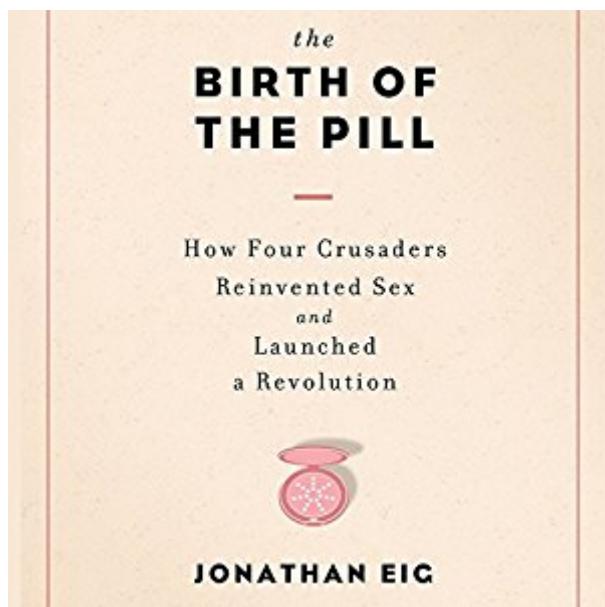


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# The Birth Of The Pill: How Four Crusaders Reinvented Sex And Launched A Revolution



## **Synopsis**

The fascinating story of one of the most important scientific discoveries of the twentieth century. We know it simply as "the pill", yet its genesis was anything but simple. Jonathan Eig's masterful narrative revolves around four principal characters: the fiery feminist Margaret Sanger, who was a champion of birth control in her campaign for the rights of women but neglected her own children in pursuit of free love; the beautiful Katharine McCormick, who owed her fortune to her wealthy husband, the son of the founder of International Harvester and a schizophrenic; the visionary scientist Gregory Pincus, who was dismissed by Harvard in the 1930s as a result of his experimentation with in vitro fertilization but who, after he was approached by Sanger and McCormick, grew obsessed with the idea of inventing a drug that could stop ovulation; and the telegenic John Rock, a Catholic doctor from Boston who battled his own church to become an enormously effective advocate in the effort to win public approval for the drug that would be marketed by Searle as Enovid. Spanning the years from Sanger's heady Greenwich Village days in the early 20th century to trial tests in Puerto Rico in the 1950s to the cusp of the sexual revolution in the 1960s, this is a grand story of radical feminist politics, scientific ingenuity, establishment opposition, and, ultimately, a sea change in social attitudes. Brilliantly researched and briskly written, *The Birth of the Pill* is gripping social, cultural, and scientific history.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Fascinating review of the politics and science surrounding the development of the 1st oral

contraceptive. As a 70 yo endocrinologist who trained during the latter portion of this story, The protagonists were colorful - a wealthy heiress, a feminist before her time and an eccentric scientist combine forces to deliver a transformational medication. Just in time to control and exploding world population. Too bad that much of the world cannot afford to use it or chooses not to use it. What I find remarkable is how far we have come in the last 75 years. It is hard to imagine that prior to 1950s we did not understand how the hypothalamus and pituitary control reproduction. We have to thank Sir Geoffrey Harris for his groundbreaking observations that made it possible for these 3 protagonists to dream that estrogen/progesterone might suppress ovulation, preventing conception. What is even more remarkable is the acceptance of a safe and effective form of contraception. I was a high school and college student during this period - it was remarkable how quickly the "pill" changed many things. Found this book remarkable and enjoyable.

The Birth of the Pill reads like a page turning adventure story. It's as if Indiana Jones were a pioneer in the sexual revolution. The larger than life characters pushing societal and scientific boundaries make the book a fun, fascinating read.

In The Birth of the Pill, Jonathan Eig tells the fascinating story of the four people whose combined efforts, arguably more than any others, made birth control effective, affordable, widely available, and perhaps most importantly (since it makes all the others possible), socially acceptable: Margaret Sanger, Dr. Gregory Pincus, Dr. John Rock, and Katherine McCormick. At the time the contraceptive pill was being developed, human reproduction was still very poorly understood. Prudish attitudes and obscenity laws hampered scientific research, discouraged and in many cases prevented doctors from educating their patients, and kept women from having any significant degree of control over their own bodies or the decision to become pregnant. It took a few independent-minded, morally driven people of unusual character to achieve change in the arena of reproductive rights. Two of these four had spent years caring for people whose unchecked fertility threatened their own life and health, and the well-being of their families. Women, especially poor women, found themselves pregnant again and again before their bodies had recovered from earlier pregnancies, had medical conditions caused or exacerbated by pregnancy and childbirth, or could not afford adequate food, clothing, shelter, and health care for their rapidly growing families. Many women also found too many pregnancies burdensome, as they were prevented from pursuing an education or a career, or suffered from exhaustion, depression, and feelings of hopelessness as they found themselves caring for more children than they could cope with. Margaret Sanger and Dr. John Rock

encountered all of these problems up close and personal; their birth control activism was the direct result of their experiences as reproductive health care providers. Sanger worked for many years as a nurse caring for the poorest people in the slums and tenements of New York City. She was so moved by the plight of these women that she risked fines and imprisonment to open the first 'birth control' clinic (as she coined the term). Countless poor women, who had often already fled starvation, poverty, and disease in their home countries, found themselves unable to escape the cycle of repeated pregnancies and deepening poverty as their own bodies weakened and their meager resources were stretched ever thinner in the face of anti-immigrant bias, pittance wages, and filthy, overcrowded, and dangerous living and working conditions. This was also an era when women had no right of refusal of sex to their husbands. They faced the awful choice of risking another pregnancy, injury or death by self-performed abortion, or being abandoned when few jobs were available to women, and few jobs paid women enough to live on themselves, let alone support a family. And charity organizations, try as they might, could not keep up with even a fraction of the demand for assistance. Despite repeated arrests and fines, Sanger continued to provide birth control devices and information to the who women flocked to her clinic, pouring out their life stories in person and in letters like this one (original spelling):'... I am thirty years old have been married 14 years and have 11 children... I have kidney and heart disease, and every one of my children is defictived and we are very poor. Now Miss Sanger can you please help me... I am so worried and and I have cryed my self sick ...I know I will go like my poor sister she went insane and died. ...the doctor won't do anything for me ... if I could tell you all the terrible things that I have been through with my babys and children you would know why I would rather die than have another one. Please no one will ever know and I will be so happy and I will do anything in this world for you and your good work ...Doctors are men and have not had a baby so they have no pitty for a poor sick Mother. You are a Mother and you know so please pitty me and help me. Please Please.'(My heart ached and my eyes tingled as I read this letter; I can only imagine what Sanger felt, since she met and struggled to help these women every day.)Dr. John Rock was an obstetrician and fertility specialist. While one of his main focuses was on helping women with fertility problems become pregnant, he also worked with many other women for whom pregnancy, childbirth, and child care was detrimental to their physical and mental health, for various reasons. He became a staunch activist for birth control, and worked to convince the public and the Catholic church, of which he was a committed member, that effectively planning families and regulating childbirth is not only practical, but of the highest moral worth, since it promotes bodily and spiritual health, and a loving family life in which all children can be well cared for. He thought he could convince the church hierarchy that the hormonal

method of birth control is consistent with Catholic teaching, since it's simply an extension of the natural cycle that occurs in a woman's body, rather than a barrier method which was doctrinally forbidden; his rhythm-method clinic taught the only form of birth control other than abstinence that was sanctioned by his religion, but as he observed, neither worked very well. His efforts to help women control their rates of pregnancy would eventually prove effective, but his efforts to convince the Church, until this day, have been in vain. Yet birth control was not only linked to beliefs in reproductive rights and health: it was linked to a change in sexual mores. Sanger, Pincus, Rock, and McCormick all held what we'd now call 'sex-positive' beliefs: they thought sex could and should be a wonderful thing, among the most joyous, intimate, and healthy means by which humans connect with one another. In a time when sex was often regarded as shameful, depraved, and for the sake of men (I would argue that while it's re-branded, it still is, as 'liberated', 'powerful' women painfully squeeze themselves into bustiers and stilettos and straighten, curl, bleach, and cut their hair and bodies to fit into a few stereotypical male fantasy body types as possible, in our crudely sex-obsessed, tabloid, misogynistic culture -- yes, I'm talking about you too, Beyoncé), they thought it could and should be a loving, freeing, and transcendent experience for both partners. Dr. Gregory Pincus, the scientist who would ultimately formulate the first effective, FDA-approved birth control pill, was an unusually independent-minded, freethinking, colorful personality from an early age. As a young researcher at Harvard, he was widely publicized for his frank and unapologetic views on the benefits of revolutionizing human reproduction through scientific intervention. The sensationalist, brave-new-world 'news' stories led to Harvard's kicking him out of their faculty and their labs, as a reputation-defense measure. Pincus went on to found his own research institute, where he continued his research into hormones and their effects in reproduction. Arguably, it was this very political and financial independence from any large mainstream establishment that enabled him to succeed in his goal to produce the first birth control pill. It also took money, and lots of it, as it does with any new pharmaceutical. Planned Parenthood could only provide limited funding for Pincus's work, so it dragged on slowly, until Katherine McCormick, wealthy heiress, came along. She had discovered, shortly after she married, that her new husband suffered from severe mental illness. McCormick was well-educated, an MIT graduate at the time of her marriage, and was fascinated by all things science. When she learned of her husband's mental illness, she poured time, money, and research into finding a cure, especially in the fields of hormonal research and heritability. She was also dedicated to women's rights causes, and by the time of her husband's death, her interests and fields of study and activism led to her single-minded determination to aid in the cause of making birth control effective and widely accessible. It was she, more than any other, who provided Pincus

the funds to pursue more lab research, and for he and Rock to conduct more clinical trials. Eig's book is not a simple hero story: he reveals the history and personalities of each with their complex set of motivations, warts and all. Sanger was a eugenicist, for example. It was not uncommon for progressives, scientists, and those in the medical field to subscribe to the principles of eugenics at that time; many thought (mistakenly, as it turned out) that it was the only way science could really 'cure' disability and disease once and for all. Medical science, humanitarian groups, and governments had not yet offered systematic or effective solutions to the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, diseases caused by overcrowding and malnourishment, and mental health issues, and were simply unable to keep up with the demands of the humanitarian crisis in affected communities. Eugenics, on the other had, seemed to offer the only sure and straightforward solution, until the application of its principles by fascist governments revealed how faulty a 'science' (really a pseudoscience) it was. Sanger was also a neglectful mother, unsuited by personality to the stay-at-home role mothers were restricted to in her time. Pincus was a media hound, and conducted some of his trials in what today would be considered an unethical manner. Rock was willing to mislead some of his patients when he found that public attitudes made most women unwilling to participate in contraceptive studies, if presented as such. And McCormick, like Sanger, had a marked tendency to elitism. Yet the contributions of these four unusual, passionate, driven crusaders towards improving women's health and social and legal emancipation can hardly be stressed enough. Women can generally have as many children as they choose, when they choose, and are (largely) not subject to the whims of men when it comes reproductive issues (still mostly true despite discouraging recent regrettable, retrograde legal decisions, for example, regarding the mandate that insurance companies pay for full reproductive health care). Sanger's, Pincus's, Rock's, and McCormick's belief that birth control would ultimately improve and save the lives of women, and improve the standard of living for families, have been vindicated over the years. For example, women on the pill live longer, on average, than other women, and the results of decades of study leads the World Health Organization to promote birth control as an important means of improving health and relieving poverty around the world. Eig does the public a great service when he tells the story, so compellingly, of how the pill came to be, since all of the reasons that accessible, effective birth control was important then are the same reasons it's important today.

Great book. All of us need to read and consider how this has led to worldwide change that is still continuing. The four people who effected this (Sanger, McCormick, Pincus and Rock) while flawed as all of us are, were/are true heroes and examples for everyone to persist and never give up. They

should be known and memorialized by all the women in this world who have benefitted by their efforts to maximize their lives. Should be required reading for all young women so they truly appreciate and can retain what could be lost to them.

If the birth control pill was one of the most important inventions of the 20th century, why is it that most people have no idea who invented it or how it came to be? As I read Jonathan Eig's excellent new book on the subject, it occurred to me that the answer to that question is probably because nobody would have believed it. In this fascinating and almost unbelievable story, Jonathan introduces us to the cast of characters responsible for the creation of the pill. They include an eccentric millionaire heiress, a radical, free-loving, way-ahead-of-her-time feminist who flirted with socialism and eugenics, a deeply religious Catholic gynecologist who believed that his work on the Pill was consistent with the teachings of his church, and a rogue Jewish scientist who had been fired from his tenure-track position at Harvard partly due to the radical nature of his research and partly due to anti-Semitism. The book reads like an entertaining and bizarre combination of a campy science fiction novel and an eclectic travelogue in which the characters lead us on a strange trip from world before the Pill to a brave new world in which it is nearly impossible to imagine life without the Pill. It is also a terrific read for anyone interested in a great story about the evolution of sex in contemporary society.

Important history about the most important scientific advance in centuries. The religious zealots who continue dog reproductive freedom today will not relent. Knowing they were there when Pinkus Sanger Rock and McCormack bravely won FDA approval again shows us that real progress always comes from the exceptional few!! Remember the Wright Brothers?

This book described the women of my life and their relationship with men and sex. From my grandmother (1900) mother of 10, my mother (1933) mother of 5, my wife (1961) mother of 4, and my four daughters (1979-1991) no children by choice. Every man on the planet should read this book and learn what women have done for and because of us.

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