



Hearts of Wisdom

Emily K. Abel

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The image of the female caregiver holding a midnight vigil at the bedside of a sick relative is so firmly rooted in our collective imagination we might assume that such caregiving would have attracted the scrutiny of numerous historians. As Emily Abel demonstrates in this groundbreaking study of caregiving in America across class and ethnic divides and over the course of ninety years, this has hardly been the case.

While caring for sick and disabled family members was commonplace for women in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America, that caregiving, the caregivers' experience of it, and the medical profession's reaction to it took diverse and sometimes unexpected forms. A complex series of historical changes, Abel shows, has profoundly altered the content and cultural meaning of care. *Hearts of Wisdom* is an immersion into that "world of care." Drawing on antebellum slave narratives, white farm women's diaries, and public health records, Abel puts together a multifaceted picture of what caregiving meant to American women--and what it cost them--from the pre-Civil War years to the brink of America's entry into the Second World War. She shows that caregiving offered women an arena in which experience could be parlayed into expertise, while at the same time the revolution in bacteriology and the transformation of the formal health care system were weakening women's claim to that expertise.

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Reviews of this book:

This excellent historical review of female caregiving within families as a transformative experience identifies conditions that make this form of human connectedness rewarding and meaningful.

--J.E. Thompson, Choice

This is a breathtaking work in terms of its depth and its breadth. Emily Abel's research is impressive in its time frame, wide range of topics, and wonderful source material. What she has given us, for the first time, is a full-length study of the female support network, not only for childbirth but for a whole range of health issues. With her pleasing writing style and clear, readable prose, she gives us much more than mere glimpses of anonymous people--she provides the reader with a sense of the texture of human lives.

--Susan L. Smith, University of Alberta

The reader of *Hearts of Wisdom* is surprised by the topic and content, but is left with the sense that the most central story of human possibility has been left out of all other history books. The work offers a substantive contribution to history, feminist scholarship, caregiving professions, and informal caregivers.

--Patricia Benner, R.N., Ph.D, University of California, San Francisco

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