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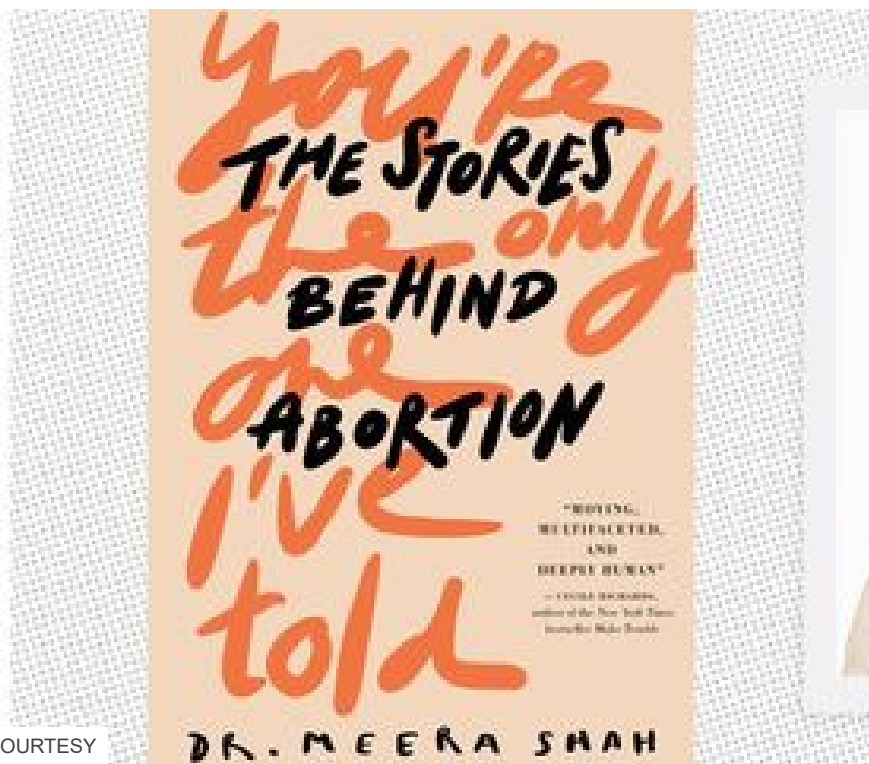
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# Dr. Meera Shah Will Never Stop Telling Abortion Stories

BY [ROXANNE FEQUIERE](#)

SEP 8, 2020



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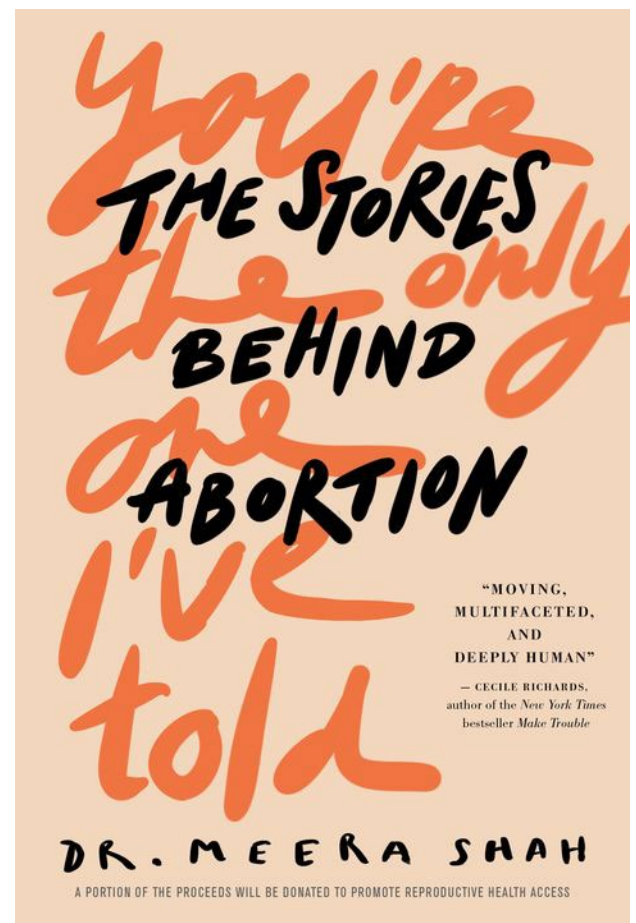
**T**he inaugural issue of *Ms.* hit newsstands in the early '70s with bold cover lines meant to establish itself as a different kind of women's magazine. One read, "Women Tell The Truth About Their Abortions." Inside, 53 prominent women, including Susan Sontag, Dorothy Pittman Hughes, and Billie Jean King, had begun a petition stating they'd had abortions and demanding "a repeal of all laws that restrict our reproductive freedom."

"I like to think that that was a precursor to the many acts that led to the *Roe v. Wade* decision a year later," *Ms.* editor Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel said in 2011. Still, the

magazine had relaunched the campaign just five years earlier, amid a new wave of threats to reproductive freedom across the United States. And in 2019, the campaign witnessed its third incarnation. Nearly 50 years after the Supreme Court ruled that a woman's right to choose to have an abortion is constitutionally protected, patients still face a number of obstacles once they make the decision to have the procedure—and it still feels radical to talk openly about it after the fact.

Dr. Meera Shah, a family medicine physician and chief medical officer of New York's Planned Parenthood Hudson Peconic, knows all too well how this stigma affects her patients. For years, she herself often hesitated to disclose the details of her work as an abortion provider for fear of how she might be perceived. And then a funny thing happened. "Once I started to open up about my work, the responses I would get were so eye-opening," she says. It's a phenomenon she describes in the introduction to her new book, *You're The Only One I've Told: The Stories Behind Abortion*. "It was like the floodgates opened," she writes. "I have become a sudden confidante at dinner parties, at rooftop barbecues, at the grocery store, even at jury duty...Being more open about my work helped people be more open about their own abortion stories."

Inspired and enlightened by the vulnerability of friends, acquaintances, and sometimes strangers, Shah began collecting firsthand accounts of people who've had abortions, seventeen of which make up the collection of stories found in *You're The Only One I've Told*, a book which builds on the legacy of the whispered confidences and brave petitions that preceded it. Uniquely positioned to discuss the details of an abortion procedure with compassion, care, and knowledge, Shah writes just as mindfully about the nuance and richness of each subject's life, both preceding and following the procedure. The process was a collaborative one. "Each storyteller was able to edit their story. I sent a draft, and they made changes," she says. "I made sure—because it's



not my story, it's theirs.”

From the beginning, Shah knew she wanted to tell a diverse set of stories, including “the ones we don't hear a lot about.” Race, religion, culture, gender identity, class, marital status, and many other factors directly influence every individual’s decision to have an abortion, all of which Shah acknowledges head-on. “I'm of South Asian descent, and I know that South Asian people get abortions, because I provide that abortion care to them,” she says. “But I don't really see those stories in the media.”

The final lineup includes a vast array of circumstances: Paige, a University of Michigan junior who travels to NYC for an abortion in the pre-Roe era; Rose, a Brooklyn teen who receives barely any sex education and finds herself pregnant in the '90s; Gwen, a married Navy employee stationed in Japan who learns that after two miscarriages, her much-wanted baby has a rare genetic disorder. and won't survive more than a few weeks outside the womb. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian voices are represented; likewise, genderqueer and male voices.

YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE I'VE TOLD: THE STORIES BEHIND ABORTION

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While each story is unique, there are unfortunate commonalities among them, namely the hoops each person must jump through to receive the care they need. Arbitrary waiting periods, out-of-pocket costs (in some states, even private insurance plans are prohibited from covering abortion), mandatory parental consent—the list goes on. Sally, a San Francisco woman who gets pregnant in 1985, seeks assistance from an institution called the Crisis Pregnancy Center—only to find she’s been duped into visiting a fake health clinic set up to coerce women into continuing their pregnancy. Decades later, facilities like these have proliferated at an alarming rate. “There are more fake health centers than there are real health centers to provide abortion,” Shah says. In fact, for every clinic that provides abortion care across the country, there are five that claim to do the same in hopes of pressuring vulnerable patients into changing their minds. “It still baffles us all who do this work that these health centers are allowed to exist,” Shah says.

Shah has always been drawn to social justice work, but as the child of immigrants, she says, “The options were multiple choice. A, B, and C, doctor, lawyer, engineer: Pick one.” Even so, she recalls, “Reading and writing were my first loves. Going to the library or going to the bookstore was the biggest treat for me—that’s how my parents would reward me for good behavior.” During her residency, “an incredible mentor who is a very vocal activist for abortion access” encouraged her to become an advocate for her patients in the “day-to-day, as well as on a larger policy front.”

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"Being more open about my work helped people be more open about their own abortion stories."

—*Dr. Meera Shah*

These days, Shah is busier than ever. “The need for abortion care does not stop even in the midst of a pandemic. If anything, it is increased,” she says, citing a recent Guttmacher Institute study that reported about 30 percent of cisgender women have decided to not parent or delay parenting due to the spread of COVID-19. In response to this need, Shah and her colleagues have expanded their telehealth platform while continuing to provide colposcopies, cervical cancer screenings, IUD insertions and removals, STI screenings,

hormone therapy, vasectomies, and other essential procedures. “I literally wake up in the morning sometimes, and I’m like, ‘Where am I today and what am I doing?’” she says, laughing.

Now, with the release of *You’re The Only One I’ve Told*, proceeds from every purchase will be donated to a number of organizations that champion the causes closest to Shah’s heart: Indiana’s [Whole Woman's Health Alliance](#) abortion fund; the [Reproductive Health Access Project](#), which trains clinicians to become abortion providers; [Physicians for Reproductive Health](#), which works with physicians to do abortion access advocacy work; and [We Testify](#), an organization dedicated to abortion storytelling.

In an increasingly divisive political landscape, it’s easy to wonder if storytelling—as it pertains to such a hot-button topic—will succeed in doing anything but preaching to the choir. Still, Shah remains certain that this work can and will make a difference. “I do stick to facts, but I know what it means to be *moved* by something, to really feel something from the heart,” she says. “Even if you can't relate to any one particular story as a whole, I guarantee that you can relate to a part of it. If I'm not changing somebody's mind, I hope that I'm at least opening it.”

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[ROXANNE FEQUIERE](#) CONTRIBUTOR

Roxanne Fequiere is a New York–based writer and editor who might just make it after all.

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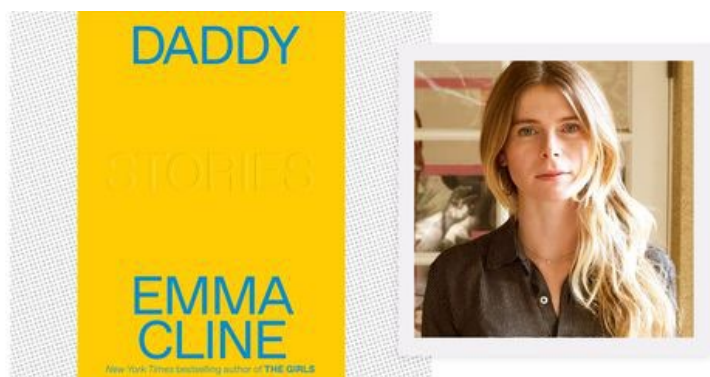
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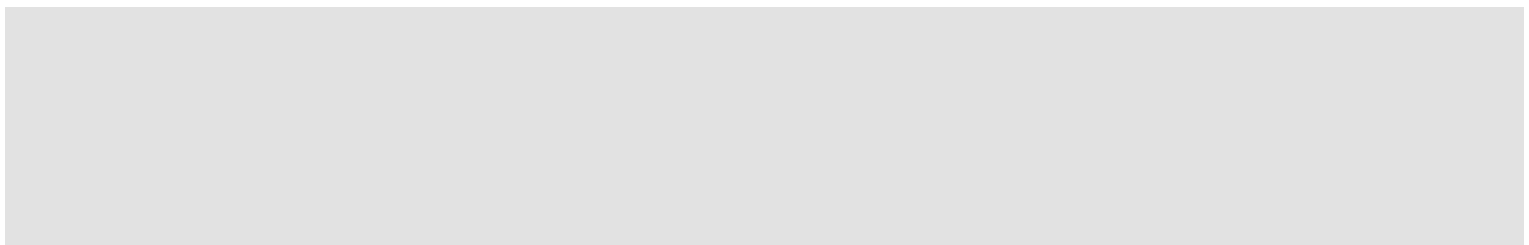


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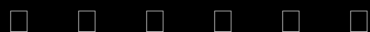
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