

Book explores men's control of women's reproductive choices

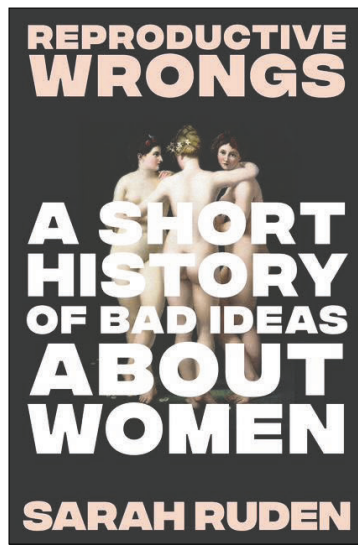
“Reproductive Wrongs: A Short History of Bad Ideas About Women,” by Sarah Ruden. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation (Norton), 2026. 220 pages, \$27.99 (hardcover).

The title of this book signals a definite attitude about how men have mistreated women throughout history. Readers who hold strong antiabortion positions can close the book now. Sarah Ruden is a Classicist and a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania who has previously published several books and translations.

Ruden’s first chapter is titled “Dawn of the Dicks” and discusses how the Roman poet Ovid inaugurates antiabortion propaganda. The author connects Ovid’s two abortion poems to the social legislation of the first Roman emperor Augustus, who struggles to reshape the Roman aristocracy after a century of intermittent civil war. Ruden assumes Octavian gave himself the title of Augustus (honored or revered one), although the Roman Senate actually bestowed this name. In Ovid’s second abortion poem, he raises the issue of

what would have resulted if Romulus’ mother had aborted her twins or if Venus had aborted Aeneas. Commenting on this poem, Ruden says: “To sustain such rage against substantially helpless people Ovid uses the kind of towering unreason that informs American antiabortion politics.... Those who in fact have little choice in whether or not to become pregnant, and cannot imagine how they will care for a single baby, are supposed to be able to save the world with only a little inconvenience.”

In Chapter 2, “Pregnant and Foot-Washing and in the Kitchen,” the author takes on the early Christian reproductive backlash. Commenting on the relative freedom and involvement Roman women had, as represented in Apuleius’ “Golden Ass,” Ruden says: “Christianity, after its initial wave of evangelism in the first century, had no room for such expansive, indulgent treatment of women. In Christian communities, women were commanded and shamed, as an entire class, into extreme



self-abnegation.” One additional source on abortion that the author could have explored is Justinian’s Digest. The next two chapters examine the influence of St. Augustine on attitudes toward women and the 15th-century book, “Malleus Maleficarum” (A Hammer Against Evil-Doing Women), on witchcraft and witch-hunting.

Chapter 5 is subtitled “Dickens Skills for Victorian Misery” and focuses on how Charles Dickens’ stories tend to focus on the positive outcomes of having a large family. Ruden refers to

Ebenezer Scrooge as a moralist – “people who had harsh but realistic opinions about what made life worse for the poor. Early, imprudent marriage was near the top of every sane list, whereas Dickens virtually insisted that it was a cure-all for those living on the edge.” The author goes on to say that Dickens “had a weird belief in the power of children to repair and elevate dismal situations, as opposed to a rational recognition that children are more or less helpless and in urgent need of care and guidance themselves, and that only exploiters, abusers, and hypocrites feel otherwise.” When discussing the influence of Dickensian imagery, she says: “A little girl’s tender gaze will melt any amount of adult woe, so it does not really matter that she is growing up in dire or squalid conditions; she is, like Meg ... an automated woe-melter, not a whole human being with her own imperative needs.”

After discussing the influence of Social Darwinism and eugenics on the reproductive rights of women, the

author turns to Margaret Sanger, who coined the term birth control, whose mother had died at the age of 50 after giving birth to eleven children and suffering seven lost pregnancies. Sanger’s American Birth Control League is now called Planned Parenthood. The most important British advocate for family limitation was Marie Stopes, who published three popular books on family limitation, married happiness, and motherhood.

In the final chapter, Ruden discusses the ongoing struggles over abortion and particularly raises the antiabortion movement’s parading of late-term abortion survivors, who testify to the horrors of the process, much as Holocaust survivors would. This was the most difficult section to read about.

The author has included Notes, Selected Bibliography, and an Index. Overall, “Reproductive Wrongs” is a good read that covers a broad period of history.

— Reviewed by Richard Weigel, Department of History, WKU.

Oprah Winfrey selects Stuart's 'John of John' for her book club

By HILLEL ITALIE
AP National Writer

NEW YORK — After growing up in a Glasgow household without books, Douglas Stuart didn’t know much about the literary world as a young man beyond the recommendations given by a favorite of daytime television watchers, even in Scotland — Oprah Winfrey.

“In a very classist country, Oprah’s club was one of the very first things that said books are for everyone. It was a powerful thing,” the 49-year-old author told The Associated Press during a recent interview at a hotel lounge in downtown Manhattan.

Stuart has since ascended high into a culture he once thought wanted no part of him. Best known for “Shuggie Bain,” he’s a bestseller, winner of the Booker Prize and Dayton Literary Peace Prize and he has seen his novels translated into dozens of languages. A few months ago, he found himself in unexpected conversation with the celebrity who had helped inspire him to read: Stuart was the recipient of what

people refer to as “the call,” when Winfrey notifies an author that she has chosen their work for her club.

On Tuesday, Winfrey announced the selection of Stuart’s “John of John.” Published this week, it’s his third novel, and returns to the country and themes of “Shuggie Bain” and its successor, “Young Mungo.” The setting is an isolated community in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, where art school student John-Calum “Cal” MacLeod returns from Edinburgh to live with his troubled father and beloved, but ailing grandmother. He re-encounters the conflicts that helped convince him he needed to leave: Catholics vs. Protestants, parents vs. children, traditional gender roles vs. the forbidden and sometimes dangerous love between men.

“I felt transported,” Winfrey said in a statement Tuesday. “I could feel every aspect of this remote community where tradition and judgment quietly shaped everyone’s life. Douglas Stuart brilliantly weaved a layered, compelling and yet so

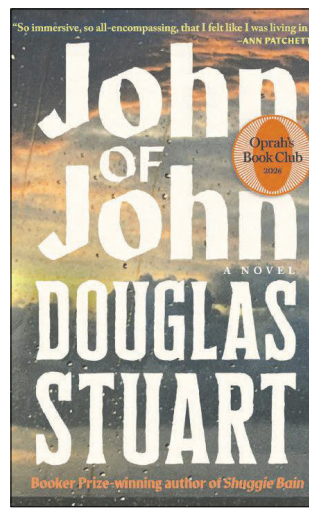
intimate a story of identity, what it means to belong, and the courage to claim your own truth.”

Stuart’s book club interview can be seen on The Oprah Podcast and other podcast outlets.

A sense of perspective A longtime New Yorker, Stuart knows he’s upholding a tradition of artists who leave their place of birth, but revisit it in their minds long after. Like Cal, he is an art school graduate who needed more space than his hometown could offer. But Stuart has otherwise proved more fortunate. While Cal struggles to support himself, Stuart had a long and successful career in design before finding even greater success as a novelist. He draws upon firsthand memories in “John of John” but also upon the perspective gained from setting abroad.

“I love the Salman Rushdie quote that you cannot see a painting until you’re outside the frame,” he said. “Leaving filled me with a huge homesickness, but it also gave me the ability to see things from a distance. I was able to understand that I wasn’t the only person with pain in my life. All the people around me were also carrying pain.

Stuart, born in 1976, was raised by a single



mother who died from alcoholism and poverty when he was 16, a tragedy revisited in “Shuggie Bain.” Discouraged by teachers to pursue a literary career, he attended the Scottish College of Textiles (now Heriot-Watt University) and received a master’s degree from the Royal College of Art in London. He moved to New York in his mid-20s and within a few years had risen to senior director of design at Banana Republic. He was a great success to those who knew him, but not to himself. By age 30, he was quietly carving out a new path.

A fateful party Like so many of his peers, he became a writer because he had to. His week was mostly filled by his job at Banana Republic, but the story which became “Shuggie Bain” so compelled him that for a decade, he

devoted much of his free time to it, recalling the “joy” of having even moments to think and reflect. He had no real publishing connections, but he did have the luck of a well-placed neighbor — Tina Pohlman, an industry veteran who has worked as an editor, agent and consultant. She and Stuart lived in the same building in Greenwich Village and met during a holiday party. Both remember Stuart telling her that he had written a book and was hoping she would look at it, the kind of request Pohlman rarely wanted to hear.

“I was immediately filled with dread,” Pohlman says. “Anytime that anyone at a party tells you they have a novel, it’s tricky. You have to be polite. I told him I would look at it, but that it will take a long time. I guess I was trying to make it as difficult for him as possible.”

But Pohlman decided to give the manuscript a quick look, loved it from the opening page and helped Stuart find an agent. After dozens of publishers turned him down, some, apparently believing that the public wasn’t ready for the occasional passage of local dialect, Grove Atlantic vice president-deputy publisher Peter Blackstock

signed it up. “Maybe because I’m from England, or maybe it’s also because I’m gay, it resonated with me,” Blackstock told the AP.

“Shuggie Bain” was released on the eve of the pandemic in 2020 and steadily gained attention even as bookstores worldwide were shut down. By the fall, his novel was a finalist for the National Book Award and winner of the Booker, an unusual achievement for a debut novel. It has since sold more than a million copies worldwide and helped convince Stuart that he could no longer regard himself as an outsider,

Stuart’s imagination often resides in Scotland, but he calls himself an American and feels very much a part of his adopted country, living in the Greenwich Village with his husband, Michael Cary. While long past the illusion that the U.S. has been spared the class system of the United Kingdom, he still finds a spirit of optimism and possibility.

“I love the feeling that success is not being something to be ashamed of,” he says. “I love that I got to start over here. Nobody knew who I was. Nobody knew where I came from. I got to completely reinvent myself.”

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 - Yesteryear: A GMA Book Club Pick by Caro Claire Burke (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group)
 - Hope Rises by David Baldacci (Grand Central Publishing)
 - Project Hail Mary by Andy Weir (Random House Publishing Group)
 - Strangers by Belle Burden (Random House Publishing Group)
 - A Deadly Episode by Anthony Horowitz (Harper)
 - Revenge Prey by John Sandford

- (Penguin Publishing Group)
- The Correspondent by Virginia Evans (Crown)
 - Isola: Reese’s Book Club by Allegra Goodman (Random House Publishing Group)
 - Top Paid Audiobooks (US Bestseller List)
 - Project Hail Mary (Unabridged) by Andy Weir (Audible)
 - Yesteryear: A GMA Book Club Pick: A Novel (Unabridged) by Caro Claire Burke (Penguin Random House, LLC)
 - Strangers: A Memoir of Mariage (Unabridged) by Belle Burden (Penguin Random House, LLC)
 - Famesick: A Memoir (Unabridged) by Lena Dunham

- (Penguin Random House, LLC)
- Theo of Golden (Unabridged) by Allen Levi (Simon & Schuster Digital Sales...)
 - Dungeon Crawler Carl: A LitRPG/Gamelit Adventure (Unabridged) by Matt Dinniman (Audible)
 - The Correspondent: A Novel (Unabridged) by Virginia Evans (Penguin Random House, LLC)
 - The Mysterious Case of Rudolf Diesel (Unabridged) by Douglas Brunt (Simon & Schuster Digital Sales...)
 - Verity (Unabridged) by Colleen Hoover (Audible)
 - Hope Rises by David Baldacci (Hachette Audio)