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CAROLYN MCCONNELL

Toward Its Being Safe, Legal, and Rare

A review of *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, 2006)

I was born in 1971 to an unwed mother, and so reading *The Girls Who Went Away* prompted the discovery that my mother might have been such a girl, one who went away—from me, forever, and I from her. My mother wouldn't have been sent away easily; she was a participant in radical politics and a burgeoning feminist who by the time I was born had lived apart from her parents for years. But thousands of women not so different from her were sent away, shunned, and hidden from view until they gave birth to babies who were taken away from them. Starting in the 1940s and lasting well into the 1970s, high schools throughout America had girls who went away. It was a gulag that didn't pile up bodies but did leave behind thousands of profoundly wounded women who are still among us. And yet, until now, the phenomenon has gone unmentioned in public dialogue.

Through hundreds of interviews with women who gave up babies for adoption between 1945 and 1973, *The Girls Who Went Away* provides a revelatory account of the fifties, illuminating it as an anomalous period beset by social contradictions. It airs a secret that still shapes our society, and it provides a window into what it would mean if the social agenda of the Christian right were to prevail.

Convention has it that the sexual revolution started in the sixties with invention of the birth control pill. In fact, as Fessler describes, the sexual revolution began several decades before. By the 1950s, 39 percent of unmarried women had “gone all the way” by the time they were 20 years old and by 1973 that figure had risen to 68 percent. Fessler describes changes in dating behavior beginning as far back as the 1920s, as privacy, independence, and mobility among the young increased. Instead of courting on front porches in front of parents' watchful eyes, young people went out in cars, to movies, to places where parents had no control. They began creating

their own norms of dating and sexual behavior—mostly the code was that nice girls do but don't tell. Yet other norms persisted; there was almost no access to birth control, no sex education, and no acceptance of birth outside wedlock. So inevitably lots of young women got pregnant outside of marriage, presenting a problem that had to be erased.

At the same time, as Leslie Reagan has documented in *When Abortion Was a Crime*, the forties saw a shift in social policy toward abortion. Until then, abortion had been quietly tolerated except in cases in which patients died, and most towns had an experienced, competent abortionist who practiced only barely under cover. But in the forties, authorities began hunting out and prosecuting both abortionists and women who received abortions. Safe abortion that had been available, if not always easily so, was suddenly unavailable to the growing numbers of pregnant, unmarried women.

Fessler explains that the postwar era was a time of upward social mobility and therefore of anxiety about class. Families that had recently reached the middle class feared their new status would be ruined by a daughter pregnant out of wedlock. (This point is explored more fully in Rickie Solinger's terrific *Pregnancy and Power*.) In their fear of ostracism, families treated pregnant daughters with startling cruelty, as Fessler's stories show in heartbreaking detail. Perhaps the most poignant feature of these stories is how many mothers pushed their daughters away in their deepest time of need. Yet the men and boys who got them pregnant paid little or no price.

While adopting families were told the mothers had "given up" their babies, Fessler demonstrates that the mothers' surrender of them was in no meaningful sense voluntary. Parents told their daughters that they had to give up their babies and the daughters, often teenagers, usually had no means of income and no source of support beyond their families. Girls were told they were unworthy to keep their babies. In many cases, when a girl showed some resistance to giving her baby up, the home for unwed mothers would tell her she could not have her baby until she paid her housing and hospital costs. They held the baby for ransom, and nearly all the mothers gave in.

Most never recovered from the wrenching loss. In the interviews, woman after woman describes how her personality was forever

altered by the experience of giving up a child. The women, many of whom had never told anyone what they had been through until Fessler interviewed them, seem never to have recovered from the shame, the guilt, the secrecy, the inability to achieve intimacy, the sense of being unworthy and forever exiled. Only those who were reunited with their adult children seemed to have achieved some measure of healing.

These painful stories should provoke a reassessment of adoption. Adoption within families or communities that does not necessitate the erasure of the birth mother may be a reasonable practice, but these stories show what a heavy moral price stranger adoption exacts from all participants. If the stories of women who surrendered their babies are widely told, perhaps we will soon hear politicians describing adoption as a tragedy that should be safe, legal, and rare.

Because secrecy was such a crucial element of the practice of sending pregnant girls away, public airing of these stories is a powerful act. Hannah Arendt describes the central but paradoxical role of secrecy in the function of totalitarian regimes. On the one hand, the point of concentration camps, disappearances, and other punishments by totalitarian states is to enforce obedience through fear. So people must on some level know about them. Yet a degree of secrecy is necessary because it “impedes rebellion and any clear, articulated understanding of the thing feared.” Just so, knowing that disappearance would be their fate if they got pregnant induced sufficient terror to keep most girls in line. Everyone knew of girls who went away and had some inkling of why. But no one talked about it, least of all the girl to whom it happened.

There has been talk lately of how the physical and psychological wounds of the thousands returning from combat in Iraq will shape our society; how are the hurts of several generations of women who surrendered their babies shaping it even now? The cruel absurdity of this history is that all of a sudden the disappearances stopped. A girl who went away in 1970 could by 1975 either have an abortion or simply keep her child. For a long time, as a matter of course, a pregnant girl was expelled from school; just a few short years later she could stay.

I was born on the cusp of that shift. My mother suffered disapproval for choosing to be a single mom, but I was hardly aware of

any stigma. I was mystified at the distress I caused some second-grade classmates when I happened to mention my parents had never been married. They were nearly in tears as they said, “But if your mom isn’t married you can’t have a dad.” I thought them very stupid. Only now do I understand that this was a late gasp of the attitude that one of the women Fessler interviewed expressed: “I was throwing up and one of my friends said, ‘You’re probably pregnant.’ And I said, ‘Oh, no, no, you can’t be pregnant unless you’re married.’ That’s what my parents told me.”

Thanks to the feminist movement, to the pill, and to Roe, those days are over. But because there was never any public discussion of the phenomenon, our society lacks “any clear, articulated understanding” of it, fostering nostalgia for the time and a political movement thriving on a promise to return to it. Fessler’s achievement is to show just what price would be paid—and who would pay it. Her book also demonstrates that such a return would not be to a prelapsarian status quo, but to an unstable historical anomaly, when one set of norms had arisen but others in contradiction with them persisted.

Fessler’s book is tremendously important. Long on interviews, shorter on analysis, it is not flawless. Fessler doesn’t delve into the crucial question of what the point of this punishing social practice was. At first glance, it was to keep girls from engaging in sex outside of marriage. But it so spectacularly failed to achieve that purpose, as Fessler’s statistics bear out, that it seems to have functioned instead as a profound message to American women of their disposability and powerlessness. Though the messages are cast more subtly now, our culture is still unsettled about the role and proper power of women. I hope Fessler’s book is only the beginning of a long-overdue conversation about our recent history, about sex and who pays the price for it. Do we want our daughters—or our mothers—disappeared?