

Biography of Barbara Ehrenreich

She was born in Butte, Montana in 1941 and brought up in a mining town. She went to Reed College in Portland, Oregon. She majored in chemistry and changed to molecular and cellular biology.



Meanwhile, she participated in anti- Vietnam War protest and realized that she was not fit to work in a science laboratory environment. With the birth of her first child, she “underwent a political, as well as a personal, transformation” (1). This realization came about when she became disappointed in the prenatal care she received. Ehrenreich found the service to be sexist and from then on decided to advocate for women’s healthcare. After this life-changing event she wrote, in collaboration with Deirdre English, “Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers” in 1973. For the past thirty years she has written many articles, essays and published a few books. In her autobiography, she concludes “I could have had more stability and financial security if I’d stuck to science or teaching, but I chose adventure and I’ve never for a moment regretted it” (2).

Summary of “Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers” by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English



According to Ehrenreich and English, women have been healers throughout history. The first reported medicine woman dates back to the Middle Ages, “long before the development of modern medical technology” (6). In order to control the women, the patriarchy responded to this rise of healers with witch-hunts. Barbara Ehrenreich writes that this important event in women

history has had “a lasting effect: an aspect of the female has ever since been associated with the witch, and an aura of contamination has remained” (6).

During the 14th to the 17th century, the witch-hunt was most prolific. In Europe it has been documented that on average 600 women a year were killed (7). The author then asks the reader what were the crimes that these witches were supposed to have committed? One reason was that women healers were considered to have committed sexual crimes against men. Also, witches were organized and supposedly had magical powers. The authors described that because of the strong influence of the Church, women healers were demonized (10). However, these witches were far from the demons, since they usually healed the poor who had no access to doctors (12). Even if these women were ostracized for a very long time, they were still seen as important in certain circles of society, which was a threat to the medical community. One way to remedy the problem was to accept someone in the medical field only if they had a university degree. Since women were not allowed to go to university they were not considered real professionals (17).



Struggle between
midwife and doctor

The authors then continue their discussion with a more contemporary look. Ehrenreich writes that although there are more women doctors in the 1970s, in the United States midwifery is almost seen as illegal (21). Furthermore, the authors question where this division between “real” doctors and women healers is. They believe that it started in the 1800s, where women, midwives and healers, were associated with the “people’s medicine”, but “when the people’s medicine was destroyed, there was no place for women, except in the subservient role of nurses” (22). Also, when women actually

entered medical school in the 1800s, they faced harassment and sexist textbooks. For example, “a well-known 1848 obstetrical text which stated: She [Woman] has a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love” (29).

The authors’ conclusions include the fact that the medical field was created by the “competition between male and female healers” and women did play a role in creating this competition (41). Another conclusion is that women should not just blame men, but the “class system which supports male power” generally called the influence of patriarchy (42). Furthermore, the oppression of women in the medical field is reflected by the oppression of women in general by the patriarchy. Finally, the authors give a word of advice to women who want to change the way women are treated in the medical field: “To reach out to women health workers *as workers* is to reach out to them as *women*” (43).

Useful links

<http://www.barbaraehrenreich.com/> - author’s blog and biography

<http://tmh.floonet.net/articles/witches.html> - an online version of the pamphlet

http://kidshealth.org/parent/pregnancy_newborn/pregnancy/midwives.html - history of the midwife

<http://www.cahn-achn.ca/> - history of nurses

Works cited

Barbara Ehrenreich. 2005-2009. Accessed April 1, 2009
[<http://www.barbaraehrenreich.com/>].

Ehrenreich, B. & English, Deirdre. Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers. New York: The Feminist Press, 1973.