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Sacred Bond: The Legacy of Baby M

Phyllis Chesler

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Phyllis Chesler : Sacred Bond: The Legacy of Baby M before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Sacred Bond: The Legacy of Baby M:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A FEMINIST PSYCHOTHERAPIST DISCUSSES THE CONTROVERSIAL SURROGACY CASE By Steven H Propp Phyllis Chesler (born 1940) is an American writer, psychotherapist, and professor emeritus of psychology and women's studies at the College of Staten Island. She has written other books, such as *Women and Madness*, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*, and *About Men*. She begins this 1988 book with the statement, On February 6, 1985, Mary Beth Whitehead, a twenty-eight-year-old housewife and mother of an eleven-year old boy and a nine-year old girl, signed a pre-conception or surrogate-parenting contract with lawyer Noel Keanes Infertility Center of New York (ICNY). The agreement provided that she (the Surrogate) would submit to amniocentesis and/or abortion upon the demand of thirty-eight year old biochemist Bill Stern (the Natural Father) and his wife, thirty-eight year old physician Betsy Stern. Mary Beth was to receive ten thousand dollars if she gave birth to Bill's healthy baby---and legally surrendered custody to him, i.e., if she signed the adoption papers. (Pg. 3) Chesler poses a variety of questions, such as: Who is a child's true mother? The woman who gives birth to her?... The woman who actually takes care of her?... Does a child need a biological mother, if her father wants to take exclusive care of her---without involving any women?... What is a fit mother? Who should decide?... What would replace the mother-infant bond---the oldest and strongest bond known to man? We must decide: Is a biological mother a human being or is she only a surrogate uterus?... Should parenting become a blue-collar or white-collar occupation?... Should every child of the future be born at scientifically timed intervals with its sex, personality, skin-and-eye color all carefully preselected?... If a woman has the legal right to terminate a pregnancy because she and no one else has a

right to her body, then at what point does her (pregnant) body cease to be hers alone?... Will the state automatically take custody of these children at birth, wall them up in institutions, sell them to the highest bidder? (Pg. 8-11)She observes, What mother freely chooses to lose her child at birth or later, to the plagues of war, disease, and accident?... What mother freely hands her child over to blood strangers to be legally adopted by her superiors, to be taught to forget her, to be punished for who she is---small hostage of her misfortune Baby M is every child who has ever been physically, legally, or psychologically separated from her birth mother for her own good in the mistaken belief that a child needs a father, a father-dominated family, and/or money more than she needs her birth mother, love, and freedom. (Pg. 16-17)She notes, The women say We dont like Mary Beth---as if that somehow justifies what was done to her; as if any woman so disliked by those more powerful than herself deserves to be punished and publicly humiliated Some feminists say: If women cant do what they want with their bodies, then well lose our right to abortion and pay equity. I hope not, but must women give up the right to keep our children for the right not to bear children?... how can we deny that women have a profound and everlasting bond with the children theyve birthed; that this bond begins in utero; that it is further strengthened by the experience of childbirth, breast-feeding and primary childcare How can we deny that children bond with their birth mothers in utero, and that children suffer terribly in all kinds of ways when this bond is prematurely or abruptly terminated? Acknowledging these truths does not doom women to the status of surrogate uteruses---or men to the status of sperm donors. Patriarchal civilization has already done so. (Pg. 22-23)She suggests, Mary Beth Whitehead is the lightning rod for all these unspoken questions. Women are very hard on her. We see ourselves---and our collective past---in her. What we see is too problematic and unacceptable. (Pg. 36)She comments, For a long time, I couldnt understand why more women, feminist and antifeminist alike, didnt view Mary Beth as a heroine. After all, look at what she was saying: I made a mistake. I cant abandon my own flesh and blood. Its my body and its my baby. Diverse groups of women should have found something here to admire. Most didnt--- because Mary Beths choice of surrogacy and then her change of heart about that choice put them (and her) into conflict with two opposing female role models: the Christian/religious one and the feminist/secular one At this precise moment in history, surrogacy and how we feel about it is also a reflection of the war currently raging between secular feminism and religious patriarchy. (Pg. 49)She argues, I still admire the spiritual context in which the Vatican discusses surrogacy. All life is sacred; ends never justify the means feminists flinch when I say I respect the seamless garment of logic worn by the Vatican. But why should my recognition of the Vaticans consistency imperil my feminist credentials? Do I have to agree with my comrades on everything and with our enemies on nothing? (Pg. 94)She wonders, A woman may promise to marry a man. What if she changes her mind? Should we force her to marry him anyway? . Are contracts sacred? Are they any more sacred than the bond between a mother and child? What makes a contract more important than a contraction? (Pg. 109) Later, she asks, Is it unreasonable to consider that the acquisition of a child by the process of pregnancy and birth is more compelling, and more inalienable, than the acquisition of a child by surrogacy, marriage, or social contract? (In my opinion, a child belongs to no one; but the right to mother the child belong to the birth mother.) If so, so we need a constitutional amendment that guarantees birth mothers and their children unbroken access to each other? (Pg. 145-146)She states, so many people, ESPECIALLY women, enjoyed seeing Roxanne Pulitzer and Mary Beth Whitehead lose bloody and sensational battles that were stacked against them from the start. Women who have never been allowed to talk back eventually identify with the aggressor and have no pity for a victim who reminds them of themselves. (Pg. 148)She closes the book with the statement, Judge Birger M. Sween ordered, liberal, unsupervised visitation to begin immediately between Mary Beth Whitehead-Gould and Baby M, her daughter. (Pg. 166)[NOTE: After reaching legal age, Baby M (Melissa Stern) legally terminated Mary Beth's parental rights.]This book poses many thought-provoking and even disturbing questions, that are as relevant today as they were back in 1988.3 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Too partisan to be a serious effort.By Elizabeth A. RootI remember loathing this book when it came out, so before dumping it I decided to reread it and see if it looked a little better when the issue was not so hot. Baby M is 20 now. There is a kind of eloquence that makes people who agree with the author feel that their views have been forcefully and aptly expressed. There is another kind of eloquence that is persuasive to people who are willing to think about the issue. I leave it to Chesler's supporters to decide the first, but I think she was an utter failure at the latter. I'm not even sure that she tried. I don't whether Chesler is too dense, too smug or too enamoured of seeing herself as the rare voice of righteousness in the wilderness of misogynistic, patriarchal, capitalism, but I don't think that she even attempts to consider, and therefore be able to respond to, anyone else's point of view. I actually agree with Chesler on a number of points, but I disliked her so much by the end of book that I almost hate to admit it. She certainly goes out of her way to insult as many people as possible. Chesler is oblivious to nuance. There is a difference, although I'm sure she doesn't see it, between asking how this particular situation should have been resolved and asking how such fiascos should be avoided in the future. People who supported giving the baby to the Sterns, or didn't really care which family got custody, sometimes still favored outlawing surrogacy. Further, Chesler sees in this case the paradigm of all custody cases, but this is only partially true. I spent hours discussing this with friends and family, and all our attempts to reason from other cases faltered in the almost unique aspects of this one. She also throws in what I'll call false negatives, that is issues that have some legitimacy, but are actually irrelevant since resolution wouldn't alter her

opinion. As an example, she throws in the case of a surrogate who contracted a venereal disease from the donor. Certainly outrageous, but actually irrelevant to the case at hand. In the first place, the Stern-Whitehead contract called for testing of both parties, and in the second because Chesler would still oppose surrogacy. She never resolves most issues. Oh, she throws out dozens of topics of varying relevance, but without any serious discussion. Many people found Mary Beth Whitehead (MaryBW) unlikable. Chesler's response is that we don't have to like all slaves to oppose slavery, but MaryBW wasn't a slave and brought a lot of the trouble on herself. She inappropriately brings up issues of class, ignoring the fact that the Whitehead's weren't poor, weren't desperate, and that MaryBW said that money wasn't the issue. And of course, since Chesler seems to agree with Germaine Greer that middle- and upper-class people in western industrial cultures are necessarily poor parents, not only are the Whiteheads and the Sterns both disqualified, but Chesler must be a bad mother to her own son. As Chesler sees it, mothers are virtually the sole parent of their children. Apparently, a mother putting her child up for adoption is the same thing as that child being kidnaped from her arms. I would suggest reading Sarah Hrdy's *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species*. I can remember when there was a movement to terminate parental rights after a period of time, because some children spent years in foster care because their parents, including their mother, would neither give them up nor take them back. Mary Gordon, in a thoughtful article in *Ms.* wrote of her ambivalent feelings about the case, and reflected that the chief issue is: how much do we want men involved with children? I would give mothers the clear advantage with newborns, but as children grow up, the issue becomes trickier. I take it that Chesler would agree with a friend of mine: the mother should determine the emotions of the father. If she doesn't want him around, he should leave without a backward glance; if she wants him around, he should learn to love diapers. She starts off by telling us that there are no heroes or heroines in this story, only flawed human beings. MaryBW is soon promoted to heroine. Chesler misleadingly says of her: "It is as if these experts were 19th century missionaries and Mary Beth a particularly stubborn who refuse to convert" Oh no, MaryBW was an early and eager convert, seeking out surrogacy. Another agency claimed that they had rejected her as unsuitable before she went to Noel Keane. Chesler infantilizes her: it's not her fault she wanted to be a surrogate, signed a contract that she didn't read, etc. Chesler fails to grasp that for some people, the fact that MaryBW signed a contract isn't inherently binding, but it does affect how they view her. Chesler also says that she cannot understand why people reacted badly to the fact that MaryBW became pregnant again, glossing over the fact that in doing so she was abandoning a husband who had been remarkably faithful to her as his life was turned upside down. There actually is a villain in this episode: Noel Keane. Chesler does go after him somewhat, but not nearly as viciously as she goes after the Sterns. Chesler tells Betsy Stern (BetsyS) what she thinks or ought to think. She refers to her as MaryBW's "unofficial physician dominatrix" (did she have a little whip?) although she also tells us that BetsyS has such a submissive personality that it should have disqualified her from parenthood. Richard Whitehead also has a submissive personality, but that apparently doesn't count. The Sterns are held to be unilaterally responsible for the contract that all four adults signed. Chesler talks as if granting custody to the Sterns was the equivalent of leaving the baby exposed on a hillside for the wolves. If one does want to read up on surrogacy, this book probably shouldn't be missed. Chesler was very active on behalf of MaryBW. There are a variety of appendixes, including the original surrogacy agreement, briefs, statements of support, etc., some of them complete, some of them tendenciously edited. Some of the selections contain more information than I would think Chesler wants; I don't know if she is being fair or can't imagine how other people might read them. There are numerous footnotes, sometimes containing explanatory information, but no index.³ of 8 people found the following review helpful. Horribly prejudiced towards Mary Beth Whitehead! By A CustomerMs. Chesler did not write a factual book. She wrote an extremely one-sided book, portraying the Sterns as disgusting, nasty people and Saint Mary Beth. Her defense for the real mother ignores such facts as Mary Beth's rejection of her son Ryan, her unfounded claims of Mr. Stern's sexual abuse against her daughter (oddly, she mentions a case where another mother's claim of such abuse against her child goes unbelieved. How can anyone take these claims seriously when mothers like Mary Beth tell such lies?), and the fact that Mary Beth denied ever threatening to kill Baby M.