

## Book Review

### **Matrescence: On the Metamorphosis of Pregnancy, Childbirth and Motherhood (2023)**

**Lucy Jones, ISBN: 9781802061307, Penguin, 320 pages, £12.99.**

I came across *Matrescence* by Lucy Jones when I was 9 months deep into my own period of postpartum fog. I hadn't slept for more than 60 minutes at a time, my hair was falling out in handfuls, I was dehydrated, over-caffeinated, simultaneously over and under stimulated, I had not read a book since my baby was born or brushed my teeth more than once a day. I felt both at my most lonely and my most connected, pulled through by my partner, family and close female friends who had done it before me. I had, up to this point, reliably got through life with a mixture of conscientiousness, enthusiasm and perfectionism. I yearned deeply to become a mum but the reality was not what I expected. My love for my son was like nothing I had ever known, and yet, so was the anxiety. I was consumed with obsessively tracking everything he did in the hope I might finally 'get it right'. I was supposed to be good at this. This was what I was 'meant' to do. However, despite all my preparation and research, my baby wouldn't sleep, needed held constantly, had a bad latch and cried inconsolably in cafes across the city. In my state of extreme sleep deprivation and mental depletion not only was I seemingly getting everything wrong but I felt wrong too.

I listened to Jones narrate her impeccably written examination into motherhood over multiple sittings. I listened as I tried desperately to get my baby to sleep on buggy walks or desperately try not to fall asleep myself as I held him during night wakes. To say it was my salvation sounds melodramatic, but in my paralysing state of overwhelm that is exactly what it was. In the spirit of feminists before her, Jones effortlessly linked the personal with the political and,

fascinatingly, the biological with the social. She named what I found unnameable and, through her highly scientific analysis helped me understand the question with which I had been wrestling - why was I finding this so, fucking, hard.

Matrescence is the concept popularised by Jones but first coined by Dana Raphael (1975). It is, in a similar vein to adolescence, a period of intense transformation characterised by great hormonal, physiological, physical, emotional and social changes. As babies are born, we are as mothers born too and yet this seismic shift is so rarely acknowledged in our western cultures. It goes unmarked, uncelebrated and we are expected to intuitively know what to do and smoothly succumb to this entirely new identity and purpose. *Matrescence* not only examines this transition as a life stage but also the ways in which our society fails new parents. The overt and covert ways in which women are unsupported, silenced, and scolded as they attempt to live up to impossible and contradictory expectations. Like adolescence, matrescence is an emotionally charged, formative time and the context in the UK exacerbates the struggle and misses the opportunity for supporting new mothers and protecting their mental health. Alarming, current statistics show that more than 10% of women experience post-natal depression (NHS, 2022). In a time where parental mental health is listed as a factor impacting long term health and happiness of children it seems counter-intuitive that more care (and funding) is not assigned to tackling this widespread, and debilitating issue.

Jones takes us through this journey of matrescence and the intricacies of pregnancy, birth, early parenthood and beyond. Each chapter is punctuated with a comparison to an organism from the natural world - from myxomycetes to seasquirts, emerald cockroach wasps to matricidal spiders. She uses her depth of knowledge to highlight matrescence as a highly functional and, at times ugly, biological process whereby our bodies and brains adapt to ensure our babies survival. With every scientific account she weaves in her own lived experience of motherhood

and the dichotomy of joy and tension, euphoria and ambivalence. This vulnerability was what I found most powerful and not only did it resonate with my own experience but it also validated my feelings of guilt, unworthiness, anxiety and all-consuming, earth-shattering love.

Matrescence concludes with a call to arms. A tour de force of the failings of our over-stretched maternity services, underfunded maternal support services and deeply flawed and crippling expensive childcare systems. This is situated within the context of neoliberalism and Capitalism and she convincingly details the benefits that better supporting parents would have to the economy and society in general. Jones uses examples of the ways in which other nations successfully embrace early motherhood as a period in which the health of the mother is considered as important as that of her baby. She highlights the financial and practical support on offer in countries such as Germany, Sweden, Romania and the Netherlands and how the UK fails in comparison. The arguments are compelling and despite such a bleak picture she still miraculously finishes the book on a hopeful note. One which marries the happiness with the pain and the anger with the opportunity for meaningful change.

This book is not a typical Community Education text but I feel it still holds relevance within our field. It shines a light on the experience and language of matrescence for individuals, and provides a wider commentary about how our society views motherhood - how agendas of individualism and capitalism do mothers, fathers and their babies a huge disservice. Perhaps it will speak to you or a loved one's experiences and help demystify this period of change. For me, it was as significant a discovery as feminism itself. And, happily, it inspired me start reading again.

## References

Jones, L. (2024) *Matrescence: On the Metamorphosis of Pregnancy, Childbirth and Motherhood*. London: Penguin Books.

NHS (2022) *Overview - Postnatal depression*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/post-natal-depression/overview/> (Accessed January 2025) (Page last reviewed: 04/08/2022. Next review due: 04/08/2025)

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