

Call for Conference Papers

Abortion Narratives: The Uses of Literature and Storytelling in Activism and Health Care

May 28-29, 2026, at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU), Odense, Denmark

We invite proposals for an international conference on the uses of literature (and cultural representations more broadly) on unwanted pregnancies. Abortion – whether legal, legally restricted or illegal – is a complex health care issue that asks fundamental questions about morality, rights and care. It concerns the individual people seeking abortion but also their partners, relatives, health care professionals, ethicists, lawmakers and the general public.

As a point of departure, the conference juxtaposes the Danish/Nordic and US American cultural discourses on abortion. In both Denmark and the US, abortion was legalized in 1973. While the US has overturned the landmark decision in 2022 after decades of increasingly radicalized and polarized public discourses, the Danish legislation has enjoyed a widespread support in the general public over the past five decades, to the extent that it is considered a given or “selvfølge.” More recently, a resurgence in the public debate entailed a change in the Danish legislation: On June 1, 2025, the Danish government expanded women’s right to ‘fri abort’ by dropping parental consent for teenagers (15-18 years) and extending the 12 weeks restriction to 18 weeks. With our conference, which takes place a year after the change of law came into effect in Denmark, we want to consider the role of the humanities at the intersections of activism and health care.

The Danish-US American comparison is particularly insightful because both countries – each with rich literary and creative cultures – have dealt quite differently with the topic of abortion. In the US American abortion activism, literary texts, other forms of cultural representation as well as personal storytelling and testimonies have been crucial in shaping public opinion, with the majority of stories featuring pronounced activist agendas and speaking from either pro- or anti-abortion positions. As researchers have observed, abortion plots have changed over time, responding to cultural and political discourses on either side of the abortion divide. While nuanced, complex and ambiguous autobiographies of abortion experiences exist in the US, they are rare. One would expect that in Denmark, where the public discourse is not split into two opposing camps, more abortion narratives would exist. Surprisingly, there have been only very few literary or cultural representations of abortion since 1973. Only recently have Danish writers started to explore this topic, and they all observe that they were motivated to do so after not being able to locate stories that might help them understand their own experiences.

From a Medical Humanities perspective, neither the Danish nor the US American example is ideal. A dearth of stories suggests a taboo, whereas texts that are either pro- or anti-

abortion do not do justice to the nuances and complexities of the issue. After all, abortion touches on an area of human life where many fundamental questions are unknown and where medical research has expanded the possibilities of what people (in and outside of health care) consider to be ethical. Abortion is also highly subjectively experienced by people who ascribe very differing meanings to their decisions and experiences. Similarly, health care professionals can be in difficult positions, either because of legal restrictions and threats or because there is no open discourse about the complexity of the procedure. Moreover, abortion-seekers and health care professionals often experience a clash between their own expectations and the reality of what an abortion entails.

To further explore these complexities, we welcome humanistic perspectives on abortion on any of the following topics:

- the role of literary and artistic representations in health care activism and politics
- the influences of cultural and political contexts on representations of abortion (or the lack thereof)
- the role of stigmatization and stereotypes
- the conditions for nuance and complexity in ideologically divided and radicalized contexts
- the role of readers and the morality of reading as a cultural practice
- the role of medical humanities and literary studies
- perspectives from health care professionals
- pedagogical reflections on health care education
- comparative cases from other countries with similar contradictions

Confirmed plenary speakers

- Karen Weingarten, Professor of English, Queens College, CUNY
- Turið Nolsøe, Postdoc, Department of Culture and Language, University of Southern Denmark

The conference is pending on the approval of funding that we are applying for. If funded, bursaries for travel and accommodation, especially for early-career colleagues and colleagues with financial constraints, may be available.

Submission guidelines

Proposals for individual papers of 20 min or suggestions for workshops are welcome. Your submission should include an abstract of 250 words, your email address as well as a short biography, incl. your professional or academic affiliation and your current role or position.

Deadline: December 10, 2025

Submit your proposal to: wohlmann@sdu.dk

Expected notification date: early January 2026

Expected notification date from the foundation: March 2026

For questions, please contact Anita Wohlmann, wohlmann@sdu.dk

Conference organizers:

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The conference is supported by the [Centre for Uses of Literature](#), the [Center for American Studies](#) and the [Research Group Narrative Medicine](#) at the University of Southern Denmark.