

Book Review

of

The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Girls Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades before Roe v. Wade

By
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The Girls Who Went Away (Penguin Press, 2006) by Ann Fessler is based on oral histories of unmarried girls who were pressured by parents, and indirectly by the social mores of the time, to surrender their babies for adoption. Fessler began to collect these oral histories in 2002, with a visual project in mind as her goal, not writing a book. Although she ended up doing both, her book appeared first. Fessler's documentary, *A Girl Like Her*, also based, in part, on her interviewees' oral histories, followed in 2012.

Ann Fessler, is a photographer not a sociologist. However, *The Girls Who Went Away* contains so many sociological concepts that I was compelled to write this review for Volume One of *Sociology between the Gaps* which focuses on the theme of *Adoption and Families*. These sociological concepts include gender; the emphasis placed on female virginity in the 1950s; denial of being pregnant; deviance from social norms; labeling the unmarried pregnant woman as a "bad girl" and the effect this label on her sense of self; blaming the victim; stigma; marginalization; loss of the birth mother's agency/voice; social control by society, parents and peers; racial and social class differences; lack of sex education in schools, both public and private; the roles and failures of various social institutions in society (e.g., the family, religion, the legal and medical

establishments, and media); and the social construction of adoption, parenthood, and kinship ties.¹

Based on interviews with 100 women in the U. S. who went through the heart-wrenching experience of giving up a child in the decades before the pill was available or abortion became legal in the U. S., Ann Fessler sets out to tell their stories. She does this with profound empathy. In her forthright and devastatingly powerful book, Fessler shares the real-life stories of single, vulnerable girls whose unplanned and unexpected pregnancies were hidden in the shadows and only whispered about in those days. For the fortunate girls who became pregnant and were in a committed relationship, they had the option of getting married and keeping their child. Most girls, however, were not so fortunate. The majority of girls who became pregnant were forced by one or both parents to leave town for about six months, give birth in secret, and relinquish their child for adoption. The expectation was that, subsequently, these girls would come home, resume their lives as though nothing important had happened while they were "away", and get past the experience of giving up their child for adoption by strangers.

¹The author wishes to thank sociologist Kathy Stolley for her assistance in identifying many of the sociological concepts in Fessler's book.

Chapter 1 of *The Girls Who Went Away* begins with Fessler's acknowledgement that she was adopted as an infant. Her adoptive mother was herself adopted. Growing up, Ann knew that she was adopted. However, her grandmother never told Ann's mother that she was adopted. Her mother discovered that fact herself one day when she found her original birth certificate taped to the back of a painting at her aunt's house.

In chapters 2-10, the author recounts the stories of 18 of the women she had interviewed for her project. She begins each of these chapters with a short narrative by one of the two women whose stories she tells. Each introductory narrative introduces the reader to the theme discussed in the chapter and provides the socio-cultural context for the stories Fessler includes in that chapter. Fessler also weaves birthmothers' stories with additional statements they make in their interviews.

There is a clear chronology to chapters 2-9 as signified by the chapter titles. "Breaking the Silence" (chapter 2) involves breaking the veil of secrecy about the pregnancy. "Good Girls v. Bad Girls" (chapter 3) involves the imposition of the label of "bad girl" on the pregnant girl. Chapters 4-8 cover issues of discovery of, and shame about, the pregnancy (chapter 4), family fears (chapter 5), going away and waiting for the baby to be born (chapter 6), giving birth (chapter 7), and relinquishing the baby (chapter 8). Chapter 9 describes the search and meeting of two birthmothers with the children they relinquished. In Chapter 10, "Talking and Listening" Fessler uses emails she received from birth mothers, siblings of the relinquished child, other birth family members, and adoptive parents to reinforce the importance of starting a non-judgmental conversation about what transpired, listening and accepting the difficult decisions that unmarried, pregnant girls and their parents felt pressured by social norms and their own life circumstances to make at that time. In Chapter 11, Fessler concludes this book by telling readers about her decision to contact her own birth mother

and about the impact her written and visual work on adoption had on her decision to reach out to her and its timing. Fessler did not seek out contact with her birth mother for more than a decade after she found out she was adopted. In this chapter, the author expresses in honest terms the fears and reasons children adopted as newborns or as young infants have for hesitating to search for their birth mothers. Fessler can relate because she experienced these same fears and concerns herself.

Much about adoption was secret up through the 1960s, longer in some parts of the U. S. than in others. Social class, the religiosity of the girl's family, as well as their religious affiliation, came into play. Into the 1950s, babies were born at home and their mothers were often attended in childbirth by midwives, even in areas in or close to cities. Since a child's birth could be registered at some point after the actual birth took place, a child born of one woman could be adopted informally by a married relative in more advantageous circumstances. For example, the birth certificate of a child born to an unmarried daughter or son could state that the child was born to the unmarried individual's parents, the child's biological grandparents. They typically never disclosed the secret and, if the infant's birth registration listed them as her or his parents, there was no paper trail of the informal adoption to contradict their claim.

Not surprisingly, none of the women that Fessler interviewed forgot, or successfully moved past, being forced to give up her child. No longer silent and hidden, their thoughts and feelings come through loud and clear in this award-winning book. The women talk about the change in their family's and society's perception of them from nice girls to flawed, bad girls once they became pregnant. The burden of being pregnant was placed entirely on them. The boys who got them pregnant were typically exempt from the disgrace heaped on the girls and got to walk away from their responsibility in producing a child. At a time when sex education in schools did not exist, most parents did not talk to their

children about sex, and teenagers' information about sex was based on largely on what they heard from age mates or on trial and error, the situation was rife for a boom in pregnancies. Myths and false information about pregnancy were common in the culture of the 1950s and 1960s.

While adoption may be a joyful experience for those who cannot have biological children, adoption is not without its share of sorrow and struggle even for them. Infertility was, and may still be viewed as a stigma, the woman's fault. The shameful deficiency of being barren could not be shed. Successful reproduction was, and still is, a woman's duty to her husband. Infertility, miscarriages, and still births were among the private troubles and losses women carried in their hearts and were not topics of conversation even among close kin.

The Girls Who Went Away portrays the heartbreak and lingering sadness experienced by women who relinquished a child for adoption because they had no other socially-acceptable option or social supports which would allow them to raise their child. Not surprisingly, they mourned the loss of their child to the unknown and wondered about his or her wellbeing. Had the child been adopted? Did she or he have loving parents? Was life really better for that child than if the biological mother had fought to keep him or her? What will the child think about the biological mother and why the child was given up? These heart-wrenching questions provide a good counterbalance to many of the myths about adoption itself to which both adoptive parents and adoptees are exposed. The sad reality is that the social and other forces which impact on individuals' lives often outweigh their personal desires and access to the resources necessary to fulfill those desires.

Fessler's book is definitely not one that women who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s can read from start to finish in one sitting. Many women of that era knew a classmate who was pregnant at high school graduation

or had a family member who disappeared for several months for a fabricated reason, then returned home slimmer. Others struggled with infertility issues experienced by their parents- the personal loss of siblings who died before they were born and the grief of parents who wanted more children but could not have them in the traditional way. At that time and subsequently, adoption was a hidden phenomenon, viewed by many as a second choice to giving birth to one's "own" child.

This book and Fessler's documentary, *A Girl Like Her* (2012), are excellent companion pieces to the film, *Philomena*, which is also reviewed in this volume of *Sociology between the Gaps*. How many women in the traumatic situation of having their child wrenched from them raised the question of how it was possible to forget a part of yourself, your first child, and move on? The answer was hidden in the veil of secrecy of the times and the culture, both in the United States and in other countries until the women who experienced these losses found the courage to tear down the veil of secrecy and trusted authors like Ann Fessler to tell their stories.

About the Reviewer: Josephine A. Ruggiero is Professor Emerita of Sociology at Providence College and Editor-in-Chief of *Sociology between the Gaps: Forgotten and Neglected Topics*. Ruggiero's areas of research and publication include gender roles, adoption, and changing families. She and her husband are adoptive parents of three biological siblings born in Russia and adopted simultaneously when the children were 4 1/2, 3 1/2 and two years old.