

Review

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NARRATIVES OF REGRET

By Anna Krohn

A comprehensive record-based study of pregnancy related deaths in Finland released in 1997 found that women who ended their pregnancies in an abortion were 3.5 times more likely to die within a year of the pregnancy than women who carried to term. More remarkably, the report found that the risk of death by suicide for women within a year of abortion was seven times higher than the suicide risk for mothers during their first year *post-partum*.

The report was conducted by STAKES, the statistical analysis unit of the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health in Finland¹. The study was not designed to record the effects of abortion but to test the usefulness of cross-linking pregnancy data. (The researchers matched death certificate records to medical records of Finland's nationalised health system and calculated the age-adjusted odds ratio of death against the similar mortality ratio of women who had not been pregnant). The research represents an unusual glimpse into a fairly stable and complete set of data.

Despite the relative smallness of the sample data, the research has, according to post-abortion specialist and author David Reardon, prompted other mental health researchers to conduct larger and more detailed studies into the association of suicide with abortion². Early results seem to have suggestive parallels with the Finnish study and with some of the outcomes of earlier studies³.

What is perhaps less surprising than the disturbing results of these recent studies, is the predictable absence of any substantial discussion of the implications of these results in the mainstream public or health media.⁴ It is ironic that in the ostensible culture of "informed consent" that those health professionals who are not outspoken advocates on either side of the debate, tread with mute wariness around the issue of abortion. This is also true of the rest of the community. To make matters more difficult still, mental health "statistics" (notoriously) do not automatically fall out into satisfying social and ethical conclusions.

A recent and significant Australian book, *Giving Sorrow Words: Women's stories of grief after abortion* by the writer and women's health researcher, Melinda Tankard

¹ Gissler, M et al "Pregnancy-associated death in Finland 1987-1994- definition problems and benefits of record linkage" *Acta Obstetrica et Gynecologica Scandinavica* 76:651-657 (1997)

² cf Reardon, D "Abortion is four times deadlier than childbirth" reprinted in *Friends of Humanity Backgrounder* No 108, July 2000. Available in the SCBI Bioethics Library.

³ B. Garfinkle et al "Stress, Depression and Suicide: A study of adolescents in Minnesota" University of Minnesota Extension Service, 1986.

⁴ Though internet discussion and distribution of information is changing this.

Reist⁵ has arrived into the midst of this collective strained wariness, threatening to trouble it further.

Tankard Reist does not attempt to enter into a collation of the statistics, nor does she present her book as a scientific analysis of either the psychology or ethics of women's abortion decisions and their aftermath. Despite this, her collection of 250 women's accounts of the destructive experience of abortion, and her inclusion of 18 in this book, represents quite an achievement for any study whether "sampling" or "analytic."

She writes:

"It seemed to me the time had come for a book giving space to women who were surprised by the intensity of their feelings after abortion. *Giving Sorrow Words* brings some of these women out of the shadows and allows them to speak."⁶

"The politics surrounding abortion has drowned out the voices of women harmed by it... (these) voices have been at least stifled, if not deliberately smothered, by institutionalised, systematic denial."⁷

In dedicating the book to "the women who created this book and to the memory of their babies" she does not pretend to be "neutral" about her conviction that the damage caused by abortion is inter-relational and inter-personal and not merely individualised.

However she displays a gift for allowing the women's stories to tell themselves in all the directness and rawness of the first-person's account. She does not edit them into a uniform style, nor does she impose authorial comment into the fabric of the narrative. Still less does she tidy the lives and beliefs of the stories to neat resolution. Readers on both sides of the abortion divide might find this unpalatable.

There is nothing predictable about the type of women included in the collection. They come from all walks of life and all levels of education, having aborted at ages 13-45, both before and after legalisation. Some were married, some were Christian, some from ethnic communities who overtly reject abortion. Some have had children after their abortion, some have rejected heterosexual relationships for lesbian ones.

The book is extremely valuable in three notable respects.

Firstly it exposes the shocking degree of duress, pressure and belittlement some women experience during those confused and ambivalent early weeks of an unexpected pregnancy. The stories are replete with boyfriends, health professionals and families, who harangue, nag, threaten and cajole women into the stirrups.

⁵ Tankard Reist, M *Giving Sorrow Words: Women's stories of grief after abortion*. Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2000.

⁶ Tankard Reist p. 8

⁷ Tankard Reist. p.6

In some cases the women are tearfully protesting that they “want their babies” up until application of anaesthesia.

Lest it be thought that this book presents a stereotype of “dominant male oppressors” it is worth recalling the role of other women dominating other women into abortion.

“Ann” an 18 year old, who wants to complete her pregnancy and is supported in this by her boyfriend and doctor, lives with and supports her invalid mother:

“I had a choice. Have my baby and be rejected by my mother. Abort my baby and have a roof over my head. To my eternal regret, I chose the latter. I makes no excuses. My decision was based on sheer terror. The paralysing fear of what my mother was capable of if I defied her was my only motivator.”⁸

The fragility of more mature and determined women at this time is also obvious as is the travesty of many so-called “full disclosure” counselling services. “Lee”, an articulate and mature married woman of 38, tells how she becomes unexpectedly pregnant and is spun into a whirl of ambivalence. She tells herself that her time for babies is past, she is “pro-choice”, but her journal extracts are full of “but yets”. Her husband crumbles into indecisiveness as she does.

A clinic counsellor tells Lee “ambivalence is normal”. She explains to the aborting doctor that she doesn’t want a baby now, but doesn’t want an abortion either.

Without further resolution she is given an abortion.

Secondly the book provides great insight into the failings of the “populist” ethic about abortion. It provides chilling documentation of the emotional and physical damage caused to women by abortion. All the women in the book have their convictions about themselves and about the “neutrality” of the abortion procedure shattered.

Lee, prior to her pregnancy, held to the widely accepted ideology about abortion:

“I believed that abortion was a fundamental right. I believed that abortion for me would always be simple and straightforward, accompanied by passing sadness, regret that the pregnancy had happened, but predominantly by an all consuming relief.”⁹

Like the other women in the series Lee plummets into unexpected and deep depression and dysfunctionality, obsessed with the desire to become pregnant again. Her children ask her “who has died”?

⁸ Ibid. p. 74.

⁹ Ibid p. 197

Her life becomes shadowed by novelist Drusilla Modjeska's warning, "Consider what it means that it is a foetus not a tonsil that is coming out."¹⁰

The outcome for the other women is even more bleak. Some stumble into anorexia, some into self-mutilation, and some into promiscuity and "trashy" sexual encounters. Many of them imagine killing themselves and are haunted by nightmares and daytime horrors.

Marion an affirmative action officer, and one-time pro-abortion protestor, says: "I was smoldering away with a depression I couldn't show... Feminist trailblazer by day emotional cripple by night."¹¹ She chose to have two more wanted pregnancies aborted in a state of distracted absent-mindedness.

The third valuable contribution made by *Giving Sorrow Words*, is that it provides a fresh phenomenology of the experience of regret and remorse.

The book is emphatically not a collection of self-pitying sob stories of "victims" done wrong by ruthless and immoral "others". (Even though the bullying and neglect of professionals, relatives and lovers is breathtaking) Leslie Cannold, in her review of the book, sells it woefully short when suggests that Tankard Reist is presenting a "time-warping back to the victim feminism of the late 70s."¹²

Indeed remarkably, given the degree to which many of them have been pummelled, lied to and pushed into their abortions, despite the smooth mechanisation of the procedure, and despite being abandoned by those who ought to have helped, each woman describes in her own way how she believes that abortion is "something I have done". Justine says: "I didn't feel I had a choice but I do feel it was my fault."¹³

No outsider could apply "guilt" any more fiercely than the women do to themselves. Sometimes the degree of self-disgust is so visceral it manifests itself in pathological self punishment and self hatred. Says "Anne":

"My self hatred swallowed everything else. Eating me alive. I wanted it that way".

All the women using different language, different images and moulding it out of their own different beliefs and traditions describe how they crash into a world of pain, sorrow, regret, but more than grief... remorse¹⁴.

Jean Curthoys says of Raimond Gaita's typically original and enlightening exploration of "remorse-as-revelation" in his *A Common Humanity*,

¹⁰ Quoted by "Lee" in *ibid.* p. 224.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 172.

¹² Cannold, L. "An interminable debate" *The Age* 8/4/2000 p. 9.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 83.

¹⁴ I would like to thank Dr Hayden Ramsay for his insightful discussion with me about Gaita and remorse.

“The pain in remorse shows that the preciousness of others lies deeply in our souls. As an insight into the very make-up of our inner life, this understanding of our common preciousness is itself ‘lucid’”¹⁵

Giving Sorrow Words, fleshes out the space between the bare bones of the emerging statistics about the effects of abortion and gives voice to the enforced silence and isolation of mothers who have had their “problem” pregnancies terminated and “dismissed” by our culture of moral evasiveness. Tankard Reist allows these women to have their own “preciousness” rediscovered by listening to them. They in turn, in their confronting and powerful accounts, reveal that abortion is for many women neither an informed or free “choice”- still less a “solution”.

¹⁵ Carthoys, J. *Australian Review of Books*. November 1999.