



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

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Jennifer Traig's "Act Natural" is an encapsulation of the many difficulties and hardships faced by parents, while also serving as great insight into the many cultural and historical methods of parenting. Primarily relying on history to highlight the many mishaps parents encountered while raising their children, Traig delivers her findings on the evolution of child rearing in an informative, yet humorous manner. Using her own experiences of being a mother, Traig emphasises that raising children is no walk in the park and is often accompanied with nothing short of exhaustion. Focussing strongly on the history of Western and Medieval parenting, Traig extensively writes about the prevalence of infant and maternal mortality, alloparenting, and children's books, to name a few. Not only does Traig somewhat criticize and question past approaches to parenting, but she also recognizes that some of the techniques are actually very helpful, and still stand today with modern parenting. Traig organizes her book into ten chapters, each of which focus on different segments of parenting.

Traig talks a great deal about alloparenting, which is the practice of leaving your kids to someone else (p. 2). Alloparenting was a very common practice among many cultures, and was primarily practiced by the rich, who wanted nothing to do with their children. Raising children requires a great deal of resources, time, and attention, which is something not all parents were

willing to provide. Traig delves into the great extent that parents would go to get rid of their infants by any means possible, even if that meant death. Abandonment and infanticide were a culturally acceptable practice, as many families simply could not afford to house one more child. As for the fate of the child, there were many possibilities. Traig's use of historical facts and cultural deep dives, allows the reader to gain a pretty clear idea of just how uncertain a child's lifespan may be. Gathering research on the numerous reasons children were abandoned so often, Traig incorporates into the book the quite gruesome reality that was for countless infants.

With the use of several historical figures, and general historical research, Traig illustrates the extremely disturbing and alarming content past children's storybooks contained. Using Favell Lee Mortimer and other historical authors, Traig explains how children's books had the exact opposite effect of what they were intended to do- which was to force kids to go to sleep. Instead, these books acted as an almost deterrent for children's sleep, as they served nothing but frightening tales, and left children wide awake in bed.

Advice manuals are according to Traig, always changing, and in some cases, not the most helpful or reassuring. Traig mentions countless times the complete uselessness of past advice manuals, that ultimately led parents feeling more helpless, or that they were the problem. Traig explains how reassurance and direct advice is what parents are really looking to extract from these books, which I think many can agree on. The aim for Traig, is to sort of debunk these past manuals, and reassure readers that parental advice is always changing, and will continue to change. Just as trends come and go, so does parenting advice.

Traig talks about the history of children's sleep schedules, which proved to be quite interesting. Traig mentions that there was really no such thing as a sleep schedule for either baby

or parent. Traig explains how monophasic sleep (which society today is conditioned to practice), was actually not common, or practiced at all (p. 270). Instead, something known as polyphasic sleep was the commonality back then, and from an evolutionary perspective, served as a great benefit, as someone was always up to keep watch (pp. 270, 271). Here, Traig is tying her historical research with evolutionary explanations, that somehow make sense. Traig describes in detail, the history of putting babies to sleep, and how it is much different from how babies are put to sleep today. Traig primarily uses history to complete this chapter, by noting that sleep schedules back then were not of particular importance to parents. Traig emphasises the drastic changes that occur over time relating to the different ways babies are swaddled, put down for bed, and even where they slept. Babies had quite the adventure when it came to where they would sleep. Traig notes that eventually, babies were actually put into a basket that was attached to the outside of a window, sort of like an AC unit, and served as a cage for babies to sleep in outside in the fresh air (p. 277).

I believe the intentions of Traig when she wrote this book were many. Traig was possibly wanting to reassure current or expecting mothers (or parents), that hardships and difficulties are very common when raising children. Traig's book works to reassure readers that they are not alone with their struggles, and are quite frankly, doing much better than Medieval parents. I also believe Traig intended on sharing the very interesting history about the evolution of child rearing and parenting methods, to simply educate people. Traig also ties in her own experiences as a mother, with intentions on making her readers laugh, and to help them recognize that children can be a handful no matter what advice is taken.

As for any limitations I found with Traig's book "Act Natural," there are a couple. My main issue was that I found her chapters to be quite prolonged, often repeating the same things several

times. I felt that Traig could have expanded more on her personal experiences, rather than on pure history. I believe the book could have been much more personable if she had given some more detail on her experience as a mother, and what she did when times were particularly tough. I found her parental advice to be quite limited, and feel that since she has gone through many of the tough times of being a mother, she could have provided her readers with more advice that could possibly help a parent, sibling, or family member in need of that advice.

For areas of improvement, there were times when I thought Traig could have cut her chapters short, or not spend so many pages repeating essentially, the same topic. Although the book does serve as a great source of historical information, it could have been a lot shorter. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, I think Traig could have talked more about her experiences as a parent, while also giving her readers some advice to possibly apply to their own life.

I think anyone interested in the history of child rearing, parenting, or cultural practices pertaining to it, would find this book quite fulfilling. I also suppose it would be a great book to incorporate into any post-secondary program relating to children.

Finally, Traig's book is an excellent source of historical information pertaining to the evolution of parenting, and the methods of it. Traig's book serves as an entertaining, yet educational ensemble of the very shocking history in the adventures of parenting, and will leave her readers feeling thankful that those past "normal" parental methods, are now for the most part extinct. As for the academic audience that would be interested in reading her book, I think anyone in the discipline of history, sociology, psychology, and women's studies may find this book helpful. I found "Act Natural" to be a pretty eye-opening book that truly informed me about the somewhat violent history of parenting, and would recommend it to anyone who is interested in history.