

Understanding Reproductive Loss: Perspectives on Life, Death and Fertility

Sarah Earle, Carol Komaromy, and Linda Layne, eds.
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In *Understanding Reproductive Loss: Perspectives on Life, Death and Fertility*, editors Sarah Earle, Carol Komaromy, and Linda Layne offer an interdisciplinary, transnational examination of different experiences of reproductive failures and loss, countering the near-exclusive focus of research on human reproduction on reproductive success. The chapters in *Understanding Reproductive Loss* will prove useful to scholars and medical practitioners alike. The collection's insights also contribute to the growing body of literature on nontraditional family formation at a moment of significant shifts in (Western) understandings of normative kin and family formations. Collectively, the chapters imagine and situate new modes of kinship unique to the twenty-first century; as Linda Layne argues: "members of the pregnancy loss support movement are forging new forms of families and ... their efforts to do so can best be understood in the context of other emerging family including single mothers by choice, two-mom and two-dad families, surrogate mothers, and new figurations of older forms of family formations such as adoption" (138).

Understanding Reproductive Loss engages with a wide range of topics and perspectives, utilizing multiple disciplinary approaches, including oral histories, cyberethnographies, and interviews. The editors' aim is to highlight the diversity and fluidity of experience in the realm of reproductive failures without hierarchicalizing the various losses as more or less traumatic, more or less serious. The first seven chapters accordingly analyze the loss of normative reproductive expectations, like infertility, involuntary childlessness, involuntary sterilization, the impact of cancer treatments on fertility, and complications during pregnancy like preeclampsia and diabetes, as well as different experiences of miscarriage, including those diagnosed during a sonogram and those sustained by surrogates.

The collection simultaneously focuses extensively (nine of the sixteen chapters) on the topic of stillbirth, making it particularly useful to scholars and practitioners interested in this form of reproductive loss. This approach provides a multi-faceted look at stillbirth that explores cultural reactions to it in Australia, Belgium, Cameroon, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States that enables the editors to present the perspectives of a number

of actors involved in the reproductive experience, including the parents, midwives and nurses, and grandparents, thereby underscoring the social nature of reproductive loss. It also creates a nuanced concept of “babyhood,” blurring the lines between antenatal and post-partum existence. Further, the variety of perspectives helps to demonstrate that not all reproductive failures prompt unalloyed grief or feelings of loss; the multiple explorations of stillbirth capture the range of emotional responses to this common pregnancy outcome.

The choice to focus so deeply on stillbirth consequently leaves some significant lacunae in the forms of reproductive loss considered. Other topics that beg further study include maternal mortalities, including death in childbirth; prenatal diagnoses of fetal abnormalities; birth experiences that do not follow the mother’s plan; fathers’ experiences of reproductive loss, including loss of custody and their experience of abortion. One chapter even opens with an anecdote about a young woman about to give birth to a baby she will reluctantly give up for adoption, but none of the chapters actually analyzes this form of reproductive loss. The introduction sketches out a preliminary understanding of reproductive loss, but, given the ground-breaking nature of this collection, deeper theorization of such loss ought to have been included. Additionally, as several contributors note, the prevailing academic discourse of reproductive loss is still highly hetero-normative in its assumptions; while some of the chapters in this collection break free of this shortcoming, a number do not, and further consideration of the impact of sexuality and sexual orientation on the experience of reproductive loss is needed. A minor weakness of the collection is the number of distracting typos. Ultimately, though, these critiques do not diminish the significant contributions that this collection makes to our understanding of women’s experiences of reproductive failures.

Taken together, the essays tie attitude changes toward the treatment and management of grief stemming from unsuccessful reproductive efforts to larger social evolutions in acceptance of public expressions of grief, as contributor Kate Woodthorpe suggests. Overall, *Understanding Reproductive Loss: Perspectives on Life, Death, and Fertility* begins to unpack some of the complexities that women experience when their reproductive efforts do not follow the hetero-normative normalized script that Western societies have come to privilege as the presumed outcome of all pregnancies. It gives voice to those previously silenced and offers insight into their experience for scholars researching these aspects of reproduction and practitioners caring for the women who experience reproductive loss.