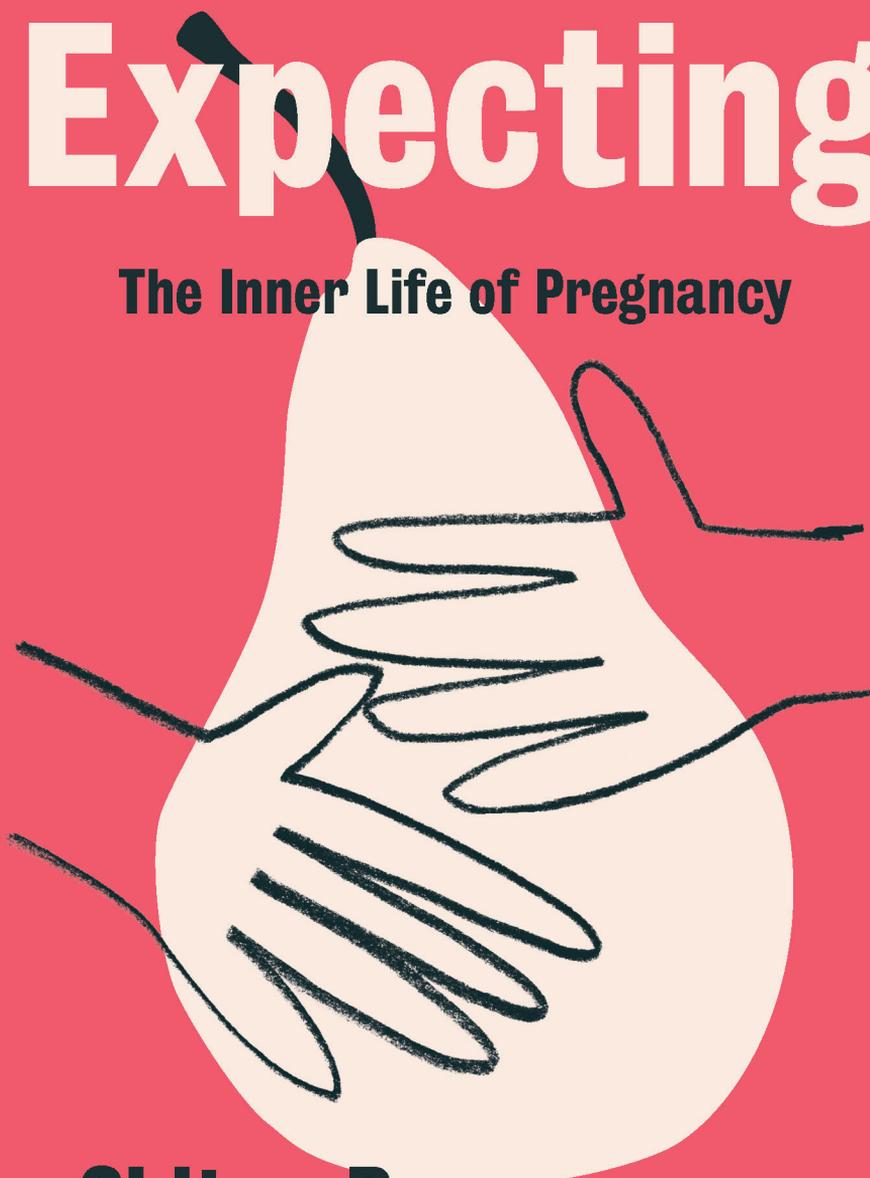


**'Immediately, poignantly, gripping
... magnificent'**

Zoe Williams, *Guardian*

Expecting

The Inner Life of Pregnancy



Chitra Ramaswamy

Expecting

The Inner Life
of Pregnancy



**Chitra
Ramaswamy**

Saraband 

One

November

But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!

The Awakening, Kate Chopin

An unremarkable Sunday morning in November. A noir-ish time of year when nature's reel turns monochrome and the world becomes as smudged as old newsprint. Sombre November, as TS Eliot called it. The last gasps of another year. On the morning dog walk the leaves were pockmarked from an excess of autumn and had lost their florid complexion. They were beginning to blacken now and stick to my shoes as though slick with a thin layer of oil. It was the eleventh month of the year, though *Novem* means nine for it was the ninth month in the Roman calendar. Nine months. A clue dropped by a season, like so many leaves.

And so with all this promise of death I found myself taking a test proposing life. A frightening test, though perhaps there is no other kind. A test taken by oneself in the privacy of one's own bathroom towards the end of another year. A test whose result is revealed not by a mark on a page but by a stream of one's own bog-standard urine. A test for which there are only two results. Either life is there, burrowing in a place as close to you as your own heartbeat yet as mysterious as the inside of a mountain, or it is not and life, the other kind, goes on. How very simple. And how brutal too.

Expecting

Like however many millions of women before me and who knows how many in tandem, I squatted, hovered, took aim and waited for a blue cross to materialise in a tiny window of possibility. I had done this a few times in my life. In Glasgow in my early twenties when my partner at the time had just moved to London and I felt vengeful and very alone. The result? Relief. Or more recently in Soho, in one of the new breed of budget design hotels characterised by receptions without people and rooms without windows. That time? Disappointment. On both these occasions, the result had been negative. Life, the other kind, had gone on.

This time was different and as is often the case with major moments, I knew before I knew. I had eaten oysters twice in the previous week – unusual in itself and almost wilful in retrospect – and felt seasick as each sup slid down my throat. I had drunk whisky, smoked roll-ups and sung along to the Proclaimers in Edinburgh's The Port O' Leith, which in its own salty way is no less glamorous than sipping Bellinis in Venice or going for bagels in New York. The Porty, as it's known to locals, is an icon of Leith on my street, with its skew-whiff nautical decor and rousing nightly rendition of 'Sunshine on Leith' when last orders are called. But instead of feeling the euphoria that comes from belting out 'sorrroooooowwww' with the bonfire of Laphroaig on my breath and the scent of the Firth of Forth on the air, I felt jittery. Five days previously, there had been a small rusty mark on a pair of pants, a question mark written in blood. It was enough of a hint for me.

And yet I had cause to doubt what is known in the business of trying to conceive – and one soon discovers that it is first and foremost a business – as an implantation bleed. That is, the moment when the ball of cells that goes by the dramatic name of a blastocyst burrows into the wall of the uterus, the

most minuscule of plants taking root and making the ground shed tears of blood in response. Little blastocyst blasting its way into the world, so small and uncertain it has yet even to become embryonic.

My partner and I had been trying to make this everyday miracle happen for almost eighteen months. It had not been easy for us. We were two women for a start. The story was the kind of romantic comedy that would never get made, with all the madcap races across cities and highly charged encounters in hotel rooms you might expect. Stories that were good for dinner parties but bad for life. We had already done so much. Our preparation had been flawless; all we lacked was an outcome.

To start, a civil partnership to ensure we would both be the parents of a baby that might never be, a leap of faith that no heterosexual couple is required to make. Bizarrely, this needed to take place not just before birth but before conception, making the most private of acts a matter of public interest from the outset. And so it went on. Three donors and three corresponding excruciating encounters up and down the country. Home insemination kits bought off websites with deflating names like prideangel and fertilityzone. Blood tests at the GP's to ensure I was fertile. Dispiriting monthly trips to buy yet more ovulation tests, cruelly addictive (and expensive) little sticks that so resembled pregnancy tests I began to feel dumbly thrilled when they showed up positive. Then a growing obsession with donor profiles on international cryobank sites, where you can buy sperm by the syringe and have it delivered to you in a hissing nitrogen tank, which if nothing else sounds like the birth of a post-modern superhero. And finally, a number of exchanges in a series of hotels with neither windows nor souls.

Expecting

Every month, these brief encounters grew at once more workaday and strange. They began to gain an air of desperation, of waning passion and lost faith, sentiments that afflict most clandestine hotel trysts in the end. And the fact was they weren't working. Like November, we remained sombre, in limbo, aching for our lives to turn Technicolor, to end and begin again. The frustration that comes when your body refuses to submit to your will grew exponentially, fattening like the foetus it seemed would never be. Meanwhile, I grew increasingly defiant towards my own flesh and blood. I knew my body less and less with each passing month, just as we slowly grow to see a partner we no longer love as a stranger. To fail to get pregnant when one badly wants to is to engage in the most treacherous kind of battle: with one's own innards. We can no more will a baby into our bodies than we can draw an illness out of them.

Now I waited once more. Watched the beads of condensation on the cistern as they trembled, brimmed over and wept. Listened to the pigeon that had taken up residence outside our bathroom window for much of the autumn cooing with the persistence of a clock. Pictured Claire, my partner of eight years, a few feet away in the sitting room with the dog curled at her feet, waiting too. Witnessed the world distil itself, telescoped by anticipation into a chain of beautiful moments. Like words, life has a way of becoming poetry when slowed down.

You must wait three minutes before reading a pregnancy test. The length of a pop song or an ad break. During this time I found myself feigning nonchalance for the benefit of no one but myself, imagining a camera lens hovering above my head as we do when we sense something monumental is afoot. I left the bathroom, paced our hall, allowed myself a Hitchcockian moment of suspense with all its long shadows

and discordant strings, and then returned to the scene on which the plot of my life suddenly hinged. Finally I allowed myself a close-up. There it was. The revelation I had been imagining for so long. A moment not entirely unlike the adverts on television with their staunchly white couples flashing white teeth against white backgrounds, making fertility look oddly sterile, as innocent as ordering a salad for lunch. The vertical line was a little less significant than the horizontal, but it was a blue cross nonetheless. And beside it, an idiot's guide to deciphering the message. + = pregnant. - = not pregnant. A turning point, the kind that is mammoth enough to be experienced twice. First as raw moment, all heartbeat and terror. Second as story: dramatised, edited and reconstructed even as it unfolds.

'I'm a riddle in nine syllables,' wrote Sylvia Plath in her 1959 poem 'Metaphors'. Nine syllables. Nine lines. Nine months. The arc of pregnancy, with its triptych of trimesters, is as meticulously structured as a poem. Though, of course, one cannot break free of the conventions of pregnancy. There is no way to subvert its stanzas. Plath wrote these blackly humorous lines that peter out into quiet desperation when she was pregnant with her first child, Frieda. Six months after Frieda's birth on 1 April at home in London, Plath published her first collection of poetry, *The Colossus*. The birth of her baby marked her birth as a poet, but in many ways it was also the beginning of her death. Pregnancy symbolised Plath's own gestating consciousness, dark and wild, which she feared would consume her in the end. 'I have a fear, too, of bearing a deformed child,' she wrote years earlier in her journal of 1956, 'a cretin, growing dark and ugly in my belly, like that old corruption I always feared would break out from behind the bubbles of my eyes.'