

A Necessary Kindness by Juno Carey (Atlantic Books, 2024)

Juno Carey's book about abortion provision in the UK is subtitled, 'Stories from the frontline of abortion care'. One notes the military imagery, and the book is concerned with conflict, about women travelling to the UK from jurisdictions where abortion is banned, like Malta, and having to battle through anti-abortion protesters outside to places like the UK clinic in which Carey works. Some of her patients are also the victims of violence, domestic or otherwise, carrying foetuses conceived through coercion or rape. At its outset, the book notes the overturning, in 2022 in the USA, of the well-known *Roe v Wade* judgement, that had made abortion legal there. Carey fears such moves in the UK, noting that abortion technically remains illegal here, with the 1967 Abortion Act merely providing mitigations to an illegal act only if significant impact on maternal mental or physical health is proved to two doctors. It is by no means the private, personal medical decision campaigned for by many.

Such fears perhaps seem ungrounded given the widespread public support (over 90%) in the UK for some form of abortion and perhaps ignores the disproportionately powerful religious lobby in the USA opposed to it. But we are reminded of women, such as Carla Foster, imprisoned in 2023 in the UK for procuring an abortion illegally. Carey, like many voices in this area with

experience of providing abortion services, like Anne Furedi, onetime head of the British Pregnancy Advice Service and author of *The Moral Case for Abortion*, want abortion to be a normal health service, a recognised, uncontroversial part of family planning and birth control. We are a long way from that.

Like Furedi, Carey points out the sheer prevalence of abortion. One in four women in the UK will at some time procure one. Across the world around 100 million legal abortions are performed. Nonetheless, women probably will not speak of it, even to those close to them. Women who have had abortions talk frequently of the turmoil that led to their decision and the guilt and shame that followed it. It seems like a taboo, regarded by many as a necessary evil, rather than the necessary kindness of Carey's title. It is against this that groups like *ShoutYourAbortion* are campaigning, imagining a world where a woman can choose an abortion without guilt and go around wearing a T-shirt saying so. Women's movements in general see abortion legislation as a discriminatory restriction on their autonomy, a symptom of oppression by power structures dominated by men, wealth and religion. One can feel their ire in books like Becca Andrew's *No Choice*. Carey's protests are less angry and political than these. Her concerns are primarily for the women she sees in her clinic. She talks of abortion care as basically 'women reaching out,

usually to other women, and asking for help'. It is not clear she wants revolution.

Carey began as a midwife but tells a worrying story of the enormous pressures she was under in this role, with apparently under-resourced teams tackling growing workloads. She left midwifery looking for an easier life and joined an abortion clinic. Like many, she had preconceptions about abortion, thinking it was a choice mostly for reckless people, then coming to see that most of her patients had reached her after a lot of thought, and many were already mothers. Many were even against abortion in principle, but circumstances had overtaken them. She tells a vivid story of a pregnant woman who woke up one day to find her husband in his thirties dead from a heart attack. She had two children already and did not feel she could face a third alone.

The foetus appears occasionally in this book, Carey admitted how distressed she was to witness her first surgical abortion, the aborted foetus appearing as a number of body parts. She notes that she is ending 'what would otherwise become a life'. But there is barely any recognition, as one might expect, of the key anti-abortionist claim, that the foetus is already a life, a human being, a person. At one point she considers that a foetus might be a 'sentient human', but argues that 'philosophy aside' the idea that an early foetus is sentient is not supported by science. There is

understandably no mention of the more sophisticated philosophical arguments, of those like Francis Beckwith in his *Defending Life*, that a foetus *is* a person. Beckwith's arguments depend on metaphysical claims, and views about the nature of personal identity. But here, philosophy is to one side. She also notes how anti-abortionists argue from the *potential* of the foetus. Carey is clear that her concern is with 'the pregnant person's life', not any life to come. Whether this is entirely philosophy aside is an interesting question. A critic might see Carey's position as intellectually underpowered. This may illustrate a feature of the wider literature on this topic, consisting as it does of either detailed philosophical arguments for or against or accounts of what is happening on the ground. What is perhaps needed is something that tries to bridge these approaches, the nuts and bolts without the philosophy aside.

Having laid out her ground, we are given accounts of different groups of people needing abortion : people whose contraception failed, those who feel they already have too many children, those who feel they are not ready for motherhood, women from overseas jurisdictions that do not permit it, victims of coercion and even rape, and women with severely deformed fetuses. Women who have been made pregnant by rape are often seen as an important group, as a test-case for even the hardest anti-

abortion position. Carey notes how Jacob Rees-Mogg, a known Catholic, has spoken out against abortion even in cases of rape. She wonders if he would think this if someone he cared for were a victim of rape. One suspects he might. It is estimated that between 2000 and 3000 children are conceived through rape each year in the UK, out of a total of over 800,000 conceptions, around 0.4%. It is estimated that about 50% of these result in abortion. One might see all this as absolutely shocking or as a warning that abortion policy should not be driven by hard cases, or both.

The hardline anti-abortion argument here is that if the foetus is a person then its killing cannot be justified just to relieve the mother's mental suffering. The moral principle allegedly at work is that it is never justified to kill someone in order to relieve one's emotional distress. Such an antagonist will even resist the claim that the rape victim, by carrying a child to term, will ruin her own life, and that is sufficient justification for abortion. They will point out that it is not normally considered morally acceptable to kill another person even to extend the life of someone who might otherwise die, so the mere ruining of a life is insufficient justification. The pro-life advocate will also point out that it is not they who are forcing the rape victim to carry a child to term, but the rapist. They will say that they are trying to avoid adding the

moral evil of a killing to the moral evil of a rape. They may also add that someone does not lose a right to life just because their father was a sexual criminal.

Carey, understandably, does not address this barrage of issues, for that would be to write another, very different, book. As we noted earlier, what may be missing from the abortion debate is anyway of reconciling, if that is the right word, these disputes with the experiences of those, like Carey, working in the 'front-line' of abortion care. It often seems as if these arguments are continuing in a spiral above the actuality working out below. This might be true if it were not, of course, for the existence of those jurisdictions where abortion is not permitted, even in extreme cases. There are apparently 24 countries in the world where abortion is not permitted at all, and to these may be added the US states tightening legislation following the fall of *Roe v Wade*. Even in France, abortion is illegal after 14 weeks. The UK, in this respect, remains a beacon of what might be called liberalism in this area. If you are not sure whether this is a good thing, Carey's vivid tale of life in the abortion trenches may persuade you with its telling anecdotes or, if you are looking for answers to ongoing and difficult arguments, it may not.