

Zoe Williams, *Bring It On, Baby. How to have a dudelike pregnancy*

Review by Jane Sandeman.

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<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Bring-Baby-Have-Dudelike-Pregnancy/dp/0852652054>

I am going to buy several copies of this book and liberally distribute it to pregnant women I meet. And here is why.....

First of all, this is the funniest book I have read for a very long time. As I was reading it on tubes and trains I would shake with laughter, much to the consternation of fellow travellers. And it's good to laugh, but more importantly the tone of the book is that in the end having a child (or two) is a joyous thing. I defy you to find any other contemporary book – on the subject of parenting, or anything else – that gives that message.

It is also, at last, a book that bears some, and in some parts great, resemblance to what I felt and thought and experienced during pregnancy. When reading books by journalists or writers on their experiences of pregnancy and having children I usually end up shouting at the book and thinking 'Get over yourself, you self-indulgent, self-obsessed woman'.

This book gives voice to some of the anxieties of pregnancy, but always puts into context how that view is only a fleeting moment in time, because then you have your child and love it and the world changes. The egotism of pregnancy and your misconceptions of what having children are like are just pinpricks in the very big adventure of your family's whole life.

I particularly liked Williams' insight that 'society *en masse* does not understand the first pregnancy-it only understands the second one'. By this she means that in the first pregnancy you are totally concerned about yourself because you don't come at it 'from the perspective of knowing how wondrous and awe-inspiring it [the baby] is when it comes'. So you are thinking about how it will affect your free time, your career, make you look fat: when, as Williams points out, it isn't

such a big deal in the end.

Williams is also spot on about how people think about the second child, before it is actually born:

'You're really thinking of it as a large, animated toy for the first one: a toy, on the one hand; relief, on the other, from the relentless company of just you, its parents; and on the third hand, a personality corrective because it is already a little bit spoilt. It's not quite as iffy as having a second child to harvest its kidney, but it's in that ballpark.'

Of course, when the second child is born you love it as the unique child it is. And when your 10-year-old and eight-year-old behave as if each of them have just left a Romanian orphanage so are completely fighting for meagre scraps of affection and scant resources, you cannot believe how you ever thought it was a good idea to have a second so that the children would be companions.

But on top of being a funny book about pregnancy, this book debunks some really serious pregnancy myths. In 2010 being a pregnant woman is no fun at all. Instead of pregnancy being seen as something that is normal and healthy, it has become a time of gloom and anxiety for many pregnant women. In an era beset by mistrust and self-doubt, a pregnant woman has become a target for moralism and behaviour management. As pregnant women quite naturally do want to do what is best for their babies, they are susceptible to the messages that are presented to them.

Zoe Williams takes a kick at all of these myths. She shines a harsh light on the actual facts behind not drinking at all during pregnancy, not eating any food that anyone likes, the anti-epidural consensus, the breast is best lobby, the competition between parenting styles, the obsession with what you feed your kids and takes it apart.

On the more medical myths she presents hard facts. She very bravely looks at the real truth behind the mantra 'breast is best'. In an age of uncertain values, new and rather strange moral absolutes have been taken up to define moral worth; and one of these is breast feeding. Outside any rational framework, the medical establishment and middle-class campaigning groups have promoted breastfeeding as the

epitome of good mothering.

As any writer who has suggested that formula feeding is not the end of the world knows, breastfeeding provokes highly irrational responses. But having researched the scientific claims, Williams argues that 'the case for breastfeeding is not that strong'. The pro-breastfeeding arguments are that it increases the child's IQ, it produces less obese children and it improves against some childhood infections. But social class and environment have such an impact that the case for breast feeding 'boils down to, "Middle-class babies do better; middle-class babies tend to be breastfed."'"

Where Williams really gets the tone of this book right is in having a go at the sacred myths that have become the hallmark of the self-righteous parent. Because we have taken to heart that what we do even before our child is conceived will make the difference between it being a Professor of Nuclear Physics at Cambridge or a homeless person, parents (and by that I generally mean mothers) can take very harsh and judgemental lines on how a child should be brought up. Instead of taking the humane, and frankly correct, view that there is no right nor wrong way to bring up a child as long as it is loved, we spend our time clucking about others in order to make ourselves feel less battered by our feeling of inadequacy in the face of the official line on brilliant motherhood, which none of us can meet.

Zoe Williams looks at all those areas and shows us that what matters is that we love our children – not that we get involved in controlled crying or hold them to our bosom 24 hours a day. That should be our own concern. Her chapter on breastfeeding has inevitably caused the most furore, as she makes the point that the advocates of breast feeding and its benefits make no distinction between the developing world and the developed world. Williams herself is someone who enjoyed and breast fed in the first few months but, as she says: 'I'll tell you what: when I look at mothers who didn't breastfeed their children, it never strikes me that they love them any less.'

Of course Zoe Williams does have her own personal prejudices. She doesn't agree with smacking your child, which she insists should be called 'hitting'. It seems her dislike of smacking stems from the fact

that smacking usually happens when a child has, say, stepped out into the road and the adult, 'hysterical with anxiety and shock' behaves 'according to their atavistic instincts'. But the atavistic instinct that she criticises is that of the parent's love and fear that something might have happened to their child. Yes, it isn't the most rational action in the world – but as she argues at other points in the book, there's a lot about how you feel about your children that isn't rational, and that's part of the joy and pain of it.

For all Williams' criticisms of the self-righteousness attached to parents marshalling their own parenting practices – exclusive breastfeeding, natural childbirth, or swearing off alcohol in pregnancy – as the Only Way to do things, it seems she cannot resist throwing in a moral absolute of her own. Which just goes to show that even in a book that encourages us to be dudelike, we've probably all got our own un-dudelike prejudices. But the good thing is that there are a few books out there now calling for unity and sense and solidarity between parents, rather than believing every bit of perfect parenting propaganda that is thrown our way.

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