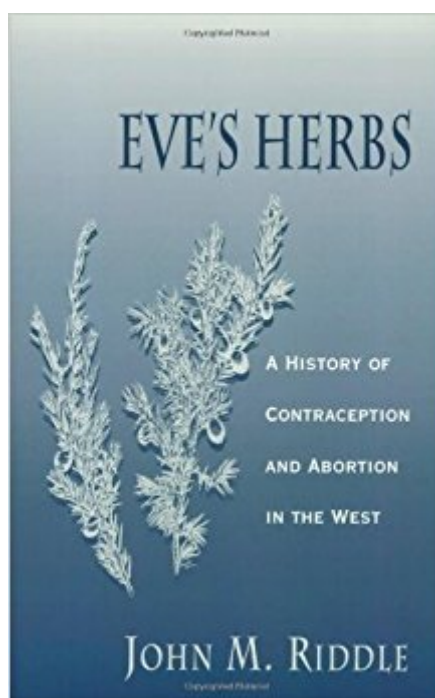


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Eve's Herbs: A History Of Contraception And Abortion In The West



Synopsis

In *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, John Riddle showed, through extraordinary scholarly sleuthing, that women from ancient Egyptian times to the fifteenth century had relied on an extensive pharmacopoeia of herbal abortifacients and contraceptives to regulate fertility. In *Eve's Herbs*, Riddle explores a new question: If women once had access to effective means of birth control, why was this knowledge lost to them in modern times? Beginning with the testimony of a young woman brought before the Inquisition in France in 1320, Riddle asks what women knew about regulating fertility with herbs and shows how the new intellectual, religious, and legal climate of the early modern period tended to cast suspicion on women who employed "secret knowledge" to terminate or prevent pregnancy. Knowledge of the menstrual-regulating qualities of rue, pennyroyal, and other herbs was widespread through succeeding centuries among herbalists, apothecaries, doctors, and laywomen themselves, even as theologians and legal scholars began advancing the idea that the fetus was fully human from the moment of conception. Drawing on previously unavailable material, Riddle reaches a startling conclusion: while it did not persist in a form that was available to most women, ancient knowledge about herbs was not lost in modern times but survived in coded form. Persecuted as "witchcraft" in centuries past and prosecuted as a crime in our own time, the control of fertility by "Eve's herbs" has been practiced by Western women since ancient times.

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Customer Reviews

Even in ancient times, people limited the size of their families. Since the major responsibilities of pregnancy, birth, and child rearing fell on women, they found methods for controlling fertility and aborting unwanted children, and they have passed down this knowledge as an oral tradition that survives worldwide. Using early manuscripts of medical and botanical texts and the proceedings of court cases, historian Riddle examines the use of plants as contraceptives, offering a fascinating view of the early knowledge of reproduction and attempts to regulate it. As formal medical training evolved and the Roman Catholic Church gained power, these preparations were forbidden, and women offering or using them were tried as witches. The information remained available in disguised form, and, in many parts of the world, Queen Anne's Lace, Pennyroyal, and other botanicals are still used to "regulate menses." More scholarly than Shirley Green's *The Curious History of Contraception* (LJ 8/72), this work is recommended for academic and large public libraries. Barbara M. Bibel, Oakland P.L., Cal. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Eve's Herbs is a highly informative presentation of the history of the use of plant products, such as ergot, as abortion agents. (Thomas Szasz *Washington Post*) Riddle examines the use of plants as contraceptives, offering a fascinating view of the early knowledge of reproduction and attempts to regulate it. (Library Journal) This fine scholarly book expands on Riddle's previous work, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, to discover why and how women's extensive knowledge and use of plants, herbs, seeds, bark, and roots was lost after the 19th century... Highly recommended for students of the history of medicine at all levels. (A. R. Davis *Choice*) Riddle's work is a useful counterbalance to extreme skepticism about the pre-modern possibility of effective fertility control. (Rebecca Flemming *Isis*) John Riddle has established his reputation as a leading expert on ancient Greek pharmacology. In an earlier study, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, he argued that a much more reliable knowledge of oral contraceptives existed in the ancient and medieval worlds than had previously been thought. In this book, Riddle attempts a broader but partly overlapping study, a history of abortion and contraception in the Western tradition (Europe and the United States, with a glance at the Islamic World). More specifically, he challenges the common view that oral contraception was little practiced and largely ineffective until the 18th century... Riddle argues his case with learning

and perspicacity. He draws widely on the specialist literature of a number of disciplines as he discusses, among other things, the theology of ensoulment of the fetus and the demographics of early modern Europe. (Gary B. Ferngren *New England Journal of Medicine*) Dr. Riddle demonstrates, as in his earlier *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, that knowledge about fertility control existed and women had access to it lost to them in modern times. Both pro-abortion and anti-abortion advocates will find these books important, instructive, and maybe prescriptive...A scholarly sleuth, Riddle permits historical texts to speak...Riddle integrates modern chemical, pharmacological, and medical confirmations that what the ancients said worked probably did. (*Journal of the American Medical Association*) Riddle is a tireless scholar and an engaging writer, and as his story moves along in chronological order, it begins to read like an official history. But at heart *Eve's Herbs* is just the opposite: a gathering of nervous confessions and forbidden secrets, committed to paper as proof of a hidden tradition. Like a covey of quail flushed from tall grass, these anguished facts burst from the page with startling life. (Burkhard Bilger *The Sciences*)

I give the book four stars and not five, because it lacks of the practical useful recipes. However, the book is not meant to be a recipe book, but there is no herbal family planning book on the market. Otherwise it is well written and informative and terminates with the view that women did have no means to plan the size of their families before the contraceptive pill & co. The contrary might be true and it is all about choices. Today, the only natural family planning method is the extended rhythm method. The herbs mentioned are mostly defined with their Latin names. Most of the book is a study of old literature. Oral lore is not included. Other herb book writers do not include contraception and abortion at all, even women's herbal books I know don't. We need a history book, written by a male to learn about the most important herbs for women!

John Riddle documents how ordinary women collectively developed and used birth control from the ancient world to the renaissance. His work reminds the reader that science and medicine have historically been a collective human endeavor, not an activity reserved for an elite class of professional doctors and scientists. In this way, he recaptures ordinary women's roles as the primary practitioners of medical science throughout most of human history. As Riddle points out, "ordinary people in the ancient and medieval worlds may have been common but they were not simple." See also Clifford Conner's "A People's History of Science"

Very informative book regarding the history of contraceptive herbs and the destruction of traditional midwifery by the emergence of male doctors. Brings in a lot of interesting facts about the traditional uses of herbs as well as some of the lore from different parts of the world. Interesting from a historical perspective as well as a women's study interest.

As a person who enjoys the study of social history (how people lived) and herbal medicine, this book exceeded my expectations on both counts. Riddle is an historian, so the scholarship in the book is historical scholarship. He moves deftly between conflicting theories of demographics and actual family sizes, at home with his contemporaries and able to argue his somewhat novel opinion on a level playing field. Not surprisingly, historians tend to go along with modern medical thought that there were no effective systems of personal or professional health care prior to our own allopathic tradition in the past few centuries. Herbalists, homeopaths and the like are still fighting for legitimacy against exactly this mindset. What surprised and delighted me was the thoroughness of Riddle's information on the herbs in question. It must be noted that he does NOT provide recipes for readers to use at home. He isn't playing (herbal) doctor. Regardless, a person with some experience in herbalism or access to alternate texts can easily take the list of herbs from this book and find appropriate dosage and other how to information from that other source--including the important caveat that herbs are not always safe and shouldn't be taken without professional advice or lots of research. Riddle's emphasis is on pointing out which plants have been indicated, by whom in the ancient world, and what science has (or has not) done to test for actual efficacy. One interesting side note for readers who allow for the possible effectiveness of today's most revolutionary complementary medicine modalities is Riddle's reporting of the fact that, historically, charms (magic) were often listed together with the herbs (medicine) in any given herbal recipe. Riddle is careful and respectful of the potential for narrow-mindedness when he admits that, to our Western minds, there can be no believing in the usefulness of the magic side of the equation, but he makes no disparaging remarks and he allows for future scientific work to prove said "magic" effective. Of course, to a modern practitioner of Reiki or any other mental/spiritual healing system, it is certainly possible to suppose the intent of the healer and/or patient was a necessary or beneficent part of the ancient cures. I expected to enjoy this book's subject matter, but I was actually delighted by how well Mr. Riddle covered both aspects of the topic, and even more so by the easy readability of his style. Any person who enjoys reading well-written history for pleasure will find this a work worth spending some time with.

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