

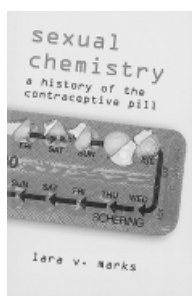
Playing It Safe

Sexual Chemistry. A History of the Contraceptive Pill. By *Lara V. Marks*. Yale University Press, London 2001. 372 pp., hardcover £ 20.00.—ISBN 0-300-08943-0

This new book by Lara Marks relates the scientific and social history of the Pill. The Pill became licensed as a contraceptive in the

USA in 1960, and in Europe and Australia in 1961. It then spread quickly throughout the world. But the origin of its discovery goes back to the early years of the 20th century. As

early as 1919 the Austrian physiologist Ludwig Haberlandt recognized the possibility of hormonal protection against conception. The chemical structures of the sexual hormones were determined in the 1930s by Adolf Butenandt and others. However, mass production of a hormonal contraceptive was at first prevented by the lack of a suitable starting material. The chemical industry sent botanists and chemists to search for plants containing substances from which sexual hormones could be extracted. One of those chemists, Russell Marker, discovered a yam root in Mexico which contained large amounts of diosgenin, which could be chemically converted into sexual hormones. Through this discovery of a raw material that was cheap and available in large quantities, he was



able to break the cartel of the European chemical companies who had banded together in 1937 and held all the important patent rights. Marker founded the firm Syntex in Mexico and recruited European exiles for his team—specialists in hormone research who had been forced to flee from Nazi Germany. By 1944 Syntex had a dominant position worldwide in the manufacture of progesterone. Marker's successor Carl Djerassi improved the method for synthesizing the hormone, and in 1951 he produced the first oral hormonal contraceptive. However, it was left to the firm G. D. Searle in the USA, which had also begun work on hormonal contraception, to introduce the first contraceptive pill onto the market in 1957, although it was at first used to control irregularities of the menstrual cycle.

That is a brief summary of the history of the invention of the Pill, which Lara Marks describes in thorough detail in this book, embedding it within the context of a social history of birth control in the 20th century. She shows that the Pill came about through the efforts of countless individuals and interest groups throughout the world, not only in the USA. In particular, the book emphasizes that the development of the Pill was not just a product of science and technology, but was driven to an even greater extent by social factors. It was created not only by medical scientists and chemists, but at least as much by women and feminists who wanted an active method of birth control. Without the well-known American birth-control pioneer Margaret Sanger and the wealthy sponsor Katherine McCormick, the Pill would probably not have become a reality. All the pioneers of the Pill, whether male or female, were scientifically and socially marginalized for a long time, because contraception was a taboo subject, socially, politically, and scientifically, until well into the second half of the 20th century. The Pill was under attack right

from the start, and it took more than 40 years for reliable information about the risk of cancer associated with its use to become available. We now know that the Pill slightly increases the risk of breast cancer. Nevertheless, the women affected by it can be cured more easily than those who develop cancer without having taken hormones.

In an impressive way, Marks has brought together many separate developments to make a whole history that the reader can assimilate and understand. Each chapter of her book represents a stage in the history, and at the same time an aspect of the development, manufacture, and use of the Pill in the 20th century, ranging from the politics of population control to the circumstances of the doctors and of the women using the Pill. The material is presented in a way that is very readable throughout, even exciting, combining narrative with analysis and discussion. The 265 pages of text are concisely written and packed with information.

The book's main conclusion is that the Pill did not, as Margaret Sanger expected in the 1950s, provide a worldwide solution to the problems of population explosion and social and political conflicts. It was not successful everywhere and in every respect. The spread of its influence was mainly confined to the industrially developed countries. As well as supporters it also encountered opponents of the plan, especially within the Catholic Church. But it gave millions of women greater freedom and opened up new possibilities for planning their lives. As a part of a wider range of birth control strategies it changed the world.

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