



Scarlet A: The Ethics, Law, and Politics of Ordinary Abortion

Katie Watson

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Although *Roe v. Wade* identified abortion as a constitutional right over 40 years ago, it bears stigma--a proverbial scarlet A--in the United States. Millions participate in or benefit from an abortion, but few want to reveal that they have done so. Approximately one in five pregnancies in the US ends in abortion. Why is something so common, which has been legal so long, still a source of shame and secrecy? Why is it so regularly debated by politicians, and so seldom divulged from friend to friend, or loved one to loved one? This book explores the personal stigma that prevents many from sharing their abortion experiences with friends and family in private conversation, and the structural stigma that keeps it that way. It argues persuasively that America would benefit from working to reverse such stigma, providing readers with tools that may help them model ways of doing so.

Our silence around private experience with abortion has distorted our public discourse. Both proponents and opponents of abortion's legality tend to focus on the extraordinary cases. This tendency keeps the public discourse polarized and contentious, and keeps the focus on the cases that occur the least. Katie Watson focuses instead on the remaining 95% of abortion cases. The book gives the reflective reader a more accurate impression of what the majority of American abortion practice really looks like. It explains why this public/private disjuncture exists, what it costs us, and what can be gained by including ordinary abortion in public debate.

As *Scarlet A* explains, abortion has been a constitutional right for nearly 45 years, and it should remain one. What we need now are productive conversations about abortion ethics: how could or should people decide whether to exercise this right? Watson paints a rich, rarely seen picture of how patients and doctors currently think and act, and ultimately invites readers to draw their own conclusions.

Scarlet A: The Ethics, Law, and Politics of Ordinary Abortion Details

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From Reader Review *Scarlet A: The Ethics, Law, and Politics of Ordinary Abortion* for online ebook

Juli Rahel says

Abortion is a difficult topic to tackle. Everyone has an opinion, and almost everyone also feels very strongly about those opinions. I myself have always been a big proponent of women being allowed to make the choice that is right for them, which means that the government needs to make sure that healthy and safe options are available. But even though I have read other books about abortion before, *Scarlet A* offered a lot of new insights and was very well written. Thanks to Oxford University Press and Netgalley for providing me with a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Key to *Scarlet A* is what Katie Watson refers to as 'ordinary abortion'. Initially I was confused as to what she was referring to, but once I got it I understood just how important it is to discuss. Watson is right when she says that most conversations around abortion are about those extraordinary cases such as rape, incest, or immediate danger to the well being of the mother and/or child. I myself have never had an abortion, but know friends who have, and not for the reasons mentioned just now. These are the ordinary abortions that Watson discusses in *Scarlet A*, the abortions that are done because the women aren't ready to be parents, or because they know they don't have the money for a child, or because they simply don't want children and made a mistake. These types of abortions make up the majority of abortion cases, yet they are also the ones that aren't discussed openly and that come with a lot of shame. It is incredibly important that books like *Scarlet A* address the experiences of these women, especially when they do it as well as Watson does.

Watson accomplishes something almost miraculous with *Scarlet A*, which is making the abortion debate accessible and, as far as possible, understandable. As an academic, she makes sure to either explain her jargon or to avoid it as much as possible. She shares her own interest and thoughts throughout the book, without influencing her readers, which makes *Scarlet A* feel more personable than many other books out there. She includes stories of many different women, and men, about their experiences with abortion, the shame they felt, or that they didn't feel, the anger they faced, the support they received, how their thoughts have evolved since the abortion. *Scarlet A* also looks into the different Supreme Court cases since *Roe vs. Wade* that addressed abortion, discusses the terms used in the abortion debate, and much more. I walked away from *Scarlet A* with a lot more information than I had before, but also with a new perspective on a number of related issues.

Katie Watson manages to make *Scarlet A* an incredibly accessible book, opening up a debate that is famously tricky and full of loopholes. I'd recommend that everyone interested in knowing more about abortions, about the stories of people who have gone through one, about the politics and the ethics around the debate, read *Scarlet A*.

Jody Mena says

If I had to recommend one single book on the abortion issue in America, this would be it.

Mira says

Accessible, relatable, thoughtful discussion of how to think about thinking & talking abortion with all sorts of people. This is a good laypersons' review of the history of abortion law and a solid overview of what it means for real women when abortion is legal, illegal, or mixed status.

Lesley says

Watson, a bioethicist and law professor, argues for separating the legal right to abortion, (which she describes as “foundational “ and beyond debate) from the ethical. She points out that all of us are affected by abortion in some way: 1/3 of American women will obtain one in their lifetimes; and the partners, friends, co-workers and children of those women can all be seen as beneficiaries. Watson establishes various frameworks for determining whether and when an abortion is ethically acceptable, and points out the hypocrisies and inconsistencies in state restrictions (waiting periods, “fetal heartbeat” and “ability to feel pain” laws) and hospital rules. Disingenuous policies ostensibly created to “protect” women are clearly designed to discourage them from obtaining a completely legal medical procedure, and serve the same purpose as the now disfavored Operation Rescue style protests. Watson calls for honest, open conversation about abortion ethics, free from misogyny, sexual shaming, and class prejudice, and insists that no one has the right to be “apolitical “ on this issue.

Cassidy (Reminders of the Changing Time) says

To see all of my book-related content, check out my blog @ <http://bit.ly/2zzVt0R>

In *Scarlet A*, Katie Watson has managed to create an incredibly accessible and comprehensive introduction to the abortion debate, both to both sides of the arguments and to the individual experiences of people who have had abortions. Because of this, I think that I would probably have gotten more out of the book if I had known absolutely nothing about the subject going into it, as it gives even the least informed a well-reasoned argument - although perhaps in such a way that some parts of it are incredibly simplistic and honestly, some of the writing feels as though it was directed at children.

But I believe, when it comes to the topic of abortion, the most important thing that people can do is to introduce new people to the argument, instead of listening to the same voices; to inform the wider community and make everyone more aware, instead of just the people who have already come into direct or indirect contact with abortion.

This is something that *Scarlet A* succeeds incredibly in, with it truly managing to break the stigma and taboo surrounding the topic, and in the future, it will be one which I will be pointing anyone who wishes to know more about abortion in the direction of.

Thanks to NetGalley and the publisher for sending me a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Head on over to <http://bit.ly/2y7JSWV> for this book, as well as all of the others featured in my reviews, complete with the added bonuses of free worldwide shipping and bringing a little joy to my life.

Valerie Brett says

This book is excellent. It could have a better subtitle; this is really all about changing how and why and about what we discuss when it comes to abortion. She lays out her book very clearly and that made a difficult topic approachable. It's a little awkward in that the audience is broad but therefore not totally defined; I think it's probably a bit challenging for the everyday reader, but also it's not an academic book. This should be read by everyone in the US, but if that's not possible, at least by politicians, doctors, and women (who unfortunately are usually left to defend themselves and their bodies). I appreciated the author sharing her own story in the epilogue but maybe that could've been a preface.

Beth A says

An amazing book; thoughtful, balanced, data-driven, measured, objective, not preachy. Regardless of whether your views are pro-choice, pro-life, pro-choice/anti-abortion, or any where in between this book clearly explains the law, ethics, and morality of ordinary abortion. The thoroughly researched book provides recommendations for more productive discussions about a constitutional right. A right that is best viewed as one in which we agree to disagree.

courtney Prior says

Argues that we should shift the abortion debate away from the rare cases (incest, health) towards the ordinary abortions that 100s of thousands of women have every year. The chapter discussing the political framing of abortions and suggesting that we frame abortion as an issue of justice really resonated with me. Also, the idea of systemic stigma that prevents providers that want to provide abortion from doing so was something I hadn't thought about.

Cara Heuser says

I'm floored by this book. As someone who has spent much time thinking about abortion and whose medical practice includes performing abortions, I thought I would read this book and see the old arguments rehashed. I was hopeful for maybe one or two insights. However, the author proposes a new paradigm for talking about this difficult topic--something with which I've been personally struggling over the last two years. Watson is clear about her position on the topic (pro-choice) but I didn't encounter any of the troubling rhetoric I've heard from "our side" in the entire book. Instead, she presents a nuanced analysis of the debate from different angles and on different plains (legal, social, ethical, etc). I've been searching for language to frame and communicate my thoughts about abortion. I'm grateful to this author for helping me on that journey.

Alexis says

Katie Watson is a lawyer and bioethicist who wants to expand our conversation about abortion. Although this book is relatively short, she manages to pack a fair number of topics into it--individual stigma, the ethics

surrounding abortion, the law, structural stigma, and conversation. Watson is pro choice, but in the ethics sections, she gives due weight to anti abortion points of view (though it's still fairly clear she rejects them).

Watson wants to split beliefs into legal vs. ethical. This is useful, to a point--one may have a personal ethical viewpoint on abortion and yet not wish to make it illegal. However, when it comes to her stated belief in pluralism, it still runs into the roadblock of people who want to make abortion illegal. While we can have a conversation about personal ethics, it's difficult to get around the legality question, and the people she talks about who advance their anti-choice beliefs as being somehow feminist don't really make a case for it.

The section on ethics is an excellent read for everyone on all sides, because she forces you to think about why you believe what you believe. Most people don't have a single ethical position, but balance different concerns, and it was personally interesting for me to do so. I do wish she would have addressed issues surrounding disability, though.

The sections on personal stigma, the abortion narrative, and structural stigma are fairly straightforwardly pro choice arguments, with an awareness of reproductive justice and the importance of social factors in women's ability to access abortion, but they are well written.

Ultimately, while her conclusion about respect for pluralism and a demand for honesty from anti-choice campaigners is logical enough, it falls a little bit flat because there's nothing new to say here, and no way to convince that segment of the population of the need to respect the beliefs of others. It may, however, be compelling to many of those who feel some conflict--that abortion should not be illegal, but that they have some issue with it.

Roberta says

From simple anecdotes to brainy ethical arguments, this book has a little something for every type of reader. For what is essentially a pro-abortion bias, the book still does a good job respecting and considering the various arguments against it, before ultimately trying to land in a pluralistic middle ground. Pluralism, while a pro-choice philosophy, tries to honor all the potential positions on the subject (and let's be honest, most of us hold "mixed" positions), while very firmly asserting that abortion is a medical and constitutional right, and the various "trojan horse" attempts to legislatively (and morally) chip away at that right are deceitful, patronizing and completely unhelpful, especially when considering that they actually increase the gestational age of a fetus prior to an abortion.

Will this book change the minds of the religious right, the "pro life feminists" and those privileged enough not to have to worry about unintended or unwanted pregnancy? No. But for the rest of us, it's a good read. The epilogue, especially, helps personalize and de-stigmatize the concept of the "ordinary abortion", of which there are hundreds of thousands in the US every year (and millions worldwide) and which should actually be made easier, not harder, for women to access and openly discuss.

Marianne says

An excellent discussion.

Nan says

Watson presents a thoughtful, fascinating discussion of the ethical issues in abortion. I have never encountered exploration of nuance in any discussion on this topic. The result is exactly what Watson set out to do - I am reflecting about my own beliefs and engaging in conversations with friends about ordinary abortion.

Deb Oestreicher says

This is really thoughtful and well argued. A great critical overview of different aspects of the national discussion about and actual experience of abortion.

Leigh says

Worth reading just for the chapter on abortion storytelling, which is brilliant. I got a bit lost in the weeds in some of the bioethics, but for the most part, it's a fascinating and surprisingly easy to follow examination of the ethics of "ordinary" abortion. Make sure to read the epilogue, which makes it clear that Katie Watson could write any kind of book she wanted to.
