



Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade

Rickie Solinger

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Rickie Solinger provides the first published analyses of maternity home programs for unwed mothers from 1945 to 1965, and examines how nascent cultural and political constructs such as the "population bomb" and the "sexual revolution" reinforced racially-specific public policy initiatives. Such initiatives encouraged white women to relinquish their babies, spawning a flourishing adoption market, while they subjected black women to social welfare policies which assumed they would keep their babies and aimed to prevent them from having more.

Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade Details

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From Reader Review Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade for online ebook

Maria says

An absolutely critical book toward understanding single pregnancy in the past and present. Fascinating.

Barbara says

The story is fairly dated and the writing style is turgid. But her points are important.

Beth Clothier says

Welp.

Heather says

January 22, 2009: This is a great study on what it was like for women, both black and white, to deal with pregnancy outside the institution of marriage. This book is well-researched and it reads like a book you would read for a college class so it is not something to just pick up and read on the beach. This book is highly informative and easy to read. The author has organized each chapter well and there is an extensive biography at the end of the book in case readers are interested as to where she obtained her information or who are interested to get other books on the same topic.

This book took me awhile to get through because it is not light reading. It is dense and has a great number of arguments and details in it but its worth the read if you are interested in post-WWII unwed pregnancy and how different the experience was depending on your race. This book definitely makes the female readers of today grateful for the Roe v Wade case that made abortion a legal practice in this country.

I would only recommend this book to people who are truely interested in the subject matter. Otherwise you will find this book dry and boring.

Lachelle says

Joe Soss recommendation.

Holly says

i only got about twenty something pages into this book and i couldn't keep reading it. the information was good and somewhat interesting but they way they presented it wasn't interesting at all. i mean, it's basically like a really long report of some kind. all facts and figures. i wanted to hear more personal stories rather than just statistics and etc. i think if they had presented the information in a different way i would have continued reading it.

Maureen Flatley says

A definitive history of adoption in America.

Dawn says

This book launched my blood pressure into the stratosphere.

Susie focuses on the quarter-century between WWII and Roe v. Wade, a time when the nation was scrambling to restore the social, racial, and gender norms disrupted by the war. Among other things, the book examines the language of blame and perception, e.g. the semantic transition from “He ruined her” in the pre-war period, to “She got herself in trouble” in the ensuing years. Similarly, the term “race” became interchangeable with “culture” in this era.

Pregnant, unmarried whites were perceived as an aberration. In the age of hyper-Freudism, white girls who had sex outside of marriage were perceived to have a treatable mental illness stemming from mother-issues in childhood. Their “sin” was essentially asexual. White pregnancy was virtually invisible as girls were farmed out to maternity homes and “encouraged” (to put it mildly) to give their babies up for adoption, as there was a real market for white babies. These “visits to far-away family” allowed a female to return home childless and once again eligible for the marriage market of the 1950s and beyond. In the eyes of society, these women were never mothers. White women were only made mothers through marriage.

Conversely, unmarried black women were not considered casualties of a fragile psychology, but rather victims of their inferior African DNA. From earliest American history, black women have been considered biologically defective as a result of their wanton hypersexuality. That this prejudice was likely manufactured by white slave owners as a convenient excuse to rape black women doesn’t seem to lessen its hold on society’s perception.

Single pregnant women of either race had few options. Therapeutic abortions, available only through the approval of (overwhelming white male) doctor boards, were routinely denied to unwed mothers. If you were white, you had the option to spend your pregnancy in a maternity home, which were White Only. A mere SEVEN black maternity homes were in existence in 1951. Single black mothers often kept their children due to an utter lack of options, as well as better support within the black community. However, while white women were able to pick up essentially where they left off, black women were systematically humiliated by a society that portrayed them as biologically defective, and found themselves both unemployable and ineligible for public housing due to their “inferior morality”.

Prior to WWII, unwed mothers were principally supported by family and immediate community. Following WWII, programs like Aid to Dependent Children (welfare) were put in place. This made unwed mothers

(read: black women, since unwed white women were rarely allowed to keep their babies) a political argument for segregation and sterilization. The bodies of black women therefore became the domain and burden of politicians, taxpayers, and social service providers. The ADC was increasingly spun as Black Welfare, with black women ‘breeding’ more and more children for a paycheck.

Child, please.

“Having babies for profit is a lie that only men could make up, and only men could believe.” –Johnnie Tillmon

Long story short: the entire history of women, women’s sexuality, and single pregnancy is a freaking outrage. But if you’re a black woman, it’s completely out of control. The postwar shifts examined by *Susie* continue to be played out on talk radio, Supreme Court cases, and society generally. Women’s bodies continue to be government-regulated.

In the US, medicines only legally require a prescription when they may harm the public health. Fifty-nine years (!) after the pill was approved by the FDA, women’s access to contraception is controlled by insurance companies, doctors, the pharmaceutical industry, and Hobby Lobby. (Don’t give me that danger bullshit; greater risks are associated with Excedrin.) Women have an abundance of paternalistic obstacles that must be overcome in the management of their bodies: unnecessary annual doctor’s appointments for birth control; sex shaming; prescriptions meted out in small monthly increments vs. other common prescriptions that come in 3-months packs; “conscience clause” laws allowing pharmacists to refuse to dispense emergency contraception; and on and on.... Obstacles like these made me a mother of three, instead of two.

...And that’s just trying to PREVENT pregnancy. Laws to restrict women’s access to safe and legal abortion are tightening all over the country. In contrast to the backlash against Indiana when “religious freedom” laws were enacted to allow LGBT discrimination, the shredding of women’s rights is met with virtual silence. Why aren’t Apple and Nike screaming to boycott Kansas and the 11 other “conscience-clause” states? Why aren’t Angie’s List and Microsoft blasting Texas after it upheld a ruling that closes all but seven abortion clinics in the state (in the No-Irony-To-See-Here name of “protecting women’s health”)? It’s the equivalent of corporate crickets.

And what about my public librarian, who made a lemon-sucking face when I checked out this book, and absolutely INSISTED in wrapping it up in a plastic bag? (A book condom for my own protection?)

I digress.

Post-13th, -14th, -15th, and -19th Amendments, Post-WWII, Post-Roe v Wade, Post Cereal – the battle for equal rights is still in its early days. And it’s not merely theoretical. 99% of women have utilized birth control. One in every three women you pass on the street has had an abortion. Three years ago, I met my secret niece, the daughter my sister had at a maternity home/“visit to far-away family” and was forced to give up for adoption.

Susie’s story stops in 1973, but...it doesn’t. It goes on.

Wealhtheow says

What it meant to be pregnant and unwed in the US from 1945 to 1965. Basically, it sucked. But, it sucked for white women and black rather differently. Both were expected to be ashamed, but white women were usually forced into maternity homes, where they could be pregnant in secret, and then give their infant up for a secret adoption (nevertheless, according to a 1957 survey, some ~30% of white women kept their babies). But because there was a demand from prospective adopters for white babies, but not black babies, black women were not offered places in maternity homes, and were expected to raise their babies. Amazingly, white women who petitioned to be allowed to raise their babies were judged unfit by reason of mental instability (after all, what sane woman would ever want to be an unwed mother!), while black women who tried to give their babies up for adoption had a hard time of it--some where even charged with child abandonment! And as for abortions--just by petitioning to have one, a woman proved herself to be so lacking in morality that she deserved the punishment of bearing and raising a child.

So many white unmarried women had the pain of a forced adoption, whereas many black unmarried women had the pain of forced child-rearing. And then, for extra fun, the black women who were forced to keep their children were thought to prove that black people were just naturally so animalistic that they couldn't think straight enough to not have sex and bear lots of babies. And ooh, also, they were the cause of all social programs and poverty in America! Which is particularly funny, cuz most social programs not only paid barely enough to keep people alive, but also, excluded people of color!

This was a stunning book, and I pretty much wanted to cry and rage half the time I was reading it. I found it such hard going, in fact, that I ran out of library time and have to return it, having only skimmed the last few chapters. I'm sure there's some important stuff in here that I've missed.

A few quotes I found particularly worthwhile:

"Race, in the end, was the most accurate predictor of an unwed mother's parents' response to her pregnancy; of society's reaction to her plight; of where and how she would spend the months of her pregnancy; and most important, the most accurate predictor of what she would do with the 'fatherless' child she bore, and of how being mother to such a child would affect the rest of her life...race-specific public and private responses to single pregnancy, between 1945 and 1965, have profoundly influenced the race-rent politics of female fertility in our time."

"An unmarried black pregnant girl looking for help in the early decades of the twentieth century could probably have found assistance only within her own family and community. Most maternity homes excluded blacks; most of the few government assistance programs that existed excluded unmarried mothers."

"White illegitimacy was generally not perceived as a 'cultural' or racial defect, or as a public expense, so the stigma suffered by the white unwed mother was individual and familial. Black women, illegitimately pregnant, were not shamed but simply blamed, blamed for the population explosion, for escalating welfare costs, for the existence of unwanted babies, and blamed for the tenacious grip of poverty on blacks in America. There was no redemption possible for these women, only the retribution of sterilization, harassment by welfare officials, and public policies that threatened to starve them and their babies."
