

Choices

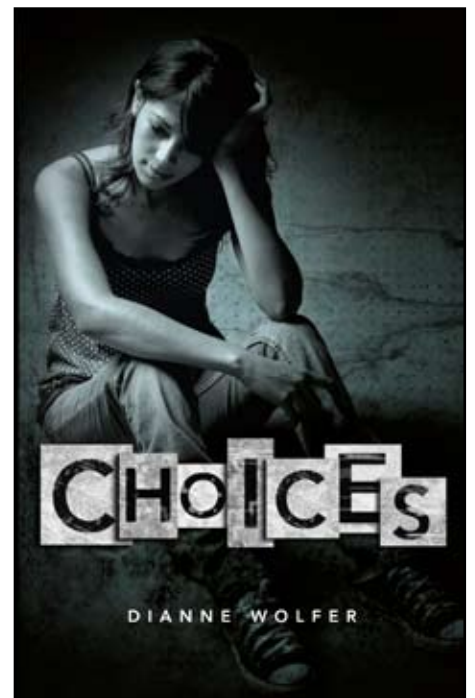
Dianne Wolfer

ISBN: 9 781863 683173

PUBLICATION DATE: 2001

Synopsis

Dianne Wolfer uses her main character, Elisabeth, who is in her final year of high school, to explore the two paths Elisabeth may choose when she finds out she is pregnant. As Libby she chooses to keep her baby, and as Beth she chooses an abortion. In tandem we share with Libby and Beth the 39 weeks of a pregnancy, and the first 16 weeks after the birth of a baby, to examine the effects each choice has on the life of her character, Elisabeth.



Interview with the author

I: Dianne, your topic is one which interests every teen, but the structure of your book is quite unique. How, and why, did you come to present it this way?

DW: I enjoy writing split storylines. My first book, *Dolphin Song*, also has two stories that intersect. In *Choices* I was interested in exploring the question of fate versus free will – to what degree our lives are pre-determined. I often wonder about those moments when we make decisions – are we really choosing, or are our lives already mapped out? I'm no closer to knowing, but I find the thought fascinating.

I: How did you research your topic?

DW: One reference was Sheila Kitzinger's book *Pregnancy and Childbirth*, which I bought in 1991 when I was pregnant with my daughter, Sophie. The book has information and pictures of foetal development and also notes detailing physical changes in the mother-to-be. That was useful in giving me both snippets, and an overview for Libby. For Beth's story, I spoke to friends about terminations and Dr Christiane Northrup's book *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom* was also very helpful.

I: Are the opinions, events and ideas in your book based on those of real people?

DW: No, I have drawn on many women's stories and this made writing the birth scene fun



(but exhausting). Neither Libby nor Beth is based on a real person. Regarding opinions, I felt that it was very important to not make value judgements. By the end of the book, both Beth and Libby feel that they have made the right decision. My personal feeling is that girls should be given clear, honest information, than be supported in whichever choice they make.

I: You have chosen a particular religion, or faith, for your leading character - why?

DW: One of the things writers do is give their characters conflict. Without conflict there is no story. Although I am not Catholic, I felt that Elisabeth's 'choice' would be that much harder if she was part of a community that strongly disagrees with abortion. Giving my leading character and her family a firm sense of faith complicates things, adding more tension. It also reduces Elisabeth's support network, forcing her to look within for strength.

I: Why did you choose to focus on the point of view of the mother (and potential mother) and not the father of the child (or potential father)?

DW: I have tried to include Darren's point of view as much as possible. Pages 111, 187 and the birth scene are a few examples of times when Darren's reactions and feelings are explored. Ultimately though, it is Elisabeth's body and therefore her story I was most interested in.

I: What aspect of writing do you find hardest?

DW: Editing!!

I: What is the most rewarding thing about it?

DW: Holding the book, for the first time. After months/years of working on a manuscript, seeing the final product complete with cover art that enhances the story is a very special moment. I also love seeing my books in bookshops and libraries, or even better, in the hands of an engrossed reader! Receiving e-mails and positive feedback from readers is also wonderful.

I: Have you any advice for would-be writers?

DW: Join a writers group or find a writing buddy who will read and critique your work. Drafting and redrafting is an essential step in discovering exactly what you are trying to say. There are heaps of story competitions around, try entering a few. Hear the advice of others, but listen most to your inner voice. Don't listen to the demons in your head saying your writing is no good. Perhaps it just needs another edit.

Suggestions for studying the text

BEFORE READING

1. Study and discuss:

- book cover;
- title;
- blurbs;
- the synopsis above;
- the book's prologue;
- the interview with the author above.

2. Write your predictions and comments about:

- settings;
- main characters (suggest up to four);
- style of writing, and structure of the book;
- complications and problems which may arise;
- outcomes.

Then, put away your notes until after you've read the book.

3. Research (individually or in groups), and record your findings in your journal, some issues related to, and aspects of pregnancy, and of being a young mother, which relate to your own context. For example:

- What part should a teenage boy have in deciding what to do about an unwanted pregnancy in which he is the father? Why?
- What part should a teenage father play in supporting his child?
- What resources are available to help a teenage mother to look after her baby, and to complete her education? Should this be the responsibility of the immediate families involved, or the wider community through government support services? Why?
- How does the availability of support services affect the choices available? Have support services always been available? Twenty years ago? Fifty? One hundred?
- What is your opinion about abortion? Support this with sound arguments.
- What do you think is the effect of an abortion on the mother? What about on the father?
- Is it possible to obtain a legal abortion? How? Where?
- How long should a pregnant student attend school before the birth of her child?
- Do you know of any student pregnancies? What decisions were made? What were the effects/outcomes?
- What would be your parents'/family's/carer's reaction if you became pregnant while still at school?
- What choice would you make if you became pregnant?
- Research the stages of pregnancy, and produce notes and diagrams to illustrate your findings.
- Present research findings (about any issue examined) to the whole class/your group.

DURING READING

4. Keep a journal and record your thoughts about, and reactions to what you are reading. You may choose to keep your responses to Libby and Beth separately, one at the front of the journal, and one at the back. Don't feel that you have to write a 'book' each time, sometimes you may simply write something like:

June 5th: I'm not ready to comment today, I'll wait to finish Part One - I'm up to 'Beth 36 weeks'.

On other occasions you might feel strongly about something and write detailed notes on:

- any character's actions or opinions, in different parts of the story, whether you agree or disagree, and your reasons;
 - how you relate to a particular character (or more than one) and their experiences — has that experience happened to you, or could it happen to you, or someone you know and how you think you'd react;
 - an event — for instance after the chapter Beth: 8 Weeks (pp 18 - 28) when Beth visits the abortion clinic, or Libby: 9 weeks (pp 29 - 33) when Libby tells Darren;
 - the language used, for instance the dialogue, does it sound real? Give examples;
 - devices the author uses to create a certain effect — like irony, metaphors, similes ... do they work for you? Why?
5. Or, you may prefer to keep a journal about a fictitious pregnancy which follows the stages discussed in *Choices*. In it you could explore both what is happening physically and emotionally.
 6. At intervals, discuss with a partner, or in class, your interpretations of events and characters. Note similarities and differences, and try to figure out reasons for these. Try to make predictions for each character. Take notes of your discussions.
 7. The book is set in Perth, so you may like to copy an overview map of the metro area for your journal, and mark sites as they are mentioned (e.g. Swan River, UWA ...)

AFTER READING

Choose from the suggestions below, or follow your own interests, perhaps raised in your journal entries, to explore further the issues raised in *Choices*.

8. The main plot revolves around an unwanted pregnancy. Write your own synopsis of the plot to encourage others to read the book.
9. Many sub-plots and themes are also explored. Some are:
 - love;
 - differences and choices;
 - relationships;
 - stereotypes;

- responsibilities;
- religion;
- beliefs;
- radicalism and obsessive beliefs;
- protest;
- marriage;
- partnerships;
- parenthood;
- issues for children of single parents;
- morality;
- rejection;
- trust and hope;
- ethical issues;
- expectations;
- self actualisation ...

Choose one (or some) of these themes, or others you have identified, and find at least three examples in the book of where the author has explored your chosen theme(s).

Write where you found each example (Part One/Two, page number and paragraph) and explain in your own words the point of view expressed, including whose it is.

Alternatively, chapter by chapter, identify the themes which are being developed in addition to the main plot.

10. One of many techniques Dianne Wolfer uses in *Choices*, is the story's structure which is clearly shaped by the two points of view from which it is told. What is interesting is that these points of view are those of the same character - depending on the life-changing choice she made. Discuss: Was this technique effective in conveying the story to you? Why do you think it worked/didn't work? What effect would it have had if Dianne had chosen to write about two different pregnant teenage girls, who each made one of the choices described?
11. Choose an event from *Choices*, and rewrite it as a play script to act out with the class. Make masks for the characters to wear.
12. Write about, and discuss things you would need to take into account if you were making Elisabeth's decision. Compare your response after reading *Choices*, with what you thought you'd do when you discussed this (see question 3) before you read the book.
13. In groups: imagine *Choices* is to be made into a television series, and you are responsible for the music. What would you choose as theme song/music for the series? Why? Each episode will show both Beth's and Libby's point of view about a particular stage/event ... But, instead of being told as tandem stories as in the book, it will be filmed as one story showing the different points of view by cutting from one to the other. Decide on music which suits each character, and explain how this could be used to indicate to viewers whose viewpoint is being shown.

14. Consider the two main characters, Beth and Libby, do you find them equally believable? Do you like one more than the other? Write the reasons for your answers.
15. In your groups, discuss the secondary characters and note your opinions about each, for example: Was each believable? How well was each developed? Was this appropriate for their part in the story? How did the author give information about each? Were their words and actions consistent with their personalities as you understood them? Can you suggest other ways to develop characters? Share your group's findings with the whole class.
16. Friendship is important to most people. Write about what it means to you. In groups, discuss what you've written, and compare similarities and differences in the viewpoints expressed. Consider what the differences mean to friendships. How far would you support a friend who does something you disagree with? Is the kind of action relevant, or does your response hold for everything?
17. Discussion topics, which may be researched prior to discussing in class:
 - What do you think of Darren's responses (in each case)? Do you know anyone like him? Consider the other characters in the same way (e.g. the parents, brother, girl friends ...).
 - What are different ways a teenage father could respond? Has your opinion changed since you considered this before you read the book?
 - Discuss the parents reactions in each scenario, and how these affected what happened to Beth and Libby.
 - Consider aspects of pregnancy researched in your before reading investigations, and how Libby's situation would have affected her baby's development prior to its birth, and afterwards. Research and discuss aspects of, and issues involving, child development.
 - Discuss the ethical dilemmas confronting those involved with sperm donors, and the resulting children and their rights. Can you form an opinion about this issue? Give your reasons.
18. Debating topics:
 - Rights of the mother vs. the child;
 - Rights of the father;
 - Father's role, and its importance;
 - Confidentiality of the doctor when a young woman becomes pregnant;
 - Abortion;
 - Adoption;
 - Parents' roles — jointly and individually ...