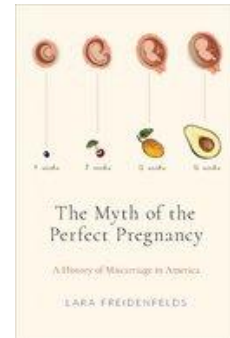


The myth of the perfect pregnancy: A history of miscarriage in America

Lara Freidenfelds

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This is a book filled with irony. It charts the history of miscarriage in America from the colonial era when women's desperate need to limit the size of their families meant that they often *welcomed* miscarriage, to the modern era when pregnancies carefully planned to fit in with women's wider life aspirations mean that miscarriage is often experienced as a heart-breaking tragedy. Down the centuries, women have sought control over their own fertility; the author shows how achieving this – at least to some extent – has come at a heavy cost. Pregnancy has always been seen by women as an exceptional health challenge, but until recently, a challenge beyond their control. Today, precisely because women can *choose* their pregnancies, they are subject to a variety of forces that seek to leverage this - from health professionals who emphasise their responsibility to have a healthy pregnancy to commercial interests whose websites and apps market baby items from the first weeks of pregnancy, when miscarriage remains a strong possibility.

The book is set in an American context but is entirely relevant to the UK and other advanced economies. It is an important feminist text, analysing the way in which women's fertility has been and is a source of oppression. It sees women as victims – victims of relentless pregnancies in colonial times, of the requirement to mother 'intensively' in more recent times, and of aggressive marketing and medical surveillance in modern times. In the final chapter, the author suggests ways in which women might take back control, by recognising that at least 30% of pregnancies miscarry in the first trimester, and then pushing back on advertisers, public health messages, anti-abortion rhetoric, parenting gurus and pregnancy tests all of which encourage women to invest in pregnancies that may well miscarry.

Lara Freidenfelds' scholarship is outstanding. Primary sources from the 18th to the 21st centuries support her analysis. She draws the reader into her narrative with extracts from the desperate letters of 18th century women describing their exhaustion at finding themselves pregnant yet again and extracts from blogs written by 21st century women excitedly announcing their pregnancies a week or so after conception – and their heartbreak when their pregnancies miscarry. There are detailed notes for each section of the book, enabling readers to follow up aspects of especial interest to them. Complementing and enhancing the author's extensive research is her pithy and engaging writing style. She memorably describes smartphone pregnancy apps as 'pregnancy websites on steroids' (p. 109) and skilfully summarises key arguments in her book, such as that miscarriage is now 'a derailing of an intended process rather than an expected and sometimes welcome part of reproductive life' (p. 144).

As an academic working in the field of the transition to parenthood, I found the book fascinating as a record of how *extensive* childbearing has become *intensive* parenting. The

author explains how colonial women's mothering focused on keeping their children alive, but as women from the late nineteenth century onwards were able to choose to have fewer babies, each child became the focus of intensive mothering, placing a burden on women equal to, if not greater than, their ancestors' efforts to help their children survive the years of infancy.

This is a book filled with insights and with compassion. It is always pro-women, especially when analysing the politics of pro-choice and pro-life still highly influential in the United States. I found it inspiring and illuminating. It is often said that it is only possible to understand the present by studying the past and this book has certainly thrown more light on women's contemporary experiences of pregnancy and mothering than many I have read that relate only to the 21st century.

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