

A woman on the verge

Julia Neuberger

I am Roe: My Life, Roe v. Wade, and Freedom of Choice. By Norma McCorvey with Andy Meister. HarperCollins: 1994. Pp. 216. \$23.

THERE is among some of those opposed to abortion a view that runs along these lines: "Abortion is wrong. It should also not be necessary, since any woman can avoid pregnancy. A woman's incompetence should not entitle her to kill her unborn child." Clearly, this is not the view of those in the Roman Catholic Church and others who object to birth control. But

lesbian in the late 1980s. But in the days when she got pregnant and allowed her children to be adopted, including by her mother who deceived her into forsaking rights to her daughter, she was confused, angry, depressed, at one stage suicidal, and deeply disadvantaged. To say to such a woman that she simply should have been more careful is nonsense. To say to her now that girls should be taught about contraception would leave her unmoved. Her experience is that many girls will never get the chance to learn in the face of pressure from the moral majority in the United States, and increasingly in the United Kingdom, against any sex education that is explicit and protective.

McCorvey has felt some of the wrath of the anti-abortionists, who have attempted to shoot her and strewn baby clothes over her lawn. She has also experienced a difficult relationship with the young female lawyers who fought *Roe v. Wade*, discovering that the case itself, which lasted almost three years, meant it was too late for her to have an abortion. She believes, in the light of her experience, that it is a woman's right to choose.

Her story is deeply moving, yet there has to be an intellectual argument as well. She provides a brief history of the changing view of the Roman Catholic Church. Before 1869, the Church sanctioned termination of pregnancies up to day 40; until this age the fetus was thought to be unformed. But since then, ensoulment is considered to happen at conception, so abortion at any stage is immoral.

Nor is this view likely to change. The distinguished legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin, in *Life's Dominion*, published last year (HarperCollins, 1993), argues that a compromise on abortion is possible if people think about issues differently. He suggests that the whole debate is based on an intellectual confusion capable of being identified, analysed and dispelled, and adduces a "derivative" objection to abortion, based on the theory that fetuses, like grown human beings, have rights, including the right not to be killed. The individual who accepts this argument believes that governments have a duty to protect these rights.

But he also adduces a "detached" objection. Not based on rights or interests, this theory relies on the premise that abortion is wrong in principle because it "disregards and insults the intrinsic value, the sacred character, of any stage or form of human life". The person who holds this view believes that governments have a detached responsibility for protecting the intrinsic value of human life. He argues that most people hold the latter view, regarding it as "a bad thing, a kind of cosmic shame" when human life at any stage is extinguished. It is then perfectly possible for them to believe that abortion is morally wrong yet feel that the decision

must be left to the pregnant woman, as the person with the greatest stake in it.

It would be good to read this argument in *I am Roe*. McCorvey is not someone who will argue intellectually, but her coauthor and fellow campaigners might. McCorvey had made a strong case from experience for leaving the decision to have an abortion to the woman concerned. Her colleagues, with her, now need to add some of the intellectual and moral bite behind the experiential justification. □

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Physics in transition

Brian Pippard

Order, Chaos, Order. By Philip Stehle. Oxford University Press: 1994. Pp. 322. £44, \$59.95 (hbk); £29.95, \$22.50 (pbk).

THE first quarter of the twentieth century saw a comprehensive transformation of physical ideas. The elaborate structure built on Newton's dynamics and Maxwell's electromagnetism had already begun to show flaws when, within a few years, the discovery of X-rays, the electron and the quantum stimulated a radical rethinking that eventually led to the invention in 1925 of quantum mechanics.

There is rarely time to tell students what happened in this period, but historians of science have rightly found it fascinating. Some great innovators, such as Einstein, Rutherford and Bohr, have had their lives and works examined minutely, while the development of leading strands of thought has been mapped in detail. Scholarship at this level makes tough reading, but shows how little most of us appreciate how the revolution was achieved. Philip Stehle has successfully condensed the most important aspects into a single volume that can be read by anyone with a modest competence in physics. It is not a 'popular' book — the lives and loves of the principal actors are left alone — but it is one that deserves to be read by science students and their seniors. The disconcerting parade of mathematics has been largely avoided in the main text, but at the end of sections there are amplifications, clearly set apart, in which more mathematical detail is presented. There is no doubt that this is a serious exposition of an intellectually enthralling tale.

In his analysis of the order, Stehle deals lightly with the accumulation of problems that menaced and eventually destroyed Maxwell's ether — these have been tack-

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REASONS

Norma McCorvey — abortion rights activist.

many passionate anti-abortion campaigners are not opposed to contraception. For them, life begins at conception, which is what renders abortion immoral.

These people should read this autobiographical story by Norma McCorvey, alias Jane Roe, the plaintiff in *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark Supreme Court case that legalized abortion in the United States in 1973. McCorvey was a woman who never had a chance in life. Her relationship with her mother was appalling from early on. She was never told the facts of life, and when she was first pregnant did not realize it. Her relationships with men were brief, often violent, and the pregnancies were resented.

Now she is a seasoned campaigner, who 'came out' both as Jane Roe and as a