

The Pursuit of Motherhood

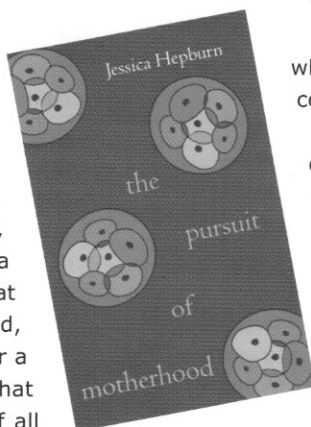
Forgive me for starting this article with a spoiler, but I want to let you know that my story doesn't have a happy 'baby' ending. Well, not yet, although eight years into my infertility journey I am still hoping.

I vividly remember the day my partner, Peter, and I decided to start trying for a baby. It was Christmas day and he looked at me across the dinner table and mouthed, 'Let's do it.' We'd been circling the topic for a while so he knew I was ready. Later that evening we had a ritual throwing away of all the contraception in the bathroom cabinet. We even opened a bottle of champagne and joked about 'pre-wetting' the baby's head.

I was 34 years old at the time. I'd enjoyed my care-free twenties, established my career and had recently been appointed chief executive of the theatre I still run. I had met Peter and fallen in love. I thought it was the perfect time to start a family. And I wasn't alone. I had lots of girlfriends of my age who all started trying to conceive around the same time and we assumed we would get pregnant in synch. Over a glass of wine in the pub we'd talk about being 'yummy mummies' together, taking our kids to baby yoga and hanging out at the school gates. I wasn't in the least concerned about my career and baby plans clashing, I firmly believed that we were the generation of women that could have it all.

As teenagers we had been led to believe that unprotected sex = pregnancy, so I naively thought we'd get pregnant within the first few months, but gradually my initial confidence and excitement turned to disappointment and envy as bellies began to swell around me and nothing seemed to be happening for us. Our life became dictated by the tyranny of the 'Ovulation Predictor Kit' and I began to stay late at work Googling 'Why can't I get pregnant?' I couldn't understand what was going wrong. My periods had always been regular, I never got ill, ate healthily and exercised. I remember looking at myself in the mirror and thinking 'I've even got child-bearing hips!'

It was about a year after we started trying that we went to see a doctor. I will never forget that first visit. I have been continually struck by the oddness of fertility clinics, how often they don't feel like the sort of place you'd go to create a baby. This one was more like the setting of a Dickens' novel than a 21st century medical establishment. I was also shocked by all the other people. The waiting room was full of men and women crammed in side by side trying not to look at each other. They seemed completely normal and fertile from the outside and I desperately wanted to know



what everyone else's story was, but of course didn't dare to ask.

After a round of routine tests we were diagnosed with 'Unexplained Infertility', a condition that I now know affects approximately 25% of infertility sufferers. The doctor was quick to say that this meant there was no reason we couldn't get pregnant, but I soon realised that this actually meant he had no idea why we weren't. Everyone's infertility diagnosis is different and difficult, but one of

the worst things about 'Unexplained Infertility' is that if you don't know what the problem is it can be impossible to know how to fix it.

Our first round of treatment was disastrous. It was decided that we should start with IUI (what I like to call IVF-lite) but the hospital staff forgot about us while we were waiting for the insemination and then tried to treat us in a corridor because there were no consultation rooms available. By that time I had become so stressed that I ended up refusing to go through with it and walking out. We never went back to that clinic, and they never contacted us again and one of my continuing disappointments about the fertility industry is that post-treatment follow-up is generally very poor.

Looking back, I think in the early days I was more concerned about the fact that we were having to resort to medical intervention to have a baby than I was about whether it would or wouldn't work. Somehow it seemed so 'unnatural' and it made me question whether it was nature's way of telling me I wasn't going to make a very good mother. I have no doubt that the feeling of inadequacy and failure to do what most women in the world seem to find so easy, had an increasing impact on my physical ability to conceive.

By this time I was also becoming more and more ostracized from my friends with babies as conversations turned from conception tips to breast-feeding and sleep routines. I wanted to join in but felt like a fraud. I began to dread that crumpling in your chest when you hear another friend has become pregnant, or when you find out that you haven't been invited to a 'baby shower' because people think it might upset you. One of the saddest things about this is that I had always loved children, but suddenly I found I was becoming self-conscious around them never asking to pick them up in case my friends thought I'd burst into tears or run off with them.

From our initial diagnosis, I could never have imagined the long road that lay ahead of us. The years that followed have become a crusade to have our own biological baby. I have seen at least a dozen doctors,



had every test you could imagine, and been through multiple rounds of IVF. We have also suffered the heartbreak of several miscarriages and a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy which was only diagnosed at three months. We seem to be able to make perfect embryos in the laboratory, and I can get pregnant, but then something goes wrong. Every doctor we've seen has been convinced that it was just a matter of time. I think this is why we've carried on for as long as we have and now I feel like a detective determined to solve a crime.

I have also been to many alternative and sometimes absurd lengths to understand and cure my infertility, from visiting a psychic tarot card reader to attending an intense therapeutic process to discover whether my 'inner child' has anything to do with it. I have tried acupuncture, homeopathy and special diets. I haven't just got the t-shirt, I've got one in every colour.

There is nothing worse than that feeling of failing a cycle of IVF, the realisation that all the work and hope of the last few months have resulted in nothing. Time and time over I have questioned whether I can go through it again, emotionally and financially. We have re-mortgaged our house, taken out bank loans; whatever happens in the end, we'll be paying back money for years to come. But I remember asking Peter after one really hard, failed cycle whether we should quit and he replied: 'We give up, when there's no hope left.' And that has become our mantra.

I've now written a book called *The Pursuit of Motherhood* which is out on 1st February and tracks our journey. It has been a big decision to publish because I have always been a very private person and told only a few people about the extent of our struggle. When I nervously announced the news to colleagues at work, someone said: 'We just assumed you were a career woman and didn't want children.' It's funny how people make assumptions, but one of the hardest things about living with infertility is the assumption you make about yourself. For year's failure, isolation and sadness became my identity. Now I realise that infertility is just a part of who I am. It's not all of me and it's certainly not the first thing that other people

think about me. The release of the secrecy and shame in talking publicly has been incredible.

I've tried to write the book that I wanted to read. I have been constantly struck how little is written about living with infertility and how most of the books that are published have a happy ending. Of course it's good to be reminded that there is success, but what happens if there isn't? Where are the stories of the thousands of women who are going through round after round of unsuccessful treatment?

In 2012, we were given a new thread of hope when we saw a doctor who has diagnosed that we have a rare, little tested for or treated, immune issue. It is not related to the much debated 'Natural Killer Cells' which I had been tested for before, but had not presented as particularly high. My condition relates to the protective, not the attacking, part of my immune system. Whilst this has offered us new avenues to explore I am managing my expectations because I know that at 42, nearly 43, my age is now also a major factor, but I can also genuinely say that I feel positive about the future whatever it holds. In many ways I lost nearly a decade of my life to 'project baby' but infertility has made me stronger and more determined to make the most of the things I can control. I also hope that by reaching out to other women through my book, that whatever the outcome of my journey, it will not have been for nothing.

Jessica Hepburn

*Editor's note: a book review of *The Pursuit of Motherhood* will appear in a future edition of this magazine.*



Diane Arnold

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FREE Supportline - 0121 323 5025

Don't forget you can speak to Diane on the Supportline free of charge which is available Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 10.00am to 4.00pm enabling you to discuss in confidence, all aspects of infertility investigations, treatment or just for some support. *Please note that as this is a free service, calls cannot be returned if a message is left.* Diane can also be reached via a pre-booked Skype call, please email her to arrange a mutually convenient day and time.

The Pursuit of Motherhood

By Jessica Hepburn

This book presents a very personal account of Jessica's IVF journey. It charts her early concerns with the unfamiliar IVF process, her heartbreak at continued failed attempts, her frustration and the heavy impact the journey has on her relationship with her partner and on her career. Jessica allows us a glimpse into her most personal moments; the most heartbreaking involving a trip to the theatre, which will forever play across my mind when I am sat in the theatre seats waiting for the curtain to rise.

I think this book captures three facets of Jessica, from which readers may recognise part of themselves. The core of the book is reflected by its very apt title, her pursuit of motherhood involving the clinics, the doctors, the tests, and the two-week waits. In addition to this, Jessica weaves in a very truthful account of her relationship with her partner and how the IVF strains the bond between them. And finally, we view Jessica in her professional guise, juggling IVF and a successful career; a balance which we may all, along with Jessica, question can actually be achieved.

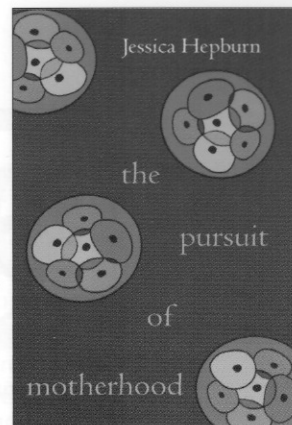
I have to say I very much enjoyed this book; Jessica writes with pace; she doesn't wallow in her disappointment and you'll be inspired by her tenacity and fortit-

ude. The bumps in the road are described with a delicate honesty and Jessica leaves no stone unturned in her pursuit, embarking on what some readers may consider to be absurd lengths to address her lack of success.

Her observations also really resonated with me, for example, she notes how when you're trying for a baby the whole world seems to be full of pregnant women with perfect bumps; and how distrustful you can become of your own body during the IVF process. What should be noted about this book, however, is that it has not been written to significantly inform those embarking on their IVF journey about the medical processes or treatment they can expect to encounter. It is an account of the emotional journey one can expect; the highs and lows, excitements and disappointments and it also goes against the grain of the IVF literature, as Jessica is yet to write her happy ending. She does, however, end her book with some sage advice based on her experiences, for those women beginning to experience the symptoms of infertility. She is not passing the baton, her journey is not yet over, but as we all have to start at the beginning, a few sound words of advice are more than welcome.

Catherine Rickard

I N UK Member



Thinking about giving up fertility treatment?

For more information about MTL, contact the I N UK head office on 0800 008 7464

Email: admin@moretolife.co.uk Website: www.moretolife.co.uk

HOLBY CITY+



I was recently approached by the BBC regarding a new storyline they are writing for the Holby City series. They had decided to include a story covering infertility issues surrounding one of the couples in the series and approached the charity asking if we could assist them which of course we agreed to. After being consulted on "correct procedures during treatments", I was asked to look over the script, which was exciting in itself, as it includes all the camera angles and whose face they are zooming in on, etc. This of course enables you to build up a picture of how it will

all come together on screen.

Being involved with this has helped to build on how we get involved with all sorts of projects in order to further promote issues surrounding infertility and raising awareness.

If you don't already follow Holby City - get watching. Unfortunately I cannot go into any details, but I can assure you it's a really good plot guaranteeing a few shocks and surprises along the way!

Diane Arnold
Supportline