

The details offered here are most telling, as the women recall their absolute loneliness before giving birth, their shock and shame at the "prep" (an enema and pubic shaving), their drugged-out deliveries, the pressure to sign papers relinquishing their babies, sometimes within hours of birth.

The women Fessler interviewed were, of course, those willing to go on record, even if pseudonymously; these are the women who feel most passionately committed to coming "out of the closet" as birth mothers, to use the formulation

many of the women do. While some had decent experiences in the maternity homes where most were sent, others share stupefying stories of callousness, ignorance, or maliciousness. As one woman observes, the mandate here was often punishment:

"It's punitive. That's it in a nutshell. You don't deserve the baby."

These people were treated as shamefully wayward animals who needed to disappear for a time and then reappear--Presto!--as if nothing had happened. These girls and women were abandoned, often by deeply loving parents, and plunged into a condition of radical powerlessness; some admit to their complicity with this arrangement, and have had to ponder what this has meant for their conception of themselves as adults.

The book sets out a paradigm of these women's experiences--from the double standard organizing sexuality in the chapter "Good Girls v. Bad Girls," through the various ways the pregnancies were handled, to "Birth and Surrender" and "The Aftermath." The final chapters explore the issues of search and reunion, as some birth mothers seek out their children, or find themselves sought out. Fessler is most strongly committed to "Breaking the Silence," as her second chapter is titled--to counteracting the silencing of these women, but also the broader silencing that used to surround adoption.

Among the common threads Fessler finds in her subjects' stories: afterlives marked by numbness, rage, or oscillations between them; a life-determining experience of grief and rage; an obsession with or phobia about children.

Throughout the book Fessler resists polemic; she is oriented primarily to the complexities of these women's experiences, not to policy statement or social critique. Clearly, though, these are stories of damage and trauma, and in their vivid sorrows and occasional humor they reanimate the feel of an era that, for all its nearness, seems in some ways extremely remote.

Fessler focuses here on the experience of birth mothers but is clearly fully aware of the claims of adoptive parents and adoptees. The book makes an implicit case for open adoption, or at least for the adoptee's right to find out the identity of his or her birth parents.

However complicated transparency might be, it seems a more honest way to navigate these treacherous emotional shoals--to balance the desires of adopting parents, the ambivalence of birth mothers, the eventual wishes of the children involved. In this book, the girls who surrendered their children were typically told that the adoptive families would be better parents, that they had better resources or admirable characteristics, that all would be well for the infants. Surrendering their children was presented as a noble gift.

Certainly it could be. Yet one feels in these interviews that most of these young women were never actually in the position to authorize this gift; they were not treated as agents caught up in a complex web, having to make terribly difficult

choices, but rather as wards and dependents who had to be cajoled and if necessary threatened to "do the right thing."

Beyond this finessing of the situation, these women sometimes later discovered that the adoptive families were not at all as advertised; here, too, they'd been betrayed, and this became a source of great bitterness.

These are stories about the cost of the sexual double standard, in which good girls were not supposed to know anything about birth control, or to express sexual desire. These are also stories about the political economy of families--how people thought about their pregnant teenagers or college-student daughters, and how their desire for respectability could trump all else. (Here as elsewhere in American life, race mattered, as "fewer African American families disowned their daughters or insisted that they surrender," Fessler writes.)

And this book offers a window onto institutional history, for many of these girls and young women were sent to maternity homes, which have since largely disappeared or re-configured their mission. As their Web pages now suggest, Florence Crittenton homes--where many went--now devote themselves to helping pregnant unwed teens (and their boyfriends) fully assess and reflect upon their options. Their programs include everything from supporting teen mothers to facilitating open adoptions to arranging foster care, for very young mothers as well as their children. Education and therapy are central to the program. This is truly a new world.

Fessler is a visual artist who came to this project through her own art and experience: She is adopted, her parents always open about that fact. Still, her adoptive mother did not want Fessler pursuing information about her birth parents, and she only did so with seriousness after she died. Fessler begins and ends with autobiographical vignettes. They are muted, subtle, resisting neat closure. Here Fessler is as nuanced and strong-minded as her informants: Rather than serve up potted stories, these women ask us to consider the complexities of teen sex, family relations, secrecy and shame, kinship given and made.

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