

Modern Pregnancy: Doing It By The Book

Presented at The Motherlode:
A Celebration of Motherhood
October 26-29, 2006

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Overview

Traditionally, pregnancy guides have treated moms-to-be as human incubators and urged expectant mothers to always keep the needs of the development baby at the forefront. *Safe Counsel*—a bestselling 19th century childrearing guide—warned expectant mothers that “low spirits, violent passions, irritability, frivolity in the pregnant woman, leave indelible marks on the unborn child.”

But living up to the standards set by the pregnancy advice-givers of generations past was a cakewalk as compared to the pressures pregnant women face today. Modern moms-to-be are expected to provide the optimal womb environment from preconception onward, stick to a regular fitness regime, avoiding exposing their babies to as much as a whiff of window cleaner, kick any vices, play the part of the pregnant nymphette (or at least dress the part), and read up on everything from prenatal genetic testing to circumcision to immunization to infant stimulation so that they can make the right decisions at every critical juncture of pregnancy and motherhood. (And, of course, every juncture is critical for the modern mom-to-be and mom. That's why pregnancy month-by-month guides are increasingly sharing space with week-by-week and day-by-day guides, even though it doesn't really make sense, biologically speaking, to provide play-by-play accounts of pregnancy action much beyond the month or even the trimester level.)

This presentation will

- talk about how pregnancy books have evolved over the past century and identify some key themes and trends (e.g., from "don't trust other women" to "do what your doctor tells you" "don't trust your doctor" to "" to "trust your own intuition")

- zero in on major sub-genres in modern pregnancy guidebook publishing (the “doctor knows best” guide, the “it’s all about the fetus” guides, the “hip/cool/insider” pregnancy guide, the “pregnancy humor” pregnancy guide (both mom and dad varieties), the “momoir,” the celebrity pregnancy guide, the “dads” guide, the specialty pregnancy guide, the branded pregnancy guide (Dummies, etc.), and, of course, the What to Expect phenomenon)
- discuss trends in pregnancy publishing as a whole (magazines and online publishing in Canada and the U.S., specifically), and
- talk about how the life in the pregnancy publishing world relates to and affects life on Planet Mom
- lead a discussion on what goes into the making of a pregnancy book bestseller, circa 2006: everything you never knew about special sales, mass market sales, book blurbs, product placement, co-authoring, author credibility, and what makes or breaks a book in the fiercely competitive pregnancy/parenting category—and that has nothing at all to do with what is written on the page. This has key implications for who does and doesn’t get published and heard (given other noteworthy trends in book publishing in general) and determines what types of pregnancy information reach mothers via pregnancy books at any given time.

The Pregnant Pause (a.k.a. The Fine Print)

- It’s impossible to properly acknowledge the excellent work that has been done by other authors who have done research in the pregnancy book/motherhood advice book field, but I did try to give credit to some of those authors in my book *Canuck Chicks and Maple Leaf Mamas: Women of the Great White North: A Pop Culture History of Canadian Women* (Toronto: McArthur and Company, 2002). See www.canuckchicks.com for more about the book.
- It is impossible to mention all the pregnancy literature of the past 100 years, so I have focused on analyzing what I consider to be some representative or noteworthy works from various eras.
- And, over the course of this presentation, I will be making note of other books or categories of books that are relevant to this discussion. I have photographed my pregnancy bookshelf (which is weeded on a regular basis!) to provide a visual snapshot of the population explosion that this publishing category has enjoyed in recent years. In that way, I’ve also wound in other titles that were not specifically mentioned in the presentation. Please don’t assume that inclusion of a particular title is a personal endorsement or that exclusion implies that I don’t consider a particular title to have made a significant contribution to the history of the pregnancy book. It simply wasn’t possible to include every worthy book, due to the scope of this presentation.
- See the detailed book summary chart and the copy of the overhead slides developed for this presentation, all available for download from www.motherofallblogs.com.

PRESENTATION

How pregnancy books have evolved over the past century, both in terms of content and in terms of key themes and trends and zero in on major sub-genres in modern pregnancy guidebook publishing

Key messages that come through in pregnancy books over from 1900 to 2006, in roughly chronological order:

Don't trust yourself
Don't trust other mothers
Trust your doctor
Listen to your doctor
Your doctor knows best
Don't bother your doctor
Let your husband take care of you
Your husband may be willing to help
The vice squad has an update for you: don't do this, that, or this thing either
Permission granted: It's okay to do this, that or the next thing
Does my beehive make my butt look less fat?
Don't trust your doctor!
Mothers know best
Ask your girlfriends
Don't panic
You should be worried
Don't worry, be happy
Your doctor is the one you can trust

Major categories of pregnancy guides

- **The doctor-written pregnancy advice guide** (*Dr. Dafoe's Guidebook for Mothers, The Mayo Clinic Guide to Pregnancy*)
- **The government issued-pregnancy advice guide** (*The Canadian Mother and Child*, various editions)
- **The association-published pregnancy advice guide** (medical associations, universities, clinics, birth associations like Lamaze)
- **The branded pregnancy guide** (*Mothering, Parenting, Today's Parent, Dummies, Idiots, KISS, Unofficial, Miriam Stoddart*)
- **The series books, of which one is about pregnancy** (*Girlfriends" Guide, What to Expect, The Mother of All, Expectant Father, Pregnancy Week by Week, Sears, Ready or Not*, etc.)
- **The specialty pregnancy book addressing particular issue, audience, concern** (multiple birth, pregnancy after a loss, lesbian pregnancy, unplanned pregnancy, single motherhood, motherhood after 35, plus-sized pregnancy, pregnancy with diabetes, Canadian parents, *Mocha Manual to a Fabulous Pregnancy*)

- **The insider's guide** (*The Pregnancy Journal, Girlfriend's Guide, Hip Mama, Unofficial Guide, The Mother of All Pregnancy Books, Belly Laughs, Pregnancy Sucks, Hello—My Name is Mommy, etc.*)
- **The mother-centered pregnancy guide:** Mothers interviewing other mothers about their pregnancy experiences—either anthologies or narratives (*Pregnancy Stories, Every Pregnancy, The Mother of All Pregnancy Books*, many books by Sheila Kitzinger). Includes the pregnancy "momoir" (one woman's account of her pregnancy experiences—most cross over into early babyhood, too, see my Amazon and LibraryThing momoir tags for some examples).
- **The sociologist's/anthropologists's pregnancy guide:** Sociological/anthropological pregnancy guides that are also a mainstream pregnancy guide (Sheila Kitzinger)
- **The "do I really want to have a baby" pre-pregnancy guide**
- **The preconception health guide**
- **The fetal development guide:** may be all about the fetus, although some like *A Child is Born* (1970) also discussed the mother's experience of pregnancy.
- **The birth guide** (focus is specifically on birth or birth preparation, and many are specifically aligned with a particular childbirth education school of thought)
- **The psychological/emotional preparation guide and personal/spiritual growth** (*The Woman's Comfort Guide* and *The Spirit of Pregnancy*)
- **The postpartum guide**
- **The pregnancy nutrition guide**
- **The pregnancy fitness guide**
- **The midwifery/doula guide** (*The Birth Partner, The Doula Book*)
- **The holistic/alternative/integrative guide:** guides that take a non-mainstream health approach.
- **The dad guide** (*The Expectant Father, The Bloke's Guide to Pregnancy*)
- **The pregnancy organizer:** Pregnancy organizers, journals, diaries, calendars (print and electronic) galore (*The Pregnancy Journal* by A. Christine Harris)
- **Month-by-month, week-by-week, and day-by-day guides**

Note: Professor Kerry Daly of the Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph has some noteworthy things to say about families and time: "Families Living in a Hurried Culture" <http://www.vifamily.ca/library/cft/faster.html>. He points out that the family's cycle—birth and death, at its most extreme—isn't always compatible with modern ideas about time and time management, as epitomized by time tools like the organizer, planner. And now there are now pregnancy day-by-day guides, too.

Trends in pregnancy publishing as a whole (magazines and online publishing in Canada and the U.S., specifically)

What's included in guides changes with the times

- Knitting patterns (*Canadian Mother and Child*, 1947)

- Cleanliness obsession (*Canadian Mother and Child*, 1970)
- Good posture as a cure for PPD (*Canadian Mother and Child*, 1970)
- Hairdos to disguise "the Bump" (*Pregnancy Notebook*, 1972)
- Mind-blowing pregnancy advice (*A Motherhood Book*, 1974)

The tug of war for control over the pregnant woman's mind/body/trust continues to the present day. At first, it was motivated by the medical establishment's desire for control over the mom-to-be. While that is still a strong theme in pregnancy books to this day, the commercialization of pregnancy and motherhood is an ever more powerful force.

Background:

It's astounding how long it took for the women's health revolution to get going, but when it got going, things really changed fast. 1970 to 1979 editions of *The Canadian Mother and Child* might as well have been different books. In her 1990 book *Every Pregnancy*, Helen McKinnon Doan does a terrific job of explaining how the women's movement in general changed the pregnancy world. Consumers stopped treating doctors as gods.

Pre-1980s: Your doctor knows best, period. Don't even go there.

1980s: a time of asking questions, challenging the medical establishment, introducing new ideas about the sociology and anthropology of birth (influence of the work of Michel Odent in France) and the work of Penny Simkins and Marshall Klaus and others here in North America about doula support during labor and the postpartum and care of the newborn. *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (1984) becomes a pregnancy bestseller because it is both reassuring to the medical establishment and because it's month-by-month format is highly appealing to mothers.

1990s: pregnancy books become more fun and more readable; some conservative books remain, but they seem highly dated; there are an unbelievable number of choices: week-by-week guides, dads' guides, humorous guides are selling well.

Today

A 500,000+-channel parenting universe made up of magazines, zines, magalogs, television shows, show-length infomercials, websites, blogs, books, booklets, and "media as yet to be invented".

Amazon.com: 96,151 books under pregnancy (some would be novels, etc., but that didn't include related searches for baby, maternity, etc.)

There is

- Consolidation and fierce competition between the top leading brands

- Consolidation and fierce competition in other parenting media/marketing (TV shows, consumer trade shows targeted at parents,
- Exclusivity clauses and provisions (informal or otherwise) that decide whose voices are going to be heard in particular media and through particular media outlets.

It's getting increasingly difficult to simply write books or articles or otherwise try to change the world for mothers. Motherhood is big business and that business is increasingly cut-throat.

How the life in the pregnancy publishing world relates to and affects life on Planet Mom

The idea that there's money to be made in "the mom market" can spill over to competition between moms, especially with all the pitches being targeted to moms about starting "mom businesses." Anyone can have one, those reassuring ads tell you, featuring two friends chatting over coffee. And now that there are more bills and hubby's raise didn't come through, shouldn't you be doing everything you can do to make a buck?

If women felt that their pregnancy was being intruded on by strangers in generations past, there's no longer any question of that now. Pregnancy is a commodity, for sale, like motherhood itself. Pregnancy is for sale! Everything about it, from preconception through postpartum. If it's the ultimate adventure, the mother of all trips, you've got to have the souvenirs. And since everyone's convinced there's so much you don't know (either your doctor's not telling you something, your girlfriends aren't telling you the wrong stuff, or there's something you desperately need to know to keep your baby safe). Is it coincidental that we're living in scary times?

There are also companies that specialize in the mom market: media, marketing, copywriting—getting inside moms' heads. They know how to sell us products by playing on that vulnerable spot that relates to new mom identity. Am I a mom or a woman? Am I still sexy? Do I smell like baby puke?

What goes into the making of a pregnancy book bestseller, circa 2006? everything you never knew about special sales, mass market sales, book blurbs, product placement, co-authoring, author credibility, and what makes or breaks a book in the fiercely competitive pregnancy/parenting category—and that has nothing at all to do with what is written on the page. This has key implications for who does and doesn't get published and heard (given other noteworthy trends in book publishing in general) and determines what types of pregnancy information reach mothers via pregnancy books at any given time.

- Publisher consolidation, media consolidation, and bookstore consolidation all have implications for what books do and do not get published.
- Book marketing: special sales (is this book safe/conservative enough to appeal to corporate partners?), mass market sales (is the price point low enough to encourage mass market retailers to carry the book), book blurbs (is the author tapped into the mom establishment?), book excerpts (will "the right publications" run excerpts?) product placement (pay for display), co-authoring (do we need to hedge this author's credibility with a co-author?), author credibility (what do moms know about pregnancy anyway?). Big books get the marketing clout.
- Who gets heard? Doctors, celebrities, and mothers with a platform. May get published by smaller publishing companies with poorer distribution and poorer publicity. If bookstores don't see good turnover on a title, books get returned. Brandable author.
- Bookstore consolidation means that purchasing decisions are made by fewer buyers. Increasingly, they are relying on electronic data to make those purchasing decisions.
- Pregnancy book giveaways affect what else gets purchased/read by pregnant women, if anything. (If your doctor gives you a free pregnancy book, you may not see the need to purchase another one. Your doctor ends up choosing your pregnancy book for you.) Some books that have been used as freebies by life insurance companies, health insurers, doctors' offices, and others interested in the pregnant consumer include *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, *From Here to Maternity*, *Pregnant and Lovin' It*, and *The Mayo Clinic Guide to Pregnancy and Baby's First Year*.
- Branded books and books with special sales opportunities are much more saleable today. Pregnancy books used as giveaways by health insurance companies, life insurance companies in the large and lucrative US market. These are risk averse companies drawn to safe/conservative titles. This simple fact of business affects the types of messages women receive about pregnancy/birth.
- Pregnancy and baby magazines want to carry columns and articles written by authors whose bylines readers will recognize or who have exclusivity arrangements with their media outlets. This can lead to a further dissemination of messages by the same authors.
- Infant formula companies have a particularly keen interest in reaching 2nd and 3rd trimester moms, so there is high crossover in the pregnancy/baby market in all media. Publishers and media outlets and baby product

manufacturers of all types all want to retain that carefully won mom customer.

- Pregnancy paranoia: fear is a powerful tool for selling books and other related products. It's one of the cornerstones of the mom marketing industry – negative marketing. Create a problem or an incentive to do something about a perceived problem and you've created a market for a product. New mom paranoia (about her body, her baby, her relationship with her partner, who she is a person/woman) is another lucrative market, of course.

The Anxious Parent's Guide to Pregnancy
Pregnancy Do's and Don'ts
Don't Panic! Pregnancy Book
The Panic-Free Pregnancy: An Ob-Gyn Separates Fact from Fiction on Food, Exercise, Travel, Pets, Coffee, Medications and Other Concerns You Have When You Are Expecting
Fearless Pregnancy: Wisdom and Reassurance From a Doctor, a Midwife and a Mom

Note: Two recent pregnancy book titles also indicate that the medical establishment is eager to uphold its reputations as "the leading experts in women's health care."

The Panic-Free Pregnancy: An Ob-Gyn Separates Fact from Fiction on Food, Exercise, Travel, Pets, Coffee, Medications and Other Concerns You Have When You Are Expecting
Your Pregnancy & Birth: Information You Can Trust from the Leading Experts in Women's Health Care (ACOG)

Conclusion

- **Some pregnancy books published years ago contained some surprisingly modern messages.**
- **Some books being published today are still perpetuating messages that should have died out around the time of the beehive hairdo.**
- **Some pregnancy books were very much a sign of their times and should be celebrated as such.**

The good news: moms can work together to spread the word about books that they truly value, either informally or through more formal book publicity channels like MotherTalk, the burgeoning number of online spaces targeting moms,

