Jennifer Traig's book, "Act Natural: A Cultural History of Misadventures in Parenting," is a refreshing and humourous synthesis of historical records and sources on parenting and child-rearing methods. An accumulation of information from Ancient Mesopotamia and the Roman Empire to the Victorian Era and up to the twenty-first century, this book serves as an overview for anyone interested in parenting or even those who want to laugh at the misfortune of people in the past. Through each chapter of her book, Traig talks about the complex histories of child-rearing, from childbirth to bedtime stories to advice manuals and sibling conflict. As Traig collects her information, she frames it not as something for the reader to solely laugh at (although there is plenty of humour throughout the book) but as something to relate to, relating many of the historical anecdotes to her own experiences as a mother. As she reiterates time and time, parents have never had all the answers; they are just learning from predecessors and hoping they do it better themselves.

For much of history, Traig states in the first pages of her book, the term and practice of "parenting" that we know today did not exist and only came into the social consciousness around the 1970s. Before this, children were not parented but instead reared. Parents had little to no involvement in raising their children, leaving that to hired help like wet nurses, tutors, nannies,
clergy, servants, or other relatives like grandparents or older siblings. The help would live in the household of the rest of the family, or the parents would send their child away from the household to live elsewhere, often to a wet or dry nurse or apprentice master as the child got older and prepared to begin work.

As Traig winds the path through the history of parenting, she exemplifies how child-rearing techniques reflect the world they inhabit. By exploring millennia of family dynamics and the advice given to parents on the best ways to raise their children, connections arise between recommended ways of parenthood and the circumstances the families are in, both in time and place. Although moments throughout the text illustrate this theme, chapter nine speaks to it the most. In this chapter, Traig focuses on the history of children's literature and the stories told to children. Not only do these stories reflect the mentality their society wanted the children to adopt, but they also reflect the world they expected their children to come into as they grew up and act as warnings for the future.

"For the history of children's literature is a shocking affair, offering death, murder, abuse, death, racism, death, and damnation" (p. 225). The chapter examines the evolution of children's literature from the brutality of Aesop's animal-filled fables (now sanitized for modern audiences) to the development of the picture book in the late seventeenth century and onward. The most interesting of these stages was what came out of the invention of the printing press in the mid-sixteenth century; this would be the etiquette guide. These books became popular alongside the printing press, and their main goal was to "get children to stop acting like animals" (p. 230). In a world controlled by the church and the supposed fear of eternal damnation, the prospect of helping one's children reach the pearly gates when their time came (which statistically was sooner rather
than later) was a tempting one at the least, a moral obligation at most.

Aside from chapter nine, the book's first chapter, "Look Busy: On Outsourcing," reflects the societies in which different people were raised throughout history. For the Ancient Romans and many other ancient civilizations, if one did not want one of one's children, it was a regular occurrence to "expose" them; an estimated twenty to forty percent of all Roman infants had parents who abandoned them. (p. 3) Myths of the time reflect the high percentage rate of infant abandonment, with many ancient heroes coming from stories of abandonment, such as Oedipus, Poseidon, and the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus. The tradition of child abandonment continued for centuries until the Renaissance when the first crumbs of the "nuclear family" emerged (p. 13). This still did not mean that parents would suddenly take care of their children by sending their children to or hiring wet nurses for their offspring.

As Traig explores the trials of child-rearing through Western History, a commonality comes out of the stories. Enough of the children survived to lead to more children. The purpose of this book, outlined by the author, is that "people have done crazy, crazy things to their children throughout history, and the species continued all the same. Our children will survive and go on to have their children" (p. xv). This sentiment runs through the entire book, reminding the reader that no one knows what they are doing, but we can learn from past mistakes and try to do better today. As much as parents try to do the right thing, "you can't see what you're doing while you're doing it," and that is what Traig's goal with her book is. To ensure parents are doing the right thing, no one else has ever known what they were doing when navigating parenthood and humankind's lives.

Traig's writing style is refreshing in a world of academia, lighthearted, and fun to read. "Act Natural" feels like you are talking to a friend who has heard about some drama you are not
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privy to yet. The way she paints pictures with her words and lets the reader know exactly how she is feeling at any moment is something that one rarely gets in the written word. The comedic tone integrated throughout the book made it enjoyable to keep picking up, helping to contrast the often-brutal scenery of historical childhoods of abandonment and abuse. While this is a sociological and historical book, Traig does not shy away from personal anecdotes, which works well with her writing style, which is already very personable. As the audience read her words, they want to hear more and know more about her thoughts. The book sometimes felt constrained by the civilizations and societies that Traig chose to study. Since she studied only Western communities, the book missed another side of the conversation. This constraint is disappointing but understandable. To keep her book at an approachable length and not fall into a rabbit hole, Traig understood her research limits and worked within them beautifully.

If an academic were to use this book as a source of inspiration for another study, sociology or history would make the most sense. Within the field of sociology, this book reads into micro studies of individual people and macro studies of how the broader beliefs of society were affecting the world around them. However, as stated previously, the primary audience this book is catering to is something other than an academic community. However, some academics and faculties could find this book appealing to their studies. Traig wrote this book for the public, for parents, and minor history nerds. Traig's writing style, the chapter divisions, and the comedic tone throughout the writing make "Act Natural" an approachable book for anyone to pick up. Traig uses a casual vocabulary, a lack of field-of-study specific jargon, and little preconceived notions of what knowledge her audience already must level the playing field for anyone picking up this book not to feel discouraged about reading it.
Traig succeeds in her goal for this book. It is a well-researched synthesis of Western historical knowledge of parenthood and child-rearing and an introduction to the historical and sociological topics it brings up. Where it excels, however, is in its down-to-earth advice for parents. The book assures parents that they are not doing anything wrong; if they are, some people have done it worse. If the children of the past went through what Traig illustrated in this book and turned out fine, so will yours; just "Act Natural."