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Book Review: Conception Diary: Thinking about Pregnancy and Motherhood

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Conception Diary: Thinking about Pregnancy and Motherhood. Susan Hogan. 2006. Sheffield: Eilish Press. 196 pp. (+ iv and Notes). £ 20.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by: Stacy Lockerbie¹

Susan Hogan's *Conception Diary: Thinking about Pregnancy and Motherhood* is an intimate, non-fiction account of a woman's struggle to balance an academic career and a family while trying to conceive a third child. As the title suggests, it is a cross section of ideas related to pregnancy and motherhood brought to the reader through a variety of personal thoughts and a commentary of happenstance encounters on the subject. Hogan follows a mix of media sources such as the popular television shows *Sex and the City*, and *Friends*; and monitors well read UK news sources such as the *Observer* and the *Guardian* in order to capture representations of motherhood in British popular culture. She astutely asks her readers to consider whether media representations of motherhood are accurate or achievable when the children of television characters are absent in most plotlines. Where can one find female professional role models? The diary records Hogan's reactions to these sources and recounts her own experiences in a manner that is personal and informative, entertaining and yet serious.

Through daily entries, her account traverses many issues troubling contemporary feminist theory such as: infertility, pregnancy loss, legal rights of fathers and the ambiguity of reproductive technology. The language is clear and accessible and therefore brings these issues out of the academy and back to the women who experience them. Hogan's unbridled honesty is particularly enjoyable. It is a snap shot into her private thoughts and personal matters, material so often undisclosed that nonetheless affects so many women. Akin to the recent movement of authors speaking out on the previously silenced issue of miscarriage (Layne 2003, Berger Gross 2006), her diary has the potential to connect women deeply concerned about postponed childbirth with the hope of envisioning a space to pursue the seemingly competing goals of both a career and a family.

As a scholar in cultural studies, her personal narrative insightfully touches on many issues that mark the cultural milieu and the changing social environment of pregnancy in the UK. In the age of in vitro-fertilization and prenatal screening, Hogan notes how she hesitated to give her friend Sarah the 'yellow newborn cardigan' she bought to celebrate her pregnancy "until after she's had the tests or even after she's had the baby" (2006:149). This alludes to the rise in use of prenatal screening, the new understanding of pregnancies as "tentative" (Rothman 1993, Mitchell & Georges 1998), and the medical imperative of pregnancy that sets childbirth as a dangerous or risky activity (Martin 1992). Such medicalization is captured in a dialogue between her and three other mothers: "the conversation turned to episiotomies, induced labour (how the contractions are particularly painful because of induction) and caesarean section. With eight children between us, only one of the births had been relatively painless and free of medical intervention..." (2005:3).

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In addition, in her reaction to a news article that suggests it is “okay to give up work and become a full time mother” (2006:150) Hogan alludes to the shift of motherhood in terms of social class in the UK. Stay-at-home mothers were once thought of as lower class, uneducated and the antithesis to feminist ideals as women became empowered from entering the workforce. The current environment is such that women work out of economic necessity rather than empowerment; choosing to refrain from work has become a prized and desirable position usually reserved for the elite who can afford to live off one income. This raises interesting questions for contemporary feminism and points to the significance in social economic status when it comes to the question of how motherhood is constructed in the West.

While the genre of the memoir is quite promising as a tool for uniting feminists, and inspiring action, I find the tone of this particular diary to be rather bleak. Hogan, for example, ends on a melancholy note, stating:

The reality of today is that women cannot compete with men in the workplace, or in the public sphere in general, unless they are childless. In the present climate you have got to be able to work unsocial hours, or be prepared to move and take up opportunities in another town, or country, for advancement: ‘to relocate’ and how many women can drag around two or three or four children and a spouse? The answer is not many (2006:196).

Her word choice throughout the text mirrors this sense of defeat. She uses negative language such as “failed pregnancy” despite the successful conception of two healthy children and her esteemed position as a reader at the University of Derby. Rare hopeful moments, where she expresses a love of motherhood in reaction to what she claims is “a time when it’s only fashionable to write about detesting motherhood” (2006:130), are overwhelmingly countered by her focus on barriers to gender equality rather than possibility. In this way, she does not stand out against the realm of writing she is reacting to but becomes yet another story of how childbirth holds women back in the public sphere until it is entirely too late to conceive. A subtext to this story reflects her disenchantment with the academy, and her self-publication seems to confirm this impression. *The Conception Diary* is the first publication of her own publishing company, Eilish publishing. It appears that it was named after her daughter Eilish, whom she mentions frequently in her diary entries. I am curious as to why she chose to self publish when clearly editorial advice from an established publishing company would have been beneficial to this piece. Surely a personal journey through the doubts of a late pregnancy is unconventional, but it has the potential to be quite powerful had she done it well. It is conceivable that self publication was used as a method to avoid the usual rigours of publication, a process, as her diary reveals, which was not going smoothly.

Also problematic is the inconsistent writing style that makes it unclear who her audience is. In some cases it is a diary, written to her, while other cases it seems to be educational rather than confessional. She describes CVS (Chorionic Villus Sampling) to her readership and explains details of her relationships to others in a way that is unnecessary if she were truly writing to herself. A diary written and later published (see Malinowsky 1989) is different than a diary used as a literary tool to convey specific ideas

to an audience. This brings me to my concerns about protecting the identity of those included in her entries. In anthropology, it is of utmost importance to conceal the identity of people we write about because of the vulnerability of the lives we study. Although I recognize that this is a different form of scholarship entirely and that the tenets of anthropology are not necessarily applicable here, the story she writes of is not entirely her own but also that of many people around her. She names the publishing company who rejected her manuscript, writes unfavourably of her former mother-in-law (a Google search identifies her as the late anthropologist Mary Douglas), and openly discusses the eating disorder of her former au pair. If this were truly her diary, any exclusion of details would strip away the rawness and authenticity of her musings; however, given that it seems to be written as an educational tool, the incorporation of these details is unnecessary and even uncomfortable.

The nature of the writing style, which switches uneasily between personal diary (complete with private details) and what appears to be an instrument to educate the readership about the difficult choices concerning motherhood faced by professional women, makes the book's goals confusing at best. Is it an educational tool? Or is it a public catharsis? Or is it both? *The Conception Diary* begins with an entry on February 25th, 2003 without an introduction, or preface, a place where she could orient the readers of her goals in writing this diary and describe the choices she made in deciding what to include/exclude from her narration. Perhaps I might have overlooked the questions of anonymity had she explained her decision to include such details. As it is, I am left questioning: did she ask permission from others to include their stories? Are there details she decided to leave out? Moreover, it is difficult task for me as, a reviewer, to ascertain whether she met the intended goals of writing this piece when there is no stated indication of her objectives, an omission that I find both frustrating and disorientating.

Despite the limitations of this work as an academic endeavour, I commend Susan Hogan for her bravery in writing such a bold and honest piece about issues that are often removed from public conversation. When research participants are so willing to share their stories, it is refreshing to see an academic take such a vulnerable role and disclose her own story. I hope that other women will follow suit and that we continue to see others write in such open and revealing ways.

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