

Book Review

Like a Mother: A Feminist Journey through the Science and Culture of Pregnancy. (2018). Angela Garbes. New York: Harper Wave by Harper-Collins Publishers. ISBN: 9780062662941

Like a Mother, a book by Angela Garbes, is a must-read for all women who have never been pregnant, are considering pregnancy, are currently pregnant, have been pregnant, or for any individual who interacts with women pre- and perinatally. Although the subtitle of the book states, “A feminist journey through the science and culture of pregnancy,” it is so much more than that. *Like a Mother* provides rich historical information about the placenta, episiotomies, the medical language of people who miscarry, breast milk, breastfeeding, pelvic floor changes from pregnancy, women’s healthcare and medical practice. The book also reminds women of the importance of knowing all about their own bodies and how that knowledge empowers and reassures them that any changes their bodies undergo during this radical transformation should not to be overlooked or dismissed. Drastic pregnancy-induced changes should be respected and valued, not disregarded, ignored or belittled.

Like a Mother challenges the traditionally male-dominated medical community’s paternalistic instructions provided to women during pregnancy. Garbes includes information throughout each section about the health inequities experienced by women of color, not only during pregnancy but also in healthcare outcomes. She provides research support that is antagonistic to common pregnancy advice offered to women on the internet and in pregnancy guides. Garbes even discusses the historical phasing out of midwives by the medical community and the subservience of women in various healthcare roles. Throughout the book, she weaves in historical context and feminist support, permitting women to nod their heads in agreement despite confusing pregnancy advice.

Like a Mother reads like a novel, or a favorite aunt telling a story where we all gather around the table and laugh out loud as she weaves through the unfolding story of her pregnancy. She not only includes her own stories, but her friends’ stories, backed up with research. She begins the book by discussing what the book is not, in that she explains it is not meant to be a pregnancy guide or a how to manual. She elaborates on her own thirst for learning about her own experiences in the nuances of

pregnancy and how she searched for real answers from experts. Yet, she was still left with unanswered questions.

Garbes claims that pregnancy information is often conflicting and is not always backed up by science. There are a plethora of pregnancy manuals, guides, and books that are loaded with opinions and contradictions. She describes searching the internet for advice on pregnancy as a self-fulfilling prophecy, explaining that individuals can find varied information on the internet or in pregnancy guidebooks depending on what they are looking for. If one is looking for a home birth, they will find a host of information on the internet describing the horrors of a hospital birth. If one is looking for information related to the safety of a hospital birth compared to a home birth, then one would find an excess of facts and data on the internet describing the horrors of a home birth. By the time she unfurls her search for knowledge about her own pregnancy, the reader understands the rationale for writing this book. *Like a Mother*, for me, filled the gap of missing knowledge related to all things about pregnancy.

I found myself fascinated by so many aspects of the book. For example, there is an entire section dedicated to the placenta. Garbes describes the placenta as the “least understood organ,” the most overlooked and often regarded as a “footnote” or “afterthought” in reproductive health. She describes the makeup of the placenta with fascination and awe and provides details on the physical aspects of the placenta with terms like “grisly, raw, meaty, and gnarly.” Garbes emphasizes how important placental function is for the baby as well as for overall women’s health.

Garbes infuses humor, curiosity, and devout admiration of women’s bodies throughout the book. *Like a Mother* is empowering because she describes the female body almost as a masterpiece, and never insults what occurs before, during, and after pregnancy. Her conversation about breastfeeding is forgiving and totally nonjudgmental. For those who just cannot make breastfeeding work, she understands and empathizes. She accepts and describes how challenging it is and how women need eight hours a day to successfully breastfeed in the first month after birth. Garbes provides her own challenges with breastfeeding and the frustrations of her friends. She discusses how our culture makes women feel inadequate for not breastfeeding and how we do not encourage women to choose their own path.

Like a Mother also confronts many scientific assumptions about miscarriage and rebuts cultural nuances for how women accept miscarriages and how people react with thoughtless comments after a woman miscarries. Her compassion makes one feel less isolated and less alone in their fears or concerns. She does not moralize pregnancy advice such as drinking a glass of wine when pregnant. Instead, she challenges superimposed rules about alcohol consumption in pregnancy and backs up the assumptions with scientific studies related to alcohol use.

Garbes offers a fresh and reassuring viewpoint of the drastic transformation to the pelvic floor experienced by many after pregnancy. She discusses the “hot burning” pain and hip discomfort she experienced for over a year after delivery. In the very personal dialogue of this intense pain, she covers the awkward embarrassment of discussing its impact on her during the six week post-delivery exam with her healthcare provider. Garbes describes this simple 20 minute postpartum visit for women as if they are an “underserved population” as women’s complaints or aches and pains are grossly overlooked and rarely evaluated even though pelvic floor disorders are a relatively common postpartum occurrence.

Garbes then expounds on the lack of cultural support in the United States for women after delivery and explains how other cultures support the mother after delivery as they allow women to “rest and replenish broken bodies.” In American culture, women often feel pressured to return to the workplace to earn money so they are not left behind. She provides cultural and historical context for supporting postpartum women as they transition through monumental physical changes. Her willingness to expose her own vulnerability and that of other women who have suffered from pelvic floor disorders normalizes a subject that is not well-known and reassures us that yes, indeed, many women’s issues are often dismissed and overlooked.

I felt like Garbes was an old friend by the end of the book. She discussed the events surrounding pregnancy in ways I have never read before, and I have been a nurse for over 30 years. She teaches admiration and respect for our bodies and acceptance of the biological and physical changes women go through as they age. *Like a Mother* is equally storytelling, educational, and informative with a scientific twist into the history of maternal child health, medical practice, and pregnancy.

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