

FICTION

A Novel About Abortion, Told From Inside and Outside a Clinic

By Richard Russo

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MERCY STREET

By Jennifer Haigh

According to a film and TV producer I spoke to recently, darkness has been shown the door in Hollywood. “Mare of Easttown” was gritty realism’s last gasp. Now everyone is looking for the next “Ted Lasso.” I guess that makes sense. We’re emerging (sort of), much the worse for wear, from a brutal pandemic and six years of nonstop political and cultural polarization that shows no sign of letting up. Readers, like TV viewers and moviegoers, could probably use a little cheering up as well. I’m not sure Jennifer Haigh’s extraordinary new novel, “Mercy Street,” which takes on that most polarizing of topics — abortion — will cheer them up exactly, but it would be a terrible mistake to give it a miss because of its hot-button topic.

Why? Because, far from being depressing, the book is wonderfully entertaining, boasting a large, varied cast of vividly drawn characters whose company readers will find deeply rewarding, in no small part because lurking in their shadows is the devastatingly wry humor of their creator.

Take the following observation from Victor Prine, whose ideal woman would work as a midwife, grow her own vegetables, bake bread and make their children’s clothes. Marrying such a woman, he tells us seriously, “would be like investing in a generator, an essential power source.” It’s even more fun being inside the head of Claudia Birch, the book’s weary protagonist, who works as a counselor at the Boston women’s clinic that gives the novel its title. At 45, having given up on romance, she’s now dating Stuart, a divorced man with whom she has little in common. All he really has going for him is a vasectomy, but “their careless sex was luxurious, like driving a car with heated seats or onboard navigation, some extravagant amenity she’d once considered unnecessary and now couldn’t live without.” Briefly married when she was younger, Claudia found that “married life was like walking around in shoes that almost fit. She wore them every day for two years, and still they gave her blisters. Like most shoes designed for women, they were not foot-shaped.”

[*Read an excerpt from “Mercy Street.”*]

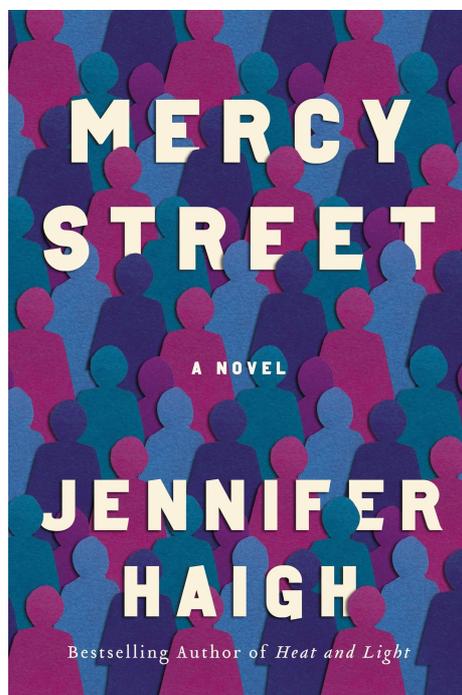
And therein lies the seriousness behind the book’s wit. Despite the fact that only women get pregnant, the laws governing abortion are often not “woman-shaped.” As Gloria Steinem reminded us back in the ’70s, if men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament, but they can’t and it isn’t.

The Mercy Street clinic, by contrast, *is* woman-shaped, offering, in addition to abortion, many other necessary services: information about “decent jobs, any sort of health insurance ... child care, affordable housing, antibiotics, antidepressants.” If the clinic’s clients were what Claudia calls functioning adults — that is, “healthy, employed, financially stable ... clearheaded, unambivalent” — it would be one thing, but most aren’t. Too often the women and, yes, girls who arrive at Mercy Street are in crisis — terrified, poor, emotionally or physically abused, sometimes H.I.V. positive and often drug-addicted. Their lives, Claudia explains, are like a burning building with a fire on every floor. Which fire do you put out first?

Outside the clinic are protesters who don’t see, or refuse to acknowledge, the fires on those other floors. To them, only abortion matters. The fact that “children, actual children, were dying every day — of abuse, neglect, wholly avoidable causes” — does not distress them particularly. They’re either squeamish about the female body, with its “secretions and hormones and cyclical seepages,” or angry about it, hurling anatomical insults that reduce the whole of a woman’s body to a single purpose. “This is what you are. This is all you are.”

Given that women’s bodies are the focus of both the clinic and the novel, it’s perhaps ironic that three of the book’s four main characters are men, a purposeful reminder that women are unlikely to gain sovereignty over their own bodies without some degree of male support, which often feels, to Claudia at least, pretty lukewarm. “I’m on your side,” one man tells her. “I have no problem with abortion, assuming there’s a good reason.”

“There’s always a reason,” she says. “Define good.”



The real struggle, then, is over how the abortion battle is waged, with protesters determined to segregate it from its social context and advocates for women insisting that this is impossible because abortion is inextricably intertwined with race, education, religion, political ideology and, especially, poverty. Most of the book's important characters are relatively poor and inadequately educated. Only Claudia has gone to college, and it's easy to see her degree in social work as an extension of her grim childhood in rural Maine, where Deb, her single mom, took in kids to make ends meet, leaving young Claudia to raise these "fosters" while Deb herself worked as an underpaid nurse's aide at the county home.

Haigh gets the details of both rural and urban poverty exactly right. The single-wide trailer Claudia grows up in is basically a shipping container, sweltering in the summer and freezing in the winter. Its wall-to-wall shag carpeting has "pile so long and dense that it seemed to suck in whatever landed on it. Spilled milk, puzzle pieces, Smarties. Cat food, thumbtacks, melting Popsicles, Lego blocks." And the homes of people like the Birches are only one manifestation of their poverty. Their processed food diets make diabetes a rite of passage into adulthood. Their TVs are never not on. Nor is urban poverty much better. Tim Flynn, Claudia's weed dealer, whom she recognizes as "her kind," lives in a "three-decker wrapped in grubby aluminum siding ... cheap workmen's housing, 100 years old and built to last 50."

And then there's religion. Because Boston is, as Claudia remarks, "the most Catholic city in America," it's no surprise that many of the protesters outside Mercy Street are Catholics who see abortion as a mortal sin. For tragically lonely Anthony, though, it's less about church doctrine than community. Brain-damaged by a falling beam on a construction site, Anthony now finds it difficult to think even simple thoughts straight through to conclusion. In his troubled mind, they swirl and collide and repeat on a loop. His only relief comes from attending daily Mass at failing St. Dymphna's Church and smoking weed, both of which calm his fevered brain. If asked, he'd probably say he was opposed to abortion, but his larger worry is losing the church itself because of "the thing with the priests." If St. Dymphna's were to close, Anthony's situation (he lives in the basement of his mother's house) would be that much worse.

The novel's scariest and most fascinating character is Victor, whose virulent misogyny seems almost innate. It really kicks in after he returns from Vietnam and falls in with Barb Vance, a girl he's clearly no match for. Learning that she's pregnant, she purposely goads him into a drunken domestic quarrel at the beginning of a long holiday weekend, then calls the cops and has him arrested. By the time he gets out of jail she's had the abortion she knows he never would've agreed to.

From this point on, Victor's rage against women plays at full volume, though we begin to suspect that his anger is a coping mechanism that allows him to ignore another truth he'd rather not contemplate — that women in general, not just Barb, see him coming and don't like what they see. Even those who might want a baby are unlikely to want his.

His other coping mechanism (if you're Victor you need at least two) is political ideology. Despite his becoming an anti-abortion crusader, abortion isn't, for him, a religious or moral issue. Victor doesn't think of women as women, but rather as "females" who have been put on this earth for one reason: to have babies. Though he couldn't be more different temperamentally from sweet, gentle Anthony, the two men have one thing in common. Both are profoundly nostalgic, Anthony for a Catholic Church he was too young to experience, with comforting indulgences and scapular medals and Latin Masses, and Victor for an America he's barely old enough to remember — the one before Vietnam, the sexual revolution and the women's movement, where white men were clearly in charge.

Now a white supremacist, Victor is particularly angry at white women for allowing themselves to be "outbred," four to one, by their brown- and black-skinned sisters. He gets this statistic and most of his other information from Doug Straight, the right-wing radio personality he's been listening to for decades. (In "Mercy Street," Straight serves a ghostly function similar to the billboard optometrist Dr. T. J. Eckleburg in "The Great Gatsby.") Under Straight's guidance, Victor's misogyny evolves into a full-blown antigovernment ideology to the point where he's stockpiling weapons for the day when white America finally wakes up. It's more than a little ironic, then, that Anthony's problem is his difficulty stringing thoughts together to arrive at a coherent philosophy, while Victor's problem is that he can do just that. Sadly, the common thread between the novel's important male characters is how profoundly trapped and isolated each has become.

At this point in a rave review, critics will sometimes introduce a quibble to prove that they're tough-minded and serious and not easily gobsmacked, so I'll offer here that some readers may be disappointed that so many of the characters in "Mercy Street" get precisely what's coming to them. They may suspect authorial — what? interference? artifice? — at work. But I'd argue the opposite: that it's the characters themselves who have been working overtime, their entire lives, to arrive where they land. Haigh isn't manipulating them, just paying close attention to their choices, large and small. That's not artifice, it's art. And I was gobsmacked.

Richard Russo is a novelist, essayist and screenwriter who won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for "Empire Falls." His most recent book is "Chances Are..."

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By Jennifer Haigh

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A version of this article appears in print on , Page 1 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: A Matter of Choice

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