

After Birth Study Guide

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Plot Summary

After Birth is the story of a young woman named Ari who lives with her husband, Paul, in an abandoned mill town in upstate New York. They moved there after Paul got a job teaching in a local college. They bought a huge old house with lots of character and in need of regular repair. The town is economically depressed but Ari enjoys the antique shops, coffee shops and other entrepreneurial businesses she finds.

As the story opens, Ari and Paul's son, Walker, is a year old and Ari still suffers from postpartum depression from which she finds no relief until she befriends recent resident, Mina Morris. Mina is a poet and former member of a girl group with a very colorful past. Ari wants more than anything to make friends with the elusive Mina, who she thinks has to be more interesting than any of the other people Ari has found in town. Paul is a college professor, loyal husband and devoted father but he is not emotionally equipped to help Ari in her depressed state. Ari relies on wine and marijuana, given to her by her gay neighbors, Crispin and Jerry, to get her over the really bad parts in her life. When Ari needs a life line, Crispin and Jerry feed her dinners and let her spend hours of time at their house, just talking and laughing.

Ari has flashbacks of her life throughout the book which help fill in her life story so far. Ari's mother died from cancer when Ari was young, most probably having inherited the tendency from her own mother who took a synthetic hormone called DES to prevent miscarriages. Ari's story also includes her Jewish heritage including her maternal grandmother who survived the Auschwitz concentration camp by becoming a whore for Nazi soldiers. Ari's father and his new wife don't fully condone Ari's marriage to a man who isn't Jewish and can't get over the fact that Walker isn't circumcised.

When Mina has her own baby, Ari is finally able to bond with someone who has shared some of the same experiences. Ari has lacked the usual female support that most women receive after childbirth because she has no sisters and her mother died when she was young. Overall, Ari is angry about what has happened to her body as a result of a C-section and the unrelenting needs of her son. When Mina makes the decision to move back to the city, Ari is bereft but realizes that this is just another phase and she will build her new life with her husband and child the best she can.

November, Pages 1-30

Summary

Ari lives in a rundown mill town in upstate New York which has seen recent new development and the revitalization of some historic homes. Ari's neighbors, Crispin and Jerry, have renovated one of these homes and have rented it to a poet named Mina Morris. Ari's son, Walker, is almost a year old and her life revolves around him. Ari is Mina's contact as Crispin and Jerry are out of town, so Ari does an online search about Mina and learns that she was a poet and a bass player in a girl group in the eighties.

Ari recalls the bleak days after giving birth to her son last year and how her life is no longer her own. Ari tries to share her depression with her husband, Paul, and he tries to help but simply can't grasp the depths of Ari's postpartum state. They live in a college town, having moved from Brooklyn when Paul got his teaching job here. Their house is a four-bedroom with a great porch in a town of sporadic historic renovations. Paul's colleague, Cat, visits sometimes and she and Ari seem to get along fine but they're not really friends. Ari works one day a week at a food co-op which is where she first sees Mina who is pregnant. Ari occasionally meets with her favorite professor, Marianne, to talk about Ari's dissertation.

Ari recalls her first friend, Nora Pulaski, whom she met in kindergarten. Ari was envious when Nora called her mother, "Mommy"; Ari's mother made her call her by her name, Janice. Ari also recalls meeting Paul when he was an associate professor and she was a grad student, 15 years younger than he is. Paul left his long term girlfriend in order to be with Ari. Ari's Jewish family doesn't stay in regular contact with her since she married Paul who isn't Jewish. Paul is not very mechanical around the house so when an animal invades the attic, they call their friend and handyman, Will, who helps them with the quirks of an old house.

Ari has a hard time calling Walker's birthday his birthday; to her it is more like surgery day because she had to have a C-section when the baby was way past his due date. Ari can't help but recall the horrors of the procedure and the exhausting recovery period in which she did not feel maternal at all.

Ari takes Walker to childcare for a few hours on four days a week so she can work on her dissertation but she has no interest in it. Ari is conflicted by feelings of needing to be away from Walker and then obsessing about him. Ari tried to join some groups with other mothers but found she couldn't relate to them and didn't continue.

Ari recalls the second friend she ever had, Jenny Jacobson, whom she met in the sixth grade. Jenny lived on Park Avenue in New York and her parents were divorcing but that was not as bad as being Ari whose mother was dying from cancer. Ari remembers hitting Jenny on the jaw when she talked about how tragic it was that Ari's mother was dying at such a young age.



Analysis

The author establishes the main character, Ari, in her situation as a new mother struggling with her identity at this phase in her life. The setting of the book is a former mill town, Utrecht, New York, which is now a college town. Her husband, Paul, is a professor there and spends much of his time there. Ari is 15 years younger than Paul and she met him when she was a grad student at another school. She stole him away from his long time girlfriend and they moved to this town when Paul got a new position at the college. Some of the town is being revitalized and historic homes refurbished but mostly stores are abandoned and nothing is really thriving. Ari feels isolated from the world she used to know and struggles with adapting.

The setting seems to mirror Ari's state of mind at the time. She has a one-year-old child whom she loves but she struggles with alternately adoring him and hating what her life has become because of him. Ari suffers from postpartum depression and this will be an important theme throughout the book.

She also struggles with the lack of female support during this time when a woman typically needs the help of other women who have given birth and raised a child. Ari's mother was distant even before she died, making Ari call her by her name instead of letting her call her mommy. And now the other members of Ari's family have distanced themselves from her because she married a man who isn't Jewish. Their prejudice will be another recurring theme in the book.

It is also important to note that the author has organized the book according to a three-month period to indicate the huge impact of having a child and how so much can occur--or not--in the life of a woman.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Ari so depressed almost a year after her first child is born?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Ari not have any real family or friend support during this time in her life? Why is that important?

Discussion Question 3

Why is the setting of the town she lives in so symbolic for Ari's state of mind right now?



Vocabulary

clawfoot, nouveau riche, plaque, elaborate, rehabbing, avuncular, imperatives, obscure, enlightenment, jaundiced, regeneration, aesthetic, annihilation, misogynists, morose, assumptive, tenure, stoic, cauterized, disembodiment, requisite, moppet, couscous, bootlegs, homage, sonic, dissertation, apocalypse



November Pages 31-63

Summary

Ari and Paul attend a faculty party at Cam's house where she finally gets to meet Mina. Mina is as bored as Ari is with the dull faculty types so she and Ari talk for a bit about Mina's pregnancy. When Mina leaves, Ari makes her way upstairs to a bedroom and lies down to nap. Paul is not happy that she has essentially left the party but Ari enjoyed herself.

Ari thinks about her father and his new wife, Sheryl, who come up from New York to visit occasionally. They try to do the correct grandparent things but are awkward around the baby. Ari's father is an ophthalmologist and Sheryl runs an organization that promotes Jewish books. After Ari's mother died, her father married a much younger woman but it didn't last past a year. After that, there was a woman he had known in school with whom he reconnected for about six months but they never married. He ultimately found Sheryl via the Internet.

It has been 17 years since Ari's mother died and Paul can sense that Ari is feeling out of sorts but he doesn't know what to do for her. He just gives her a look like he does sometimes when he's about to suggest that she take a day off, get a massage or maybe schedule an appointment with a therapist. Ari is just frustrated with him.

Ari recalls that her mother's mother was prone to miscarriages but when she conceived Ari's mother she was given the drug, DES (Diethylstilbestrol) which was a synthetic estrogen. It prevented a miscarriage but subjected the fetus to cancer. There is no information on what happens to the daughters of those women but Ari receives information periodically from the CDC to get checked. Ari's mother was diagnosed with cancer six months after Ari was born.

Will comes one day and removes the attic trap that has caught a squirrel. He and Ari talk for awhile and he asks about her dissertation. Will is impressed but Ari doesn't care much about it anymore. She's not sure what she should do if that opportunity passes though. Ari feels like Will actually enjoys talking to her which is a switch from Paul who is a good husband but doesn't really keep her company.

Ari thinks about the days immediately after Walker's birth and how he required constant care and that she couldn't give him to Paul because she felt the baby was her responsibility. Caring for Walker was far more physically demanding that Ari could have ever imagined. Ari's father and Sheryl came to spend a few days to help Ari and they berated Ari and Paul for not having Walker circumcised. They were also uncomfortable with how outright Ari was when she breastfeeds the baby.

When Walker was still tiny and Ari was going out of her mind, she began to spend time at Crispin and Jerry's house. They fed her, held the baby and gave her some marijuana



to take the edge off her nerves. Their evenings continued all winter and spring until Crispin and Jerry leave for Europe.

Ari recalls that her mother was sick off and on all during Ari's childhood and then died in November when Ari was in the seventh grade. Her father came to her room that night to tell her that it was all over. Ari remembers a big condolence card from her classmates but she hated how everyone treats her differently.

Last November, Paul and Ari took Walker to her father's home for Thanksgiving but they left early because her cousin, Erica, had asked Ari to be in her February wedding but they didn't want any children to attend. Ari protested that Walker was a newborn and still nursing but Erica was unmoved.

One day, Ari gets a phone message from a man named Bryan staying with Mina who tells Ari that the furnace and hot water heater have gone out at Crispin and Jerry's house. Ari calls Will and they proceed to the house. Ari is surprised to see that Mina is holding her newborn baby. She delivered the child four days ago with the help of a midwife at the house. Ari wants to know where Mina's family is since a new mother needs help but Mina just laughs hysterically.

Analysis

The theme of childbirth is the main one in the story. Ari's life is consumed by how having a baby has altered her life, not all for the better. Having a baby which is supposed to be a natural act, was a surgical procedure for Ari who can't get used to the idea that she was cut wide open to deliver her child. She suffers almost more from the emotional effects of that than the physical effects of the surgery. She is consumed with the baby's care almost non-stop and she has ceased to exist as an individual person.

Pregnancy and childbirth have also altered Ari's relationships which is another important theme in the book. Ari and Paul have to learn how to be parents together and not just spouses and lovers. They also have this tiny new person with whom they need to bond and develop relationships. Ari's relationship with her father and stepmother also changes because they now are more critical of her decisions since she is responsible for a baby. They become more vocal in their criticisms, too, such as wondering why Walker is not circumcised. This continues the theme of prejudice as they don't like the fact that Ari has married a man who isn't Jewish.

Some people, like Ari's cousin, Erica, can't adjust to the fact that Ari has a child and that her life is no longer her own. Erica's demands on Ari regarding her wedding are selfish and not considerate of a new mother and baby. This plays into the theme of women's relationships. Ari finds that her relationships with other girls and women throughout her life change and evolve and definitely change once a child has entered into their lives. Erica is not yet a mother and can't fully comprehend Ari's angst at the thought of leaving her baby with someone else in order to attend Erica's wedding.



With Crispin and Jerry out of the country, Ari doesn't really have any close relationships. She had hoped she would have made some friends working in the food co-op but that hasn't happened either. Ari longs to have a woman to talk about her life but there really isn't anyone until Mina. She and Mina actually begin their friendship over a talk about Mina's pregnancy and that will extend through the book.

The animals in the house symbolize Ari's state of mind in which she feels trapped in a new life which she has entered into for security but it also restrains her and she still tries to find a way out.

Discussion Question 1

What was Ari's father's dating situation after her mother died?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Ari so frustrated when Paul does not remember the anniversary of her mother's death?

Discussion Question 3

What were the circumstances surrounding Ari's mother's getting cancer?

Vocabulary

envy, condescending, contraptions, ballyhooed, melancholic, sciatica, ficus, superficiality, insular, rousing, audible, beseeched, genocide, tentative, proverbial, primal, dissertation, recompense, pobrecita, funereal, berate, circumcision, inaugural, doting, estranged, narcissism, claustrophobic



December, Pages 63-92

Summary

Early one morning, Ari can hear her mother talking to her as she breastfeeds her son. Her mother thinks that giving a baby formula and some Benadryl will fill him or her up and let them sleep longer. Her mother also taunts Ari about her messy house, her baby's name and her abandoned dissertation.

Ari goes with Will to Crispin and Jerry's to fix the heat and water heater. The man named Bryan is there and Ari learns that he is an old friend of Mina's. Ari sympathizes with Mina whose breasts are engorged and painful. Mina has named her baby Zev which means wolf. Both Ari and Mina commiserate over their lack of mothers and sisters to help them through this period of adjustment to new babies.

Ari ends up going to Erica's wedding. Walker is left with a babysitter and some bottles but Ari leaves the wedding early to get home to nurse him.

Ari envies the fact that Mina had her baby naturally while Ari had a C-section. She also can't stop talking about how C-section babies have respiratory problems and low Apgar scores. There are also complications that the mothers suffer, too, such as uterine tissue infection, decreased bowel function, blood clots and urinary tract infections. They are also more prone to postpartum depression.

Mina calls Ari for help because Zev is having trouble breastfeeding and isn't gaining weight. Mina is desperate to calm her crying baby but refuses to give him formula as her doctor advised her to do. She wants Zev to have breast milk and not some chemically processed product. Mina tries again but she and Zev can't make any progress. Ari decides to fix Mina a meal and then begins to breastfeed Zev. Ari recalls a kind nurse in the hospital who helped her learn how to breastfeed Walker and how that made such a big difference in how they have been so successful in the process.

Paul is skittish making love with Ari because he doesn't want to risk having another child right now even though he is crazy about Walker. Women stop Ari all the time to tell her how lucky she is to have a husband who is so good with his little boy. In fact, Ari sometimes feels neglected because Paul focuses on Walker so much.

Ari recalls the days of puberty when girls her age plunged into a life of teeth whitening, waxing, nail polish, electrolysis and dermatology. Ari's father essentially ignored her maturing body. She and her friend, Shane, were sounding boards for each other in attempts to help each other through this difficult period. One of Ari's father's girlfriends, Arlene, took her to a dermatologist, electrolysis salon and a gynecologist because her father was clueless about how to help her. Ari was not one of the teeny tiny girls and was never very popular.



Analysis

Breastfeeding is an important theme in this section. One day as Ari nurses Walker, she can hear her mother's voice talking to her about breastfeeding and how Ari should just give Walker formula in a bottle. That is how Ari's mother fed her and it's easier on everyone involved. Ari, however, wants the bonding with her baby that breastfeeding brings and wants him to have the health benefits too. It's possible that Ari will tend to go overboard in taking care of her child because Ari's own mother was distant with her and then died when Ari was a young girl.

Ari's life is consumed with Walker because he is totally dependent on her. It is extremely difficult for her to leave him with a babysitter to go to Erica's wedding because she has to leave milk in bottles for him. In relation to everything else about motherhood, Ari has had an easy time with breastfeeding. Mina has not been as lucky. She and her baby are having a difficult time and the baby is not getting enough nourishment. Ari's mothering instincts kick in and she breastfeeds Mina's baby so that he will get full and be able to sleep. It is very generous of her to do this for someone else's child, but Ari has natural mothering abilities even if she questions herself sometimes.

Ari continues to recall her childhood friends and how they struggled through puberty. Because Ari's mother was dead, she had no one to take her to all the grooming appointments that the other girls were going to with their mothers. Her father's girlfriend helped out some but Ari always felt inadequate because she didn't have a mother and because she felt big and awkward around the smaller girls whom she thought were prettier and more popular.

Ari hearing her mother's voice symbolizes the disapproval she feels about herself and her life. When Ari talks to her dead mother throughout the story, her mother is chastising her for something and these conversations symbolize Ari's sense of disappointment in herself for not being able to manage the childbirth experience any better than she thinks she has.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ari hear her mother speaking to her and chastising her even though her mother is dead?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Ari envy the fact that Mina delivered her baby naturally?

Discussion Question 3

How do Ari's nurturing abilities help Mina and Zev adapt to each other?

Vocabulary

chaotic, moppet, idiotic, dissertation, hysterical, winces, culmination, transcend, assiduously, condescension, lodestar, tableau, amniotic, neonatal, postpartum, scant, quasi, perpetrate, fallacy, serotonin, cobalt, conjure, hospice, fanfare, demure, utopia



December Pages 92-131

Summary

Ari questions herself about why she can't just relax into motherhood. She reasons that she has been cut in half and that the child is her responsibility even though there are other people who can help her. They did hire an older woman to come in and help during the week but Ari is frustrated because the woman asks her what she wants done, when all Ari wants is to be told what to do. When Walker was a newborn, Ari was frantic during the days until Paul would return from work and be completely at ease with the baby. Paul encourages Ari to get out more but all she can contemplate is how much better off they would be if she were to kill herself.

Ari continues to nurse Zev until Mina can increase her milk supply. Mina and Ari talk about how weird it is to be a mother but it's because no one ever told them how things would be. They were never taught skills like sewing, growing things, fixing things, birthing babies, feeding babies and everything else women are supposed to be able to know how to do. One day Ari encounters a new mother in a cafe and offers some support if the woman finds herself having a hard time at home.

It's been four months since Erica's wedding and she is worried that she isn't pregnant yet. Ari tries to encourage her to relax about it. Erica wants to know when you know you're ready for pregnancy and Ari says she is never ready for anything, things just happen, and that Erica needs to calm down about it.

Ari and Walker begin spending much of their time with Mina and Zev. Ari continues to nurse Zev as Mina nurses Walker because he can suck stronger and help Mina's milk production. They eat and nap and talk and enjoy being mothers together.

Ari recalls going to Jewish summer camp when she was younger where she became friends with an older girl named Jessica. She was a rich girl from Boston who traveled a lot and Ari was enamored with her worldly ways. She began to copy the way Jessica dressed and emulated what Jessica liked such as yoga, vegetarianism and hippie clothes. They even got matching tattoos together. They kept in touch during college but then Jessica joined the Peace Corps, fell in love and now lives in Germany.

Ari hangs on Mina's every word when she describes her birthing experience and she is envious of Mina's elation. Ari tells Paul that she really loves being around Mina and that she's going to try hard not to mess up their friendship.

Ari and Paul attend a Christmas party at Cam and Betsy's house and people are condescending because Walker says "boobie" which means he wants to nurse. They think that if a child is old enough to ask for the breast, he is too old to still be breastfeeding. Ari launches a sarcastic tirade of how they should get rid of women who prefer to give their children natural, loving experiences instead of buying manufactured



formula and food from mega corporations. Ari leaves the house with Walker in her arms and goes to see Mina who understands everything.

One day Mina tells Ari about her life after she left the girl band. She played with a couple other bands briefly and then she just floated around for awhile, traveling and writing. Ari asks Mina about having ECT (electroconvulsive therapy) in the psychiatric hospital but Mina doesn't remember anything about it.

Ari begins to totally enjoy Walker who is developing his own sweet personality. She can't believe it's possible but she loves him more and more every day. She hopes she doesn't do anything to mess him up.

On New Year's Eve, Ari, Cat and Bryan go to a party consisting mostly of local college kids. Bryan and Ari dance and he asks if she's happy and she deflects. On New Year's Day, Ari makes dinner and invites Mina and Bryan. The topic of childbirth comes up and Ari says that women are as afraid of it as they are of death and try to do everything to numb their way through it.

Analysis

Ari struggles with her identity now that she has had a child who depends on her for everything. The flashbacks in the book show a side of Ari that bordered on irresponsible and caring non-stop for another person is a new experience for her. She still has lots of anger, an important theme in the book, because her body was cut in order to give life to her child. She had to suffer the physical and emotional pain related to a C-section as opposed to giving birth naturally like most women do. Paul is at a loss on how to help Ari with this dilemma but probably no one who hasn't experienced it would understand the postpartum depression and anger. Perhaps Ari is mourning the death of who she used to be and she's having a difficult time with that grief as well.

Ari does show signs of improvement, though, in that she is able to calmly counsel Erica who is frantic because she has been married for four months and isn't pregnant yet. Ari advises Erica to relax and not stress about her situation. Ari is also able to help Mina work through new motherhood issues such as when Zev is not able to nurse properly. Ari can quickly see that Zev is not getting enough milk from his mother so she breastfeeds him so that he gets full and can fall asleep. It is ironic that someone who claims to have such anxiety about motherhood knows exactly what to do and how to help others manage through difficult situations. Perhaps Ari is not giving herself enough credit for what she has learned and how powerful her maternal instincts really are.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ari alternately love her life and then want to commit suicide?



Discussion Question 2

What do Ari and Mina supply for each other that no one else seems to be able to do?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Ari take Walker and storm out of the Christmas party when the topic turns to breastfeeding?

Vocabulary

enraged, vigilant, enormity, imperative, dread, cherub, cohesive, swath, burqa, excrement, cackle, sway, oblivious, warrant, primal, cosmic, mythic, cacophony, Semitic, paramount, bipedal, taunting, malevolent, palsy, cremains, pandemic

January, Pages 131-164

Summary

Sheryl invites Ari to come to the city for a day out even though Ari would rather do any number of things instead. She and Sheryl get their nails done and later Ari meets with Marianne and they talk about feminist writers. Ari is impatient and just wants to get home to nurse Walker.

Ari gets a new co-worker at the co-op, a woman who has just returned from visiting her daughter and new grandchild in Oregon. Ari is envious of the time that the daughter had with her mother.

Ari tells about how her grandmother survived the Auschwitz concentration camp by becoming a whore for the Nazi soldiers. Her grandmother was given food, a cot, heat and some clothes in return. Her grandmother's friend was also saved from death because she was a seamstress for Nazi wives and children. Ari's grandmother met her husband in a refugee camp and he was very old when Ari knew him.

Ari met her best friend, Molly, at a party after college graduation. Molly dressed horribly and was depressed and bubbly all at the same time. Ari loved her because she was funny, charming and authentic. Molly had a job running errands for a television show and Ari was doing the same for a film producer. Eventually Molly started grad school and took up with Paul and Molly bounced from low level writing jobs and bemoaned the fact that she wasn't getting close to marriage. Ari began to pull away from her and Molly moved to Los Angeles and they don't speak anymore.

As Ari's due date to deliver the baby drew closer, Paul tried to keep the mood light but Ari grew more irritable. When the due date passed and the baby was still not born, the doctor decided to induce labor. Ari agreed because of the potential harm to the baby. That is why Ari calls Walker's birthday, "surgery day." She has trouble calling his birthday a birthday because she feels she is a big failure in not delivering him naturally.

Winter seems to drag on for Ari and Mina so they take a little trip to a little town called Victory where they check out an old abandoned textile mill. They walk among the broken glass and decaying wood and Mina tells Ari about her days in the band.

Ari recalls her grandmother who never recovered from the horrors of Auschwitz. She wondered why she couldn't have done more to save her siblings and friends. Even after moving to America with her husband, the effects remained and she miscarried several times. She was even given electroshock therapy and sent home to rest until her anxiety level improved. Then she was given DES to stop the miscarriages and Ari's mother was born. Eighteen years later she killed herself by sticking her head in the gas oven.

Ari recalls meeting her mentor, Marianne, in grad school and how they became such good friends. Marianne's work centered on how we look at women, how we understand



and own them by looking at them. Marianne treated Ari like the daughter she never had. This made all the other girls hate Ari but she didn't care. Marianne was not overjoyed when Ari told her she was pregnant. Ari's dissertation, or lack of it, will be a source of angst for Ari throughout the book. She feels as if she should devote time to completing it not only because she committed to it but also because it would remind her of the person she used to be.

Analysis

Sometimes throughout the book it seems as if Ari is whining about her lack of female support and how things would be different if she had had a mother or even a sister in her life. But at other times, it's amazing that Ari is able to function as well as she does given the bleak family history she has. In this section, Ari talks about how her grandmother survived the Auschwitz concentration camp by becoming a whore for the Nazi soldiers. Her grandmother never recovered from that, had shock therapy to help with the trauma of it and ultimately committed suicide by sticking her head in a gas oven. Ari's own mother got cancer and died when Ari was a girl as a result of her own mother receiving DES treatments to prevent miscarriages. Ari clearly has no female history that is healthy and normal. She has nothing to pattern after so it makes sense that she is floundering at times. Ari's father's girlfriends try to step in and help Ari at different points but they are no substitute for a female family member who knows all about you and loves you for who you are as a person.

The theme of women's relationships continues in this section. Throughout the story, the author has provided flashbacks of Ari at different stages of her life and the girlfriends she had at the time. They all met needs that Ari had at the moment and she learned something from all of them. Sometimes it appears as if Ari easily disposes of people when they no longer fulfill a need she has, but it really is the nature of life that people come and go in your life as you move through phases. People change and their lives change and old friends drop away as new friendships are forged.

Discussion Question 1

How did Ari's grandmother stay alive during her time at the Auschwitz concentration camp?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways was Ari's grandmother's life forever impacted by her experiences at Auschwitz?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways was Marianne a surrogate mother figure to Ari?



Vocabulary

exhorted, quirky, sumptuous, nurselings, pluck, lecithin, fenugreek, transcendental, deportation, lineage, voluminous, almondine, parched, perverse, agoraphobic, proverbial, cohort, contemplate, floundered, biconvex, bombous, bulbiform, cornute, gibbous, odontoid



January, Pages 164-193

Summary

Ari finally talks to Mina about the successful book Mina had written a few years ago. Mina tries to pass it off as no big deal and is still baffled by the celebrity it brought her. Then Mina shocks Ari by telling her that she and Zev are moving to Brooklyn to live with Mina's sister. Mina is tired of living in the small town, plus her sister has been surprisingly nice lately so they're going to spend some time together. Ari is devastated and can't believe that Mina is leaving her and their friendship.

Ari makes the trip into the city to visit Erica and Steve whom Ari likes but she feels he's uncomfortable around her because he doesn't know how to classify her. In Steve's world, women are either someone to sleep with or his mother and Ari doesn't fit into either of those categories. Ari learns that Erica is pregnant and everyone is so happy. On the train ride home the next day, Ari thinks about how a baby changes your life. There's a sense of things that happened before the baby arrived and then things that happened after the baby is here.

Ari gets a postcard from Crispin and Jerry and she thinks about how they saved her with food and laughter when she was going through the difficulties of postpartum depression. Ari notes that a hundred years ago, a woman would have been surrounded by many women who would support her when it came time to have a baby. Then the childcare would also be shared by family and friends who would teach you so that you could then help younger women when their time came. Ari knows now that Paul couldn't help her emotionally after Walker was born; she just have to realize what people could do, and he just wasn't capable of that.

Ari recalls her wedding when she and Paul got married at the Brooklyn Borough Hall and invited a few family members and friends to a restaurant afterwards.

Ari gathers all her birthing materials and sends them to Erica, wishing that she had had someone do that for her when she was pregnant. When Ari tries to send Erica an online link to learning more about C-sections, Erica shuts her down, asking Ari to stop because she and Steve have their own plan and don't want any interference.

Ari has another imaginary conversation with her dead women on the fact that Ari must hate women and they must hate her. Ari would like women to be authentic but they try to play roles and cover up their flaws until they get old and die. She wishes women would just admit that they're trying to outrun death but that nobody escapes.

Ari and Mina take their babies to the co-op. Ari is happy that Zev is thriving now. Mina repeatedly thanks Ari for all she has done for her and the baby. The next day Mina comes to Ari's house in the morning to give her an amber stone on a leather cord which



is called a nursing bead. It's supposed to help the child transition from nursing to teething as he plays with it as it hangs around the mother's neck.

One day after Mina is gone, Ari spreads newspaper on the floor and cuts her hair. She likes the new look that evening but hates it the next morning. Ari feels lucky that the bad hair doesn't bother Paul. Paul loves the fact of Ari which she considers a very good thing.

Toward the end of her shift at the co-op one day, Ari sees one of Paul's colleagues who acknowledges Ari and can sense that Ari is pregnant. The two women chat for a couple minutes then she brushes a strand of hair out of Ari's eyes. Ari is touched by the maternal gesture and doesn't mind the woman at all. Ari thinks this must mean that she's better.

Analysis

Ari's world is shaken when Mina tells her that she is moving to Brooklyn. Mina has been a lifeline for Ari just as Ari has been for Mina. They bonded and worked through some difficult days together. It is hard for Ari to keep any friends and losing Mina will be a real blow. She can obviously go to Brooklyn to visit Mina, but when someone who has been in your life on a daily basis is no longer there, the dynamic of the relationship changes and, as Ari's past has shown her, the relationship doesn't last. Mina's move is especially hurtful for Ari because Mina will be moving in with her sister. Throughout the time that Ari has known Mina, Mina has positioned her sister as being weird and unavailable. The fact that Mina had no female support system was something that she and Ari shared and now Ari feels betrayed in that Mina will be receiving support from her sister now and not Ari.

The theme of women's relationships continues when Ari thinks about how it used to be 100 years ago when a woman had a baby. Not only did other women teach her how to prepare for the birth but they also helped out with her recovery and had an extended childcare network. Women's lives are different now as most of them work outside the home too and they usually aren't able to extend themselves on a consistent basis to new mothers and their babies. Ari does try to extend herself and shares information with the newly pregnant Erica who immediately deflects us. Ari wants Erica to be informed and wishes someone had done that for her but Erica is not open to it which baffles Ari.

The author shows that Ari is transitioning once again when she chops off her hair. She wants to be seen and see herself as someone else now. She has come through the worst of the postpartum period and no longer needs to hide behind her hair. She is feeling stronger and wants to exhibit this in some visual way.

At the end of the story, it is insinuated that Ari is pregnant again. Paul's colleague reaches out to her in a maternal gesture which changes Ari's view of the woman. The slightest female interaction is a gift to Ari and it brightens her mood, leaving her to believe that she is finally better.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Mina want to move to Brooklyn to be with her sister when she had never talked very nice about her sister?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Ari think it was better for women who had babies a hundred years ago as opposed to today?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the interaction with Paul's colleague at the co-op make Ari believe that maybe she's finally better?

Vocabulary

omniscient, prissy, ribald, simian, misogyny, bejeweled, ironic, cogent, standoffish, snafu, rouse, tenuous, catatonic, harass, millet



Characters

Ari

Ari is the main character in the story. Ari is a young Jewish woman who is married to an older man, Paul, and they have a new baby named Walker. Ari's mother died when Ari was a young girl so she grew up without her support in her life.

Ari's baby was overdue and there was concern for his well being so Ari's doctor performed a C-section. Ari can't get over the fact that she had this surgical procedure and didn't deliver her son in a natural birth. Ari feels that she had not been prepared for that eventuality and resents that she was cut open and had to heal from physical wounds in addition to the emotional upheaval that comes after childbirth.

Ari also bemoans the lack of any female support system in her life even though her mother and grandmother are both dead and Ari has a way of alienating her friends. Ari longs to be guided in this process, to have someone take a maternal interest in her and show her how to care for her child and also how to be the new person that a woman becomes after she gives birth. Ari does find a friend in Mina who also gives birth and struggles with the adjustment period. Ari really likes Mina but resents her for having a natural birth.

Paul

Paul is Ari's husband. He is a professor at the local college which is where he met Ari when she was a grad student. Paul is a loving, caring man but is unequipped to deal with Ari's postpartum issues. He tries to be patient and supportive but simply doesn't know what Ari needs from him sometimes. She is learning to be a mother and yearns for female guidance but has none so Paul is her sounding board. He does the best he can, but he has never been a parent before either and is also finding his way with it.

Paul is a bit older than Ari and loves her spirit but he also likes his schedule; early to bed, up with the baby at dawn. He spends a lot of time at the college teaching and grading papers. He is much more low key than Ari and can be embarrassed by some of her outbursts, especially at faculty parties. Even though he and Ari have bought an historic house in an abandoned mill town, he is not very handy around the house. He is more of an intellectual, sensitive type and just the man who is perfect for Ari.

Mina Morris

Mina is a published poet who temporarily moves into Crispin and Jerry's house. Mina had been wild and was part of a girl group several years ago. She also experimented with drugs and sex and traveled around a lot. Ari becomes a friend to Mina and Ari helps her after her baby is born. Mina is still very closed in, though, and doesn't even reveal



the name of her baby's father. Ari is attracted to Mina's free spirit and is devastated when Mina decides to move to Brooklyn.

Crispin

Crispin is a gay man in a relationship with Jerry. The two of them have renovated a historic townhouse which they rent to Mina. He and Jerry are very good to Ari during her postpartum depression period.

Jerry

Jerry is a gay man in a relationship with Crispin. He and Crispin ask Ari to look after their home while they are out of the country. Ari meets the tenant, Mina, when the house needs repair. Jerry and Crispin were kind and generous to Ari when she was struggling emotionally after the birth of her baby.

Cat

Cat is Paul's colleague at the college who visits Ari and Paul occasionally. Ari enjoys Cat's cultural sense and they laugh together and enjoy the same things such as drinking and getting high. Ari enjoys Cat because she is more worldly than many of the other people that Ari encounters in the little town.

Will

Will is the handsome handyman who helps out at Paul and Ari's house when they need some help. Ari thinks Will is handsome and she likes talking to him so she is almost glad when something goes wrong at the house and she needs to call him. Will and Ari are sexually attracted to each other but they don't act on that attraction because Ari is married.

Walker

Walker is Ari and Paul's baby boy. The story follows three months of his life during which he and his mother bond and he grows to become a happy child.

Bryan

Bryan is Mina's friend who comes to stay with her for a little while around the time of her baby's birth. Bryan is also a writer and spends a lot of time online. Bryan lets Ari know that he wants to support Mina during this time but the emotional mood swings are things that he's not equipped to handle.

Erica

Erica is Ari's cousin who lives in New York. Ari is in Erica's wedding and Erica confides in Ari when she is not yet pregnant four months later. When Erica does get pregnant, Ari sends her birthing information as a gesture of support but Erica rejects them, preferring to find her own way through the process.



Symbols and Symbolism

Ari's dissertation

Ari had planned to complete her dissertation but after having the baby, her time and interest have waned. The dissertation symbolizes Ari's pre-baby life which has now altered to focus almost completely on her child.

Animals

Paul and Ari begin to hear animals in the attic and walls of their old house. The animals symbolize Ari's state of mind in which she feels trapped in a new life which she has entered into for security but it also restrains her and she still tries to find a way out.

Walker's birthday

When Walker turns one, Ari calls it surgery day instead of birthday. She still resents that she had to have a C-section and was denied the chance to deliver her son naturally. Ari feels like a failure because she needed the surgical procedure.

Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is not only an important bonding ritual between Ari and Walker, but it also symbolizes something Ari has learned to do right in the childcare zone. She gains motherly confidence this way and even begins to nurse Zev when Mina has a difficult getting started with him.

Ari's mother

Ari holds imaginary conversations in her head with her dead mother as she goes about her life. Typically, her mother is chastising her for something and these conversations symbolize Ari's sense of disappointment in herself for not being able to manage the childbirth experience any better than she thinks she has.

The food co-op

Ari works one day a week at the food co-op in town in the hopes of meeting new people and making a friend. The co-op symbolizes nourishment for people and Ari does her best in trying to add sustenance to her life by encountering people during her time there.



Ari's friends

The author introduces Ari's friends through flashbacks in the story. They are all from different stages in Ari's life, symbolizing who she was at that particular time and what was important to her. The reader learns about what makes Ari the person she is through the stories of these friendships.

Judaism

Ari was raised Jewish and she views life through that filter. Obviously, it has had a huge impact on her life and its effects still continue. She gets notes of displeasure from disgruntled aunts when she marries a non-Jewish man and her father doesn't like the fact that Walker isn't circumcised. Ari's life story is Jewish and her rebellion toward it symbolizes the choices she makes and doesn't make.

Nursing bead

Before Mina moves away, she gives Ari a nursing bead which is a small stone attached to a leather cord. Traditionally a mother would wear the cord around her neck and her child could play with the bead during the period of transitioning away from breastfeeding. This is symbolic for Ari because she now has to wean herself away from Mina which will also be a difficult transition.

Hair cut

Toward the end of the story, Ari chops off her hair. This symbolizes that Ari views herself differently now and wants to visually make the change so that everyone else can see that she is no longer the person she used to be.



Settings

Utrecht, New York

Utrecht, New York is the town where Ari and Paul buy their old house. It is a former mill town which has not recovered after the industry left. Some of the old buildings are inhabited by coffee shops and antique shops but there are also a lot of abandoned buildings and houses.

Crispin and Jerry's house

Crispin and Jerry live in a historic home they renovated and they rent it to Mina when they are out of the country. Ari spends lots of time there helping Mina adjust to new motherhood. She also spent many evenings there after Walker was born when Crispin and Jerry would feed her dinner and just talk with her, helping her through a blue period.

Ari and Paul's house

Ari and Paul bought a big historic house in Utrecht. It has loads of charm and character but Paul is not handy with fixing things, so they rely on their friend, Will, to help them out.

The food co-op

Ari works part time at a food co-op in town. She took the job to get out of the house occasionally and in the hopes of meeting some new people.

New York City

Ari grew up in New York City and most of her flashbacks occur there. She returns sometimes to visit her father and other family members.



Themes and Motifs

Childbirth

The theme of childbirth is an important one in the book. Both Ari and Mina have to make lots of adjustments to their lives after their children are born. Ari bemoans the fact that she didn't have a female support system to teach her what to expect and to help care for her and her baby afterwards. She thinks about how nice it would have been to have had her baby a hundred years ago when women supported each other. Mothers, sisters and grandmothers and extended family and friends participated in the preparation for the baby to come. Then, after the birth, the women all helped the new mother adapt to feeding and caring for the baby. Ari marvels at what this extended network of love must have been like for both mother and child.

Childbirth was especially difficult for Ari who had a C-section. She resents the fact that she had to have a surgical procedure instead of delivering her child naturally. The necessity for the procedure was not totally unfounded because Ari's baby was overdue and prime for complications, but Ari is still angry. Because Ari had no mother, she had no one to prepare her for this possibility and she feels betrayed. Ari envies other women, including Mina, who seem to know that they have more control over the process than Ari thought she did and manage their pregnancies and childbirth with more confidence.

Mina seems better equipped to deal with the challenges of childbirth, even going the route of giving birth in a tub with only a midwife present. Perhaps because Mina has a more open lifestyle than Ari did, she feels open to new ideas and doesn't give in to common beliefs, which allows her to make her own choices on her own terms.

The story also includes difficulties that other women have had related to childbirth. Ari's grandmother had repeated miscarriages and was given the synthetic hormone DES to prevent them. She was able to give birth to Ari's mother but a hideous side effect of the drug, cancer, struck Ari's mother, leaving Ari motherless as a young girl. The specter of cancer also hangs over Ari as she, too, could inherit the disease as a result of the DES in her heritage.

Women's relationships

The theme of women's relationships is an important one in the book. Ari bemoans the fact that she had no female support system in her family and she is thrilled when she is able to bond with Mina. They are both a little wild at heart yet they want to have authentic experiences with their babies and do what is best naturally for them.

Throughout the book, the author shares stories of Ari's friendships at different stages in her life. She starts in elementary school and works up to Marianne, the mentor who wanted to help Ari with her dissertation. Ari always measured her worth against the



backdrop of the other girls in her life. She never thought she was pretty or small enough to be attractive so she decided to develop her own personality which is bold and willful. Although Ari so admires the girls who can get their nails done and wear perfect clothes, she just isn't that way and ultimately the friendships end.

Plus, it is just natural for people's relationships to change as they move through different stages in their lives. What is important to a 10-year-old girl is light years away from what is important to a 30-year-old woman. The women's relationships in the book show Ari's progression as a person.

Possibly the most coveted, but cruelest, relationship Ari ever had with another woman was with her mother. She was never the maternal type, instructing Ari to call her by her name and not call her mommy. In spite of their distance, her mother's death left a gaping hole in Ari's life and she has imaginary conversations with her mother which shows that she is still very much in her mind.

Anger

Anger is an important theme in the book. Ari has a lot of anger built up throughout her life. First, Ari's mother died when Ari was little, leaving Ari untethered and unprepared for how to live in the world as a woman. She's angry that the other girls have mothers to help them with hair appointments and clothing purchases. Ari is then angry at her father's choices for girlfriends and how they try to insinuate themselves into her life. Ari also knows that she's not as polished as the other girls who have their mothers' influence and that makes her angry too.

But Ari's largest source of anger stems from not having a support system during her pregnancy and subsequent childbirth and childcare experiences. She feels that if she had been better prepared for what occurs during pregnancy and delivery, she might not have had to have a C-section. If she had delivered naturally, she wouldn't have had to recover from surgical wounds in addition to postpartum issues.

Ari is also angry at people who question her choices to do what she thinks is best. When people at Paul's faculty party don't understand why she is still breastfeeding one-year-old Walker, she is instantly angered and rants that she will give him a maternal experience in favor of feeding him some processed formula created by corporations.

Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is an important theme in the book. Ari learned how to breastfeed from a kind nurse at the hospital and she remembers this woman with great fondness. The nurse treated her with kindness and respect and gave her the attention that she desperately needed. Getting such a good start with her new baby made a world of difference in how Ari was able to view feeding her baby naturally and also got the baby off to a good start in bonding with his mother.



Ari wants to do what is best for her child and she refuses to give in and give him bottles of formula which she feels are manufactured toxic substances from huge corporations. Ari is outright with her desire to breastfeed and won't be swayed by others who think it is too much work or too demanding. Mina feels the same way about not giving her baby formula. Even when Mina's baby has trouble getting established with nursing and the doctor tells her to give him formula in a bottle, Mina refuses and puts her baby at risk for failure to thrive and dehydration.

Ari also doesn't want to hear from people who think that breastfeeding past a child's certain age is the wrong thing to do. In Ari's mind, giving her child a loving, maternal experience for as long as he wants it is what she will do. Ari has a difficult time with Paul's colleagues who don't understand her position and she is in constant conflict with most of them for this reason.

By the time Mina has her baby, Ari is a breastfeeding pro. She knows instinctively that little Zev is not getting enough milk from his mother so she nurses him herself. Even after Mina and Zev settle into a breastfeeding routine, Ari will still nurse him just to make him feel better. Breastfeeding seems to be the only aspect of pregnancy and childbirth that Ari really treasures.

Female power

Female power is an important theme in the book. Even though Ari has had to work through many challenges with pregnancy and giving birth, she feels that it is an amazing thing to have been a part of. The birthing ritual that has been going on since the beginning of time is a powerful one and Ari feels strong, having been a part of that. Creating and delivering another human being from her body is an unexplainable joy for her and she's in awe of her own power.

Female power exhibits in other ways in the story too. For example, Ari's grandmother knew that she could survive the concentration camp if she were to become a whore for the Nazi soldiers. Survival comes in many forms and she was able to rise above her hideous circumstances and wield female power that was hers alone.

Female power is evident in both Ari and Mina who will not do anything less than the best for their babies. They are fierce in their protection of their children and rage when others challenge their methods and ideas. For example, when Paul's colleagues think that Walker should be weaning off the breast when he is a year old, this infuriate Ari who intends to give him a nurturing experience with her for as long as he wants it. Mina is also fierce in her desire to provide only the best for her baby. When her child is failing to thrive because the breastfeeding is not successful, she visits the doctor who advises her to give the baby formula in a bottle. Mina absolutely refuses and is even more determined to make the breastfeeding work because that is what she feels is best for her baby. There is real power in a mother protecting her child and both Ari and Mina exhibit this throughout the story.

Styles

Point of View

The story is told from the first person narrative point of view. This means that the author tells the story directly in her own words. As the narrator, Ari uses the pronoun of "I" throughout because the story is being told just as she sees it or experienced it. With the first person narrative point of view, the reader has access to the thoughts and feelings of the narrator only. What is going on in the heads of any other people in the story is only speculative as the reader does not have the privilege of seeing them.

As Ari goes from present day to flashbacks in the story, she still maintains the first person narrative point of view. The story is hers and the reader will learn only what the author wants him or her to learn. The first person narrative point of view tells the narrator's story and the reader must take into account who the narrator is to understand the perspective. For example, a child will see a story from a different perspective from that of an adult and the reader should make allowances for that.

An example of the first person narrative point of view is when Ari states, "The baby's first birthday approaches. Still, there are bad days. Today's not so bad. Today I have fulfilled two imperatives: one, the baby is napping; two, we are out of doors, a few blocks from home." The author not only provides information from Ari's perspective about what she did, but also projects into Ari's thoughts about her life. If this were written in another point of view, the speaker would be able to say that Ari and the baby are outside and the baby is asleep but would have no insight on Ari's thoughts about how she feels about her life at this point.

Language and Meaning

Because *After Birth* is set in modern day, the language is current for the times. The author uses 21st century terminology and euphemisms in narration and dialogue to show authenticity. The author uses things like current movies and pop culture icons so that the modern day audience can relate to them. The language, especially from Ari, is very direct and borders on being offensive because it can be so raw.

For example, when Ari projects what it would have been like if Mina had met Ari's mother, she says, "You woke me up you inconsiderate little shits!" She used to call me that as a term of endearment. "Shut the fuck up, bitch," Mina Morris told her coldly and my mother was shocked silent for once.

The author also uses alliterative language to punctuate the text. For example, she writes, "I was not simply huge. I was arched, bellied, biconvex, bloated, bold, bombous, bossed, bosselated, bossy, bowed, bulbiform, bulbous..." By writing this way, the author lets us know that in the last stages of her pregnancy, Ari had more than a big stomach, she felt like she was everything there was to describe her state.

Structure

The structure of a novel usually takes one of four forms: character, milieu, event or idea. And while a story can contain all four forms, one usually predominates. *After Birth* takes the structure of a character form. These types of novels tend to show a character's personal growth as the story extends. A character structure shows transformation as being important as opposed to an event story which is more concerned with what a character does. It is easy to identify a character structure novel because there comes a point in the story when the main character reaches a point of frustration with life or a set of circumstances that are no longer acceptable for personal growth. The character then decides on changes, both small and dramatic, that will move the character's life in a different direction. The story concludes then when the character has resolved his or her issues and feels satisfied with the transformation or decides to stay in the current situation.

The author also has structured the book into three sections, three months of the year: November, December and January. This not only gives the reader a sense of timing but also correlates to Ari's mind as a new mother. Babies' ages are given in months for the first couple years of the child's life and she marks the passage of time now by Walker's progress month-by-month.



Quotes

I'm not interested in anything." "Ari. Babe." "Which might make sense if I was all consumed with thoughts of baby-food making and craft projects and sleep-training philosophies and bouncy-chair brands, but I really can't get all that excited about any of that shit either. So basically I have no idea what to do with myself, Paul."

-- Ari (November, Pages 1-30 paragraph 1)

Importance: The author immediately sets up Ari's state of mind and her depressed state over the changes in her life since the birth of her son. She feels that she should be feeling better about her life by now but her husband thinks she needs more time to adapt. He really isn't equipped emotionally to know how to help her through this period but he tries to be patient with her.

Such a mindfuck, right? Can't sleep? Weird dreams? Sciatica, indigestion? Peeing constantly, sick of being told to, like, 'enjoy this time?' And people don't seem to trust that you'll let them know when you've had the baby, right?

-- Mina (November, Pages 31-63 paragraph 11)

Importance: Mina and Ari have pregnancy in common and they're able to begin their friendship based on this experience. Neither one of them is that thrilled with being pregnant because of the physical and emotional changes and they're relieved that they have found a kindred spirit.

It's fine, I say, because it's not like I'm reminded she's dead or newly sad she's dead or anything as simple as that. She's always dead, and time does a pretty good job on whatever the hell that means. It's more like I get yanked back into the shit, forever eleven, twelve, thirteen, caught in the fray. Not logical. No explaining it. "It's a spiral," I tell him. "It's the eye of the tornado. It's time and space inverted in a nightmare. It's being trapped in a mine.

-- Ari (November, Pages 31-63 paragraph 11)

Importance: Ari carries around a lot of baggage about her dead mother and she's oddly hurt when Paul does not remember that it's the anniversary of her death. She alternately doesn't want to talk about it and then she does so Paul is never sure what he's supposed to do or say. Some things are just personal issues that no one else can understand and this is one of those things for Ari.

I yearn to one day rip open a CDC envelope and find a different kind of letter. As on behalf of the entire community, our sincerest apologies for the shortsightedness and carelessness with which we treated the reproductive health of your forebears... our bad... promise to stop fucking with you ladies, et cetera.

-- Ari (November, Pages 31-63 paragraph 4)

Importance: Ari feels as if the whole women's reproductive process should be easier than it is and that people should be more up front about what a woman actually goes



through during the process. This is especially true in the case of Ari's mother and grandmother who was given DES, a synthetic hormone, to prevent miscarriages. And while it did prevent Ari's grandmother from miscarrying her mother, her mother got cancer and now Ari lives with the scare that she will also get the disease as a result of the drug given to her grandmother.

Take a shower! Change your clothes. Jesus. Make yourself something to eat. Any opportunity to fall apart, this one. Have you looked in a mirror lately? What is the big deal, here? Get it together. Honestly.

-- Ari's mother (December, Pages 63-92 paragraph 12)

Importance: Ari listens to the voice of her dead mother chastising her about the way she is raising her baby and conducting her life. She comes back to her in a negative way because that's the way she was when she was alive. Ari feels like she is failing right now and the voice of her mother just validates those feelings.

Listen, I'm trying pretty hard not to go nuts here and I know it's not really your problem like at all but I haven't slept very much in like a long time it feels like and I really don't know what the fuck to do, I mean the doctor's like, 'he's fine!' but he's not fine, you fucking cocksucker. Obviously he's not fine! Doctor says 'Give him some formula if you're concerned.' But I'm not giving him fucking formula, fucking prick!

-- Mina (December, Pages 63-92 paragraph 4)

Importance: Mina is overwhelmed by having a baby and all the emotions that flood her changing world. She is trying as hard as she can to do what she thinks is right for her child and not give in to what others are telling her to do. This exhibits the difficulty that new mothers face when they are suddenly responsible for a new little person.

No, seriously, you should bury her up to her neck and throw rocks at her until she dies. What a crazy lunatic, offering her child a normal, healthy mammalian childhood. A woman in full bloom of health daring to use her body according to its biological design and function? Gross! When she could be purchasing from a multinational corporation a totally inferior product for the same purpose. That's downright un-American. And to do so in full view of an intellectual such as yourself!? Tie her up and SET HER ON FUCKING FIRE!

-- Ari (December, Pages 92-131 paragraph 10)

Importance: When Ari is challenged about breastfeeding her child past a certain age, she sarcastically reacts in anger. It makes no sense to her that people who don't have children or don't put their children's needs first should be able to tell her how she should raise hers.

You know why I hate women? Because they didn't prepare me. Because they didn't help me. Because they let me do this alone. Because they avoided knowing, mostly, themselves. How could they let me fall down this rabbit hole? They knew what was going to happen. Every woman who's ever lived is supposed to know.

-- Ari (December, Pages 92-131 paragraph 1)



Importance: Ari has anger about the lack of support for her in the pregnancy and childbirth experience. She wishes that she had had someone to tell her what to expect and how to manage through it. It's no one's fault that Ari's mother and grandmother are both dead and couldn't prepare her. And Ari's friends were not exactly the maternal type so there were no resources there either.

May you learn to mother yourself as you learn to mother your child," I say. "May you trust and respect your body, and may others trust and respect your body, and may your body astound you.

-- Ari (January, Pages 164-193 paragraph 9)

Importance: When Ari is at dinner with Erica and Steve, they tell her that Erica is pregnant. Ari toasts Erica with a special wish that incorporates everything that she wishes someone had wished for her when she was pregnant.

A baby opens you up is the problem. No way around it unless you want to pay someone else to have it for you. There's before and there's after. To live in your body before is one thing. To live in your body after is another. Some deal by attempting to micromanage; some go crazy; some zone right the hell on out. Or all of the above. A blessed few resist any of these, and when you meet her, you'll know her immediately by the look in her eyes; weary, humbled, wobbly but still standing. Present, if faintly. You don't meet her often.

-- Ari (January, Pages 164-193 paragraph 8)

Importance: Ari has always had difficulty keeping women as friends but now she would do almost anything to find a friend who has also had a baby because she longs to be with someone who has experienced what she has.

Two hundred years ago--hell, one hundred years ago--you'd have a child surrounded by other women: your mother, her mother, sisters, cousins, sisters-in-law, mother-in-law. And you'd be a teenager, too young to have had any kind of life yourself. You'd share childcare with a raft of women. They'd help you, keep you company, show you how. Then you'd do the same. Not just people to share in the work of raising children, but people to share in the loving of children.

-- Ari (January, Pages 164-193 paragraph 9)

Importance: Ari really feels the lack of a female support system in her life. Many years ago, before women started working outside the home so much, their primary role was to have children. They lived in an extended network of other women who helped them give birth and then helped them raise their children. Ari longs to feel a part of something like this.

Sheryl and Norman were obviously uncomfortable, but they bit their big Jew lips about it. Unlike my crazy aunt Ellen, who sent me that letter about shame and cut off and disappointment and history and your grandparents and lost to us. Real classic of the genre.



-- Ari (January, Pages 164-193 paragraph 7)

Importance: In addition to adjusting to motherhood, Ari still carries the angst she suffered by marrying a man who wasn't Jewish. Her father and his new wife came to her wedding but it was clear they weren't delighted. Ari also received negative communications from other relatives showing their displeasure.