

JESSICA: How Should We Feel?

Jenn Stanley: This is CHOICE/LESS, a storytelling podcast from Rewire Radio about reproductive injustice and the laws that put people in choice-less situations. I'm Jenn Stanley, senior staff reporter at Rewire and the host of this podcast.

The Guttmacher Institute estimates that one in three women will have an abortion by age 45. But even as more and more people speak out about their experiences, public opinion regarding abortion has remained relatively stagnant for the past 30 years, according to Gallup data, with roughly 50 percent of Americans saying that abortion should be legal under all circumstances.

The data collected from these polls suggests that many Americans, even those who may identify as pro-choice, believe that there are right and wrong reasons to have an abortion, and a correct way to feel about that abortion.

In her new book, *Sex Object*, feminist author, Jessica Valenti, writes about her experience with street harassment, sexual assault, bad boyfriends, and growing up in a culture that hates women.

Jessica Valenti: The title *Sex Object*, you know, I knew it would raise some eyebrows, and at first actually when I thought of it I immediately put it to the side because I knew the backlash it would get, and I didn't really want to deal with it. But ultimately I can't let what trollish reactions will be dictate what the title of the book will be. So we just went with it. At the end of the day it is a book about sexual objectification and the way that women and girls are made to feel dehumanized throughout their lives. It felt like the most accurate title even though it is flashy.

JS: She also talks about her experience with abortion.

JV: It was definitely an exercise in what getting an abortion is like for an extraordinarily privileged person. It was very expensive. It was over \$1000, but I had the money to pay for it. And because they value privacy and this midwife like experience you're not waiting in the waiting room with anyone else. You go and it's just you in that office for the entire time.

I went it and it was a small office, just me they offered me tea, they offered me a little something to eat. And that was it.

JS: Jessica told me that her experiences with pregnancy, motherhood, and abortion strengthened her resolve that there is no right or wrong way to feel about an abortion.

JV: The idea that there could be barriers, and being forced to feel that way, and being forced to carry a pregnancy you didn't want even for an extra day or two felt impossible to me and felt so hard and so ridiculous. I thought about that a lot and it strengthened my resolve around pro-choice issues.

JS: Here's Jessica's story.

JV: I had an abortion my first abortion in my 20s. I was in my mid-to-late 20s, and I was actually in the process of writing my first book when it happened. I was in a relationship that was not really going anywhere. I knew it was not really going anywhere, so the decision to end the pregnancy was not a difficult one.

I hadn't missed a period yet but I just didn't feel right and I felt off for myself, and even though I was on the birth control pill at that point I just had a bad feeling and so I took a pregnancy test. It came back positive.

My parents were there and they were really supportive and I told them like two seconds after I found out. They're excellent and they're big feminists and they're amazing and we're super close. When I told them I had already made the decision to end the pregnancy, so it was very much like a 'by the way, you don't have to worry about this because I have already made a decision about it, but just so you know, FYI i'm getting an abortion next week.'

It's really interesting because I had really thought that because I was 26 or 27, I had just always thought like I'm old enough, I'll just carry the pregnancy to term, I'll have the baby no problem.

But literally as soon as I looked at the pregnancy test I was like, er, nope, absolutely not, no way. So it wasn't- it just didn't feel like a decision. It was just like a really instinctual- like, there is no way that I'm having a baby right now. And it was absolutely the right decision.

I actually Googled around for an abortion clinic in New York that did early abortions because I was so early in the pregnancy that you actually for certain abortion procedures you can't get them until you're a little bit later on, and I didn't want to wait. I wanted to be not pregnant that second. And I found a place in Manhattan that specializes and only does early abortions. I went there, and they were great.

The way that they described it was a more midwifery abortion than using a machine. And so it's more like a syringe than anything else, and so it's very quick. The procedure is less than 5 minutes you're in and out of the doctor's office within a half hour and you can get on with your day. Most people can.

JS: Jessica says she has a particularly low pain tolerance, and the procedure was not easy for her, physically. But afterward, she went on with her life. She celebrated her birthday. And then she returned for a blood test to see if the procedure was successful. It was not. The people at the clinic warned her when she made the appointment that she was earlier along than they would typically recommend, but she felt like she needed it done as soon as possible. Unfortunately, it was too early, and the abortion didn't fully take.

JV: The pregnancy certainly wouldn't have been viable after that, but it was important to go back. I got a blood test done after that first office visit, it showed that I still had pregnancy

hormones. I went back, they did it again. I was really upset, so they gave me a sedative in an IV and it was much better.

JS: After she had her procedure, Jessica was surprised to learn that when she and her sister were children, her mother had an abortion. She was even more surprised by her own reaction to her mother's admission.

JV: She told me about having her abortion, and it was a mind-fuck because my first immediate thought despite all my feminist work and my pro-choice beliefs was like oh but that's crazy because she's such a good mom, which was bizarre because she had had the abortion after my sister and I were born and we were like 10 and 8, we were older. It was a strange conversation to have, and I think she wanted to feel camaraderie around it and I think that she, I don't know if regret is the right word, but she wasn't happy about the decision and I think she wanted to commiserate over that and I didn't because it was fine for me.

JS: Were you surprised that your mom had an abortion?

JV: I was. I was surprised. I was really surprised. But again I think that just goes to show how far stigma goes.

JS: A few months after Jessica's procedure, she met Andrew, the man who would become her husband.

JV: He was working for Talking Points Memo, which still exists, but they had an op-ed section that is no longer there. We were chatting online he was new to New York, so I invited him to go out and hang out with me, and for me to introduce him some people in the lefty world in New York, and I was not thinking of it as a romantic date-type thing because he was much younger than I was but you know, life happens.

JS: As their relationship was getting more serious, Jessica told Andrew about her abortion—how painful it was for her, and that if she were to get pregnant again, she would continue the pregnancy to term. He understood.

JV: I think I was 28 or 29 at that point and he was 22, so we were in very different places in our lives, but I sort of made clear at that point I had just gotten out of a very bad relationship. I said listen, I'm not really interested in a casual relationship, if you're interested in a casual relationship let's end this sooner rather than later. I do want to have a kid. I want to get married. I want to do all the grown up things.

So he actually ended up moving in just a couple of months after we started dating, first informally as folks do in New York City when you just sort of stay at each other's apartments and then more formally because it made the most rent sense and because we were ready. Then we were together I think a year and a half when we decided to get married. There was like no proposal or anything like that. It was like a conversation that we had been having and then we were on vacation in his childhood home in northern California and we decided let's say we're engaged now, and that's what we did.

JS: A few months alter, Jessica was pregnant with their daughter Layla.

JV: I ended up getting pregnant- we got married in October, I was pregnant by January. It took a little bit of trying but not too much. I was also nervous because my mom was married for 13 years before she had me, and had a lot of miscarriages and had a hard time getting pregnant. And of course I knew I had gotten pregnant before but I didn't know if that was a fluke. I didn't know if it would happen again. So I wanted to get right on it so we were pregnant really soon after, which really surprised our families, especially poor Andrew's, because he was still I think at that point like 24 or 25.

I did not have a great pregnancy from the beginning. I was really sick my first trimester. I was- I remember in March, so I was almost three months pregnant, that's women's history month and I was really busy speech wise and I was doing two or three schools a week. I remember giving talks at colleges and I would keep a plastic bag at the podium with me in case I had to puke. It never happened, thank goodness, but it was a fear. I think a little bit before the 20-week mark I had a blood test come back that said that there was a really big chance that the fetus had a chromosomal abnormality like it was a 1-in-20 chance on Down syndrome and a 1-in-4 chance of trisomy 13.

I think it was and I was actually in Florida with my sister taking a little pre-baby vacation with her when I found out, so I to leave that three days early come back do genetic counseling with my husband we had to get an amnio which was all very scary and traumatic. And we had to have the discussion about what would we do if we find out that there's a problem with the pregnancy.

Fortunately there was not. It turned out to be a false positive. That was around the time we found out that she was a girl, which was super exciting. And everything was ok a few more weeks.

Then I think I was like 27 weeks or 26 weeks- we were on vacation in like a beach area and I just really swollen. My face blew up, and I was just not feeling great. By the time we got back to New York it was August, and it is so hot and disgusting in New York in August that I sort of felt like I was entering my third trimester, I was at 28 weeks at that point. I just thought well that's just what pregnant ladies are like. I could not get my shoes on and it was just the worst and then soon after that I had a night where I didn't like feel the baby move that much and I drank some orange juice and she was moving a little and I didn't feel great but I had a doctors appointment set for the following morning anyway to take a glucose test. And I went in for my normal appointment, and as they did with any appointment they took my blood pressure and the nurse was sort of like looked at me and she took it again and then she took it again, and then she said wait right here.

My doctor came in and she said I'm going to turn off the lights for five minutes, lay down with the lights out for five minutes. And she took my blood pressure again and then she told me like 'we have to admit you to the hospital.' I don't remember what exactly it was but my blood pressure was through the roof. Extremely high. I wasn't that nervous at that point and she was like listen it's probably nothing. Some people have high blood pressure during pregnancy. Most likely maybe you'll be on blood pressure medication the rest of your pregnancy, but we do have to admit you. We do have to check you out.

So I wasn't panicked at that point. I was just sort of like, oh this sucks. And luckily enough my mom happened to be along for that appointment which I feel like was fated somehow. But she was nervous from the beginning. And we got to the hospital. They admitted me right away. They

put an IV in .They're checking my blood pressure. And I think it was like an hour or two later they checked my urine for protein and then the head of the OBGYN department came in and basically told my husband and I, 'you're not leaving until this baby is born.'

At that point I was three months away from my due date. And I was like, 'you mean I'm going to be here for like three months,' and he's like, 'we'll be really happy if you last a week.'

We started crying and it was totally devastating. But still we I wasn't feeling terrible at that point I still felt pretty normal. Andrew and I were like maybe they're wrong, and even a couple of the nurses said you don't look preeclamptic, people who are preeclamptic look really sick, you don't look really sick. So we were holding out hope like maybe I'll just have to be on bed rest for a few months and that will suck, but like we started making a spreadsheet of friends to visit and asking people to bring food by and all that sort of stuff. But we knew it was serious enough that Andrew called his parents, and they came on a red eye to New York from California to be with us.

Within a day or two- I don't have a lot of memories of that time because at that point they put me on a mag drip, which is like epsom salt. It's really intense, and it makes you really confused, and it is really- it makes you really uncomfortable and pained. It's like a shitty medication to be on so I don't actually have a lot of memory of the following two-and-a-half to three days, but I think it was like 24 hours later- first they moved me down they're like, 'oh, you're getting better. We're moving you to a less serious floor. Then it was like, 'oh, you're getting worse. You're going back to labor and delivery.'

I woke up in the middle of the night with a terrible pain, like gas pain, but it went through to my back too. And that turned out to be a sign that I developed something called HELLP syndrome, which is a problem with your liver. They basically said you need to deliver now. This is going to happen today

For me I was trying to just keep her in a little longer. Like, it's fine. I'll be fine. Which was like a very martyr thing to do, but it also didn't take into account that the sicker I got the worse off it was for Layla. So they gave me pitocin and they were going to try to have me deliver vaginally but I kept getting sicker. mMy liver numbers kept getting worse just within a number of hours. So they brought me in for an emergency c-section.

It was horrible. It was really horrible. I didn't feel pain but I could feel- I was distinctly aware of multiples sets of hands in me I could feel them shifting things around.

Andrew was breathing in my ear trying to relax me. It was not relaxing me. It was fucking irritating me but I didn't want to be like 'that's annoying' because I was like what if I die and the last thing I said to him was 'shut up. That's annoying.'

And that's how Layla was born. she was born at 2 pounds 2 oz. And I saw her for like a split second before they brought her to the nicu.

I remember so little. It's one of those things where your mind plays tricks on you. I know that I saw her. I'm aware that they brought her over to me. But I can't really remember that. I think that the memory I have is almost like the idea of what I think it would look like.

I was in a recovery room which was like a torture room for 24 hours while they waited for my numbers to come down.

Andrew saw Layla. He was trying to keep the rest of the family from seeing Layla because he didn't want anyone to see her before me. But I was like, 'listen, I'm going to be here for a long time,' and so basically I was the last person to visit her in the nicu. I was the last person to see her.

They wheeled me up about 24 hours later on a gurney. I couldn't even be in a wheelchair yet. I was still laying down. When they first brought me in there and I saw her she was very covered up she had foam things on her eyes to protect her eyes from the blue light they had on for jaundice, and she had a little hat and like tiny diaper that was like the size of a matchbox almost.

The first 24 hours I couldn't remember her name I kept asking Andrew, 'what did we name her again? I can't remember.' And he kept having to tell me, and that was very upsetting to me. So I asked them to lower my pain medication and they were like, 'absolutely not' because the c-section I had, they had to cut be both ways horizontally and vertically because she was very- it was early in the pregnancy, she was very high up, and so I was out of it for a few days.

I ended up staying in the hospital for, I think, a week after that recovering. And of course I knew that she was going to be there for much longer but I still just wanted to get home. I didn't want to be in the hospital anymore. I didn't want to leave without her, but I was so exhausted and I just wanted to be in my own bed. And I knew that- and we did end up going every day for the most part to visit her someone was with her every day.

The thing about having a kid in the nicu is that it's roller coastery. There's a honeymoon period then something goes really wrong, it gets better, something goes really wrong. While cumulatively it got better there were always set back along the way.

We got to take her home two months later, when she was four pounds. Basically to take a baby home they need to be able to eat on their own, breathe on their own and regulate their body temperature on their own. She was doing great with breathing and body temperature but was not doing a great job with eating. So she was still being tube fed up until like the last few days. And we were trying to get her to take the bottle. She was way too small to breastfeed, so I was pumping and putting breast milk in a bottle and giving it to her. And so finally on the last day she was ready. And they have to pass a carseat safety test to make sure that their breathing doesn't go crazy when they sit in a car seat for a certain amount of time. We also had to do a CPR class before we took her home because the babies could stop breathing at any point.

I was really afraid that I was losing my mind because of how convinced I was that she was going to die. And my therapist and everyone else is saying, 'no, that's not going to happen.'

There was one point where I lost some time and was driving and an hour later I was somewhere completely different.

Even when the big stuff started to go away, Andrew would say something to me, or I would ask him a question, he would give me an answer and like five minutes later I would ask him again and had forgotten I had asked the question in the first place. So I thought this is what my mind is going to be like now. That I'm just going to be completely out of it and not myself anymore.

I just I just had to accept that I was not going to be the same person that I was before this experience and that's ok.

Sometimes we have this expectation that after a trauma happens you're supposed to bounce back to the person you were before and that's what recovery means. But I don't think that's what recovery means. Recovery means being ok with the person you are now. Yes I'm the same person but I'm profoundly changed and that's fine.

Because of where my head was at during those first couple of years, I actually don't have a lot of memories of being a mom up until Layla was 2 or 3. I can look back on videos and pictures and I can see that I was a good mom, and I can see me interacting with her in really lovely ways and like being great with her. But at the time it was really interesting I felt like a shitty mom all the time. So I don't know when exactly I completely relaxed into it. Maybe you never do relax into it. It's a weird thing to become a parent to bring another person into the world.

JS: Jessica desperately wanted another child. She wanted Layla to grow up with a sibling. But she knew that another pregnancy would be incredibly hard on her body. Potentially fatal.

JV: We had been told by doctors, 'you can never get pregnant again. It would be too dangerous to your health. There's a more than a 50 percent chance that you would get sick again. If you did get sick again there's a very good chance you'd get sick even earlier in your pregnancy, at which point you're talking about a 24- 25-week fetus, and the moral questions around care for that fetus become much more complicated.'

To be honest with you, even if you told me the same exact thing would happen again, I don't think that I would want to put another baby through everything that Layla went through. It was horrible.

JS: But accidents happen. And a few years after Layla was born, Jessica found out she was pregnant again.

JV: It was terrible. I really, really wanted a second baby. I desperately wanted a second baby, we both came from families where we had siblings. We really wanted to have a bigger family. So it was really different from getting my first abortion in that I was really torn up about it.

We made rushed appointments to see specialists, to see doctors, to see if in the three years since Layla had been born was there any change in the literature, what would happen if i was to keep the pregnancy. They just couldn't give me answers. Doctors are usually fine to give you advice to say, 'hey, you need to keep your health safe,' but when you're pregnant, doctors are not like, 'yea, you need to get an abortion.' It's a little more tricky than that for them I think.

They would say things like, 'yea you can keep the pregnancy. There's a really good chance you'll get sick. There's a chance you will die. There's a chance that the baby will die.'

Once we saw a few doctors I knew that there was not really a choice. Andrew was really wonderful in that, even though I knew what he already wanted from the get-go, but he never said, 'look you gotta end this pregnancy.' He sort of let me get there on my own. And I made the

decision, and I ended up going back to the same place that I had been before because again it was very early in the pregnancy.

JS: In her book, *Sex Object*, Jessica writes, “The feminist who gets one abortion is understandable, expected even. The woman—the mother—who gets two, though, must be doing something wrong with her life.”

JV: It wasn't terrible. I was really sad for a few weeks. I wrote about it as writers do, and that made me feel better and talking about it made me feel better.

I wrote about it at the Toast and I wrote about my second abortion not because I was trying to hide the fact that it was my second, but because it was the one that impacted me and had an emotional toll.

JS: As a feminist author with a large internet following, Jessica is no stranger to internet trolls. In fact, the end of her book is devoted to some of the most troubling, misogynist comments she's received. But she said after writing about her second abortion, comments were tame. Supportive even.

JV: I hate to say it but I think I didn't get a lot of backlash, and even had a lot of empathy from the anti-choicers because I didn't want to have the abortion. I had the appropriate, in their mind, response.

That's why I ended up writing about the first one too later because, you know, I was like, 'listen, you can have multiple feelings about different abortions. You can feel bad about one, and one story is not more important than the other.'

It's fine to be a mess sometimes, we're all a bit of a mess. It's ok to feel bad about things or not worthy. I think there's sort of this mainstream idea on what women should feel like we have to put on this really strong persona all the time. Like, I'm doing great. I'm awesome. Independent ladies, all that. And that's wonderful, but I don't think there's anything wrong with owning up to feeling vulnerable and bad. There's power in that too.

I would have this experience of going to college and talking to younger women, and they'd be like, 'oh wow you're doing awesome you're doing great,' and I'm like, I'm doing awful, what are you talking about.

The public perception of who I was felt so starkly different than how I actually am that it just started to feel dishonest, and like I was doing a disservice to the folks who read me by pushing forward an image of a person who is very together, when in fact, I don't feel that way at all.

JS: *Sex Object*, published by Dey Street Books, is available through HarperCollins.com and wherever books are sold.

This story was produced by me, Jenn Stanley, for Rewire Radio, with editorial oversight by Marc Faletti, our director of multimedia. Jodi Jacobson is our editor-in-chief, Brady Swenson is our director of technology. Music for this episode was by Doug Helsel. Special thanks to all the staff at Rewire.

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