

**SELFISH**

**SIXTEEN WRITERS**

**ON THE**

**SHALLOW**

**AND NOT**

**SELF-**

**TO HAVE KIDS**

**PICADOR**

**EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY MEGHAN DAUM**

**ABSORBED**

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# SELFISH, SHALLOW, AND SELF-ABSORBED

SIXTEEN WRITERS ON THE  
DECISION NOT TO HAVE KIDS

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

**MEGHAN DAUM**

PICADOR  
NEW YORK

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# INTRODUCTION

WHILE WORKING ON this book, I sometimes found myself contemplating a variation of Leo Tolstoy's famous "happy families" line from the opening of *Anna Karenina*: *People who want children are alike. People who don't want children don't want them in their own ways.*

Of course, the original maxim isn't exactly true, since happy families come in all varieties, and unhappy families can be miserable in mind-numbingly predictable ways. And since most people eventually wind up becoming parents, whether by choice, circumstance, or some combination thereof, my version isn't necessarily an airtight theory either. Still, in thinking about this subject steadily over the last several years, I've come to suspect that the majority of people who have kids are driven by any of just a handful of reasons, most of them connected to old-fashioned biological imperative.

Those of us who choose not to become parents are a bit like Unitarians or nonnative Californians: we tend to arrive at our destination via our own meandering, sometimes agonizing paths. That's one of the reasons I put this anthology together. Contrary to a lot of cultural assumptions, people who opt out of parenthood (and, to be clear, this is a book about *deciding* not to have children; not being able to have them when you want them is another matter entirely) are not a monolithic group. We are neither hedonists nor ascetics. We bear no worse psychological scars from our own upbringings than most people who have kids. We do not hate children (and it still amazes me that this notion is given any credence). In fact, many of us devote quite a lot of energy to enriching the lives of other people's children, which in turn enriches our own lives. Statistically, we are more likely to give back to our communities than people who are encumbered with small children—not just because we have the time, but because "giving back" often includes returning the kids to their parents at the end of the day.

To read the essays in this book is to notice that, in many ways, the common theme is that there is no common theme. Though all the authors are more than satisfied, and in some cases downright ecstatic, with their decision to forgo parenthood, no two reached that decision in quite the same way. For some, the necessary self-knowledge came after years of indecision. For others, the lack of desire to have or raise children felt hardwired from birth, almost like sexual orientation or gender identity. A few actively pursued parenthood before realizing they were chasing a dream that they'd mistaken for their own but that actually belonged to someone else—a partner, a family member, the culture at large. As Jeanne Safer so poignantly describes in her essay, she didn't really want to have a baby; she

wanted to want to have a baby.

That line nearly took my breath away. Though I can now say (and as I wrote in the margin of Jeanne's piece), "That's exactly how I once felt!" there was a time before that when I hadn't yet reached such hindsight. Instead, I was trying very hard to talk myself into wanting something I always known deep down wasn't for me. Not that things wouldn't have worked out fine if those talks had ended with a baby. I had a willing husband and a supportive community of friends. There's no question that I would have loved my child with a kind of love I'd never know otherwise. But when I found my way back to my gut instincts, when I "stood in my truth" as the parlance goes today, I realized that what I wanted most of all was to find some different ways of talking about the choice not to have kids. I wanted to lift the discussion out of the familiar rhetoric, which so often pits parents against nonparents and assumes that the former are self-sacrificing and mature and the latter are overgrown teenagers living large on piles of disposable income. I wanted to show that there are just as many ways of being a nonparent as there are of being a parent. You can do it lazily and self-servingly or you can do it generously and imaginatively. You can be cool about it or you can be a jerk about it.

Typically, it's been the nonparents who have carried a reputation for being jerks. Some of that is our own doing. When *Time* magazine ran a cover story in the summer of 2013 showing a visibly self-satisfied couple lying on the beach under the headline "The Childfree Life: When Having It All Means Not Having Children," it highlighted a major misconception about the voluntarily childless: the idea that we don't want kids because we'd rather have expensive toys and vacations. Type "childfree" into an Internet search engine and you will find no end of tirades against "breeders" along with smug suggestions on the order of "I'd rather spend my money on Manolo Blahniks" and "My reason for not having kids is that Porsche in my driveway." Even the term *childfree*, which was coined as a way of distinguishing the deliberately childless from those who unwillingly or unintentionally find themselves in such circumstances, rubs some people the wrong way—after all, why should childless people fall into the same category as cigarette smoke or gluten?

When that *Time* article came out (the article itself, I should say, showed far more equanimity than the cover suggested), I had just begun my search for contributors to this book. The timing seemed perfect. As the subject was being chewed over in the media, it was clear that the conversation had a long way to go. Cable news hosts purported to be "shocked" at the idea that some people don't want kids (the more diplomatic were quick to add, "Not that I'm judging"). On the Internet, the standard barbs of "selfish" and "shallow" ricocheted around comment threads, even as thousands of contented nonparents expressed their gratitude that the issue was finally being talked about. One night I caught a public radio program on which a listener called in to say that choosing not to have children was a totally legitimate and commendable choice but that he personally had been so enriched by fatherhood that he couldn't help but think that nonparents were living incomplete, ultimately sad lives.

If the core message of this book is that parenthood is not—and moreover should not be—for everyone, the chief lesson of editing the book was that writing about skipping parenthood isn't for

everyone either. Of the many dozens of writers I approached (all of whom had at least hinted, in the work or in interviews, that having children was never high on the agenda), very few were prepared to take on the subject. Some said that, yes, they were childless by design but lacked sufficient angst about it to have anything interesting to say. Some told me they had a lot to say but couldn't for fear of hurting certain family members. In one case, a celebrated novelist who'd apparently been known at one point as someone who never, *ever* wanted children replied to me with a photo of his infant son.

That's why the sixteen essays in this book are such gifts. Brave, thoughtful, and uncompromisingly honest, they are all tributes to the exquisite challenges of living what is commonly (and usually inadequately, though there's often no other way to say it) called an "authentic life." Frequently funny and sometimes sad, occasionally political and always personal, these essays show that there's more than one way to be a responsible, productive—and even happy—adult in the world.

The authors of these essays represent a range of generations, geographical regions, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Despite this diversity, they have one big thing in common: they are all professional writers. Some will say (and as Geoff Dyer cheekily insinuates in his essay) that makes for a less-than-representative sample of the general childless-by-choice population. After all, artists—especially writers—need more alone time than regular people. They crave solitude whereas many people fear it. They resign themselves to financial uncertainty whereas most people do anything they can to avoid it. Moreover, if an artist is lucky, her work becomes her legacy, thus theoretically lessening the burden of producing a child to carry it out.

I take the point. But the truth is that writers, outliers though they may be, are the ones whose job is to write. They are the ones charged with putting the world's complications and contradictions into more universal terms. And while many contributors to this book refer to their writing lives when reflecting on their feelings about parenthood, in no case do I think anyone's choice boiled down to "writing versus children." If it were that simple, they wouldn't have much to say on the subject. Besides, the majority of writers, like the majority of nonwriters, want children and have them. For all the talk of a groundswell in "childfreedom," for all the ways in which it's crucial that society stop assuming that everyone should be a parent, people who want kids will always outnumber people who don't. And anyone but the most catastrophizing overpopulation hawk will say thank goodness for that.

There are notably more women than men here—a thirteen to three ratio, to be exact. That ratio feels to me more or less proportionate to the degree to which men devote serious thought to parenthood (at least before it happens) compared to women, who are goaded into thinking about it practically from birth. Still, I thought it was essential that the collection include male voices. Too often, this subject is framed as a women's issue. But men who are disinclined toward fatherhood must contend with their own set of prejudices; for instance, assumptions that they can't commit to a partner, that they wish to prolong adolescence indefinitely, or that they'll be intractably (and gratefully) domesticated as soon as the right partner reels them in.

The three men in this book draw from very different life experiences. Geoff Dyer is straight

married, and rather dyspeptic about children and family life. Tim Kreider is straight, single, and searching for existential mooring outside the realm of parenthood. In a bittersweet essay about fatherhood avoided by default as well as by choice, Paul Lisicky, a gay man now single after a long-term relationship, confesses, "I'd probably say yes if I ever become involved with someone who wanted to be a parent ... though I might be saying it with the same level of commitment with which I'd say, 'Of course I'd move to Tokyo.'"

The women's stories hit just about every possible note. Some are fiercely unapologetic, such as Laura Kipnis's jeremiad against overly sentimentalized notions of motherhood and Lionel Shriver's confirmation that, yes, human populations are dwindling in the Western world, but that's still no reason to have a baby. Some revisit less-than-idyllic childhoods; Michelle Huneven writes about parents who managed to be at once indifferent and suffocating, Danielle Henderson explores the psychological fallout of her mother leaving her permanently in the care of relatives at age ten, and Sigrid Nunez recalls the harsh child-rearing styles of the urban housing projects where she was raised and her recognition, later on, that the writing life that had saved her would never lend itself to her being the kind of mother she felt it necessary to be. On the other side of the spectrum, Anna Holm pins her ambivalence on the fact that her parents set too good an example. "I suspect that my commitment to and my delight in parenting would be so formidable that it would take precedence over anything and everything else in my life..." she writes. "Basically, I'm afraid of my own competence."

For a book about not having children, there are a surprising number of real and would-be pregnancies in these stories, ending in elective abortion, miscarriage, or a sudden change of heart about trying to get knocked up in the first place. For Rosemary Mahoney, the fear of future regret drove her, for a time, to shop for donor sperm and undergo fertility treatments as a single woman. Kate Christensen spent part of a difficult marriage longing for a baby, only to eventually find happiness outside the bounds of marriage and motherhood. Elliott Holt writes of a brief period of balmy lust followed by a major bout with depression. Forced to take an inventory of her mental health history, she realized that the rewards of being a doting, besotted aunt far outweighed the risks of having children and being an unstable mother.

There is perhaps no more besotted an aunt than Courtney Hodell, who elegantly chronicles her gay brother's path to fatherhood and must confront the ways in which their uncommonly close relationship will be forever changed. For Pam Houston, who writes about the tyranny of the "having it all" message and the backward march of reproductive politics in the United States, it's an adorable stepdaughter who taps her nurturing instincts. For Jeanne Safer, a practicing psychotherapist, the process of guiding patients to clarity and genuine insight can feel like a form of parenting. Meanwhile, M. G. Lord writes provocatively about how the effects of a childhood tragedy played out decades later when her then partner decided to adopt a potentially drug-exposed baby.

Some of these essays will no doubt enrage certain readers. Some enraged me in places, which I took as all the more reason they should be included. But all of them, without exception, left me feeling

a little bit in love with their authors—and not just because those authors were handing me sizable chunks of their souls, sometimes with prose that brought me to tears. I loved them because of all the reactions they stirred in me, the one that rattled around most loudly in my brain was *It's about time*. It's about time the taboo of choosing a life other than parenthood was publicly challenged by people who've thought beyond the Porsche in the driveway or the Manolos in the closet. It's about time we stop mistaking self-knowledge for self-absorption—and realize that nobody has a monopoly on selfishness.

And so it is my great privilege to present these sixteen works. May you find them as captivating, exasperating, entertaining, and enlightening as I do.

*Meghan Dau*

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# BABES IN THE WOODS

by

Courtney Hodell

*The myth is pessimistic, while the fairy story is optimistic, no matter how terrifyingly serious some features of the story may be.*

—BRUNO BETTELHEIM,  
*THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT*

ON MY SIXTH BIRTHDAY, I was given a little green mop and bucket, enchantingly kid-scaled. Also a baby doll. The mop held my attention. It was fun to swish the twisted strands around the floor, nominally making it cleaner, and I got the point of the job: it started, it ended, you felt proud. The doll mystified me. The limbs were rigid; the eyes glared. I couldn't make it go on adventures in my mind like I could my collection of stuffed animals—fearless rabbit, leopard seal, koala. Nor did it squish under my arm in a companionable manner while I went about my business.

I viewed this doll with suspicion, as an inducement to take up some dubious enthusiasm that was going to turn out, Tom Sawyer-like, to be work in the way the mop and bucket were not. This was not an age when people wallowed in parenting. Kids like my parents got married and started having children right away, before they even knew what they were giving up to do it. My mother was everywhere and nowhere, constant but peripheral, the separate acts of care like salt grains dissolved in water. It was hard to see where the fun of it was.

The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes that the mother “hates the infant for the child's ruthless use of her.” My mother's body was indistinguishable from mine—to me, at least. I poked at the constellation of freckles on her arm while sitting bored in a church pew; I dragged on her hand swinging, when she walked down the grocery aisles, my brother the counterweight on her other hand. “Stop *hanging* on me,” she would say, fretfully, despairingly. We would gape, shocked that she didn't consider us all a single being, like a grove of aspens is said to be. Then we would resume our tugging.

The bedtime song she sang to us most nights was “Babes in the Woods,” in which two children are stolen and then lost in the forest. We clamored for its lilting melody: “They sobbed and they sighed

and they bitterly cried, / and the poor little children, they laid down and died.” Here we tucked ourselves side by side under her arm to savor their fate. “And when they were dead, the robins so red took strawberry leaves and over them spread.”

Her mother no doubt sang it to her, and had been sung it herself. My grandmother was the ninth child in an immigrant German farm family, the kind whose idea of a fun game was throwing live chickens at each other. In my imagination they hadn’t read but rather lived Grimm, those unsentimental tales with swift, implacable revenges, with rifts between parents and children taken for granted. The song fit us, even if I didn’t consciously grasp that sometimes my mother might have wanted to lose us, too.

My brother, Christian, was a benevolent dictator, though only eleven months older than I; Iris and I, twins, they call it. Early on we got the idea that it would be sensible to look after each other, and our private mythology of brother and sister as the two faces of a coin, around which so much of our lives has taken shape, was forged before we could both speak. I recently found a snapshot of the two of us hand in hand, walking ourselves to kindergarten. It’s taken from behind and we don’t know we’re being watched. Our white knee socks are pulled very high. Who took it—my mother or my father? What were they thinking as we set off on our own?

Those wild strawberries: they were a thrilling signpost of danger for anyone alert to the presence of magic in the world. “Brother, come and dance with me,” coaxes Gretel in the opera by Engelbert Humperdinck (true name!) that we checked out from the local library. She and Hansel break the milk pitcher and spill their poor supper, and their furious mother sends them into the woods to gather strawberries as twilight gathers. You know the rest. The witch is immolated, the mother repents; the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim suggested that they are, to the child, the same person, and that “the child can become himself only as the parent is defeated.”

Soon enough we children were looking after children ourselves. Press-ganged by neighbor parents, I noted their eagerness to leave, how they rattled off emergency numbers while the car keys jingled. We were terrible babysitters, impatient, insincere. The kids knew it. One used to ask accusingly, every single day after school, “What are *you* doing here, stupid?” I gave up babysitting as soon as I got a work permit and could clear plates for two dollars an hour plus tips.

Around this time, in the back room of a record store I found a 1920s movie poster of two plump children asleep under a blanket of curled brown leaves. *Babes in the Woods*, said the poster: *Gorgeous Tale of Charm and Adventure for Young and Old*. That was an optimistic way to characterize the plotline. Did the kids die in the Hollywood version, eulogized by robins? I tacked it to my bedroom wall. At sixteen I was already nostalgic for our childhood, for the time when the two of us were alone together by choice and not by social fiat, even though my brother was just there on the other side of the wall, besieged. I was doing nothing to help.

From birth, Christian had an innate sense of flair and ceremony: in elementary school, indifferent to mockery, he would cut our peanut butter and jelly into crustless tea sandwiches and include a flute

paper plate in our lunch bags. By adolescence, this aesthetic sensitivity had toughened into a defiant flamboyance, which took breathtaking moral—and sometimes physical—courage to carry off in 1980s New England. The high school cafeteria was a site of martyrdom. Injustices done to him—Bradley Crawley throwing Suzy Qs at my beautiful and rare brother!—made my skin burn with caustic fury. But I didn't have any great plan for saving him. I was dealing with issues of misfitness, too, though instead of blazing, as he did, I moped and skulked. He left for college and the house was horribly quiet. No one to dance around waving a dish towel and singing *Sweeney Todd* while I did the dishes.

But as the story happens, we went off to school together again, the first of many thousand-mile drives in a 1974 Chevy Impala with a Styrofoam cooler of fried chicken in the backseat. I'd only been bothered to apply to one college. Had he decided ahead of time, in his imperious way, that I'd follow him to his? It was an excellent school for the sprawl of things I was interested in, but that seemed almost a lucky coincidence. It was unimaginable that we would be separated, though I regretted that he'd picked a punishing climate. Lake Michigan froze in chaotic slabs all the way out to the horizon.

At college, I was delighted and relieved to find that he was loved. Potheads, sorority girls, supercilious professors, and ROTC cadets adored him for his absurdist wit and his air of having trailed a little bit of splendor behind him, like the bright winter smell that follows you in from outside. Christian presented me to all his various social groups with an almost belligerent confidence that I would be taken in, too. He taught me how to pull a respectable bong hit, how to find the nerve to fling myself into a pool of conversation, and how to sign up for the right classes—that is to say, those with the least practical application: Introduction to the Art Song, the Seven Hills of Augustan Rome, a seminar on semiotic inside jokes in *The Name of the Rose*. “Come on, sister, have yourself a ball!” the Kinks song went; I heard it for the first time on a body-swallowing sofa while getting high with his new friends. “Don't be afraid to come dancing, / it's only natural.”

That first year I was away, one of my small band of outsider friends back home got pregnant. We'd all been strenuously taught that being a teen mother meant the death of hope, but she was doing cooler things than any of us had or would, and she made college look like a desperately bourgeois choice. She had a record contract, she toured, and now she played her electric guitar slung sidesaddle to her enormous belly. I thought that she, if anyone, might be able to invent a new kind of motherhood. But when I visited, the baby cried and cried and cried and cried, creating a sort of huge ear-popping pressure that shoved all thought out of the room. I quietly got up to leave—it somehow seemed almost an indecent thing to witness. My indomitable friend stood with her back to me, gripping the porcelain of the kitchen sink, and said dully, “Please don't go.” Even her bright mind seemed ground down. Her bravery terrified me, and so did the foreverness of what she'd done.

I still feel the ecstatic release of driving away from that house along the coast road, the long wait around just because I could, twiddling the radio dial for a good midnight song to rinse away the static. And for a long while, that is all I thought about the subject of babies, other than trying not to have one accidentally. Every now and then I'd squint my eyes to visualize a time when I'd start feeling the

craving myself: when I was thirty, it would be at thirty-two; at thirty-two, I'd be ready by thirty-six and on it went. I was hitching a ride on Zeno's arrow, speeding toward a target I'd never reach. Boyfriends were only too grateful, I imagined, not to have the "Where is this relationship going" conversation.

A job as a book editor took me to London, where Christian had gone to work as a theatrical agent and after a gap of a decade we once more lived close by. If I felt lonely, I could put a coat on over my nightgown and walk unnoticed through the sleazy all-night carnival of Old Compton Street to hang out at the flat he shared with Mikey, his boyfriend and then, once England discreetly began to allow civil unions, his legal partner. Christian and I spent our professional lives looking after people in sometimes fragile emotional circumstances. It is not easy being a creative person, and oftentimes the tantrums that were thrown, the vulnerabilities that cracked open and needed to be patched up again could be wearying and unnerving to cope with. Like looking after children, but without the adorability to seduce you into not minding so much. "The world," he said to me darkly one of those evening "has enough people. You and I do not need to add to them." And I was happy to sign this latest treaty of mutual support and defense.

Scientists say that our pupils flare when they register something of interest; for women, babies to the list. (Porn follows.) But my pupils and my hypothalamus, the seat of desire, did not seem to be communicating. There was no corresponding baby hunger, at least not in that ready place where all my other hungers were shouting for attention. Meanwhile, there had been a societal swing back to the orthodoxy of motherhood. Serious journalists wrote with anguish of their biological clocks, a term that came to hate. Twins in strollers wide as combines mowed the sidewalks, the result of untold numbers of women over thirty-seven enduring a hypodermic in the behind. All of a sudden it was de rigueur for rising stars to be photographed lusciously, peachily pregnant. But a dwindling number of my babyless friends admitted, very quietly indeed, that they weren't so sure they wanted one, not just now but even—like a group of medieval heretics muttering agnosticism at a time when that could get you a date with a stake and some matches.

All the available cultural artifacts seemed to be telling us holdouts that if you were a woman, your business was having a baby, and if you didn't, there was something wrong—with your body, meaning you couldn't conceive, or your mind, meaning you couldn't conceive of it. So perhaps this absence of desire in me really was pathological. Dutifully, I added it to the list of things to talk over with my therapist. I could chitchat with her for costly hours about my complicated feelings on this and that—but not, I found, on this subject. I studied the inoffensive museum prints on the wall of her little room watching her hands lying folded and waiting in her lap. We both, I think, wished I had something more to say.

I wondered often what she hoped I would do. I sensed she wanted me to be courageous, to be bigger than just myself. But she, impeccable Freudian, kept her counsel. Not so others. Is there any other situation in life where people feel so free to tell you what to do, short of checking you in to rehab?

“I’d get on with it, if you’re going to do it,” said the gynecologist, blunt as a speculum. “And soon rather than later.” I didn’t recall having asked her opinion. A literary agent who’d had enough kids to populate a string quartet told me over lunch that I would regret my decision, but by then it would be too late, and she smacked her hand down on the table so our water glasses sloshed. (What decision? What and when had I decided?) Another woman held both my hands, her eyes drilling into mine, and said that for her, having children was like flicking on the light in a dark room. *But the older I get,* she thought mutinously to myself, *the more I like a bit of dim lighting. At forty, it’s easier on the complexion.*

In the meantime, Christian and I had taken to pointing to each other.

You do it.

No, *you* do it.

And we laughed.

\* \* \*

So much of being a grown-up is about managing or quelling desires. For food, for drink, for sex, for good times; if you’re a woman, I maintain, for ambition. You should not want *too* much. It is strange then, to be in a position where society demands you should have an appetite for something. And yet here was a rare instance where I was appetite-free, and the world seemed to be saying, “You have not wanted this thing, if only so that we can help you work through your feelings about not having it!”

And so I set about trying to try, with the same enthusiasm that I would have brought to cooking Thanksgiving dinner and sitting down joylessly to chew the whole thing myself.

Here’s where I tell you that I love children, and where you look at me skeptically. But I do. I love them for their wild experiments with language; for their inability to feign interest in things that do not truly grip them; for their seriousness and total immersion in play.

But when you talk of not wanting children, it is impossible to avoid sounding defensive, like you’re trying to prove the questionable beauty of a selfish and too-tidy existence. It is hard to come across anything other than brittle, rigid, controlling, against life itself. Anyway, I resented having to explain myself at all, to open a hatch over my heart because a near stranger asked an impertinent question.

A writer friend, defending her choice not to, said, “Boredom in children is useful. Boredom in adults is not.” I, too, was sometimes aghast at the short-fibered thoughts of my friends whose small children beseeched or bellowed as their stories were begun again and again and never finished, whereas I got to spoil myself with long hours of unspooling daydreams. (A nagging thought: What do I have to show for all that free time the mothers didn’t have?) But it’s also true that I was staggered by the transformation of these women. Their devotion, their patience (not something I’d always noted in them before the kids came). They were not showing off; this was not display. There was no status in saying they had to give themselves over so completely. They were going to wipe the face, wipe the bottom, feed, bathe, lull, teach by word, teach by example, read the books, put away the toys, buy the

tiny clothes, six months later buy a slightly larger set of clothes, fret about the schools, and on and on. the caring and the worry was never, ever, ever going to stop, not until death. I wasn't sure I had it in me. Perhaps I was a kind of human geode: sparkly and hollow.

Still, I did give it a go. Never let it be said that I wasn't willing to get on a scary amusement park ride at least once, even if I bent the safety bar with my grip. But the big joke after all the brinksmanship in my twenties—tense days of waiting for a period to show up after some delicious amount of heedlessness—was that it isn't so easy to get pregnant. And I didn't. I wasn't relieved, but I wasn't sorry either. I felt with some satisfaction that my body had honorably answered for my whole family, this lingering question of whether there would be a next generation of Hodells. I'd done my duty, and now we could all move on.

\* \* \*

The two kids with their high white socks were now undeniably middle-aged. One afternoon, Christian e-mailed to say that he and Mikey had something important they wanted to talk to me about. He said Important Conversations could be unpredictable and sometimes terrifying: Why He Is the Wrong Boyfriend for You; Your Job Is a Poisoned Chalice; That Lipstick Shade Does Not Flatter. (We all feared the familiar words "I'm going to say this with love...") We skyped; I trained my face to look serenely receptive.

But this time, it was not about me. The comedy of it! While my family had glanced covertly my way, wondering when I'd get around to marrying, my gay brother had gone and done it. And now while they'd politely held their tongues on the subject of grandkids, he'd visited a clinic in Connecticut to flip through binders full of baby mamas. He and Mikey squeezed close so they'd both fit onto my monitor to tell me that they'd picked an egg donor with a profile that suited, and with luck and a hundred thousand dollars, in a year's time they'd be parents. I hadn't even known they were considering it. Yet it made total sense to me that Mikey wanted children. An atmosphere of calm hangs about him like a cloud cap on a green mountain. Everyone in need of balm seeks him out: the anxious and the shy, little kids, old people. He's one of the secret, mighty soothers and nurturers of this world.

It's not that Christian has nothing of this in him. Once I'd passed a shop window and stopped dead at a little bronze meerkat up on its hind legs, scouting trouble in wait for its troupe. I bought it at once; it looked exactly like him. But our pact! What he'd said about the too many other people! I forgot that I'd been at least a little ready to break the pact, too.

They found a surrogate, the magnificent and sainted Sharla, who lived all the way out in Wichita, Kansas. The Connecticut clinic frothed with activity. Both Mikey and Christian contributed—I didn't ask, but I imagined it involved specialized magazines in a toilet stall—and this was eyedropped on the eggs vacuumed up that same day from the donor they'd met for a few nervous minutes before she was wheeled in for the procedure, and whom they had forgotten to get a photo with for posterity.



Caesar's now, but he'd grown into his handsome nose, and I thought he looked very distinguished and not at all improbable at the wheel of the big car.

"Tell me about the ... about the coochie." He couldn't quite get the word out.

"You mean the vagina?" I bit down a laugh. Really I was thrilled to be asked about a subject I could at last feel learned about. "First of all, think of it as a kind of self-cleaning oven. You don't need to get up in there with any soap or whatnot. It takes care of itself as long as you keep the outside area clean and..." So I went on.

His knuckles tightened on the steering wheel after a time. "Okay, that's great. I don't think I can hear any more right now." He appeared to be breathing through his mouth. "But thanks. Really helpful."

Poor boy. I realized I didn't know if he'd ever seen a vagina up close, and now he was in charge of making someone feel okay about hers. We steered into a consoling Krispy Kreme drive-through with the "Hot Now" sign lit up. I had the feeling that the next time he'd ask me for advice would be in a decade, when the dreaded menses loomed.

Elsa was no longer than my forearm, and there was just so much turbulence ahead. Girls are born with all the eggs they will ever have, enough to populate a small city. But these start dying off at birth and only a few hundred of them will kick off into the fallopian tubes and mature into the big chance. Women have, I would guess, about two decades of genuine, galloping fertility. With twelve periods a year, that's 240 shots at making a baby without enlisting a team of professionals and some lottery winnings. Why was I thinking about this already? She was a few weeks old. This was the telescoping nature of human endeavor. All the flailing around, the mad activity—going to parties, falling in love, buying houses, striving at work—could be smashed like a soda can into this flat fact: we have children so they can have children so they can have children. I had a blast of vertigo, as when you look into a puddle and see the stars falling away behind your head.

Elsa got her passport, Sharla's milk dried up, and we all dispersed, exhausted: Mikey and Christian to a wholly altered life, with unrecognizable hours and fears and blisses, and me back to mine, where there was still a sock lying in the middle of the rug and an empty glass in the sink.

\* \* \*

I'm no Facebooker, but I started checking in daily to see photos of them settling in, 3,500 miles away. One morning, Christian posted: *Last day of my paternity leave. Devastated. My little angel is five weeks old today. From this moment on, everything I do is for her and her wonderful daddy.*

Here it was: I'd been kicked out of our tiny Narnia. The wardrobe held only coats. The cold stone in my chest was the rightness of what he'd written. In his novel *On the Black Hill*, Bruce Chatwin describes grown twins: "Because they knew each other's thoughts, they even quarreled without speaking." Now my brother was thinking and feeling things I never would. In college he'd taught me how to speak, but this was something I could never say aloud: *Don't leave me behind.*

The only recourse was to love this little scrap of a human, and in the first really adult way I would love anyone. Without expectations of returned affection. Without wounded vanity. With foreknowledge of impending boredom, of exasperation, of anger that I could not allow myself to nurse. In the understanding that I would sometimes be ridiculous in her eyes. Knowing I did not have the rights of parenthood, I could make no demands of her beyond those any grown-up would make of a child: *Hold my hand; we're crossing the street.*

\* \* \*

The ruthlessness I feared, the ruthlessness I knew in myself as a child, turns out not to be the point of the tale. There are times when the parent enjoys being feasted upon.

When Nathan, my boyfriend of five years, held Elsa for the first time, he wept—big sparkles caught in his lower eyelashes, too light to drop. “Not sadness,” he said, “just big feeling.” Now the decision is made. But the decision is not past. No matter how it came about—was it procrastination; disinclination; anxiety; self-absorption?—we live with its consequences every day. Nathan is younger than I am, and it’s a little odd to be dealing at his age with the question of whether he will have his own children or not. For as long as he chooses to be here with me, it will be the latter. I want him to stay, but it is, as they say, a big ask.

I’ve learned from the work of the primatologist Sarah Hrdy that aunts exist in nature. Of course they are everywhere, biologically speaking, but some (marmosets and langurs, I’m looking at you) truly behave as the aunt I want to be, the aunt I have already become, and this is called allomothering. They will feed, groom, hold, and carry a child when they have had none of their own. So there is no word for what this is that I’m doing, I and all my sisters of the genetic dead end. Whatever I’ve learned in this life will not stop with me; I’ll teach it to Elsa.

From feeling we move to thinking, and then to doing. “If there is a kindness instinct,” writes Ada Phillips, “it is going to have to take onboard ambivalence in human relations. It is kind to be able to bear conflict, in oneself and others; it is kind, to oneself and others, to forgo magic and sentimentality for reality.” As night falls in the forest, Hansel crowns Gretel Queen of the Woods and sings to her, “I’ll give you the strawberries, but don’t eat them all.” It is hard, so hard, to let go of a story you’ve lived by. Brother, good-bye; father, hello. As in the fairy tales, there must be a gift at a christening, and that gift is my offering: for her, the wild strawberries will only be strawberries, and sweet. “*Fraises d’arbres*, Elsa darling,” my brother will say. “Try one.”

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# MATERNAL INSTINCTS

by

Laura Kipnis

“LIKE SHITTING A PUMPKIN” is how radical feminist Shulamith Firestone famously described childbirth, though she hadn’t had the experience herself; it was a friend’s report on what labor was like, shortly after the happy event. It only confirmed Firestone’s view that childbearing was barbaric, and pregnancy should be abolished. Beyond the personal discomfort, her larger point was that women aren’t going to achieve social equality until some technological alternative is invented to save us from being the only sex expected to go through it. If men were the ones forced to endure this ordeal, obviously such a technological solution would long ago have been devised.

Firestone was clearly no fan of Nature, an animus I find myself reliving whenever I hear people, especially women, espousing such supposedly “natural” facts as maternal instinct and mother-child bonds. It’s not that I think these things don’t exist; they certainly do. They exist as social conventions of womanhood at this moment in history, not as eternal conditions, because what’s social is also malleable.

But what’s with all the sentimentality about nature anyway, and the kowtowing to it, as though adhering to the “natural” had some sort of ethical force? It’s not like nature is such a *friend* to womankind, not like nature doesn’t just blithely kill women off on a random basis during childbirth or anything. No one who faces up to the real harshness of nature can feel very benignly about its tyranny. Sure, we like nature when it’s a beautiful day on the beach; less so when a tidal wave kills your family or a shark bites off your arm. If it were up to nature, women would devote themselves to propagating the species, compliantly serving as life’s passive instruments, and pipe down on the social demands. It’s only modern technology’s role in *overriding* nature—lowering the maternal death rate, inventing decent birth control methods—that’s offered women some modicum of self-determination. If it comes down to a choice, my vote’s with technology and modernity, which have liberated women far more than getting the vote or any other feminist initiative (important as these have been), precisely by rescuing us from nature’s clutches.

But my quarrel with the concept of maternal instinct isn’t why I never had kids myself. I was never

particularly opposed to the idea of having kids—let no one say that I don't love kids! It always seemed like an interesting future possibility, the same way that joining the Peace Corps someday seemed like an interesting future possibility. And though neither possibility ever consolidated into action, I still feel I've done my share when it comes to ensuring the future of humanity. Let no one say that I didn't spend the equivalent of a year's college tuition hauling my beloved niece and two nephews to the movies regularly during their formative years, bribing them into good behavior with pricey buckets of popcorn and gallons of soda. Let no one say that I didn't do my best to imbue them with my values (social rebellion, critical thinking), and subtly shape them in my image, a project that continues to this day—at holidays I like to slip them hundred-dollar bills with my picture taped over Franklin's. "Who's your favorite grown-up?" I wheedle, when their parents are out of earshot. Under my careful tutelage, they've evolved into fast-talking and ironically hilarious little wiseasses tolerating and mocking my improvement campaigns; pocketing the cash; pretending to note my reading suggestions and life lessons. I think we understand one another.

No, despite my proven talents at nurturing, I don't believe in maternal instinct because as anyone who's perused the literature on the subject knows, it's an invented concept that arises at a particular point in history (I'm speaking of Western history here)—circa the Industrial Revolution, just as the new industrial-era sexual division of labor was being negotiated, the one where men go to work and women stay home raising kids. (Before that, pretty much everyone worked at home.) The new line was that such arrangements were handed down by nature. As family historians tell us, this is also when the romance of the child begins—ironically it was only when children's actual economic value declined because they were no longer necessary additions to the household labor force, that they became the priceless little treasures we know them as today. Once they started costing more to raise than they contributed to the household economy, there had to be *some* justification for having them, which is when the story that having children was a big emotionally fulfilling thing first started taking hold.

It also took a decline in infant-mortality rates for mothers to start regarding their offspring with much affection. When infant deaths were high (in England before 1800 mortality rates were 15 to 30 percent in the first year of life), maternal attachment ran understandably low. As historian Lawrence Stone pointed out, giving a newborn child the same name as a dead sibling was a common practice; in other words, children were barely regarded as distinct individuals. They were also typically sent to wet nurses following birth—so much for the mother-child bond—and when economic circumstances were dire, farmed out to foundling hospitals or workhouses ("little more than licensed death camps," says Stone). But then childhood as such really didn't exist, or at least it wasn't a recognizable concept, as historian Philippe Ariès documented; this, too, is a social invention. Children were viewed as small adults; apprenticed out to work at age five. It was only as families began getting smaller—birthrates declined steeply in the nineteenth century—that the emotional value of each child increased. Which is where we find the origin point for most of our current ideas about maternal fulfillment.

All I'm saying is that what we're calling biological instinct is a historical artifact—a cultural

specific development, not a fact of nature. An invented instinct can feel entirely real (I'm sure it can feel profound), though before we get too sentimental, let's not forget that human maternity has also had a fairly checkered history over the ages, including such maternal traditions as infanticide, child abandonment, cruelty, and abuse.

But the real reason I'm against the romance about maternal instincts is that what gets lost amid the fealty to nature is that nature hasn't been particularly kind to women, and I say we owe it no favors in return. If women have been "ensnared by nature" as Simone de Beauvoir (no fan of maternity herself) put it, if it's so far been our biological situation that we're the ones stuck bearing the children, then there should be a lot more social recompense and reparations for this inequity than there are. The reason these have been slow in coming? Because women keep forgetting to demand them, so convinced are we that these social arrangements are the "natural" order of things. The willingness to call an inequitable situation "natural" puts us on the royal path to being society's chumps.

Even though I never actually ruled out having kids, I suppose I wasn't that deeply identified with the prospect of maternity either, which meant that I was always a little more casual about birth control than a fully cognizant anatomical female probably should be. I never entirely connected sex and procreation—it didn't help that I generally used methods you don't have to actively think about, like IUDs—which resulted in a few pregnancies over the years whenever I took a month or two off between the previous model and its successor. Pregnancies are useful for clarifying one's life priorities, of course, but they also clarify a lot about the prevailing conditions of motherhood when you're deciding whether or not to sign on for the long haul.

The second to last time I got pregnant, I was in a long-term relationship, which is one of the usual practical considerations for those contemplating motherhood. My boyfriend and I had been living together for about five years at that point—we'd stay together for twelve and eventually even buy a house together—meaning we were stable enough, and financially comfortable enough. Except that I was the bass player in a well-known jazz band and thus on the road about half the year, and I'd just received a three-year fellowship at the University of Michigan and was planning to commute by train between Ann Arbor and Chicago when my boyfriend was in town (though he promised to come up for weekends when he could). Contemplating the result of the pregnancy test, I envisioned myself on the train lugging a baby, a computer (they were a lot heavier in those days), books, and the requisite ton of baby paraphernalia, and I couldn't imagine how I'd carry all that stuff. I thought about giving up the fellowship (for about a nanosecond), but this didn't seem like the wisest life choice, as I'd been lucky beyond belief to get it. My boyfriend, too, had his dream gig—he wasn't about to give it up (and even if he had, then do what for money, play bar mitzvahs?). It took me about ten seconds—far less time than it took to type this paragraph—to conclude that having a baby was unfeasible, or not feasible under the current conditions of isolate do-the-best-you-can parenthood. I had an abortion.

I realize, looking back, that the image of myself struggling on the train with too much baggage was analogous to my sense of what being a mother would feel like: weighted down and immobilized.

though my ambivalence surely had as much to do with my perception of the social role of “mother” with diaper bags. (I probably could have bought a car for the commute instead of struggling on the train—I later did just that.) But one of the pleasures of living with a jazz musician was picking up and meeting him in far-flung places on short notice, or traveling as a band girlfriend for stretches: jaunts to Japan, Europe, Omaha. I learned to pack light and not carp about delays. (Also to go through a different customs line than the band unless I wanted every last toiletry opened and sniffed.) I liked having the kind of life where you didn’t know what was going to come next; the opposite of what life as a mother would be, or so I presumed.

Some might adduce that my getting pregnant (yes, more than once) suggests that I was more eager to embark on the path of motherhood than I’m letting on. Maybe so, but I think not—it’s not like I agonized about having abortions or regretted them later. I was willing to contemplate kids, though I’m being honest, among the factors militating against it was my profound dread of being conscripted into the community of other mothers—the sociality of the playground and day-care center, and at the endless activities and lessons that are de rigueur in today’s codes of upper-middle-class parenting. What terrified me. For one thing, I’ve never been good at small talk, or female conventionality. Also, the mothers I met struck me as a strange and unenviable breed: harried, hampered, resentful. I didn’t want to accidentally become one of them. I know there are unparalleled joys in having children—the deep love for another creature; the connection to a greater human purpose. But then there are the day-to-day realities. Let’s face it: children’s intellectual capacities and conversational acumen are not their best features. Boredom and intellectual atrophy are the normal conditions of daily life for the child-raising classes. All of which I could see all too plainly on the faces of the other women around the swing sets when I hauled my beloved niece and nephews to various playgrounds or trotted them around to kiddie museums over the years. Not to mention (how to put this politely?) that child raising is not what you would call a socially valued activity in our time despite the endless sanctimony about how important it is, which those doing the labor of it can’t help being furious about—quietly furious about being dropped down a few dozen rungs in the social-equity ranks. You have to wonder: Is it really such a great idea to rely on the more aggrieved sex—those whose emotional needs are most socially disparaged, whose labors are most undervalued, and who may consequently be a little ... on edge—to do the vast majority of the child rearing?

Lately I’ve been hearing from childless female friends and acquaintances about their sense of being judged by this community of other women for not having children, as though their *not* having children betrays all the women who took a hit for the team. I can’t say I ever felt any such disapproval myself (maybe I was just oblivious), or family pressure, but apparently it can be intense. (I recently said to my mother, “How come you never pressured me to have kids?” She rolled her eyes and said, “What good would it have done?”) But then you also hear from friends and acquaintances who *have* had kids about feeling judged by the community of other mothers for such things as not pureeing their own organic baby food, or other failures to comply with the many heightened requirements set by today

former careerists turned full-time moms.

Apparently, the more “progressive” the community, the more intense the inducements to do it a “naturally”—once again, nature and women locked in some sort of master-slave dialectic. I listen, ponder, and in my darkest heart, I think that motherhood today is no less deforming than when Betty Friedan detailed maternal malaise in 1960; it just takes updated forms. Women are still angry about feeling duped and undervalued, but instead of ignoring their kids and downing cocktails all day, as in Friedan’s time, now we have the angry overdrive child-rearing style: motherhood as a competitive sport.

Back to women and nature. Let me say something possibly controversial in the hopes of clarifying something else. When it comes to female anatomy, it’s not only being saddled with the entire excruciating, immobilizing burden (sorry, “privilege”) of childbearing that we’re dealing with (a privilege that can kill you, thanks). It gets worse. Among nature’s other little jokes at women’s expense is the placement of the clitoris, a primary locale of female sexual pleasure, at some remove from the vagina, a primary locale of human sexual intercourse. Perhaps this mainly affects women who have sex with men, but that’s still a majority of us, because apparently some percentage of men don’t automatically fathom these anatomical complexities, or so say researchers who collect data on women’s orgasm rates compared to men’s. On this score, women lag far behind. (I realize that orgasms aren’t the sole index of sexual pleasure, but surely they’re *something*.)

Now, we could account for the orgasm gap between men and women by simply concluding that women are anatomically constructed in such a way that a certain amount of sexual dissatisfaction comes with the territory, and leave it at that. But mostly we don’t say that, because even though the anatomy in question can be enlisted to tell that story, it’s not the socially favored narrative at the moment. The preferred story is that women and men are entitled to sexual equity; sexual pleasure is as much a woman’s right as a man’s—even the men’s magazines say so! In fact, it’s now such a mainstream view that network sitcoms make jokes about it. Pretty much everyone these days knows that with a small amount of reeducation and patient communication, men can be schooled in becoming better lovers. A lot of men these days even take pride in developing such skills—I’ve seen T-shirts to this effect.

My point is that women have been a lot more inventive at demanding sexual pleasure than at demanding maternity reform. When it comes to sexual pleasure, whatever inequities nature has imposed on women can be overcome: in other words, culture overrides anatomy. Yet when it comes to maternity, somehow everyone’s a raging biological determinist. Not only are women fated to be the designated child *bearers* in this story, but this mostly still translates into their taking on the social role of raising them, too. Even with men doing more parenting than before, the majority of women are still left facing the well-rehearsed motherhood-versus-career dichotomy. But it’s *not* a dichotomy; it’s a socially organized choice masquerading as a natural one. There would be all sorts of ways to organize society and sexuality that don’t create false choices if we simply got inventive about it—as inventives

as we've been about equity in sexual pleasure—but there has to be the political will to do it. There has to be the right story going in.

It must be said that women themselves haven't helped much here, at least not those who go around touting our mystical relation to nature—maternal instincts, mother-child bonds, and so on. According to Diane Eyer's *Mother-Infant Bonding*, the concept that bonding has any biological basis is “scientific fictionalizing.” Bonding research has been dismissed by most of the scientific community as an ideological rather than a scientific premise, Eyer says, driven by popular concepts about nature, womanhood and a woman's place being in the home. No one ever talked about such bonds before the rise of industrialization, when wage labor first became an option for women. Note that the bonding story got revved up again in the early 1970s, as women were moving into the labor market (screwing up traditional conceptions about the natural female role), popularized by child development experts like pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, who said that mothers who don't stay at home bonding with their children for the first year spawn delinquents and terrorists.

So the question we're left with is this: What's the most advantageous story to adopt about female biology and nature? If we keep telling the one about nature speaking to women in a direct hook from womb to brain, then guess what? This *will* parlay into who should do the social job of child-rearing and under what conditions. Men will have less reason to sign up for child-rearing equity (assuming there's a man in the picture), day care will *never* be a social entitlement like public education, and the issue of how to manage a child and a job will continue to remain each woman's individual dilemma to solve, even when that job is an economic necessity, as is certainly the case for the majority of mothers today.

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At one point, in my late thirties, I thought for a bit about having a child on my own. I was no longer with the musician boyfriend. My next boyfriend and I occasionally fantasized about having a kid—I even once proposed during such a reverie, on a romantic boat trip—but though we were together for years, we couldn't get along for a sufficient stretch of time to accomplish either marrying or procreating. After we split up, I wasn't in anything very serious with anyone for a while, though there was a man I used to roll around with on a casual basis. When I told him I was thinking about having a kid, he said he'd be happy to try to get me pregnant if I wanted, though he didn't want to be involved in raising a child. So that was one practicality taken care of, at least. I approached my sister, the one who'd borne my beloved niece and nephews, to ask whether, if I had a kid, it could sort of lodge with her while I was at work or out of town—she had so many kids underfoot already, one more wouldn't be that noticeable. I'm sorry to say that she laughed in my face (though in a kindly way, she instructed me to add). When she got done laughing, she explained that it was a well-known fact that no nanny or babysitter would work in a house with four children; three was the limit. I tried guilt-tripping her, but she wasn't biting. The single motherhood idea faded away a short time later.

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