

Afterbirth

Chitra Ramaswamy

When my son was a few weeks old I started writing my first book. My milk came in and, finally, so did the words. I started to write, as Hélène Cixous put it, in the white ink of my milk. Neither came easy at first, but a decade on I wonder if the difficulty, the frustration, the tenderness, and the damn constraints were what birthed the book. That I wrote not in spite of the pram in the hall, but because of it.

So. There was this baby. The same one, I had to keep reminding myself in the hospital as I was confronted with the belly still mountaining before me, who roiled in there for nine months. Here he was with his elegant fingers, wise face, and my father's nose, and yet still, in so many ways, still there, roiling in my womb. He was an internal organ that I carried around on my soft, leaking, also new person. He was an independent creature with his own bodily functions, which were produced by mine. He was a person, already.

There he lay, arms and legs of his sleep suit trailing off his mini-limbs, snuffling on his back at the foot of the Moses basket. Sorry... *Moses basket?! Yes.* The bed where the baby

(theoretically) sleeps is still, in the culture in which I gave birth, named after the Old Testament story of Moses, the infant left by his mother (in an act of protection not abandonment) in a wicker basket amongst the bulrushes of the River Nile. The language given to you by history when you are handed the baby is not just inadequate, it is often archaic. And without thinking much at all about it, I used it. I put the baby in the Moses basket. (Then, as history also dictates, he started crying so I took him out again.)

Throughout my pregnancy I had been thinking about the book I might write and so *Expecting*, a book of curious, digressive essays, grew in my mind in tandem with the foetus fattening in my belly. I couldn't write it, no, I was too busy with its subject, but I did start to read.

What did I find? At first, very little. And as for books telling the stories of black, brown, and queer expectant and mothering bodies – which is to say, mine – even less. There was no Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* nor Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*. No Jacqueline Rose's *Mothers*, Claire Kilroy's *Soldier, Sailor*, or Olga Ravn's *My Work*. Elena Ferrante's Neopolitan Novels had not yet been translated and published in the UK. Avni Doshi hadn't written *Burnt Sugar*. Sheila Heti hadn't written *Motherhood*. Prescription was the order of the day in pregnancy and birth literature. Being told what to expect when you're expecting seemed to mean being told what to do. There were exceptions but it is not easy to be an exception, which I would find out myself soon enough. If you are seen at all, and most likely you won't be, you will be misunderstood, laden with responsibilities that aren't

yours, and punished. *A Life's Work* by Rachel Cusk was a tender, frank, and courageous psychological study, but look at the viciously misogynistic backlash with which it was met.

The foetus kept doing his thing, and I did mine. I read Sylvia Plath, Sharon Olds, Hélène Cixous, Margaret Atwood, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kathleen Jamie, and, always and forever, Toni Morrison. Then, casting the net more widely, Leo Tolstoy, Nan Shepherd, Shakespeare, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I became increasingly struck by how little I knew about what was happening to me, month by month. How little I understood the silences breeding across centuries. Silences in which my book would also, unsurprisingly, be engulfed.

Mothering is a practical business. So, too, is writing. When I wrote *Expecting*, I was new to both roles, figuring things out at the level of the baby and the sentence. As I wrote the foetus in question transitioned from newborn to toddler. He crawled. He walked. He spoke. He jumped. He spun things. He tried to pluck the moon from the sky.

I took voluntary redundancy from my full-time job as a journalist and with the money bought the gift which all mothers are desperate to be given. Time. (You can't, unless you're really loaded, buy sleep.) I looked after the baby and wrote. I paid a childminder to look after the baby and wrote. I jettisoned the advice to sleep while the baby slept – I never was any good at taking advice or sleeping during the day – and wrote. I wrote straight after feeds when the baby was sated, opening my laptop with buzzing breasts

and brain. (Letdown is a very electric feeling.) I wrote on park benches, one hand tapping the black glass of a tablet, the other pushing the buggy back and forth in the unending project to keep the baby sleeping. I wrote instead of taking a shower. I wrote on the sofa while the baby lay in his jungle gym, opening and closing his fat fishmouth hands at the mirrors dangling on strings. I wrote as though my life, by which I mean my sense of self, depended on it. Which, in a way, it did.

A memoir is a document of the times as well as a life. Rereading *Expecting*, I am struck by all that has happened, so much of it detrimental to women's bodily autonomy, in the intervening years. Here in the UK, where I birthed and was birthed, the number of women dying during pregnancy or soon after childbirth has reached its highest level in almost twenty years. Asian women are twice as likely to die than white women during pregnancy or soon after birth. Black women are three times more likely. In Italy the right-wing government has ordered state agencies to cease registration of children born to same-sex couples, effectively removing mothers from their children's birth certificates. Maternal death rates are rising again in many countries and in 2020, a woman died every two minutes from preventable causes related to pregnancy. And on June 24, 2022, the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, ending the federal right to an abortion. Twenty-one US states have since banned or restricted abortion. The time for writing the stories of our bodies, for fighting with and for them with all the tools at our disposal – our words, our feet, our votes – more than ever, is now.

I wanted *Expecting* to be a deeply political book. When I wrote it I was invested in the intimate story I was telling being both particular and universal. My womb, but also everywomb. It mattered to me, hugely, that I didn't explicitly explain, label, or, by association, justify the identity of the body doing the writing. This was not the story of a brown, bisexual, leftwing, feminist, second-generation pregnancy. This was the story of *my* pregnancy. I wanted to seize the narrative for myself. I wanted to hit the ground running, write without explaining why I was here or what I was up to, just like any so-called majority writer unthinkingly does. I was influenced by the way Toni Morrison wrote her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and Alan Hollinghurst wrote *The Swimming Pool Library*. Not 'Look, this is how people like us live' but 'Come, join me, I admit you into my confidence'. I wanted the sociopolitical, historical, racial, and patriarchal structures of my specific situation to breathe through every single hard-won line. I still want all these things, but we are now living in a time when being explicit about what you mean is also important. So to nail my rainbow colours to the mast, when I write 'pregnant woman', 'woman', 'mother', or 'motherhood' in *Expecting*, I include anyone who includes themselves in this description, and lives, and births, in its confines, hazards, shadows, and liberations. Mothering, like gender (and writing!), is in the doing of it. It is more verb than noun. And there have always been so many of us labouring unnoticed at its coalface.

I am struck all over again by what I did not know. Not about pregnancy and birth but as Sontag called it, the night side of life. Illness, and death. In the same decade I became a mother, I lost a mother. *My* mother. The one who made me. So I notice now, with some

discomfort, that when I wrote about death in *Expecting* it tended to be as a theoretical counter to birth. Metaphorical only. How could it have been otherwise? I had not been forced to look directly at death itself.

Nor, indeed, had I seen motherhood. The moment that probably touches me the most is the sole appearance of my son at the close of the penultimate essay, 'throwing cushions to the floor and running fire engines up the arms of the sofa.' What I also didn't know when I wrote those words, but was starting to strongly suspect, was that he, the foetus forever sealed in the womb of this book, was autistic. That life would look nothing like I thought it would. That it would be harder, better, and much less (and, okay, sometimes more) frightening than I could have imagined. That four years later, almost to the day, his sister would be born, turning me into one of those insufferable women who say giving birth was the happiest day of their life. That more life, and death, would happen. That we would be okay. That it really would be a beginning, after all.

<https://saraband.net/sb-title/expecting/>

Chitra Ramaswamy

Chitra Ramaswamy is a journalist and author. Her first book, *Expecting: The Inner Life of Pregnancy* (Saraband, 2016, 2024), won the Saltire First Book of the Year Award and was shortlisted for the Polari Prize. Her latest book, *Homelands: The History of a Friendship* (Canongate, 2022) is a work of creative non-fiction exploring her friendship with the 99-year-old German Jewish refugee Henry Wuga. It won the Saltire Non-Fiction Book of the Year and was included in The Guardian's top memoirs and biographies of 2022. She has contributed essays to *Antlers of Water*, *Nasty Women*, *The Freedom Papers*, *The Bible* and *Message from the Skies* and recently completed a commission from the Alasdair Gray Archive. She writes for *The Guardian*, is the restaurant critic for *The Times Scotland*, and broadcasts for BBC radio.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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