Jennifer Traig’s book “Act Natural: A Cultural History of Misadventures in Parenting,” is an inspection of the evolution and progression, or degression, of the role of parenting through the centuries. Traig takes a comedic approach as she uses anecdotes to compare the historical parenting ideals with the current Western expectations including her own experience as a mother. Through vulnerably providing her personal challenges in life, the audience gains empathy. Traig introduces theorists, establishing the influence they elicited over society in each time period, and the affect their research had on the development of child rearing. She comments on and criticizes the sexist and misogynistic views that have held through many generations by calling out theorists claiming, “studies were almost certainly bullshit, and definitely cruel” (p. 95). Her satirical style of writing captivates the audience, lightening up heavy topics and engaging younger readers, ultimately creating a curiosity about what Traig will say next. She explores how themes consisting of parental avoidance of responsibility, maternal and child mortality, gender inequality, and anxiety have been elicited by theorists or nature.

Traig explores how the “history of parenting is, in large part, a history of trying to get out of it” (p. 2). Traig dives into the disgusting loopholes historians found to escape their parental responsibilities. She notes how this avoidance and lack of guilt was characterized by wet-nurses and “exposure” (p. 7) during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Exposure “allow[ed] parents
to subtract children as [it] was convenient” (p. 8), and typically guilt-free due to the prevalence of it. If families kept their child, typically they grew up with a wet-nurse until “as late as seven” (p. 15) years old. While discussing the unpleasant and horrific ways history chose to ‘parent’ their children, she acknowledges the idea that at the time no one knew any better and society supported these acts. She perceives the lack of guilt to be a leading factor in their minimal child rearing, which began to change as Locke and Rousseau were introduced (p. 19).

A large topic Traig highlights is the mortality of women and children, including the dangerous, and sometimes unconventional, birthing process. Traig provides the audience with insight into the challenges she faced during pregnancy and labor. She explains how during her second pregnancy her daughter dealt with a “double ear infection” and dislocated her elbow, Traig was faced with palsy, and her husband “herniated a disc,” yet in comparison to history, she felt she was doing “pretty good” (p. 43). Traig examines the high mortality rate in the past and addresses some of the major causes. Traig enlightens the readers with the severity of overcrowded birthing areas with the example of Maria Antoinette almost being killed by her “audience of hundreds” (p. 58). She attributes crowded hospitals/birthing spaces (which she had experience with), lack of hygiene, and underqualified doctors as primary contributors.

Traig analyses the sexist gender roles involved in parenting, describing the scrutiny women have endured as mothers and daughters. She introduces historical theorists and comically critiques their male superiority complex. Though Locke and Rousseau encouraged parental involvement, Traig notes that their child rearing beliefs were male centered. Their claim that mothers were “too untrustworthy to be responsible for much more than nursing” (p. 21), situated the father as solely responsible for raising the child. Traig explains how Watson, Sackett
Haeckel, and the majority of historical theorists consisted of the one-frame mindset of women as inferior. Traig questions how the “readers ate it up, finding Watson’s approach exciting and new. But if the science was new (and wrong), the misogyny (also wrong) was old hat” (p. 97). Watson and Haeckel viewed women as less “evolved” (p. 120), whereas Sackett, according to Traig, revealed his sexism through condemning physical appearance. He advises mothers to steer clear from alcohol consumption in order to avoid weight-gain, rather than health risks of the baby. Traig inputs her personal experience growing up with these standards:

To be fair to Sackett, these guidelines were pretty standard for the time. I was born during this era, and my mother’s OB-GYN was so strict about weight gain that she always went for a haircut before her checkups, hoping it would shave off a few ounces at weigh-in. For the same reason she continued to smoke throughout my gestation, a feat she’s still proud of as, she tells me, it was really hard to fit in a full pack a day what with all the nausea. The cigarettes kept down both her weight and mine, and my mother often recommended it as an excellent method for producing easy-to-deliver babies (p. 150).

Traig acknowledges this to be the status quo at the time, but due to the contemporary morals, current parents may question how a mother could ever smoke during pregnancy and encourage others to as well.

Traig expands on the uncertainty, questioning, and anxiety parents experience everyday while raising their child. This topic seems to be the underlying theme throughout the book. Traig introduces and concludes her book by disclosing the exhaustion and anxiety she feels as a parent. Traig categorizes these insecurities as normal due to the competitive nature of human beings to be the best parents possible, or to fit the image of the ‘perfect parent.’ Traig researched the reaction to theorists’ parenting books, finding how “pediatricians reported visits from large
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numbers of anxious mothers, frantic, and confused by experts’ conflicting advice, exhausted and worried that they were doing everything wrong” (p. 98). Traig reports that parents found comfort as “Spock offered common sense advice in a wonderfully encouraging you-can-do-it tone” (p. 99). Traig discusses the difficulties she, as well as theorists, have endured with feeding children who dislike almost all food sources or are allergic to most. As Traig delves into the complicated contemporary nighttime routine, claiming “our forebears seem to have managed the whole thing with a great deal less fuss and anxiety, under far less comfortable conditions” (p. 267). Traig presumably implies that this unbearable anxiety and stress could possibly be caused by the human nature of overcomplicating tasks.

Traig incredibly tackles the intricate evolution of parenting with a witty tone that engages the audience. “Act Natural” stems from “a curiosity about what parents actually did throughout history, what they do now in other parts of the world, and why, here and now, we do what we do” (p. xii). Traig addresses parental involvement, sexist treatment of women, maternal and child mortality rates, as well as anxiety involved in parenting. Traig critiques historical theorists “lack of knowledge” (p. 82) and compares contemporary ideals using personal anecdotes along with researchers and authors. Traig evaluates the constant debate of nature and nurture associated with child behavior, leaving theorists and parents to distinguish the ‘right’ approach. Traig provides comfort to the audience through acknowledging that no one has all of the answers to parenting, especially not historical theorists, so feeling uncertainty is universal and normal.

Traig’s audience for “Act Natural” is presumably intended to reach expecting or current parents. Although, students studying in the departments of Sociology, Anthropology or Psychology, could be another targeted audience.
I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, I found “Act Natural” to be empathetic, humorous, and Traig applied cultural relativity, partially. I say partially due to Traig’s judgement of the actions of theorists and societies, especially prior to the enlightenment. Although, she also expresses understanding that past actions represented the only knowledge people knew at the time. I felt Traig’s claim that “all parenting is a history of parenting. We do what our parents did because that’s what we know; or sometimes we do what they didn’t do, because now we know better” (p. 287), to perfectly summarize parenting. I would certainly, and already have, recommend this book to anyone willing to learn.