



Motherhood Reimagined: When Becoming a Mother Doesn't Go as Planned

Sarah Kowalski

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What if one of the secrets to becoming a mother is learning not to force parenthood into a predetermined social box? Sarah Kowalski's own journey to parenthood was marked by extremes, from her burning desire to be a mother in her childhood to the ambivalence she felt when, at forty, it seemed time to finally make the decision. She charts these positions and more with frank sympathy in her memoir *Motherhood Reimagined*.

In her youth, Kowalski didn't just play with dolls, she grafted herself on to the new mothers in her neighborhood in preparation for her own eventual baby. By college, that baby mania led her to study law in hopes of defending women's access to reproductive care. Pragmatism derailed her somewhat, and instead she became a corporate climber, a high achiever on whom the demand of endless work weeks took a drastic physical toll.

By her late thirties, though, Kowalski was back on track, and semi-ready to answer her Qigong coach's questions about whether she still wanted to be a mother with a tentative yes.

Of course, fertility is not always quite as simple as an internal decision; she found that if she truly wished to actualize that yes, it would mean exploring alternatives to her childhood plan, including medical procedures, from IVF to egg donations, and maybe even reentering the dreaded world of dating. "I would be operating outside of the realm of convention," she writes. "I could define family however I wanted." This reality proves both terrifying and liberating.

Kowalski's is as much a spiritual memoir as it is anything else. Obstacles arise in the form of self-doubt and flimsy, socialized excuses. Even as she coaches other people toward wellness, she fights to push away negativity and distractions. Arriving at her truest wants and abilities is shown to require an uphill, strenuous trek. She goes on retreats and consults with Buddhist masters while working toward her truths, and her accounts of this concentrated, often inward work are inspiring.

Still, the most universal aspect of the book is its concentration on conceiving, especially conceiving at a later age. Kowalski's descriptions of her struggles will strike a familiar chord with other would-be parents, and blunt admissions, like that she "wilted in sadness" at learning that she would not be able to use her own eggs, are comforting in their emotional rawness.

Kowalski's is an exhaustive pursuit, involving basal body temperature readings, mixtures of Chinese herbs, midwives, visits to specialists, trips out of the country, egg and sperm donations, and copious support from friends and confidantes. The "will she conceive or won't she?" aspect of the text is harrowing.

Kowalski's biography is in the back if anyone requires relief in the form of spoilers, and her determination, even during momentary defeats, proves to be an encouraging example for others facing reproductive challenges. Doses of levity are interjected in the text at appropriate intervals, guaranteeing that this serious project never becomes too solemn.

"I was ... an empowered woman choosing to have a baby from a highly conscious place," Kowalski declares, and this assertion could easily become a rallying cry for modern women everywhere. *Motherhood Reimagined* is an illuminating account of what becomes possible when you approach conception with knowledge, motivation, and determination—and the right combinations of contemporary medical magic.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (December 6, 2017)

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