

**Jessica Hepburn** grew up in Hampstead and is executive director of the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith. Now living in Bloomsbury, she writes about her heart-breaking attempt to become a mother – and why not getting a happy ending may not be the end of the world

**A** little while ago I was sorting through some boxes in the attic of my parents house in Hampstead and came across a cutting of me aged around sixteen in the *Ham&High*. Our school orchestra (in which I played second oboe) had been invited on a tour to Germany and the paper had covered the story. I looked at the article remembering myself as a teenager full of excitement at the adventure of life. At that age motherhood hadn't even entered my mind.

I am part of the generation that was brought up to believe that women could have it all. I went to Camden School for Girls, renowned for turning out independent, high-achieving women. We were all encouraged to go to university and pursue our careers in our 20s before starting a family. It wasn't until my early 30s that I was ready for a baby. I thought the only difficult thing was how to fit a little person into my busy life. But now, after nearly a decade of unsuccessful fertility treatment, I realise that "having it all" isn't always possible.

#### **Yummy mummies**

I vividly remember the moment my partner and I decided to start trying for a baby. It was Christmas Day and we'd just returned from a pre-dinner walk on Hampstead Heath. As the whole family were tucking into their turkey he looked at me across the table and mouthed, "Let's do it." At the time, I had lots of girlfriends my age who had all recently started trying to conceive and we assumed we would get pregnant in synch. We'd talk about being "yummy mummies" together: going to baby yoga and hanging out at the school gates. But gradually my initial confidence and excitement turned to disappointment and envy as bellies began to swell around me. Our life became dictated by the tyranny of the ovulation predictor kit and I started staying late at work Googling "Why can't I get pregnant?" I couldn't understand what was going wrong. I'd always thought that getting pregnant was easy.

About a year after we first started trying we went to see a doctor. After a round of routine tests we were diagnosed with "unexplained infertility", a condition that affects approximately 25 per cent of couples unable to conceive. It essentially means that everything seems to be in working order and there's no known medical reason we can't get pregnant. From that initial diagnosis, I could never have envisaged the long road that lay ahead.



■ Jessica Hepburn

I have been through multiple rounds of IVF and gone to many alternative (and sometimes absurd) lengths to understand and cure my infertility from acupuncture and special diets to visiting a psychic tarot card reader and attending an intense therapeutic process to discover whether my "inner child" had anything to do with it. I have also suffered the heartbreak of several miscarriages and a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy. And sadly there still hasn't been a miracle happy ending.

Looking back, one of my biggest regrets is that I lost most of my 30s to Project Baby. My obsession with trying to conceive and the shame that I felt at not being able to become a mother prevented me from enjoying the life I did have. Then one day, shortly after I turned 40, and had just been through another draining round of IVF, I started writing. For sometime I had been looking for a book that empathized with what I was

going through. I couldn't find one so I started writing it myself.

My book, *The Pursuit of Motherhood*, came out on February 1 and has already become a #1 Bestseller on Amazon. Dozens of women are contacting me daily thanking me for telling our story and lifting the lid on the secrecy and shame that surrounds the silent epidemic of infertility. It suddenly feels as if my long and difficult journey may not have been for nothing. I have also found a new passion which has reignited my childhood sense of adventure – writing. I am now working on a second book, a novel based on the life of my grandparents – my grandmother, the poet Anna Wickham, who was an important figure in Hampstead's literary past and my grandfather Patrick Hepburn, an astronomer, who built the Hampstead Observatory.

So no more regrets. No experience, however hard, is wasted if you use it to turn your life around. Right now this Hampstead girl is living proof of that.

■ *The Pursuit of Motherhood*, published by Matador, is priced £8.99. Details at [thepursuitofmotherhood.com](http://thepursuitofmotherhood.com).

