



DES Daughters, Embodied Knowledge, and the Transformation of Women's Health Politics in the Late Twentieth Century

Susan E. Bell

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From the 1940s to the 1970s, millions of women were exposed prenatally to the synthetic estrogen DES, a “wonder drug” intended to prevent miscarriages. However, DES actually had damaging consequences for the women born from DES mothers. The “DES daughters” as they are known, were found to have a rare form of vaginal cancer or were infertile. They were also at risk for miscarriages, stillbirths, and ectopic pregnancies.

In DES Daughters, Susan Bell recounts the experiences of this generation of “victims.” In moving, heartfelt narratives, she presents the voices of those women who developed cancer, those who were cancer-free but have concerns about becoming pregnant, and those who suffered other medical and/or reproductive difficulties.

Bell examines the hierarchy of knowledge and power of scientists, doctors, and daughters, tracing the emergence of a feminist health movement. The “embodied knowledge” of these DES daughters prompted them to become advocates and form a social movement that challenged reproductive medical knowledge specifically, but also the politics of women’s health in general. Bell’s important book chronicles the history and future of these grassroots activists born out of illness, suffering, and uncertainty.



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