

The Suffering of Surrogacy: A Veteran Feminist Spells It Out

What do Jimmy Fallon, Lucy Liu, Sarah Jessica Parker, Neil Patrick Harris, and Ricky Martin have in common? They all bought babies via surrogacy. You might have seen them in glossy women's magazines.

Of course the women who bore the babies are nowhere to be seen; they would have received but a small cut of the money, while IVF clinics, surrogacy brokers and lawyers took the lion's share. Surrogacy is a rapidly growing industry, bolstered by glowing photographs of celebrities beaming over cute babies. Who could begrudge them their happiness?

In [*Surrogacy: A Human Rights Violation*](#) Dr Renate Klein dares to take on the surrogacy industry without begrudging but with plenty of sass and hard evidence. A dogged feminist academic and publisher for over thirty years, her critique of neoliberal capitalism is always underpinned by an authentic concern for women's wellbeing and a focus on patriarchal structures.

She never fails to point out the power differentials. She completely rejects surrogacy in all its forms.

Notice, for example, that she obstinately uses inverted commas around the terms "surrogate", "donor" (of eggs), the "right" to a baby, "altruistic" surrogacy, and (surrogacy as) "work" for the entire book. This is because she believes that there are no such things.

There is no such thing, she says, as a "surrogate" for the process of growing a baby in the womb. And this is not "work". She refuses to endorse the modern vocabulary, which long ago

capitulated to the commercialisation of women and reproduction.

Rather, she takes head-on the popular narrative of surrogacy; desperate but deserving well-to-do couples, the “angels” who gestate the baby and happily hand it over at the end, and the cute babies in staged photographs. She lays bare all that which can and does go horribly wrong throughout IVF, pregnancy, labour and delivery, and the years following, traumas borne by the women and children but carefully concealed by marketing spin.

As a radical feminist and lesbian academic, Dr Klein’s views are not mainstream. Yet any reader will recognise that they are common-sense, based on women’s concrete experiences.

The word “radical” refers to getting at things right at their root, and this is the essence of her approach. She is careful to distinguish women’s difficult *decisions* (for example deciding between poverty or prostitution) from women’s *choices* (for example choosing between chocolate cake or lemon tart). And she insists unswervingly that we must always consider the social context in which women make their decisions.

She demonstrates the harms – physical, psychological and sociological – that women endure because of their difficult decisions. Her analysis reveals the nonsense of the liberal feminist mantra of “self-determination” and “choice” in the case of surrogacy. We are shown throughout the book that women’s “choices” to engage in surrogacy “never fail to fill the coffers of the greedy sexual exploitation and reproduction industries”, a market expected to be worth US\$31 billion by 2023.

In Chapter 3 Dr Klein connects surrogacy with the horrific abuse and trauma of women and girls in kidnapping and sexual enslavement, The Stolen Generations, and forced adoption in Australia. Readers may see this as an exaggeration. Surely

surrogacy is undertaken with the consent of all parties?

But again, Dr Klein wants to get to the root of the problem. She points to the wealth of the commissioning couple (think Nicole Kidman, Elton John, Kim Kardashian), while the “surrogate” mother remains faceless, nameless and absent from the child’s life – because in a patriarchal culture, women and particularly poor women can merely be vessels to be discarded.

The disparity in wealth and power is a challenge to anyone who believes consent and regulation can solve the problem of surrogacy.

And she touches the plight of children who are born to serve adult desires. The baby born of surrogacy never consented to being commissioned, being bought, and being given to strangers. Consent, money, and infertility mean nothing to the baby, who has lost the flesh-and-blood mother, the only person a baby knows and wants.

Klein refers briefly to the groundswell of activists, adults who were adopted as babies (those cute babies grow up, you know!) or born of purchased gametes, who are now speaking out and gaining traction.

Dr Catherine Lynch, founder of the Australian Adoptee Rights Action Group and a rising force in adoptee activism, is quoted here, speaking of “the loss of the mother’s body at birth is experienced as a trauma which is felt at first as an inexpressible loss (what can the baby do but cry?) and creates a lacuna of despair that never leaves the person despite a lifetime of adaptation and socialisation.”

Acceptance of adoption has surely paved the way for surrogacy to thrive. Dr Klein might have explored more of the problems with adoption, but instead refers briefly to [the work of Penny Mackieson, an adoptee and social worker](#).

To Dr Klein, the experiences of adoptees and mothers demand

that we ask ourselves: *why are we committing such fraud yet again?* She continues relentlessly exposing the horrors of surrogacy gone wrong – for example babies commissioned by paedophiles – and surrogacy gone “right” – the children of the surrogate mother afraid that they too will be given away if they are naughty, or the desperate woman who aborted her own baby to enter into a surrogacy contract.

In Chapter 4 Dr Klein asks whether surrogacy can ever be appropriately regulated so that it can be considered “work”. Here she goes into more detail about the “work” performed under a surrogacy contract, including the extreme invasive medical procedures and surveillance, the restrictions on her life (strict diet, no sex with husband), and the substantial risks of pregnancy and delivery, plus the backup plans of foetal reduction or abortion if baby is not what was ordered.

She understands pregnancy not as a period of incubation but as a profound, all-encompassing, mind-body-soul experience. And she remarks that there is a symbiotic relationship between pregnant woman and baby that contradicts the popular story of surrogacy as a “team effort” by doctors, donors, technology, and female body parts. The fact is that only a woman can grow a three-kilogram baby from an egg and a sperm cell.

Little wonder, then, that the commissioning parents are compelled to lock out the mother from seeing or touching baby (and no breastfeeding, hence violating a [child's right to breastmilk](#)). Even if promised an ongoing relationship with the commissioning parents and the baby, the flesh-and-blood mother is usually cut off.

After all, there is no confusion for the baby about who is the mother – baby cries for the warm body and the voice that nurtured her for nine months, and for the breastmilk that baby would surely recognise if she smelled it.

Dr Klein sensitively describes the barrage of painful

situations faced by all women in the surrogacy transaction. This includes the potentially devastating sense of failure for the commissioning woman who cannot herself conceive or gestate a baby: "The fact that some women feel resentful about the baby they know is not their own, and bitter because they remain infertile, is not allowed to be talked about in public." Indeed, they must appear radiant with happiness since they now have a baby that is legally theirs.

She describes the flesh-and-blood relationship between mother and baby during pregnancy, one that endures long after the baby has been born and handed to strangers. And she describes the methods by which such deeply personal conflicting dilemmas are endured by women; dissociation, achieved by counselling and marketing spin. The panacea of "counselling" (of course never aimed at assisting the surrogate through the process, but rather to ensure she is willing to give up the baby at the end) could have received more attention here.

Perhaps most inspiring is Chapter 6, the documenting of the resistance movement against surrogacy. She carefully relates the history of the writers and activists, their books, the conferences and resulting grassroots movements, and landmark legal cases, the work of women who have worked tirelessly with little reward.

It would be frustrating for these women to watch the industry booming, as rich Americans and Australians increasingly hire poor women of colour around the world, wealthy Chinese couples buy babies from poor white women in the USA, and gay men attending lavishly appointed surrogacy seminars.

Nonetheless, the resistance continues to grow. Klein describes the rise of [Stop Surrogacy Now](#) campaign, spearheaded by [California filmmaker and advocate Jennifer Lahl](#). She explains how the European Parliament came to adopt a resolution condemning surrogacy, and lauds the work of European feminist activists such as Julie Bindel, Kajsa Ekis Ekman, Eva-Maria

Bachinger, and Sheela Saravanan.

And she commends The International Convention for the Abolition of Surrogacy, arising from the 2016 conference “For the Universal Abolition of Surrogate Motherhood” in Paris, as a tool for future activists.

Dr Klein also documents the rise of wealthy gay men fuelling demand for surrogacy, contrasted with the significant phenomenon of gay men speaking out against surrogacy. She notes the fear of being condemned as homophobic for those heterosexual critics of the powerful gay lobby demanding babies.

Here she reminds us that women are exploited not by “gay” or “heterosexual” men, but simply by *men*, and that it is not homophobic to withhold support for gay men when they claim they have a “right” to exploit two women to get a baby. She calls for more members of the LGBT community to engage with the issue. After all, she says, most lesbians neither need nor support surrogacy.

She is scathingly critical of the commercial surrogacy lobby in Australia that continually promotes international commercial surrogacy and provides connections for Australian clients, reminding us that this remains a criminal act across much of Australia. She reprimands the lobby for thus inappropriately kindling the hopes of people who have failed IVF and still yearn for a baby.

And importantly, she suggests other ways for people to engage meaningfully with children, urging those who cannot have their own baby to discern what it is they really want – the joy of spending time with a child? Or do they want to *possess* a child that they have purchased? She urges more acceptance of the ‘child-free’ life not as second-class, not as people who hate children or don’t know any children, but as a life with many other opportunities: foster care, permanent care arrangements,

the many professions that are child-centred, and a commitment to spend time with children of their siblings or friends, supporting them through both the fun and the hard times.

It seems that Dr Klein has lived this child-free life and speaks from decades of experience. Perhaps these people could be the highly valued “Aunties” (and “Uncles”) that acclaimed parenting expert [Steve Biddulph](#) says children need in their lives, particularly in their teen years.

Finally, in her urging to stop surrogacy altogether, she makes two points that explain from a radical feminist point of view why reproductive technologies industries are burgeoning. First, men cannot gestate life and give birth to babies. Second, men as a social group loathe women and their bodies for this power.

Here, the conservative reader may take issue and sense some misandry. Perhaps at this point the radical and the conservative may finally diverge, as the book could have benefited from a more careful unpacking of what is meant here, especially for the supportive male reader who deeply respects women and their reproductive powers.

But do read on to understand just a little of how she arrives at this conclusion. Her long-ago developed concept of patriarchal medical control of women’s bodies is not explained in this book; reading her earlier work would make it clear.

She points out for example the degrading medical terms applied to infertile women: “hostile mucus”, “incompetent cervix”, “old eggs”. Women oughtn’t have babies without consulting a doctor these days, she points out, and submitting to a barrage of tests (many invasive and entailing risks) including those that identify “abnormal” unborn babies. And this is part of the “cutting up” of women into their body parts, used and discarded, to which Dr Klein objects in the strongest possible terms.

Dr Klein also views with disdain the attempts to create an artificial womb. This is no solution to surrogacy, but rather a reinforcement of it. And her comment here poignantly reveals something of that which motivates her personally as a major foe of the surrogacy trade:

“... in my view, a pregnant woman’s body, her brain, heartbeat and breath (not to mention her soul) provides a bit more than just a container to which tubes are attached. (And I don’t believe the intriguing human placenta has shared all her secrets).”

Her radical approach is to uphold the dignity of women as whole and unique beings, and to expose and condemn the surrogacy industry as a patriarchal, neoliberal capitalist exploiter of women. This book is short but packs a punch and additionally is a good primer for those who want to learn more about how radical feminism, as distinct from liberal feminism, contributes to global social justice movements.

Surrogacy: A Human Rights Violation by Renate Klein is available from [Spinifex Press](#).

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