

GRETCHEN SISSON, PH.D.

Sociologist, Abortion and Adoption Researcher, and Author of [*Relinquished: The Politics of Adoption and the Privilege of American Motherhood*](#) (St. Martin's Press, Publication date: February 27, 2024)



Gretchen Sisson, Ph.D. is a qualitative sociologist who studies abortion and adoption in the United States. She is a researcher at [Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health](#) in the Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco.

Gretchen's studies on adoption include hundreds of in-depth interviews with women who have relinquished infants for domestic adoption over the past sixty years, with a particular focus on women who have relinquished since *Roe v. Wade*. Her research on adoption decision-making after abortion denial (as part of [The Turnaway Study](#)) was cited in the Supreme Court's dissent in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health* from Justices Breyer, Kagan, and Sotomayor.

In response to the oral arguments and decision in *Dobbs*, Gretchen authored pieces in the [Washington Post](#) and [The Nation](#). In these op-eds, Gretchen condemns the court's decision that adoption over abortion is the best moral alternative and outlines the harsh realities women face when relinquishing a child for adoption. Gretchen has a strong media presence and has been published and quoted in [AP News](#), [Atlantic](#), [BBC](#), [Bitch Media](#), [Bloomberg](#), [Christian Science Monitor](#), [Intelligencer](#), [Good Morning America](#), [Ms Magazine](#), [NBC News](#), [Next Question with Katie Couric](#), [Publisher's Weekly](#), [Refinery29](#), [Rewire](#), [Salon](#), [San Francisco Chronicle](#), [Shondaland](#), [Texas Tribune](#), [The Conversation](#), [The Cut](#), [The Hollywood Reporter](#), [The Nation](#), [The New York Times](#), [TIME](#), [Today Parents](#), [Vox](#), [Washington Post](#), among others. She has also been interviewed on NPR shows [1A](#), [All Things Considered](#), and [Consider This](#), KQED's [Forum](#), and Peacock's [Zerlina](#).

Her first book [*Relinquished: The Politics of Adoption and the Privilege of American Motherhood*](#) is a powerful study of domestic adoption during the age of *Roe v. Wade*. Notably, Sisson centers the stories of relinquishing mothers and the myriad of social, economic, and political factors that shaped their adoption decision-making. She explores the coercion and constraints of the adoption industry, rooted in a long history of state-sanctioned family separation, from the forced assimilation of Native American children to the post-WWII "baby scoop" era. Her findings reveal adoption to be a path of constrained choice for those for whom abortion is inaccessible, or for whom parenthood is untenable. In short, it is no choice at all.

Relinquished was positively reviewed by the [Washington Post](#), [San Francisco Chronicle](#), [Kirkus](#), [Booklist](#), [Library Journal](#), [YES! Magazine](#), [Ms. Magazine](#), [Washington Independent Review of Books](#), and starred in [Publishers Weekly](#). Gretchen was interviewed about the book in the [Boston Globe](#), [The Cut](#), [Forum](#), [City Arts & Lectures](#), [WOSU All Sides](#), [WGBH Under the Radar](#), [The Nation](#), [Mother Jones](#), [Jezebel](#), [DAME Magazine](#), with forthcoming coverage from *It's Been a Minute* and C-SPAN.

THEMES AND IDEAS THAT GRETCHEN SISSON CAN DISCUSS:

- Why adoption is not a valid alternative to abortion, and how adoption may change during the post-Roe era
- The role religion, race, and class play in pregnancy decision-making and adoption
- The history of adoption and family separation in the United States
- Debunking the feel-good narrative surrounding adoption, and the coercive messaging pregnant women receive
- The representation of abortion and adoption in American film and television
 - Examples include *The Handmaid's Tale*, *This is Us*, and *Grey's Anatomy*
- The debate around transnational adoption

A CONVERSATION WITH GRETCHEN SISSON ABOUT RELINQUISHED:

Q: *Why is your forthcoming book, **Relinquished: The Politics of Adoption and the Privilege of American Motherhood**, important in our current climate? What inspired your research and ultimately the writing of this book?*

A: This work was initially inspired by my work with young (teen) mothers and understanding the stigma and marginalization that they face while working to care for themselves and their families. That work, along with my time volunteering for local abortion funds, prompted me to want to more critically consider how we support families in this country, and who we believe is worthy of parenthood. As I began studying adoption and interviewing women who relinquished infants for domestic adoption, I was deeply inspired by their stories and motivated to use my work to counter cultural and political narratives that do not reflect the lived experiences of adoption.

Q: *Has your research changed your own beliefs about adoption, pregnancy-decision making, and motherhood?*

A: I have come to a much more critical place in my understanding of adoption, and who it serves. Adoption is widely believed to be a social good, with the focus on building families. We rarely consider the families that are separated by adoption, and the inequities and vulnerabilities that lead to that separation. As far as pregnancy decision-making, most of the mothers I interviewed wanted to parent, but felt that was untenable. Their stories helped me understand how fragile many American families are, and the risks we take by failing to provide a meaningful social safety net.

Q: *What is one of the most surprising things you've learned in your conversations with the relinquishing mothers?*

A: One of the most surprising things, to me, what how little it would have required for these mothers to parent their children. Most of them just need a little more support: stable or safe housing, a couple hundred dollars, one person in their lives that expressed faith in their ability to make it work. Instead, most of these mothers are facing crises alone and adoption become a lifeline.

Q: What impact would you like RELINQUISHED to have on policy-making? What impact would you like it to have on readers?

*A: I would love our policymakers to be more critical of the role adoption plays in our country. Our governments (federal and state) make very large investments in subsidizing private adoption systems, whereas comparable investments in families would prevent the adoptions in the first place. We need to see value in keeping families together and recognize the harms that follow from failing to do so. For both elected leaders and readers, I think this book will be the first time they've thought deeply about adoption or heard from relinquishing parents, and I hope it will spark many conversations how about adoption works – especially in our post-*Dobbs* world.*

TO BE IN TOUCH WITH GRETCHEN SISSON:

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