

Coming

for years I kept my struggle to have a baby a secret. I was too ashamed to admit that I couldn't do what so many other women find easy to do. And then I wrote a book about it and the secret was out.

It all started one day when we were driving to a family lunch to meet my cousin's new baby. My partner, Peter, asked me how I was feeling about it and I started to count all the people I knew that had had babies (and how many) since we began trying to conceive ourselves. I finished with a flourish by naming one friend who had managed to squeeze in three babies already exclaiming: 'I'm fine! One more isn't going to make any difference!' I had a strong sense of this scene becoming the opening of a book. I wrote it down, and then kept on writing.

Whilst I had spent years writing formal reports for work, I had never done any creative composition, but I found (or more accurately stumbled upon) a new passion. I started to look forward to the journey to and from the office when I could open my laptop and write. Several times I missed my stop on the tube because I became so engrossed in what I was doing. The process was very cathartic. I also found that I really enjoyed making up scenes and snippets of dialogue, but at the beginning I never fully contemplated the prospect of publication. I told a few close friends what I was doing and some suggested I published it as a blog. Although I do now write one, I think blogs are best read when they are current. My story had started years ago and I wanted to tell it from the beginning. I was also convinced I was going to be able to write my way to a happy ending although that didn't quite work out in the way that I planned.

For a long time I had been struck by how little had been written about the experience of living with infertility and I hoped I could write the book I couldn't find. I wanted to reveal the private world of the infertile: sex to schedule; the dread of pregnancy announcements; the gradual isolation from family and friends, but I also wanted it to be funny. I imagined it as a Bridget Jones Diary for the infertile generation and started to include short sections which I called 'The Infertility Diaries' as a homage to the girl with big knickers (in solidarity with Bridget, it's recommended that all infertiles should wear big knickers).

A year after I put a full stop on the last sentence of

the book, I had reached the brink of publication. One of the big decisions, right up until the last minute, was whether I would publish under my own name or a pseudonym. The fact that so many blogs on the internet are anonymous shows what a taboo infertility still is and how difficult it is to associate yourself with it. I also had quite a high profile job and was worried about the impact it would have on my professional status and, naturally, about becoming a source of gossip in the pub. For a while the name on the front of the book was 'Jessica Harper' (my grandmother's maiden name) but I decided against that when I found

out that there was a Jessica Harper who had just committed a multi-million pound fraud. It wasn't worth the mix up.

However, the thing that really convinced me to publish under my real name was that I hoped to be able to use the book to campaign for some of the things I wanted to see change within the infertility industry. In particular, I feel there is a need for improvements in the patient environment and care; the diagnosis and treatment of unexplained infertility; and equality of access to IVF on the national health. A wise friend of mine said it would be very difficult to take any sort of campaigning role if I was pretending to be someone else. It was excellent advice on many levels because being able to speak auth-

entically about what I've been through has also been very healing. Not only for me, but also for those that are close to me.

One of the most special moments was my book launch which took place at Waterstones in London's Covent Garden and was chaired by the broadcaster Janet Ellis (and mother of Sophie Ellis Bextor). I was excited but very nervous as I find public speaking much harder than writing. The response I got from family and friends as well as total strangers was phenomenal. Since then I have received so many moving messages from people who have shared their stories with me and I've met many new people who I know will grow into great friends in years to come. In an unexpected way, my infertility has started to feel like a privilege and a blessing.

The first magazine article I did was for *Grazia*. TV, radio and newspapers followed. If you told me this time last year that I'd be meeting Holly Willoughby and Philip Schofield and getting my legs out for a tabloid paper on the subject of not being able to have a baby,

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Out

I'd have never believed you. Sometimes when I think about what a private person I have always been, especially about my infertility, it feels a bit like an 'out of body' experience. It's almost as if the Jessica in the media isn't really me.

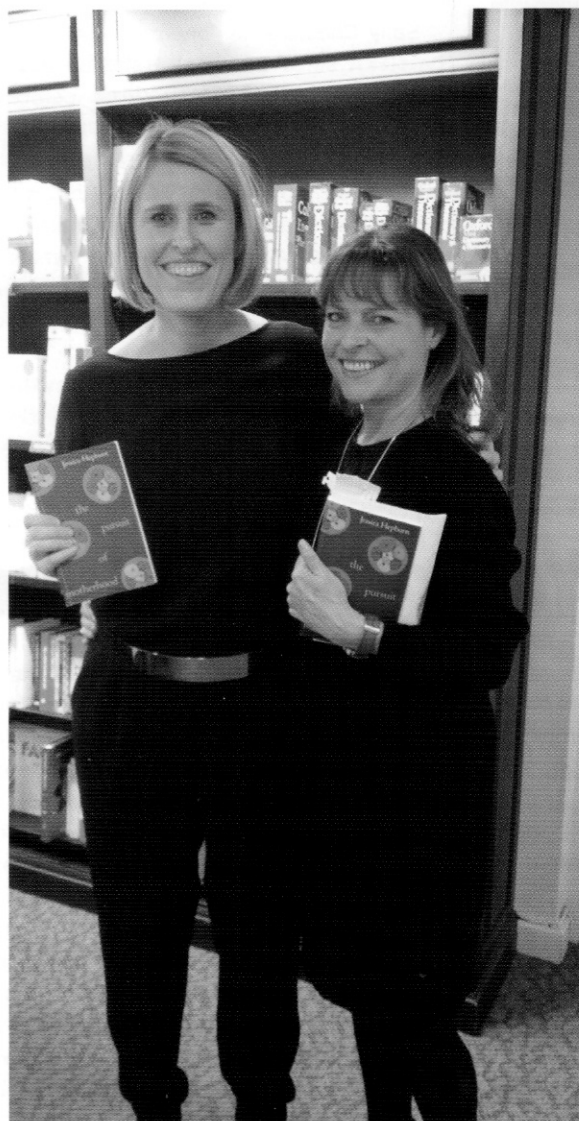
Following publication of the book and the related press coverage, other things have happened. I was asked to join Infertility Network UK as a Trustee which I am totally thrilled about. It's great to be joining such a knowledgeable and committed group of people who are working to improve conditions for couples diagnosed with infertility. And I have been asked to speak at events including the *Women of the World Festival* at the Southbank and the annual *Fertility Show* at Olympia where in November I am giving a talk on 'How To Manage Your Fertility Clinic...' Through these things, my hope to make a difference to infertility treatment in the UK, are starting to materialise. There's no doubt that my wise friend was right - it would have been impossible to do all this in disguise.

In addition, through some of the articles I've written I have also been able to highlight some of the changes I'd like to see. For example, in one I wrote I said that I thought that many clinics handled the administering of pregnancy tests badly. I believe that all clinics should provide patients with an hCG blood test and not let them do a urine test at home. Home tests can be inaccurate or difficult to read. I know this from personal experience having been through an ectopic pregnancy that was only discovered at three months because the clinic didn't do a blood test. Moreover, for those clinics that do blood tests, I also wrote about the ignominy and pain of not being able to leave after an unsuccessful result until you've settled up for the cost of it. I was delighted to hear that in response to the article one UK clinic has subsequently decided to include the cost of an hCG pregnancy test in the overall cost of their IVF package. Not only does this mean that patients get the test they need, it also ensures that payment for it is all done and dusted well before treatment starts. I hope more clinics will follow suit.

It is now over six months since my book was published and my own life has gone in many new and positive directions as a result of it. I feel that I am living proof that you can survive infertility whatever the outcome and that being open and honest about it can make life easier not harder, but don't just take my word for it. If you have a spare twenty minutes I would recommend watching Brene Brown's inspirational TED talk: *The power of vulnerability*. In it, she says that in all the research she's done she's found that the people who are the happiest are those that have the courage



Jessica with
This Morning



Jessica with
Janet Ellis

to embrace their shame and vulnerability. I can honestly say that coming out about my infertility has healed the hurt and made me happier than I ever imagined it could. It's definitely worth trying if you haven't yet.

Jessica Hepburn
IN UK Trustee and Author of
The Pursuit of Motherhood