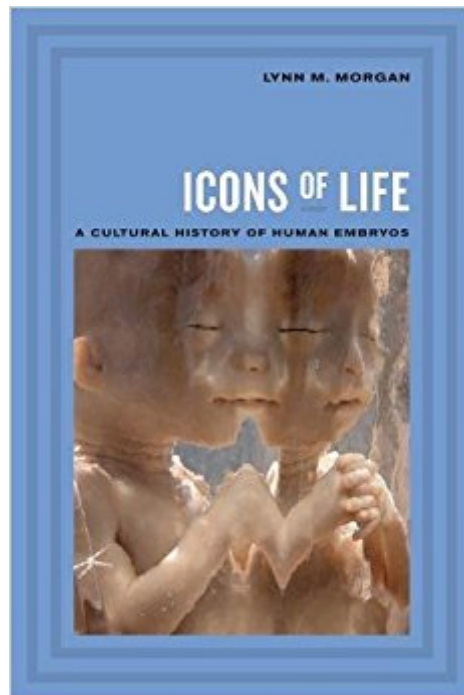




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Icons Of Life: A Cultural History Of Human Embryos



Synopsis

Icons of Life tells the engrossing and provocative story of an early twentieth-century undertaking, the Carnegie Institution of Washington's project to collect thousands of embryos for scientific study. Lynn M. Morgan blends social analysis, sleuthing, and humor to trace the history of specimen collecting. In the process, she illuminates how a hundred-year-old scientific endeavor continues to be felt in today's fraught arena of maternal and fetal politics. Until the embryo collecting project-which she follows from the Johns Hopkins anatomy department, through Baltimore foundling homes, and all the way to China-most people had no idea what human embryos looked like. But by the 1950s, modern citizens saw in embryos an image of ourselves unborn, and embryology had developed a biologically based story about how we came to be. Morgan explains how dead specimens paradoxically became icons of life, how embryos were generated as social artifacts separate from pregnant women, and how a fetus thwarted Gertrude Stein's medical career. By resurrecting a nearly forgotten scientific project, Morgan sheds light on the roots of a modern origin story and raises the still controversial issue of how we decide what embryos mean.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A remarkable work that seems destined to have a significant impact both within and well beyond anthropology." (Janelle S. Taylor, University of Washington American Anthropologist 2013-04-12)
"Fascinating and rigorously documented. . . . Recommended." (Choice 2010-07-08)
"Morgan's book is important. Icons of Life provides a crucial resource

for historians of medicine, anatomy, science and reproduction. (Isis 2010-06-01) "Morgan has done a masterful and truly respectful job discerning what it is that embryos might tell us about the shifting organization and logic of collective life. (Bulletin Of The History Of Medicine 2011-05-04)

"Fascinating! Icons of Life is an account of how we have come to know ourselves as ourselves, both a compelling human origin story and an engaging tale of intellectual curiosity, biological specimens, reproductive politics, and science. Morgan draws skillfully on her ethnographic toolkit to reveal the social context of embryology alongside the cultural and scientific work of crafting objective 'facts of life' from unremarkable flesh." Monica J. Casper, author of The Making of the Unborn Patient "How do scientists convert people into things? Lynn Morgan's book takes the reader on a wonderfully eerie tour through the cultural history of a macabre science, that of collecting human embryos. Not only is it an immensely valuable contribution to the anthropology of science, but it represents at the same time an extended hand across the field of anthropology, where the remains of human beings are still commonly passed around tables of undergraduate students; inviting us to reconsider the nature of our own scientific specimens." Jonathan Marks, author of Why I Am Not A Scientist

A Fascinating Read!

This is a very interesting book on the history of fertile research and what we know about the fetus.

Lynn Morgan creatively presents early 20th century embryo science and society in ways that invite us to see embryos, fetuses and their progenitors (women, men, scientists alike) in new and productively disorienting ways. She cleverly builds on feminist social science literature and highlights exciting areas for explorations. For instance, she challenges scholars to explore the "hidden sources" of embryo production, asking how they came to exist and were materialized. This, in itself, is a compelling directive, though the details of her historical ethnography makes the best argument for how to do this and why it is so important. The stories of Mrs. R and Carnegie no. 836 so strikingly and smartly show how invisibilized women's labor and contributions to embryo collecting were. Illustrating this through documenting the multiple dead-ends in Mrs. R's history - like facing the sad fact that Morgan could not find her gravestone in the hills of West Virginia - helps to re-entangle Mrs. R with Carnegie no. 836's long and well-documented story. Icons of Life is solid

and intriguing scholarship that gives readers a lot to think about in our contemporary "embryo-centric political climate." Also, as a teacher, I look forward to using this book to help complicate and put into relief some deeply entrenched assumptions about fetuses, women, life/death, and science. The clarity of Morgan's argument and the abundance of engaging examples makes this text well-suited for the classroom.

"Icons of Life" is on the ROROTOKO list of cutting-edge intellectual nonfiction. Professor Morgan's book interview ran here as the cover feature on October 6, 2010.

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