

Q & A with Joanna Lipper

How and when did you start making documentary films?

In 1995, as part of my work towards my Masters of Science Degree at The Anna Freud Centre and UCL, I launched an independent study of forty children from England, Ireland and the U.S. For this project I recruited, interviewed, and photographed creative children from diverse cultural backgrounds within their home environments.

The study culminated in my thesis, which was entitled, “Imagination, Self-Perception, and Creative Inclination in Children Between the Ages of Five and Twelve.” I went on to make my first documentary about several of the children who had participated in the study.

“Inside Out: Portraits of Children” screened at film festivals in the U.S. and abroad, winning several awards, and was shown at MoMA and The Museum of Tolerance before being broadcast on the *Sundance Channel*.

Children and teenagers are central to your work. What do you find most compelling about these early years?

I think that children and teenagers alternate between functioning as sponges--absorbing the adult world around them--and acting as mirrors, reflecting back conflicts and defects in an uncompromising way. Children and teenagers observe and internalize the problems and complexities of adult life, and yet at the same time they maintain a certain degree of innocence and idealism. I find this dynamic fascinating.

I am captivated by the heightened sensitivity, awareness, hope, resilience, emotional openness, and insight that so many children and teenagers have. So often these precious qualities fade with age as many adults repress and ultimately close down the most vulnerable parts of their personalities as a way of surviving the difficult process of growing up.

As a writer and filmmaker, I try to immortalize the fragile, deeply truthful, profoundly idealistic aspects of youth before they are crushed by disappointment, eroded by a malignant environment, or defensively hidden from view. I am very interested in the transition that occurs during adolescence and early adulthood as one moves from the dependence and powerlessness of childhood towards self-definition, the assumption of responsibilities, and the act of trying to break free from the constraints, pathology, and patterns that define one's own family history.

All of the main subjects of your book appear in photographs and their real names are used. How and why did you choose this approach?

My book aims to unmask teen parents, who are often obscured by statistics, lumped into categories, used as scapegoats and misunderstood. It's too easy to dismiss a statistic. It is not quite as easy to dismiss the face of a real young woman whose name you know, and who, judging by her photo, looks like she could be your son's classmate, your daughter's friend, or wears her hair the same way your granddaughter does.

The more vivid the lives of the girls are made, the easier it is to identify with them and the harder it is to dismiss them. By interspersing photographs throughout the text and by using real names, I was trying to break through boundaries of intolerance and ignorance to create an empathic connection that lessened the distance between reader and subject. I wanted the unifying force of human compassion to override the class lines along which American society is so sharply divided. I wanted to bring these young parents out of the shadows to face those who are shaping and influencing the world they and their children are growing up in.

All of the main subjects of the book and film wanted to use their real names. They granted videotaped interviews over the course of several years because they felt their stories were important and they wanted to record them and share them. There was no other incentive. I admire them for being so bold and so forthright. Their courage was rare and illuminating and I will always be extremely grateful to them. Without their long-term commitment to this project, there would not have been a book.

Your book is set in Pittsfield, which used to be one of the main manufacturing bases for General Electric. Jack Welch lived in Pittsfield for seventeen years. It was there that he ascended the ranks in the plastics division, starting out as a chemical engineer in 1960 and ending up as the legendary CEO who introduced globalization and downsizing on a grand scale, earning himself the nickname, “Neutron Jack.” In Pittsfield, thousands of workers were laid off. The teen mothers in your book were between the ages of five and seven when GE began shutting down their Pittsfield factories. The manufacturing base of the region virtually disappeared. What were the repercussions of globalization and downsizing on this community?

Globalization, downsizing and the shift to hi-tech definitely took a huge toll on Pittsfield. For most of the twentieth century, including the seventeen years during which Jack Welch lived there and ascended to the top ranks of the corporation, residents proudly referred to Pittsfield as a “tank town.” Corporate hegemony was the glue that held its fragile, dependent economy together and when G.E shut down its factories it had a domino effect on the culture, morale, quality of life and crime rate. The bottom fell out of the middle class.

The already dismal situation was further complicated by the legacy of the PCB contamination GE left in Pittsfield. This toxic waste crisis called for the intervention of the E.P.A and made it harder for the city to attract new businesses. The 2000 Census designated Pittsfield as one of five metropolitan areas that experienced the steepest population drop in the 1990’s. Increasing unemployment, a dwindling population, crippling budget cuts, a surge in crime and increasing hopelessness along with the influx of crack-cocaine and heroin, all combined to make Pittsfield an environment that sustained an epidemic of teen parenthood and a host of other social ills.

There are numerous parallels to the transformation that occurred in Pittsfield in the wake of factory closings and GE’s departure. Because of Michael Moore’s documentary film, *Roger and Me*, the story of GM and Flynt, Michigan is perhaps the most widely known—but there are many other cities and towns that faced similar scenarios as the twentieth century drew towards a close and many companies curtailed their US based manufacturing in favor of cheaper non-unionized foreign labor. Buffalo, NY, Schenectady, NY, Erie, PA, Louisville, KY, Evandale, Ohio,

Youngstown, Ohio, Biddeford, MN, and Fort Wayne, IN, are just a few of the many communities that experienced factory closings and massive layoffs. Many post-industrial communities across the United States have been thrown into turmoil and are struggling to resurrect and re-invent themselves. Right now, the steep decline of manufacturing jobs in this country is a major issue. It's something many communities are grappling with on a daily basis.

Four out of six of the teen mothers in this book are white, one is black, and the other is half-white, half-Hispanic. Most of them are involved in interracial relationships and most of their babies are of mixed race. What are your thoughts about this?

Often when the American public and media discuss teen motherhood they tend to associate it with the African-American and Hispanic populations, feeding stereotypes connecting poverty and social adversity to minorities. While true that within some minority groups, teen parenthood *rates* are significantly higher than the rates within the white population—a fact that merits major attention, resources and targeted intervention—in *sheer numbers* most American teen mothers are indigent and white.

In Pittsfield, the population is 92.6% white and 81% of teen births are to white mothers, but at the local high schools, all different combinations of interracial relationships are in vogue. Some residents say they think this trend stems from the younger generation's fascination with hip-hop music, fashion, and the gangsta culture. Many parents think it's a form of a rebellion. Others are mystified by the trend and don't understand why their daughters aren't interested in dating men of their own race. The younger and older generations had very different attitudes towards this subject.

The views and experiences of these young parents of multi-racial children reflect some of the major developments and trends that are changing the face of America. The number of children who are multi-racial is roughly double the percentage of adults, and is likely to keep growing at an exponential rate. An article in USA Today cited the following projection made by demographers: "By the year 2050, 21% of Americans will be claiming mixed ancestry." As the significance of race diminishes as a basis of social distinction, many other forms of social disadvantage that come hand in hand with teen parenthood are coming into even sharper focus: Most prominent are the sharp disparities between socioeconomic classes.

What is your next project?

I am going to direct my first feature film. It's a remake of the 1953 classic, *Little Fugitive*. I've also been talking to my editor about writing another book.