

April 2023

Documentary Review: The Janes (2022)

Katelyn M. Campbell

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, kcampbe2@live.unc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Campbell, Katelyn M. (2023) "Documentary Review: The Janes (2022)," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol3/iss2/14>

This Media Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Feminist Pedagogy by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@calpoly.edu.

Abraham, N., Heller, L., Lacy, S. (Executive Producers), & Lessin, T., Pildes, E. (Directors). (2022). *The Janes* [Motion picture]. United States: HBO Max.

In the opening frames of Tia Lessin and Emma Pildes's *The Janes* (2022), the camera trains itself on Dorie Brown as she describes an encounter with the Mob she'd had in the 1960s. "I had no other options," she recalls. "I wanted it over with, and I didn't care how it was done. I was that desperate." Such was the nature of abortion care in Chicago in that pre-Roe world: often desperate, typically lonely, and always secret and high stakes. It was in this milieu that a group of everyday women, who had come into political consciousness in Civil Rights and anti- War struggles, came together to form "the Janes," an underground abortion service that provided an estimated 11,000 abortions between 1968 and 1973. In a moment where a new generation of feminists face a renewed sense of urgency with regard to abortion care after the fall of *Roe v. Wade* (1973), *The Janes* offers a portal to a recent and usable past where, when faced with similar barriers, a group of ordinary people saw fit to roll up their sleeves and act. In this review, I trace the plot of the film before orienting its subject matter around more recent work on trans health care and theories and practices of reproductive justice.

Lessin and Pildes's film follows the emergence of the Janes from the wave of radicalism that swept Chicago during the late 1960s and articulated itself through feminism in groups such as the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. The film's narrative roots itself in the personal experiences that led eventual members of the collective to become interested in abortion: specifically, Eileen Smith's encounter with a fellow college student she found bleeding in her dorm room after suffering complications from a back alley procedure; Heather Booth's search for a doctor who could relieve her friend's sister from an unintended pregnancy that had rendered her suicidal; and Eleanor Oliver's own abortion, which she sought out when she became pregnant during the period she was the sole breadwinner for her household while her husband attended graduate school. The urgency and danger of accessing abortion pushed the Janes to move beyond theory and research into practice. Using Oliver's home phone number, the women placed ads on neighborhood bulletin boards and in radical publications directing pregnant and worried people to call the number and ask for Jane. While at first the Janes referred clients to an abortionist who had previously been affiliated with the Mob's abortion services, upon learning that he lacked formal medical training, the Janes learned how to perform the procedure themselves, which allowed them to significantly reduce the cost to patients. The Janes continued to provide abortions until 1972, when their makeshift clinic was raided by the Homicide Unit of the Chicago Police

Department. The Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade* (1973) facilitated the charges against them being dismissed.

While the work of the Janes was bookended by *Roe*, their story has acquired a new resonance in the wake of the overturning of the ruling in June 2022. *The Janes* offers an important example of how everyday people have addressed threats to reproductive sovereignty by taking matters into their own hands. The film would pair well with historical work on the feminist self-help movement, such as Hannah Dudley-Shotwell's *Revolutionizing Women's Healthcare: The Feminist Self-Help Movement in America* (2020) and might also find its place on an undergraduate course syllabus in feminist bioethics.

Many of the challenges to accessing abortion addressed by the Janes have persisted in the fifty years between their arrests and the fall of *Roe*; however, more recent organizing has sought to account for the ways people from a more diverse set of gender identities seek out abortion care. While the scholarship on trans abortion care is still emergent (Moseson et. al., 2020), Hil Malatino's *Trans Care* (2020) provides an accessible engagement with ways trans people have navigated or worked outside of the medical industrial complex to receive care that would provide a helpful corollary for discussions of gender-based health disparities.

Lessin and Pildes do briefly take up the tensions between the predominant whiteness of the collective and the growing number of women of color who sought abortions through their service (particularly in the wake of changes in New York state law that allowed wealthier women to fly in for legal abortions); however, further teasing out the relationship between race and abortion care would be a fruitful class conversation. Feminist teachers interested in taking a more intersectional approach to the film might pair it with work from reproductive justice activists and scholars, such as the edited collection *Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundation, Theory, Practice, Critique* (Ross et. al., 2017).

What makes *The Janes* such a strong teaching tool for this moment is in part its subjects' forthrightness, the way the women of Jane look straight into the camera, unflinchingly describing the actions they took to provide safe and affirming abortions while "traveling under the radar of the Mafia and the Chicago Police Department." While the exact structures of care used by the Janes may not precisely match up with the conditions of the present, their vision and legacy serve as important evidence for how feminists in conversation with other social movements have transformed their parts of the world.

References

- Abraham, N., Heller, L., Lacy, S. (Executive Producers), & Lessin, T., Pildes, E. (Directors). (2022). *The Janes* [Motion picture]. United States: HBO Max.
- Dudley-Shotwell, H. (2020). *Revolutionizing women's healthcare: The feminist self-help movement in America*. Rutgers University Press.
- Malatino, H. (2020). *Trans care*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Moseson et. al. (2020). Abortion experiences and preferences of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive people in the United States. *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology*. [10.1016/j.ajog.2020.09.035](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajog.2020.09.035)
- Ross, L. J., Roberts, L., Derkas, E., Peoples, W., & Bridgewater Toure, P. (eds). (2017). *Radical reproductive justice: Foundation, theory, practice, critique*. The Feminist Press.