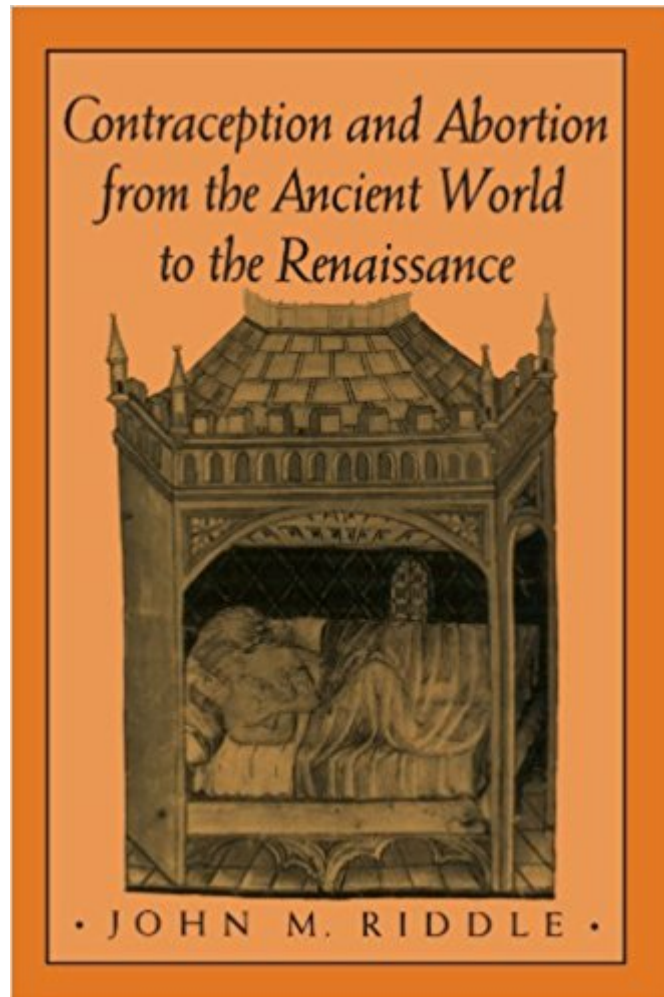


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Contraception And Abortion From The Ancient World To The Renaissance



Synopsis

John Riddle uncovers the obscure history of contraception and abortifacients from ancient Egypt to the seventeenth century with forays into Victorian England--a topic that until now has evaded the pens of able historians. Riddle's thesis is, quite simply, that the ancient world did indeed possess effective (and safe) contraceptives and abortifacients. The author maintains that this rich body of knowledge about fertility control--widely held in the ancient world--was gradually lost over the course of the Middle Ages, becoming nearly extinct by the early modern period. The reasons for this he suggests, stemmed from changes in the organization of medicine. As university medical training became increasingly important, physicians' ties with folk traditions were broken. The study of birth control methods was just not part of the curriculum. In an especially telling passage, Riddle reveals how Renaissance humanists were ill equipped to provide accurate translations of ancient texts concerning abortifacients due to their limited experience with women's ailments. Much of the knowledge about contraception belonged to an oral culture--a distinctively female-centered culture. From ancient times until the seventeenth century, women held a monopoly on birthing and the treatment of related matters; information passed from midwife to mother, from mother to daughter. Riddle reflects on the difficulty of finding traces of oral culture and the fact that the little existing evidence is drawn from male writers who knew that culture only from a distance. Nevertheless, through extraordinary scholarly sleuthing, the author pieces together the clues and evaluates the scientific merit of these ancient remedies in language that is easily understood by the general reader. His findings will be useful to anyone interested in learning whether it was possible for premodern people to regulate their reproduction without resorting to the extremities of dangerous surgical abortions, the killing of infants, or the denial of biological urges.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press; Revised ed. edition (January 1, 1994)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674168763

ISBN-13: 978-0674168763

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.6 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (10 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #480,113 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #94 in Â Books > Politics & Social

Sciences > Women's Studies > Abortion & Birth Control #870 inÂ Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Sexual Health > General #1365 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Social Services & Welfare

Customer Reviews

Looking for information about birth control options is frustrating. This book tantalizes the reader with the possibilities but unfortunately, as the author points out, it is impossible to find real methods without trial and error, which is not an acceptable risk for most of us! It is fascinating to learn that birth control was possible even before vulcanized rubber and the pill, and there are possibilities out there that haven't been touched by the medical community. This book and its companion (Eve's Herbs) are well worth reading and I recommend them to anyone interested in not only family planning of the ancients' but also the history of the western world's attitude toward fertility, especially contraception and abortion. Physicians especially could learn a lot from this book.

John Riddle provides a comprehensive and compelling examination of contraception and abortion through history. An excellent reference, and the only source that shows the historical underpinnings of the contraceptive and abortive agents we use today. Fern Reiss (fernreiss@aol.com), author of "The Infertility Diet: Get Pregnant and Prevent Miscarriage"

This book is very clinical and dry, but does provide an accurate depiction of women throughout the ages and their efforts to control nature.

This is a fine reference book for botanists, pharmacists, academics, writers, and, I suppose, those who want to make the point that abortion and contraception have been around a long, long time. It is clearly written, if a little disorganized, and recipes are given, though the reader is well advised NOT TO TRY THIS AT HOME.

I read Eve's Herbs, which was a stunning glimpse into the pharmaceutical and medical history of contraception and abortion in the Western world. But this book goes much deeper in time with a good comparison of cultures in ancient civilization and details the fact that medical texts which provided contraceptive recipes were also found in other cultures. I tend to wish I read this book before Eve's Herbs. However, this is still a good book for pharmacists, physicians, herbalists, botanists, pharmacognocists, and others who are curious about herbs as well as curious about the

medical underpinnings of women's health ethics and practices. I wanted to learn of women's history. But no other book or approach vindicated and validated women's original wisdom.

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