

The Apothecary's Wife: The Hidden History of Medicine and How It Became a Commodity

Karen Bloom Gevirtz

University of California Press (Nov 12, 2024)

Hardcover \$28.95 (340pp)

978-0-520-40991-0

Karen Bloom Gevirtz's compelling history book *The Apothecary's Wife* covers the commodification of medicine and the sidelining of women in medical history.

In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the Scientific Revolution transformed how medicine was practiced in a way that left out people in need. Medications made at home were replaced by prescribed medications with consequences leading into the present. To capture this transformation, the book introduces historical figures including Mary Trye, who practiced medicine under the title of medicatrix, and Joanna Stephens, who had a real cure for kidney stones in the eighteenth century. They and other women were sidelined in the new era of medicine, though, as remedies began to cost money, required a physician's prescription, and were supplied by apothecaries.

Personal recipe books and medical prescriptions are used to illustrate how medicine changed from work that housewives did at home into a specialized practice. Newspapers, poems, and plays are used to show how the public's perception of medicine and its practitioners evolved in tandem with these shifts. Lay language is used to elucidate the book's scientific topics, and touches of whimsy and dry humor enliven it: mansplaining, the book suggests, began early in human history. In addition, an imaginary time-traveling patient is used to illustrate changes to medicine across the centuries, with the book suggesting that such a patient would be shocked to be expected to pay for medications and would be baffled by the change from homemade medications to prescribed treatments.

The Apothecary's Wife is a stunning history book about the effects of the Scientific Revolution on the practice of medicine.

CAROLINA CIUCCI (November / December 2024)

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