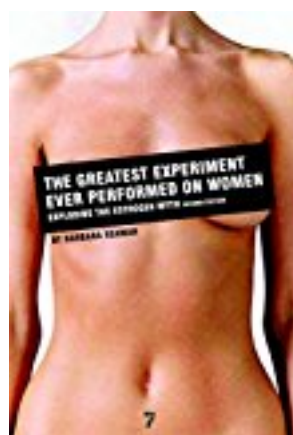


GENERAL TOPICS



Review - The Greatest Experiment Ever Performed on Women

Exploding the Estrogen Myth

by Barbara Seaman
Seven Stories Press,
2009

Review by Cecile
Lawrence

Gloria Steinem is alleged to have described the author of *The Greatest Experiment Ever Performed on Women* (2003), Barbara Seaman, as "the first prophet of the women's health movement." From her mid-twenties, Seaman spent her entire career, until her death in 2008 of lung cancer, writing about problems with how women were treated by the U.S. medical system, especially when it came to their hormones. She blazed upon the national consciousness with her incriminating first book *The Doctor's Case Against the Pill*, published in 1969. Thirty-four years later, Seaman's fierce advocacy for the particular needs of women in a male-oriented medical culture still shone brightly.

In *The Greatest Experiment Ever Performed Upon Women*, Seaman presents a wealth of evidence of the misuse and misunderstanding of the role of estrogen in a woman's body over her lifespan. She uses the feminist technique of interspersing narratives of individual women's lives in tandem with laying out chapter and verse of the decade after decade of experimentation upon women, done, from Seaman's perspective, either out of arrogance and/or inexcusable ignorance. Amongst the chief perpetrators of the series of almost criminal behaviors are pharmaceutical companies.

In her words, her purpose in writing this book was to arm women with the information they need in order to resist and to fight back. Inferred is the message that women, in order not to lose their health or their lives, and no matter how meek and quiet they may have been acculturated into being, they must perforce become militant activists. It is not

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enough to have the knowledge and information, as crucial as those ingredients are, women must also act to protect not just themselves but the entire female half of the human race. Seaman perceives the situation to be nothing less than a war on women through their subjection to dangerous hormones, "for the sole purpose of increasing the wealth of drug companies, akin to the attack on Pearl Harbor."

Her underlying premises go to the very heart of what it means to be a woman in a society that, in spite of advances, continues to maintain many of the trappings of patriarchy. In the general culture, estrogen is associated with the female although both genders have varying amounts of all the sex hormones. One bizarre example of this association is the existence of a company selling women's cycling, running, and fitness apparel having the name TeamEstrogen©. With this association came the notion, including in the medical profession, that a higher level of estrogen can be a good thing as it feminizes and increases fertility, e.g. bigger breasts, as well as a bad thing if it gets in the way of male lives and capitalist productivity, e.g. premenstrual syndrome. Therefore, according to Seaman, and others, for the good of women and humanity, the estrogen levels of women have to be monitored and manipulated. Seaman, over and over, advocates for the precautionary principle, while railing against the dominance of the management of risk precept, because sex hormones, including or especially estrogen, are too complex with so many unknowns that to prescribe or to inject them into bodies constitutes dangerous experimentation.

Considering the tone and premises of this book, a better title might have been *The Most Dangerous Experiment* . . . or something other than "Greatest" but perhaps that was the publisher's decision so as not to scare away potential readers, even though there's a disconnect between "greatest" and "performed upon."

And "performed upon" is truly what Seaman means as, at one point, she compares the products invented for administration, including from the sex organs of animals, to treating women as laboratory rats. Seaman dissects the poor understanding of hot flashes, of menopause, of the deleterious effects of hysterectomy, which used to often include removal of the ovaries. She goes into extensive and detailed descriptions of the experiments done by the Nazis upon women in concentration camps, easily leading the reader to infer that what was being done to women in the U.S. in the 20th century was not much different. She excoriates what she describes as the callous attitudes of some researchers even when faced with the evidence of the dangers of birth control pills and estrogen replacement "therapy" for women going through menopause. She delves into the role of U.S. birth control researchers in "pressuring poor women in public housing in Puerto Rico to be subjected to dosages ten times higher than in use today," drawing a link between Auschwitz and the Rio Pedras housing projects. In relating a long series of acts, which she clearly regards as crimes, at times she interjects personal comments such as "I began to wonder if it was the doctors, not the patients, who might need head exams." For those oriented towards "pure" science, this might be a drawback, while for others these inserts brings to life the kind of outraged response Seaman seems to be demanding from her readers. The story of Rio Pedras continues to be carried in Puerto Rican culture, although in the 21st century with its distractions, younger Puerto Ricans might not be so strong in this race memory.

Relevant to current events in the early part of the 21st century are her analyses of the start of what she calls the control of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (F.D.A.) and the legislators in Washington D.C. by the pharmaceutical cartel (her term), what activists now call Big Pharma. She names names. Seaman also describes what she calls the complicity of women in promoting the very drugs that have the potential to maim and kill them. So much of what she describes would resonate with the history of the subjection of African-Americans and the existence of internalized racism.

Some of the flaws of this book involve areas of disjointedness where Seaman takes the reader back and forth in time, possibly leading to confusion as to who did what and when, but I have no problem with excusing Seaman as the issues are very complex. There's little to no chance of the reader of this book being bored but, just in case, I would recommend a short run through those sections where Seaman relates astounding and infuriating anecdotes of the actions and statements of physicians.

This book would play a valuable role in an undergraduate course in the

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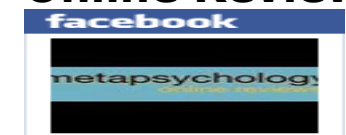
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history of women's health in the U.S. as well as being worthy for helping women understand how they have been used and abused by the interrelationships between the medical, the pharmaceutical and the legislative. As increasing amounts of evidence point to our entire environment having become deeply saturated with endocrine disrupting chemicals, hormones in our food, birth control pill residues being found in our drinking water, we need a new Barbara Seaman to continue her valuable work in fervent information collection, confrontation, dissemination and advocacy.

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