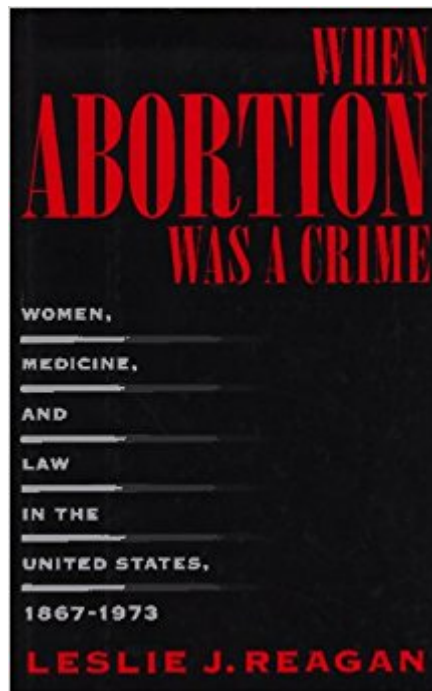




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# When Abortion Was A Crime: Women, Medicine, And Law In The United States, 1867-1973



## Synopsis

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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## Customer Reviews

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. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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 Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I found Ms. Reagan's book through a Google search when I was doing genealogy research on my great-grandmother whom I had recently learned died from an abortion in 1915, at the height of the country's War on Abortion. Finding her referenced at all was news to me. What I learned from Ms. Reagan's research was that my great-grandmother pleaded with the police from her hospital death bed, begging them to keep her case out of the newspapers. I was sick - physically sick - at the idea that a woman I never got to meet was likely denied medical attention while she was bullied in an attempt to learn who had performed her abortion. Imagine learning that was how your family member was treated. Coincidentally, I have another great-grandmother who also died from an illegal abortion. She was told by her doctor that having yet another child would kill her, but having to have an illegal abortion ended her life instead. This book is a critical education for a generation of people who are unaware of the how outlawing abortion will affect - and end - lives. It is critical for those in positions of political authority who dare to try to dictate that a woman cannot end a pregnancy. Yes, it is a moral conundrum, but also a harsh reality that will never go away. Even now, states are making it extremely difficult for women to get the medical care they need, much less an abortion - and outlawing abortion will do nothing more than drive it into the shadows and doom legions of women to the unsafe abortions that killed two of my great-grandmothers and orphaned their children. Read the book. Educate yourselves. It is an excellent study.

"When Abortion was a Crime" by Leslie Reagan. Without a doubt one of the best books I have read recently, if you are as passionate about women's reproductive rights as I am and wonder about what it was like in the good old days before women's had rights to control their own bodies. I didn't know this book even existed until I was watching Rachel Maddow one night and the author was on her program discussing a paperback copy that had recently been released (I don't care for paperback unless I don't have a choice). So I bought a used hard copy of the book that had originally been in a Library in Illinois. That came in good enough condition and no major flaws in it. So far, I have had good luck buying used ones. Most have come in good condition. Sometimes only a few highlighted phrases here and there. But, that's immaterial. I can overlook it. I was raised in the 50's when abortion was illegal. I was raised in a small Midwestern coal mining town in a super religious family and had no idea such a thing as abortion even existed in those days. So if I had gotten pregnant I was just out of luck. That's how painfully ignorant a lot of we teenagers were in those days. It's a day and age I have no desire whatsoever to return to. Or to see my Granddaughters be forced to return too. It wasn't that great of a period in this country. This country was awash in racism, sexism was the order of the day too and what one viewed on television was

mindless drivel designed for 4 year olds. I married when I was 17 and my mother stumbled through a description of what was going to happen on my wedding night. But, I didn't get a vivid enough description to have clue what to expect. That's just how dumb and uninformed a lot of girls like myself were. I am really surprised I didn't get into trouble when I was young, not knowing anymore than I did. I have always wondered about the issue of illegal abortion when I grew a older and wondered what it was like in the days before Roe. I knew next to nothing about the era. Just whispers I had heard from other people and had read about in passing. Something a lot of us hope our daughters and Granddaughter will never be forced to return too. But, it is looking like Christian zealots are going to chip away at Roe v Wade until it is just a shell of a law. Because the electorate keeps making the mistake of voting the type of people in office who are catering to these religious zealots. People often take their freedoms for granted until after they have been taken away. They don't comprehend when these people get through taking away women's rights, they will start in on African American's, Hispanic's and anyone else who doesn't live up to their immoral beliefs. And they will drag us kicking and screaming back to the dark ages of back alley abortions. But, they won't stop the practice. It's just going to cost them dearly in new tax dollars to add new law enforcement personnel, new judges to already over burdened court system, to build prisons to house all the new criminals in. But, it won't stop the practice. I don't know how many of them are intelligent enough to have looked at it that way. But, morality laws do not work and have never worked. It just brings on a worse society. They should have learned that for a few of their other misadventures like prohibition. This book covers most aspects of what it was like before Roe and should be required reading for anyone interested in women's personal freedoms. It was an enlightening book.

Exhaustively researched book detailing the social climate, politics, and paternalistic attitudes that led up to abortion gradually becoming highly restricted by the twentieth century. In a country where abortion has currently been legal for two generations, this book gives a much needed perspective for the now-forgotten, yet very grave problems that occur when safe abortions are unavailable. The "pro-life" movement is full of people who never stop to consider that their current efforts to restrict abortion access directly cause the injury, suffering, and death of women, particularly low-income women. It's tragic that these consequences have already been suffered and overcome once, and yet people ignorant of history are naively endeavoring to repeat them. This book should be read by everyone who considers abortion a social issue, rather than a private one.

When we consider the abortion, we often do so in a vacuum of information and with a lack of historical perspective. This is true for both pro-choice and pro-life proponents. This author provides this information in a readable, organized fashion. She also does so without engaging in a polemic either for or against abortion per se. That being said, she is very clear that abortion has been with us throughout history, and the more severely abortion is repressed by the medical and legal establishment, the greater the deaths from septic abortions or from injuries inflicted by unskilled abortionists. I cannot recommend this very readable book too highly for everyone on either side of the abortion debate!

Fascinating book about a difficult subject, but the author has unearthed some amazing facts and shines a light on the dark area that is the abortion debate ...I'll bet most people, including women, did not know just how widespread abortion has been over the years and just how much damage is done to women when the right to have a safe, early abortion is denied us. Also, extremely worrying is the fact that women were deliberately targeted by the medical profession in their early turf wars for control over the various areas of medicine, particularly the areas around pregnancy, child birth and contraception...this is a must read for all those interested in this debate, which continues unabated into the 21st Century..

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