

New book examines how college students practiced motherhood on orphaned babies

November 7 2014, by Marc Ransford

The long forgotten practice of using infants from orphanages as "practice babies" in college home economics classes has been rediscovered in a new e-book by a Ball State University professor.

"Borrowed Babies: Apprenticing for Motherhood," written by Jill Christman, a Ball State English professor, examines how most American land grant colleges used "borrowed" infants as teaching tools, while prepping the little ones for adoption.

Through Christman's focus on the first baby to enter Cornell University's program in 1920—Dickey Domecon—readers learn about the common 20th-century practice of using real babies in homemaking apartments. Christman spent hundreds of hours combing through the archives at Cornell, in Ithaca, New York, and "Borrowed Babies" features an interview with one of the "practice mothers" who lived in the practice apartment with a baby when she was an undergraduate in the home economics program.

"I first found out about this in a fiction writing workshop in graduate school and was amazed that I had never heard about these babies," Christman said. "I went to the archives looking for muckraking, or maybe even a love story, and came out with something completely different.

"I found out that practice babies weren't something colleges and universities were hiding. More likely, the programs were discontinued

after attachment theory came along—maybe having lots of mothers wasn't better than one mother—and then it just wasn't something we talked about. Most land grant colleges and universities had this option to help their undergraduate students practice mothercraft, or the science of motherhood.

"They were teaching women how to run a home, including how to throw a dinner party, bake a pie, do the laundry—and take care of the baby. That's why they needed to get babies."

Strict and strange rules for mothering

What the practice mothers were told to do might appear odd to young 21st century parents.

"The women in the home economics programs were taught strict rules about mothering the children," Christman said. "They weren't allowed to hold a crying infant because it would coddle them. Crying was considered good exercise for the baby. These were the days of rickets. So cod liver oil was a daily supplement, and the babies napped outside, even in the Ithaca winter.

"I went in imagining brokenhearted practice mothers bonding with their temporary charges, but through my research, I came to realize that these were undergraduates who wanted to go out on a Friday night and they couldn't do that when it was their turn to take care of the baby. They liked the baby, but he was kind of a pain, and in most ways the practice apartment was just another class."

That said, it wasn't all bad for the babies. When the [babies](#) got too old to be useful in the practice homes, there was a long list of potential adoptive parents who wanted a baby who had been "raised by the book" in these homemaking laboratories.

Expecting a child

The initial research and interviews for the book took place during the summer Christman was several months pregnant with her own first child. She didn't want to go to New York to start the project: "I wanted to stay home, be pregnant, eat crackers and feel sorry for myself, but I forced myself."

In the book, she looks inward to examine how her journey into motherhood would unfold against the backdrop of the practice apartments.

"I want the book to be valuable to readers both for the history it reveals and for the big question it asks: What does it mean to become a mother?" she said. "I'm hoping this question will resonate with readers—and that I wasn't the only one who had this question!"

Christman's book was released in September 2014 by Shebooks, a publisher of high quality nonfiction and fiction by women in e-books that can be read in one sitting.

Provided by Ball State University

Citation: New book examines how college students practiced motherhood on orphaned babies (2014, November 7) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-11-college-students-motherhood-orphaned-babies.html>

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