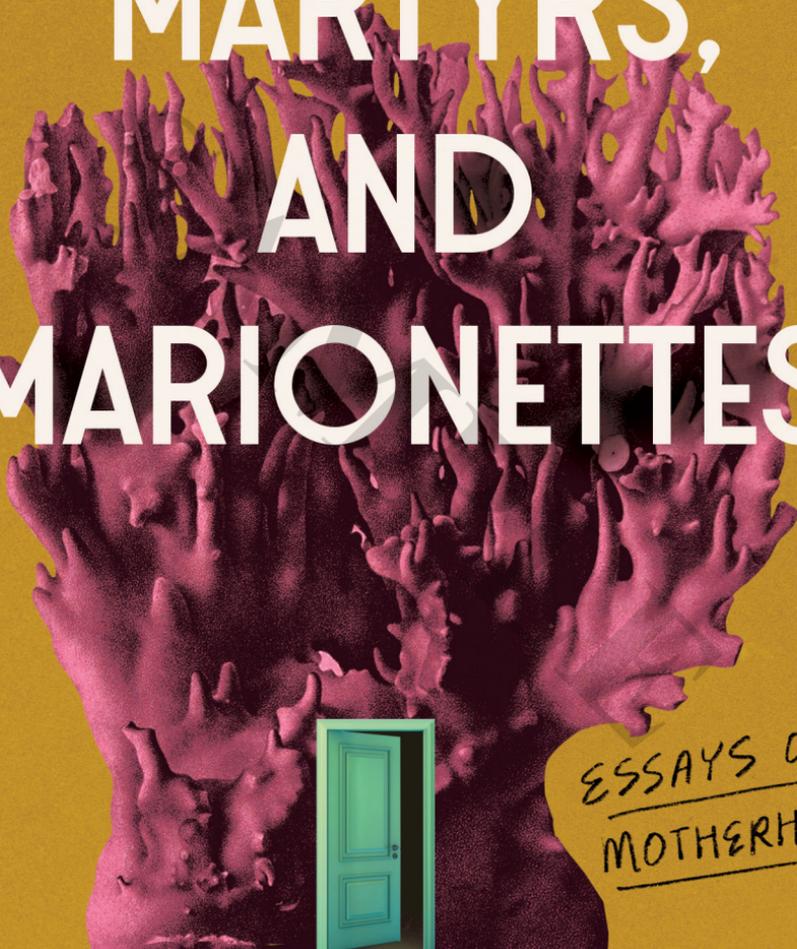


MONSTERS, MARTYRS, AND MARIONETTES



ESSAYS ON
MOTHERHOOD

ADRIENNE GRUBER

**MONSTERS,
MARTYRS,
AND
MARIONETTES**

ESSAYS ON MOTHERHOOD

ADRIENNE GRUBER

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peoples, and are grateful for the opportunity to meet and work on this territory.

Prologue: Other Mother

It's my turn to pick the movie for our family movie night. I've chosen *Coraline*, a stop-motion animation about an only child who finds a small brick door in the house her family has recently moved into. It turns out this brick door is a portal to another dimension, a home identical to her own. One afternoon, Coraline crawls through the portal into an identical kitchen and sees another mother who looks just like her real mother, but has buttons sewn, crisscrossed, over her eyes.

Visually the movie is stunning. The richly textured scenery is riveting for my two older daughters, Quintana, eight and Tamsin, five. Dagney, the baby, doesn't know what she's looking at, but she babbles at the screen, inserting herself into the dialogue so as not to be left out.

In the alternate dimension, Coraline's parents are everything her actual parents aren't—attentive, engaging, doting. They make Coraline extravagant meals, play games with her, and give her love in ways they don't in her day-to-day life.

There's just one small catch—Other Mother wants to steal Coraline's eyes and sew buttons onto her eye sockets.

I've started making pizza from scratch for our movie nights because my eight-year-old refuses to eat pizza from Nat's Pizzeria, our usual go-to take out place. Mothering seems to mean screwing oneself over for the sake of your kids. Mothering is a concept somebody made up. Mothering moments are made up of tasks and those tasks go unnoticed and unacknowledged and remain unseen.

After we watch the movie, Quintana starts calling me Other Mother. She runs away from me as I chase her with a toothbrush at bedtime, begging me not to sew buttons over her eyes. She cackles as I cringe. Matrilineal lines have blurred since her birth. I'm not sure which mother I am.

SAMPLE

At the Vancouver Aquarium, two-year-old Quintana and I wander past rays, cuttlefish, and a goliath grouper. The darkened tunnels in the exhibit are like an ominous ocean. Navy lighting moves in mock waves along the floor. We come across a taxidermized female shark. Her open cavity presents three fetal sharks inside, while three plasticized baby sharks swim alongside her. Partially digested shrimp and the ringlet tentacles of a former squid are rigid in her intestine. Her skin is sickly beige. The babies in her womb are fully formed; tiny teeth jut out of their open mouths like arrowheads.

This new exhibit is modelled after the popular decade-old “Bodies” exhibit, where real human cadavers were preserved in a revolutionary polymer preservation technique. Plastics, like silicone rubber, polyester or epoxy resin, replace water and fatty material from dissected bodies. At the aquarium, obscure fish and other aquatic creatures are similarly presented; the cadavers showcase fully circulating arteries and veins, nervous systems, muscles, and sinewy tendons.

Just as Quintana reaches out to poke a fetal shark, a volunteer approaches and asks if I’m familiar with the cannibalization of shark embryos. I stare at him for a moment, trying to register why he’s asking me this while also noting the eager grin on his face. He informs me that when shark embryos have different fathers, one dominant fetal shark will grow larger and stronger by devouring the others. Sometimes two will share in the devouring, but only two who share the same father. It’s a kind of strategic competition in which the males try to ensure their paternity. The strongest, quickest growing embryo is ultimately the one that secures patrilineality.

“What do you think about that?” the volunteer asks, his eyes shifting from my swollen belly to my face. I shrug and smile politely. Quintana yanks my hand and pulls me into another darkened room with various prehistoric-looking creatures. She runs up to one and touches it and another volunteer glares at me. There are DO NOT TOUCH signs everywhere. When I attempt to restrain her, she throws her head back and shrieks.

Human fetuses can perform a similarly gruesome act to sharks. Vanishing twin syndrome occurs when the fetal tissue is either absorbed by the other twin or by the mother herself. In most cases the healthy fetus waits until the non-viable one dies before absorbing it, but sometimes a partially developed fetus becomes incorporated into a normally developing one. This is called fetus in fetu. There are articles on this phenomenon, one with the title “Baby Born Pregnant With Her Own ‘Twins!’” reporting that an infant in Hong Kong was born with an unidentifiable mass that turned out to be two fetuses, one on her liver and the other on her kidney. Some medical professionals consider these masses to be simple teratomas, tumours with tissue and organ components, rather than normally developing fetuses, but many insist they have all the cellular makeup of a potential human.

Years ago, I had emergency surgery in New Mexico to remove a thirteen-centimetre teratoma attached to my left ovary. The surgeon showed me a picture of the mass, tangles of hair like sea grass wrapped around it. She had to remove part of the ovary where the mass was stuck. “Don’t worry,” she said during pre-op, “your right ovary will still work perfectly.” It did, and a few years later I found myself pregnant with my first daughter.

While thrilled to be pregnant, I was immediately anxious about the idea of giving birth. To curb this paralyzing fear, my husband Dennis and I registered for Hypnobabies, a special prenatal class with six regimented sessions that focused on using hypnosis in childbirth to manage and potentially transcend pain.

There were six couples in the class. At the first session, we were instructed to shield ourselves from negative stories and media dramatizations of birth with what the instructor called our bubble of peace. We would close our eyes and visualize being enveloped in a translucent sheath where only positive messages of birth could penetrate. We could welcome anyone into our bubble so long as they were fully supportive of our birth plan and the Hypnobabies ideology. Dennis was in my bubble, along with our futon where we watched TV every night, a plate of chocolate chip cookies and our three-legged cat,

Grendel. Sometimes my mom was there, depending on how on board she was with this method.

Included in the Hypnobabies philosophy was a complete change in the language of birth. Instead of saying labour, we said *birthing time*. Pain became *pressure*. Contractions were waves or surges.

“Language can severely impact your birthing experience,” our instructor warned us. “It’s important to use positive self-talk when referring to your birthing time.”

There was homework every night—meditation CDs to listen to, pregnancy and birth affirmations to repeat, and activities to do with your birth partner intended to encourage deeper intimacy and bonding with the baby. (Not a fetus. Never a fetus). Every night, I’d lie down on the bed with Grendel and close my eyes, listening to the woman’s bewitching voice instructing me to count backward from three and transform myself into a state of complete relaxation.

Regardless of this preparation, as the weeks passed and my due date (or in Hypnobabies speak, *guess date*) approached, my dread loomed.

Ancient navigators thought the sea was filled with a number of dangerous sea monsters, but the Kraken, a legendary cephalopod-like beast in Nordic folklore was, by far, the most terrifying. So large as to sometimes be mistaken for an island, the danger was not simply the creature itself but the whirlpool left in its wake.

When I gave birth to my daughter, I became the Kraken. Forty hours of unmedicated labour followed by five hours of pushing will do that to a person. I grew extra limbs that flailed and thrashed. With each contraction, I rose from the birth pool like a colossal mollusk, ready to crush and consume.

Pain is meant to be a message to the brain that something’s wrong. In birth, pain is indicative of progress, but with that progress, fear barbed itself under my skin. My body’s quick recovery from birth proved how effective an unmedicated birth experience could be, but emotionally I felt weak, tortured by the knowledge that I had succeeded in the natural childbirth “dream” and all it did was render

me traumatized.

I was shocked when my midwife raised her head from between my legs and declared that I had no tearing. “Are you sure?” I asked, convinced my clitoris had split in two. I couldn’t believe there hadn’t been permanent damage.

Our apartment mimicked my battered insides. Blood and vomit tinted the water in the birth pool into a murky swamp. Large bloody pads and sheets overflowed from a garbage bag and the carpet was streaked with bright red stains. Grendel had the look of a war casualty, his eyes hollow and dulled from the roaring, exploding woman he witnessed rampaging naked around the apartment for the last two days.

When I told friends and family I had my baby at home, I was met with different reactions. Some expressed relief that I had managed to birth a living and healthy baby without medical assistance, while others considered me a birthing goddess, a warrior. Truthfully, I was a fraud. I couldn’t find the empowerment I was promised through Hypnobabies. If only they knew that, after Quintana was born, I wanted to unzip my skin and pull her back inside that space she once inhabited. I resented the trauma it took to release her from my body, and I wanted to consume her the way she consumed me.

My rage often teetered on eruption. Some days I wanted to sink the vessel of obligations she brought into my life. Some days I was swimming in circles, regardless of my wants, and the maelstrom dragged us all underwater.

Quintana runs all over the aquarium in hopes of finding more dead creatures to touch. I waddle after her, rapidly approaching my second child’s due date. Another daughter. I can picture the scene in my womb during her future departure, when she’ll abandon her ten-month vacation home via tsunami. I feel relatively confident in my ability to breastfeed her, to wake in the night with her, to care for her. We have baby clothes in a box in our storage room waiting to be laundered and folded. Yet I feel unprepared. It’s birth that I can’t seem to plan for, as though there were a true way to assemble one’s body into a readied

state to pass a human. So much depends on the baby's positioning and how she twists and contorts through the pelvis, the angle of her head as it propels through the birth canal.

There was a moment during Quintana's birth that clings to me as fervently as she did as a newborn. It was late afternoon and my active labour had already surpassed a full night and morning. I hadn't felt the urge to push, but began as soon as my midwife gave me the okay, desperate to do anything to speed up the process. The ramming in my pelvis convinced me that death from childbirth might be getting off easy—I was sure my clitoris would explode, shards of eight thousand nerve endings rocketing off into the atmosphere. As my vagina stretched to accommodate Quintana's head, the globe of her was like an eye lifting and erupting from its socket.

In Greek mythology, there is a legendary monster named Scylla that lives on one side of a narrow channel of water, opposite her counterpart, Charybdis. There are many accounts of Scylla's descent into madness. In some versions she sprouts multiple gruesome heads, each with snakelike necks and rows of jagged shark teeth. Sometimes her body consists of tentaclelike legs and a feline tail. In one telling she captures six sailors off the deck of their ship and devours them alive.

With every push, the pain made me clamp my palms down against Quintana's head in a futile attempt to cram her back inside. As I pushed, it felt like I was sprouting my own mutinous appendages, the pain giving me a voice that could tear apart the birth team that hovered around me.

The final push lasted five full gratifying seconds. So pleasurable was the release of her head into the open air that I was in ecstasy. After her head emerged, her ethereal body paused, her shoulders obstructing entry into the world. Time froze as we both waited for that next contraction and I became mythical, polycephalic, a double-headed monster twinning with my unborn.

The French obstetrician and childbirth specialist Michel Odent argues that pain plays a crucial role in the physiological process of labour and childbirth. If you take away the pain with a medicated industrialized

approach, you take away the process inherent in oxytocin, often referred to as the “love hormone,” a powerful biochemical elixir that provides natural endorphins during labour and allows labour to progress.

“You cannot extract the pain and keep the rest. It’s a chain of events,” Odent says. “So the objective should be that women are in such an environment that they can make the birth as easy as possible.”

I’m not sure where I stand on this. When I tried creating the environment to cushion the pain, the cosmos of it split open a torrent of fear. I hovered above myself, calculating how my body could withstand my daughter’s release.

It couldn’t, I decided.

I could only imagine the relief an epidural provided; along with the absence of pain, it seemed like a tether to the human world that I had abandoned. Pain is what I strived to escape from, what Hypnobabies promised me I could transcend, what I would have done anything to crawl out of, yet birth seemed to require pain as a guiding force.

Under optimal positioning and the best physiological and environmental circumstances, birth still requires a crossover into a murky and ambiguous state. Labour is otherworldly. *You’re so beautiful, so strong, so safe.* I could hear the words Dennis whispered to me, but they were so far away, like he was speaking to me underwater. I was aware of his presence but couldn’t access the comfort he offered.

I became unreachable, categorically alone.