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Book Review: The Woman Who Knew Too Much

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- The Woman Who Knew Too Much: Alice Stewart and the Secrets of Radiationby Gayle Greene; reviewed by Jean Robinson

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Reviewed by Jean Robinson

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I feel guilty (so what's new?). I have talked so much about a biography I read recently that I have a whole queue of friends wanting to borrow it, but I can't bear to part with it because I am constantly going back to the many pages I have marked with Post-It notes. It is the story of Dr Alice Stewart, the woman who discovered that X-raying pregnant women could cause the exposed child to develop leukaemia or other cancers years later. She came from a medical family. Her mother had managed to get into medical school in 1901, and did pioneering work with poor children in Sheffield.

Alice herself became a skilled clinician, but was set on a new research path when the child of a close friend, her threeyear- old goddaughter, died of leukaemia at the age of three, and the mother asked her to find out why.

Alice was puzzled because there were two peak age groups for leukaemia-people over 50, which you might expect, and children aged two to four, which was mysterious.

With typical modesty, she commented later that she had only done one clever thing in her life: she remembered that life began at conception. So she asked mothers of children who had leukaemia or cancer a lot of questions about their pregnancies, and asked the same questions of mothers of healthy children. (She was later criticised for believing what mothers said, but she was a mother herself). One difference emerged-they were twice as likely to have had an X-ray.

In fact, she soon realised that leukaemia deaths had gone up because deaths from infection had fallen after the introduction of antibiotics. Many children who had died from pneumonia and other diseases had reduced immunity because they were developing leukaemia. Alice also believed that miscarriages, unexplained stillbirths and sudden infant deaths could be caused in the same way.

An enthralling story follows: how this finding, so unpopular with the Establishment, led to her being pushed out of academic jobs and not getting research grants, and how obstetricians refused to believe it and carried right on giving X-rays.

England was, in fact, the last country to stop irradiating pregnant women. Alice was recruited by groups fighting radiation exposure from nuclear plants, and continued her researching and giving evidence in court cases in the US. She also believed that background radiation was worse than X-rays because exposure began even before conception.

She continued to work well into her 80s, and died only recently. Her story is inspiring and exciting. It wasn't just what she did, but how she did it-bringing together unlikely groups of people and harnessing talents others had not recognised, doing high-quality work on a shoestring and gaining a huge number of admiring friends all over the world. Yet, she always remained straightforward and open and, despite a brilliant brain, her greatest gifts seem to have been her common sense and the ability to communicate in plain speech.

If you can get hold of this book, do read it. It is an inspiring example of how women work when they are at their best, and how much can be achieved against the odds.

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