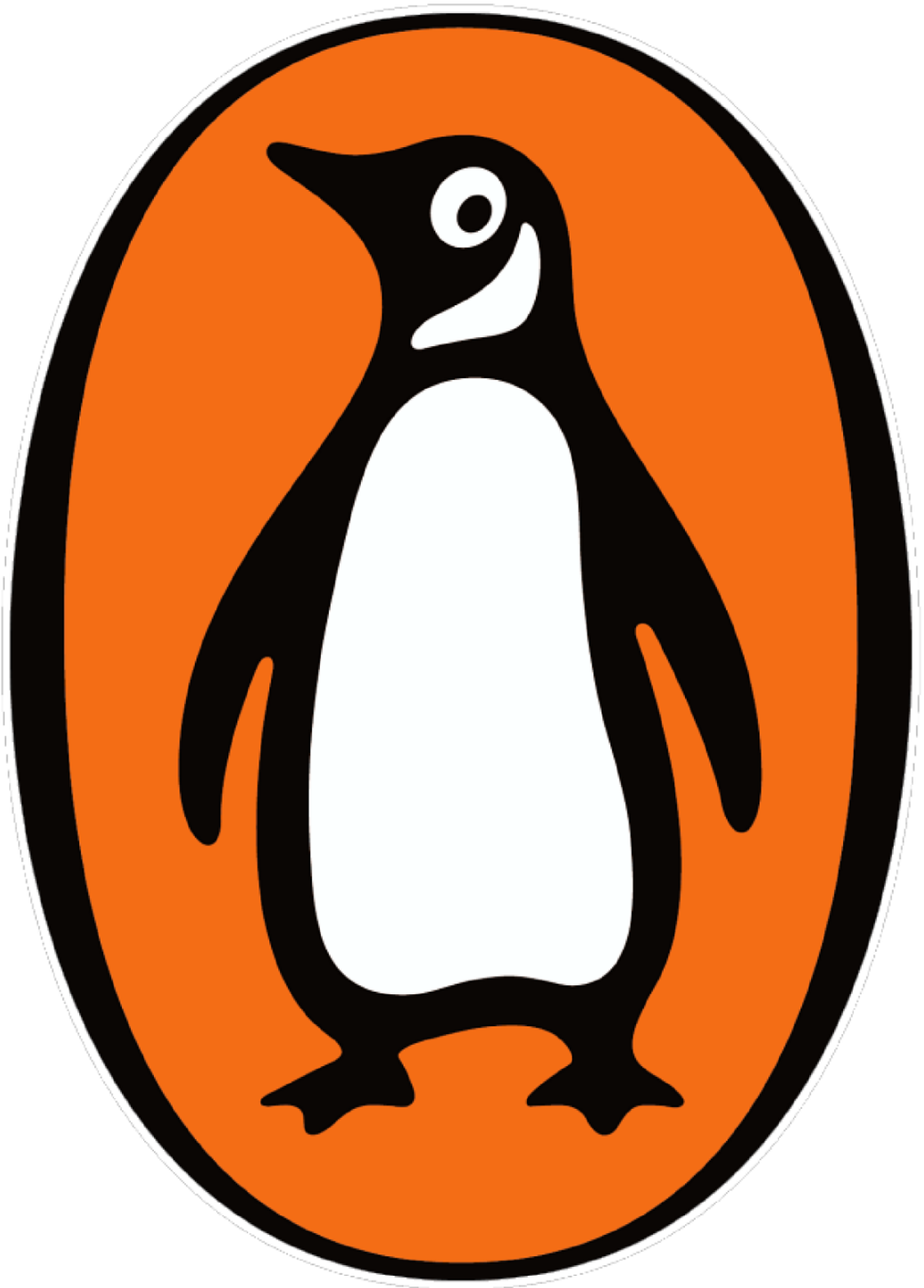

# Contents

# *Index*

# MOTHER

Sarah Knott grew up in England. Educated at Oxford University, she is now a professor of history at Indiana University and a fellow of the Kinsey Institute. She is the author of *Sensibility and the American Revolution* and numerous articles on the histories of women, gender and emotion. Knott has served as an editor of the *American Historical Review*, the American Historical Association's flagship journal, and sits on the editorial board of *Past and Present*. She has held many fellowships including from the Andrew Mellon foundation, the Rothermere American Institute and the Oxford Centre for Life Writing.

PENGUIN BOOKS

# Mother

‘A joy to read, borne of raw curiosity and intelligence, nurtured into the world to fill a gap in understanding’ *New York Times*

‘A timely and fascinating investigation into one of the most overlooked and yet fundamental human experiences’ Amanda Foreman

‘A remarkable history – exploratory, pointillist, and intensely personal – of what it is, and has been, to be a mother’ Helen Castor, author of *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*

‘In this innovative, grippingly readable history, Sarah Knott has woven a scintillating tapestry of ideas and experiences across time. *Mother* is a moving and enlightening meditation on the most elemental, yet ceaselessly varied, of all human bonds’ Fara Dabhoiwala, author of *The Origins of Sex*

‘A remarkable book. Sarah Knott weaves an intimate account of becoming a mother into a richly documented history of maternity’ Barbara Taylor, author of *Eve and the New Jerusalem* and *The Last Asylum*

‘The last couple of years have been marked by an explosion of writing about motherhood in memoir and fiction. What Knott adds to this is less her own experience, though it’s beautifully recorded, than the wider perspective that allows her to say with authority that mothering has always been intimately connected with other aspects of our economic and social lives’ *Guardian* Book of the Day

‘Fascinating and beautifully written. A book I will feverishly press on others’ Rebecca Schiller, author of *Your No-Guilt Pregnancy Plan*

‘Beautifully written, full of stories ranging across time, space, and ethnicity’ Nancy Shoemaker, author of *A Strange Likeness*

‘This lyrical book – one-third memoir, two-thirds history – guides us through centuries of pregnancy, childbirth, and infant care. With stunning prose, she gives us the sensory shorn of the sentimental. A riveting read’ Joanne Meyerowitz, author of *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*

‘A fresh, lively narrative of personal and historical memory’ Kirkus

‘Knott’s novel approach, companionable tone, and sidesteps into memoir of mothering her own babies give the book a sense of freedom; sharing her joy or delirium, she shifts naturally into intimate, poet’s prose’ Booklist

to K, M and V

# Prologue

There's a sepia document on the kitchen table, just out of the new baby's reach. My mum brought it the last time she visited us, thinking I'd be interested in her maternity records. The print on the envelope reads 'CONFIDENTIAL'. 'IMPORTANT NOTE' runs along the bottom: 'This card must be kept in YOUR POSSESSION.' In the 1970s, Britain's National Health Service spoke to its patients in officious tones.

The brown-beige colour of the envelope is not unlike the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century manuscripts I usually read in my job as a historian. Paper often starts out almost white, but the centuries bring out the impurities by the time the sheets rest in a contemporary archive.

The NHS envelope is scuffed from use, but in good enough shape to open. On the outside, my mother's London N14 address is crossed through, replaced by the Essex address of my childhood. A small urban flat switched for a tidy three-bedroom house, in a village not far from the North Sea.

I'd like to remove the envelope's contents, but the baby keeps moving on my lap, locks eyes and wants distracting, smells good and distracts. Starfish hands bat towards round face, signalling the naptime hour.

What are the many different pasts of becoming a mother? What can we know of what, say, seventeenth-century people called 'going with child': carrying and caring for an infant? 'Going with child is as it were a rough sea on which a big bellied woman and her infant floats the space of nine months', reckoned an observer in 1688. Then 'labour, which is the only port, is so full of dangerous rocks, that very often both the one and the other, after they are arrived ... have yet need of much help to defend them'. A stormy, shape-shifting scene, fraught and rocky, full of drama.[i]

In an hour and a half, there will be a clatter at the front door, and my spouse, K, will arrive with the baby's noisy older sibling. Better put the envelope, and its single home-grown piece of evidence, aside for now.

The baby is asleep, and slanting sunlight falls on the 'Mrs' printed by the envelope's first address line. The late-twentieth-century NHS presumed that pregnancy indicated marriage. The everyday phrase 'unwed mother' shifted to the less pejorative 'single mother' in the 1960s, but a wedding and stay-at-home motherhood were still held out as the family norm.

Inside the envelope is a 'Co-operation Record Card for Maternity Patients' with an infant's immunization record stapled on top. What insights might this hold about mothering an infant in 1970s Britain? Antenatal care began at three months, after a

test administered by a doctor to confirm the pregnancy. 12 weeks reads the record card. 14 weeks, 18, 22 ...

Other London mothers of the same decade told sociologist Ann Oakley about attending an antenatal clinic. 'Very assembly line,' reckoned the twenty-six-year-old illustrator Gillian Hartley about her first visit; 'I got up a nervous wreck as usual,' though the staff were nice. Nina Brady, a shop assistant who called Oakley 'dear', found the encounter with a doctor so embarrassing that she did not want to go again. Brady told one of the nurses about a woman who never attended the clinic because she thought it was all a load of rubbish. 26 weeks, 28, 30. My mother, then a shy nurse in her late twenties, attended all her appointments.[ii]

'Quickening' gets its own entry on the record card. The first time a person felt their baby move was deemed medically important. The term has a long pedigree. Seventeenth-century Englishwomen took quickening as definitive proof of pregnancy. Ojibwe women native to North America saw this as when a life within became a human being. Familiarity with the term has come and gone. Charlotte Hirsch, a novelist who in 1917 anonymously wrote the first published, personal account of being pregnant, had always thought the word meant the baby taking its first breaths of outside air. My English friends and family routinely know the term. The friends and colleagues where I usually reside and work in the United States sometimes do not.[iii]

The record card documents the sensations and feelings of pregnancy tersely and at second hand. 'Quickening' is recorded by a date, but no other details. 'Well' recorded the London doctor at 34 weeks. 'Feels well' wrote the Essex doctor a little later. 'Well' again, at 40. If it's a dilemma, figuring out how to recapture experiences from the 1970s, how much greater for the terrain of Britain and North America since the seventeenth century? These places have been sometimes connected – by a colonial past, or by changes common to the West – and sometimes not.

'Feels well'. The brevity of that tiny phrase is typical of what past experiences of mothering have left behind for us to notice, retrospectively, and to wonder about. Even in the best-lit corners of past and present, caring for an infant interrupts thinking, punctures reflection, or leaves a book half-read. The richest records, like letters and diaries, often stop exactly as they are getting interesting. A piece of correspondence is left off, mid-sentence, the letter-writer called away by a cry, or a diary suspends, because both hands are needed to hold the baby.

The political revolutions I more usually research as a historian lend themselves to massive paper trails: declarations of independence, constitutions, newspaper columns, ideological pamphlets, wartime correspondence. When not on maternity leave, I tell my students grand narratives about the late-eighteenth-century transition from kingdoms to republics. Their eyes widen at the less familiar parts: not the doings of a Benjamin Franklin or a Marie Antoinette but enslaved men and women escaping to freedom, or Native American diplomats forging alliances with France or Spain, Britain or the United States, in an attempt to stop settlers' expansion across the American continent. About mothering an infant, I am on smaller, grittier ground. The drama is piecemeal, and the record is fragmentary.

Some of quickening, or of 'feeling well', 1970s style, is illuminated by contexts immediately beyond the maternity card. Pregnancy should be 'healthy and content', according to medical recommendations of the day – a 'happy event'.

Will it be a *happy* book? my very private mother asks, kindly, tentatively, on the phone, a thread of worry in her voice.

In fact, we know more about experiences of mothering in the 1970s than any earlier generation, thanks to the women's liberation movement of that decade. When Ann Oakley asked her London interviewees about quickening, they detailed the baby's first movements variously as 'like food resting', or 'just like fluttering', or a 'little butterfly', 'a fish swimming – or a very large tadpole'. Some writers, mainly white feminists in the United States, published maternal memoirs, as if the fact that having a baby had become optional finally allowed the complexity of maternity to be worthy of interest. Others defiantly wrote poetry. 'The Language of the Brag', Sharon Olds titled her poem about giving birth.[iv]

But what's left behind from Britain and North America *before* the 1970s is mainly a hundredweight of fragments. A seventeenth-century court record happens to reveal a baby being noisy in church. Or an eighteenth-century traveller describes a Native woman tanning a leather hide and tending to the occupant of a cradleboard. Or a nineteenth-century social reformer notes an infant suspended in an egg box from a factory ceiling, hinting at how working mothers managed. Or a farmer's wife in the 1930s dashes off an account of colic to a government department, requesting the latest medical advice.

These are such small shards of evidence. I've been complaining to K, who is also a historian, that there's not much to work with. At least my mother's life generated a medical record.

Perhaps the best way to explore the pasts of having a baby is to put grand narratives aside, and pay attention to the fragments and the anecdotes. Perhaps the best way to explore mothering's many pasts is to build a trellis of tiny scenes, pursuing the many different actions involved. Conceiving, miscarrying, quickening, carrying, birthing. And then, cleaning, feeding, sleeping, not sleeping, providing, being interrupted, passing back and forth. These make up the visceral ongoingness, the blood and guts of being 'with child'. The verbs.

'Mother' as a verb.

This evening, K has the radio on and is getting things ready for the baby's bath. The white noise should prevent any conversation waking the firstborn. Did you know, I say, leaning in the door frame, that when the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott was doing the first radio programmes about mothering back in the 1940s, listeners initially thought he was a woman? His high, reedy voice sounded female. Perhaps how Winnicott talked about infant care helped; unlike so many male experts before and since, he clearly liked and trusted mothers.

On the radio tonight there's discussion of a memoir by a Canadian trans man, who nurses his own baby and works as a lactation consultant. Having a baby is such a moving target. Think of all the changes in our twenty-first century, the new figures and styles on the social landscape: the trans man in Winnipeg; queer families with an infant; new fathers staying at home; egalitarian mothering of babies among working parents. Or the rolling back of health services and state support, and the low value assigned caregiving under capitalism.

K nods and agrees, preoccupied with washing the baby's torso. His New York accent bounces lightly against my English tones, another half-conversation in a stream of half-conversations.

I take the baby back in my arms. That's exactly what makes the different pasts of mothering so compelling. A changing present calls forth changing histories.

The NHS record that I am putting in a safe place, under a pile of my diaries, presents maternity mainly as a biological affair, a natural process to be monitored. LMP, last menstrual period. EDC, estimated date of confinement, what we now just call birth. But mothering, I am finding out, is more bodily than biological.

The historical fragments are just so various. Carrying and caring for a baby depends richly on time and place, more so than we might ever have guessed. Mothering an infant is not a fixed state. Physical, yes. Visceral, yes, enormously so. Biological, universal, unchanging, merely natural: not so much. If so, grasping what mothering has been means getting plural and specific, exploring its immense variety. To 'pluralize and specify' is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's beautiful, succinct phrase: a promise to remake understanding, to take nothing physical for granted.[v]

I take endless notes, walking up and down the garden path with the new baby in a naptime sling and an article or book in hand. I read historians, demographers, archaeologists, anthropologists and sociologists. I read memoirs, letters, diaries; government reports and court records; surveys and interviews – sources that often have little directly to do with pregnancy or infants, but that reveal something along the way.

The research began when I was initially contemplating motherhood and kept going during the turmoil of my first child's infancy. A new small detail, or a series of details, a flash of empathy, or the challenge of walking for a moment in another's shoes, a sense of familiarity or distance, these were solace and illumination.

Typing and revising in snatches of time, like an evening hour or a half-day at work, I aim to hold on to the flavour of the original sets of notes: the sleepless, pell-mell quality, the peculiar interrupted attention, the short sentences, the fretting about sleep or damp cloth, the joy and jaggedness and distaste for sentimentality. Having this second child has returned a sense of urgency to the enquiry.

Next morning, needing to get out after a broken night, I take the bus into town on an errand. Mild rain presses on the umbrella's top, darkens the tip of each shoe. Across a stone courtyard, the revolving door of a museum beckons into the dry. There's no other spot in town to sit with a baby without buying a tea or a coffee.

In the gallery where I head, in hazy fatigue, the magenta red of the low stools seems to pull the paintings' Renaissance colour into the middle of the room. On the walls, bright doublets pose stiffly and lush skirts swathe. A Madonna and Child hold perfectly still. It's sixteenth-century Florence, or Naples. Then a break in all the crimson calls attention to a thoroughly modern image, a temporary addition to the gallery walls. Plain charcoal lines dart and cluster to shape a woman who holds an infant. Almost all colour is gone but the image pulses with motion. The child's body arches, kicks into hanging air. The mother clasps, steadies, and gazes out.

A museum guard glances at me, not entirely unsympathetically, across the room of Asian tourists and local school groups. Maybe he sees a nursing mother being a nuisance, or a youngish white woman looking damp and preoccupied, or a parent enjoying a child.

'When my first child was born, I felt like flying,' explains a taped interview with the artist of the charcoal image. Jenny Saville traded in paint for the quick freedom of wide charcoal strokes. The massive sketch reprises Leonardo's Madonna, reworking her as the contemporary living mother of a living child. The scale is dwarfing. Open lines, rather than hard silhouette, suggest that mothering is made and remade. Saville's present enlivens the gallery's past, just as the past shapes the present. Joined and contrasted, each appears richer and more kinetic.

Historical curiosity lets us fly, I am reckoning, allows us to get free of ourselves. To doubt, and to reimagine. To own more fully our own times, discerning in the contours what they are or might become. The past can burden us, or the past can release.

# 1. Mothering by Numbers

Back to the beginning, before there is any child on hand, just as research is under way. Mothering is only an abstract prospect.[1]

The clock tower outside the window shows ten to the hour. University students hurry to late summer classes, their feet flattening pathways across the parched grass. I'm in a heated conversation with a colleague, a close friend, about life and work.

If I have children, I'm not sure if I'll have one or two, I announce, a little too brightly.

This is slightly fraught territory. We both know – or at least, I think we both know – that surveys suggest men with partners and children, like him, progress very well in our workplace. Women with children, not so much. Their success rate slows, falling behind those of childless men and women.

His retort is bemused and a touch impatient: You choose to have *one* first.

How did people in the past act about how many children to have, and what did they assume about family size? What might a person have seen, of mothering and numbers, in their own time and place?

The Miami and the Potawatomi people who once moved across the hilly Midwestern landscape outside, travelling between large summer agricultural settlements and smaller winter villages, cared little for singletons. The women who processed furs and cultivated corn, pumpkin and kidney beans, had multiple children apiece and cared for them communally. Children were cautiously spaced three to four years apart, by use of local abortifacient herbs, sexual abstinence and late weaning. This was a kin-based world, in which family cooperation was crucial to survival. In Pennsylvania or in Ohio, observers routinely noted that Indian families averaged four to six children.[2]

Further east in these seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the settlers edging on to the vast North American continent had more children than the Native peoples they sought to displace and the Old Worlders they had left behind. The settler women who inhabited former Iroquois or Algonquian lands typically married in their late teens or early twenties, and gave birth every eighteen months to two years. This more frequent birth rate was the approved rhythm of reproduction, so usual as to seem natural and God-given, as well as a sign of prosperity. Large families were especially typical among the gentry, in urban Jewish communities, and among German inhabitants, all of whom married young. In the old European societies from which the colonists had migrated, meanwhile, where economic life was often less certain, women married later, if they ever did wed, and gave birth every two to three years. Many never had the material security to marry at all.

Most societies are not interested in keeping collective numerical accounts. I learn about these birth rates mainly thanks to modern demographers working backwards.

For a childless person, the numbers can seem terribly cold and out of reach, even off-putting. Modern demographers who count and graph show that the numbers have shifted further over time, from an average of eight or seven children in seventeenth-

and eighteenth-century North America, or five or four in Britain, to 2.2 or lower in both places by the later twentieth century. They culled and amassed the numbers mainly from Western sources: local censuses, family histories, wills, church records, and then, since the nineteenth century, from national surveys. I pause, take in a breath, over the first North American number: an *average*, nearly, of broad-hipped, thick-shaped 8.[3]

Can the numbers be brought forward into the warm hubbub of daily routine, I wonder? The fertility transition, as the demographers crisply term it, is surely the major shift that has shaped maternity since the seventeenth century. If there *is* an overarching narrative about mothering, the change in likelihood from larger to smaller families is as close as we might get.

The average numbers – from eight or five to 2.2 – suggest three broad changes in lived expectations, a trilogy of shifts in what a person might anticipate in their future:

From childbearing ... to child-rearing. Or less succinctly put, a 'before' of bearing many babies and inhabiting a body marked by multiple pregnancies and births, and an 'after' of bearing just a few. A 'before' of mothering an assemblage of children, maternal attention distracted and divided, and an 'after' of the intensive mothering of one child, or half a handful ... not that I can quite imagine either.

From accepting the fertility mainly handed out by fate ... to an emphasis on family planning. That shift was driven less by new forms of contraception and more by knowledge and by the arrival of a strong orientation to the future – indeed, of counting more precisely. Plan your children, ran the later logic, consider their spacing, assess what you can afford, act accordingly.

And from the prospect of continual maternity, layered over with grandmothering ... to just a handful of years caring for infants. Once, the numbers suggest, mothering lent a permanent and defining adult status. Later and today, mothering babies became more like a short moment in a life cycle.

'Do not you, my friend,' Susanna Hopkins wrote in a letter, 'think the person very contracted in his notions' – small-minded – 'who would have us [women] to be nothing more than domesticated animals?' The young Marylander was writing at the beginning of these changes, in the late-eighteenth-century United States. She recoiled from older ways that she thought treated women like breeding livestock. The fertility transition began in exactly her generation, around the American Revolution, when some women had the opportunity to apply the radical message of liberty and independence to their personal lives. Sarah Logan Fisher, a Quaker merchant's wife, remarked on a contemporary's '6th child before she is 29': too many, too early, and too fast. The rejection of older ways, the sense of enacting new possibilities, seem as radical and profound as throwing off monarchy.[4]

Frenchwomen's demographic history followed a similarly revolutionary path. Britain followed suit in reducing family size by the later nineteenth century, a change most often associated with industrialization.

Whenever and wherever the transition in family size, women gained in health and in control over their bodies and their time. They came to peg ideal family size to precise and particular numbers. Esther Atlee, an elite Pennsylvanian woman, might have assessed the shift as an improved lot. In the 1780s, she noted her poor mood on being pregnant yet again: 'I cannot account for a glooming which too frequently comes over me,' she wrote, immediately adding, 'if I had some relief in my family affairs ... I should be much easier.' (The pregnancy would nudge the number of her children into two figures.) Looking back from 1855 at the rural life of her grandmother, who had a dozen

children, Martha Bowen of Williamsport noted that 'having the care of a large family ... her sphere of operation was limited'. The intervening generation had four children. Martha, a minister's wife, had only one.[5]

The altered prospects were typically experienced piecemeal and in local circumstances. 1920s visitors to the small American city of Muncie noted that the obligatory fruitfulness inherited from the 1890s had been 'relaxed'. Families of six to fourteen children were no longer seen 'as "nice" as families of two, three or four'. In 1930s London, a young woman like sewing machinist Doris Hanslow could associate having fewer children with other recent domestic improvements like hot running water or electric lighting or municipal housing. Her mother had eight children in turn-of-the-century Bermondsey. Like other working-class London women of her generation, Doris would have fewer, just two. My London grandmother, who scrubbed steps for extra cash, was behind the curve; she had five children, three of whom lived to adulthood. Asked about ideal family size, a woman on the city's streets, just after the Second World War, might answer that 'one's enough', or maybe two or three. One, because: 'You've got to bring them up decent, haven't you.' Three, because: 'I'd like to give them all I possibly could and I don't think I could afford more.'[6]

In particular communities, the numbers sometimes went the other way. Nineteenth-century Cree women, living on the North American prairies, usually had four children. But the numbers rose in the 1860s, perhaps because of increasingly sedentary lifestyles as the buffalo hunt years came to an end. Numbers found their way into Cree stories: 'that "long ago" we never had more children than we could grab and run with if there was a battle.' Ojibwe people living on reservations in 1930s Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota might have agreed about low figures in the old days. An informant told the Catholic nun and anthropologist Inez Hilger that it was 'a disgrace to have children like steps and stairs'.[7]

The demands of fruitfulness, the threat of 'glooming', the limits placed on a woman's 'sphere of operation', emerge rugged and intimidating from times of large families.

The possible pleasures taken in what has been lost are more intangible. Quiet pride in a stout, teeming body, perhaps. Or the pleasing generosity of gathering up a parcel of children. Or the reappearance in a newborn of the looks of a now-grown child. Or the carved documentation on a gravestone of dozens of living descendants. Somewhere between the fecund past and the parsimonious present, mothering as dilemma, as question, replaced mothering as destiny.

Growing up, it seemed unlikely I would have children. I wanted an interesting life. I wanted to be independent and to have an equal relationship, aspirations that befitted an English grammar-school girl and a beneficiary of second-wave feminism. Motherhood looked boring, constrained, domestic and drained of adult conversation. I loved my mum with all the complacency of the well-loved child, but I disliked her deference to my dad, with whom I also closely identified. He did not like small children and nor did I; only in my twenties did I realize that some people were not just being polite when they cooed over a baby.

In my early thirties, an older friend I greatly admire observed that her life's regret was not having children. I met some independent-minded types who unabashedly adored and enjoyed their kids. Suddenly the matter seemed entirely different. This kind of revelation is not uncommon in the twenty-first century when, it seems, a person is not having a child, until they are. Deciding for or against is the latest version of mothering by numbers, a very contemporary twist: not just how many children to have but, rather, whether to have a child at all.

Many considerations and many different heritages can shape such a revelation. 'Choosing motherhood after a life-time of ambivalence' reads the subtitle of a memoir by Rebecca Walker, daughter of the black feminist icon Alice Walker. To the Edinburgh writer Chitra Ramaswamy, pregnancy appears as a sudden temptation and a complex riddle: how to cast aside the sentimentality, sanitization and science; the prescription, self-help and emotionally manipulative doggerel; the lies, the misconceptions and unwanted advice; the politicking; the never-ending slew of new stories?[8]

The issue of children is already settled for my colleague. His partner radiates competence. When K and I go hiking with them in the local woods, she sends their two small children ahead looking for an oversized mushroom here, or a letter-shaped stick there, spurring them past fatigue. The same competence clings to my colleague and, I notice, to K, who lifts the smaller one on to his shoulders. You choose to have one first.

The demographic graph stays with me, peoples my imagination about former, lost worlds. In most societies before the twentieth century, there must have been crowds and crowds of little children. Infants were visible to all: quite the contrast with our present day, where those who are not mothering are typically sequestered from those who are. My ignorance about babies, the sharp sense of a divide, is a modern invention.[9]

Those little children of former times ran in crowds, despite higher infant mortality. By the middle of the twentieth century, few parents lost a baby, but in all previous centuries infant death was an experience which parents would have been lucky to avoid. Demographers cannot entirely explain the declining mortality rates, though they point to improved standards of living.

My less haunting subject, I determine, will be among those who stayed alive and together: the living mothering of a living child, rather than maternal mortality, infant loss, or forced relinquishment. In the raw unknown of whether a child is in my future, only that mothering is fully bearable to contemplate.

The more ghostly histories I leave to others. The living mothering of a living child, those twinned becomings, take imagination and research enough.

'How I shall get along when I have got ½ dozen or 10 Children I can't devise' fretted the New Jersey colonist Esther Edwards Burr after her child's birth in 1755. Narcissa Whitman, a pioneer in Oregon a century later, might have recognized these concerns, knowing first hand the immediate consequences of mothering a large brood. 'My Dear Parents,' she wrote in a rare but warmly affectionate missive back to New York in 1845, 'I have now a family of eleven children. This makes me feel as if I could not write a letter.'[10]

I come upon more and more letters or first-hand accounts that contain such chance references, such unintended and on-the-ground dispatches from different points along the fertility transition. The vast majority were penned by the most literate and the more leisured. Here, in these beginnings of research, it proves easiest to turn mothering by numbers into people, to imagine how the changing fertility numbers felt real, for the literate classes of Britain and North America.

It is much harder to bring mothering alive for, say, enslaved women, or for Native peoples, or for the working classes of my own past. Literacy was harshly prohibited among enslaved people, meaning that we have few documents left behind in their own handwriting. North American Native groups of all kinds conveyed their cultures orally rather than in written words that were deposited in archives. The working classes of

every race and ethnicity spent most of their waking hours simply getting by. But I can persist. Without them, the view is misleading, truncated, wrong.

My colleague's small children keep growing, and he is sticking with a pair.

Nought, one or two? None or some?

# 2. Generation

Conceiving takes moments. Repeating moments, perhaps, but moments nonetheless. After so many years of safe sex, a whole adult life of carefully unreproductive and alternate intimacies, there was a certain glimmer of novelty about the whole business. There is surely a history to such moments of coital sex, to the acts associated with what one late-eighteenth-century diarist termed 'jumbling up' a child.[1]

Recent generations are heirs to the sexual revolution and to the story of sex it tells about the past. Famously, as the poet Philip Larkin quipped, sex did not begin until 1963. For the first time, or so it seemed, the Pill separated sex from reproduction, and a racy new world of sexuality was born. Earlier generations were pitied as repressed, unfulfilled and weighed down with shame and moral anxiety. Women of former times were imagined to have silently lain back and thought about something else. Now the Pill was commonly seen as a blessing. Modern sensuality meant sexual openness, sex as pleasure, sex for its own sake. Anything else, or anything earlier, was bad or indifferent.[2]

The glimmering novelty I feel, the sheer peculiarity of adding reproduction to sex, procreative hopes to sexual desire, surely makes me an inheritor of this modern story, its fortunate beneficiary. I am the beneficiary, too, of an even newer world in which sex appears loosed from heterosexuality. Coming of age can routinely mean coming out. 'Choice' now concerns both who you sleep with and whether or not you want to conceive a child, even as forces like poverty, male rapacity, or die-hard conservatism work to deny that. I may be hoping to conceive, with a man, the old-fashioned way, but I am getting to be choosy, doing so of my own volition.

What of the Dark Ages of sex implied by these recent stories of sexual revolution and of comings out? Was there really only an unrelenting, unchanging, silent world of coital sex before 1963? That seems like a caricature, or perhaps a myth, sex rarely being simply pleasure or simply procreation.

Of course, the history of past sexual activities is almost uniquely hard to know. But we can ask the question. If mother is a verb, procreating is a usual, original activity, babies of any kind – adoptive, surrogate, your 'own' – not coming from storks.

Was sex only dreary and silent before the sexual revolution? Occasionally that question has been asked directly of those who knew best. Members of the generations just prior – those who came of age and married in the 1930s and 1940s – are mainly gone now. But before the century's end, some from the English industrial heartlands of Lancashire and the more affluent Home Counties sat down with a pair of researchers. Phyllis, a lower-middle-class woman born in Blackburn in 1921, who ran a small grocery business with her husband, was among them. She remembered the topic of sex as decidedly off limits. 'It wasn't discussed at school; it wasn't discussed at home' with her parents. She hadn't liked boys who were 'pushy'. Most young women, wanting to preserve their respectability, were encouraged to steer clear of any discussion of sex,

even in confiding relationships with a mother or friends. They grew up carefully trained to be private and hygienic with their bodies, discreetly covering themselves from view on family wash night, and avoiding wandering hands on the way home from a dance hall.[3]

Doreen, a church-goer and builder's wife, awkwardly recalled her wedding night. The pair lay one each side of the bed, 'thick as two planks'. Asked what sort of kisses she had, she answered: 'Not sloppy ones.' 'I wouldn't tolerate that.' 'I've had plenty of kisses but they've had to be proper ones.' These women voiced concerns about passing on germs, and hinted at strong taboos against experimentation. Surely this made for unsatisfactory or dreary sex? Doreen, for one, never really liked that marital obligation. At first glance, drear and silence seem exactly right. Dreary ignorance, dreary duty.

Yet not entirely so. Some of these same ways showed themselves, perhaps surprisingly, as a foundation for meaningful sex. That same privacy, or the prizing of cleanliness, could be hallmarks of loving sex, dimensions of sexiness. Phyllis and her husband did find it impossible to undress in front of one another. 'I mean we'd never get in bed naked or get undressed, you know, in front of people,' that is, each other. But did she enjoy sex? 'Yes, I suppose so, yes.' Her husband would deliberately 'hold back' for her pleasure. Dora, a dressmaker who married a car mechanic in 1945, remarked with implicit relish, 'he built me a gorgeous bathroom. It was as big as that ... it took two years to build. He was a devil really, honestly.' Penny 'didn't ever undress' for sex, but she saw 'it' as natural, enjoyable and easy. On courting with her 'country boy' and later husband, they'd go walking and 'sort of lay down and have a kiss and a cuddle'. She added, 'I think it just goes on from there ... it just led up to that and then you know it automatically ... it automatically came to you that something was going to happen.'

Perhaps most striking, these women did not link sexual duty in marriage to sexual misery. For them, dutiful sex might also be pleasurable. Phyllis's tentative affirmation that she liked sex – 'Yes, I suppose so, yes' – came with the explanation: 'It's a, to me it was just a way of saying "I love you", you, er, showing your,' (coughs), 'showing your affection for each other really.' What did Eleanor, a former weaver, actually enjoy about it? 'Well the actual thing, you know,' (pause), 'yeah the actual thing ... it's nice for a woman to enjoy sex because a man likes you to enjoy it, doesn't he?' The remark teetered between her pleasure and his, between marital expectation and her enjoyment.

In the wake of the sexual revolution, engaging in sex as a form of obligation is seen as unpleasurable almost by definition, as clear evidence that a relationship is in crisis. These women recalled good sex, and bad sex, rather differently. If they guessed, correctly, that later generations thought their ethos of privacy 'silly' or 'stupid' – all that never seeing each other 'in the nuddie' and the scrupulous bath-taking – they also thought their younger, modern critics did not take proper care of themselves.

Most touching, looking back from now, is the absence of fretting about the curve of a thigh, or the depth of a cleavage. Shining hair, a clean complexion and trim clothes seem to have mattered to sexual attractiveness, but not much else. Most strange and distancing, retrospectively, and most confirming of later assumptions, is the absence of words, the lack of language to accompany the gestures and touch and feelings between two people.

The women spoke to their interviewers in fumbling, unrehearsed stories, as if sexual intimacy was being described aloud for the first time, as if marital sex was a silent,

interior experience. The women did not only merely 'sit back and then settle back' as one middle-class woman wryly put it, but sex was certainly shrouded in silence, left largely undiscussed, undescribed, unspoken. The signs of a husband being interested might simply be 'the usual, two arms around me instead of one'. Or a wife might cue, 'Go and have a bath upstairs.'

Obligation hovers, sometimes duels with spontaneity. I count out the fertile days, lightly, discreetly. I tell K about the bathrooms, the silences.

If not always dreary and indifferent, was silence invariably a feature of earlier sex, of coital moments before the revolution of 1963? The silence of the 1930s and 1940s generation seems confirmed by the mainstream dictionaries of the twentieth century, where words for sex appeared only with the advent of the sexual revolution. Nor do sex words appear in the lexicographical tomes of the nineteenth century, their absence fitting the general stereotype that procreative sex among British and American Victorians was short, prudish and unhappy. Nor, to keep going backwards, can sex words be found in Samuel Johnson's famous mid-eighteenth-century *Dictionary of the English Language*. A lexicographical investigation seems to end in a quiet cul-de-sac.[4]

Yet head back considerably further, and the arrival of sex words in the 1960s turns out to be merely a reappearance. They *are* there in the English dictionaries of the seventeenth century and even earlier. Of what do they speak?[5]

Sitting on a dictionary page, seventeenth-century sex words look earthy, vigorous, often big on metaphor or on body parts, and sometimes baffling. Yielding. Sporting. Tumbling. Clipping. Clapping. There's a way to reread such words now that can slip between shame and prurience, and reveal something of past sexual moments, even at great distance. (No oral interviewers were on hand in the seventeenth century, and no direct traces of sexual moments were left behind in a woman's own handwriting.) We can think of the dictionary words as offstage actions turned into vibrant, lively language – a glimpse of acts at one remove. If so, having sex in that century made for these verbs and phrases for sex in general: lusting; being lewd or lascivious, or wanton or bawdy; having carnal knowledge or congress; enacting the rite of love. Some of these terms sound passionate or wild, others exploratory or possessive, others loving.

Coital sex between men and women, my particular concern, suggested verbs like fornicating, copulating, consummating, lying with and swiving – rhymes with jiving. (Below the radar, seventeenth-century pornography portrayed procreative sex as especially sexy.) The moving body parts during such acts forged a massive array of nouns, of one thing fitting into another thing. Arranged in pairings of female and male, the reproductive parts were bit and bit, box and bauble, cony and pintle, fig and pizzle, purse and yard. Some of the accompanying acts and gestures, meanwhile, invoked wooing, chin chucking (a facial caress), patting fondly, fondling, and firking like a flounder (a way of arousing someone, though quite how is elusive).

The tumble of words sounds faintly Shakespearean, like attending a play and waiting for your ear to attune to a different vocabulary. That's an appropriate scene to reimagine. The audience at one early modern theatrical performance heard a character remark, playing the line for laughs: talk about sex straight out and stop tiptoeing about with 'your "rope in the ring", your "obelisk in the Coliseum", your "leek in the garden", your "key in the lock", your "bolt in the door" ... not to mention ... your "little monkey", your "this", your "that", your "him" and your "her"'. The character, a courtesan, had metaphors aplenty: pestle in the mortar, sword in the scabbard.

I don't know if those seventeenth-century Englishwomen who consulted dictionaries or attended plays experienced these acts and words as belonging fully to them as well as to men. Certainly there were women of all kinds in the audiences of seventeenth-century theatres. Working women, gentry, aristocrats, prostitutes and mistresses jostled shoulders.[6] Some surely expected to get a funny line by a courtesan about a rope in the ring, or an obelisk in a garden. Others surely carefully adjusted their faces. The metaphors for coital sex usually assumed that men took charge of the action – picking a lock, pounding an anvil, piercing a bodkin, jousting with a lance, stealing the treasure, laying siege – but women may have preferred to think of a 'bit' fitting with a 'bit' over being pierced or besieged, over gardens and obelisks, locks and keys, sheaths and scabbards.

Not being able to describe sex was typically seen as virtuous. But in seventeenth-century England, women were generally seen as the lustier sex, their passions readily able to overwhelm.

So moments of coital sex in seventeenth-century England, by this evidence, were unlikely to have been as silent as versions in 1930s and 1940s Lancashire. That particular society, from among those of the Dark Ages of sex, could be relatively unskittish about sex talk. In the world of the lexicographers and the theatre-goers, the bawdy wordiness lasted at least until the later part of the century, when a rising puritan propriety tamped down sex talk. The evidence suggests a kind of sexual revolution in reverse, as brisk as the changes of the 1960s. The lexicographers and playwrights heard people stop talking publicly about chin chucking or firking like flounders, and we no longer have such phrases in our stock.

Conceiving does indeed take repeating moments, and weeks turn into months. The clarity of wanting to get pregnant wears away.

Things won't change between us, will they? I ask of K. There'll just be an addition, something new in our lives, but not something altered between you and me?

I locate a recording of Philip Larkin reading his poem about the sexual revolution. His tone is offhand and deadpan, his voice faintly proper. In 1967, the year the poem was composed, the Family Planning Act was making oral contraception easily accessible to unmarried as well as to married British women. Similar changes occurred in France in 1967, and the United States in 1972. It must have seemed as if the whole world, whether of the unmarried, or the married, or the never married, was changing overnight. I'm not surprised that the story that emerged was so confident about a singularly bad past.[7]

'Until then,' Larkin reads with flat disdain, 'there'd only been' the tussle between men and women over sex and marriage. Bargaining. The threat of shame. A 'wrangle' over a wedding ring. British women of his youth had a whole, worried vocabulary for premarital sex: 'losing one's head', 'giving in', 'giving way'. Sheila Walker was among the unlucky bargainers. Aged nineteen, she had fallen for the father of her child 'hook, line and sinker': 'I saw marriage on the horizon with him so I thought that it was probably okay. I was quite safe, and he would take good care of me if anything happened ...' But he 'just went completely cold on me. He changed and that was it, that was the end.' She ended up in a Mother and Baby Home.[8]

If the singular drear and silence of the Dark Ages of sex is overstated, Larkin's 'there'd only been' is understatement, too. I think of the bald fact of male privilege, and the coercive forms it could take. In rural Essex, some three hundred years before I was raised there, notions of sexual property posed a dilemma for ordinary young women. Most worked as farm servants: tending cows, pulling weeds, caring for

chickens. But such women had long been seen as the sexual property of their masters. A majority of illegitimate births were among farm servants, more than half of whom had become pregnant by the men who hired them. That a master of a family 'had to do with me' was a baleful and frequent remark in the church courts. City life was no better. As Robert Parker told Alice Ashmore in 1606 London: 'thou art my servant and I may do with thee what I please.' Such humiliating phrases got recorded in courts set up to enforce marital morality.[9]

Being treated as sexual property was the dilemma, too, of enslaved women in North America. During the centuries of American slavery, the rapacity of overseers and slaveholders revealed itself through children perceived to have a distinctive hue, or through the existence of whole 'shadow' families. In the 1930s, a formerly enslaved man recalled the tactics of a South Carolinian master before the Civil War. He would instruct a young woman to 'go shell corn in the crib': the granary. 'He's the master so she had to go. Then he sent the others to work some other place.' The story continued: 'then he went to the crib. He did this to my very aunt and she had a mulatto boy.'[10]

In a rare and famous first-hand account, the abolitionist Harriet Jacobs explained these ordinary facts of life. Her North Carolina slave master was already the father of eleven slaves. James Norcom 'told me', she recounted in 1861, that 'I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things'. He whispered and threatened and harassed. He was violent. Such stories were news neither to Southern slaves nor to white slave mistresses, who routinely loathed their husbands' 'concubines' and 'fancy maids'. Under a pseudonym, Harriet Jacobs explained to the white women readers of the free North her calculation: to form a relationship with an unmarried white man, who might better protect the resulting children. Her involvement with a town lawyer was, as she cast it, 'a perilous passage'. Perhaps James Norcom would back off, perhaps the Edenton lawyer might purchase and free the two children she eventually bore.[11]

Still not pregnant. What's missing in the story the sexual revolution of the Sixties wanted to tell, I now notice – and there's no reason it should have wanted otherwise – is the desire for a begotten child, the fleshy history of hopes to conceive. In 1776, the wife of a Scottish linen-draper was impregnated with the aid of a warm syringe, a rare and daring – and successful – early attempt at artificial insemination. (The advising physician dared to publish his notes only many years later.) For the first century thereafter, in a medical response that fitted in with marital expectations, only a husband's sperm was used.[12]

The giving and receiving of 'seed', where it got named aloud, was called ecstasy, epilepsy, cough, spilling, dousing, purging or flowing forth. The longest-standing historical answer to how to conceive held that a woman, as well as a man, must experience something like this, something like what we now call orgasm. This understanding, popularly held among white American settlers and their descendants, and by English people, derived from a certain logic of sexual sameness. People were thought to have roughly the same sex organs, just differently located. To paraphrase one medical student, turn the scrotum, testicles and penis inside out and you get a woman's genitalia. An early bishop had put the same idea more gently: 'women have the same genitals as men, except that theirs are inside the body and not outside it.'[13]

A seventeenth-century treatise on midwifery in the Lilly Library, five minutes from my office, displays an anatomical engraving that looks at first glance like a slightly unattractive, hairy penis with a thick-rimmed head. But the image is of internal female anatomy. The tiny, crouched foetus-in-a-womb displayed at the organ's top makes the point unmissable. The logic of sameness had the sometimes happy, sometimes terrible

# 3. Finding Out

Today, sex happens all over the place: in bedrooms and hotel rooms, under burning sun or faint moonlight, on top of sheets and mats and grass. Finding out you are pregnant, however, is more a business of the bathroom. Peeing on a stick – they call it, more elegantly, a 'wand' – occurs in public lavatories, or in the bathrooms of friends, or workplaces or, most usually, at home. Whatever the mode of reproducing, your annunciation usually comes down to a toilet and a stick.

I stand by an unfamiliar sink, hard white tiles beneath my feet, waiting for a line to appear. It is the end of a holiday with friends, a beachside week laced with milky coffees and late suppers. My period is latish. Maybe by three days, maybe four? Earlier, I drove with one of the friends to one of those big chemists which sell everything from sunglasses to bread. The woman at the cash register greeted our nervy cool with an uninterested smile, shunting the box, along with unnecessary tissues and lip salve, past the scanner. No, the 'home' test has not made finding out a private matter.

The bathroom floor is not entirely clean in the corners. Cat hair is balled up against one skirting board. A recent magazine, wet at the edges, is curled limply around the lowest bar of a towel rack. Unfolded instructions flutter to the floor. It is still not time to check for the line.

It is still not quite time, but I do. And there it is. Unmistakably a line, which is still getting darker. Linear. Reaching across from one side of the oval window to the other. I blink. Here it is, then: the crossing of a line from not being pregnant to being pregnant, the moment of finding out. The hormones say so. They have said so, by different ways and means, since they were named in the 1890s, or more properly since the 'A-Z' test was devised in 1927. Aschheim and Zondek injected a woman's urine into a rat or a mouse, which then went into heat if the woman was pregnant. In the Roaring Twenties, rats and mice were forced to say so. Rabbits came next, and then, in the 1950s, toads.[1]

Several hours later, after a celebratory supper ('Can she eat shellfish?') and the cooling of my reddened face, K and I take a walk. I am eerily content. So I really *did* want to be pregnant, and now, abruptly, I am.

Before the A-Z test mapped hormonal change like a fork in the road, pregnancy was apprehended later and more gradually. *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, the favoured health handbook of English speakers for some centuries, used biblical lines which hinted that being pregnant was a bit like cheese curdling: 'Have you not poured me out as milk, and curdled me as Cheese? You have clothed me with Skin and Flesh, and have fenced me with Bones and Sinews.' In rural societies, making butter, cream and cheese was central to most women's work. Imagining being pregnant as curdling may have given the inchoate processes of early pregnancy a marvellous lucidity. Being pregnant was fluid and gradual, the matter that would become a child being shaped by slow, turning, churning coagulation.[2]

The sharp joy of my holiday's ending, the red-faced confusion of a half-private and half-public moment, these are distinctly contemporary experiences: commonplace and secular annunciations. I hug the secret to myself, willing the weeks of nausea on.


image
not
available

written and then scratched out, and in the disorderly return to the timing of the miscarriage, there is some sign of an unsteady emotional state. Or perhaps these are no more than indications of the preoccupying distraction of a vulnerable child – the fifteen-month-old Sally had been inoculated with a smallpox virus – or the time taken to calculate when Drinker's husband, often away on business, had been staying at home some weeks before.

On a February day nearly two centuries later, the poet Sylvia Plath miscarried. Like Drinker, she already had a small daughter. Unlike Drinker, she wrote richly about miscarriage. The early 1960s was the moment of the Beatles and the obscenity trial for *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and Plath was becoming known as a 'confessional' poet. One poem's narrator walks on London's Parliament Hill Fields, her mind running with gulls and with a crocodile of schoolgirls in ill-assorted blue uniforms, and with the meaning of loss. 'Your absence is inconspicuous; / Nobody can tell what I lack'. 'I suppose it's pointless to think of you at all. / Already your doll grip lets go'. 'Your cry fades like the cry of a gnat. / I lose sight of you on your blind journey.'[4]

We might suppose that miscarrying, like madness, can only be captured by poets. But that's not quite right, for many cultures talk as readily about miscarriage as they do about cabbages and kings. In late-twentieth-century Nepal, women chatted as 'easily' and 'loudly' about infertility and miscarriages as they did about births. Among their contemporaries in rural Jordan, miscarriage was marked by a ritual meal.

Yet in mid-twentieth-century London, Plath was breaking something of a taboo. Today, the factual ordinariness of miscarrying is built neither into medical culture, where unpleasant topics are not brought up until they must be, nor into consumer culture. The pregnancy home test had made no mention, leaving me faintly deceived. Our discretion, which now feels confusing, meant that almost no one knew.[5]

In Drinker's early modern world, peers certainly talked routinely among themselves about miscarriage. Her diary for these months briefly reports two friends miscarrying: Becky James, the matronly companion to her husband's business partner, and Catty Howell, another merchant's wife, whose pregnancy loss made her 'very ill'. Perhaps miscarriage was on Drinker's mind; in other years, she did not bother noting similar information. Miscarriages were known between mistresses and servants, and they were discussed among circles of friends. Diaries like Drinker's were read aloud and shared for evening entertainment and reminiscence.[6]

What exactly it was that people actually said to one another is more elusive. Sometimes there is an oblique glimpse in court records or in doctors' notes. Elizabeth Lewys, in seventeenth-century Somerset, told the widow Margaret Whorewood that she had been exceedingly ill the night before and gave her a 'most filthy cloth to wash'. She 'would have taken anything that had first come to hand, if it had been the best linen she had'. Matter continued to flow from her body. Elizabeth Bradford was given 'a most menstrous cloth to wash', and remarked that Lewys's 'diseases as it seemed by that cloth was far different from the natural disease [menstruation] that women use to have'. Another described what Lewys shed as 'as much blood (as thick as jelly) as a man could hold in both his hands'. Miscarriage was bloody like menstruation, but thick and heavy, distinctive, jelly-like, prodigious.[7]

One unusual eighteenth-century German doctor, Johann Storch, made direct notes of women's own words before making his own deductions. The women of Eisenach described evacuating blood curds, burnt-out stuff and singed blood. They shed things that were leathery or made up of skins, matter that appeared watery and windy, bloody and bubbly and stony. Even in the first weeks of uncertain pregnancy, an

evacuation from the womb was frightening. Women described what they purged as 'false conception' or 'useless' or wrong 'growth'. In his own words, Storch noted evil growths, burnt stuff, singed skins and fleshy morsels, as well as – in more learned language – mooncalves and moles. Conception, according to the physician, could be 'true and real' and lead to the timely appearance of a child, or it could be 'wasted, empty and useless'. The latter should be expelled through labour-like pains or with the help of expulsive medicines such as red coral powder.[8]

My expulsion is neat and tidy, a half-day outsourced to an outpatient clinic of sharp lights, vacuumed carpet, and cold anaesthesia snaking up my arm.

Unsure what to make of events, I wonder about infertility. My mind races ahead to childlessness.

Blighted fertility has been more dangerous than shedding blood or having an anaesthetic. Fears of damaged fertility were the subject of an act passed against witchcraft by the English Parliament in 1604. The last such statute was revoked only in 1736. Across early modern Europe and the American colonies, fertility was thought to be prey to magical, evil attacks in both the natural and human worlds. An infertile woman might be a witch, or her infertility might be caused by witchcraft. Under conditions of stress, fear of infertility sowed dissension among women, generating the kind of suspicion and hatred which made the Devil and his henchwomen seem at hand. Fecund married women could be envied; and childless women, young and old, could be vulnerable. Witch-hunt crazes depended on the religious armoury of inquisitions and inquisitors, but they also depended on women fearfully accusing other women.[9]

Being 'barren' is hard where childbearing is central to a person's reputation or when childlessness is involuntary. The Londoner who put down her neighbour by saying 'I have ten children, and you have never had one' spoke in the seventeenth century, but a jibe of 'some' versus 'none' worked until deep into the twentieth, and still resonates. Early New England settlers depended on children for many of the common tasks of life, and women saw infertility as due to God's ill favour. Barrenness threatened both material survival and piety. For the Quaker farmers who settled further south in the Middle Colonies, children were expenses rather than sources of income, but among them successful pregnancy was also contrasted to reproductive failure. Fertility and fruitfulness were opposed to barrenness both for women and for farms. Marriage and children went together, and together they comprised women's proper lot. Elizabeth Drinker's older sister Mary, who remained single and childless, was reduced to being her 'housekeeper'.[10]

Old habits die hard. The last woman to be hunted down as a witch in the Drinkers' Philadelphia died in 1787. Accused of rendering a woman childless, she was 'cut in the forehead, according to ancient and immemorial custom', carried through the streets and pelted, and soon after found dead. She was poor, old, perhaps a basket maker. The newspapers cast these scenes as remnants of earlier, unenlightened times.[11]

Witchcraft has not been the only unwelcome companion to childlessness. In the mid-twentieth-century United States, before the backlash to the baby boom years, childless women were seen as unfeminine, socially maladjusted and un-American. Personal happiness and patriotism alike were cast as depending on a woman's fertility. Even the screen siren Elizabeth Taylor was 'a Woman at last' only once she had a baby. Among modern women, words could be hurtful, if not as dangerous as accusations of witchcraft. Sylvia Plath's 'Barren Woman' imagines herself like an empty museum, all pillars, porticoes and rotundas but no statuary. The poem may have been directed, a

biographer suggests, at Olwyn Hughes, the childless sister-in-law with whom Plath had fallen out.

Nasty meanings have clustered round the term 'barren' like wasps to a picnic: unproductive, sterile, stark, deficient, lacking, wanting, destitute, devoid, bare. Some imply failure and incompetence. Others conjure a void.[12]

No wider social world knew of my pregnancy. I have not been a mother in any sense I understand. I am changed, though: I was becoming. Now, I am suspended.

Losing a pregnancy is not just inseparable from time and place – an ultrasound in a scrapbook, bloody cloth, a walk in a London park – but soaks into a broader life. This loss is overridden by family demands. My mother is in a coma after a brain haemorrhage. In Essex, my sister and I share my old bed with her new baby son. We take care of our frail father. My sister leaves, and I continue to play my mother's role. My mother wakens; she draws a picture of an outfit knitted for a friend's baby; she tells me that she dreamed my sister was pregnant again. Across a terrible autumn, my English family is taken apart and, miraculously, put back together.

Childless for months, I am the daughter who cooks and drives and arranges and plays housekeeper. I inhabit my mother's domestic life on her behalf. I am useful. Then my mother can move her legs, next she can speak, and finally she leaves hospital. A miscarriage seems like small fry; it is not to be shared.

When my parents are reunited, I return to my American household. I am suspended.

True to her eighteenth-century times, Elizabeth Drinker went on to have four more living children after Sally. In 'Parliament Hill Fields', Plath imagines the miscarrying woman taking joyful comfort in her young daughter. She walks home to a lit house and the glow of an occupied nursery. Unexceptional in her modern fertility, if in little else, Plath went on to have a second child before her suicide thirteen months later.

In the spring, just at the time a baby would have been born, I dream of a tiny child with a shock of hair, staring curiously at me on a garden path. Next month, I am pregnant again.

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Viking 2019
Published in Penguin Books 2020



ISBN: 978-0-241-97275-5