



America and the Pill: A History of Promise, Peril, and Liberation

Elaine Tyler May

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In 1960, the FDA approved the contraceptive commonly known as “the pill.” Advocates, developers, and manufacturers believed that the convenient new drug would put an end to unwanted pregnancy, ensure happy marriages, and even eradicate poverty. But as renowned historian Elaine Tyler May reveals in *America and the Pill*, it was women who embraced it and created change. They used the pill to challenge the authority of doctors, pharmaceutical companies, and lawmakers. They demonstrated that the pill was about much more than family planning—it offered women control over their bodies and their lives. From little-known accounts of the early years to personal testimonies from young women today, May illuminates what the pill did and did *not* achieve during its half century on the market.

America and the Pill: A History of Promise, Peril, and Liberation Details

Date : Published April 27th 2010 by Basic Books (AZ) (first published 2010)

ISBN : 9780465011520

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Format : Hardcover 214 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Feminism, Science, Womens, Sociology, Academic, School

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Mav says

This is short and very readable book that covers the discourse surrounding the use of the Pill since its inception. Despite being a history major, I tend to find commercial nonfiction history books really boring, but May does an excellent job presenting her academic analysis without falling into feminist jargon or "dumbing down" the material.

I wouldn't have read this book if it hadn't been assigned for my class - as a feminist, I'm really more interested in discussion of colonialism, racism, GLBT issues, and intersectionality than reproductive rights. Granted, as a US citizen, with women's bodies under fire from the GOP, I know I should be and I am, but I figure the white middle class feminists have that war well manned.

What this book focuses on, and makes relevant to me, isn't the discourse on women's liberation from reproduction and control over their bodies, but rather the political, public, typically male discourse on the public effects of the Pill on population, male sexuality and dominance. The discourse on population control has shifted somewhat now with the spread of STD. However, as May makes clear, there's still that fear of the loss of male virility and patriarchal power that effected and continues to effect, discussions of reproductive rights amongst men even more than religious objections.

TLDR: Recommended for all women of voting age.

Maria says

The Pill was hailed as the cure for overpopulation, unwanted pregnancies, poverty, unhappy marriages, and even communism. (That theory was that uncontrolled pregnancies lead to poverty and poverty lead to civil unrest and communist take-over.) Others claimed that it would end the moral underpinning of society and ending family life.

Why I started this book: Controversy, history and interesting conversations...

Why I finished this book: I love history books that show the difference what people expect to happen with a new invention and what actually happened. People predicted both great and terrible things for the Pill.

Ana says

Interesting read for an American history newbie like me.

Ashley says

Seeing as the Pill recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, I thought this was an apt time to read this; it was quite an interesting read. I feel that these micro-histories I've been reading lately are either too in-depth or not in-depth enough. This is one I wouldn't have minded some additional details and/or chapters.

Interestingly, the author's father played a role in testing the safety of the Pill and actually angered many by holding up FDA approval until some safety improvements were made.

Tyler May's book shines in examining the history, which is fascinating and enlightening and raises so many questions about women, our roles in society, and the influence of men. So many times reading this book, I would become outraged at men (and my poor husband took the brunt of some of this frustration - having not read this book, he was at a distinct disadvantage in my interrogations). The dramatic shift in social acceptance of the Pill and contraception was huge. I think it's hard to imagine in today's society what a big deal this really was. Giving women an easy, effective, and cheap way to control when they get pregnant, if they ever do at all, is a radical change from where the country was just a few centuries, or even half-centuries, earlier. This allowed women to pursue an education and gain meaningful employment which wasn't possible when she was popping out kids all the time.

A statistic that just makes my head spin - 1957 marked the highest year of teens giving birth. Nearly 10% of 15 to 19 year old women had babies. 85% of them were already married! By 1959, nearly half of all American brides were younger than 19! Can you even imagine getting married at such a young age and having no means to control if and when you get pregnant? It's a horrifying thought.

The exploration of a Pill for men is where I really went off the deep end, though. Doctors can do this. Clinical trials on men have been performed. And you know what? Men have categorically said that after experiencing the side effects, they would never take it regularly. What are these horrendous side effects, you ask? Weight gain, decreased libido, nausea, and mood changes. Men find these side effects that women deal with - and have dealt with for 50 years - completely unacceptable. But no one gives it a second thought that women have to deal with these side effects. One doctor explained this by saying, "Women can get pregnant; men can't." Yes, women have a higher stake in contraception, but does that mean the burden should fall on us alone? Sanger and McCormick would have said yes; they were always adamant that contraception should be controlled entirely by women. I see their point, but it still doesn't sit well with me. Especially when many doctors point out that A) men don't like doing clinical trials when it affects their sexual functions and B) "the delicate male psyche equates virility with fertility". Men also took issue with using artificial hormones to change the way their body works and questioned long-term safety of doing so. As a matter of fact, this is how vasectomies rose in popularity. It's a direct result of men's refusal to "develop, test, and distribute" contraceptive options for men. I say, serves them right. (Idiots. I mean, take a pill or have surgery? Hmm... which is better for me?) To be fair, a few guys were in favor of it, mostly more progressive men willing to share the burden of contraception with their mate. But one guy expressed pleasure over being able to keep women from essentially stealing his seed and tricking him into getting them pregnant. Methinks someone has more pressing needs than his seed being stolen. Such as dealing with his abundant narcissism and rampant paranoia. But that's just me.

But wait! There's more! Remember Viagra? It became the most successful prescription drug ever launched in the US, despite the fact that it carries serious health risks. Tyler May ends this chapter by wryly commenting that, "apparently a pill that enhances the potential for men to impregnate women is considerably more marketable than one that diminishes that possibility." On a similar note, it's not uncommon for health insurance plans to deny coverage for birth control, such as the Pill. However, very few plans deny coverage for Viagra. Nice. (Idiots.)

The review below is more focused on the history surrounding the Pill, which is only slightly less fascinating than the social issues, in my opinion -

Some parts were a nice refresher from history I learned in school, such as the Comstock law of 1873, which equated birth control with pornography and banned all contraceptive devices being sent via US mail (Comstock was the US Postal Inspector - why anyone listened to him on matters of birth control still baffles me). It seems that calling contraception a vice, was in part due to efforts by the emerging medical profession (mostly male, btw) who were trying to marginalize midwives' and lay healers' role in pregnancy and birthing. Americans, being the ingenious bunch we are, figured out that marketing contraceptives as "effective for female disorders" and the like was a neat way around the laws. Amazingly, the Comstock law was in effect for over 50 years.

Enter Margaret Sanger and Katherine McCormick; Sanger, described as "a feisty socialist and militant feminist" came from a working class background and coined the term "birth control" in 1915. Sanger was a nurse, who saw first-hand women who were injured or killed by illegal abortions or from simply having too many children. Sanger's mother, who birthed 11 children, died at age 50 which Sanger attributed to "constant childbearing and lack of access to contraceptives". McCormick, on the other hand, was born into wealth and was the 2nd woman to graduate from MIT. She later married Stanley McCormick, son of the founder of the International Harvester Company. After Sanger and McCormick teamed up, they created an unstoppable force. McCormick smuggled diaphragms into the US from Europe to supply Sanger's clinics (which would later become Planned Parenthood).

Keep in mind that this is the 1950s - contraceptive research was considered a disreputable business. Neither pharmaceutical companies nor the federal government would fund such research. Neither did the National Science Foundation nor the National Institutes of Health. President Eisenhower even avowed that as long as he was President, the federal government would not get involved. McCormick stepped up, though, and contributed more than \$2 million to research - the equivalent of \$12 million in 2000 dollars.

Gregory Pincus and John Rock teamed up to test a prototype of the Pill on women. Interestingly, contraception-related research was often billed as fertility research, as that was much more socially acceptable at the time. It was difficult to get large enough pools of women to participate in testing as the women were required to follow very stringent protocols for long periods of time, even though the studies were often marketed as "fertility treatments". Eventually, the Pill was tested on 15 psychiatric patients at a state hospital, who made excellent research subjects, despite the inherent ick factor. At the time, this was a somewhat common practice for drug testing and not illegal.

The Pill eventually was found to be quite effective and amid growing concerns of communism, over-population, and other macro-level issues, the government changed its tune on funding "family planning" and dumped \$56.3 million into research in 1969. In the mid-1960s, Eisenhower even recanted his earlier statements. When the Pill first came on the market, doctors would only prescribe it to married women, though, which led to women wearing fake wedding rings to their appointments. Eventually, it became more accepted and even mainstream. Today, more than 12 million women in the US take the Pill. More than 45 million women of childbearing age have taken the Pill at some point in their lives. I think, regardless of all the other issues, that Sanger and McCormick would be pleased.

Abby says

America and the Pill is a brief account of the history of the birth control pill in the United States. While I do

consider myself to be a part of the feminist/reproductive rights world, I picked this book up because I wanted a first look at the history of the pill. By no means did this book go into specific events in depth or make mind-blowing conclusions, but it did what it was supposed to! I learned so much about the history of the pill and feel prepared to continue my research into the topic.

Samantha says

Finally, a book that is informative yet easy to read. Elaine Tyler May did a fantastic job at putting her research into a book that is easy for everyone to understand. You do not have to be a professor to understand this book. It is interesting and very informative. Also, it makes women appreciate how easily they are able to obtain birth control compared to women when the pill first came out. Overall, this book is a really good overview of the history of birth control and how it has changed the lives of both women and men.

Tanuja says

Interesting read.

Jane Hope says

This book is somewhere between history, sociology and feminist folk tale. Although extensively researched, it retains a sense of being lightweight. Although it tries to include the experiences of women of colour, lesbians and other women who are not university educated liberals, it falls into the trap of trying to do too much with too little. Nonetheless, still recommended.

Alison says

This is a history of the pill, but I found it to be a little on the light side. I expected to hear more of the science -- how, exactly does it work? So if they started out with an extremely high dose by today's standards, how was that dropped down? Under duress by the pharmas, or suddenly, or gradually and willingly? If you want an easy read that's a little bit of the social issues and a little bit of the science, this is a good bet. But if you want something that really delves into either side, this isn't going to be quite what you're looking for.

Kelly says

Elaine Tyler May was 12 years old when the pill was approved by the FDA in 1960 (50 years ago today, as I write this). Her own parents were reproductive choice advocates in Los Angeles, running Planned Parenthood clinics. Her father, Dr. Edward Tyler, ran clinical tests of the Pill and held up approval of the first pill, Enovid, because he was concerned about significant side effects that weren't being addressed by the manufacturers. Elaine knew more about birth control than most kids her age.

It's this personal perspective that enhanced my reading of this book. While it maintains a fairly unbiased view of the Pill and its consequences (good and bad), the author obviously maintains an insider knowledge of its beginnings, and as a noted scholar of feminism she can help us understand what the Pill has meant to our society over the past 50 years.

It's a slim, easy read, therefore I recommend this to any woman who has used, loved, hated, or pondered any form of birth control since 1960. In fact, it should be required reading.

Mikey B. says

This is a short look at the repercussions of the Pill in American society since its introduction in 1960. As the author contends, its impact has not been as revolutionary as initially foretold (the world is still filled with many problems) and because it is individual women who take the Pill – some women love it (finding it empowering, efficient) and others come to loath it (for the side affects or other reasons).

At times this book is a little too cursory (with other recent books used as sources) and given to generalizations. For instance when speaking of this current century and the fear of pregnancy (on page 149) she states: 'Today there is no longer the terror of facing an illegal abortion, a shamed reputation, banishment to a home for unwed mothers, or hasty abortion'. Oh really – to begin with in many states it is very difficult for a teenage girl to obtain an abortion. Unfortunately when it comes to sexual behavior and 'shamed reputation' there is always someone who wants to push his or her view of the world unto a young person (particularly if it is a puritanical point of view).

But regardless the author provides a brief but good history. Elaine Tyler May is obviously in favour of contraception and the education of women and men to make an informed choice. She points out that Republican presidents over the years have always tried to repress access to birth control knowledge and devices – the most recent one was trying to promote abstinence to the detriment of basic contraceptive knowledge. In the best chapter in the book (A Pill for Men) she illustrates that men are very willing to take a drug (with various side affects) that enhances their virility but are extremely reluctant to have a drug to prevent fertilization.

My favourite quote in the book (from page 25) "Every child should be a wanted child. Those who want them should be able to have them; those who don't should be able to prevent them".

Alaina Morales says

I know previous reviewers were not so impressed with this book, and if you have any familiarity with the history of the feminist movement, this book will probably not tell you anything incredibly enlightening or something you didn't already know. Despite this, I really enjoyed reading this book. Tyler May does an excellent job of providing a well-researched, unbiased history of the pill and women's sexual liberation that is written from a feminist perspective. She includes viewpoints from a variety of people, which I really appreciated. This book is especially relevant now, with all the contraception and abortion controversy circulating in politics and the media. I highly encourage anyone who has female parts or anyone who has sex with female parts to read this book.

Craig Werner says

Slightly disappointing. May's a first rate historian and the issues that cluster around the introduction of oral contraceptives, especially the politics of family and the resurgence of feminism in the early sixties are ones she's at home with. The problem is mostly with the book's length; there's simply not enough room to fully develop her ideas or to provide sufficient detail to make it clear that her judgments aren't based on anecdote. Not a bad introduction for readers who don't know much about the history, but won't add much for those who do.

Chris Hitchcock says

In this book, Elaine Tyler May focuses on describing the social context within which the oral contraceptive pill was developed and used. Her book is one of several to hit the shelves on the 50'th anniversary of FDA approval of the first pill, Enovid.

This book is an important part of the story of the pill.

May makes the case that the pill had the most effect on the sexual behaviour of married people. She carefully disentangles the timelines of the sexual revolution, women's rights, and the release of the pill.

For young women today, it is important to have this record of "the way things were." As a woman who came of age during the 1970's and 80's, her description of the tensions of the sexual revolution articulated the multiple pulls that I felt as a young woman.

As a researcher in the field, I have a few quibbles. Oral contraceptives use progestins, not progesterone. And the dose of oral contraceptives is described by the estradiol content, not by the content of progestins.

Having said that, May does not claim to be writing a book about the history of science, but rather a social history. And it is a history worth reading, and a necessary context to understand the many threads of narrative around the pill today.

Alexandra Michaelides says

What a disappointment. There is very little new here, which is only part of why I was displeased. Her text doesn't have nearly the level of analysis or depth I expect from her (as I am a fan of her earlier work!). She glosses over major events in the history of the pill--such as the Catholic church's opposition and birth control commission and the fight to include possible side effect information. Yes, these events are mentioned, but only as much to say that they happened without fully explaining the events. The only new and useful part of the book is the final chapter when she presents the findings from her survey about women and the pill today. But even that doesn't provide much above the typical arguments about the pill and birth control today.

A MUCH, MUCH better look at the pill and birth control in general is Devices and Desires by Andrea Tone or even the PBS documentary, The Pill.
