

# Book Review: *Against their Will: The Secret History of Medical Experimentation On Children in Cold War America* by Judith L. Newman et al.

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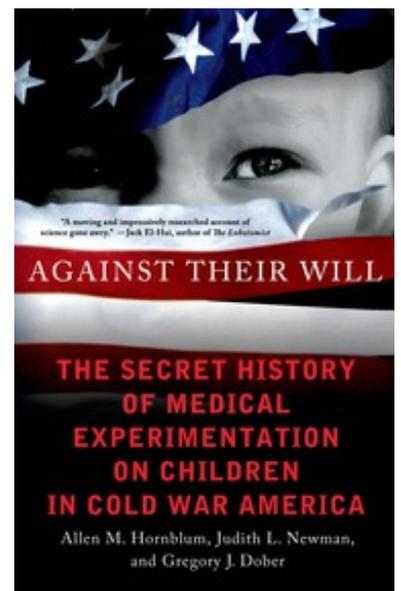
Michael Warren finds that *Against their Will* stands as a stark warning from history of the pursuit of scientific success at all costs. It is chillingly engrossing with detailed accounts of lobotomies and other horrific procedures, and also describes clearly how the American establishment was able through historical factors to permit such actions.

**Against their Will: The Secret History of Medical Experimentation On Children in Cold War America.** Judith L. Newman, Gregory J. Dober and Allen M. Hornblum. Palgrave Macmillan. 2014.

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The twentieth century was an era of medical breakthroughs, but below the victorious sheen there was a disconcerting narrative of suffering and exploitation of institutionalised children via experimentation.

*Against their Will: The Secret History of Medical Experimentation On Children in Cold War America* by Judith L. Newman, Gregory J. Dober and Allen M. Hornblum comprehensively charts mid-twentieth century psychological and physical experiments conducted in the name of scientific progress. Newman is an associate professor of human development; Dober is a medical journalist; and most prominently, the author Hornblum wrote *Acres of Skin* – a landmark chronicle of dangerous medical experiments in a Pennsylvania prison. The book is driven by the recounting of personal stories by subjects of testing, which gives an emotional and human lens to the book. However, the stories can be too brief and by the end of the book the reader is bombarded by a patchwork of harrowing accounts with poor commentary by the authors unifying the accounts. Instead it is left to the reader to complete that task.



Prisons, orphanages, schools and hospitals were the subject of experimentation in a variety of guises. The experiments ranged from minimal interventions to life-changing and total control of the subject's agency which could be as extreme as receiving electric shocks from an 'electrified cattle prod' as this was the only way of obtaining a 'pain threshold severe enough to impact children who had already grown used to pain'. The institutions mentioned offered a controlled environment where researchers could observe and control all factors affecting a child or adult (the book deals in depth with adult experimentation too) in experiments such as one where the lead researcher withdrew all items in prisoners' diets until the symptoms of pellagra were visible on the skins of unsuspecting prisoners. Devalued by society and the researchers experimenting on them, often children were repeatedly sexually abused by the staff of the institutions enabling the researchers.

However, the pain suffered by test subjects was not only physical but also mental. One of the most disturbing chapters of the book explains how a speech professor, Wendell Johnson, deliberately induced stuttering in non-stuttering afflicted children to support his thesis that children developed and exacerbated stuttering when they were reminded and corrected vociferously by those around them. At an Iowan orphanage, a group of children was chastised, lectured and were told they were stuttering (even if none was occurring). The study would come to be

known more famously as the 'Monster Study'. The children were left permanently damaged, but Johnson's theory had been proven – and accordingly, scientific merit had taken precedence over ethical qualms. The Monster Study is one of the few sections of *Against their Will* where the researchers are not merely presented as binary characters, but their inner strife at running the experiment is explored.

How did such violent and insensitive actions come occur at the heart of American institutions? Hornblum, Newman and Dober point to three factors which aided the rise of experimentation. The first is scientific prestige: In the 1920's and 1930's, or the "Age of Heroic Medicine" as dubbed by the authors, foundations were laid for unquestioned medical authority in the realms of experimentation. Medical scientists adorned cover pages of glossy magazines and set hearts aflutter with their daring deeds in the fight against malady and disease. Such elevated status meant medical researchers were at liberty to go unquestioned, which was often buttressed by prestigious institutions which sponsored their research (Harvard, MIT and many others). The Cold War was a catalyst for much of the research too: for example, one 1961 study attempted to determine the amount of regular iodine that had to be added to children's diets to block the uptake of a radioactive iodine they might be exposed to from nuclear fallout after a nuclear attack or accident. The third factor explaining the rise of laissez-faire experimentation was American society's lack of respect for mentally disadvantaged and orphaned children, which can be seen as an offshoot of the eugenics movement earlier in the twentieth century of which many Americans had subscribed to its principles. In essence, the hospital became a representative microcosm of a nation still grappling with hierarchical issues, as Ted Chabasinski (who was experimented on as a child) noted: "Doctors were an elite group... (the doctor in question) was shocking subhumans, mental patients, people who were not of the same value as real or regular humans". This contextualisation of the experiments is a massive asset of the book – explaining clearly the maelstrom of historical conditions needed to create such calamitous circumstances to readers who are living in a very different world.

*Against their Will* stands as a stark warning from history of the pursuit of scientific success at all costs. It is chillingly engrossing with detailed accounts of lobotomies and other horrific procedures, and also describes clearly in the first third of the book how the American establishment was able through historical factors to permit such actions. However, the lack of substantial narrative tying together decades of varied human experimentation means the book falls short of the benchmark set by others in the field for complete analysis (for example *Undue Risk* by Jonathan D. Moreno) leaving the reader shocked at the tapestry of horror he or she has just consumed, but none the wiser on unexplored themes which tie the experiments together (for example, legal issues of patient consent and the internal dilemmas of researchers).

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**Michael Warren** completed an MSc in Empires, Colonialism and Globalisation at the LSE in 2012, having graduated from the University of Sheffield (studying on exchange at the University of Waterloo, Ontario) with a BA in Modern History in 2011. He has researched as part of an open data project for Deloitte and the Open Data Institute, and worked for the All-Party Parliamentary Health Group. He is an Analyst at Accenture. [Read more reviews by Michael.](#)

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