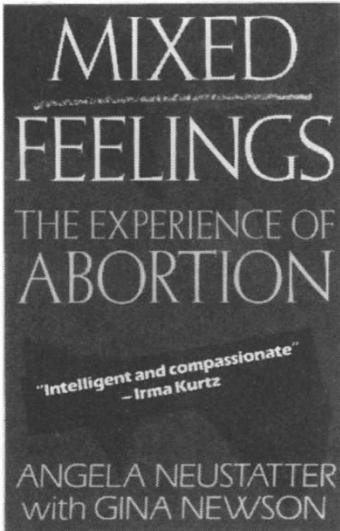


BOOK REVIEWS



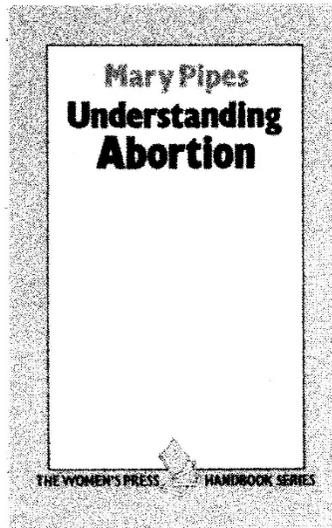
Mixed Feelings: The Experience of Abortion
Angela Neustatter with Gina Newson

Pluto Press London, 1986
ISBN 0 7453 0027 8 £3.50 Pbk

Understanding Abortion
Mary Pipes

The Women's Press London, 1986
ISBN 0 7043 3982 X

There is an enormous number of books available dealing with pregnancy and childbirth; books dealing with women's health generally skim



over the topic of abortion, if they deal with it at all. Now, at last, two books are available which deal only with abortion. Despite (or is it because of?) its importance for the women's movement as a political issue, there has been very little literature for women thinking about going through with an abortion and trying to understand it in the context of their lives. The long and bitter struggles over legalizing abortion and over women's reproductive rights generally produced only theoretical arguments for a women's control over her own life. Nearly two decades after the Abor-

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tion Act, it has become possible to explore, in print, some of the emotions, the reality and the possible consequences of the experience.

Mixed Feelings is the more 'populist' of the two books, with a relaxed, informal style. It grew out of the film of the same name made for Channel 4, and consists primarily of quotations from interviews with women talking about their lives and the way they felt about their abortions. Although a very wide range of factors is mentioned, there is little attempt to sift through or categorize the experiences in any way. There is a small and necessarily unrepresentative sample of men who were prepared to come forward and discuss why they found 'their women's' abortions traumatic. This I found unhelpful, since the vast majority of men, who remain silent and/or unmoved, were not questioned.

The moral aspects of abortion are touched on frequently throughout the book, again mostly in quotations. Sara Maitland is quoted in the first chapter as saying that 'the perversion of abortion is a structural necessity' (p.12), and this attitude seems to be shared by the author. There is some emphasis on the trauma and the horror of abortion, including distressing descriptions of anti-abortionist propaganda. To counterbalance this, many women give evidence of the inevitability of their decision. The conclusions drawn are that the taboo on speaking about abortion should be broken, and that women should come together to share and thereby to work through their grief.

The book from the Women's Press by Mary Pipes is altogether more positive and more sympathetic in its approach, as well as giving a great deal of practical information. She writes of 'us' and 'our' decision. As with *Mixed Feelings*, the text is based on the words of women speaking about their experience, but the issues involved are separated out at each stage. For ins-

tance, the chapter on 'Post-abortion feelings - a new beginning' discusses the changes that may occur in the way we feel about our bodies, menstruation, sex, contraception, motherhood, other people, our partner, friends, parents, and our children. It is sometimes important to approach a topic in all its complexity. However, in the jumble of strong, confused emotions that are involved in the idea of abortion, it is very valuable to have some clearly defined headings to think under.

With all the honest, open discussion that this book contains, there are still major contradictions that are not confronted. In her argument that abortion is not a negative decision, the author states that 'making a stand against conditioned responses brings us into contact with what we really want and who we really are' (p.39). This does not go far enough, for what about the response of a panic-stricken woman whose lover does not want her to have a child? In this case the decision to have an abortion may not be 'a stand against conditioned responses', but may be a conditioned response in itself. It is not the decision but the decision-making process which is the positive factor. Later, she says: 'For most of us, having an abortion will ultimately lead to a greater understanding of ourselves and our needs' (p.104). The control over our lives does not come automatically with the possibility of legal abortion, but with the deeper understanding and conscious awareness of our situation. Another area which is skimmed over and not dealt with directly is that of how the biological changes in our bodies affect the way we feel. This is a topic which feminists are beginning to explore and reclaim from the 'pro-motherhood' lobby, and would make an important contribution to understanding abortion.

The chapter on 'the history of abortion' is excellent and shows how far the women's movement has come in being able to deal with abortion.

For a long time to come, many women will still have to face the consequences of undergoing an abortion as isolated individuals, since each experience is unique and not easy for others to understand. But now that the issues and the

emotions are out in the open, and these two books are available in bookshops, many more of us will be able to approach this difficult subject with dignity and courage.

Ania Grobicki



**WOMEN AND
WORK IN PRE-
INDUSTRIAL
ENGLAND**

Edited by
Lindsay Charles and Lorna Duffin

**Women and Work in
Pre-Industrial England**
Lindsay Charles and Lorna
Duffin (Eds)

Croom Helm London, 1985
ISBN 0 7099 0856 3 £7.95 Pbk

There is a new contribution to the ongoing debate about the changes in the sexual division of labour brought about by emerging capitalism. Lindsay Charles and Lorna Duffin have edited a book about women and work in pre-industrial England. This collection of different papers originated as a series of seminars given under the auspices and with the financial support of the Oxford Women's Studies Committee. As Lindsay Charles says in the very informative introduction, it is meant to be a contribution to the debate which originated in the pioneering works of Alice Clark in

The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century and Ivy Pinchbeck in *Women Workers in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* about women's work and the transition to capitalism.

Although the essays do not contradict the underlying thesis of Clark and Pinchbeck about the fundamental change occurring in women's economic role through the rise of capitalism, they do question some basic assumptions. The work that women did in pre-industrial England was not always, as Clark and Pinchbeck claimed, closer to the household so that reproductive and productive work could be easily combined. Chris Middleton argues in the last essay that even the protocapitalist form of domestic industry common in seventeenth-century rural England did not provide space and time for household tasks. His sociological rather than historical essay makes a conceptual critique of Clark's and Pinchbeck's books. He claims that they have made false assumptions about the role of women in the feudal mode of production and have failed to see that the effects of the transition were more complicated and uneven than the 'critical-pessimist' tradition generally suggests.

Following this critique, Lindsay Charles calls for more historical research concentrating on specific regions and periods. Kay E. Lacey and Diana Hutton offer examples of such research for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They use court rolls, guild records and other available contemporary sources to draw a picture of women's work in London