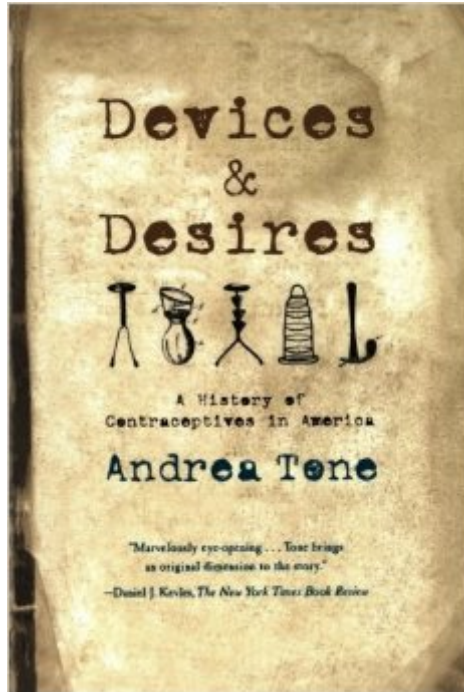


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Devices And Desires: A History Of Contraceptives In America



Synopsis

From thriving black market to big business, the commercialization of birth control in the United States. In *Devices and Desires*, Andrea Tone breaks new ground by showing what it was really like to buy, produce, and use contraceptives during a century of profound social and technological change. A down-and-out sausage-casing worker by day who turned surplus animal intestines into a million-dollar condom enterprise at night; inventors who fashioned cervical caps out of watch springs; and a mother of six who kissed photographs of the inventor of the Pill -- these are just a few of the individuals who make up this riveting story.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When I reviewed this extraordinary book for THE NATION Magazine (issue of June 11, 2001) my piece was entitled "The Secret History of Sex." It's fun to scoop the N.Y. TIMES.! The lead review in the NY Times Book Review for July 22, 2001 is also of DEVICES AND DESIRES, and is entitled "The Secret History of Birth Control." DEVICES AND DESIRES is so original, so persuasive, so meticulously researched and documented that it overrides some of our most taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs., It opens in 1873 when the Comstock law was passed in the U. S. Congress, banning both pornography and birth control devices. The new law must have made contraception known to some folks who had never heard of it before (or maybe the fact that it was banned made people think it might be fun) because birth control quickly grew into a huge bootleg industry, as popular as liquor was during prohibition, and offering many more products and options for both women and men than we have today. Some were dangerous, some were ineffective, but

others were quite good and many couples doubled up on protection, with husband and wife each using one or more methods. The birth rate in the U.S. fell by more than half from 1880-1940, even though we were later led to believe by Margaret Sanger and others that until birth control was largely taken over by doctors, (in the 1930s) it was quite scarce. You will be astonished at the documented information in this book and mesmerized by the case histories of the colorful and inventive bootleg birthcontrol entrepreneurs. Tone's exhaustive research led her- like an ace detective or shoe-leather crime reporter (she is in fact a history professor at Georgia Tech) through an eight year coast to coast investigation of Post Office Department records, Federal Trade Commission transcripts (some with decaying diaphragms and condoms glued to the pages) American Medical Association Health Fraud Archives, credit reports from 19th century Dun and Co. collections, patents, love letters, arrest records, trial records, advertisements and trade catalogues, and "entrapment letters" from Anthony Comstock and others seeking to arrest the purveyors of contraception. To me- one of the most fascinating findings in *DEVICES AND DESIRES* is simply this: As every legislator knows, you can vote a measure into law but if you don't provide funds to enforce it the measure may remain a "paper tiger" Although Congress gave lip service to Comstock's prudish ideas, most members didn't support them with sufficient enthusiasm to vote money for enforcement. The "special agents" of the Postal Service who were, by law, required to chase down contraceptives and pornography (on top of their many other preexisting duties) were fifty-nine in number (nationally!) before Comstock was passed, and after passage the number was raised to sixty-three. You do the math. This book illustrates the great divide between "conventional wisdom"- and what an unconvinced and energetic historian can unearth. We all knew that the U.S. birthrate hit an all-time low in 1940. Why didn't we ALL question how this could have happened if it was true that there wasn't any contraception?

For nearly a century, from the advent of repressive Comstockery in the 1870s to the development of The Pill in the 1950s and 1960s, the history of contraception in our national history suggests several irrefutable truths. National and state governments, ignoring the realities of consumer demand for safe and effective contraception, have unsuccessfully attempted to repress not only the creation of birth control devices but have actively engaged in suppression of information about them. Despite official opposition, a semi-covert, but vibrant underground market economy developed to satisfy the insatiable demand for methods to control sexual reproduction. Professor Andrea Tone's meticulously researched and felicitously written "Devices and Desires" is at once a survey of the technology of contraception, a political analysis of the struggle for women to obtain control over the

reproductive lives and an engaging social history of the advocates, producers and consumers of contraceptive devices over the past century and a half. Recounted through a series of analytical and chronological narratives, Professor Tone provides an interesting perspective on Anthony Comstock, whose name now symbolizes sexual prudery and repression. Tone comments that Comstock's fierce advocacy of governmental intervention and suppression of birth control contains its own class and ethnic bias. Comstock purposely ignored the fact that his most loyal supporters not only abetted, but profited from, the production of birth control devices. (Tone's exposure of Samuel Colgate's hypocrisy exemplifies this blatant double standard.) Ironically, Comstock's purported success in nationalizing repression and supposed eradication the manufacture and dissemination of birth control products and information generated a robust, underground market-driven economy centered around contraceptive devices. With large-scale industrial giants eschewing production, a fiercely competitive, unregulated industry blossomed and produced its own Horatio Alger success stories, such as that of condom-king Julius Schmid, once arrested and later lionized for the same activity. "Devices" also praises the extraordinary contributions of Margaret Sanger but notes the costs of her focus. Eventually losing her egalitarian radicalism, Sanger becomes responsible for the conversion of birth control from a market-generated phenomenon to a medically-controlled activity. Though she succeeds in legitimizing contraception, Sanger inadvertently works to narrow the range of women who could obtain access to the very services and products she so desperately wanted to make accessible to all women. Tone's history contains numerous wise and unexpected observations about the political and social impact of the battle to make birth control legal. Chapters detailing the controversial development of oral contraceptives and the re-emergence of the IUD help underscore the essential tensions of birth control in a nation where women consistently demand a safe-reliable product but their government sorely lags behind clear public consensus. This tension between technological ability and restricted social access to education and product results in our country's staggering rate of unwanted pregnancies. Professor Tone's spirited history suggests that the history of contraception in the United States has many chapters yet to be written.

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