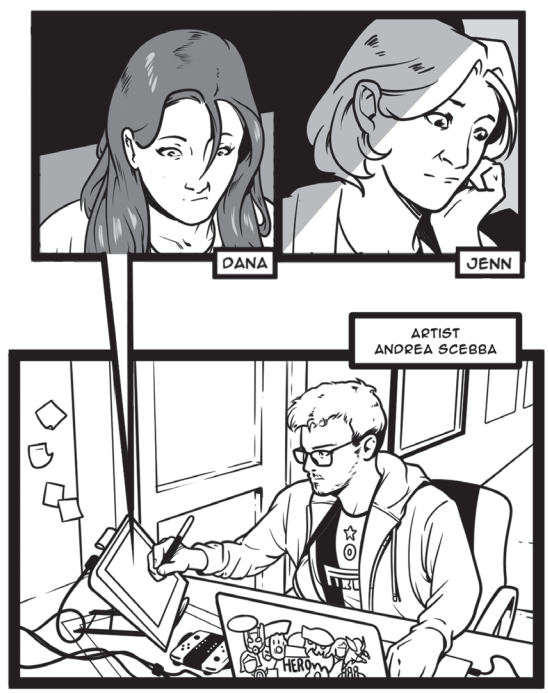
Introduction

A Tale of Two Surrogates is the first graphic novel about the controversial topic of surrogacy. The book is a collaboration between sociologist Zsuzsa Berend and anthropologist Elly Teman, who have each devoted two decades of their careers to ethnographic research on surrogacy. Illustrated by comic artist Andrea Scebba, the storyline follows two surrogates in alternating chapters—Jenn in the United States and Dana in Israel. Their stories show the striking similarities and differences in the way surrogacy plays out in these two countries in particular, and, at the same time, they situate the storyline in an international context.

Publicly available stories about surrogacy most often focus on extreme legal cases, celebrity intended parents (IPs), or babies in transnational surrogacy arrangements stranded because of bureaucratic hurdles, natural disasters, the pandemic, or war. Our graphic novel focuses on the much less sensational everyday stories of surrogates and the important practical and ethical questions those stories raise. Jenn and Dana are composite fictional characters, but their words, actions, and interactions come from qualitative data from our respective ethnographic studies. Ethnographers study people in social context, often for long periods of time, and observe their interactions and behaviors. They also usually talk to people in these social settings to hear their individual and collective interpretations of their reality.



Jenn's story is based on Zsuzsa's online ethnographic research on Surrogate Mothers Online (SMO), a virtual meeting place where surrogates constructed a distinct culture of surrogacy. Dana's story is based on Elly's ethnographic research among Israeli surrogates and IPs. More about these studies and their methods can be found in our separate and joint publications.[1] This graphic novel condenses the most important themes and ideas that emerged from our studies and from our joint comparative publications on US and Israeli surrogates' responses to legal regulations, articulations of kinship and

motherhood, and negotiations of surrogacy with their husbands and children as a "family project."

Jenn's and Dana's stories are situated in the United States and Israel, which are outliers in relation to the rest of the world in terms of surrogacy. These are the only two highly developed countries where compensated surrogacy has remained legal for over two decades, throughout a period in which the international surrogacy industry became something of a "Wild West." Some countries allowed surrogacy "under the radar" for short-lived, unregulated periods that resulted in complications, scandals, and eventual criminalization.[2] Each ban, in succession, pushed the industry to the next country (India, Thailand, Nepal, Mexico, Cambodia). Current unregulated markets include Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia. A few countries continue to permit uncompensated surrogacy arrangements (Canada, Australia, UK), and many have banned surrogacy altogether (most of Europe).

The United States and Israel legislate compensated surrogacy in very different ways. Our comparative approach invites readers to think about the repercussions of these regulatory differences. The United States does not have a federal law; surrogacy is regulated state by state and is open to noncitizens. Private agencies and clinics function with little or no state oversight.[3] California, where Jenn lives, has long been the center of this booming industry and is known as a surrogacy-friendly state.

Conversely, Israel's surrogacy law closely regulates the process via a government-appointed committee that must approve all applicants and contracts. Surrogacy is formulated as a last resort for Israeli citizens or permanent residents who satisfy a long list of criteria for approval. Medical and psychological screening and other contractual protections are mandated. Further complicating the Israeli surrogacy law are provisions for making surrogacy compatible with Jewish law.

For instance, surrogacy parties cannot be related, because some rabbis view intrafamilial surrogacy as a form of incest. Moreover, parties must share the same religion, unless none of them is Jewish. This is because cross-religious surrogacy can have religious repercussions for the recognition of the baby as a Jew.[4]

Surrogacy is prohibited in Islam, so Israeli surrogacy occurs primarily between Jews. Accordingly, the characters of Dana and her IPs are Jewish. They are not religiously observant, but like many Jewish-Israeli families, they honor Jewish life cycle rituals and holidays. Jenn and her family are Christian, reflecting a prominent demographic among surrogates in the United States.

The majority of surrogates in the United States and Israel are heterosexual and married.[5] A growing number of US surrogates carry for same-sex

couples and single persons, yet the majority of IPs they work with are straight, married couples. In Israel, the surrogacy law prevented single women from contracting with a surrogate until 2018 and prevented single men and same-sex couples from entering these arrangements until 2022, a social inequality addressed in the story.

In keeping with our and others' scholarly findings on the demographics of surrogacy in these two countries, we chose to depict both surrogates and their IPs as married, heterosexual couples. The two surrogates are middle-class, working mothers. They represent the majority of surrogates in the United States and Israel, who are lower-middle to middle class and are most often not financially needy. Most have complex reasons for becoming a surrogate, in which financial reasons, although relevant, are not necessarily dominant. These reasons include doing something important and meaningful, creating life and families, becoming one of a select group of women, and earning money that helps their families achieve their goals. Surrogates in both countries tend to conceptualize surrogacy as a family project undertaken openly in their communities, and they usually form a relationship with their IPs.

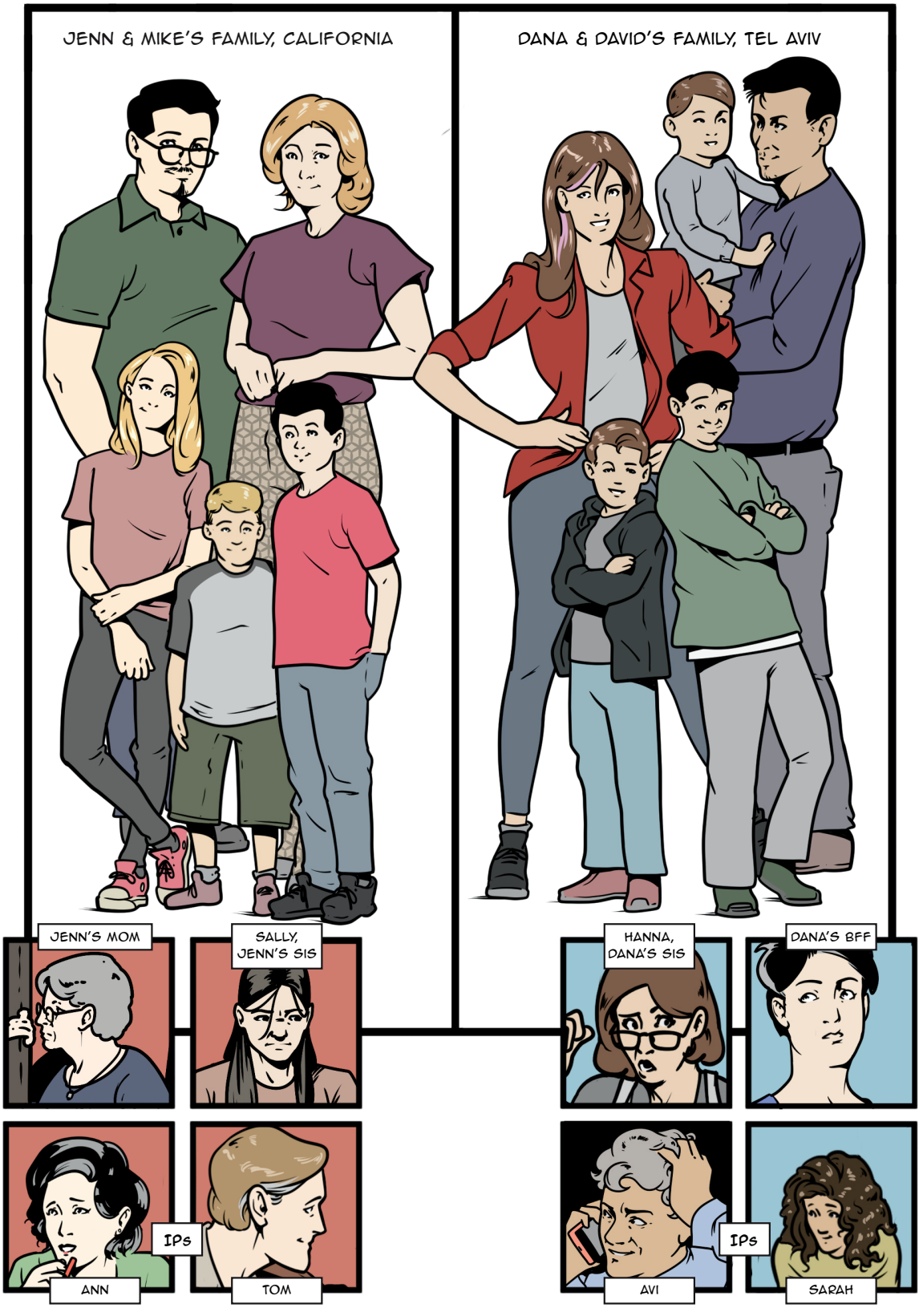
In order to highlight the often-neglected reality of family members' involvement in surrogacy, we depict Jenn and Dana each interacting with a husband, three children, a sister, and other family members.

US surrogates and IPs are predominantly white. Jenn and her IPs are white, reflecting the majority of empirical evidence. There are some Latina but still very few African American and almost no Asian surrogates in the United States. Surrogates do carry babies for couples of various racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds, including many Europeans, an increasing number of Chinese, and other foreign nationals who cannot pursue surrogacy in their countries because of legal barriers.[6]

Throughout the story, Jenn and Dana participate in online social networks, giving us a vehicle to portray how surrogates share information, advice, and support in online communities. Through these networks we introduce the different voices and range of approaches, outcomes, and opinions they represent. The surrogates Jenn meets online carry babies for a diverse group of people involved in surrogacy, including single persons, same-sex couples, and international IPs.

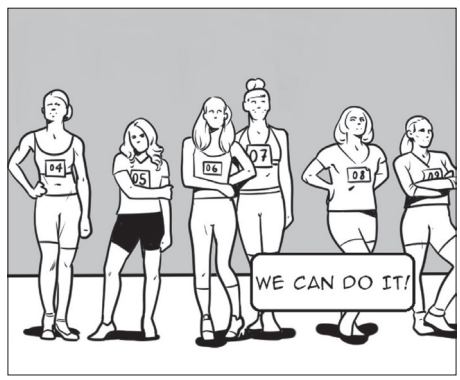
Jenn's online world of US surrogates is represented as a modern version of a classical Greek chorus commenting on and underscoring themes of her story. The chorus, like the online surrogacy network (SMO) that it represents, vocalizes a particular image of surrogacy that aligns with the collective meanings and norms of

CAST OF CHARACTERS



the group, which are shaped by online discussions and debates. We portray the chorus in shades of gray, representing their symbolic nature in the story.

In turn, Dana's online network of Israeli surrogates is represented as competitors surmounting the challenges of an obstacle course. This depiction highlights Dana's athletic lifestyle as well as the selective nature of Israeli surrogacy screening; only women who satisfy the physical and mental criteria outlined in the law can become surrogates. It also connotes the hero's journey, a narrative trope that Israeli surrogates often draw upon to tell their stories as tough, determined adventurers who bravely choose to face risks and surmount obstacles to complete their mission. All of the advice and opinions shared with Jenn and Dana through their social networks represent the diverse voices of surrogates in our research. All names used in this book are fictional.



We have included interludes throughout the book, representing some of the research findings on transnational surrogacy in other scholars' work.[7] Each interlude depicts a place where fertility clinics once catered to international surrogacy clients, such as different locations in India. The one-page vignettes include a snapshot of a monument or setting in that specific part of the world, as well as quotes from participants in the surrogacy process from relevant publications. The interludes are not meant to present a comprehensive picture but to spark comparative conversation. They provide a brief glimpse into the medical, interpersonal, and legal situations of surrogates in the few countries where surrogacy has been documented by other researchers.

Juxtaposed with themes from Jenn's and Dana's stories, they illuminate major differences in surrogates' situations in different social and cultural contexts. For example, the scholarship on women who became surrogates in Russia, India, Mexico, and Thailand suggests they did so primarily because surrogacy paid significantly more than the jobs available to them. These surrogates hoped to accomplish goals such as repaying debt, buying a house, and paying for their children's education.

Surrogates documented in these places often lived separately from their partners, children, and community for the duration of the pregnancy and kept their involvement in surrogacy a secret, sometimes out of shame, because the practice was stigmatized. They rarely met or directly communicated with the IPs, and many did not even know who they were carrying the baby for.

Yet scholars described not only these surrogates' vulnerability but also their subjectivity and agency. Surrogates in these studies expressed awareness that their lives in the reproductive market were "discounted," their "womb work" objectified and invisible. Nevertheless, they did not view themselves as victims but as making use of opportunities to better their lives.

We urge readers to pause during the interludes, to think about the institutional arrangements that constrain Jenn's and Dana's actions as well and how their impact unfolds in the two stories.

This graphic novel has found its home in a series on graphic medicine, a term coined by Ian Williams to denote the intersection between comics and the discourse of healthcare. Several books in this series are based on personal memoirs of the authors' encounters with reproductive health issues, such as infertility, miscarriage, and menopause.[8] Our ethnographic contribution to graphic medicine brings it into dialogue with the anthropology of reproduction and is inspired by recent works in anthropology that communicate scholarly research findings through comics in order to make the findings more broadly accessible.[9] Our story uses fictional characters based on many women's stories as a means to introduce readers to the practice of surrogacy and its social implications, including different medical and legal practices and the diverse interests and perspectives of the participants involved.

We do not advocate for or against any of the practices we present in these stories. These are all real practices we encountered during our years of research. We believe these stories can help readers understand surrogacy from the surrogate's perspective, better grasp the potential difficulties, and form a realistic assessment of the complexities. In line with the vision of graphic medicine, we hope this book will be useful and informative for medical providers, healthcare workers, people interested in pursuing surrogacy, public health and legal decision-makers, students, and anyone curious about what many US and Israeli surrogates grapple with during their "journeys." While reading, we encourage readers to think about some of the questions below.

What draws Jenn and Dana to surrogacy? How do they imagine surrogacy and what do they discover?

What is the impact of each woman's family on her decisions and experience? What are the implications of surrogacy for her family?

How do Jenn and Dana exercise agency and negotiate bodily autonomy throughout the surrogacy process?

Which issues do they view as their own responsibility and what are their expectations, if any, of the state?

What kind of relationship do the surrogates develop with their IPs? What expectations do the surrogates have about this relationship?

What recurrent metaphors shape the surrogates' experience?

What role do gifts and reciprocity play in surrogacy?

What role do their online communities have in shaping their expectations and interpretations?