

Rust Proof **by Martin Peretz**

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Mention the Berkshires to nearly anyone and you will evoke the image of a bucolic life for landed locals and a place of respite for frazzled New Yorkers and Bostonians who want quiet hills of green and great old trees. And great old houses, too. Besides what nature provides, the Berkshires provide the lineaments of high culture: Tanglewood, Jacob's Pillow, art museums, two of the little Ivies, two of what used to be called the Seven Sisters, summer stock, exquisite food. The Berkshires are not the frenetic Hamptons; they are its opposite: tasteful, allergic to celebrity, calming. For many of its residents, the Berkshires are paradise.

Except that there is also the nineteenth century small city of Pittsfield which sits at its center, a sore, a scar, eerily reminiscent of the parsimonious prosperity that came with the steady industrial work of thousands of unionized workers in General Electric plants and the middle class that grew beside them. All this is now barely memory, and for some not even memory. Prosperity is history in Pittsfield. This is a real rust belt area outside the rust belt, characterized by polluted waters, pockmarked lands, unemployed laborers and the social consequences of worklessness as a way of life. It's not that these people don't want to work. It is quite simply that there is no old work, and no one--certainly not GE--has ever tried to engineer a transition to new kinds of work. (Lipper discusses the closing of a major GE plant in the area.) Let's call contemporary Pittsfield clear evidence of Jack Welch's industrial statesmanship.

This is the setting for Joanna Lipper's first book, *Growing Up Fast*, which she began to write after directing a documentary film, called *Inside Out: Portraits of Children*. *Growing Up Fast* is the end-product of another short film, much lauded and also honored. But the book does what no short film can do. In nearly 400 fast-paced pages of wonderfully evocative prose, much of it in the words of her six subjects, all teen mothers, Lipper has actually conveyed the social and personal history of a growing class of Americans for whom there is little help and less hope. But this class of people has inner lives, and this is what Lipper is so deft at communicating.

It's not that these young women--or even the men with whom in short flights of frantic ecstasy they conceived their babies--are lazy. But determination only goes so far; even bravery only goes so far. Social service agencies are, in this picture as in many others, not exactly central to the lives of the principals. Their parents are themselves depressed, their friends live lives not unlike their own, and their boyfriends are often also teens, undirected and untrained for a world that might otherwise welcome them. But in Pittsfield, Kentucky Fried Chicken, with the equivalent of Third World wages and no health care benefits, is an optimal ambition for many. Lipper does not hedge or bow to convention. She tells us what she sees, knows, understands. She follows no party line. She is neither politically correct nor conservatively callous. She tells us the truth as she hears it and grasps it.

These six narratives are not sagas about black people, although there are black women in the book and, thus, black cases. But, in Pittsfield, children having children and having troubles raising these children is a phenomenon that cuts across races and ethnic groups. This is an all-American problem and it will remain so, even though the statistics will ebb and flow a bit with the vicissitudes of the economy. Lipper has mastered all of the relevant data. She has also mastered the scholarship on teens, on teen families, on children of these families, on the families from which these mothers come. And, in my experience, a first: She cites the relevant websites than can inform and help.

Lipper is not only a filmmaker and writer. She is a photographer, and the book's chapters are interspersed with probingly gentle photographs of the dramatis personae, innocent, frightened, doubting, suspicious, even happy. Poor people, poor mothers and their children, their men-folk and fathers, want lives different than those they have been dealt. It is hard to imagine an American politics that will help them get it.

Give this book for Christmas. It will burden the conscience of its readers.

THE WASHINGTON POST

Old Before Their Times

By *Katherine S. Newman*

Dean of social science, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Urban Studies professor at Harvard University,

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GROWING UP FAST

By *Joanna Lipper*

Picador. 421 pp. \$25

Western Massachusetts is best known for its beautiful Berkshires, rich cultural life, a dozen pristine colleges and superior hunting grounds for antiques. Yet just next door to the boutique shops are numerous communities that have fallen on hard times, victims of downsizing and depopulation. Shuttered factories, jobless families, broken men and poor women have been left in the wake of transformations we associate with Rust Belt cities rather than New England's small towns.

Journalists and social scientists have chronicled the social devastation that followed from the tectonic shift away from an industrial economy in Rust Belt cities like Chicago and Cleveland. Joanna Lipper, an accomplished documentary filmmaker, takes a close look at the desolate landscape of family life in Pittsfield, Mass., once "inextricably intertwined" with General Electric, now an economic wasteland with few decent jobs to offer.

She zeros in on the lives of six teenage mothers, some single, some divorced and some temporarily "hooked up" with unreliable or unsavory men, the teen fathers of their babies or the next boyfriend in line. The narrative focuses on their lives as daughters in families that range from the solid to the dysfunctional; these are teenagers who crave attention and thrills, and those desires get them into trouble that lasts a lifetime.

Amy, a slender, lovely Catholic girl, is a veteran of weekly catechism and parochial school. Her parents are first-generation American-born descendants of Irish and Italian immigrants, and they managed to buy a home and raise a solid family of three children on the strength of her father's salary as a machinist at GE. When the plant shut down, Amy's dad discovered that Pittsfield offers only jobs that pay a pittance. The union "saves" him with a low-seniority assignment on the night shift in a plant nearly 60 miles away, just about the time Amy's life starts running off the rails. Her screaming rebellion homed in on her mother, already depressed by her husband's frequent absence.

By seventh grade, Amy is drinking heavily and partying hard with much older boys, especially an unconventional and therefore alluring prospect for a boyfriend, a black youth named Trevor, a senior in high school. Amy loses no time showing him off at parties at home while her parents are out to work. At 14, Amy finds herself pregnant with Trevor's child. The father drifts off to the Army and, while posted to another state, breaks off his relationship with Amy. A short while later, Amy meets Bernard, an earnest African immigrant, and has a son with him, but that relationship founders as well.

Lacking two incomes, Amy and her children are relegated to subsidized housing in a neighborhood burdened by drug dealers and fractious families. Yet, among the stories in "Growing Up Fast," Amy's must be counted as a success. She completes her high school degree, works her way through a cosmetology course, lands a hairdressing job she enjoys and finally reconciles with her parents. Bernard wants nothing to do with Amy's daughter (Trevor's child), but in the end takes some responsibility for his son. Still, Amy feels like she is 19 going on 50. She is exhausted, limited in her ability to earn a better living by the need to take care of her kids, and staring at a future that looks depressingly like the present.

Compared with the other single mothers in Lipper's book, though, Amy has beaten the odds. Shayla, herself the daughter of a young, unwed mother and a father who spent much of his daughter's youth in prison on drug charges, becomes pregnant on purpose by age 16. Her violence-prone boyfriend beats her and finally flees the

state, one step ahead of the law. By the time he returns to stalk Shayla, she has had another child, a premature baby who has serious health problems.

Sheri endures violent fights between her parents, a father who deserts the family and a new stepfather who joins her mother in a series of drug escapades, which lead to multiple arrests for assault and battery. Sheri and her sister are shuffled off to foster homes, with dismal stints in between with their mother, who has sunk into serious addiction and abusive relationships seriatim. Both girls become single mothers who never do better than low-wage jobs, despite heroic efforts to return to school for computer classes that might offer a better future.

Lipper's portrait of each of these teenage mothers is sympathetic but clear-eyed. Their stories unfold slowly and patiently, confronting the reader with a litany of violent relationships, desperate desires for affection and social status and romantic longings that lead almost inexorably to out-of-wedlock motherhood. In an economy in which only the well-educated will garner jobs good enough to support a family, Lipper's young moms have practically no chance to overcome their early mistakes.

They are consigned to the low-wage labor market and, for the most part, lack the breaks to improve their credentials and put themselves in line for opportunities that might provide a better standard of living -- prospects that are rapidly declining in Pittsfield anyway. The local Teen Parent Program helps them earn their diplomas, without which they would be virtually unemployable, but it cannot turn the tide of their lives. Readers looking for a slice of life in deindustrializing America will find much to admire about this book. Those seeking an argument that knits these affecting stories together may be less satisfied. Lipper implies that the economic woes of Pittsfield undo local families, leading them to neglect and abuse their daughters, who turn to unstable boyfriends for solace, ending in a teenage pregnancy that dooms them for life. This line of argument makes sense of Amy's situation.

The other families don't quite fit the story line of economic decline, since the parents are either lowlifes who abuse and abandon their kids for no discernible reason, or fairly sensible people caught flatfooted by rebellious daughters who will not listen to their counsel. In these cases, the pathway that leads from the economy to the baby carriage is less straightforward and the remedies more unclear.

What is perfectly clear is that becoming a teen mother poses an enormous challenge, even for the most determined. The book should be mandatory reading in middle school, for as the young mothers themselves explain, had they known what they were getting into, they never would have walked this path.

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REVIEW

Bringing Up Mother

Growing Up Fast

By Joanna Lipper
Picador, New York, 432 pages

Reviewed by Bill Everhart



The Berkshires, or "America's premier cultural resort," as the region is referred to by the local Chamber of Commerce, is also the home of wrenching poverty--much of it in Pittsfield, the bleak industrial city just a few miles away from the cultural tourism hubs of Lenox and Stockbridge. Social service agencies now dominate a quiet downtown that, during the glory days of General Electric, throbbed with life, as GE workers and their families strolled in and out of busy stores. The agencies help the unemployable, the drug-addicted, the alcohol-ravaged, and, in alarming numbers, the young, single mothers.

The Teen Parent Program is the agency charged with the challenging task of helping these young moms deal with the difficult, often cruel, realities of their new lives that they had never anticipated, and it was to workshops at the Teen Parent Program that filmmaker Joanna Lipper, at the invitation of psychologist Carol Gilligan and her colleague Normi Noel, came to make a documentary. Over a period of four years, Lipper interviewed young mothers, their parents, and the fathers of their children. The result was not only a film, chosen as one of the outstanding short documentaries of 1999 by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, but now a book, *Growing Up Fast*, which turns the desperate young mothers who are usually no more than the stuff of government statistics into flesh and blood and tears.

Growing Up Fast focuses on six young moms--Amy, Shayla, Jessica, Colleen, Liz, and Sheri--as they confront societal obstacles that their youth and naiveté leave them ill-prepared for. The story of Colleen, who grew up in Dalton, a small town bordering Pittsfield, is representative of them all.

An alcoholic father and a depressed mother created a turbulent home environment that, in essence, deprived Colleen of her childhood. Her boyfriend, Ryan, is a heroin addict with a similar background, yet Colleen sees him as a white knight who may rescue her from her unhappy life. She is confident that Ryan's weak points--drug addiction, a propensity for violence and petty theft--are things she can correct.

Unprotected sex leads to Colleen's pregnancy, which does not contribute to Ryan's anticipated reformation. He assaults Colleen, kicking her in the stomach, and is arrested and jailed. Neither does the birth of her child magically transform her life as she had hoped it would. She goes to school, with young Jonathan watched by her parents, who appear to have

been jolted into sobriety by the birth of their grandson, then returns home for a few brief moments with her son before heading to her job at Burger King. After work, she heads back home, falls into bed, and begins the cycle again the next day.

Ryan responds to her visits to him in jail with verbal abuse, accusing her of cheating on him-- as if she had the time. Nonetheless, Colleen convinces herself that this is not the "real" Ryan and she can still rescue him. When Ryan is freed, the couple moves in together, where the verbal abuse turns into physical abuse. Colleen, who blamed herself for much of her parents' fighting, convinces herself that she is the cause of Ryan's behavior and sinks into the paralyzing depression that has plagued her mother.

The clouds finally begin to part for Colleen when Ryan, whose heroin habit and thievery have kept the cops on his tail, flees to Florida. With Ryan's abuse now limited to long-distance phone calls, Colleen moves back in with her parents, along with her son, and begins taking courses at Berkshire Community College.

Jonathan, however, is showing signs of problems. His right hand is clenched at all times and he drags his legs behind him when he scoots along the floor. For nearly a year, Colleen avoids taking him to the doctor, afraid of what she might learn. When she finally does, a neurologist informs her that her baby has cerebral palsy and polymicrogyria, a rare brain disorder. He will have difficulty controlling movement and posture and most likely will have impaired cognitive and verbal abilities. Since cerebral palsy can be caused by problems during pregnancy, the doctor asks Colleen if she experienced any trauma during her pregnancy. In denial to the end, Colleen says no.

Growing Up Fast goes on in this way with the stories of five other teen mothers, the particulars differing but the basic similarities strikingly and demoralizingly similar. The young moms and dads come from broken or dysfunctional homes, and they behave much as their parents and stepparents did. The girls believe that having a baby will improve their lives and aid in their efforts to reform their boyfriends. When this doesn't prove to be the case, the girls generally soldier on. A couple of them try, selfishly if understandably, to join in the carefree social lives of their childless friends. Meanwhile, the boys make themselves scarce or react abusively, out of panic as well as irresponsibility.

Products of the MTV culture and prone to long hours in front of the television set, the single moms and their boyfriends have a worldview that bears little correlation to reality. A few of the young people profiled express a desire to become actors or models or wealthy in some fashion. Failing this, they go to work at Burger King. (Without belaboring the point, Lipper points out how much hugely profitable fast-food chains benefit from a large, uneducated class of young people with no other options for employment.) The vast middle ground of opportunity that lies between fast-food worker and celebrity doesn't exist for these young parents; if they know it is out there, they don't know how to reach it or lack the time and energy to make the attempt.

The sameness of these stories is a strength of *Growing Up Fast*, as it pounds away at the social problems behind broken homes and broken lives, resulting in the next generation of young parents who are a product of this dysfunction and carry on the sad tradition. In one sense it is a weakness, however, as incidents and actions that were shocking the first time around become numbing through repetition. A shorter, punchier book that concentrated on just four or five girls would have been a better book, if only by degree.

What is society's role in this saga of young moms and dads continuing a legacy of unhappiness and dysfunction? Lipper does an excellent job of exploring how society in general and government in particular have failed to address the issue of single parenthood and its attendant issues of poverty, drug abuse, violence, and hopelessness.

But Lipper does provide some rays of hope in the fine organizations these young women come in contact with, the Teen Parent Program first and foremost among them. Jessica is able to attend Berkshire Community College thanks to a grant arranged by the college's financial aid advisor and Berkshire Works (a collaboration between the state Division of Employment and Training and the Berkshire Training and Employment Program), which pays for her books. Many of these and other beneficial programs, however, have been hamstrung by severe budget cuts, and given the political climate in Boston and Washington, DC, that reality is not likely to change for the better anytime soon.

Young, single moms inevitably find themselves enmeshed in the welfare bureaucracy. Beacon Hill has congratulated itself in recent years because the welfare numbers have declined considerably. This is in part because of stricter work requirements --which send moms to the Burger Kings and Kentucky Fried Chickens, where they often work double shifts to make ends meet. Are "reform" measures to be celebrated when they leave babies to vegetate in poorly run day care centers or put children in the care of unstable grandparents? Lipper makes a convincing case that they should not be.

There are good day care programs in the Berkshires, but not enough of them. Shayla is dismayed when young Jaiden returns from a home day care bruised and withdrawn. Exhibiting the denial typical of these young mothers, Shayla explains away these injuries, rationalizing that her hyperactive son banged himself up playing, until the woman running the day care center dies of a drug overdose. These bruises are likely to turn into psychological scars that Jaiden will carry into young adulthood.

Growing Up Fast also portrays the foster home bureaucracy as a complete nightmare. Foster parents, at least the (unnamed) ones we see here, are in it solely for the money, warehousing kids at best, further contributing to their misery at worst. When the young girls or boys inevitably run away, they are tracked down and returned to their parent or parents, where the problems that sent them to foster care in the first place remain unaddressed. Soon enough they are in another dysfunctional foster home where the vicious circle continues. A foster care system this destructive needs radical reform, but again, there is little reason to see that happening.

The public schools seem to do little for the troubled teens in their classrooms, but it is hard to find fault with the harried teachers we see in *Growing Up Fast*. The shedding of teachers is an annual ritual in Pittsfield, as it is in many financially strapped school systems. The inability of teachers who are struggling to teach in overcrowded classrooms is just another of the societal and political failings Lipper illustrates.

The main weakness of *Growing Up Fast* is Lipper's superficial knowledge of Pittsfield politics. Those who see Pittsfield as a helpless victim have her ear. Yes, General Electric's slow departure from the city has led to a loss of jobs, income, and hope, not to mention the creation of related social problems. But while Pittsfield sees itself as unique, its story is shared by any number of New England and Northeastern industrial cities, many of which have found ways to bounce back. Pittsfield's inclination to self-pity has slowed its response to problems that are all too common.

Nonetheless, *Growing Up Fast* should find an audience among readers who know or care nothing about Pittsfield because the plight of the six teen mothers is a universal one. The counterparts of Amy, Shayla, Jessica, Colleen, Liz, and Sheri exist all over Massachusetts and all around the country. Lipper's book is powerful because she resists the temptation to preach and overanalyze, letting the girls speak for themselves.

Lipper tries to leave us on an upbeat note, and it is hard not to be cheered by the outreach program launched by Shakespeare & Co., the Lenox-based theatrical group, and its artistic director Tina Packer. Edith Wharton, that great chronicler of societal hypocrisy, lived and wrote in the Berkshires, and Packer's workshops with young mothers employ Wharton's works to help them understand that many of the problems they face are age-old, and that they don't defy solution.

Still, the larger sense a reader is left with is that of a lost class of young people, deprived of role models, repeating the mistakes of their parents, lacking self-esteem or a reason to hope, and failed by government--and this leads to a sense of alarm about the generation to come, the small children of these lost young women. This stark, insightful, often riveting book reminds us that the fate of what Lipper refers to as the "young sons and daughters of the class of '99" remains up for grabs and must be addressed before they are lost as well.

Bill Everhart is the editorial page editor of the Berkshire Eagle in Pittsfield.



"My life is just beginning"

Far from being lazy and unmotivated, teen mothers are anxious to succeed. They just need the opportunities.

By Ashley Nelson

Nov. 17, 2003

While teen pregnancy rates fell during the 1990s, the national rate is still miles above other industrialized countries. Four out of 10 teens will become pregnant before they are 20. In the South, where 55 percent of schools receive federal funding that prohibits them from endorsing contraception, birthrates are significantly higher than average.

In her new book, "Growing Up Fast," filmmaker Joanna Lipper follows six teenage mothers from the working class town of Pittsfield, Mass. -- Amy, Liz, Colleen, Shayla, Sheri, and Jessica -- over a period of four years as they navigate a rocky adolescence, with a baby (or two) on their hip and a whole lot of baggage. "Growing Up Fast" began as a documentary film by the same name. Asked by psychologist Carol Gilligan to videotape writing workshops she was conducting at a teen parent program in Pittsfield, Lipper was so inspired by the stories she heard that after the six-week program ended, she decided to stick around and get to know the girls -- their problems, their hopes, and their children -- on a deeper level.

Pittsfield, once the main manufacturing base for General Electric, has become an economic and cultural ghost town ever since the company left in 1986. "Growing Up Fast" explores the girls' circumscribed worlds -- fast food chains, dank daycare centers and violent housing projects -- and uncovers six histories marked by abuse, poverty and low expectations. Although each girl "longed to be independent and self-sufficient," Lipper writes, "they confessed that they had never taken the SAT, nor did they remember ever being told that the test was required for admission to most four-year colleges." (Not surprising, according to the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention program, only about one out of every three teen mothers finishes high school.) Far from isolated cases, Lipper argues that these women are part of a complex social web, and her book is a touching treatise on the role of individuality, responsibility and luck in American society.

Salon recently spoke with Lipper about teen sexuality, family values, and six young mothers who are doing everything they can to beat the odds.

This project began as a 30-minute documentary. What motivated you to spend an additional four years of your life writing a book in what Jessica, one of the teen mothers profiled, called a town so boring that there's nothing else to do but have sex?

It began when Carol Gilligan asked me to videotape writing workshops she and Normi Noel were conducting at the teen parent program in Pittsfield -- and when Carol Gilligan calls, you come! But what made me stay after the documentary were the oral histories I encountered. I let the words of my subjects dictate my research. It was my talks with Bill, Jessica's stepfather, that led me to research the devastating effect GE's departure had on the town. Liz's experiences drove me to study foster care, sexual abuse, and the juvenile justice system. These are the stories that inspired me. And while they are incredibly detailed and specific in their own right, they are not isolated cases. They reveal a lot about American society as a whole.

Given that trust does not come easily to these girls, their candor is remarkable. How did you gain access into their lives, win their confidence and that of their family members?

It was definitely a gradual process. The fact that all the girls were already in a teen parent program was very helpful. And with Carol and Normi's workshop, they were starting to become more confident in sharing their feelings. As time went on, I met with them more individually. One day I'd go with Amy to pick up Kaleigh, her daughter, from daycare. Or I'd stop by Friendly's, a fast-food restaurant, early when she was on the morning shift. I did whatever I could to fit into their lives on their terms.

And while it's difficult to generalize because each girl had her own individual motivations, it is fair to say that they were eager to defend themselves against the normal stereotypes and stigmas about teen parents. In speaking to me, they seemed to say, "Rather than accept someone else's definition of me, I would like the chance to define myself." And that journey of speaking for yourself and defining who you are is in many ways a rebellious act against a society that wants to label, marginalize, and ultimately write you off. That's why I end the book with Sheri saying, "When I was pregnant lots of people told me, 'You're gonna be a teen mom -- your life is over.' Whoever says that to teen mothers is lying. My life is just beginning."

Speaking of marginalization, 83 percent of teen births are to poor moms. Only 17 percent are to higher income teens, since nearly three-quarters of them have abortions. What do you think accounts for the connection between poverty and teen pregnancy?

On a practical level, these kids are not getting the same opportunities at school as their wealthier counterparts, because instead of using free time to do homework and extra curricular activities, they're working. Jessica had so many jobs before she became pregnant -- at Burger King, Pretzel Time, Bonanza, you name it -- all before she was 16. When you aren't economically burdened, there is the expectation that you're going to graduate and go onto college, where you'll meet new people and new doors will open. For many economically disadvantaged girls, however, there simply isn't such an established "rite of passage." Or, too often, if there is one, it means going from working part-time at Burger King to working full-time, from cleaning rooms at a hotel during high school to cleaning rooms afterwards at a bed and breakfast.

So did these girls become parents because they saw no reason to avoid it?

While most teen pregnancies are unintentional, many do "fall into it" because they lack any other appealing options. But that's not to say they have no desire to participate in their world, or that they utterly lack motivation. The sociologist Kristin Luker has noted that for many low-income girls love is one of the most valuable resources they have to give. Having kids

allows them to define a place in society for themselves. They become more involved, more connected -- their kids go to school, they use services. The children also become vessels for their hopes and dreams. Interestingly, many of the girls altered the spelling of their children's names -- Ezekiel became Ezakeil; Leah became Leeah. It seemed to be their way of saying their children are special, unique, and would hopefully have a better childhood than they had had.

Let's talk about the girls' environments growing up, because their untimely pregnancies were always presented as one of many problems -- a parent's addiction, poverty, poor foster care, and especially domestic violence and sexual abuse. And violence only seems to beget more violence. One of the girls, Colleen, was beaten badly by the baby's father during her pregnancy and her son, Jonathan, was born with cerebral palsy -- which has many possible causes including severe physical trauma which can cause a stroke in utero.

In my endnotes I cite studies which have found that almost 60 percent of pregnant teens report histories of sexual abuse. Twenty percent of high school girls say they've been physically or sexually abused by a dating partner. We spend millions on teaching young kids to avoid the dangers of smoking and alcohol, and yet sexual abuse, which is equally devastating, is so often hidden. This may be slowly changing, with movies like "[Mystic River](#)" and the coverage of the crisis surrounding sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, but it's interesting that it's so often about priests and young boys. There was "The Pledge," a great movie directed by Sean Penn starring Jack Nicholson, and it was about the sexual abuse and murder of a young girl, but it didn't get nearly as much attention.

Silence and denial are major themes in the book -- particularly as they relate to teen sexuality. These girls grew up at a time when Britney Spears (and countless others) ignited social anxieties about girls' sexuality -- stripping one minute, pledging to remain a virgin until marriage the next. In fact, a few weeks ago the governor of Maryland's wife said she wanted to [shoot](#) Britney, not long after she french-kissed Madonna.

One of the things that characterizes countries with a low teen pregnancy rate is their acceptance of teen sexuality. So the fact that it's such a conflicted topic in the U.S. leads to silence. If someone can't talk about something and discuss it, they are more likely to enact it. You see the effects of this silence in the girls who hide their pregnancies for six months. Or in Jessica, who got pregnant after lacking the energy to refuse her boyfriend's advances. She was tired, had no ride home, and worried that objecting would cause a fight.

So remaining silent about teen sexuality has consequences. Most girls don't even know what consent is -- literally, how and how not to give it -- so when you're talking about comprehensive sex education you can't only focus on sex, but rather you need to focus on gender identity, on how to have a relationship with someone, and on how to express yourself. In my book there are examples of programs, like the [Council Program](#) with its Mysteries Curriculum, that do just that.

Yet in recent years, politicians have spent approximately \$300 million supporting abstinence-only programs. Consequently, over one-third of U.S. school districts have policies that require educators to teach students that abstinence is the *only* effective way to prevent pregnancy and STDs. In fact, they are not even allowed to discuss contraception, except to discount its effectiveness.

The abstinence-only movement perpetuates the problem of teen pregnancy, since it's largely based on silence about sexuality and a refusal to discuss it in an educational framework. This is not the case in countries like Sweden or France, where people acknowledge that teenagers are sexual creatures, and don't punish them or make them feel that they are doing something bad, but rather try to help them. Consequently, according to a study done by the [Alan Guttmacher Institute](#), teen birthrates here are approximately four times higher than in Sweden and France. I mean, how can you teach someone about, say, consent and alcohol in an abstinence-only program if you can't talk about sex? How can you talk about what happens when you're drunk and you might not have the inhibitions, judgment, or decision making skills you normally would?

In his book "The Broken Hearth: Reversing the Moral Collapse of the American Family," William Bennett argues that social services, like welfare, only encourage out-of-wedlock births. As a remedy, he suggests cutting benefits to this population, starting with unmarried teenage mothers. Why do teen moms provoke so much vilification and resentment in our society?

For one thing, pregnancy can't be hidden. Sexual abuse can be hidden. Domestic violence can be hidden. But not pregnancy. It's undeniable. So with these girls, their bodies spoke for them. Their bodies said what society does not want to verbalize. And this has incredible implications, economically and socially, that most people would rather not confront. When you hear Liz talking about being in foster care or being absent from school for several semesters and no one caring, you start to see a mirror of society in her experiences. One of best lines about how society regards teenage mothers is in Toni Morrison's book "The Bluest Eye," where the narrator talks about Pecola, a young girl who became pregnant after being raped by her father: "We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her ... We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness ... We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength." Of course, when you meet these girls in the flesh you see that they are hardly destructive forces, but beautiful, young, hardworking women.

In the past few years, there have been a number of books, such as "Queen Bees and Wannabes," that suggest teen girls are hardly passive creatures, but rather brutal social opportunists. The recent movie "[Thirteen](#)" also plays on this theme. How do you see your book in relationship to these works?

This is a totally different kind of book. The authors that inspired me were Dorothy Allison, Rick Bragg, Studs Terkel and Barbara Ehrenreich. The book is about teenage girls, but it's primarily about American society. Through these girls, I wanted to write about the experience of being in an American family that is struggling. There are a lot of characters in the book, including male characters -- a police officer, a worker at GE, educators, teen fathers, a Vietnam vet and a doctor. I never wanted to look at these teenage mothers in isolation. It's really about the interplay between them and society.

As for risks, stories are presented and readers have a right to judge the girls. Readers can and will bring their own perspectives to it; and I hope they learn something about themselves from the book. I hope the amount of information I provide precludes any threat of exploitation, however. No one incident, no one mistake, is ever presented without context. In the time I was in Pittsfield, good and bad decisions were made. That's life.

Toward the end of the book Jessica, who attends community college, works part-time, and has sole responsibility for her child, says, "I don't want to be on welfare. I'm trying to do what I have to do to get off of it. I don't want to be stuck in the system, but thank God for the system." How important are social safety nets? And how do our safety nets compare to those of other industrialized nations? In France, for instance, emergency contraception can be handed out in high schools.

The United States has the largest gap between rich and poor among industrialized countries, and yet many other nations offer more support to youth during the transition from adolescence to adulthood -- and the existing support to American youth is dwindling as many programs -- particularly those in education, health, and human services -- are being cut left and right in attempts to rein in state budgets. In some European countries, kids don't already have to be suffering or be a teen parent to get services and support in the transition from childhood to adulthood. But in America, the belief is that every individual is responsible for her or his own destiny and welfare, but that can be difficult especially when there is such disparity in, say, public education.

Welfare reform -- with its five-year limit, long work requirements, tough sanctions, and strict rule that teenage moms must live with a parent or a guardian -- has made it challenging for these girls. If this country properly funded many of the innovative prevention and education programs I write about in the last chapter of the book, there is a good chance that we might come closer to a more cost-effective and positive strategy -- for society at large and young mothers. I can't say it enough: Far from being lazy and unmotivated, as the right and others so often label them, these teen moms prove not only through their own lives, their jobs, and their kids, but through their own dedication to this book that they are motivated, and that they do want to make a difference. They want a place in the world.

The Boston Globe

EDITORIAL NOTEBOOK

Teens in need

2/8/2004

PITTSFIELD

JOANNA LIPPER'S book "Growing Up Fast" is a searing, heart-rending account of how six teenage girls from this depressed city become mothers and how they try to build new lives for themselves and their children. In their own words, the girls describe home lives from hell, full of drug addiction and physical and sexual abuse, presided over by parents who are, with rare exceptions, hopelessly unfit.

The girls' lives are often said to be "empty," and they are: of positive interests or role models. But they are full of violence and hyper-sexualized media that make teen motherhood look to them more like a solution than the difficult challenge it inevitably is. "I wanted a baby so I'd have a friend 24 hours a day," one mother told Lipper.

The book has rubbed exposed nerves here. Many Pittsfielders fear readers might not understand that the vast majority of families in the city are nothing like those Lipper describes. Despite decades of job losses in the electrical, paper, and plastics industries, the city still has a hard-working population base whose children prepare for college, work, or the military at public or private schools with solid reputations. But anyone who works in the social services or schools knows it is also home to the families in the book.

Pittsfield's teen birth rate is not among the state leaders. Lipper focused on the city because she had first been invited to do a video documentary of teen mothers enrolled in a writing workshop here. Pittsfield might not appreciate the attention, but in many ways it was a good choice. Its teen birth rate of 44.8 births per 1,000 women age 15 to 19 is close to the US average of 42.9, and while the US rate decreased, Pittsfield's has risen in the past decade. The problem has worsened as Pittsfield has moved from an economy tied to the dwindling General Electric works to one dependent more on low-paying jobs in service industries and at tourism facilities in nearby Berkshire County resort towns.

The great majority of the city's teen mothers (and of those in the book) are white, confirming that kids having kids is a problem that spans racial and ethnic groups.

Some residents also object that the book gives little credit to the impressive array of activities and services in the city: Boys and Girls clubs, YMCA, Catholic Youth Center, after-school programs. All of these options do exist, as do teachers, counselors, and school officials willing to reach out to children in need. Lipper's book, in which few helpful adult mentors figure at all, simply makes clear that the outreach effort with children from families like these must be intensive to be successful.

The book is also a strong argument for better state funding of teen pregnancy prevention programs that have seen cuts in recent state budgets. Somebody -- an art teacher, a basketball coach, a pastor, a therapist -- has to throw lifelines to these girls before they grow up too fast in a world in which premature sex and motherhood are rites of passage.

-- DONALD MacGILLIS

EXCERPTS from additional reviews of Growing Up Fast by Joanna Lipper

From *The New York Times*: "Lipper builds a detailed case against the systems -- schools, welfare, the Department of Social Services -- that repeatedly fail these girls."

From *Publisher's Weekly*: "Compelling and important...this book adroitly illuminates a social crisis."

From *Booklist*: "This deserves a spot on the shelf near Robert Coles' similarly accessible investigations of contemporary social issues."

The "Elle's Lettres" Readers' Prize 2004: "Lipper's straightforward account of teen mothers struggling to raise their children in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, doesn't treat these young women as objects of pity or scorn. She reveals their naïveté and the poor choices they've made, but also their willingness and determination to take care of their babies despite such obstacles as abusive boyfriends, drug addiction, and low-paying jobs."

From *Seventeen Magazine*: "...a moving portrait of struggling young families trying to make it without much help."

From *Elle girl*: "Joanna Lipper's collection of excruciatingly real stories ...will captivate you."

From *The Washington Post Fall Preview*: "There is nothing like the excitement of cracking open a new book, discovering talent, stumbling onto a fresh idea. It's what keeps us alert, trolling the endless shelves... *Growing Up Fast*, the story of six teen mothers in a burnt-out rust-belt city (originally the subject of a documentary) reveals much about welfare reform, domestic violence, and the state of public education."

From *MSNBC News*: "What makes Lipper's book a page-turner is how intimate and detailed the stories are. Whether it's attributable to an interviewing skill of Lipper's or the openness of the young mothers, they've held little back. *Growing Up Fast* is a fascinating and deeply personal look into a part of our world that many of us choose not to see."

From *Mother Jones*: "...extraordinary reporting... clear, insightful prose.... *Growing Up Fast* succeeds because of the author's evident respect for her subjects."

From *The Toronto Sun*: "...extraordinary insight into the lives of unwed teenage mothers, with all the problems and challenges they face.... A haunting and important book for those who want to understand more about a growing social problem."