



# **Terrible Virtue**

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In the spirit of *The Paris Wife* and *Loving Frank*, the provocative and compelling story of one of the most fascinating and influential figures of the twentieth century: Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood—an indomitable woman who, more than any other, and at great personal cost, shaped the sexual landscape we inhabit today.

The daughter of a hard-drinking, smooth-tongued free thinker and a mother worn down by thirteen children, Margaret Sanger vowed her life would be different. Trained as a nurse, she fought for social justice beside labor organizers, anarchists, socialists, and other progressives, eventually channeling her energy to one singular cause: legalizing contraception. It was a battle that would pit her against puritanical, patriarchal lawmakers, send her to prison again and again, force her to flee to England, and ultimately change the lives of women across the country and around the world.

This complex enigmatic revolutionary was at once vain and charismatic, generous and ruthless, sexually impulsive and coolly calculating—a competitive, self-centered woman who championed all women, a conflicted mother who suffered the worst tragedy a parent can experience. From opening the first illegal birth control clinic in America in 1916 through the founding of Planned Parenthood to the arrival of the Pill in the 1960s, Margaret Sanger sacrificed two husbands, three children, and scores of lovers in her fight for sexual equality and freedom.

With cameos by such legendary figures as Emma Goldman, John Reed, Big Bill Haywood, H. G. Wells, and the love of Margaret's life, Havelock Ellis, this richly imagined portrait of a larger-than-life woman is at once sympathetic to her suffering and unsparing of her faults. Deeply insightful, *Terrible Virtue* is Margaret Sanger's story as she herself might have told it.

## **Terrible Virtue Details**

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## **From Reader Review *Terrible Virtue* for online ebook**

### **Jennifer S. Brown says**

While I knew of Margaret Sanger, I didn't know many of the details of her life. This book brings Sanger to life, showing her drive and her passion. It covers her entire life, yet I never felt like it skirted much. It was an insightful look at what life was like for women, what the freethinking community was like, and the challenges Sanger encountered as she paved the way for women.

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### **Scottsdale Public Library says**

I was looking for a book to read for Women's History Month and this title stood out. Learning it was about Margaret Sanger, I immediately resolved to read this. Margaret Sanger is someone I have always wanted to know more about. There is controversy around her, yet her life work left one of the most important legacies for women. She devoted herself to earning women the legal right over their own bodies and reproductive decisions. Ironically, her own children lacked her attention, as she traveled around to change the world. Author Ellen Feldman gives a very fascinating and accurate account of Sanger's life, as she consulted the Margaret Sanger Papers Project and Sanger's own grandson. I was surprised at the depth Feldman gave Sanger, even with her flaws. A great book club choice. Readers may also like "Loving Frank". A good companion to "Red Clocks" and "The Handmaid's Tale". -Lisanne E

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### **Jessica says**

#### **Get to know Margaret Sanger**

I've long enjoyed the historical legacies of Margaret Sanger, and I bet you have, too - but you may not have known it. She came of age many years before women even won the right to vote - but the lack of that great gift did not stop her from making her voice heard both here at home in the US and, really, all around the world. It was Sanger, you see, who led the way in helping women gain agency and power over their own bodies. She worked relentlessly her entire adult life to ensure that ALL women (not just the rich) learned how their bodies worked (many had little to no knowledge of reproduction), how sex led to pregnancy, and how to prevent pregnancy with contraceptives. For millions of impoverished wives and mothers, gaining access to this information and to birth control options literally saved their lives and helped make life better for the children to whom they did give birth. Although she died not long before the Pill was introduced in the United States, she did live to see her once radical ideas and activities embraced by women (and men) across the country. She also opened the first clinic specifically dedicated to women's health - and that clinic became the first Planned Parenthood! Her dedication to the goal of helping women take care of their bodies and their sexual health continues to live in in a very real way; for many millions of women, PP is the only place to find affordable and frank medical care!

Sanger's work, however, came at a terrible cost both to her and to those who loved her most, and this is where Feldman's book, which is a fictionalized account of Sanger's life told in from Sanger's own (imagined) perspective. She offers up a complex, driven, admirable - and yet deeply flawed - personality throughout the novel, and although it is fiction, Feldman clearly has done thorough and painstaking research. She brings not only Margaret to life for us, but also some of the great intellectuals and activists of the era, and

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## Rebecca McPhedran says

An interesting fictional account of the life of Margaret Sanger. A controversial woman who had ideas about women having control over their bodies. She is the mother of birth control. Her life was one of huge professional success, but very little personal success.

Her ideas have led to what we now know as Planned Parenthood, and the services that many women rely on. But her personal life was a shambles. Because of her traveling, her children basically grew up without a mother. She married, and had numerous extra-marital affairs, and abandoned her family in the United States, because she was facing a trial.

A courageous woman, with faults and frailties, who was able to save countless women's lives. I think if I want to read more about Margaret Sanger, I'll read a biography.

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## Jenny (Reading Envy) says

*"No woman can call herself free until she can choose when and how often she will become a mother."*

Margaret Sanger played an essential role in establishing access to birth control for women in the United States in the 20th century. She did so while the state's obscenity laws *prohibited* non-doctors from disseminating birth control information, while Anthony Comstock and the Society for the Suppression of Vice had free reign to censor materials being sent through the post office (and more! For another account of how that organization violated freedom of press, a good read is *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's Ulysses*), while even the President of the USA gave speeches equating childbearing with patriotism.

This novel tells the story of Margaret from teenage years up until her death. I have to admit that I am more likely to consume history in this form, and for the most part found it very readable. I felt the author shied away a bit from the juicy parts (Margaret believed in free love and had multiple relationships, was active in anarchist and communist circles, and those parts are mentioned only in passing) and overdid it on the foreshadowing. I appreciated the many historical tidbits, for instance this is the first time I've ever seen Aimee Semple McPherson presented as a villainous quack (Margaret is portrayed as being very envious of her success!) while Margaret tries to hide her involvement in Rosicrucian philosophy. I would have loved more about this part of her life - Emma Goldman runs around in the background but was crucial to her in two ways and I would have liked to see more on their friendship or mutual acquaintances. Or perhaps I have always wanted to read more about Emma.

Sanger endured jail time, court cases, even a period of exile from the United States, as she pursued her belief that women of all income levels deserved access to birth control (meaning: not just the wealthy.) The controversy has lived longer than she has! Even now, the first page of Google results are still half factual biographical information and half websites linking her (and by association, Planned Parenthood) with racist eugenic policy making. The author attempts to address the common criticisms of Sanger by having her defend them in her voice, but I am not sure that works well in the flow of the story (and is one place I would have appreciated a historical treatment to get all the information.) There are also periodic moments where other characters are given a voice through letters they've written to Margaret, usually in the tone of "this is

how you wronged me." I appreciated multiple perspectives but they did not ring as true as Margaret's voice.

*I received a copy of this from the publisher through Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review.*

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### **Annie says**

*Terrible Virtue*, by Ellen Feldman, is one of the most directly relevant pieces of historical fiction I've read in a long time. I can usually find connections between the news and what I've been reading; it's how my brain works. But I genuinely hope that *Terrible Virtue* gets a lot of attention when it comes out next month. Feldman's book is a fictional account of the life and work of birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger...

*Read the rest of my review at A Bookish Type. I received a free copy of this book from Edelweiss, in exchange for an honest review.*

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### **Sarah Beth says**

I received an uncorrected proof copy of this novel from HarperCollins.

Told in the first person, this novel follows the life of Margaret Sanger, who worked tirelessly throughout the early twentieth century to give women access to reproductive rights. Indeed, it was Margaret Sanger who first coined the term "birth control," because she believed every woman had a right to control when and how many times she would call herself a mother. This novel opens with young Margaret living in abject poverty, watching her mother slowly killed by pregnancy after pregnancy. This childhood would shape her views and lead her to fight tirelessly, even in the face of criminal charges and neglect of her own children so that no woman would have to watch her children go hungry and her own body waste away, because she had no way of preventing an annual pregnancy.

The novel makes it very clear that its narrator Margaret is a feminist and a liberal; "We were committed to sexual equality. We believed that women as well as men had the right, the duty, to use their God-given bodies as well as men had the right, the duty, to use their God-given bodies to live as fully as possible" (46). Although it seems as if many of her social aims were admirable and well-intentioned, she also seems to have alienated and angered many. This is conveyed through the use of letters addressed to Margaret interspersed throughout the text, written by those that knew her. For instance, one colleague writes to her saying, "You needed followers and admirers. No, more than that, you needed lackeys and sycophants. And you had them in droves, though I will never understand the spell you cast" (210). She is also critical of Margaret taking all the credit herself, saying, "To hear you tell it, Margaret Sanger created the birth control movement as single-handedly as the Lord created the universe" (210). Margaret comes across as less than a likeable character.

However, aside from disliking the narrator, my main complaint with this book was it relied far more on the narrator providing a litany of her life events than it did on action. It felt as if the author had done immense research on the historical figure of Margaret Sanger and then attempted to weave too much historical fact into a novel. For instance, upon meeting Havelock Ellis, the narrator says, "Later, when he would erase my name from his autobiography for fear of offending his wife [...]" (120). At times I wondered why the author didn't just write a biography rather than awkwardly having her narrator tell the reader extraneous facts throughout this novel. Because of its reliance on telling rather than show, this novel functions more as a

fictional autobiography than a novel about a historical character.

Although Margaret Sanger is to be lauded for her accomplishments and I appreciated learning more about her through this novel, the style of its narration ultimately prevented me from fully enjoying this book.

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## **Holly Weiss says**

Two words describe Ellen Feldman's historical fiction novel about Margaret Sanger: Relevant and controversial. Margaret Sanger fought a fight for the good of downtrodden women, all the while leading a personal life open to question.

It is well known that American women had few rights in 1900. Because of social convention, fears of pregnancy hovered over them like dark clouds. Margaret Sanger, intent on improving her own position in society, and mourning the state of her own mother (who gave birth to thirteen children paying for it with her health), eventually devoted herself to the cause of legalizing contraception. Eager to bettering lives of women faced with unwanted pregnancies, abortion, and shame, she played a pivotal role in legalizing birth control for women. Her mission: To give women of all economic levels access to birth control in the United States. This trailblazer was accused of muddying the waters and met opposition by:

- Imprisonment
- Court cases
- Exile to England
- Journalistic censure

In Sanger's voice, Feldman addresses the common criticisms leveled against the feminist and mother of the birth control movement. She focuses a lens on Margaret Sanger's enigmatic personal life. Sanger, one of thirteen siblings, mourned her mother's premature death. The daughter of an alcoholic father, she married with trepidation. A trained nurse, she suffered from tuberculosis. Frightened of the responsibility, Sanger became a wife and mother. She broke sexual taboos and struggled with family responsibility. She triumphed in the establishment of Planned Parenthood, but sacrificed her family. Her life ended in heartbreak and isolation.

Historically accurate, the book hinges on a first person narrative by Sanger, which downplays the events surrounding the birth control movement in favor of her own personal agenda. Pocket narratives by her children and husbands fill in detail. If the reader can move past Sanger's self-focused aggrandizement, he will cheer, chide and salute the strides made for the female sex. On the cusp of Planned Parenthood's centennial in October 2016, Miss Feldman successfully navigates the controversy over the pioneer who sacrificed personally for the good of all women.

The title stems from a Margaret Sanger quote from 1914:

“It is only rebel woman, when she gets out of the habits imposed on her by bourgeois convention, who can do some deed of terrible virtue.”

I thank Harper Collins for the advance readers copy.

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## **Katie/Doing Dewey says**

**Summary:** This was a fascinating story, but given that it was fictionalized, I'd particularly have liked to feel more of an emotional connection.

This is the "story of one of the most fascinating and influential figures of the twentieth century: Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood—an indomitable woman who, more than any other, and at great personal cost, shaped the sexual landscape we inhabit today. This complex enigmatic revolutionary was at once vain and charismatic, generous and ruthless, sexually impulsive and coolly calculating—a competitive, self-centered woman who championed all women, a conflicted mother who suffered the worst tragedy a parent can experience." (Source)

I was intrigued by this book because of both the description of Margaret Sanger's complicated personality and because of the historical significance of her life. The book delivered on both counts. Margaret Sanger's work, her personal motivation, and the change she helped facilitate were the centerpiece of this book. Although I can't speak to the accuracy of any aspect of this fictionalized account of her life, the author certainly presented many perspectives on Margaret Sanger's life and personality as well. Unfortunately, the way these other perspectives were injected into the story was one of my least favorite parts of the book. Random sections broke from the mostly third person description of Margaret's story, with commentary on her life written as though a family member or acquaintance was talking to Margaret. I found these sections disruptive.

I found the story hard to emotionally connect with because of these disruptions and for two other reasons as well. First, the author skipped almost all the most important moments in Margaret's life. At the times when Margaret would be expected to be most emotional, we only heard about events after the fact. Secondly, the author didn't include much speculation about Margaret's emotions. In a nonfiction account, I'd prefer that. At the point an author has gone to the trouble of making things up, I'd like some made up emotions to make the story read like engaging fiction. In my ARC, I was double annoyed because there was no note letting us know what was fictional about the account. This meant that I got neither the emotional engagement of fiction nor the education of nonfiction.

Despite spending a long time outlining my one complaint - lack of emotional engagement - I did enjoy this book overall. Although I'm not going to rave about it and push it on you, if you're at all interested in the topic, I would recommend giving this a chance. I think this would pair very well with some nonfiction to help you determine what parts of this book are fact or fiction.

For some other perspectives, check out the other stops on the tour.  
This review was originally posted on Doing Dewey

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## **Karen says**

Margaret Sanger had a rough childhood; born in 1879, as one of eleven children. Her miserable mother and drunk father had little to share amongst their many children. The older girls escaped as quickly as possible and Margaret tended to many of the younger ones. With a sharp eye and quick wit Margaret found herself wanting more than the average woman and she refused to believe this was not possible. As she grew both in age and maturity, Margaret married and became a mother to her own three children. She had a lifelong love



of learning and thirst for freedom and equality that often could not be quenched. While rebels and socialists fought for rights and the vote, Margaret's part time nursing position brought her to the tenements along New York's lower east side. While her political friends held dinners where they discussed world views and downed champagne, Margaret climbed the stairwells of decrepit buildings where dreams were crushed and women were dying. These women asked – no, they begged - Margaret for a way to stop having more babies. There were no alternatives for these women and no restraints for these men they were married to. Margaret spent her entire adult life fighting to establish birth control and planned parenthood. She was an outspoken character that was said to embellish the facts but much of what she fought for changed the lives of innumerable women. We are still fighting for these rights. These legal rights that are made by men. Do I have to tell you this is a must read? Author Ellen Feldman narrates this easy to follow story, the life of a woman that to this day continues to reach out to us. Read it and decide for yourself, but please read it.

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### **Rebecca Foster says**

**(DNF @ 25%)** Another case of expectations too high and payoff too little. Fictionalized biographies can be among my favorite historical fiction, but the key is that they have to do something that a biography doesn't do. They have to shape a story that goes beyond the chronology of what happened to whom and when. This novel about contraception activist Margaret Sanger failed to tell me anything I didn't already know from *The Birth of the Pill*, a more engaging book all round. If anything this left me more confused about why Sanger consented to marriage and motherhood. These cringe-worthy lines try to explain it: "His [Bill's] sex upended the world. His love filled the hole my childhood had carved out of me. Maybe that was the reason I married him." **(2.5)**

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### **Diane says**

There has been a recent trend of historical novels featuring women many of us don't know much about. Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife* about Hadley Hemingway, Ernest's first wife, began the trend a few years ago, and some more recent ones include McLain's *Circling the Sun* (about aviatrix Beryl Markham) and a book I recently loved and reviewed *The First Daughter*, about Thomas' Jefferson's daughter Patsy. ([My review here](#))

Ellen Feldman's *Terrible Virtue* tells the story of Margaret Sanger, widely regarded as the woman who helped bring about birth control education for women and the founder of Planned Parenthood. I didn't know much about Sanger, so I was curious to read more about her.

Sanger's mother had thirteen children and her father was an alcoholic who fancied himself a socialist atheist philosopher. Sanger watched her mother give birth year after year and become a shell of a woman, worn out by caring for so many children without any help from her husband.

Margaret was intelligent and thanks to her older sisters who raised enough money, she was able to attend nursing school. She also became passionate about social justice, as well as men. She had relationships with many men and believed in free love.

Yet she married Bill Sanger and they had three children- two sons and daughter named Peggy. Peggy was diagnosed with polio, a diagnosis Margaret disagreed with, and she refused to let her daughter wear a leg brace.

One day Margaret was asked to speak to some women about health issues, and she began to talk about contraception, which was a forbidden topic at the time. Women were hungry for more information and soon Margaret's talks drew more and more women.

She also drew attention from authorities and Margaret was arrested. Margaret fled the country for Europe, leaving behind her family. When she eventually returned, she devoted so much of her time and energy to the issue of contraception and women's health that her relationship with her husband and children suffered.

The story is told from Margaret's point of view, with some characters- her husband, her son, her sister, her lawyer and others in her life- telling their story in small doses. I think the novel may have been stronger if we heard more of their voices.

It was difficult for me to completely empathize with Margaret. She is, to say the least, a very complicated character. She was a pioneer in women's health, and her determination to help women understand and have access to contraception changed the world for women. So many poor women were trapped, forced year after year to have babies because contraception was not available to them.

But she wasn't a good mother or wife. It's one thing to say that her husband knew what he was getting into with Margaret and her extramarital affairs, but her children didn't deserve to have an absentee mother. They were sent a boarding school that was horrible, and at the end of her life, I wonder how much she regretted not having a better relationship with them.

I recommend *Terrible Virtue* as it brings to light how difficult life was for women because they didn't have any control over basic health care regarding contraception. The world changed dramatically for women once this happened, and Margaret Sanger was the one who changed it.

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## **Darth Vix says**

3.5 Stars

I'd like to send a big thank you to the author, as well as to the publisher Harper Collins and TLC book tours for giving me opportunity to read this book in exchange for an honest review.

*Terrible Virtue* is a work of historical fiction based on the life of Margaret Sanger, a woman who advocated for birth control in a climate that was definitely not friendly to the idea of women being in control of their bodies and futures. Since this is historical fiction, not everything in this book is going to be solidly factual but I did feel as though it read much more like a memoir than historical fiction which is something I ended up enjoying because I do enjoy reading books of that genre.

I am new to Margaret Sanger and I consider myself to be pretty new as well, to feminist literature both fiction and nonfiction. I am wanting to expand my reading of feminist literature so when presented with the chance to read this book, I had to and was really excited to read it. It was an interesting and light read although there were areas that I wished we were given more detail on. I am not super familiar with the life of Margaret Sanger so I'm not sure what in this book is factual and what is not but I do believe that it gave me a

good idea of her life, what she advocated for and what she went through because of her beliefs and her conviction. I do think that she is someone who is important in the feminist movement but I found it hard to really connect with her I think because we are shown both sides of her life - Margaret the Revolutionary and Margaret the mother. She was human and this book definitely showed that but if anything, I really really felt for her children and obviously I felt for all of the women she was fighting for. It just shows how much she sacrificed in order to research and fight for her cause.

I am giving this book 3.5 stars because I did like it, I enjoyed reading it and felt like I did learn a bit about Margaret Sanger. This book actually makes me pretty interested in learning more about her and the topic of the history of birth control. I definitely recommend reading this if you are looking to read more feminist literature or learn a little bit about the climate Margaret Sanger was operating in or even to learn a little about her life.

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### **Andrea says**

Margaret Sanger has influenced the lives of millions of women. Most of us know the name, but possibly little else. Ellen Feldman recreates Sanger's life and times in a fictionalized biography that shows Sanger in a sympathetic light, but introduces voices that offer competing interpretations of Sanger's personality and behavior. What seems unquestionable is Sanger's courage and determination. A very timely subject and engagingly written.

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### **nikkia neil says**

Thanks Edelweiss for this arc.

I didn't know a lot about Margaret Sanger before this reading this novel, but now I will definitely tell my daughter about her when she gets older. We forget about the woman who suffered so we can have freedom of choices and that needs to change.

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