



About the Book

How do the French manage to raise well-behaved children, and have a life?

What British parent hasn't noticed, on visiting France, how polite and

civilized French children are, compared to our own? They don't cause

havoc in restaurants, they always say '*bonjour*' politely to adults, and they

never throw tantrums in supermarkets. Why is it normal for French babies to sleep through the night by two or three months? And how do their mothers always manage to look so sexy, cool and chic?

New Yorker Pamela Druckerman never imagined she would end up in a Paris apartment with an English husband and a baby, followed in quick succession by twins. She discovered that in France mothers do things differently – and often better. So she set about investigating the secrets of parenting *à la française*. The result is this funny, helpful and informative book.

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French Children

Don't Throw Food

Pamela Druckerman

For Simon, who makes everything matter

Les petits poissons dans l'eau,

Nagent aussi bien que les gros.

The little fish in the water,

Swim as well as the big ones do.

French children's song

Prologue

French Children Don't Throw Food

WHEN MY DAUGHTER is eighteen months old, my husband and I decide to

take her on a little summer holiday. We pick a coastal town that's a few hours by train from Paris, where we've been living (I'm American, he's British). We book a hotel room with a cot. She's our only child at this point, so forgive us for thinking: how hard could it be?

We have breakfast at the hotel. But we have to eat lunch and dinner at the little seafood restaurants around the old port. We quickly discover that two restaurant meals a day, with a toddler, deserve to be their own circle of hell. Bean is briefly interested in food: a piece of bread, or anything fried. But within a few minutes she starts spilling salt shakers and tearing apart sugar packets, then demanding to be sprung from her high chair so she can

dash around the restaurant and bolt dangerously towards the docks.

Our strategy is to finish the meal quickly. We order while we're being seated, then we beg the server to rush out some bread and bring us all of our food, appetizers and main courses, simultaneously. While my husband has a few bites of fish, I make sure that Bean doesn't get kicked by a waiter or lost at sea. Then we switch. We leave enormous, apologetic tips to compensate for the arc of torn napkins and langoustines around our table. On the walk back to our hotel we swear off travel, joy and ever having more kids. This 'holiday' seals the fact that life as we knew it eighteen months earlier has officially vanished. I'm not sure why we're even surprised.

After a few more restaurant meals, I notice that the French families all around us don't look like they're in hell. Weirdly, they look like they're on holiday. French children the same age as Bean are sitting contentedly in their high chairs, waiting for their food or eating fish and even vegetables. There's no shrieking or whining. Everyone is having one course at a time. And there's no debris around their tables.

Though I've lived in France for a few years, I can't explain this. In Paris, kids don't eat in restaurants much. Anyway, I haven't been watching them. Before I had a child, I never paid attention to anyone else's. And now

I rarely pay attention to any child but my own. In our current misery, however, I can't help but notice that there seems to be another way. But what exactly is it? Are French kids just genetically calmer than ours? Have they been bribed (or threatened) into submission? Are they on the receiving end of an old-fashioned seen-but-not-heard parenting philosophy?

It doesn't seem like it. The French children all around us don't look cowed. They're cheerful, chatty and curious. Their parents are affectionate and attentive. There just seems to be an invisible, civilizing force at their tables – and, I'm starting to suspect, in their lives – that's absent from ours. Once I start thinking about French parenting, I realize it's not just mealtimes that are different. I suddenly have lots of questions. Why is it, for example, that in the hundreds of hours I've clocked at French playgrounds, I've never seen a child (except my own) throw a temper tantrum? Why don't my French friends need to end a phone call hurriedly because their kids are demanding something? Why haven't their living rooms been taken over by teepees and toy kitchens, the way ours has?

And there's more. Why is it that so many of the Anglophone kids I meet are on mono-diets of pasta or white rice, or eat only a narrow menu of 'children's' foods? Meanwhile, my daughter's French friends eat fish, vegetables, and practically everything else. And how is it that, except for a

specific time in the afternoon, French kids don't snack?

I hadn't thought I was supposed to admire French parenting. It isn't a *thing*, like French fashion, or French cheese. No one visits Paris to soak up the local views on parental authority and guilt management. Quite the contrary: the British and American mothers I know in Paris are horrified that French mothers barely breastfeed, and let their four-year-olds walk around with dummies.

So how come they never point out that so many French babies start sleeping through the night at two or three months old? And why don't they mention that French kids don't require constant attention from adults, and that they seem capable of hearing the word 'no' without collapsing?

No one is making a fuss about all this. But quietly and en masse, French parents are achieving outcomes that create a whole different atmosphere for family life. When British or American families visit our home, the parents usually spend much of the visit refereeing their kids' spats, helping their toddlers do laps around the kitchen island, or getting down on the floor to build Lego villages. There are always a few rounds of crying and consoling. When French friends visit, however, we grown-ups have coffee, and the children play happily by themselves.

French parents are very concerned about their [kids.1](#) They know about

paedophiles, allergies and choking hazards. They take reasonable precautions. But somehow they aren't panicked about their children's well-being. This calmer outlook seems to make them better at both establishing boundaries and giving their kids some autonomy.

I'm hardly the first to point out that middle-class Britain and America have a parenting problem. In hundreds of books and articles, this problem has been painstakingly diagnosed, critiqued and named: pushy-parent syndrome, hyper-parenting, helicopter parenting and, my personal favourite, the kindergarchy. One writer defines the problem as 'simply paying more attention to the upbringing of children than can possibly be good for them'. [2](#) Another, Judith Warner, calls it the 'culture of total motherhood'. (In fact, she realized this was a problem after returning from France.) Nobody seems to like the relentless, unhappy pace of Anglophone parenting, least of all parents themselves.

So why do we do it? Why does this way of parenting seem to be hard-wired into our generation, even if – like me – you've left the country? First, starting in the 1980s, there was a mass of data and public rhetoric saying that poor kids fall behind in school because they don't get enough stimulation, especially in the early years. Middle-class parents took this to [mean that their own kids would benefit from more stimulation too.](#)³

Around the same period, the gap between rich and poor Britons began to widen. Suddenly, it seemed that parents needed to groom their children to join the new elite. Exposing kids to the right stuff early on – and ahead of other children the same age – started to seem more urgent.

Alongside this competitive parenting was the growing belief that kids are psychologically fragile. Today's young parents are part of the most psychoanalysed generation ever, and have absorbed the idea that every choice we make could damage our kids. We also came of age during the divorce boom in the 1980s. We're determined to act more selflessly than we believe our own parents did.

What's more, we feel that we're parenting in a very dangerous world. News reports create the impression that children are at greater risk than ever, and that we must be perpetually vigilant about their safety.

The result of all this is a parenting style that's labour-intensive and exhausting. But now, in France, I've glimpsed another way. A blend of journalistic curiosity and maternal desperation kicks in. By the end of our ruined beach holiday, I've decided to figure out what French parents are doing differently. It will be a work of investigative parenting. What is the invisible, civilizing force that the French have harnessed? Can I change my wiring, and apply it to my own offspring? Why don't French children throw

food? And why aren't their parents shouting?

I realize I'm on to something when I discover a research study⁴ led by an economist at Princeton, in which mothers in Columbus, Ohio, said childcare was more than twice as unpleasant as comparable mothers in the city of Rennes, France, did. Or to put it more positively, while the French mums were doing childcare, they spent more of that time in a pleasant state. This bears out my own observations in Paris, and on trips to Britain and America: there's something about the way the French do parenting that makes it less of a grind and more of a pleasure.

I'm convinced that the secrets of French parenting are hiding in plain sight. It's just that nobody has looked for them before. I start stashing a notebook in my nappy bag. Every doctor's visit, dinner party, play date and puppet show becomes a chance to observe French parents in action, and to figure out what unspoken rules they're following.

At first, it's hard to tell. French parents seem to vacillate between being extremely strict and shockingly permissive. Interrogating them isn't much help either. Most parents I speak to insist that they're not doing anything special. On the contrary, they're convinced that France is beset by a 'child-king' syndrome in which parents have lost their authority. (To which I respond: 'You don't know child kings. Please visit New York.')

For several years, and through the birth of two more children in Paris, I keep uncovering clues. I discover, for instance, that there's a 'Dr Spock' of France, who's a household name throughout the country but who doesn't have a single English-language book in print. I read this woman's books, along with many others. I interview dozens of parents and experts. And I eavesdrop shamelessly during school drop-offs and trips to the supermarket. Finally, I think I've discovered what French parents do differently.

When I say 'French parents', I'm generalizing of course. Everyone's different. The parents I meet mostly live in Paris and its suburbs. Most have university degrees and professional jobs. But I'm struck that, despite individual differences, French parents all seem to follow the same basic principles. Well-off lawyers, caregivers in French nurseries, state-school teachers and old ladies who approach me in the park all say more or less the same things. So does practically every French baby book and parenting magazine I read. It quickly becomes clear that having a child in France doesn't require choosing a parenting philosophy. Everyone more or less takes the fundamental rules for granted. That fact alone makes the mood less anxious.

Why France? I certainly don't suffer from a pro-France bias. *Au contraire*, I'm not even sure that I like living here. I certainly don't want my

kids growing up into sniffy Parisians.

But for all its problems, France is the perfect foil for the current anxieties in British and American parenting. On the one hand, French parents have values that look very familiar to me. Parisian parents are zealous about talking to their kids, showing them nature, and reading them lots of books. They take them to tennis lessons, painting classes and interactive science museums.

Yet somehow, the French have managed to be involved without becoming obsessive. They assume that even good parents aren't at the constant service of their children, and that there's no need to feel guilty about this. 'For me, the evenings are for the parents,' one Parisian mother tells me. 'My daughter can be with us if she wants, but it's adult time.'

French parents want their kids to be stimulated, but not continually. While some Anglophone toddlers are getting Mandarin tutors and pre-literacy training, French kids are – by design – just toddling around.

The French are getting lots of practice at being parents. While its neighbours are suffering from population declines, France is having a baby boom. In the European Union, only the Irish have a higher birth rate. [5](#) The French have all kinds of public services that surely make parenting more appealing and less stressful. French parents don't have to pay for nursery

school, worry about health insurance or save for university. Many get monthly allowances from the state – sent straight to their bank accounts – just for having kids.

But these public services don't explain the differences I see. The French seem to have a whole different framework for raising kids. When I ask French parents how they discipline their children, it takes them a few beats just to understand what I mean. 'Ah, you mean how do we *educate* them,' they ask. *Discipline*, I soon realize, is a narrow, seldom-used term that refers to punishment, whereas *éducation* (which has nothing to do with school) is something they imagine themselves to be doing all the time. For years now, headlines have been declaring the demise of the current style of Anglophone child-rearing. There are dozens of books in English offering helpful theories on how to parent differently.

I haven't got a theory. What I do have, spread out in front of me, is a fully functioning society of good little sleepers, gourmet eaters and reasonably relaxed parents. I'm starting with that outcome and working backwards to figure out how the French got there. It turns out that to be a different kind of parent, you don't just need a different parenting philosophy. You need a very different view of what a child actually is.

Are You Waiting for a Child?

IT'S TEN IN the morning when the managing editor summons me to his office

and tells me to get my teeth checked. He says my dental plan will end on my last day at the newspaper. That will be in five weeks, he says.

More than two hundred of us are laid off that day. The news briefly boosts our parent company's stock price. I own some shares, and consider selling them – for irony rather than profit – to cash in on my own dismissal. Instead I walk around lower Manhattan in a stupor. Fittingly, it's raining. I stand under a ledge and call the man I'm supposed to see that night.

'I've just been laid off,' I say.

'Aren't you devastated?' he asks. 'Do you still want to have dinner?'

In fact, I'm relieved. I'm finally free of a job that – after nearly six years – I hadn't had the guts to quit. I was a reporter for the foreign desk in New York, covering elections and financial crises in Latin America. I'd often be dispatched at a few hours' notice, then spend weeks living out of hotels. For a while, my bosses were expecting great things from me. They talked about future editorships. They paid for me to learn Portuguese.

Only suddenly they aren't expecting anything. And strangely, I'm OK with that. I really liked films about foreign correspondents. But actually

being one was different. Usually I was all alone, shackled to an unending story, fielding calls from editors who just wanted more. I sometimes pictured the news as a mechanical rodeo bull. The men working the same beat as me managed to pick up Costa Rican and Colombian wives, who travelled around with them. At least they had dinner on the table when they finally slogged home. The men I went out with were less portable. And anyway, I rarely stayed anywhere long enough to reach the third date. I'm relieved to be leaving the paper. But I'm unprepared for becoming socially toxic. In the week or so after the lay-offs, when I still come into the office, colleagues treat me like I'm contagious. People I've worked with for years say nothing, or avoid my desk. One workmate takes me out for a farewell lunch, then won't walk back into the building with me. Long after I clear out my desk, my editor – who was out of town when the axe fell – insists that I return to the office for a humiliating debriefing, in which he suggests that I apply for a lower-ranking job, then rushes off to lunch. I'm suddenly clear about two things: I don't want to write about politics or money any more. And I want a boyfriend. I'm standing in my three-foot-wide kitchen, wondering what to do with the rest of my life, when Simon calls. We met six months earlier at a bar in Buenos Aires, when a mutual friend brought him to a foreign correspondents' night out. He's a British

journalist who was in Argentina for a few days, to write a story about football. I'd been sent to cover the country's economic collapse. Apparently we were on the same flight from New York. He remembered me as the lady who'd held up boarding when, already on the gangway, I realized that I'd left my duty-free purchase in the departure lounge and insisted on going back to fetch it. (I did most of my shopping in airports.)

Simon was exactly my type: swarthy, stocky and smart. (Though he's of average height, he later adds 'short' to this list, since he grew up in Holland among blond giants.) Within a few hours of meeting him, I realized that 'love at first sight' just means feeling immediately and extremely calm with someone. Though all I said at the time was, 'We definitely must not sleep together.'

I was smitten, but wary. Simon had just fled the London property market to buy a cheap apartment in Paris. I was commuting between South America and New York. A long-distance relationship with someone on a third continent seemed a stretch. After that meeting in Argentina, we exchanged occasional emails. But I didn't let myself take him too seriously. I hoped that there were swarthy, smart men in my time zone.

Fast-forward seven months. When Simon calls out of the blue and I tell him that I've been sacked, he doesn't emote or treat me like damaged

goods. On the contrary, he seems pleased that I suddenly have some free time. He says he feels that we have ‘unfinished business’, and that he’d like to come to New York.

‘That’s a terrible idea,’ I say. What’s the point? He can’t move to America because he writes about European football. I don’t speak French, and I’ve never considered living in Paris. Though I’m suddenly quite portable myself, I’m wary of being pulled into someone else’s orbit before I have one of my own again.

Simon arrives in New York wearing the same beaten-up leather jacket he wore in Argentina, and carrying the bagel and smoked salmon that he’s picked up at the deli near my apartment. A month later I meet his parents in London. Six months later I sell most of my possessions and ship the rest to France. My friends all tell me that I’m being rash. I ignore them, and walk out of my fixed-rent studio apartment in New York with three giant suitcases and a box of South American coins, which I give to the Pakistani driver who takes me to the airport.

And poof, I’m a Parisian. I move into Simon’s two-room bachelor pad, in a former carpentry district in eastern Paris. With my unemployment cheques still arriving, I ditch financial journalism and begin researching a book. Simon and I each work in one of the rooms during the day.

The shine comes off our new romance almost immediately, mostly because of interior-design issues. I once read in a book about *feng shui* that having piles of stuff on the floor is a sign of depression. For Simon, it just seems to signal an aversion to shelves. He has cleverly invested in an enormous unfinished wooden table that fills most of the living room, and a primitive gas-heating system, which ensures that there's no reliable hot water. I'm especially irked by his habit of letting spare change from his pockets spill on to the floor, where it somehow gathers in the corners of each room. 'Get rid of the money,' I plead.

I don't find much comfort outside our apartment either. Despite being in the gastronomic capital of the world, I can't figure out what to eat. Like most Anglophone women I know, I arrive in Paris with extreme food preferences (I'm an Atkins-leaning vegetarian). Walking around, I feel besieged by all the bakeries and meat-heavy restaurant menus. For a while I subsist almost entirely on omelettes and goat's-cheese salads. When I ask waiters for 'dressing on the side', they look at me like I'm nuts. I don't understand why French supermarkets stock every American cereal except my personal favourite, Grape-Nuts, and why cafés don't serve fat-free milk. I know it sounds ungrateful not to swoon over Paris. Maybe I find it shallow to fall for a city just because it's so good-looking. The cities I've

had love affairs with in the past were all a bit, well, swarthier: São Paulo, Mexico City, New York. They didn't sit back and wait to be admired.

Our part of Paris isn't even that beautiful. And daily life is filled with small disappointments. No one mentions that 'springtime in Paris' is so celebrated because the preceding seven months are overcast and freezing (I arrive, conveniently, at the beginning of this seven-month stretch). And while I'm convinced that I remember my year of schoolgirl French, Parisians have another name for what I'm speaking: Spanish.

There are many appealing things about Paris. I like it that the doors of the Métro open a few seconds before the train actually stops, suggesting that the city treats its citizens like adults. I also like it that, within six months of my arrival, practically everyone that Simon and I know in Britain and America comes to visit, including people I'd later learn to categorize as 'Facebook friends'. We eventually develop a strict admissions policy and rating system for houseguests. (Hint: If you stay a week, leave a gift.)

I'm not bothered by the famous Parisian rudeness. At least that's interactive. What gets me is the indifference. No one but Simon seems to care that I'm there. And he's often off nursing his own Parisian fantasy, which is so uncomplicated it has managed to endure. As far as I can tell, Simon has never visited a museum. But he describes reading the newspaper

in a café as an almost transcendent experience. One night at a neighbourhood restaurant, he swoons when the waiter sets down a cheese plate in front of him.

‘This is why I live in Paris!’ he declares. I realize that, by the transitive property of love and cheese, I must live in Paris for that smelly plate of cheese too.

To be fair, I’m starting to think that it’s not Paris: it’s me. New York likes its women a bit neurotic. They’re encouraged to create a brainy, adorable, conflicted bustle around themselves – *à la* Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally*, or Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall*. Despite having nothing more serious than man troubles, many of my friends in New York were spending more on therapy than on rent.

That persona doesn’t fly in Paris. The French do like Woody Allen’s movies. But in real life, the ideal *Parisienne* is calm, discreet, a bit remote and extremely decisive. She orders from the menu. She doesn’t blather on about her childhood or her diet. If New York is about the woman who’s ruminating about her past screw-ups and fumbling to find herself, Paris is about the one who – at least outwardly – regrets nothing. In France ‘neurotic’ isn’t a self-deprecating half-boast; it’s a clinical condition. Even Simon, who’s merely British, is perplexed by my self-doubt, and

my frequent need to discuss our relationship.

‘What are you thinking about?’ I ask him periodically, usually when he’s reading a newspaper.

‘Dutch football,’ he invariably says.

I can’t tell if he’s serious. I’ve realized that Simon is in a state of perpetual irony. He says everything, including ‘I love you’, with a little smirk. And yet he almost never actually laughs, even when I’m attempting a joke. (Some close friends don’t know that he has dimples.) Simon insists that not smiling is a British habit. But I’m sure I’ve seen Englishmen laugh. And anyway, it’s demoralizing that when I finally get to speak English with someone, he doesn’t seem to be listening.

This not-laughing also points to a wider cultural gulf between us. As an American, I need things to be spelled out. On the train back to Paris after a weekend with Simon’s parents, I ask him whether they liked me.

‘Of course they liked you, couldn’t you tell?’ he asks.

‘But did they *say* they liked me?’ I demand to know.

In search of other company, I trek across town on a series of ‘friend blind dates’, with friends of friends from back home. Most are expatriates too. None seems thrilled to hear from a clueless new arrival. Quite a few seem to have made ‘living in Paris’ a kind of job in itself, and an all-

purpose answer to the question, 'What do you do?' Many show up late, as if to prove that they've gone native. (I later learn that French people are typically on time for one-to-one meetings. They're only fashionably late for group events, including children's birthday parties.)

My initial attempts to make French friends are even less successful. At a party, I hit it off reasonably well with an art historian who's about my age, and who speaks excellent English. But when we meet again for tea at her house, it's clear that we observe vastly different female bonding rituals. I'm prepared to follow the Anglo-American model of confession and mirroring, with lots of comforting 'me too's. She pokes daintily at her pastry and discusses theories of art. I leave hungry, and not even knowing whether she has a boyfriend.

The only mirroring I get is in a book by Edmund [White,1](#) an American writer who lived in France in the 1980s. He's the first person who affirms that feeling depressed and adrift is a rational response to living in Paris.

'Imagine dying and being grateful you'd gone to heaven, until one day (or one century) it dawned on you that your main mood was melancholy, although you were constantly convinced that happiness lay just around the next corner. That's something like living in Paris for years, even decades. It's a mild hell so comfortable that it resembles heaven.'

Despite my doubts about Paris, I'm still pretty sure about Simon. I've become resigned to the fact that 'swarthy' inevitably comes with 'messy'. And I've got better at reading his micro-expressions. A flicker of a smile means that he's got the joke. The rare full smile suggests high praise. He even occasionally says 'that was funny' in a monotone.

I'm also encouraged by the fact that, for a curmudgeon, Simon has dozens of devoted, long-time friends. Perhaps it's that, behind the layers of irony, he is charmingly helpless. He can't drive a car, blow up a balloon or fold clothes without using his teeth. He fills our refrigerator with unopened tins of food. For expediency's sake, he cooks everything at the highest temperature. (University friends later tell me he was known for serving drumsticks that were charred on the outside and still frozen on the inside.) When I show him how to make salad dressing using oil and vinegar, he writes down the recipe, and still pulls it out years later whenever he makes dinner.

Also to Simon's credit, nothing about France ever bothers him. He's in his element being a foreigner. His parents are anthropologists who brought him up all over the world and trained him from birth to delight in local customs. He'd lived in six countries (including a year in America) by the time he was ten. He acquires languages the way I acquire shoes.

I decide that, for Simon's sake, I'll give France a real go. We get married outside Paris at a thirteenth-century chateau, which is surrounded by a moat (I ignore the symbolism). In the name of marital harmony, we rent a larger apartment. I place a massive order with Ikea for bookshelves, and position spare-change bowls in every room. I try to channel my inner pragmatist instead of my inner neurotic. In restaurants, I start ordering straight from the menu, and nibbling at the occasional hunk of *foie gras*. My French starts to sound less like excellent Spanish and more like very bad French. Before long I'm almost settled: I have a home office, a book deadline, and even a few new friends.

Simon and I have talked about babies. We both want one. I'd like three, in fact. And I like the idea of having them in Paris, where they'll be effortlessly bilingual and authentically international. Even if they grow up to be geeks, they can mention 'growing up in Paris' and be instantly cool. I'm worried about getting pregnant. I've spent much of my adult life trying, very successfully, not to, so I have no idea whether I'm any good at the reverse. This turns out to be as whirlwind as our courtship. One day I'm Googling 'How to get pregnant'. The next, it seems, I'm looking at two pink lines on a French pregnancy test.

I'm ecstatic. But alongside my joy comes a surge of anxiety. My resolve

to become less Carrie Bradshaw and more Catherine Deneuve immediately collapses. This doesn't seem like the moment to go native. I'm possessed by the idea that I've got to oversee my pregnancy, and do it exactly right.

Hours after telling Simon the good news, I go online to scour English-language pregnancy websites. Then I rush to buy some pregnancy guides, at an English bookstore near the Louvre. I want to know, in plain English, exactly what to worry about.

Within days I'm on prenatal vitamins and addicted to BabyCentre's 'Is it safe?' column. Is it safe to eat non-organic produce while pregnant? Is it safe to be around computers all day? Is it safe to wear high heels, binge on sweets at Halloween, or holiday at high altitudes?

What makes 'Is it safe?' so compulsive is that it creates new anxieties (Is it safe to make photocopies? Is it safe to swallow semen?) but then refuses to allay them with a simple yes or no. Instead, expert respondents disagree with each other and equivocate. 'Is it safe to get a manicure while I'm pregnant?' Well yes, but chronic exposure to the solvents used in salons isn't good for you. Is it safe to go bowling? Well, yes and no.

The Anglophones I know also believe that pregnancy – and then motherhood – come with homework. The first assignment is choosing from among myriad parenting styles. Everyone I speak to swears by a different

book. I buy many of them. But instead of making me feel more prepared, having so much conflicting advice makes babies themselves seem enigmatic and unknowable. Who they are, and what they need, seems to depend on which book you read.

Another consequence of this independent study is that we Anglophone mothers-to-be become experts in everything that can go wrong. A pregnant Englishwoman who's visiting Paris declares, over lunch, that there's a five in one thousand chance her baby will be stillborn. She says she knows that saying this is gruesome and pointless, but she can't help herself. A Londoner I know, who unfortunately has a doctorate in public health, spends much of her first trimester cataloguing the baby's risks of contracting every possible malady.

I'm surrounded by this anxiety when we visit Simon's family in London (I've decided to believe that his parents adore me). I'm sitting in a café when a well-dressed woman interrupts me to describe a new study showing that having a lot of caffeine increases the risk of miscarriage. To stress her credibility, she says she's *married to a doctor*. I don't care who her husband is. I'm just irritated by her assumption that I haven't read that study. Of course I have; I'm trying to live on one cup a week.

With so much studying and worrying to do, being pregnant increasingly

feels like a full-time job. I spend less and less time working on my book, which I'm supposed to hand in before the baby comes. Instead, I commune with other pregnant Anglophones in due-date-cohort chat rooms. Like me, these women are used to customizing their environments, even if it's just to get soy milk in their coffees. And like me, they find the primitive, mammalian event happening inside their bodies to be uncomfortably out of their control. Worrying – like clutching the armrest during aircraft turbulence – at least makes us feel like it's not.

The English-language pregnancy press, which I can easily access from Paris, seems to be lying in wait to channel this anxiety. It focuses on the one thing that pregnant women can definitely control: food. 'As you raise fork to mouth, consider: "Is this a bite that will benefit my baby?" If it is, chew away ...' explain the authors of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, the famously worrying – and bestselling – pregnancy manual.

I'm aware that the prohibitions in my books aren't equally important. Cigarettes and alcohol are definitely bad, whereas shellfish, cold meat, raw eggs and unpasteurized cheese are only dangerous if they've been contaminated with something rare like listeria or salmonella. But to be safe, I take every prohibition literally. It's easy enough to avoid oysters and *foie gras*. But – since I'm in France – I'm panicked about cheese. 'Is the

Parmesan on my pasta pasteurized?’ I ask flabbergasted waiters. Simon bears the brunt of my angst. Did he scrub the chopping board after cutting up that raw chicken? Does he really love our unborn child?

What to Expect contains something called the Pregnancy Diet, which its creators claim can ‘improve fetal brain development’, ‘reduce the risk of certain birth defects’ and ‘may even make it more likely that your child will grow to be a healthier adult’. Every morsel seems to represent potential SAT points. Never mind hunger: if I find myself short of a protein portion at the end of the day, the Pregnancy Diet says I should cram in a final serving of egg salad before bedtime.

They had me at ‘diet’. After years of dieting to slim down, it’s thrilling to be ‘dieting’ to gain weight. It feels like a reward for having spent years thin enough to nab a husband. My online forums are filled with women who’ve put on forty or fifty pounds over the recommended limits. Of course we’d all rather resemble those compactly pregnant celebrities in designer gowns, or the models on the cover of *Fit Pregnancy*. Some women I know actually do. But a competing message says that we should give ourselves a free pass. ‘Go ahead and EAT’, says the chummy author of the *Best Friends’ Guide to Pregnancy*, which I’ve been cuddling up with in bed. ‘What other joys are there for pregnant women?’

Tellingly, the Pregnancy Diet says that I can ‘cheat’ with the occasional fast-food cheeseburger or glazed doughnut. In fact, pregnancy seems like one big cheat. Lists of pregnancy cravings read like a catalogue of foods that women have been denying themselves since adolescence: cheesecake, milk-shakes, macaroni and cheese and ice cream cake. I crave lemon on everything, and entire loaves of bread.

Someone tells me that Jane Birkin says she can never remember whether it was ‘*un* baguette’ or ‘*une* baguette’, so she just orders ‘*deux baguettes*’. I can’t find the quote. But whenever I go to the bakery, I follow this strategy. Then – surely unlike the twiggy Birkin – I eat them both.

I’m not just losing my figure. I’m also losing a sense of myself as someone who once went on dinner dates and worried about the Palestinians. I now spend my free time studying new-model buggies and memorizing the possible causes of colic. This evolution from ‘woman’ to ‘mum’ feels inevitable. A fashion spread in a pregnancy magazine that I pick up on a trip to New York shows big-bellied women in floppy shirts and men’s pyjama bottoms, and says that these outfits are worthy of wearing all day. Perhaps to get out of ever finishing my book, I fantasize about ditching journalism and training as a midwife.

Actual sex is the final, symbolic domino to fall. Although it’s

technically permitted, books like *What to Expect* presume that sex during pregnancy is inherently fraught. ‘What got you into this situation in the first place may now have become one of your biggest problems,’ the authors warn. They go on to describe eighteen factors that may inhibit your sex life, including ‘fear that the introduction of the penis into the vagina will cause infection’. If a woman does find herself having sex, they recommend a new low in multitasking: using the moment to do pelvic-floor exercises, which tone your birth canal in preparation for childbirth.

I’m not sure that anyone follows all this advice. Like me, they probably just absorb a certain worried tone and state of mind. Even from abroad, it’s contagious. Given how susceptible I am, it’s probably better that I’m far from the source. Maybe the distance will give me some perspective on parenting.

I’m already starting to suspect that raising a child will be quite different in France. When I sit in cafés in Paris, with my belly pushing up against the table, no one jumps in to warn me about the hazards of caffeine. On the contrary, they light cigarettes right next to me. The only question strangers ask, when they notice my belly, is *Vous attendez un enfant?* – are you waiting for a child? It takes me a while to realize that they don’t think I have a lunch date with a truant six-year-old. It’s French for ‘Are you

pregnant?’

I am waiting for a baby. It’s probably the most important thing I’ve ever done. Despite my qualms about Paris, there’s something nice about doing this waiting in a place where I’m practically immune to other people’s judgements. Though Paris is one of the most cosmopolitan cities on earth, I feel like I’m off the grid. In French I don’t understand name-dropping, school histories and other little hints that, to a French person, signal someone’s social rank and importance. And since I’m a foreigner, they don’t know my status either.

When I packed up and moved to Paris, I never imagined that the move would be permanent. Now I’m starting to worry that Simon likes being a foreigner a bit too much. After living in all those countries while he was growing up, it’s his natural state. He confesses that he feels connected to lots of people and cities, and doesn’t need any one place to be his official home. He calls this style ‘semi-detached’, like a house in a London suburb. Already, several of our Anglophone friends have left France, usually when their jobs changed. But our jobs don’t require us to be here. The cheese plate aside, we’re really here for no reason. And ‘no reason’ – plus a baby – is starting to look like the strongest reason of all.

Paris Is Burping

OUR NEW APARTMENT isn't in the paris of postcards. It's off a narrow street in

a Chinese garment district, where we're constantly jostled by men hauling rubbish bags full of clothes. There's no sign that we're in the same city as the Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame or the elegantly winding river Seine.

Yet somehow this new neighbourhood works for us. Simon and I stake out our respective cafés nearby, and retreat each morning for some convivial solitude. Here, too, socializing follows unfamiliar rules. It's OK to banter with the staff, but generally not with the other patrons (unless they're at the bar, and talking to the barman too). Though I'm off the grid, I do need human contact. One morning I try to strike up a conversation with another regular – a man I've seen every day for months. I tell him, honestly, that he looks like an American I know.

'Who, George Clooney?' he asks snidely. We never speak again.

I make more headway with our new neighbours. The crowded street outside our house opens on to a quiet cobblestone courtyard, where low-slung houses and apartments face each other. The residents are a mix of artists, young professionals, mysteriously underemployed people and elderly women who hobble precariously on the uneven stones. We all live so close together that they have to acknowledge our presence, though a few

still manage not to.

It helps that my next-door neighbour, an architect named Anne, is due a few months before me. Though I'm caught up in my Anglophone whirlwind of eating and worrying, I can't help but notice that Anne and the other pregnant French women I come to know handle their pregnancies very differently.

For starters, they don't treat pregnancy like an independent research project. There are plenty of French parenting books, magazines and websites. But these aren't required reading, and nobody seems to consume them in bulk. Certainly no Frenchwoman I meet is comparison-shopping for a parenting philosophy, or can refer to different techniques by name.

There's no new, must-read book, nor do the experts have quite the same sway.

'These books can be useful to people who lack confidence, but I don't think you can raise a child while reading a book. You have to go with your *feeling*,' one Parisian mother says.

The French women I meet aren't at all blasé about motherhood, or about their babies' well-being. They're awed, concerned, and aware of the immense life transformation that they're about to undergo. But they signal this differently from Anglophone women. We typically demonstrate our

commitment by worrying, and by showing how much we're willing to sacrifice, even while pregnant. French women signal their commitment by projecting calm, and flaunting the fact that they haven't renounced pleasure. A photospread in *Neuf Mois* shows a heavily pregnant brunette in lacy ensembles, biting into pastries and licking jam from her finger. 'During pregnancy, it's important to pamper your inner woman,' another article says. 'Above all, resist the urge to borrow your partner's shirts.' A list of aphrodisiacs for mums-to-be includes chocolate, ginger, cinnamon and – this being France – mustard.

I realize that ordinary French women take these calls to arms seriously when Samia, a mother who lives in my neighbourhood, offers me a tour of her apartment. She's the daughter of Algerian immigrants, and grew up in Chartres. I'm admiring her soaring ceilings and chandeliers, when she picks up a stack of photographs.

'In this one I was pregnant, and here I was pregnant. *Et voilà*, the big belly!' she says, handing me several pictures. It's true, she's extremely pregnant in the photographs. She's also extremely topless.

I'm shocked, first of all, because we've been using the formal '*vous*' with each other, and now she's casually handed me naked pictures of herself. But I'm also surprised that the pictures are so glamorous. Samia

looks like one of those lingerie models from the magazines, *sans* most of the lingerie.

Granted, Samia is always a bit dramatic. Most days she drops off her two-year-old at daycare looking like she just stepped out of a film noir: a beige trench coat cinched tightly at the waist, black eyeliner and a fresh coat of shiny red lipstick. She's the only French person I know who actually wears a beret.

Nevertheless, Samia has merely embraced the conventional French wisdom that the forty-week metamorphosis into mother shouldn't make you any less of a woman. French pregnancy magazines don't just say that pregnant women can have sex; they explain exactly how to do it. *Neuf Mois* maps out ten different sexual positions including 'horseback rider', 'reverse horseback rider', 'the greyhound' (which it calls ' *un grand classique* ') and 'the chair'. 'The oarsmen' has six steps, concluding with 'In rocking her torso back and forth, Madame provokes delicious frictions ...'

Neuf Mois also weighs in on the merits of various sex toys for pregnant women (yes to 'geisha balls', no to vibrators and anything electric). 'Don't hesitate! Everyone wins, even the baby. During an orgasm, he feels the "Jacuzzi effect" as if he was massaged in the water,' the text explains. A father in Paris warns my husband not to stand at the 'business end' during

the birth, to preserve my feminine mystique.

French parents-to-be aren't just calmer about sex. They're also calmer about food. Samia makes a conversation with her obstetrician sound like a vaudeville routine:

'I said, "Doctor, I'm pregnant, but I adore oysters. What do I do?" He said, "Eat oysters!"' she recalls. 'He explained to me, "You seem like a fairly reasonable person. Wash things well. If you eat sushi, eat it in a good place.'"

The stereotype that French women smoke and drink through their pregnancies is very outdated. Most women I meet say that they had either the occasional glass of champagne, or no alcohol at all. I see a pregnant woman smoking exactly once, on the street. It could have been her once-a-month cigarette. I leave her alone.

The point isn't that anything goes. It's that women should be calm and sensible. The French mothers I meet distinguish between the foods and substances that are almost definitely damaging and those that are only dangerous if they're contaminated. Another woman I meet in the neighbourhood is Caroline, a physiotherapist who's seven months pregnant. She says her doctor never mentioned any food restrictions, and she never asked. 'It's better not to know!' she says. She tells me that she eats steak

tartare, and of course joined the family for *foie gras* over Christmas. She just makes sure to eat it in good restaurants, or at home. Her one concession is that when she eats unpasteurized cheese, she cuts off the rind.

I don't actually witness any pregnant women eating oysters. If I did, I might have to throw my enormous body over the table to stop them. They'd certainly be surprised. It's clear why French waiters are baffled when I interrogate them about the ingredients in each dish. French women generally don't make a fuss about this.

The French pregnancy press doesn't dwell on unlikely worst-case scenarios. *Au contraire*, it suggests that what mothers-to-be need most is serenity. 'Nine months of spa' is the headline in one French magazine. *The Guide for New Mothers*, a free booklet prepared with support from the French health ministry, says its eating guidelines favour the baby's 'harmonious growth', and that women should find 'inspiration' from different flavours. 'Pregnancy should be a time of great happiness!' it declares.

Is all this safe? It sure seems like it. France trumps the US and Britain on nearly every measure of maternal and infant health. The infant mortality rate is 29 per cent lower in France than it is in the UK, and the under-five mortality rate is 50 per cent lower in France. [1](#) According to Unicef, about

6.6 per cent of French babies have a low birth weight, compared to about 7.5 per cent of American babies.

What really drives home the French message that pregnancy should be savoured isn't the statistics or the pregnant women I meet. It's the pregnant cat. She's a slender, grey-eyed cat who lives in our courtyard and is about to deliver. Her owner, a pretty painter in her forties, tells me that she plans to have the cat spayed after the kittens are born. But she couldn't bear to neuter the cat before she had gone through a pregnancy. 'I wanted her to have that experience,' she says.

Of course French mothers-to-be aren't just calmer than we are. Like the cat, they're also skinnier. Some pregnant French women do get fat. In general, body-fat ratios seem to increase the further you get from central Paris. But the Parisians I see all around me look alarmingly like those celebrities on the red carpet. They have basketball-sized baby bumps, pasted on to skinny legs, arms and hips. Viewed from the back, you usually can't tell they're expecting.

Enough pregnant women have these proportions that I stop gawking when I pass one on the street or in the supermarket. This French norm is strictly codified. English-language pregnancy calculators tell me that – with my height and build – I should gain up to 35 pounds during my pregnancy.

But French calculators tell me to gain no more than 26.5 pounds (by the time I see this, it's too late).

How do French women stay within these limits? Social pressure helps.

Friends, sisters and mothers-in-law openly transmit the message that pregnancy isn't a free pass to gorge. (I'm spared the worst of this because I don't have French in-laws.) Audrey, a French journalist with three kids, tells me that she confronted her German sister-in-law, who had started out tall and svelte.

'The moment she got pregnant she became enormous. And I saw her and I found it monstrous. She told me, "No, it's fine, I'm entitled to relax. I'm entitled to get fat. It's no big deal," et cetera. For us, the French, it's horrible to say that. We would *never* say that.' She adds a jab disguised as sociology: 'I think the Americans and the Northern Europeans are a lot more relaxed than us when it comes to aesthetics.'

Everyone in France takes for granted that pregnant women should battle to keep their figures intact. While my podiatrist is working on my feet, she suddenly announces that I should rub sweet almond oil on my belly, to avoid stretch marks (I do this dutifully, and get none). Parenting magazines run long features on how to minimize the damage that pregnancy does to your breasts (don't gain too much weight, and take a daily jet of cold water

to the chest).

French doctors treat the weight-gain limits like holy edicts.

Anglophones in Paris are routinely shocked when their obstetricians scold them for going even slightly over. ‘It’s just the French men trying to keep their women slim,’ a British woman married to a Frenchman huffed, recalling her pre-natal appointments in Paris. Paediatricians feel free to comment on a mother’s post-pregnancy belly when she brings her baby for a check-up. (Mine will just cast a worried glance.)

The main reason that pregnant French women don’t get fat is that they are very careful not to eat too much. In French pregnancy guides, there are no late-night binges on egg salad, or instructions to eat way past hunger in order to nourish the fetus. Women who are ‘waiting for a child’ are supposed to eat the same balanced meals as any healthy adult. One guide says that if a woman is still hungry, she should add an afternoon snack consisting of, for instance, ‘a sixth of a baguette’, a piece of cheese and a glass of water.

In the French view, a pregnant woman’s food cravings are a nuisance to be vanquished. French women don’t let themselves believe – as I’ve heard Anglophone women claim – that the fetus wants cheesecake. The French *Guidebook for Mothers to Be* says that instead of giving in to a craving,