

A GIRL LIKE HER



Jeanette 1957

Produced and Directed by Ann Fessler

website: <http://agirllikeher.com>

contact information
ann@agirllikeher.com
401-440-1962

“*A Girl Like Her* Ann Fessler’s haunting group portrait of women who surrendered their children for adoption in the 1950s and ’60s juxtaposes their voices with stock archival images from an era when wrenching human drama was buried beneath airbrushed images of family and sexuality.”

— *The Washington Post*, “Ten movies not to miss at Silverdocs”

A GIRL LIKE HER reveals the hidden history of over a million women who became pregnant in the United States in the 1950s and 60s when “nice girls” didn’t get pregnant. It was a time when women were routinely expelled from high schools and colleges and forced to leave jobs as teachers and nurses before their indiscretion was apparent to others. They were rendered voiceless and invisible—banished to distant relatives or maternity homes to give birth and surrender their children for adoption so they could start over with a clean slate. But did they?

The film combines footage from educational films and newsreels—that both reflected and shaped the public’s understanding of single pregnancy and adoption during that time—with the voices of these mothers as they speak today, about the long-term impact of surrender and silence on their lives.

A cautionary tale about a time when sex education and birth control were not readily available to single women.



Jeanette 2011

What these women have to say is critical to current debates about an adoptee’s right to access their original birth certificate and family medical history.

Hear what they have to say now.

“There was a clear social category for unwed mothers and that was the slut category. That was the ‘You must not come from a very good home’ category. I think it was impossible for my parents to get past those feelings and to see me as somebody who needed some help from them.” —*Deborah*

“The decision was made that I would be sent away and that our baby would be put up for adoption. I just felt like I had done this horrific thing...and I was not in any position to protest or say what I wanted. Certainly, I wasn’t in any position to say, ‘Is there any way that my baby wouldn’t have to be taken?’” —*Lydia*

“I had to go sign the papers and I said, ‘Can I have some more time?’ They said, ‘No, you can’t have any more time.’ They never told me I had three months to change my mind.” —*Margy*

“Not knowing your options is the same as not having any options.” —*Laurie*

“I was scared for my baby all those years. I never slept though the night. I never made it through a night without wondering how she was.” —*Sue*

“I suffered this alone for 21 years so everyone around me would be comfortable. Don’t talk about it because it makes us uncomfortable. And I didn’t.” —*Nancy*

“This young woman that they locked away was not allowed to have her voice. People did not want to hear what she had to say. She wanted her son.” —*Lydia*

The women that the feminist movement forgot.

Historical Background - A GIRL LIKE HER

Most people equate the 1960s with a time of free love, yet few understand the actual lived experiences of women from that era who became pregnant outside of marriage.

Between 1945 and 1973, an unprecedented 1.5 million women in the United States lost children to adoption under enormous social pressure.

They were expelled from high schools and colleges and forced to leave jobs because they were pregnant.

Most were sent away to distant relatives or to maternity homes where they gave birth to their first child, left it behind, and returned home alone. They were advised to keep their secret, move on and forget.

They were shamed into secrecy and, as a result, their collective story is not widely known.

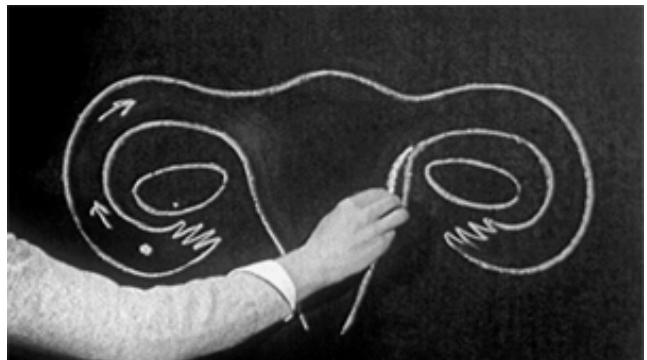
A GIRL LIKE HER brings this hidden history to light, as the women's voices collide with the authoritative narrators of films from the era—films that attempted to control women's sexual behavior and present adoptable babies as unwanted by their mothers.

For women of this generation, sex before marriage was rapidly becoming the norm, yet sex education still meant watching a scratchy movie with egg and sperm meeting in some mysterious place.

It was not until the 1972 *Eisenstadt v. Baird* Supreme Court decision that single men and women in every state were legally entitled to contraceptives.

Before Title IX (1972), if a young woman became pregnant while in high school or college, she could be immediately expelled. If she kept her child she could not return.

Never-married women with children were stigmatized, ostracized, and discriminated against in the workplace and in housing. An unmarried teacher or nurse could not return to her job if she kept her child.



Despite these pressures, society viewed adoption as a choice, a personal decision made by a woman who had weighed all of her options and ultimately chose placement over parenting.

A GIRL LIKE HER – SCREENINGS, 2012

Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, April 2012 – US PREMIERE
Q & A with Director

Minneapolis/St. Paul International Film Festival, April 2012
Q & A with Director, reception sponsored by Concerned United Birthparents

American Adoption Congress, National Conference, April 2012
Denver Colorado, Q & A with Director

AFI-Discovery Channel SILVERDOCS Documentary Festival, June 2012
Q & A with Director

Flickers-Rhode Island International Film Festival, August 2012
Grand Prize, Providence Film Festival Award, 2012

Montreal World Film Festival, August 2012 – CANADIAN PREMIERE

University of North Carolina School of Medicine, September 2012
Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Chapel Hill, NC
Q & A with Director

Milwaukee Film Festival, October 2012
Q & A with Director, Panel Discussion

Mill Valley Film Festival, October 2012

New Orleans Film Festival, October 2012
Q & A with Director and surrendering mother featured in the film

Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival, October 2012

Origins Canada, Adoption Experience Conference, October 2012
Toronto, Canada, keynote address and Q & A by Director

Rocky Mountain Women's Film Festival, November 2012
Q & A with Director

San Francisco Documentary Film Festival, November 2012

IDFA -- International Documentary Festival, Amsterdam, November 2012 – EUROPEAN PREMIERE
Q & A with Director

The Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, November 2012
Q & A with Director

Cleveland State University / Co-sponsored by Adoption Network Cleveland, November 2012
Q & A with Director, panel discussion with cinematographer and surrendering mothers

WATCH DOCS, Human Rights Film Festival, December 2012
Warsaw, Poland, traveling throughout Poland in 2013

see agirllikeher.com website for updates

Ann Fessler - Director's Bio

Fessler turned to the subject of adoption in 1989 after being approached by a woman who thought Ann might be the daughter she had surrendered for adoption forty years earlier. Though the woman was not her mother, Fessler—an adoptee—was profoundly moved by the experience. The conversation that ensued changed the focus of her work.

Since that time Fessler has produced three films, audio and video installations, and a non-fiction book on adoption. Between 2002-05, she conducted over 100 interviews with women who lost children to adoption during the 28 years that followed WWII, when a perfect storm of circumstances led to an unprecedented number of surrenders.

Fessler's two previous short films on adoption, "Cliff & Hazel" and "Along the Pale Blue River", have won honors at festivals and have been screened internationally. Her book, "The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before *Roe v. Wade*" (Penguin Press, 2006) was chosen as one of the top 5 non-fiction books of 2006 by the National Book Critics Circle, and was awarded the Ballard Book Prize, given annually to a female author who advances the dialogue about women's rights. In 2011, her book was chosen by readers of *Ms.* magazine as one of the top 100 feminist books of all time.

Critical Praise for Fessler's film **A GIRL LIKE HER**

"Fessler offers a sociologically rich and important deconstruction of a devastating double social standard that was in effect in those days. In revealing the painful legacy that permanently impacted so many birthmothers, Fessler has finally and respectfully given them a voice and created a powerful collective portrait that will benefit everyone touched by adoption."—*Art Hound*, review by Geneva Anderson, October 6, 2012

"Precise, daunting, and also allusive, this story recalls those bad old days ... when ignorance, silence, and repression were the preferred social strategies ... decidedly anti-nostalgic ... heart-wrenching."
—*PopMatters*, review by Cynthia Fuchs, Film and TV Editor, June 19, 2012

"A Girl Like Her" Ann Fessler's haunting group portrait of women who surrendered their children for adoption in the 1950s and '60s juxtaposes their voices with stock archival images from an era when wrenching human drama was buried beneath airbrushed images of family and sexuality.
—*THE WASHINGTON POST*, "Ten movies not to miss at Silverdocs" by Ann Hornaday, June 15, 2012

"A Girl Like Her", a new film by Ann Fessler, visually expresses the trappings of an era unthinkable by the standards of today ... with a punishment that far surpassed the crime. Scenes in the movie unleashed all too familiar memories. That evening I grieved for all the young mothers and yet felt liberated to see that our ordeal had been real, not imagined."
—*Decree*, Journal of the American Adoption Congress, review by Donnie Davis, President, Summer 2012, Vol. 29/No.2,

Critical Praise for Fessler's book *The Girls Who Went Away*

"Fessler's thorough analysis of the social context of adoption in America between 1945 and 1973 demonstrates only too well how good intentions can produce disastrous outcomes. "The Girls Who Went Away" is a remarkably well-researched and accomplished book." —*The New York Times*, "In Trouble" review by Kathryn Harrison, June 11, 2006

"Wrenching, riveting" —*Chicago Tribune*, "Delivering Up Their Babies" by Maureen N. McLane, May 14, 2006

A blend of deeply moving personal tales bolstered by solid sociological analysis—journalism of the first order."
—*The San Francisco Chronicle*, "Deprived of a Chance to be Mothers" by Robert Speer, May 7, 2006

A GIRL LIKE HER

Logline

The haunting story of more than a million women in the US who were pressured into surrendering their babies for adoption in the 1950s and 60s, when “nice girls” didn’t get pregnant.

Short Synopsis

In the 1950s and 60s, over a million women in the United States surrendered children for adoption due to enormous social pressure. At a time when “nice girls” didn’t get pregnant, women were expelled from high schools and colleges and forced to leave jobs as teachers and nurses before their indiscretion was apparent to others. They were rendered voiceless and invisible—banished to the towns of distant relatives or maternity homes to give birth and surrender their children so they could start over with a clean slate. But did they?

The women’s stories unfold over images of an idyllic post-WWII period in America that continues to dominate the national psyche. Educational films from the time period offer guidance about dating and sex, and scripted newsreels paint a picture of adoption from an era when secrecy prevailed. As the footage illuminates the past, the women’s stories—which are eerily similar—form a collective narrative as they recount their experiences of dating, pregnancy, family reaction, and banishment, and the long-term impact of surrender and silence and on their lives.

Long Synopsis)

Between 1945 and 1973, an unprecedented 1.5 million women in the United States surrendered children for adoption due to enormous social pressure. They were expelled from high schools and colleges and forced to leave jobs as teachers and nurses as soon as their pregnancy was detected. Women and girls were sent to live with distant relatives or to one of the more than 200 maternity homes that existed at that time to take care of the “problem”. Women were sequestered until their baby was born and then left it behind, so they could returned to their former life and start over with a clean slate. They were advised to keep their secret, move on and forget.

A GIRL LIKE HER brings this hidden history and social phenomenon to light, through the voices of these mothers and footage from the time period. The film begins with images of the “idyllic” 1950s, a time filled with promise, hope and upward mobility in the United States. As the story progresses, this footage gives way to educational films and scripted newsreels from the time that were designed to shape the public’s understanding of adoption, and the sexual behavior of young women.

As the women tell their story the narrative is periodically interrupted by the introduction of a film within the film and audiences see the educational films as the young women would have seen them in a classroom. They paint a vivid picture of messages sent to young women and the fate that would await them if they became pregnant. Though these films were apparently unsuccessful at scaring women into abstinence, they were quite successful at perpetuating lasting and damaging stereotypes that helped shape the public’s perception of surrendering mothers, as well as their image of themselves.

The women’s stories--culled from over 100 interviews conducted by Fessler with women who surrendered infants during this time period—form a “collective voice” which stands in sharp contrast to the singular, authoritative narrator, present in the educational films and newsreels. The women’s stories unfold in chronological order and weave together as one voice, as they recount their experiences of dating, pregnancy, family reaction, banishment, surrender and, in some cases, reunion. The film ends with contemporary footage that depicts the suburbs and rural communities where the women currently live, and yearbook pictures of the surrendering mothers from the time of their pregnancies—beautiful young women full of hope and promise—who were just beginning understand their depth of their loss.

Keywords

Women, Women’s History, Adoption, American Culture, Human Rights, Social Justice, Reproductive Rights, Single Mothers, Baby-Boom Generation, Health & Wellness, Marriage and Parenting, Maternal Trauma, Grief and Loss, Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, Family Studies, Sociology, Psychology, Media Literacy.

A GIRL LIKE HER and Recent News about “Forced Adoptions” Around the World

The number of women who were pressured into surrendering infants for adoption in the US in the 1950s–early 70s is unprecedented, but coercion is not limited to the time period, nor is it unique to North America. Coercive adoption practices taking place around the world are just now coming to light. Countries like Australia, Canada, Ireland, Spain are addressing the “forced adoptions” that took place during this time period in their own countries and reexamining current practices.

Human rights violations against single mothers continue to take place.

Below is a list of selected 2012 articles. (Articles in red type indicate the inclusion of the Director, Ann Fessler)

USA

Adopted or Abducted? Dan Rather Reports, AXS.TV, Aug. 21, at 8 PM. Update of previous program with new developments in Canada. (1 hour documentary, broadcast on cable, available on iTunes.) - [click here](#)

“Adopted or Abducted?” Dan Rather Reports, HDNet, May 1, 2012) (see above)

“Adopted or Abducted? Veil of secrecy lifts slowly on decades of forced adoptions of unwed mothers around the globe” by Dan Rather, Yahoo News, March 27, 2012 - [click here](#)

CANADA

“United Church of Canada to hold mirror to its role in forced adoptions as families push for a national inquiry” *National Post* article by Kathryn Blaze Carlson, October 9, 2012 - [click here](#)

“United Church archives ground zero in search for evidence of forced adoptions” *National Post* article by Kathryn Blaze Carlson, April 22, 2012 - [click here](#)

“Spanish nun accused of stealing babies in another forced adoption scandal” *National Post*, Canada, Reuters, April 12, 2012 - [click here](#)

“Lawsuit accuses Quebec’s Catholic Church of coercing adoptions” *The Gazette*, Montreal, by Rene Bruemmer, March 14, 2012 - [click here](#)

AUSTRALIA

“NSW (New South Wales) says sorry for forced adoptions” *The Australian*, Sept. 20, 2012 - [click here](#)

“Forced adoption apology a ‘significant step’ for healing” *National Times, Australia* by Dan Harrison, June 23, 2012 - [click here](#)

“Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices” *Parliament of Australia*, February 29, 2012, 66 minute video of the report being delivered in the Australian Parliament - [click here](#)

“Social worker tells of forced adoptions” *ABC News*, (Australia) by Geoff Thompson, February 27, 2012 - [click here](#)

AFRICA

“Nigerian’s battle to keep her baby” BBC News, by Will Ross, Nigeria correspondent, Lagos, September 25, 2012 - [click here](#)

“Nigerian teens ‘being forced’ to give up their babies” (video report) BBC News, by Will Ross, September 26, 2012 - [click here](#)



Ann Fessler – Producer, Director, Editor

Fessler is a filmmaker and author. Her two previous award-winning films on adoption include “Cliff & Hazel” (1999), a documentary about her adoptive parents, and “Along the Pale Blue River” (2001), an experimental film about the search for her mother. Her non-fiction book, *The Girls Who Went Away* (Penguin Press, 2006), written during the research & development phase of A GIRL LIKE HER, was chosen as one of the top 5 non-fiction books of 2006 by the National Book Critics Circle.



Mary S. Lampson – Editorial Consultant

Mary Lampson is an award-winning independent documentary filmmaker and editor. Lampson co-edited the academy-award winning documentary “Harlan County, USA” (1976) and worked as an editor on many other independently produced documentary features including “A Lion in the House” (2006), “Kimjongilia” (2009) and “We Still Live Here” (As Nutayunean). She has worked with Emile de Antonio, Ricky Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, Barbara Kopple and, most recently, with Julia Reichert, Steve Bognar and Anne Makepeace, Michael Tucker and Jill Eikenberry.



Dennis Goulden – Cinematographer

Goulden has worked as a cameraman, editor, writer, executive producer, producer and director on hundreds of films and has received over a dozen Emmys. He was producer of the Montage television series for WKYC in Cleveland from 1965 to 1978 and in that capacity produced “I’ll Never Get Her Back”, a film that follows a young woman as she enters a home for unwed mothers and surrenders her child.



Mike Reid – Original Compositions, Pianist

Mike Reid’s songs have been recorded by Bonnie Raitt, Anita Baker, Bette Midler, Prince, George Michael, Nancy Wilson, Etta James, Wynonna Judd, Joe Cocker, Tanya Tucker, and Willie Nelson. He has composed more than 30 top ten country and pop hits, twenty-one of which have gone to number one on the charts. Mike Reid was a defensive tackle for Penn State and a 1st round draft pick for the Cincinnati Bengals. He was Rookie of the Year and voted NFL All-Pro in 1972. In 1973, at age 27, he left his successful career in football to pursue music.



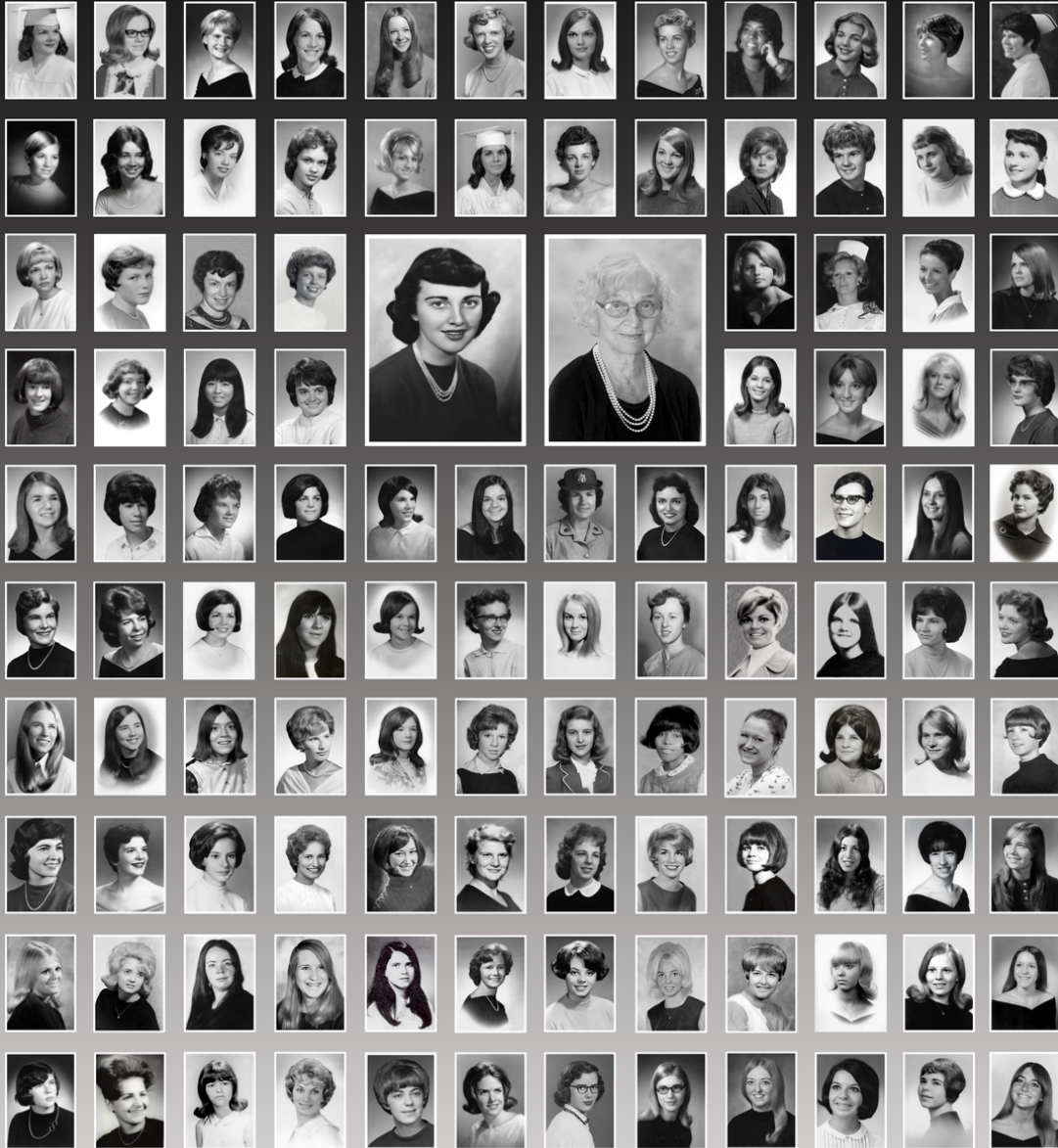
Jacquieine Schwab – Pianist

“I Wonder as I Wander” included in the film, is a traditional hymn, arranged and played by Schwab. She is a folk and classical improvisational pianist who has performed on the soundtracks for the Ken Burns films the Civil War, Baseball and Mark Twain. Her signature style defies easy categorization, fitting somewhere between folk, traditional, classical and new age music.



Mike Majoros – Online Editing and Sound Mix

Majoros has spent the last 20 years directing and editing feature-length documentaries. He was an editor and writer for “The Singing Revolution” (2006), director of “Rolling” (2004) and director and cinematographer for “Unfinished Symphony: Democracy and Dissent” (2001). He worked as a sound editor for several episodes of The American Experience PBS TV series Eyes on the Prize. His work has been screened internationally at festivals including Sundance and Berlin, and on PBS.



A GIRL LIKE HER

Produced and Directed by **Ann Fessler** Author of *The Girls Who Went Away*

Documentary Footage by **Dennis Goulden** • Music by **Mike Reid** and **Jacqueline Schwab** • Online Editor **Mike Majoros**

In the 1950s and 60s over a million unmarried women in the United States lost their babies to adoption.
Hear what they have to say about their experiences and the long-term impact on their lives.

agirllikeher.com