



When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973

By Leslie J. Reagan

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As we approach the 30th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, it's crucial to look back to the time when abortion was illegal. Leslie Reagan traces the practice and policing of abortion, which although illegal was nonetheless widely available, but always with threats for both doctor and patient. In a time when many young women don't even know that there was a period when abortion was a crime, this work offers chilling and vital lessons of importance to everyone.

The linking of the words "abortion" and "crime" emphasizes the difficult and painful history that is the focus of Leslie J. Reagan's important book. Her study is the first to examine the entire period during which abortion was illegal in the United States, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and ending with *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. Although illegal, millions of abortions were provided during these years to women of every class, race, and marital status. The experiences and perspectives of these women, as well as their physicians and midwives, are movingly portrayed here.

Reagan traces the practice and policing of abortion. While abortions have been typically portrayed as grim "back alley" operations, she finds that abortion providers often practiced openly and safely. Moreover, numerous physicians performed abortions, despite prohibitions by the state and the American Medical Association. Women often found cooperative practitioners, but prosecution, public humiliation, loss of privacy, and inferior medical care were a constant threat.

Reagan's analysis of previously untapped sources, including inquest records and trial transcripts, shows the fragility of patient rights and raises provocative questions about the relationship between medicine and law. With the right to abortion again under attack in the United States, this book offers vital lessons for every American concerned with health care, civil liberties, and personal and sexual freedom.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In 1900, women attempted to induce abortions by inserting knitting needles, crochet hooks, hairpins, scissors, chicken feathers and cotton balls into their uteruses. In 1917, black women "pinned their faith on... [the] ingestion of... starch or gunpowder and whiskey." Reagan, an assistant professor of history, medicine and women's studies at the University of Illinois, dedicates her disturbing work on abortion in America before *Roe v. Wade* to "the lives of... women who died trying to control their reproduction." She chronicles the covert efforts and subsequent prosecution of doctors and midwives, and of unmarried women and their lovers (while married women made up the majority of clientele and were accused of "race suicide," they were pursued less often). Reagan has her work cut out for her: Though the law forbade abortions, she writes, "some late-nineteenth-century doctors believed there were two million abortions [performed] every year." And then, as now, debate raged: though some doctors disagreed, the Journal of the American Medical Association declared itself against abortion in the case of rape since "pregnancy is rare after real rape." For those who take legal abortion for granted, Reagan's work is an eye-opener.

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From School Library Journal

YA?Most books written about this subject focus on the post-*Roe v. Wade* period. Reagan relates heart-wrenching stories of women who survived abortions and those who did not. She includes narratives from physicians, midwives, husbands, and boyfriends. The stories of poisonous potions drunk by women in an attempt to "open up the womb" remind readers that reliable birth control and pregnancy tests are recent developments. The author's research for this book comes from the Chicago AMA archives beginning in the mid-1800s when the organization led the way to criminalize abortion. Reagan utilized court records, police reports, medical literature of the day, and coroners' reports. The result is a scholarly chronicle of abortion in a large city. Containing 112 pages of endnotes and bibliography, and a 20-page index, this is a well-researched, organized, and interesting look at the inception and expansion of women's reproductive freedom as a political issue. After reading it, YAs will be better informed about the complexities of this ever-controversial subject.?Nancy Karst, Fairfax County Public Library, VA

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From Library Journal

This book brings to life both the medical and the legal history of abortion in the United States by using newspaper articles, transcripts of trials and inquests, and other archival sources to show readers how people were affected by the criminalization of private activities. Reagan (history, medicine, and women's studies, Univ. of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) demonstrates that abortion has always been available to women, whether or not it was legal. The documentation here points out the use of physicians as police and moral authorities, the correlation of economic depression with the need for abortion, the discrimination against unmarried women and midwives, and the paternalism of the medical profession. These factors have, until *Roe v. Wade*, placed many obstacles in the path of women seeking abortion. The current backlash against abortion threatens a return to the difficult times of the past. This fascinating history, with its extensive bibliography, is an essential purchase for academic medical, legal, and women's studies collections. Highly recommended for public libraries as well.

Barbara M. Bibel, Oakland P.L., Cal.

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