

Livia Arndal Woods // It's Mother's Day, holiday of breakfast-in-bed and/or reflection on the ways our society fails families. This Mother's Day, I want to add a thought about how memoirs of motherhood cultivate an insistent thread of anxiety about medicine.

This spring, driving 10 hours to and from work each week, I listened to the entire parenting podcast *The Longest Shortest Time* from beginning to end. The almost-200 episodes filled a semester's worth of commuting so tidily that it seemed fated that mainlining Hillary Frank's longform postpartum fever dream is what I had found myself doing with these hours in which I wasn't caring for a new baby, frantically scribbling up notes for class, or teaching. This felt both personal and academic, an extension of both my fourth trimester and my book project on novelistic representations of pregnancy. Maybe that's why I came to think about *The Longest Shortest Time* as a long-form aural memoir, an exploration of what parenthood means that spiralled out of one woman's questions about her own childbirth experience and the medical choices that were and weren't made.

Last October, Emilie Egger wrote here about white motherhood and essential oils. Recently, reading Tara Westover's 2018 *Educated* and still thinking about memoirs, I recalled that post's interest in the intersection of motherhood and the pursuit of "purity." Although the essential oils Westover's survivalist mother compounds are a more or less minor subplot in *Educated*, they are a subplot that speaks to much more central concerns: a deep distrust of medicine and the conflicts of familial responsibility. What is the relationship between these concerns and memoir more generally, I wondered? What do memoirs and medicine have to do with motherhood and the way parenting finds/eludes voice?

Though the memoir as literary form hardly belongs to the turn-of-the-21st century, the past 25 years have certainly seen a popular memoir explosion. And there's something in the emphatic navel-gazing of the contemporary literary memoir that seems to invite a contemplation of anxiety about medicine. This is particularly marked in the "Difficult Mothering" memoirs of the past decade. I have read almost all of these memoirs, stalking an inchoate question about the narrativization of reproductive bodily experience. Eula Biss's 2014 *On Immunity: An Inoculation* is particularly notable for its treatment of this relationship between maternity and anxiety about medicine, but a fraught relationship between motherhood and medical institutions pervades the genre more generally.

Certainly, this fraught relationship reflects America's high maternal and fetal mortality rates, mortality rates that, the CDC reminded us just this week, are highly racialized. And though Angela

Garber's 2018 *Like A Mother: A Feminist Journey Through the Science and Culture of Pregnancy* articulates these racial contexts with particular clarity and Garber has called for more attention and opportunities for women doing the same, memoirs of motherhood are generally memoirs of racially and socioeconomically privileged experience, the (sometimes estranged) cousins of a white, well-heeled mommy-blogsphere where heated advocacy for or against co-sleeping fuels all-out comment section wars about vaccination. In short, the most audible articulations of maternal anxiety about the dangers of medicine don't tend to issue from the most vulnerable families.

The convergence of personal experience and research methodology that drove my compulsive listening to *The Longest Shortest Time* is a convergence not uncommon to memoir itself. Perhaps this is part of why memoir affords an unusual amount of room for existential anxiety. In staging a pursuit of knowledge about the self that goes unsatisfied even as that self is articulated, memoir is always about doing and undoing. Perhaps, in treating the constant doing and undoing of the self in personal and public cultures, memoirs of motherhood tilt instinctively toward medicine as the most common 21st century American mediator of maternal existential anxieties, a mediator whose pursuit of somatic knowledge is often unsatisfying even as it articulates itself.