



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

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Jennifer Traig's book, "Act Natural: A Cultural History of Misadventures in Parenting," provides an overview of some of the strangest and most ill-advised parenting techniques used by parents of different geographic locations throughout history. Throughout this book, Traig discusses the various parenting strategies used in many different situations, some of which include birth, discipline, and sleep, while emphasizing how the methods used today and parenting in general are relatively new concepts. Furthermore, Traig also contrasts her descriptions of historical parenting techniques by providing personal anecdotes of her own parenting style, which helps showcase the drastic changes seen in parenting techniques over time and further exemplifies how strange most of these previous techniques were. As Traig provides humorous commentary and insights regarding both the historical parenting techniques and her own for the different situations, several common themes arise, such as the misguided nature of most historical parenting practices, the ways that historical parenting practices contradict one another, and the recency at which most modern parenting practices have come about.

One of the most frequently demonstrated themes throughout this book is how most historical parenting practices are misguided and have caused harm to children. Traig alludes to the

frequent misguided nature of historical parenting practices by noting that a “shocking amount of [parenting advice] would be very, very bad, written by people who either had no children, or were estranged from them,” thus indicating that throughout history, the people who were putting forth advice on how to parent children had little experience doing so themselves, so much of their advice was ill-advised and more harmful than good. (Chapter 3). One person Traig highlights as being highly influential in terms of parenting advice while also being underqualified to give such advice is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who advocated for parents to raise their own children despite not doing so himself (Chapter 3). Even though Rousseau may not have intended for the methods he published in his book “*Émile*” or *On Education*” to be popularized or taken literally, parents were still influenced to follow them (Chapter 3). Traig explains how Rousseau’s ideas are dangerous in practice, as some of these ideas included suggesting parents “fire pistols near their children’s heads to make them less skittish” and “discontinue all formal education and ban all books, [allowing children to] spend all their time scantily clothed outdoors in all weather” (Chapter 3). As one might expect when put into practice, these methods had devastating consequences, most notably the death of children, and they did not provide an environment in which children could thrive (Chapter 3). Therefore, through the missteps of Rousseau, it becomes clear how parenting methods can have adverse effects on children and cause more harm than good, especially when put forth by someone who does not have the proper knowledge to advise others on the subject. Moreover, it was the frequency at which people like Rousseau, with limited understanding of parenting, were at the forefront of the trending parenting techniques that led to the overall theme of historical parenting practices being misguided because, without proper knowledge of parenting, the advised methods

are likely to be ineffective and harmful.

Apart from focusing on the people who popularized and led to the overall trend of misguided parenting techniques, Traig also discusses many more specific parenting techniques that further showcase the theme of historical parenting practices being misguided and harmful. Based on the descriptions of parenting techniques that Traig provides, it becomes clear that much of why these techniques were misguided was due to the frequency at which they led to an unintended outcome. One specific practice which Traig revisits throughout the book and provides countless details on is swaddling, which was done tightly to ensure the baby developed a human form as they believed the human form must be “forcibly imposed on them,” so the tight swaddling was used to essentially mold the baby into a human (Chapter 4). The unintended outcome that often came with swaddling was the increased danger it placed children in. Due to the combination of the lack of changing of the swaddling and the straight pins used to hold the swaddling in place, children could die from infection (Chapter 4). However, once swaddling fell out of practice, it became clear that swaddling so tightly was unnecessary, as even without this intervention, children still developed the human form, thus further indicating the misguided nature of this practice. Therefore, through providing detailed descriptions of the unqualified individuals who were leading the trends for harmful parenting practices and how other common practice methods were not achieving their intended outcomes, Traig was able to successfully communicate the misguided nature of the historical parenting practices across multiple contexts of parenting.

Another theme that arises within Traig’s book is how historical parenting practices contradict one another throughout time. More specifically, it is the ways that as certain methods

fall out of practice, the methods that emerge in their place often oppose the previously favoured methods. Traig best demonstrates this through her discussions regarding outsourcing of childcare (Chapter 1). Traig provides a detailed recounting regarding the history of outsourcing childcare, explicitly stating that “the history of parenting is, in large part, a history of trying to get out of it,” which is further supported by the practice of sending children away to be raised by someone else entirely, whether that be a wet-nurse, tutors, or other relatives (Chapter 1). However, throughout this book, Traig describes the differing opinions that appeared throughout history regarding who should raise a child. Some, like John B. Watson, felt that “parents were the least qualified for the job of raising children” and that “limited parental contact” was better for children, whereas others, like Rousseau, felt parents should raise their own children (Chapter 1). So, based on these differing opinions regarding childcare, it is clear that throughout history, the methods suggested to replace the current or previously used methods often directly contradict what was common practice before.

The last theme highlighted in this book is the recency at which modern parenting techniques have come about, as much of the historical practices Traig describes throughout this book contrasts directly with the modern techniques represented in her personal anecdotes. A clear indication of the differences that exist between historical and modern parenting practices, as well as the recency of the modern techniques, comes when Traig expresses that “[she] would be jailed for disciplining [her] children with methods that were considered normal less than a century ago...” (Chapter 8). This theme is further demonstrated through the different problems that modern parents deal with that were not present in the past, such as children requiring sleep training because modern parenting techniques would have evolved to deal with modern parenting problems

(Chapter 10). Traig further provides details regarding sleep training, noting that it is a “recent invention” stemming from the new expectations for children and adults to sleep the whole night, as there is no evidence in the historical record of problems getting children to bed (Chapter 10). Therefore, based on the examples provided, Traig illustrated how modern parenting techniques have evolved relatively recently and, in some cases, developed to deal with new problems that modern parents face.

Overall, while I enjoyed reading this book, and while I understand her intention of attempting to provide solace to parents who feel that they are not parenting their children right by providing an overview of some of the ridiculous and horrible techniques people previously used to parent their children, I still feel that this book might be a bit too biased towards the outrageous parts of the history of parenting. I think that adding in some of the less horrible historical methods that would still be unacceptable by modern terms would provide a more well-rounded picture of the history of parenting, while still ensuring present-day parents that they are doing a fine job without focusing too heavily on all the dark, inhumane methods people have used when parenting their children. Another critique I have of this book is that it tends to be a bit repetitive at times with some of the “tidbits” of information added in by the author, such as the repetition that Benjamin Spock did not promote/advocate for permissiveness or the dangers of placing a cradle too close to the hearth/fire, both of which are repeated in different ways multiple times. I think this repetition distracts from the book as a whole and would better hold the readers’ attention if it was limited. Lastly, I think the academic audience for this book would be sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists looking to examine how parenting methods have changed over time and differed

across different Western cultures throughout history while focusing on the more extreme parenting methods and being able to compare these historical methods to modern ones using the author's anecdotes.