



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

Reviewed by: April Lauzon, MacEwan University

Jennifer Traig's book "Act Natural: A Cultural History of Misadventures in Parenting" takes a comical stroll through history detailing out-of-touch practices that occurred through the early stages of an infant's life, from birth to surviving the first few years, consisting of teething, potty training, the so-called "terrible twos" and onwards. She covers such themes as the ever-growing amount of contradicting parenting advice, gender roles in parenting and the difference in expectations set out for the father and mother, the evolution of understanding child development, and parenting trends and fads. She explores these themes by observing the historical trends, following them and their supporting theories and experiments throughout time, and adding comical remarks on their sometimes outlandish methods. She also often adds anecdotes and reflections on her own parenting choices that make the book feel more personal, like you're chatting with her about parenting. She discusses the good, the bad, and the ugly sides of parenting, along with the joy that it brings to one's life while providing a research background to support the commonly felt sentiments, overall leaving the reader entertained, informed, and perhaps a little more prepared for bringing a child into the world.

On the theme of contradicting parenting advice, she has an individual chapter devoted to

the disputing advice offered throughout the years, but it's also touched on in every chapter as well. She notes, "A shocking amount of it would be very, very bad, written by people who either had no children or were estranged from them" (p. 56). This point is expanded on through her exploration of the history of parenting advice starting as far back as the first century when parchment scrolls used by physicians would be referenced. The advice within the scrolls was mostly gathered from midwives, allowing it to be sensible for the time, although she notes that one practice that was widely followed was rubbing the baby in fine salt (p. 57). She goes further, commenting on that a concept often found through early parenting advice that still finds true today, the notion that other people are the ones who are wrong and crazy. She notes:

Once childcare experts stopped hating other cultures on principle, they turned on people closer to home, directing the blame at segments of their own society. Authors faulted the working classes or the upper ones; other experts or amateurs; the help; the previous generation; or, as was the case in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women in general. Occasionally the books were written explicitly to settle scores, either with colleagues, or, as in a few instances, with the author's own parents (p. 58).

Traig further comments on the classical theories of toughening the child, which can be found as far back as the 1300s, with Giovanni Dominici advocating for denying affections and regular beatings (p. 59), in the late 1600s, John Locke encouraging hardening of children through uncomfortable sleeping accommodations and irregular feeding patterns (p. 62), through the rise of behaviourism in 1920s and 30s which recommended the limiting of nurturing the child as we are all products of nature and nurturing the child does little (p. 65). Most of the time, the advice Traig finds is aimed at women, with books coming out through the ages that state the parents must pass the children off to other women or institutions, as the parents are the least qualified to raise them

or that the environment that children are being raised should be similar to that of a scientific lab with help being outsourced, in order to raise proper, well-behaved children (p. 23). Another example is that of doctors in magazine ads advising to give the children syrups laced with opiates to placate and constipate them, which was followed up quickly after with contradicting advice to see detox doctors who then were prescribing syrups containing alcohol to ease the come off (p. 23). Much like the rest of the chapters in the book, Traig uses historical examples to express how little was known about parenting and what we do know has only recently come into fashion, stating at the conclusion of the main chapter, “There are so many ways to do it wrong, and we’re just getting started” (p. 72).

The theme of gender inequality throughout the birthing and childrearing experience is also touched upon throughout the book, with the focus being on the women somehow being in the wrong for most of it. Traig makes this clear through her use of different historical beliefs, theories, and game changers within the medical field like, for example, the commonly held belief during the first century that Roman children who were often born with deformed legs were caused by their mothers being plainly bad mothers, as they weren't attentive and devoted enough (p. 52). Or how, during medieval times, priest Giovanni Dominici wrote “*Regola del governo di cura Familiare.*” stating that for the female readers, the husband is the master, and she is the servant who must do whatever the husband demands, raising the children to his wishes (p. 54). Traig gives another example of Dr. Charles Miegs, who is honoured as the “dean of American midwifery” who is quoted to say that a woman's head is “too small for intellect but just big enough for love,” or the belief that anesthesia during child labour was considered blasphemous as the pain that occurs

has been ordained divine (p. 36). In another example, professor of midwifery William Dewees, who in his 1825 book *Treaties on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children*, stated that it should be the fathers who take up the task of educating the children, even if any “sensible father found the duty ‘a bore’ that ‘he would feel almost disgraced to perform’” going further to state that it was unfortunate that the mother was tasked with education (p. 58). Traig uses the gender discrepancy when discussing feeding difficulties in chapter five, stating how at the advent of children focused foods, the mother’s workload had doubled as she now had to prepare two full menus at every meal (p. 84). She finds that in many of the early versions of children’s books, particularly that of the brothers Grimm who transcribed German folk tales, they discussed sex with a focus on fathers sexually assaulting their wives and daughters, but it wasn’t until the second world war that the books became banned in the allied countries, not for their sexist, incestuous themes but because of the Germanic ties (pp. 138-139). Whether Traig states it plainly or it is inferred through the examples used, the gendered difference in experience in parenthood is seen throughout the book, shining a light on an arguably still current issue.

Traig’s intended readership is probably that of either expecting parents or those studying historical patterns in parenting, as it provides comical commentary and real-life examples through her personal anecdotes, allowing the reader to develop a deeper understanding, as well as historical experiments and theories that can act as a starting place for those wanting to do more research on the subject. Other disciplines like anthropology, history, child and youth care, and possibly psychology would find useful information in this book; however, I did find that it could have been a bit more academic in its delivery of the theories, as it sometimes came across as a casual read.

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Nonetheless, it was thoroughly enjoyable, and I would highly recommend it to those both in and out of an academic setting.