



FILM: **THE JANES**

FDG RATING: 4.6 ☺☺☺☺☺

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Tia Lessin and Emma Pildes: *directors*  
documentary

DATE: November 20, 2022

## DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE JANES**

The Janes is a 2022 documentary about a group of women activists in Chicago who provided safe but illegal abortions in the late 1960s and early 1970s until the landmark Supreme Court ruling of Roe v. Wade in 1973, which legalized abortion nationwide. The Janes performed about 11,000 safe, low-cost abortions between 1968 and 1973 before disbanding.

The film focuses on several ordinary, educated women, activists by nature, who strongly believed in a woman's right to have an abortion. Their personal stories included accounts of their own abortions which had to be secured through the mob at great expense at a middle-of-nowhere motel. We heard how poorly they'd been treated, which was their motivation to make sure others felt safe and supported. They also described the women they were able to help by directing them to a secret place where an abortion would be performed safely by person trained in the procedure.

We learned that "Jane" is the pseudonym they included in understated ads in underground newspapers and flyers they'd post throughout the city: "Pregnant? Call Jane" with a phone number. A woman who'd probably been in the same position at some point, was ready to listen and help. The Janes had to be extremely covert and took extraordinary care to connect with women in need. They used secret code words and rotating vehicles and locations. Fortunately, the cops "had bigger fish to fry" so The Janes were able to stay under the radar. The narrative traces these women's efforts from the beginning — when the group was merely a referral service — to their final days contending with law enforcement. It was the religious Irish Catholic sister of a young woman seeking an abortion who reported the "criminal activity" she saw to the police that finally unleashed a series of arrests of the Jane volunteers.

One discussion participant who came to the US from Russia in 1968, was stunned that abortions were not available here. Another discussion participant pointed out that there was (and still is!) a strong religious aspect to the ban of abortions.

We were all impressed that these incredibly brave white, college educated women risked so much to help women who needed an abortion, regardless of background. It was difficult, but they found one doctor in Chicago who could be trusted. He had an assistant who he trained so that when the doctor decided it had become too risky for him to continue, the man who had assisted him took over. Though this man was surprisingly not a doctor, and he looked more like a lumber jack, he was extremely skilled and empathetic so that patients praised him. When he decided to no longer perform the abortions, several women volunteers asked to be trained and then proceeded to perform abortions for thousands of desperate women.

The film captured the political unrest of the time and footage from the period set the tone. The directors' approach was straightforward so it was not over dramatized despite revealing the hospital's septic abortion ward where victims of back alley abortions were being treated, the horrific results of botched abortions.

The interviews were extremely vivid and engaging. Photos of the women as young, energetic, fresh-faced, eager Janes from the 60s brought a youthful vitality to the film. And then we see them today (filmed in 2019) emotionally speaking about their past experiences. We felt like we got to know them. Reflecting on what they had accomplished, we're sure that The Janes are shocked at the 2022 Supreme Court dissolution of Roe v. Wade.

"Fascinating, well done, a brilliant film, they were true heroes", were some of our discussion comments. One discussion participant admitted it was her favorite film of this year. Another critical participant gave the film our highest score, and it is the only time in ten years of rating our groups films that he gave a film that high of a score. Educational, engaging, and inspiring, we recognized the importance of this timely film with a strongly supportive 4.6 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best).



See you at the movies!

Adriane Dedic, [adedic@pacbell.net](mailto:adedic@pacbell.net)  
[www.filmdiscussiongroup.com](http://www.filmdiscussiongroup.com)