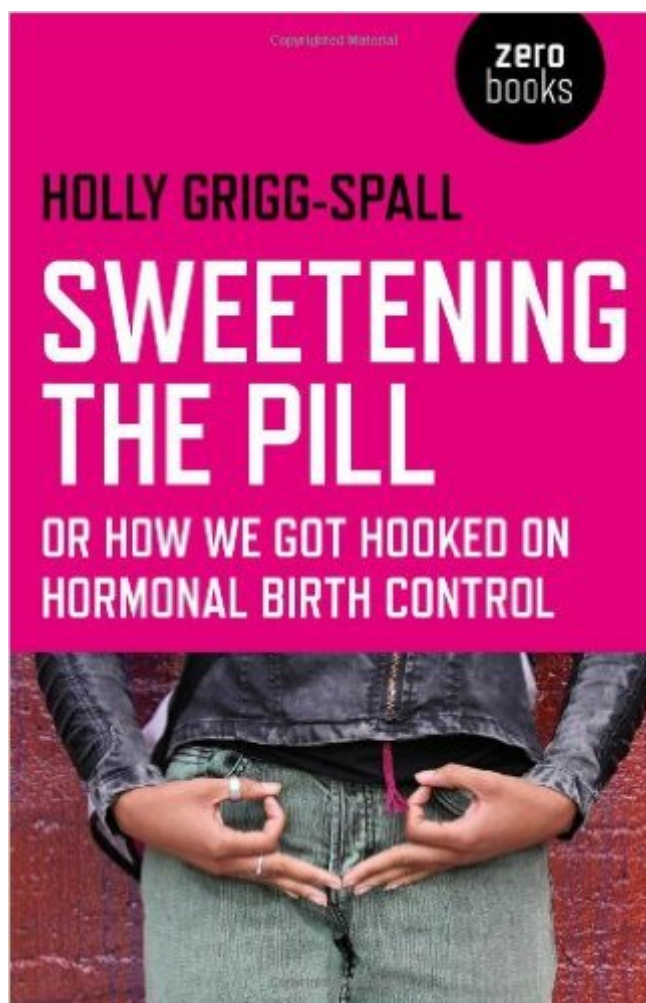


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Sweetening The Pill: Or How We Got Hooked On Hormonal Birth Control



Synopsis

Millions of healthy women take a powerful medication every day from their mid-teens to menopause - the Pill - but few know how this drug works or the potential side effects. Contrary to cultural myth, the birth-control pill impacts on every organ and function of the body, and yet most women do not even think of it as a drug. Depression, anxiety, paranoia, rage, panic attacks - just a few of the effects of the Pill on half of the over 80% of women who pop these tablets during their lifetimes. When the Pill was released, it was thought that women would not submit to taking a medication each day when they were not sick. Now the Pill is making women sick. However, there are a growing number of women looking for non-hormonal alternatives for preventing pregnancy. In a bid to spark the backlash against hormonal contraceptives, this book asks: Why can't we criticize the Pill?

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Customer Reviews

Back when my husband was in medical school, his pharmacology textbook listed seven full pages of adverse side effects associated with oral contraceptive use, including:- heart attacks- strokes- liver tumors- blood clots- gall bladder disease- migraine headaches- depression- loss of vision- urinary tract infections- yeast infections- weight gain- thyroid problems- high blood sugar- as well as an increased risk of infertility, miscarriage, and birth defects even after discontinuing use of the Pill. That was enough to convince us we made the right decision when, as newlyweds, we opted to forgo hormonal contraceptives three years (and two babies) earlier. Yet when we shared this information with family and friends, they remained skeptical. If the Pill were really that

unsafe, they reasoned, then doctors wouldn't prescribe it. Fast forward 25 years, and we're still having those same discussions. That's why my husband recently bought me a copy of *Sweetening the Pill: How We Got Hooked on Hormonal Birth Control*. The author, Holly Grigg-Spall, writes from an ultra-liberal, pro-abortion, anti-Christian, doctor-bashing, communist-sympathizing, sexually-licentious radical feminist perspective. In other words, she is my ideological opposite. Yet on one point we can emphatically agree: that there are compelling reasons to reject hormonal contraceptives that have nothing to do with religion. I found the book refreshing (despite the author's rather one-dimensional representation of folks like me who do not share her political agenda). It asks questions that desperately need to be asked, discussed, and answered. Plus, it's chock full of interesting (and oftentimes harrowing) statistics:-

- Today eighty percent of women will take the birth control pill at some point during their lifetimes. (p.25)-
- In the US, half of all women under the age of 25 are currently using the Pill. (p.26)-
- The Pill significantly lowers a woman's libido sometimes irreversibly so, since the impact on testosterone levels is permanent. (p. 50)-
- Using hormonal contraceptives greatly increases a woman's risk for developing many life-threatening conditions, including heart disease and breast, cervical, and liver cancers. (p. 60)-
- Recent research shows that if a woman starts taking the Pill before she turns twenty her risk of developing breast cancer in later life is doubled. (p. 60)-
- Birth control pills represent a \$22 billion a year industry with approximately sixty brands on the market. (pp. 112-113)

Interestingly, Grigg-Spall and some of the authors she quotes have run into the same argument my husband and I got back when he was in med school: People (mistakenly) believe the FDA wouldn't have approved hormonal contraceptives if they weren't safe. She answers that objection by pointing to the money trail. In her mind, the Pill is a conspiracy to pad the pockets of physicians and pharmaceutical companies, to keep women in the workforce, and to bolster our consumer-driven economy. Granted, some of those factors probably do come into play. But I don't think you can fully understand our society's unhealthy addiction to birth control without taking into account its general prejudice against children and aversion to unplanned pregnancies. Just as cancer patients routinely submit to chemotherapy, despite the fact it saps their strength, leaves them nauseous, and makes their hair fall out, because they consider the alternative (letting the cancer grow unchecked until it kills them) completely unacceptable, so our society is willing to assume the high risks associated with hormonal contraceptives, because the alternative (conceiving and carrying a baby until it is time to deliver) is seen as something to be avoided at all costs. These days,

an unplanned pregnancy is about as welcome as a cancer diagnosis. As long as this is our attitude toward babies, doctors will continue to prescribe the Pill, and women will continue to take it, regardless of the risks.

In the first ten pages, Holly Grigg-Spall delivers an impassioned description of *The Problem*, told from personal experience: While Taking Yaz/Yasmin, she thought she was losing her mind. Her sanity, her work as a writer, and, she thought, everything she held dear was collapsing. In delving into the problem with a trusted girlfriend, a doctor who did not dismiss her concerns, groundbreaking books, her then-boyfriend now-husband, and women that had taken to the Internet to air their personal stories, Ms. Grigg-Spall realized that Yaz was wreaking havoc with her body and mind--and yet, even after stopping it for good, the allure of the Pill beckoned. To be blunt, Ms. Grigg-Spall has plenty of attitude, wit, and insight and spares no one in the birth control debate--population control advocates, capitalism, our warped commercialized view of sexuality, the patriarchy, pharmaceutical companies, the religious right, the Pill evangelical feminists on the Left who silence any criticism of the Pill's and in particular Yaz's serious emotional and physical side effects. It is refreshing to see Ms. Grigg-Spall take on all comers and argue for a portrait of women that isn't perfect, that allows, nay, encourages dissent. There is a lot to criticize about this drug, Yaz, and hormonal BC as well and the way cultural icons "Om NOM NOM" the Pill and Yaz in particular. The labyrinthine daisy-chain forged by the pharmaceutical companies, society, eugenics, the culture, the success treadmill, even other women (!) gets skewered and dissected here. "Who am I when I'm not on the pill?" This is a question the author asks herself. She also comes to the conclusion that she, like many women, is still discovering who she is off birth control, which she took for ten years, including the infamous Yaz, because she became dependent on it. Who the author is now is a fearless, dynamic, take-no-prisoners, yet compassionate voice. She may upset the sexual and social apple cart, but speaking as a Yaz survivor who loathes this drug and distrusts hormonal contraception in general, I think it is long overdue. The women that have actually lost relationships, jobs, marriages, their own self-worth, and even more, the sense of self that is sacred, to say nothing of their health and wellbeing, while on this drug have been ignored because their stories are 'anecdotal,' treated with all the respect of an email hoax or an urban legend 'old wives' tale'. I would actually have liked more women's stories in the book, and another helping of the author herself. The scholarly and meticulous research and cultural trends are important but, true to the author's contention that we need to listen to women's actual experiences, the stories give faces and life to the research. This is an important book because it also gives a roadmap for women that are

wondering where they go from considering the pill, taking the Pill, getting off the pill, rediscovering the reason for their menses. I for one had never been all that enamored with my period (except when it worked), but now I come to understand the reason for ovulation: keeping our fluids in balance, keeping our bodies in balance, whether we have children or not. As much of a hassle as menstruation is, it's better than being silenced and not having someone love you for who you are. It is better than taking a pill that promises to cure PMDD but makes you feel worse. Is it desirable for women to make themselves sick by eliminating their own hormonal balance--and in so doing, alter their own characters? Those who say 'biology is not destiny' have no idea of how hormones, proteins, our brains, and our beautifully interlinked systems work. Why is it anti-feminist to say that we shouldn't just put young women on birth control? Why is it anti-feminist to say that Yaz was marketed in a misleading way, which the FDA agrees with? Why are we automatically labeled as abetting the Religious Right (Ms. Grigg-Spall is correct when she says both sides have botched the debate) if we question whether the Pill is healthy? Why does the pro-Pill lobby automatically dismiss women who have major depression on the pill that disrupts their life badly so that they cannot function and in some cases self-harm or attempt suicide (such as Autumn Plevniak, who tragically succeeded while on a cocktail of Yaz and Accutane), even if they have had no prior history of depression (or even if they have!), as "well, she's a headcase anyway, it works for me, it's her fault"? The pro-pill lobby blames the woman, too. The eco-feminists, those who believe that the domination of women is connected to the domination of nature, campaign for everything else that betters our health and our planet such as organic everything, natural cotton tampons, cage-free and free-range and hormone-free chickens, pigs, and cows, a vegetarian or vegan diet, cleaning products from Whole Foods, products that haven't been tested on animals, and so many causes. Why, then, do they cheerfully accept that pumping our bodies full of hormones we don't need (and that in the case of drospirenone are especially toxic), no questions asked, to change our cycles and change who we are (silencing us) is as unacceptable as hormone-sick cattle, chickens, and pigs? Are we worth less than cattle? Why will we avoid white sugar, bad cholesterol and bad fats but pump hormones in our bodies that not only have no health value but are detrimental? Why don't we demand a higher standard of care from the men in our lives (the book notes that Japan, which gives us blow-up dolls and manga with big-eyed childlike women in schoolgirl uniforms, demands that men use condoms to show their devotion to their partner)? Ms. Grigg-Spall's then-boyfriend and now husband (and the other supportive husbands and boyfriends I have read of) had the sense to understand what was going on--in his case, he could see a connection between his battle with cigarettes and her battle with the Pill. (Thumbs up to him.) As Marilyn Monroe once said, "[I]f you

can't handle me at my worst, then you sure as hell don't deserve me at my best."There is another aspect to the Pill. It silences conversation between men and women about sex, about taking care of each other, about being able to express our needs and our desires and our concerns. If you want to get a sense of who your partner is, buy this book and give it to him. If it starts an honest conversation and he is concerned about you (and your children if you have them), he's okay. SWEETENING THE PILL has opened the debate (although there is no debate for me), which is what we needed. It also makes the thought provoking point that we allow ourselves to be controlled by others' expectations, sometimes with life-changing consequences. Finally, those who criticize what women have suffered while on Yaz or on other birth control pills with drospirenone or pills that deliver four periods a year have no clue what it is like to have your sense of self violated, your creativity stifled, your personality altered, blood clots, strokes, major depression, and all the life-threatening conditions.

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