

DISCUSSION and ACTIVITY GUIDE

Jane Against the World: Roe v. Wade and the Fight for Reproductive Rights

by Karen Blumenthal, 2020, Roaring Brook Press

BOOK SYNOPSIS

Jane Against the World is a deep look at the riveting history of the fight for reproductive rights in the United States. Tracing the path to the landmark decision in *Roe v. Wade* and the continuing battle for women's rights, award-winning author Karen Blumenthal examines, in a straightforward tone, the root causes of the current debate around abortion and the repercussions that have affected generations of Americans. This journalistic look at the history of abortion is the perfect tool to facilitate difficult discussions and awareness of a topic that affects every young person.

"Written in clear, accessible language, as lively as it is thorough, the book presents the issue as far more nuanced and complex than the often sharply divided "pro-choice" and "pro-life" stances it is often boiled down to."
(*Publishers Weekly*)

Karen Blumenthal is an award-winning nonfiction writer and a long-time journalist. She writes nonfiction for young people with the belief that it brings context to a complicated world. She lives in Dallas, Texas.

Other books by Karen Blumenthal:

Bonnie and Clyde: The Making of a Legend

Hillary Rodham Clinton: A Woman Living History

Tommy: The Gun That Changed America

Steve Jobs: The Man Who Thought Different

Mr. Sam: How Sam Walton Built Wal-Mart and Became America's Richest Man

Bootleg: Murder, Moonshine, and the Lawless Years of Prohibition

Let Me Play: The Story of Title IX: The Law That Changed the Future of Girls in America

Six Days in October: The Stock Market Crash of 1929

Resources for Teaching Sensitive Topics

These resources and others like them encourage teachers to plan in advance when tackling challenging topics. They provide pre-reading strategies and other tips to help create productive classroom discussions:

- "[Difficult Dialogues](#)"
a teaching guide from Vanderbilt Center for Teaching
- "[On Education: Teaching Sensitive Subjects in the Classroom](#)"
a 2/5/19 blog post by Karissa Neely on the *Studies Weekly* site



Discussion Questions

1. Abortion is a topic about which people have intense opinions. Share your thoughts about how to keep a conversation respectful when discussing a sensitive subject. Have you discussed other kinds of sensitive topics within a group? In those cases, were you able to fully listen to other people's opinions? What was challenging to you about those situations?
2. Think of a time that you changed your opinion about something. What led to that change?
3. How would you define reproductive rights? How are they related to women's rights? What topics beyond abortion do they address?
4. Discuss some of the factors that have limited women's input into the laws that govern reproductive rights in the U.S. What changes need to happen to ensure that women have a greater say in making decisions about reproductive rights? Ultimately, should women have a greater say than men on these issues, since women are the ones who become pregnant?
5. Some nonfiction books try to present the facts in an even, balanced way. Other nonfiction books are written with a goal of persuading readers to adopt a certain point of view. Which kind of book did you find *Jane Against the World* to be? Can you point to specific examples in the book that support your assessment? What are some ways authors can avoid showing their own bias when they want to present the facts in a neutral way?
6. Some people believe that abortion is never an appropriate choice. Other people believe that abortion as an option should be available to any woman without limitations. Still other people fall somewhere in between these two views. What are some of the factors that shape these differing opinions? Who do you believe should get to make the final decision in cases where individuals don't agree (for example: should it be the government or the courts, medical professionals, religious leaders, the person most affected by the decision, someone else)?
7. Were you surprised to learn that until recent decades, the major U.S. political parties were more evenly split on the abortion question than they are today? What impact have politics had on reproductive rights? Do you believe this is an issue that should be decided by politics?
8. *Jane Against the World* relates that abortion has not always been as publicly a contested issue as it is today. What are some of the factors that have turned it into a prominent debate in current times?
9. *Jane Against the World* details many different examples where accessibility to a safe abortion depends on factors such as a woman's race, class, and financial status. Does it change your own opinion about abortion when you think of it as a privilege available to certain Americans but denied to others?
10. What did you learn about the Supreme Court in *Jane Against the World*? Did anything you learned surprise you?

11. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) website states, “The right to privacy is not mentioned in the Constitution, but the Supreme Court has said that several of the amendments create this right.” How do you understand the right to privacy as it relates to the abortion debate?
12. Supreme Court justices are supposed to set aside their personal opinions when considering the cases before them; their focus is supposed to be on the legal issues. Imagine you are a justice yourself – or perhaps serving as a juror in a court case closer to home. How difficult do you think you would find it to set aside your personal opinions and focus only on the legal issues of the case? What if your own sense of right and wrong in the case is different than what the law says you must base your decision upon?
13. Marketers make careful language choices in their attempts to sway public opinion. Consider the terms “anti-abortion” and “pro-life.” Why might a group or person choose one of those terms over the other? Does one seem like a more persuasive option for a group that wants to attract followers?
14. Some high-profile people have changed their public stance about abortion over time. Do you think there are times when people pretend to change their opinion in the hopes of gaining something (for example, political followers)? Can you think of any specific examples where that might be the case?
15. *Jane Against the World* opens with this:
*“Imagine that you’re sixteen years old and still in school.
Now imagine that you have just discovered that you’re pregnant – or your girlfriend is pregnant.
“What does that mean to you?
“What does that mean to your life from now on?
“What do you want to do?
“What can you do?
“What are you going to do?”*
How might you answer these questions? What things in your own life have shaped your answers? Are you comfortable sharing your answers with the group? Why or why not?
16. On page 317, almost the end of the book, the author again poses the above questions but makes some slight changes. Why do you think she poses the questions again at that point? Why do you think the questions have subtly changed?
17. Based on the information found in *Jane Against the World* and your understanding of history and current events, what changes do you predict are coming for reproductive rights in the U.S.?

ACTIVITIES FOR DIGGING DEEPER

May It Please the Court

The Supreme Court has played a key role in the abortion debate. You can learn more about how the court works by visiting oyez.org. Under “Cases” you can find recordings of the oral arguments for some of the Supreme Court cases listed there. Listen to one or more of these recordings to experience a little of what it might have been like to argue *Roe v. Wade* in front of the Supreme Court.

One Doctor’s Story

- Consider this quote from Chavi Eve Karkowsky, an American medical doctor reflecting on her discussions about abortion with her patients: “There is no right answer, only one that is less wrong for each patient.” What is your response to that quote?
- Read the rest of Dr. Karkowsky’s piece, “[I Found the Outer Limits of My Pro-Choice Beliefs](#),” published in *The Atlantic* on 8/7/19. Did reading the piece as a whole change your initial impressions? What else did you learn? Did anything you read change your own views about abortion?
- Dr. Karkowsky also says, “There needs to be a way to talk about all the places in the middle of the abortion debate, where most Americans’ beliefs actually lie.” Do you agree that there is not enough discussion about “the places in the middle of the abortion debate”? Why or why not?