



# Hearts of Wisdom: American Women Caring for Kin, 1850-1940

*Emily K. Abel*

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The image of the female caregiver holding a midnight vigil at the bedside of a sick relative is so firmly rooted in our collective imagination we might assume that such caregiving would have attracted the scrutiny of numerous historians. As Emily Abel demonstrates in this groundbreaking study of caregiving in America across class and ethnic divides and over the course of ninety years, this has hardly been the case.

While caring for sick and disabled family members was commonplace for women in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America, that caregiving, the caregivers' experience of it, and the medical profession's reaction to it took diverse and sometimes unexpected forms. A complex series of historical changes, Abel shows, has profoundly altered the content and cultural meaning of care. *Hearts of Wisdom* is an immersion into that "world of care." Drawing on antebellum slave narratives, white farm women's diaries, and public health records, Abel puts together a multifaceted picture of what caregiving meant to American women--and what it cost them--from the pre-Civil War years to the brink of America's entry into the Second World War. She shows that caregiving offered women an arena in which experience could be parlayed into expertise, while at the same time the revolution in bacteriology and the transformation of the formal health care system were weakening women's claim to that expertise.

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