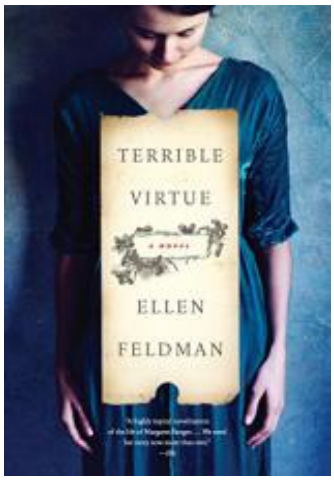
Terrible Virtue

by Ellen Feldman



About the Book

In the spirit of THE PARIS WIFE and LOVING FRANK, the provocative and compelling story of one of the most fascinating and influential figures of the twentieth century: Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood --- an indomitable woman who, more than any other, and at great personal cost, shaped the sexual landscape we inhabit today.

The daughter of a hard-drinking, smooth-tongued free thinker and a mother worn down by thirteen children, Margaret Sanger vowed her life would be different. Trained as a nurse, she fought for social justice beside labor organizers, anarchists, socialists and other progressives, eventually channeling her energy to one singular cause: legalizing contraception. It was a battle that would pit her against puritanical, patriarchal lawmakers, send her to prison again and again, force her to flee to England, and ultimately change the lives of women across the country and around the world.

This complex enigmatic revolutionary was at once vain and charismatic, generous and ruthless, sexually impulsive and coolly calculating --- a competitive, self-centered woman who championed all women, a conflicted mother who suffered the worst tragedy a parent can experience. From opening the first illegal birth control clinic in America in 1916 through the founding of Planned Parenthood to the arrival of the Pill in the 1960s, Margaret Sanger sacrificed two husbands, three children, and scores of lovers in her fight for sexual equality and freedom.

With cameos by such legendary figures as Emma Goldman, John Reed, Big Bill Haywood, H. G. Wells and the love of Margaret?s life, Havelock Ellis, this richly imagined portrait of a larger-than-life woman is at once sympathetic to her suffering and unsparing of her faults. Deeply insightful, TERRIBLE VIRTUE is Margaret Sanger?s story as she herself might have told it.

Discussion Guide

1. In what important ways was Margaret Sanger influenced by her mother and father?

2. Margaret?s father believed that ?formal education was nothing but a tool to breed docility.? What did he mean?

3. What was the unexpected value of Margaret?s time at Claverack College? What did she learn about herself and where she was from?

4. Why does Margaret believe so ardently in sexually open relationships? Is her unwillingness to be monogamous about personal freedom? Emotional capacity? Experience?

5. Why, despite deeply valuing personal freedom, did Margaret marry twice?

6. What was attractive and valuable to Margaret about Bill Sanger? In what ways was the marriage ?a different kind of union? or not?

7. Why did Margaret initially not want to have children? Why did she decide to have them?

8. Is Margaret?s decision to spend so much time away from her children for the sake of her political and social work justified?

9. Margaret invented the fictional story of Sadie Sachs to represent the many suffering women but told it as fact. Why did she invent the story? In what ways is such a deceit justified or not? How can something not factual still be true?

10. Margaret strategizes to profoundly change the law by breaking it and pursuing the issues in court. Mary Ware Dennett thought it better to try to lobby legislators to change the laws. What are the potential advantages or disadvantages of each approach to social change?

11. Why was the issue of women?s reproductive health a forbidden topic for so long?

12. Is Margaret really immune to jealousy? And what does her competitiveness with other women say about the subject?

13. In what ways was J.J. Goldstein valuable to Margaret and her work?

14. Margaret speaks of her dedication to the cause as not a choice, but ?a calling, like the vocation of the nuns.? What is the nature of such an experience? Is it ironic given her similar dedication to personal freedom and choice?

15. Late in her life Margaret says regret and guilt are ?merely two sides of self-indulgence?two sides of self-pity.? What does she mean by this?

16. Discuss the interaction between Margaret?s battle to bring about social change and society?s changing view of women?s sexuality.

17. How would Margaret combat the current war against Planned Parenthood?

Author Bio

Ellen Feldman, a 2009 Guggenheim fellow, is the author of THE LIVING AND THE LOST (winner of Long Island Reads award), PARIS NEVER LEAVES YOU (translated into 13 languages), TERRIBLE VIRTUE (optioned by Black Bicycle for a feature film), THE UNWITTING, NEXT TO LOVE, SCOTTSBORO (shortlisted for the Orange Prize), THE BOY WHO LOVED ANNE FRANK (a *New York Times Book Review* ?Editors? Choice?), LUCY and THE TROUBLE WITH YOU.

Ellen has lectured extensively around the country and in Germany and England, and enjoys talking to book groups in person or via the web.

She grew up in northern New Jersey and attended Bryn Mawr College, from which she holds a B.A. and an M.A. in modern history. After further graduate studies at Columbia University, she worked for a New York publishing house.

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