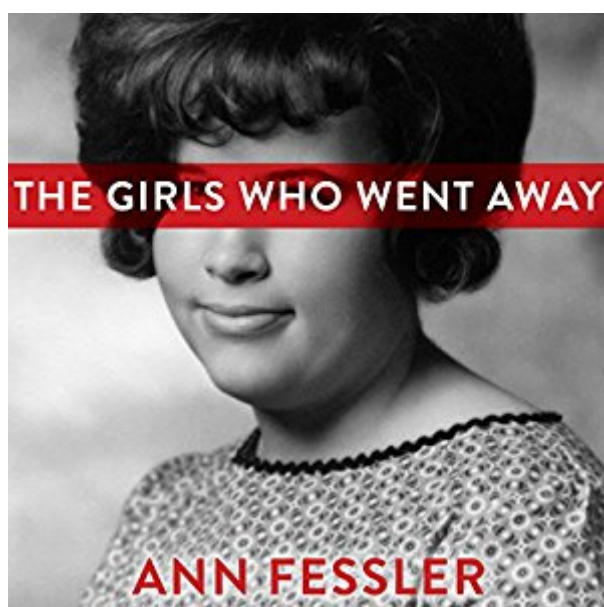


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# The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History Of Women Who Surrendered Children For Adoption In The Decades Before Roe V. Wade



## Synopsis

In this deeply moving and myth-shattering work, Ann Fessler brings out into the open for the first time the astonishing untold history of the million and a half women who surrendered children for adoption due to enormous family and social pressure in the decades before *Roe v. Wade*. An adoptee who was herself surrendered during those years and recently made contact with her mother, Fessler brilliantly brings to life the voices of more than 100 women as well as the spirit of those times, allowing the women to tell their stories in gripping and intimate detail.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book was recommended to me by one of the subjects within. As I am an adoptee who was surrendered in the mid 1960's I found the books revelations both informative and unsettling. I had never put the picture in my head of how socially motivated and financially interested some of the adoption agencies of the time were nor the gamut of emotions felt by these birthmothers. This is well researched from a historical standpoint as well as a facinating read delving into the very human feelings shared by those in the triad of adoption. Feelings, I might add, that are not well understood by those outside of this subculture. I have recommended this book to several counselor friends of mine and would do the same for anyone who may find themselves across the couch from persons involved in the adoption process. Mrs. Fessler's book flows very smoothly and is quite an easy read. The books stories are filled with the heart wrenching fear, dissapointment, guilt, anguish and uncertainty felt by many birthmothers but the ultimate message is one of underlying love, resolution and final completion. My final thoughts were of hope. Hope for governmental reform in its policies,

hope for institutional reform in their practices and procedures and hope for adoptee and birth parent alike in the illumination of uncertainties and for final completeness.

The subtitle says it all: this is the hidden history of women who surrendered children for adoption in the decades before *Roe vs. Wade*. Author Ann Fessler balances her chapters with first-person narratives from both the women who gave up children and from adopted children. Fessler's book explores the shame of getting pregnant in the post-WW II era, the lack of birth control education, the lack of medical birth control for unmarried women, and the hurry of "good" families to bury the mortifying secret product of premarital sex. At its core, the book is about psychological pain, for both mother and child. This pain and confusion lasts for a lifetime. I grew up with sex education, had access to reproductive planning clinics, and went to a high school that had a day care center on site. Modern women take our choices for granted--the choice to use birth control, the choice to keep a child as an unmarried mother, the choice to have an open, structured adoption, the choice to have a closed adoption, and the choice for safe, legal abortion. This was an eye-opening examination of choices (or lack thereof) over the last fifty years. Fessler has no agenda other than educating the reader about the hidden histories of these shamed, embarrassed unwed mothers. Chapters focus on specific issues such as birth control education, the social stigma of unmarried pregnancy, double standards for men and women, houses that women were shipped off to, the adoption agencies and processes, and the aftermath of adoption. She uses personal narratives to flesh out her history book, but Fessler does not edit the histories to make any specific political point. Her subjects had widely varying experiences and reactions, all of which are captured herein.

In Lois Lowry's young adult science fiction book *The Giver*, a young girl hopes to receive a birthmother assignment. Her mother's sharp response was, "Lily!...Don't say that. There's very little honor in that Assignment. The birthmothers never even get to see the new children." Very little honor indeed. I've been a member of the birthmother sisterhood for 30 years. I relinquished my daughter to adoption in 1976, three years after *Roe v. Wade*. Thankfully I wasn't forced to go away, had a strong say in my decision, and was spared much of the guilt and shame expressed by the courageous, selfless women featured in *The Girls Who Went Away*. In fact, I received a lot of negative criticism for choosing to have my child. I heard "why didn't you just get rid of it" from "friends" and acquaintances and even the nurse who was in the room when I awoke from the anesthesia. Just try to imagine delivering a baby with no one holding your hand or soothing your brow. There are simply no words for what has to be one of the loneliest, most tragic human

experiences. Regardless of the paths traveled by young women faced with a crisis pregnancy, the results are all the same: their lives are dramatically, permanently altered and they all share the same harsh reality--they're childless mothers. Why revisit such a painful, tragic part of my history? Why let myself get a lump in my throat after reading a few pages? Because I owe it to these women who, some for the very first time, had the courage to speak out and reveal the inhumane treatment they experienced during what should have been the most wonderful moment in their lives. Their stories deserve to be heard, need to be heard. Those unfamiliar with this embarrassing moment of our country's history will be stunned by the punishments that hardly fit the "crimes" of these incredible, tenacious women. In one of my favorite passages, Yvonne discusses how her whole life has been based on shame: "You hear about people's lives being touched by adoption. It's no damn touch. I mean, that just drives me nuts. You're smashed by adoption. I mean, it alters the mothers' lives forever." I have used the phrase "touched by adoption" regularly over the years, but Yvonne's description is far more accurate. Everyone facing a crisis pregnancy--the ill-prepared mother and father, their parents, siblings, and beyond--are smashed to pieces from the fallout of adoption. Read it slowly, carefully. *The Girls Who Went Away* should be required reading for every high school and college student; I'm certain it would help young adults be more thoughtful and mindful about sex. More importantly, *The Girls Who Went Away* should be read by every single person who is considering creating a family by adoption. While adoption has mercifully become kinder and gentler over the past 25 years or so, it's still not an ideal institution, there's still a great deal of work to be done. It's time of all of us to get our heads out of the sand and work together. Whatever side of the right to life/pro choice fence you sit on, I'm sure you'll rethink your position after meeting the wonderful women of *The Girls Who Went Away*. Ann Fessler deserves all the great reviews and high praise she's received for raising awareness and shedding light on this controversial subject; indeed, I hope she's recognized with several awards. Should the reader be interested in further enlightenment, the movie *The Magdalene Sisters* is highly recommended.

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