



Homing Instincts: Early Motherhood on a Midwestern Farm

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Sarah Menkedick spent her twenties trekking alone across South America, teaching English to recalcitrant teenagers on Reunion Island, picking grapes in France and camping on the Mongolian grasslands; for her, meaning and purpose were to be found on the road, in flight from the ordinary. Yet the biggest and most transformative adventure of her life might be one she never anticipated: at 31, she moves into a tiny 19th-century cabin on her family's Ohio farm, and begins the journey into motherhood.

In eight vivid and boldly questioning essays, Menkedick explores the luminous, disorienting time just before and after becoming a mother. As she reacquaints herself with the subtle landscapes of the Midwest, and adjusts to the often surprising physicality of pregnancy, she ruminates on what this new stage of life means for her long-held concepts of self, settling, and creative fulfillment. In "Millie, Mildred, Grandma Menkedick," she considers the nature of story through the life of her tough German grandmother, who raised two boys as a single mother in the 1950s and then spent her seventies traveling the world with her best friend Marge; in "Motherland," on a trip back to Oaxaca, Mexico to visit her husband's family, she finally embraces her Midwestern roots; in "The Milk Cave," she discovers in breastfeeding a new appreciation for the spiritual and artistic potential of boredom; and in "The Lake," she revisits her childhood with her father, whose relentless optimism and mystical streak she sees anew once she has a child of her own.

A story of a traveler come home to the farm; of becoming a mother in spite of reservations and doubt; and of learning to appreciate the power and beauty of the quotidian, *Homing Instincts* speaks to the deepest concerns and hopes of a generation.

Homing Instincts: Early Motherhood on a Midwestern Farm Details

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Andrew Knott says

Excellent essay collection from a talented writer. Even though my life before kids was completely different than the author's, many of the themes and concepts she explores are highly relatable. Plus, it was nice to get a look at parenting from a perspective different than my own.

Emily says

A meditation on a year of mothering and motherhood-to-be, beautifully written essays that examine one woman's experience--utterly unique in some ways, amazingly universal in others.

If you're going through a period of change, pregnancy or otherwise, you'll appreciate Sarah's journey.

Sharon says

More than a book about early motherhood, Homing Instincts is about big questions like: How do we make meaning of our lives? How do we teach ourselves to be patient? How do we learn to inhabit the moment, fully and mindfully? How to begin to enjoy stillness, of mind and body? How do we embrace all the activity in our bodies and minds and in nature without trying, constantly, to BE something and DO something ambitious and competitive and snapshot-worthy?

What's beautiful about this book is that it allows us to follow a brilliant mind at work. When the LA Times Review called Homing Instincts "a pregnant Walden," it wasn't far off the mark. Thoreau challenged readers to think differently, to start from scratch and leave no assumptions unexamined, and Menkedick does the same.

For me, though, it's always the writing itself that interests me even more than the content, and it's here that Menkedick dazzles. Her work has a lyrical, poetic quality that's hypnotic.

Here's an example, chosen almost at random (because there are lovely, lovely passages on every page): "I sit on the rooftop terrace eating persimmons. They have the taut flesh of plums but the strangest most decadent interior of any fruit I've ever tasted. They seem as though they were crafted in an elaborate hipster San Francisco kitchen: a touch of Madagascar vanilla, a dash of Saigon cinnamon, and the plushness of a rum-drenched cake. We've never seen them in Oaxaca before, and we buy them in twos and threes at the market in spite of their exorbitant price. They appear only in my pregnancy; when we return over a year later we cannot find them anywhere."

Even if you're not pregnant and never will be, you'll savor the exquisite descriptions and insights of this gorgeous book.

Samantha says

Menkedick is a fantastic writer - the vivid descriptions of her life feel as if I'm right there with her. However, I guess I'm not one for essay/prose type books. I felt it was harder to follow compared to a regular nonfiction. But this is just my personal preference.

Becca says

Since I'm 23 weeks pregnant, I expected to *love* this, but it wasn't quite what I hoped it would be... maybe it was the way her essays meander, the fact that I can't relate to her cozy family life, the zen quotes, that despite the subtitle "Early Motherhood on a Midwestern Farm," 2/3rds of the book was about pregnancy, that her takeaways were so cliché (one example: this year on the farm taught me the importance of family)?

There's a lot to like here too though!

I enjoyed the research into lobsters and salmon - how they find their way back to where they're from, just as people sometimes do (hence the title, Homing Instincts).

I liked the stories about her travels, her father, and her husband's upbringing.

I appreciated her candid descriptions of feeling impatient with her baby's crying, then feeling guilty (as if she were now two selves: restless traveler and beatific mother).

I really liked the questions she poses about presence vs. achievement (especially in the context of sitting through the boredom of breastfeeding vs. multitasking on her new iPhone), travel/adventure vs. putting down roots, the creative pursuits that call to her vs. earning money for her family somehow...

Kevin Ionno says

This morning I read an essay from Homing Instincts: Early Motherhood on a Midwestern Farm, a newly released book by Sarah Menkedick. It's a collection of essays about her transition from free spirited wanderer to motherhood as she takes up life with her husband in a cabin on her father's farm before and after the arrival of their daughter. The essay called "The Lake" is a musing about her dad's lifelong love, kindness and encouragement toward her. She recalls the ungrudging sacrifices he chose in his life that opened the possibility for her's. Only now as she reflects on her own thoughts and actions as a mother does she crack open the door of understanding about the instincts that guided her father's drive to both shelter her spirit and send it soaring. Along the way she awakens to the preciousness of life's small moments which mean both everything and nothing, explores her changing relationship to writing, and finds an unfolding sense of place.

Sarah's description of her relationship with her dad is tender and flows from a deeply rooted bond. The strength of his acceptance is a lifelong haven for her. His optimism she occasionally finds untethered to reality yet it has served him well, as has his acquiescence to the mystery of life. He is an accomplished man. In one poignant passage he holds his fussy granddaughter as Sarah whips up a squash blossom quesadilla and then feeds it to him with her fingers. In that instant she flashes on a shift in roles, seeing him in his approaching old age. She becomes the parent, he the child.

Sarah writes with a brilliance born of reflection and intelligence, and is capable of creating images that spring to life in the reader's imagination. Her prose often dances on the margins of poetry.

Akhila says

Oh my, I loved this one. Reading it felt like a breath of fresh air, like being outdoors, like slowing things down... it felt like one long, beautiful meditation on life, on change, on growth, and on growing a new life - on giving birth. I could relate to so much of her book (despite not having kids). I loved hearing about the changes the author has gone through, from a life full of travel and adventure to something slower, to something more mundane and yet in finding beauty and happiness in a new way in a slower way of life. It was just.. gorgeous and soothing. Highly recommend.

Megan Murphy says

A friend told me about this book as we are both mothers of young children. My goodness, Ms Menkedick has given identity to emotions and feelings I have experienced but couldn't express. My interest was piqued because I heard it was about motherhood, but then I found it to be about so much more. I can imagine each reader will recognize his/her own experiences in Menkedick's perceptions about life. Her words reveal the worth of the seemingly mundane details of living.

I'm so grateful for her honesty and courage in sharing her deepest thoughts and experiences. And I'm so in awe of the sheer brilliance she has in doing so.

What a gift to myself to steal away the time to read each essay.

Anna Keating says

I liked her stuff on travel, how she traveled to tell people she'd traveled, etc.

Natalie says

I just finished reading this collection of essays over a weekend. Sarah Menkedick shares her journey through her pregnancy and early motherhood. Her story of transformation of self and purpose is both incredibly personal and universal.

R. says

Mixed feelings about this one. The subtitle is misleading, since the vast majority of the book takes place before the baby arrives. That's a minor quibble, though; my bigger issue was with the aimless, meandering nature of the essays. There was a bit too much poetry for my taste: glinting leaves and freshly picked blueberries and crisp evenings on the porch and so on. That's good in small doses, but I soon found myself skipping ahead in search of some revelations about what pregnancy and birth and having a newborn were like (which is the primary reason I keep reading motherhood memoirs, and why I found Meaghan O'Connell's so satisfying). I did appreciate reading a memoir in which the author did not have a completely awful birth and postpartum period; her mixed happiness as a new mom was a nice counterpoint to all the

doom and gloom that seems to dominate this genre lately. I was frustrated by (and, honestly, jealous of) the extent to which money and making a living didn't seem to be a concern; what a privilege, and a mostly unexplored one, to spend one's 20s traveling the world before living rent-free on a family farm. Though a professional writer myself, I couldn't really relate to her struggles to find herself and Make Art; my challenges are more quotidian, like how to afford daycare and grow my 401k. My favorite part by far was the last chapter about her relationship with her dad; it was beautifully written and moving.

Heather says

Perfect! Such a gorgeous deep-dive into so many aspects of early motherhood: ambivalence about parenting, feminine aspiration, bodily transformation, domestic intelligence, and above all, the spiritual inquiries of the self: what it is, what it means. It's a book that's hard to encapsulate, and even Menkedick writes in the last few pages, "I have shred the pressing need for purpose. I don't need to be able to define a book's themes, its goals, its message." There is far more essaying here than narrative or plot, and given Menkedick's conclusions, the form makes perfect sense. Still, a plot builds from essay to essay, hinging on Sarah Menkedick's own transformation as a mother, from external adventure-seeker to internal resider, a person who has learned to see the world up-close. It's a beautiful book.

Alexia says

A moving and incredibly honest view into pregnancy and family bonds

I can't easily put into words just how much I loved reading Homing Instincts. Especially so soon after finishing the book, with Menkedick's incredible prose and vivid imagery, I feel so self-conscious about the way I write.

This is an incredible book, and do not be misled by the title into thinking Homing Instincts are not for you. I have never had an interest in reading about pregnancy before and am not planning on having children myself, but reading the book made me appreciate all the process of pregnancy and early motherhood, all the sacrifice and all the gains at the same time. In some way, reading Homing Instincts made it clearer to me that having a baby is not for me, but I have also formed a new-found respect for child-bearing.

This book is also about so much more than pregnancy and motherhood. It's hard to describe it, but I'd say it's also about human nature and what it feels to truly appreciate life and its everyday moments.

One of my favorite parts of the book was the closing chapter, which is about Menkedick's father and how he raised her, and the strength of their bond.

I hope you'll decide to read this book. It was an amazing experience!

Miriam says

I'm giving this memoir a 3.5 because it's not bad but I don't particularly like Menkedick's writing style.

This is a memoir of Sarah Menkedick's journey to motherhood on a rural farm in Ohio. Each chapter begins

as a straightforward description of her life and proceeds to weave back and forth from past to present and to the past again. It's more stream-of-consciousness than I prefer. If you are interested in the topic or want to know what happens to Menkedick, peruse this short book.

Look for a different review in the Ohioana Library Quarterly <http://www.ohioana.org>

Roxanne says

I have loved Sarah's essays since the Vela days, and I devoured this book between three long, hot June afternoons. I am not a mother, and yet she writes about motherhood and pregnancy and place and wandering and ambition and writing in ways that gripped me.

A favorite quote: "Part of the task of the self is to organize the world into hierarchies, tiers of relationships and preferences and desired outcomes and should. But death levels all that, and we are left with a cup of coffee, does of trinkets, the green lichens on bare branches, pizza."
