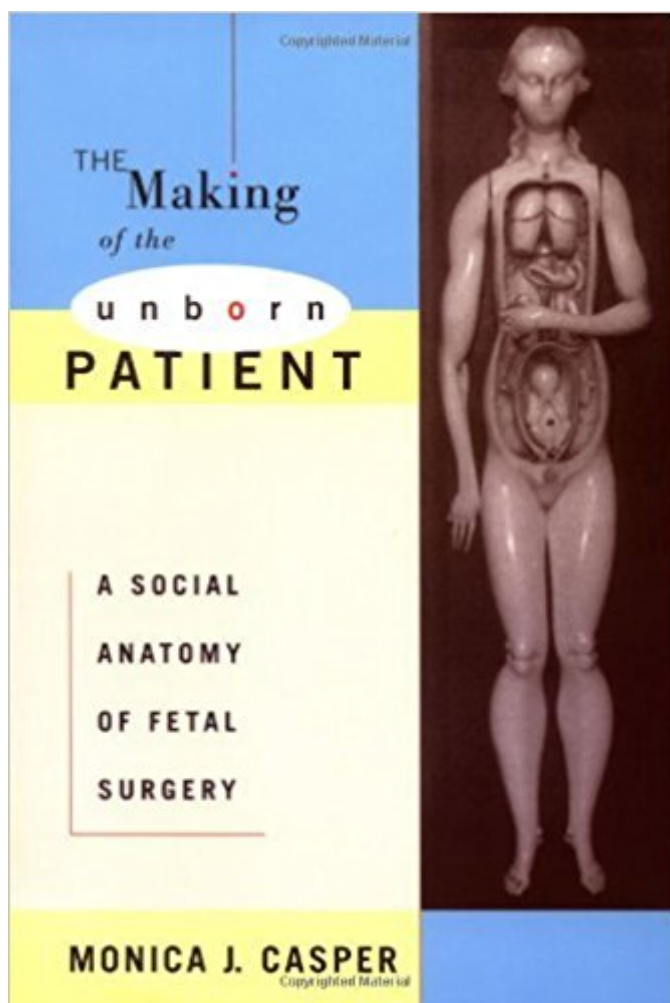


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Making Of The Unborn Patient: A Social Anatomy Of Fetal Surgery



Synopsis

The Making of the Unborn Patient: Social Anatomy of Fetal Surgery, Monica J. Casper, It is now possible for physicians to recognize that a pregnant woman's foetus is facing life-threatening problems, perform surgery on the foetus, and if it survives, return it to the woman's uterus to finish gestation. Although foetal surgery has existed in various forms for three decades, it is only just beginning to capture the public's imagination. These still largely experimental procedures raise all types of medical, political and ethical questions. Who is the patient? What are the technical difficulties involved in foetal surgery? How do reproductive politics seep into the operating room, and how do medical definitions and meanings flow out of medicine and into other social spheres? How are ethical issues defined in this practice and who defines them? Is foetal surgery the kind of medicine we want? What is involved in reframing foetal surgery as a women's health issue, rather than simply a paediatric concern? In this ethnographic study of the social, cultural and historical aspects of foetal surgery, Monica Casper addresses these questions. "The Making of the Unborn Patient" examines two important and connected events of the second half of the 20th century: the emergence of foetal surgery as a new medical specialty and the debut of the unborn patient.

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Customer Reviews

As the parent of a child who underwent fetal surgery for spina bifida (FS4SB), I was especially interested in this book. While it raises some very interesting, thought-provoking issues about medical ethics and "fetal politics", some of its musings are already outdated. It came out less than a year after Vanderbilt University began its remarkably successful program in FS4SB, which has greatly improved the potential quality of life for more than 150 children in the past several years. It's unfortunate that the real, unmistakable medical benefits of this kind of surgery can be overshadowed by the monolith of politics. The social anatomy of fetal surgery has changed radically since this book came out; perhaps it's time for a more insightful, well-balanced update.

I read this book because someone close to me had started working in a hospital that does this type of surgery, and told me some interesting stories. The book really opened my eyes to how fetal surgery and other medical practices are developed. After talking to my friend about it more, I was amazed to find that the types of things described in this book (basically experimenting on patients) are still going on! I think the previous reviewer must either be totally clueless, or is intentionally trashing the book because he or she is somehow invested in fetal surgery and is thus trying to squelch criticism. Or maybe that person didn't want the moral implications of the issues raised in this book to be discussed. If you are at all interested in this issue, you have got to read this.

I found this book to be a fascinating read, from the astounding photo of a fetal foot extended by surgeons' hands from the blank field of a woman's belly, to the behind the scenes look at research ethics. Casper put this experimental work in the context of fetal politics, a needed alternative to the perspective that views virtually all new medical procedures as "miracles." We need more, and more informed, public dialogue about medical experimentation, and we need more studies like Casper's. Her book is richly detailed, politically incisive, and historically and culturally informed. Few readers will be disappointed.

I haven't read this book, but according to a Wikipedia entry, it alleges that Sir William Liley was a devout Presbyterian. In fact, although he was respectful on a personal level towards religious believers, he was an atheist throughout his adult life and always insisted his opposition to abortion was on scientific grounds rather than religious grounds. This was very important to him, and I think if

he were alive he would be very disappointed at any suggestion that his views were motivated by belief in a supernatural being. Liley's widow and children are all still alive and any one of them could have given the author the facts of Liley's religion, or rather lack thereof, but clearly she didn't bother to check her allegations with those who knew him best. I have to wonder whether this error is a typical illustration of her accuracy. I would take anything you read in this book about people's views or politics with half a pound of salt.

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