

## Abortion: The Heart of a Struggle

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Magda Denes has performed a significant service for all who have tried to understand or to comment on abortion without taking it seriously as a particular and concrete human event. In *In Necessity and Sorrow: Life and Death in an Abortion Hospital* (Basic Books; 247 pp.; \$10.00) she reports with unadorned directness on how the patients and the staff she interviews (and she herself as a researcher-observer) describe the situations out of which abortions arise. The actual states and experiences of the women undergoing abortion and the clinical details of various abortion procedures put the lie to any attempt to see abortion theoretically and abstractly as being, first of all, a conflict of moral values. Of course abortion involves such a conflict, and most of Denes's subjects and Denes herself are on some level painfully aware of this. But what Denes's book makes so overwhelmingly clear is that in the actual situation of an abortion—or at least in the setting she chooses to examine—the encounter with conflicting values is in many ways secondary to the encounter with questioning, crying, sweating, bleeding, cursing, frightened, and frustrated persons. This fact neither lessens nor resolves the conflict of values. In fact, it is finally unclear to me—and perhaps to Denes—precisely how the experiences she records do relate to the conflict of values. At the very least they say that, whatever else it is, abortion is most often a wrenching human experience.

There are three distinct elements in the book, which require separate comment. The central element on which all else rests is the interviews Denes conducted with the patients, their families and lovers, and the staff (social workers, messengers and orderlies, as well as doctors and nurses) of an "abortion hospital" operating in New York State during the period when abortion was legal in New York but was prohibited or severely restricted in the rest of the country. With the legalization of abortion in New York this small private hospital expanded from 4,500 patients one year to 22,000 the next, with 98 per cent of the latter checked in for abortions.

The book clearly rests on the interviews. They have the compelling immediacy and urgency we expect and find in most human conflicts that we are permitted to view from the inside. Although Denes more than once comments on her uneasiness, even her inadequacy as an interviewer, she secured interviews that appear

uninhibited and honest—or at least as honest as such situations permit. They are not, however, interviews of great depth. Few of them are five pages long, and most are half that. While these are no doubt edited versions, in few cases do we find a real wrestling with the deeper conflicts that the reader senses are often present. There is some of this in the comments of the doctors who struggle with what they suspect might be a prostitution, a betrayal, or even a perversion of their skills and profession. But in general the interviews tend toward repetition, moving on a fairly superficial level of "Yes, I do feel some conflict. It is too bad about the fetus. But you see, I really have no choice because...." The "because's" differ. But almost invariably they fall within a soon predictable spectrum of human dilemmas arising from cruelty, indifference, ignorance, passivity, exploitation, insensitivity, or simple frivolousness.

Even if the interviews are repetitious and move on a rather immediate and simple level, this may not be Denes's fault; nor does it mean that the interviews themselves are to that extent worthless. If this is the level on which most participants understand and articulate what they are involved in, then we should know that. At the very least such knowledge should keep us from discussing abortion as though the persons involved are trained psychologists, moral philosophers, or even just wise, sensitive, and reflective persons.

A second element in the book is Denes's description of the hospital, the routines, the staff, the patients and their families. This is perhaps a necessary setting of mood and tone for the reader to understand the interviews. But its quality is spotty, and not infrequently it gets in the way of her major task. Sometimes helpful and effective, at other times the description is too extended and borders on self-conscious artistry. More puzzling, given Denes's generally compassionate response to her subjects, is the occasional inclusion of unnecessary, even unkind details—the patient's fat, dirty knees, the female technician's full beard, the doctor whose niceness costs him his manhood, or, most disturbing, an extended description of the "cackle of huge, overweight, formidable women" who make up the clerical staff. It is hard to locate Denes's purpose in such remarks.

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Finally, Denes gives her reflective responses to the material and to her own experiences in gathering it. These sometimes focus on abortion itself, but more often move toward reflections on the human condition as such, or the female condition of which, according to Denes, abortion is only one revealing facet. Again the quality is spotty. Often she should have said either more or less. At times the brevity of some of the comments coupled with occasional awkwardnesses of style left me uncertain of her point. But there are some nice touches here—the parable on the “paradise of one-sidedness” she experiences on donning surgical gloves for the first time, of being able to touch, to handle, to gather information without herself being exposed, or her musings on seeing the aborted fetus of one of her interviewees in a bucket awaiting incineration: “This is Master Atkins—to be burned tomorrow—who died like a hero to save his mother’s life. Might he have become someday the only one to truly love her? The only one to mourn her death?”

The last passage will suggest to some that this is an antiabortion document. It is not. In the prologue Denes reveals that she had an abortion and refers to herself as a “proabortionist with a bad secular conscience.” What then is the book’s message or meaning? What are the criteria by which we are to assess it?

Denes is Clinical Professor, Supervisor, and Training Analyst at the Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies at Adelphi University and at New York University. But she appears not to offer this as a psychological work. True, we do glimpse some of the intriguing workings of the human psyche, and occasionally Denes makes them explicit in brief comments. But in general they are very brief and relatively obvious, even to the psychologically untrained.

The work is even less a sociological analysis. The hospital is private, serving mostly white but not wealthy patients. It flourished in a situation sustained for a brief period by the difference between New York State’s laws and those of the rest of the country; and, as she reveals in an intriguing epilogue, it died with the passing of that anomalous situation. There are no grounds for saying that what she observes here is typical in the sense that careful sociological analysis would require.

Finally, it is not a moral treatise on abortion, at least not in any usual sense. True, much of her concern about abortion is a moral concern: She is intensely aware of what is being done to all the persons involved here—and that is the substance of morality. She reveals in the interviews some interest in the usual moral questions of the justification of our choices, the balancing of competing goods or rights, questions of motivation, and so forth. Unfortunately, however, her statements on such matters are not always made with sufficient care. For example, concerning saline induction she simply pronounces that “There is no way to say that this is not a type of murder.” She strikes something of a balance when she follows that statement with, “And yet, there is no way to say that it would not

be just as surely murder, more cold and vengeful, to force little Flo to give birth to her bastard.” But the uncritical, or at least undefended, use of the label of “murder” remains regrettable. In characterizing the abortion conflict she speaks several times of situations of life against life, of the question of which life will be sacrificed. But that is rarely the case in abortions, and never in any of the situations Denes portrays. It is only three pages from the end of the book that she states this crucial matter correctly: “This is the heart of this struggle. The quality of life pitted against life.” This is an important difference to which she might have been more attentive.

In a larger sense the work is a thoroughly moral statement aimed not so much at abortion as such but at the ways persons treat one another and themselves. On this level the total situation is best summarized by Big Daddy’s reference in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to the “strong smell of mendacity.” One wants to cry out, “Is there an honest person in the house?” And Denes is not self-righteous here. For example, she admits to referring to herself as “doctor” to gain privileges the Ph.D. does not grant. “Above all,” she writes, “this is a document on the evasions, multifaceted, clever, and shameful, by which we all live and die.” Of course there are efforts made to see the truth clearly and to deal with it. They are perhaps not always honest or sustained, but at least they show that we are not entirely fooled by our own subterfuges. Perhaps the most vivid such effort to confront an uncomfortable truth in the book is that of a doctor who comments: “There is another little thing which I’ve never read about or discussed with anyone else. But on a number of occasions with the [saline injection] needle, I have harpooned the fetus. I can feel the fetus move at the end of the needle just like you have a fish hooked on a line.” Is it any wonder that he and his colleagues hide from the truth by remaining silent about this “little thing”?

Denes’s purpose or message, then, is not to offer a psychological or sociological analysis, nor to take a moral stand for or against abortion. Yet, while her points must be stated separately, they do form a unified whole. Most broadly she argues that to be human is to face dilemmas and to suffer. We should acknowledge that fact, admit that we hurt, and face those hurts honestly but without the illusion that we can banish them. With reference to abortion her points are several: that unwanted pregnancies are not *the* problem but are the outcome of complex human situations that will not be set right by an abortion, although an abortion may prevent some further complications; that abortion should be available to all in as humane, as compassionate, and as supportive a setting as possible with all the remaining legal, moral, and financial obstacles to it removed; and—and it is here that Denes may lose her “liberal” audience—that it is only after such unnecessary, even peripheral cares and obstacles are removed from abortion that we will be able to see clearly the real meaning of the dilemma, even the tragedy, that abortion is; that it is at its very heart “a human event of great sorrow and terrible necessity.”