



**Traig, Jennifer. (2019). Act Natural: A Cultural History of Misadventures in Parenting.  
New York: Harper Collins Publishers.**

Reviewed by: Zoe Smith, MacEwan University

Jennifer Traig's book "Act Natural," is a research-based exploration of the history of Western parenting practices. Traig goes into specific parenting dilemmas such as feeding, disciplining, sibling conflicts, sleeping, and even childbirth. She delves into the history of these practices in the Western world while incorporating her own personal anecdotes from her experience as a mother of two. Traig's distinctive dark sense of humour ties the book together, which works to lighten the disturbing information provided about past child-rearing practices. Traig synthesizes child-rearing trends through the ages with an interesting lens that highlights the idea that maybe no one really knows what they are doing when it comes to parenting, and that's ok. (Because at least we are not recommending beer instead of water to children anymore) (p. 91).

Traig digs into the concept of parenting and how "the word itself only came into common usage about forty years ago" (p.1). The reason for this, she explains, is that "parenting" wasn't usually done by the parents. Traig delves into the popular practice of using wet nurses and how little most parents had to do with (especially the first few years of) their children's lives. "A big part of the reason it wasn't called *parenting* is that for much of history, parents did so little of it. A cast of wet nurses, dry nurses, tutors, servants, slaves, clergy, older siblings, other relatives, and

apprentice masters did the day-to-day labour” (p.1). Traig successfully displays how difficult parenting has always been by exploring, as she puts it, “a history of trying to get out of it” (p. 2).

Another way Traig completely turns her reader's perspective on child-rearing is her discussion of some darker standards of child-rearing in classical times. A practice in ancient Greek and Roman times known as *exposing*, which refers to abandoning a newborn infant when the parents do not have the means to look after them. Traig explains, “In ancient Rome an estimated 20 to 40 percent of all infants were exposed, suggesting that the majority of families exposed at least one child” (p. 3). Although the average reader knows that practices in classical times were gruesome in nature, Traig’s detailed synthesis of the history in this section is shocking to any person, shifting our view on how humans treated their offspring.

Throughout the text, there are many other shocking examples of how people have mistreated their children over the ages. However, “Act Natural” is as relatable as it is disturbing. Traig weaves her own personal experiences through the entire book, delving into extremely personal details about her children and her own misadventures in parenting. These details differentiate the book from other research-based texts. While recounting the frightful history of childbirth practices in Western society, Traig reveals the details of her own story of the birth of her second child. She recounts how both she and her husband were in the ER for unrelated reasons just days before her second child's birth, putting them both in wheelchairs when the time came for her to have her child. Although this does not seem at all like the ideal birth plan, she counters that: “Compared to how childbirth could go throughout most of history, we were actually doing pretty well... To have a baby in the twenty-first century is a blessing previous generations couldn’t

imagine. There are anesthetics and antibiotics. Should something go wrong, brilliant people and equipment are on hand to ensure both mother and baby live” (pp. 43-44). While comparing and contrasting ancient practices with modern-day woes, Traig relates to the reader while also informing and educating them.

To inform her readers of the strange trends of child-rearing throughout history, Traig explores different manuals through the ages. She found a general theme throughout all of them: “You’re doing it wrong” (p. 81). “The answer is usually simple: it’s you. You’re doing it wrong. Your incompetence may be due to your inexperience or the mistakes of your own parents; to your gender, your social class, or your nationality; to the bad advice of other experts or to simple stupidity” (p. 82). She delves into several historical manuals; the first ones touch on child-rearing practices, and then, as time goes on, more manuals and advice books develop. They all share a common theme: they are judgemental and highlight what parents may do to “ruin” their child. This portion of the book exemplifies what I believe is the antithesis of what Traig tries to convey in “Act Natural.” Through personal anecdotes of her own mistakes as well as the entire Western history of parenting mistakes, Traig expresses that there may be no “right” way to do any of this and we are all just trying our best. The peculiar parenting trends are well displayed in Traig's exploration of Rousseau’s *Émile*, an allegorical novel written in the late 1700s that many readers mistakenly thought was gospel, causing their children to suffer due to their extremely harsh parenting practices. The author expresses her confusion at this trend:

A few hundred years later I am baffled as to why Rousseau became huge. He was asking parents to make their children miserable and ungovernable, and to oversee much of the child-rearing themselves. It’s one thing when the nursemaid has to interact with the young yeti, but another when the viscount himself does (p. 92).

She refers to the child as a yeti here because she explains earlier that Rousseau endorsed exposing children to extremely cold weather and baths.

“Act Natural” is not short of personal anecdotes, thrilling tangents, hilarious commentary and informative snippets of history. It skillfully balances these aspects to create a book that is impossible to put down. Traig has found a way to examine historical parenting practices while comforting any reader that their own or their parent’s practices were the best they could do with the information they had at the time.

Traig’s intended audience is any post-secondary student interested in the sociology of families, children, and parenting, as well as students in developmental psychology, history, or medicine. Not only does this book appeal to an academic audience, it is also an essential read for anyone who works closely with children and parents with children of any age.

I found this book to be witty, educational and hilarious. Traig did a fantastic job balancing humour with her extensive research; she found a way to get a substantial amount of information across without it once becoming dull. After reading this book, you will feel connected to Traig through her personal stories and vulnerability, and your perspective on parenting will have been shifted for the better. The main goal of this book was to provide an understanding of how we will continue to make mistakes in parenting; however, we are much better off than when we started, and as Traig states in the afterword,

Knowing our history does not mean we aren’t doomed to repeat it. I’ve spent the past five years reading nothing *but* parenting histories and I’m still making parenting mistakes every day. I am pretty sure that’s okay. If I’ve learned anything, it’s that barring the really awful stuff, things mostly turn out fine, and the ones that don’t were beyond our control anyway (p. 287).

Smith

Traig executed her message intelligently and in an entertaining manner. I recommend this book to anyone looking to delve into the true histories of parenting practices. They will appreciate her vulnerability, insight and extensive research on the topic.