



An Intimate Life: Sex, Love, and My Journey as a Surrogate Partner

Cheryl T. Cohen Greene , Lorna Garano (Editor)

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For the past forty years, Cheryl Cohen Greene has worked as a surrogate partner, helping clients to confront, consider, and ultimately accept their sexuality. In this riveting memoir, Cohen Greene shares some of her most moving cases, and also reveals her own sexual coming-of-age. Beginning with a rigid Catholic upbringing in the 1950s, where she was taught to think sex and sexual desires were unnatural and wrong, Cohen Greene struggled to reconcile her sexual identity.

An Intimate Life offers a candid look into the personal and professional life of a surrogate partner, examining the cultural and emotional ramifications of pursuing something most people do not immediately understand.

The memoir opens with Cohen Greene's work with Berkeley-based poet and journalist Mark O'Brien, whose essay "On Seeing A Sex Surrogate" was adapted into a major motion picture titled "The Sessions," which was released nationwide in October 2012.

An Intimate Life: Sex, Love, and My Journey as a Surrogate Partner Details

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From Reader Review An Intimate Life: Sex, Love, and My Journey as a Surrogate Partner for online ebook

Nathan Cola says

A clever autobiography of sex partner surrogate, Cheryl Cohen-Greene, of whom 'The Sessions', starring Helen Hunt, is based upon. Cohen-Greene recounts some her memorable experiences as a surrogate, working with patients suffering from physiological & psychological ailments preventing them from enjoying a fulfilling sex life. She also paints a portrait of her upbringing and relationships which shaped her attitudes toward sex and ultimately led her to surrogacy. An enlightening read that is sure to educate and possibly challenge your views on sexuality.

N says

I, like many, also read this book as soon as I finished watching "The Sessions." I thought that the movie was very touching and wanted to learn more about the real Mark O'Brien and Cheryl as well. Reading An Intimate Life was an eye opener and I was filled with compassion. The way she helped and worked with her clients was amazing, her personal story touching and filled with so much love and hardship. The best thing was that Cheryl always found a way to pull through with support from others and looking back to the lessons she taught to clients. I would definitely recommend this book!

Barbara Skuplik says

Like many readers, I picked this book up after the movie "The Sessions" (which was based on the author's life) came out in theaters. The author, Cheryl T Cohen Greene, who has established herself as a successful sex-surrogate, has an easy way of relaying her story which makes this book pleasant to read. You can tell that she is at ease with herself, and has the gift of storytelling mastered as a form of communication, most likely due to her many years work as a sex-surrogate.

I didn't know what to expect when I started reading this book, but I'm glad I picked it up.

Throughout the book, she makes it very clear that her goal is to bring "light" or understanding to her profession, and really educate people about what it is she does, and why it's so important. The openness and ease in which she talks about sex and her life, are disarming. She talks about her work without any sensationalism-- which I really appreciated, and brings a new meaning to the often overused term "sex-positive".

Throughout the book she emphasizes that she believes we should embrace our sexuality and be comfortable with ourselves, rather than treat sexuality as a taboo topic or sin. She accomplishes this without sounding scandalous, preachy, or overbearing.

This is a fascinating memoir presented in a clear, educated, and positive manner by a strong woman who has devoted her life's work to this cause.

ThatPickedReader says

Interesting life of a surrogate that seems self-edited at times not detailed enough. How did she become a surrogate--was there procedure or protocol involved or proper training? Qualifications?

Readers not used to being exposed to non-traditional lifestyle (for lack of a better term) may find her sometimes candid approach regarding sex as well as her own life unsettling.

The book is half recollection of previous clients, of which surprises me there wouldn't be MORE unique cases like Mark's (the first case she opens up with in the beginning) than the hum-drum more "common" issues that most people have, as well as half auto-biography. The writing style is sometimes overly simplistic for me. For someone with such a fascinating life the presentation of the material felt too simplified.

I would be curious what a biography would say about her life written by her children. At times the relationship with one of her spouses seemed at best questionable and at worst destructive.

Glad I read it, I just wished the presentation of the material had been better.

Henry Le Nav says

I guess I am one of the few who had never heard of the movie *The Sessions* prior to reading the book, well what can I say, I live under a rock.

I read the book out of a curiosity for the surrogate process. I have read brief technical descriptions of the role that surrogates play, but I was hoping to get a better understanding of surrogacy which the book delivered but only partially to my satisfaction. It is a memoir of her life with some surrogacy tossed in. For most people this book probably is the correct mix of surrogacy and her life. For me it was a dipping of ones toes in the waters of surrogacy. While her life was interesting, I was far more interested in the surrogacy. I think what I was after is Masters and Johnson delivered with her warmth, perspective, and human touch. I would have liked a deeper understanding of how the specific therapies and exercises would help with specific problems. I also would have liked to know how the field has grown or not since Masters and Johnson. But also realize that I have an interest in sexuality, a lay hobbyist, like some people are interested in astronomy.

I found it interesting that she felt arousal and could experience genuine orgasm with her clients. I would imagine that would be an essential ingredient in the surrogate process, and it has to require a special personality. There is a curious mix of professional detachment and emotional availability that I find fascinating. People in the therapeutic and counseling professions are always very careful to maintain professional objectivity and avoid transference. A surrogate is in the odd position of taking that out to the hairy edge. Obviously not every one can do this sort of thing. As to the question, is she a prostitute? Absolutely not.

I think there is very much a place for surrogacy in society. I think that it does need to be conducted under the auspices of a regulating professional body that would provide research, training, therapeutic standards, and certification to surrogates. The training and certification process should be difficult and expensive (like any

other professional education) which would guarantee the integrity of the surrogate and surrogacy process and would serve to winnow out those would be practitioners with less than noble intentions. I also think that surrogacy should be limited and a prescribed therapy as she described in the book. That is, a visit to a surrogate should be prescribed by a sexual therapist (the talk therapist) much like a physical therapy is prescribed by a MD. The results of each session should be discussed and evaluated by both the surrogate and talk therapist What I am driving at, I don't believe that one should be able to find a surrogate on Craig's List. I don't say this in terms of moral judgement, but rather recognizing that someone that has a sexual problem or dysfunction needs professional help...not some quack seeking to make a fast buck or indeed a mere front for prostitution. I also believe that surrogacy should be a treatment of last resort. In my own thinking, I would much prefer that a problem be resolved with couples therapy where a talk therapist works with the couple with counseling and provides exercises to the couple and all physical intimacy is limited to that couple. Of course the main difficulty with couples therapy is that it requires a couple. With modern dating where a sexual relationship is often established early on, having a sexual inhibition or dysfunction could make the notion of dating terrifying and as such make the process of establishing a committed relationship extremely difficult. This in my mind is where surrogacy can play an important role by allowing an individual to gain experience or therapeutic aid in a safe and emotionally neutral atmosphere. That is the client knows the surrogate relationship is limited and does not fear the pain and loss of a break-up with a committed partner.

Regarding the book, I feel that she did an adequate job of describing surrogacy for most people's tastes. It first and foremost is a memoir of her life and while surrogacy is described, it is not the main emphasis of the book.

I read the Kindle edition, which at the time of the review is not listed at Goodreads.

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Richard Wagner says

I have another swell sex-positive book to tell you about today. Anyone who frequents <http://www.dr dicksexadvice.com/> will already be familiar with my dear friend and esteemed colleague, Cheryl Cohen Greene. If ya don't believe me type her name into the search function in the sidebar and PRESTO!

Not only will you find the fabulous two-part SEX WISDOM podcast we did together, you will find a posting about the movie *The Sessions*. You've seen it right? It's the award-winning film starring John Hawkes, Helen Hunt, and William H. Macy. It's the story of a man in an iron lung who wishes to lose his virginity. He contacts a professional surrogate partner with the help of his therapist and priest. Ms. Hunt plays Cheryl, the surrogate partner in the movie

Cheryl also contributed a chapter on sex and intimacy concerns for sick, elder and dying people for my book, *The Amateur's Guide To Death And Dying*.

With all that as a preface, I now offer you Cheryl's own story: *An Intimate Life: Sex, Love, and My Journey as a Surrogate Partner*. The first thing I want to say is this book is it's not a clinical or technical tome. It is an easily accessible memoir. And that, to my mind, is what makes it so fascinating.

She writes in the Introduction:

"I started this work in 1973, and my journey to it spans our society's sexual revolution and my own. I grew up in the '40s and '50s, a time when sex education was—to put it mildly—lacking. As I educated myself, I found that most of what I had been taught about sex was distorted or wrong. The lessons came from the playground, the church, and the media. My parents could barely talk about sex, much less inform me about it."

What follows is a candid and often funny look into the personal and professional life of a woman on the cutting edge of our culture's movement toward sexual wellbeing.

Cheryl comes out of her conservative Catholic upbringing and her often tortured family dynamics with what one would expect—her own sexual awakenings as well as the conspiracy of ignorance and repression that wanted to stifle it. This is a common story, the story of so many of us.

"Starting when I was around ten, I masturbated and brought myself to orgasm nearly every night. ... If my nights began with anxiety, my days began with guilt. I became convinced that every earache, every toothache, every injury was God punishing me. ... I couldn't escape his gaze or his wrath. Sometimes I imagined my guardian angel looked away in disgust as I touched myself and rocked back and forth in my bed."

The miracle here is that this troubled tween would blossom into the remarkable sexologist she is today.

Some of the chapters in her book describe one or another of her hands on therapeutic encounters as a

surrogate partner, but equally important and compelling are the chapters that describe Cheryl's own sexual struggles as she moved to adulthood and beyond. Cheryl's acceptance of her own sexuality enables her to build a career out of helping others do the very same thing.

"Everyone has a right to satisfying, loving sex, and, in my experience, that most often flows from strong communication, self-respect, and a willingness to explore."

Despite the frank discussion of sexual topics within the book, there is no prurience or sensationalism. For the most part, Cheryl's clients are regular people, mostly men, who have pretty ordinary problems—erection and/or ejaculation concerns, dating difficulties, as well as self-esteem, guilt and shame issues. Cheryl helps each of her clients with the efficiency and confidence of the world-class sex educator she is. Most of her interaction involves her supplying her clients with some much-needed information, dispelling myths, and giving them permission to experiment. As she says;

"I continue to be amazed at how solid education delivered without judgment can eradicate much of the guilt and shame that turns life in the bedroom into a struggle instead of a pleasure."

Her most famous client, Mark O'Brien, the 36-six-year-old man who had spent most of his life in an iron lung after contracting polio at age 6, was the author of *How I Became a Human Being: A Disabled Man's Quest for Independence*, in which he writes about his experience with Cheryl. This, of course, was adapted into a film, *The Sessions*, which I mentioned above. For her part, Cheryl delivers a most poignant remembrance of Mark early in her book.

"I explained Sensual Touch to Mark. Although he was paralyzed, he still had sensation all over his body, so he would feel my hands moving up and down. ... I encouraged him to try and recognize four common reactions: feeling neutral, feeling nurtured, feeling sensual and feeling sexual."

An Intimate Life chronicles Cheryl's life-long interest in human sexuality. Her life and sometimes-turbulent loves are on display, but in the most considerate fashion. She teaches by example. She's even able to speak with great compassion of her time living with and through cancer.

"As I inch toward seventy, I appreciate more and more how much I have to be grateful for and how fortunate I've been. I was lucky to find a wonderful career and to be surrounded by so many smart, adventurous, caring people. My personal sexual revolution auspiciously paralleled our culture's, and in many ways was made possible by it. I am eternally grateful to the pioneers, rebels, and dreamers who made our society a little safer for women who embrace their sexuality."

There is so much I loved about this book, but mostly it's the humanity I found in abundance. Her enlightened soul shines brightly from every page. Her no nonsense approach to all things sexual is an inspiration. And her perseverance to bring surrogate partner therapy into the mainstream is laudable.

"...what separates surrogates from prostitutes is significant. When people have difficulties grasping [that], I turn to my beloved and late friend Steven Brown's cooking analogy that I've so often relied on to help me through that question: Seeing a prostitute is like going to a restaurant. Seeing a surrogate is like going to culinary school."

Finally, *An Intimate Life* is the culmination of Cheryl's life as a sex educator, her surrogate partner therapy practice being just part of that mission. I highly recommend you read this book. You will, I assure you, come away from it as I have, a better person—enriched, informed, as well as entertained.

Cheryl, thank you for being in my life and being such an abiding inspiration. Thank you too for this marvelous book; now you can be in the lives of so many others who need you so that you can inspire them along their way.

Christa Wojo says

I was interested in reading Cheryl Cohen Green's story as research for my series of novels involving a character with deep-rooted sexual issues. This book was an honest look into the life and career of a fascinating person in a profession weighed down by stigma and ignorance.

Cheryl Cohen Greene begins by telling us how she suffered as a young woman in the days when a woman's sexuality was ignored, shunned, and hidden. Eventually, she met a man who understood and appreciated her sexual desires. They married and moved to California where she found her calling as a sex surrogate.

Between glimpses into her life are case studies. Some are touching, others are disturbing as they expose the intricacies of one of the most fiercely guarded aspects of our lives—sex.

Cheryl Cohen Greene's frank and simple way of sharing her emotional struggles makes a difficult topic easy to read. Her selflessness and generosity can't be overstated. She is a most special and giving person to be able to do the work she does.

I was hoping for a little bit more psychological information, but this was more of a memoir than a manual. I highly recommend it to everyone to open their hearts and minds, and gain a new perspective on what it means to be human.

Catherine says

I hadn't seen the movie, "Sessions," prior to reading this book. I was interested in learning more about Cheryl after reading some reviews and seeing an interview with Helen Hunt, who portrays Cheryl in the movie and was nominated for Best Actress for an Academy Award.

The chapters switch between Cheryl's surrogate clients and her work with each individual, and her personal life, discussing her conservative upbringing, her nonconformist marriage, motherhood, and what led to her choosing her career as a sex surrogate. Her story is unique and direct.

I found it very interesting that she had such a hypocritical, judgmental view of her first husband's choices. And her acrimonious attitude toward her mother's conservative views seemed self-righteous to me. There is a big contrast to her character. She's both compassionate and self-righteous.

What I missed from her clinical work was how her patients' spouses/partners were included/excluded from her work. Perhaps that was discussed with the referring practitioner prior to them seeing Cheryl, but she didn't address that aspect.

The book is very different from the movie. If you've seen the movie, there's a fascinating contrast between

this book and the film.

Suzanne says

This book tells the life story of Cheryl Cohen-Greene, a woman who has made a living as a sex surrogate, helping hundreds of people overcome problems with sexual dysfunction and fear. She seems like a very warm person and her writing style is quite engaging. The book consists of alternating chapters that tell the story of her life and relate her encounters with various clients who have left a lasting impression on her.

I found the chapters telling her life story much more interesting than the chapters about sex. Although she has led a pretty average life filled with lasting relationships and difficulties relating to her parents, a life similar to any average Joe, I found myself invested in finding out more.

As for the chapters on sex, after the first couple I found them repetitive and I came away understanding that sex, like eating or sleeping, can be very pleasurable but it is just another function of being human and unless you're the one having it, it's just not that interesting.

I highly recommend the movie based on Cohen-Greene's relationship with Mark O'Brien - a polio victim who spent his short life in an iron lung. It's moving and features so wonderful performances.

Lynley says

I haven't seen *The Sessions* but I had seen the British documentary *My Sexual Surrogate* on SBS (where else?) a few years ago and I must have been impressed because I remembered who the author was, but only made the connection after I started reading. That documentary was uncomfortably voyeuristic to be honest. And the male colleague working with the woman was ever so slightly creepy. But the warmth of Cheryl shone through. (To be fair, apparently it's much easier to work with typical male sexual problems than with women - this was mentioned and was clear enough anyway.)

It takes a special person to do this job. And now I'm thinking of the documentary about the Australian sex worker who specialises in working with people with disabilities, and how she had to move states to avoid the law. Sex work in general seems to be full of exploitation, but there's no doubt about it, workers such as Cheryl need the same rights and responsibilities as all workers, and governments need to sort this out.

Michelle Cristiani says

Like many, I came to this book because of "The Sessions," which I have not yet seen. I get the feeling, given the timing, that this book is a companion to the film.

Cohen-Greene explains that the difference between a surrogate partner and a prostitute is that seeing a prostitute is like going to a restaurant, and seeing a surrogate partner is like going to culinary school. I understand her point. Surrogate partners, like therapists, have to harbor a great deal of sympathy for clients. All of her clients are referred by therapists, and she does not fake arousal or get paid for specific sex acts.

Instead she focuses on physical self-comfort and communication. I can't imagine anyone NOT benefitting from that. Her choice of described clients range from a sexually inexperienced man with polio (the topic of the film) to a woman with body image issues, to an elderly virgin, to men with erectile dysfunction. It was interesting, even if it is very "Berkeley CA," in that it is a fringe subculture. Even if anyone can benefit, not everyone could, and not everyone would. I can imagine most Americans thinking this is really freaking weird.

The book is interspersed with her own life story, which is its own Hippie tale of open marriages and sexual shame. There was too much on a troubled relationship with her mother. She seemed not to understand why her family, a stoutly Catholic Northeast clan, couldn't approve of her shacking up with a college drop-out who she spent nights with before marriage. Her being on a mission to combat sexual difficulties is admirable, and her outspokenness is warranted. But then, she went overboard. That she went on the Geraldo show (in its heyday) to discuss the sexual landscape of her own marriage struck me as inappropriately oversharing. I'm not related to her and I was even disappointed in her – I can only imagine how her mother might have felt. She even called to remind her parents she'd be on the show without preparing them for the topic, and afterwards, she pushed the issue until she got a smattering of acceptance. I'm sure there are tons of people out there who think Cohen-Greene is just a nut-job with a high libido. The only time I thought they might be right was when she talked about her parents. For all her yoga and bodily acceptance, she learned none for her family, and that's a shame. She seems to have lost the ability to communicate with people who don't agree with her take on sexuality. But as that's not part of her job description, she could comfortably stay in her bubble – until now.

Janell says

3.5 stars. I came across this book while I was walking around chapters and it was their featured biography and thought it sounded interesting. I had never heard of a surrogate partner before so I found it quite interesting. The books starts off with "I've had over 900 partners". And I was like whoa! But I found the book to be more of her life with her husband and her open marriage than the surrogate partner. It opened up with some discussion and her history into how she got into this work but then I think that it went into alot about the dynamics of her marriage and the relationship with her husband so it kind of lost a few ratings for me there. It seemed like she really only talked about a few different clients. I would have thought that with over 900 partners that there would have been a few more interesting stories in there. But overall I would still recommend as it was interesting read and a completely different "occupation" then the most of us I would think!

Stephanie says

Found this memoir in the "staff recommendations" section at the library. Since I enjoyed the movie (The Sessions), I decided to give the book a try. Overall I liked it -- I would probably give it 3.5 stars. At first the chapters alternate between stories of Cohen Greene's work with clients and her own life history. I found the early chapters about her client work very graphic and hard to read. The later chapters about surrogate partnership are less detailed (since the reader is already familiar with various techniques and exercises). It was the memoir parts of the book that really spoke to me, however, Cohen Greene has had such an interesting life, and her experiences mirror some major cultural changes and events of the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s. Overall, since I really like memoirs, I found it worth reading.

Tania says

Touching, insightful
