

# **Expecting Adam: A True Story of Birth, Rebirth, and Everyday Magic Study Guide**

**Expecting Adam: A True Story of Birth, Rebirth, and Everyday Magic by Martha Beck**

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# Plot Summary

Expecting Adam is a memoir by Harvard-educated writer Martha Beck. In this novel, Ms. Beck shares with the readers the events leading up to the birth of Adam, her son. Martha's pregnancy, an unexpected surprise, was fraught with exhaustion and nausea that kept her from the ferocious focus she would normally place on her studies. At the same time, the pregnancy was filled with discovery for Martha as she began to feel as though her life was guided by unseen forces all around her. By the time Martha learned in mid-pregnancy that her son, Adam, would be born with Down syndrome, Martha had come to love and respect the old soul growing inside of her whom she felt was responsible for the odd events taking place around her, making the choice to keep the child despite the opposite opinion of her intellectual acquaintances. Expecting Adam is a spiritual journey that is both heart wrenching and humorous, leaving the reader both entertained and changed in a fundamental way.

Martha Beck learned she was pregnant with her second child while taking a rare trip away from her studies at Harvard. It was a difficult time to have a child because both she and her husband were working on their PhD's while raising an eighteen-month-old daughter. Not only this, but Martha's husband, John, had recently taken a consulting job that would require him to travel to Asia every few weeks. However, the moment Martha learned she was pregnant, she knew she could not end the pregnancy despite her right to choose views.

Almost from the moment she learned of the pregnancy, Martha began to suffer terrible morning sickness that she would later learn were symptoms of a yet undiagnosed autoimmune disorder. Martha was so sick and so exhausted all the time that she could barely care for her young daughter, let alone attend classes as well as teach a course herself. However, Martha was determined to continue with her normal life, hiding her pregnancy until her physical appearance made it impossible to hide. To do this, Martha had to find a sitter for her daughter, a task that proved nearly impossible. However, by some miracle, a spot opened up in a nearby daycare whose waiting list was normally years long.

The first time John went to Asia, leaving Martha alone, she had such a bad spell of morning sickness that she could hardly move. Martha thought of the only foods she could imagine eating, but had no energy to go to the store that sat just nine floors below her in her own building. Unexpectedly at that moment an acquaintance stopped by the apartment with exactly the food Martha was craving.

As the pregnancy progressed, Martha would have many strange dreams. One of these dreams was of a man named Adam who told Martha her baby would be born with something wrong, but that it would be okay. Martha instinctively knew that man was her baby. Martha focused on the idea of something being wrong with her baby and began asking the medical personnel to perform tests that would diagnose a birth defect in her unborn child. One of these tests came back abnormal during the Christmas holidays. Martha took another test and was offered an amniocentesis that would include an

ultrasound. Martha jumped at the chance to see her baby and once again found herself thinking of him as Adam as the technician showed her his face.

Weeks later, the amniocentesis report came back with the news that Adam had Down syndrome. Heartbroken, Martha nevertheless continued to insist on keeping her baby despite the opinions of the doctors at Harvard Medical and the opinions of her colleagues. Even John doubted Martha's resolve for a time, but a powerful dream in Asia convinced him that everything would be alright.

Martha was in labor with Adam for a week before he finally arrived. The birth was a silent and solemn event as the medical teams prepared for the worst. However, Adam was born healthy and happy despite his chromosomal disorder. Martha and John fell in love with their son from the moment they saw him and have never regretted their choice.



# Chapter 1-3

## Chapter 1-3 Summary and Analysis

Martha Beck has three degrees from Harvard. Ms. Beck has written several works of non-fiction. This book is a memoir that relates a highly personal story of the year in which Ms. Beck was expecting her second child, Adam, who was born with Down syndrome.

In Chapter 1, Ms. Beck relates a story that took place when Adam was three. Adam could not yet speak. However, a woman Ms. Beck was interviewing for her PhD. Dissertation happened to be a psychic. This woman told Ms. Beck that Adam wanted her to stop worrying so much. Adam wanted Ms. Beck to be more open, assuring her she would be hurt more by being closed than open. This advice is what led Ms. Beck to write this book.

In Chapter 2, Ms. Beck relates how her family returned from Tokyo in late summer and began to focus on the upcoming school semester. Both Ms. Beck and her husband, John, were intimidated by Harvard and the hard work they would have to do. They were also nervous about a new consulting job John had taken that would require him to fly to Asia every few weeks. For this reason, they turned to each other for comfort despite the danger of pregnancy. Two weeks later, the family was driving a rental car to New Hampshire for vacation, when a truck stopped in their lane causing John to swerve. Their rental car spun four times, but landed on the side of the road without any serious damage.

In Chapter 3, Ms. Beck relates how difficult her pregnancies were. Due to an undiagnosed autoimmune disorder, Ms. Beck would experience extreme nausea, exhaustion, and a lack in coordination while pregnant. It was this last symptom that alerted Ms. Beck to her pregnancy that summer as she tripped while attempting to join her family in looking at a moose. Later Ms. Beck went into town and got a pregnancy test which she was forced to wait until morning to take. When Ms. Beck took the test and saw the positive result, she found herself hearing beautiful bells like the bells rang in Boston Common every Easter. Any thought of an abortion melted away at the sound of those bells.

This book is a memoir. The reader knows immediately that it will be told in the first person point of view by the person the book is about. This book is written by Martha Beck, who is a twenty-five year old Ph.D. candidate at the time that has just discovered she is pregnant with her second child. Ms. Beck tells the reader how difficult her life has been at Harvard, a place where she feels intimidated and always fearful of being discovered as a fake. This has caused Ms. Beck to live her life in such a way that she hopes will gain her respect from her peers, but that is not entirely honest to the person that she really is. This tips the reader off from the beginning of the book that Ms. Beck will have a change of opinion as the book progresses, that she will eventually discover

that it is okay for her to be who she is despite the opinions of those at Harvard. The entire book, as the reader interprets these first few chapters, will be about Ms. Beck overcoming her fears, of overcoming what she has been taught to believe, and becoming her own person.



# Chapters 4-6

## Chapters 4-6 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 4, Ms. Beck relates how she went shopping in New Hampshire for heavy, oversized clothing she could use to hide her pregnancy. Ms. Beck decided immediately that she did not want anyone at Harvard to know about her pregnancy because she knew they would think her commitment to her studies was not strong enough if they knew. At the same time, John bought suits for his new job.

In Chapter 5, the new semester started and Ms. Beck found herself having to struggle with nausea and exhaustion while attending her classes and teaching a course of her own. At the same time, Ms. Beck had to arrange for some kind of childcare for her daughter, Katie, for the weeks John would be in Asia. This proved more difficult than Ms. Beck expected. When no one answered their ad for a babysitter, Ms. Beck began checking into daycare centers. The one center nearest the school that would not require the Becks to buy a car had a waiting list years long. Ms. Beck began to despair when by some miracle the secretary at the daycare called her back and informed her that a white Harvard-affiliated eighteen-month-old girl had just pulled out of the daycare and left a spot open. Ms. Beck immediately jumped at the opportunity.

In Chapter 6, John left for Asia, leaving Ms. Beck home alone with Katie for two weeks. The first week went well, but then Ms. Beck began to struggle with her morning sickness. Ms. Beck could not eat for several hours and found herself growing weaker and weaker. That night Ms. Beck thought of her husband and how much she missed him. A strange thing happened. Ms. Beck found herself walking the streets of Singapore with John. Ms. Beck thought it might be a dream, but when John called later that night she knew it was not.

By the second day without food, Ms. Beck knew she either had to eat something or risk collapsing and leaving Katie without a caregiver. Ms. Beck went into the kitchen and began to think of the few things she could handle eating from the grocery store in the lobby downstairs. However, Ms. Beck knew she could not make it to the store on her own. Therefore, Ms. Beck was shocked when an acquaintance, Sibyl Johnston, arrived at the kitchen door with a bagfull of the exact groceries Ms. Beck was craving.

By this point in the book, Ms. Beck begins to experience strange things. First, the open spot in the daycare happens. This seems like a miracle that has come along at just the right moment, one can be explained away by coincidence. However, when Ms. Beck begins to miss her husband and suddenly finds herself walking the streets of Singapore with him, she begins to wonder if something odd is not happening to her. The reader sees her circumstances, how she has gone for a full twenty-four hours without eating even as she is continuing to vomit hourly. This might suggest dehydration has led to this vision.



Ms. Beck experiences one more miracle in these chapters. Ms. Beck is desperate to eat or drink something, but she cannot find anything palatable in the house. Ms. Beck thinks of the things she might be able to eat despite her intense nausea, but does not have the energy to get them. It is at that moment that an acquaintance, someone she has only spoken to at a party, arrives with exactly the things she wants. This miracle seems harder for the reader to explain away.





# Chapters 7-9

## Chapters 7-9 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 7, Sibyl stayed about an hour, caring for Katie for Ms. Beck while she got her strength back from the food. The next day, Sibyl stopped by again, this time bringing a woman named Deirdre. Deirdre explained to Ms. Beck that she was once married to a man who was cruel to her. When Deirdre finally left this man she was pregnant and unable to eat. Deirdre ended up in the hospital where a kind old woman bathed her while whispering soothing sounds, a moment that helped Deirdre find the will to live. Deirdre tells Ms. Beck that it was because of this experience that she and Sibyl were helping Ms. Beck.

In Chapter 8, John came back from Singapore and brought along a stomach virus. Within twenty-four hours, Ms. Beck had to go to University Health Services emergency room to have an IV to combat dehydration. This would happen often during Ms. Beck's pregnancy and she soon discovered that because of her large, prominent veins she would become a favorite test case for the new nurses. That night, Ms. Beck had a vivid dream that left her with the idea that her baby had something wrong with him. Ms. Beck inquired about prenatal testing and arranged to have several tests done.

In Chapter 9, Ms. Beck knew appearance was important at Harvard, but found it amusing when she discovered by accident that she was not the only person faking her way through the school. However, her pleasure in learning this was dimmed somewhat when she passed out in her gender seminar and had to tell the instructor about her pregnancy. Afterward, a fellow student offered to walk her home. As they approached Ms. Beck's apartment building, this fellow student berated Ms. Beck for falling for the stereotype of the weak woman by indulging in morning sickness.

In these chapters, Ms. Beck begins to learn more about human nature. First Ms. Beck learns the true meaning of motherhood when she hears the story of her friend Deirdre's darkest moments during her first pregnancy. This knowledge inspires Ms. Beck and helps her to focus on her children later in life. At the same time, Ms. Beck learns that she is not the only person at Harvard faking her way through. Ms. Beck learns the truth about some of her fellow classmates when they mistake her flippant comment about the Smurfs for the name of a scientist at the school. Finally, Ms. Beck begins to see how cruel some people can be when a woman berates her for falling for the stereotype of the weak female by indulging in her morning sickness. What is ironic about this is that Ms. Beck considers herself a feminist and she was avoiding telling people about her pregnancy for this very reason. However, her sickness is not fake in any way.

In Chapter 8, Ms. Beck has a dream in which she is given a letter by a grown man she instinctively knows is her unborn child and is told the child will be born different. This causes Ms. Beck to arrange for prenatal testing that will warn her of any defects in her fetus. Ms. Beck does this more out of curiosity than fear at this point, but the reader,

who already knows about Adam's Down syndrome, wonders what impact the truth will have on this young mother.

# Chapters 10-13

## Chapters 10-13 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 10, John had just left on his third trip to Asia when the supermarket in the ground floor of the apartment building exploded. Ms. Beck felt an urgency to leave the apartment, but she ignored it until her daughter saw the fire trucks in the street below. Ms. Beck dressed her daughter and herself without urgency because the building had been known to have multiple false alarms in the past. However, when Ms. Beck opened her front door, she realized the fire was real.

In Chapter 11, Ms. Beck quickly made her way to the stairwell and began to walk down ten flights of stairs. Unfortunately the smoke was especially heavy in the stairwell and Ms. Beck eventually became so weak she could go no further. Ms. Beck felt a hand urging her on, pushing her down and out of the stairwell. Once outside of the building, Ms. Beck learned what had happened, quickly forgetting about her rescuer. The following day, Ms. Beck discovered a picture had been taken of her and Katie as they emerged from the building with their rescuer behind them. However, there was no one there.

In Chapter 12, Ms. Beck made her way to an ambulance to ask if the smoke might have harmed her baby. Once the words were out of her mouth, the ambulance attendant immediately asked two people to give up their seats in the ambulance to allow her and Katie on. Ms. Beck was moved by this generosity. At the hospital, Ms. Beck was declared healthy. Ms. Beck called Sibyl and was offered a place to stay until the building was reopened to residents.

In Chapter 13, John arrived in Singapore twenty-four hours later, unaware of the fire at his apartment building. John began to panic when he could not reach his wife, finally calling his office and hearing of the fire. John blew an important business dinner that night out of fear for his family.

In these chapters, Ms. Beck and her daughter find themselves trapped in a burning building. Ms. Beck felt early on that she should leave, but did not heed the advice until it was nearly too late. Trapped in the smoke filled stairwell, Ms. Beck would have died if an invisible rescuer had not come to help her. It is a mystery who this person was or why he helped Ms. Beck. In fact, Ms. Beck cannot even be sure anyone was there at all except for the feel of a hand on her back. This is yet another miracle that Ms. Beck will experience throughout her pregnancy.



# Chapters 14-17

## Chapters 14-17 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 14, John, Martha, and Katie went off to enjoy their Christmas holiday with family, dragging along dozens of books to study for final exams upon their return to Harvard. However, they studied very little between visits and arguments over the difference in their family structure.

In Chapter 15, Ms. Beck found a message from the nurse practitioner at the University Health Services. It turned out one of her tests, the alfa fetal protein test, came back low. Ms. Beck was urged to return to repeat the test. Afterward, Ms. Beck and John stop at a café for a meal. John suggested to Ms. Beck that she should abort the baby should she learn anything was wrong with it. Ms. Beck passionately objects to this course of action and insisted that she would have the baby no matter what. The argument became loud until John appeared to hear something and relented.

In Chapter 16, Ms. Beck was sent to have an amniocentesis with an ultrasound. When Ms. Beck saw her baby for the first time on the ultrasound, she thought of him as Adam despite the fact she and John has already decided to name the baby Christen.

In Chapter 17, Ms. Beck placed a picture from the ultrasound on the refrigerator after showing it to Katie. A few days later, John returned to Singapore while Ms. Beck dealt with students unhappy with the grades she gave them on their term papers. That afternoon, Ms. Beck felt ill, but ignored her symptoms only to wake in a pool of blood that night.

In these chapters, the Becks begin to get the impression that something might be wrong with the baby. Ms. Beck has a test that comes back too low, suggesting Down syndrome. However, the likelihood that someone her age would have a child with Down syndrome that she laughs it off. The only reason Ms. Beck agreed to have an amniocentesis is because she would be able to see her baby on ultrasound. At this point, the reader gets the impression that everything is still simple and happy in the Beck household despite the difficult pregnancy. It feels like a sword is hanging over their necks. The only sign of this sword is their argument over the fate of a possibly deformed child. John wants the baby aborted if it is deformed, but Martha is clinging to the child, determined to see it born no matter what. This adds tension to the situation, leaving the reader curious if the marriage will survive Adam's birth.

When Ms. Beck saw the baby on ultrasound, she immediately began to think the name Adam. This is significant because the reader knows that the Beck do call their child Adam, but that they have already named him Christen. This leaves the reader wondering what happened to make them change their minds.

# Chapters 18-21

## Chapters 18-21 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 18, Ms. Beck was bleeding from a partial abruption of the placenta. Ms. Beck called the University Health Services, but was so weak that she decided to sleep rather than drive herself to the emergency room. Ms. Beck recalled asking for someone to save the baby and felt a hand touch her, causing the bleeding to stop. Ms. Beck also asked for help for herself, requesting a woman's hands and quickly feeling a woman's hands on her body.

In Chapter 19, Ms. Beck woke to the telephone the following morning. The caller was the doctor she had spoken to the night before begging her to come into the hospital. Ms. Beck promised, but never did. Instead, Ms. Beck ordered steak from a grocery delivery. Ms. Beck spent the rest of the day trying to figure out who the people were who saved her and her baby the night before.

In Chapter 20, John returned from his trip and began arranging for the next semester of classes for himself and Martha. When John spoke to his dissertation adviser, he felt guilty for not being closer to finishing than he was supposed to be. The meeting made John more determined to focus on his schoolwork.

In Chapter 21, Ms. Beck was home alone when the call came from the University Health Services. Judy, the nurse practitioner, told her about the Down syndrome the amniocentesis diagnosed in her unborn child. Ms. Beck was in shock, refusing to let Judy hang up until John arrived home.

Ms. Beck had a placental abruption, which was a situation that could potentially lead to the death of both the baby and herself. However, Ms. Beck prayed to the people around her, the Bunraku puppeteers, she has sensed since the beginning of her pregnancy. Ms. Beck believes that these people cured her abruption and saved both hers and Adam's life. This touches on the spiritual and mythical things that have been happening around Ms. Beck since the beginning of her pregnancy and left her convinced that Adam himself is the center of something that has brought these good things to her life.

Ms. Beck and her husband continued to be Ph.D. candidates during this time, causing them a great deal of stress, particularly for John who was also traveling to Asia quite often during this time period. For this reason, the reader knows that the impact of Adam's diagnosis will be devastating on them both.



# Chapters 22-24

## Chapters 22-24 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 22, Ms. Beck left the apartment almost immediately to meet with Jane, the nurse practitioner. On the way, Ms. Beck stopped at the Harvard Coop to buy a book on Down syndrome. However, the only book Ms. Beck could find was a textbook on how to teach mentally retarded children. The book was dark and depressing, one Ms. Beck would read voraciously during her pregnancy but would disregard angrily later in Adam's life. After paying for the book, Ms. Beck cried in the elevator.

In Chapter 23, Ms. Beck and John called their parents and told them the news, finding them supportive of the decision to continue the pregnancy. The following day, Ms. Beck told Deirdre and Sibyl about the diagnosis only to discover that Sibyl knew everything there was to know about children with birth defects because of research for a novel she was writing. However, when John told his dissertation advisor, he was told that if he allowed his wife to have this child he would never get his Ph.D. John refused to back down off his position, however.

In Chapter 24, Ms. Beck began reading everything she could find on Down syndrome, most of it dark and depressing. This caused Ms. Beck a great deal of guilt and worry during the final months of her pregnancy. Then one night Ms. Beck was in the hospital for IV fluids after a particularly difficult bout with nausea. One of the obstetricians came the next morning and accused Ms. Beck of starving herself to kill the baby and offered to perform an abortion. When Ms. Beck refused, the doctor began to list all the reasons why she should not have the baby. As he talked, Ms. Beck felt she could see the fear inside the doctor, hidden just under the surface. Finally Ms. Beck told the doctor to leave.

In these chapters, the reader can see how the news of a baby with Down syndrome affects the people around Martha Beck and her husband. While family attempts to be supportive, faculty at Harvard and even Ms. Beck's own doctors, disapprove of their desire to have their baby. One faculty member tells John he will never reach his goals, playing on John's own fears. At the same time, a doctor who is clearly afraid of failure, of Ms. Beck's baby looking like a failure on his record, urges her to have an abortion. These people are clearly selfish, unkind people who believe they are promoting what is best for themselves as well as the Becks. However, Martha has fallen in love with the baby in her belly despite her own guilt and fear, and is determined to have her son. This is a clear change from the attitude Ms. Beck had at the beginning of the novel when she never would have dreamed of crossing anyone at Harvard and asserting her own opinion.



# Chapters 25-28

## Chapters 25-28 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 25, John went on another trip to Asia. This time John thought he would not return to Boston. John thought about Martha and the children constantly, but he was not sure he could face the day to day routine with them any longer. One night, while out walking alone, John came across a shrine where he lay on a bench and slept. John had a vivid dream in which Adam showed him that death was just the beginning of a great adventure, showing him that bad things always have a good side to them. This made John decide he could he would return to his family.

In Chapter 26, Ms. Beck struggled in her classes, aware that everyone knew about her pregnancy and Adam's diagnosis. In fact, there was even a discussion in one class in which a man yelled out that it was a woman's responsibility to abort a deformed child, leaving Ms. Beck no doubt how most of her fellow students felt about her decision.

Ms. Beck was visiting her family during one of John's trips to Asia. Ms. Beck's cousin, Lydia, took her out one afternoon and joked around about their childhood, making it easy for Ms. Beck to grieve the loss of her normal child and accept Adam as he was. At home, Ms. Beck's father was having difficulty with Adam's diagnosis, initially laughing it off. However, when Ms. Beck came home from a difficult trip to the mall in tears, her father sobbed like a child, showing her how deep his grief truly ran.

In Chapter 27, John and Ms. Beck found it difficult to talk to one another until one night Ms. Beck woke in the middle of the night and went in search of a snack. John followed and before either knew it, they began fighting over both's expectations for their child. After the fight, they began to talk and shared some of the odd experiences both had had since the pregnancy began. When John told Ms. Beck that he felt they should name the baby Adam, she knew something truly mystical was happening to them.

In Chapter 28, Ms. Beck became more convinced than other that there was some power, someone, around each of us helping us deal with life. Ms. Beck's conversation with her husband only seemed to confirm her sense of the Bunraki puppeteers.

Magic seems to become a theme in the Beck household in these chapters. Ms. Beck has already experienced quite a number of unusual and spiritual events throughout her pregnancy, but now the reader learns that her husband, John, has also experienced a few of these odd events as well. The biggest event John has experienced is when a dream convinced him that he should stay with his family rather than remaining in Singapore. This was a powerful moment in John's life that only gained acceptance as he talked to Martha about it and learned of some of her odd experiences. These experiences, shared by both Martha and John, seem to support Martha's idea that they all have something to do with Adam himself.



# Chapter 29-31

## Chapter 29-31 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 29, Ms. Beck began having contractions while John was once again in Asia. John was having a conversation with a mentor who was encouraging him to forget about his family and refocus on his job because the consulting job was coming to an end and John needed to fight for another assignment that would place him in a good position for a future job. However, John found himself unable to concentrate on his mentor's words. At the same time, Martha was thinking of John and wishing he would come home. John suddenly decided he should go home, there was nothing in Singapore he could not conclude via fax or phone.

In Chapter 30, John packed up to go home only to find all the flights to America booked. However, a last minute cancellation got John home the following day. When John got home, Ms. Beck was panicked over her continuing contractions. Ms. Beck was frightened what would happen if Adam were born prematurely. John left the apartment to do the laundry and Ms. Beck found herself in a moment of despair. Then Ms. Beck saw a pair of feet floating in front of her and was cradled in the arms of someone who made her feel completely at peace. Ms. Beck would spend many years after this experience hoping for the death that would her back to that sense of overwhelming love.

In Chapter 31, a week passed and Ms. Beck continued to have contractions. One day while both John and Katie were out of the apartment, Ms. Beck went to the Harvard Coop and bought a Harvard sweat suit for Adam. At the apartment, Ms. Beck went to hide the outfit in a bottom drawer in Katie's room only to find her husband had bought a pair of shoes for Adam and hid them in the same drawer. That same day, John was across town attempting to resign from his job. However, when his boss learned of John's situation, he agreed to pay him for six months while he finished his dissertation. When John returned home with the news, he found Ms. Beck packed and ready to go to the hospital.

In these chapters, John and his wife once again connect long distance without the use of the phone. Ms. Beck called her husband home with her Seeing Thing ability as she began to go into labor with Adam. Labor was a stressful time for Ms. Beck because there are many unknowns with the birth of a Down's baby, especially an early birth. As Ms. Beck feared for her child, she once again had a mystical experience that led her to welcome and hope for death. This experience cannot be easily explained away like some of Ms. Beck's earlier experiences and it leaves her more spiritually aware even as she continues to question her religious beliefs.

Fear for Adam overwhelmed both John and his wife. Ms. Beck feared for Adam's health and his life once he separated from her, but slowly began to remember the Bunraki puppeteers all around her and let go of her fear. This was a highly spiritual and almost religious situation that left Ms. Beck, a reformed Mormon, unsure how to feel. However,



it remained clear to the reader and Ms. Beck that there was something special about Adam that had spread to all those around him.



# Chapters 32-33 and Epilogue

## Chapters 32-33 and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 32, Ms. Beck and her husband arrived at the hospital and were prepared for the delivery. Ms. Beck was overwhelmed with pain and screamed often before the epidural was placed. Ms. Beck noticed the great silence in the room as everyone waited for Adam's arrival. Ms. Beck and her husband could not even see Adam in the early moments of his birth because of the number of people examining him for life threatening conditions. In the end, Adam was declared perfectly healthy.

In Chapter 33, Ms. Beck and her husband were able to hold Adam for the first time. The pediatrician pointed out Adam's perfect, if small features. Over the next few hours, so many doctors and interns came to see Adam that Ms. Beck finally had herself discharged and went home. Adam was jaundiced for a few days, but otherwise had no problems immediately after birth.

In the Epilogue, Ms. Beck began dreaming about dolphins when Adam was two. After learning of a woman with a Down's child who had the same dreams, Ms. Beck arranged to take Adam to Florida where a psychologist was working with mentally retarded children and dolphins. Although Adam was terrified of large animals and water, Ms. Beck was surprised to discover he took quickly to the dolphins.

In these chapters, Adam came into the world and proved to be less of a monster than everyone made Ms. Beck and her family believe he would be. Not only that, but Ms. Beck learned a great deal from her child and believed that he was sent into the world not only to teach her and her husband, but to guide them as well. In the end, Ms. Beck related a story of how Adam swam with dolphins, showing just what kind of daily miracles she and her family shared due to Adam.



# Characters

## Martha Beck

Martha Beck is the author of the memoir *Expecting Adam*. Ms. Beck was a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard when she learned she was expecting her second child. Ms. Beck, who suffered from an undiagnosed autoimmune disorder, had a difficult time with her pregnancy. Ms. Beck was nauseated all the time, weak, and lacked coordination. She would often faint for no apparent reason. All these things made the pregnancy especially difficult for Ms. Beck almost from the moment she learned about her pregnancy. The stress of Ms. Beck's physical condition was only compounded by the fact that her husband, also a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard, had accepted a consulting job that would require him to fly to Asia every few weeks throughout Ms. Beck's pregnancy.

Ms. Beck suffered from depression on top of her physical problems, as well as a terrible struggle to keep up with her classes, both those she taught and those she was taking. Added to this struggle was an instinctive fear that something was wrong with her unborn child. Ms. Beck began having what she called the Seeing Thing or visions in which she would actually feel as though she were walking through the streets of Singapore with her husband or walking through the aisles of a local grocery store. Ms. Beck also saw people standing around her in her bedroom when she was suffering from an abruption in her placenta. Ms. Beck was rescued from a burning building by unseen hands and again felt those hands comforting her after the stress of the fire and during her placental abruption. All these things caused Ms. Beck to change the way she viewed many things around her, including religion and the academic structure of Harvard.

Ms. Beck learned late in pregnancy that her child would be born with Down syndrome. This shocked Ms. Beck and her husband, leading to a difficult time in their marriage. This also caused Ms. Beck to grieve for the normal child she thought she was going to have and to reach out to educate herself on the birth defect. When Adam was born, Ms. Beck was convinced he would be a monster because of the things she had read. However, Adam's birth proved to Ms. Beck that a child with Down syndrome is not the monster that some people might believe him to be. In fact, Adam has taught Ms. Beck a great deal about life since his birth.

## John Beck

John Beck is Martha Beck's husband. John was a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard when he learned his wife was expecting their second child. John accepted this news with some trepidation, especially since he had recently accepted a consulting job that would require him to travel to Asia frequently. Midway through Ms. Beck's pregnancy, John asked her if she would abort the baby if they learned it suffered from birth defects. At Ms. Beck's outright refusal, John argued with her, expressing the opinion that it was their responsibility as parents to end a pregnancy that would result in a defective child.



Ms. Beck argued that it was her choice and she was already attached to their unborn baby and would not consent to an abortion. John continued to argue until he heard a voice that told him he should keep the baby.

John felt he was not focusing enough on his dissertation the year Ms. Beck was pregnant with Adam. John promised himself he would work harder on the dissertation, but then learned that the baby they were expecting had Down syndrome. This news caused John to doubt himself and his focus on work. John went to Asia and considered staying there until he could finish his dissertation and his consulting work. However, a dream in which Adam showed him there was always happiness even in the darkest moments, John changed his mind and accepted his responsibilities.

## **Katie Beck**

Katie Beck is John and Martha Beck's oldest child. Katie was only eighteen months old when her mother became pregnant with Adam. Katie was a constant challenge to Ms. Beck because of the level of illness she experienced in her pregnancy and the level of care Katie required. Katie gave Ms. Beck focus, however, and gave her a reason to take care of herself and to look to the future. If not for Katie, Ms. Beck might have given in to her illness on several occasions, ending her own life and that of Adam.

## **Adam Beck**

Adam Beck is John and Martha Beck's only son. It is Adam's gestational period and birth that is the main focus of this memoir. Adam was born with Down syndrome. For this reason, Ms. Beck believes that she experienced a great many miracles during her pregnancy. Ms. Beck found she could see people around her, like guardian angels, she could transport her conscious mind to where her husband was, and she could see the secret façade beneath the mask most people wear. At Adam's birth, Ms. Beck discovered that her son was much more perfect than the people around her had led her to believe and in his childhood discovered that he was there to teach her as much as she was there to teach him.

## **Sibyl Johnston**

Sibyl Johnston is a writer and a good friend of Martha Beck. During Ms. Beck's pregnancy, Sibyl came to her home unannounced and just happened to bring many items that Ms. Beck had just been wishing for. Sibyl and Ms. Beck became good friends during this pregnancy as Sibyl often found herself caring for and supporting Ms. Beck through her difficult pregnancy. In fact, when Ms. Beck learned that Adam had Down syndrome, it was Sibyl that gave her much needed information to help her deal with the situation. Ms. Beck believes that Sibyl was an angel sent to her in a time of need.



## Deirdre Hennesy

Deirdre Hennesy was a friend of Ms. Beck's that she met through Sibyl Johnston. Deirdre had been married to a cruel man and she left him during her first pregnancy. At that time Deirdre suffered terrible morning sickness and had to be hospitalized for dehydration. Deirdre thought she would die during her stay in the hospital. While crying in her hospital bed, a woman came into the room and saw Deirdre's distress. This woman, although she did not speak English, took it upon herself to give Deirdre a sponge bath and to croon to her in a soothing and mothering tone. It was for this reason that Deirdre befriended Ms. Beck and helped her through her pregnancy.

## Hugh and Phyllis Nibley

Hugh and Phyllis Nibley are Martha Beck's parents. Hugh Nibley was a highly educated man who often presented his eight children with puzzles and games that showed off their intellect. Hugh Nibley also allowed local college students to use his children for their college projects by giving them intelligence tests and other such mental tests. Hugh Nibley was pleased to know that all his children were highly intelligent. Phyllis Nibley was a housewife who did little to keep the clutter out of her house and could often be found making meals with worm-filled flour and other unappetizing things that were a result of an overcrowded house. The Nibley household was often loud and filled with people, causing a stark contrast between the Nibley home and the Beck home.

## Jay and Faye Beck

Jay and Faye Beck are John Beck's parents. John had few siblings. John's parents were hardworking people who expected the same from their children. However, John's parents rarely spoke to one another about anything of importance, spending hours in small talk. Ms. Beck often found this household too quiet and perfect, making her uncomfortable.

## Professor Goatstroke

Professor Goatstroke is the pseudonym of the professor John Beck used as an adviser for his dissertation. Goatstroke was highly focused and he would push John hard in his work because he thought John would one day replace him at Harvard, or at least become a colleague. When John told Goatstroke about Adam's Down syndrome, he told John to encourage his wife to have an abortion. Goatstroke related a story of how he once had a wife who became pregnant, but he forced her to have an abortion because the child would interfere with his focus on work. Needless to say, John disregarded Goatstroke's advice on this matter.

## Mark Fuller

Mark Fuller was John's boss during his time as a consultant on the Asia project. A short time before Adam was due and about the time the consulting job ended, John visited Mr. Fuller to let him know he would be resigning his position. When Mr. Fuller learned why John wanted to quit his job, Mr. Fuller offered to pay him for six months until he could finish his dissertation, stating that the dissertation would be good for the company. Without this offer, John most likely would have been forced to give up his Ph.D. aspirations in order to provide for his family.



## Objects/Places

### Alphabet Letters

John bought alphabet letters to put on the refrigerator in hopes of teaching Katie to read. These letters became something of a game between John and Martha as they attempted to make phrases out of the letters that were often left after Katie lost or flushed them down the toilet.

### Chocolate Chip Cookies

Martha and John were both big lovers of chocolate chip cookies and would often eat them during stressful times.

### Yellow Textbook

Martha Beck went to the Harvard Coop to buy a book on Down syndrome and the only book she could find was a textbook on teaching mentally retarded children to learn with several Down syndrome children on the cover. This book stated that Down syndrome had an IQ that was nearly as low as that of a tree.

### Sweatsuit and Shoes

Ms. Beck buys a sweatsuit with Harvard written on it for Adam before his birth as an optimistic hope that he would be born alive. When Ms. Beck goes to hide the sweatsuit, she discovers that her husband has bought their unborn son a pair of tennis shoes and hidden them in the same place she intended to hide the sweatsuit.

### Alpha-Fetoprotein Test

An alpha-fetoprotein test is a simple blood test that measures the amount of a specific protein excreted by a fetus. This test, when performed at the proper time in pregnancy, can often indicate birth defects such as spinal bifida and Down syndrome. It is an abnormal reading on this test that leads Ms. Beck to have her amniocentesis.

### Amniocentesis

An amniocentesis is a test performed on pregnant women in which a needle is inserted into the uterus to remove a small amount of the amniotic fluid that surrounds an unborn baby. This test was performed on Martha Beck and diagnosed Adam's Down syndrome.



## Ultrasound

An ultrasound is a test performed on pregnant mothers to view the fetus inside the womb. This test was not common during the time in which Martha Beck was pregnant and she only received one in order to aid in the amniocentesis.

## Ultrasound Picture

Martha and John received a picture from their ultrasound that they placed on their refrigerator as a reminder of the baby growing inside of Martha.

## Bunraku Puppeteers

Martha once saw Bunraku puppeteers in Asia. These puppeteers actually appear on stage with their puppets, but the show was often so good that people forgot they were there. This is what Martha thinks of when she thinks of the invisible people who appear to be pulling the strings in the lives of John and herself.

## Seeing Thing

Martha began to see the street on which her husband was walking in Asia while lying in her apartment despairing over her condition and her desire to see her husband.

## Apartment Building

Martha and John lived in an old apartment building not too far from campus while they were expecting Adam. Many of the things that happened to Martha during her pregnancy, happened in this apartment building, including the fire that potentially could have taken Martha and Katie's lives.

## Harvard

Harvard is a prestigious, Ivy League university in Boston, Massachusetts. Both Martha and John got their undergraduate degrees from Harvard and were working on their Ph.D.'s when they learned that they were expecting Adam.





# Themes

## High Risk Pregnancy

High risk pregnancies are those that are complicated by maternal illness or a defect in the fetus. Ms. Beck's pregnancy was considered high risk from the beginning because of her undiagnosed autoimmune disorder that often caused her to become dehydrated due to extreme nausea and vomiting. Ms. Beck would often find herself at the University Health Services receiving IV fluids in order to counteract her dehydration.

Ms. Beck struggled with this pregnancy from the beginning because of her illness. When she learned of Adam's Down syndrome, it really had no impact on her overall pregnancy. What had the largest impact on Ms. Beck's pregnancy other than her nausea and vomiting was the placental abruption she suffered in the fifth month. Normally when the placenta begins to separate from the wall of the uterus, there is little that can be done to save the pregnancy. In fact, if the placenta came away from the uterus enough, the baby would no longer receive the nutrients and oxygen required to sustain the pregnancy. However, Ms. Beck's abruption appeared to be mild and had no lasting effect on the pregnancy.

The entire memoir was about Ms. Beck's pregnancy. For this reason, the theme of high risk pregnancies is an important theme to the overall book because of its prominence on the developing story and the impact it had on Ms. Beck and her entire pregnancy.

## Children with Birth Defects

Ms. Beck and her husband were both Ph.D. candidates at Harvard at the time they became pregnant with Adam. The people at Harvard had taught Ms. Beck and her husband to think in a certain way, leaving them often feeling like phonies, like they truly did not belong in this world of the highly educated and the highly successful. For this reason, Ms. Beck attempted to hide her pregnancy for the first few months because she was afraid of what her colleagues would have to say about such a situation. In fact, when John missed a single class two years prior because he was attending his daughter's birth, he was openly ridiculed and berated by his class professor.

Ms. Beck suspected early in her pregnancy that there might be something wrong with her baby. For this reason, Ms. Beck underwent several tests to check on the health of her fetus. When Ms. Beck learned that her child had Down syndrome, she was filled with grief. Ms. Beck mourned the child she thought she was going to have. At the same time, Ms. Beck began learning all she could about Down syndrome and what life would be like for her only son. Ms. Beck was determined to have her child.

A doctor came to Ms. Beck while she was receiving IV fluids in the University Health Services and offered to perform an abortion on her six month old fetus. Ms. Beck refused, but was forced to listen to the doctor outline all the bad things that would



happen in her life if she welcomed a deformed child into it. Later, Ms. Beck attended a class in which a classmate told the classroom that everyone had the responsibility to abort deformed fetuses in order to protect all of society. It was clear to Ms. Beck that few people agreed with her decision to bring a child afflicted with a birth defect into the world. In fact, Ms. Beck herself began to feel guilt for what she might be inflicting on her own child. However, she had Adam and never regretted it.

## Spirituality

During Ms. Beck's pregnancy, she began experiencing things that were not normal occurrences. Ms. Beck would find herself walking down a street in Singapore even though she was lying in her own bed. Ms. Beck thought of some food she needed to eat in order to stave off a medical emergency and a friend miraculously showed up at the door with the exact food Ms. Beck desired. Ms. Beck saw the face of her unborn baby and thought of the name Adam despite the fact that the child had already been named Christen. Ms. Beck had dreams that were amazingly vivid. Ms. Beck was even saved from a burning building by an invisible helping hand.

Many strange things happened to Ms. Beck and her husband during Adam's gestational period. Ms. Beck was raised Mormon and had a crisis of faith early in her college career. These events caused Ms. Beck to question everything she knew and everything she had been taught. In fact, when Ms. Beck learned that her husband had experienced some of these strange events as well, she became certain that we were not alone in the world and that everyone should just open their eyes to see the spirits around them.

Ms. Beck's pregnancy made her experience something spiritual, something that was beyond explanation that left her questioning the direction of her life and her focus on work above family and happiness. In the end, Ms. Beck learned to embrace life for what it was, rather than focus on pushing herself to be something she was not. For this reason, spirituality is an important theme of the memoir.

# Style

## Perspective

Martha Beck, the author of this memoir, tells a story that happened to her and is highly personal. Ms. Beck's perspective, therefore, is highly subjective. The story focuses on a time in which Ms. Beck was expecting her second child who turned out to have Down syndrome. During that pregnancy, Ms. Beck experienced many unexplained phenomena that she explains away by saying that Adam himself was the focus of a spiritual world most people never know, let alone see in action. The reader might argue that some of these events were brought on by Ms. Beck's difficult pregnancy, loss of blood, or dehydration. However, Ms. Beck sees them as miracles and this is how she presents them in her memoir.

The perspective of this novel is highly subjective, presenting a story from a personal place in the author's life. The author adds a note at the end of the memoir that suggests she did her best to double check facts, suggesting to the reader that she attempted to write the memoir with an objective point of view or perspective. However, it is impossible for a person to remove themselves from such a personal experience and therefore the reader can only conclude that the memoir's perspective is highly subjective.

## Tone

The tone of this novel initially is lighthearted. Ms. Beck begins her story by talking about her career at Harvard and how intimidated she felt being around so many intelligent people. This sets up a background by which the reader can appreciate the change that takes place in Ms. Beck and her family as they deal with a difficult pregnancy. Later, Ms. Beck's tone changes as she tells the reader about this difficult pregnancy and the changes it brought to her life. However, Ms. Beck never loses her sense of humor as she tells her story, often injecting stories that are both amusing and heartwarming. Toward the end of the memoir, Ms. Beck tells the reader how she and those around her reacted to the news Adam would be born with Down syndrome. At this point, the memoir becomes a tearjerker, but quickly returns to the warm and amusing tone with which Ms. Beck has told her story all along.

The tone of the novel seems a little light for the subject matter at first. However, the reader is quickly pulled into Ms. Beck's story and amused by her sense of humor as the memoir progresses. Ms. Beck makes it clear with her tone and the way in which she structures her memoir that this time period was difficult for her, but that it led to a knowledge and a life that she respects and loves as deep as a mother can love her child. Ms. Beck's tone makes it clear to the reader that having a child with Down syndrome is not a death sentence, but a new lease on life, an opportunity to see the world through fresh eyes and with a sense of happiness she might never have found



otherwise. The tone of this novel is perfect for the story and perfect for the message Ms. Beck wants to leave her readers with.

## Structure

The memoir is divided into thirty-three chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter varies in length from very long to extremely short. Many of the chapters begin with an anecdote about Adam, who at the time the novel was written was nine years old. The memoir ends with an epilogue that describes a time in which Ms. Beck took her son to swim with dolphins and the miraculous experience she had with him at that time. The memoir also includes an acknowledgement page that makes note of all the people who have been important in Ms. Beck's time before, during, and after her pregnancy. Finally, Ms. Beck adds an author's note that expresses how carefully she attempted to present the reality of that time in her life by using her own personal journals and the memories of others who were involved.

The memoir is structured in such a way that Adam's conception, gestation, and birth are presented in a linear fashion. Ms. Beck uses both exposition and dialogue to present her story in an easy to comprehend way. Ms. Beck also includes throughout the memoir little anecdotes about her son, Adam, as well as other members of the family in order to help the reader appreciate how having Adam has changed Ms. Beck's life and the lives of those in her family. However, these little flash forwards do nothing to complicate the telling of the main story, but in fact are used to enhance the entire story.

## Quotes

"What they did not realize is that they themselves were the ones who would be "born," infants in a new world where magic is commonplace, Harvard professors are the slow learners, and retarded babies are the master teachers" (Chapter 1, pg. 7.)

"Adam deals with many things more graciously than I do" (Chapter 3, pg. 19.)

"How bourgeois to demand special delicacies, I thought, how...stereotypical" (Chapter 6, pg. 45.)

"He looked back at me with steady eyes, and I knew what I had known—what I should have remembered—all the time: that his flesh of my flesh had a soul I could barely comprehend, that he was sorry for the pain I felt as I tried to turn him into a 'normal' child, and that he loved me despite my many disabilities" (Chapter 8, pg. 71.)

"In the picture, there was nobody behind me" (Chapter 11, pg. 96.)

"Then I remember that despite all my years of education and training, I have learned most of what I know about living joyfully from one person, and he is not on any faculty. They barely let him into the first grade" (Chapter 13, pg. 114.)

"This is it, I thought. This is the part of us that makes our brief, improbable little lives worth living: the ability to reach through our own isolation and find strength, and comfort, and warmth for and in each other. This is what human beings do" (Chapter 15, pg. 136.)

"Whatever they were, wherever they came from, whomever they belonged to, the hands kept touching me, sending that sublimely comforting warmth gradually through my skin and into my muscle and bone" (Chapter 18, pg. 163.)

"Then I hung up the telephone, that terrible, terrible instrument of destruction. The phone just sat there, as if it hadn't done anything bad at all" (Chapter 21, pg. 187.)

"It is difficult to convey the fear and despair I felt as the weight of their collective disapproval ore down on me" (Chapter 24, pg. 219.)

"John and I spent a lot of time wondering about meanings that first night we sat up and told each other the naked truth" (Chapter 28, pg. 265.)

"He was gorgeous" (Chapter 33, pg. 308.)



## Topics for Discussion

What is Down syndrome? What causes it? What are its symptoms? Why are Down syndrome children often thought to be retarded or unable to learn? Why did many of the books Ms. Beck read during her pregnancy suggest that her son would die at birth or would have multiple health problems? Why was Ms. Beck encouraged to abort her child before his birth?

What is abortion? Why was Ms. Beck encouraged to abort her child before and after she learned of his diagnosis? Why did Ms. Beck refuse to do so? Why does Ms. Beck consider herself pro choice even though she did not abort her child? Why do the pro life people embrace Ms. Beck's decision? Who has the ultimate choice over a child's fate? How might Ms. Beck's life have been different if she had aborted her child?

Who is Martha Beck? What was her childhood like? How is her childhood different from her husband's? How did Ms. Beck's childhood shape the woman she would become? Why did Ms. Beck go to Harvard? Why was Ms. Beck often afraid at Harvard? Who was Fang? What impact did her second pregnancy have on Ms. Beck's Harvard career?

Who is John Beck? Why did he often travel to Asia during his wife's second pregnancy? Why was John so fascinated by Asia? Why did John ask his wife to abort their child before they learned of his Down syndrome? Why was John offended by Ms. Beck's refusal to abort the baby? Why did John stop insisting on an abortion? Why did John consider leaving his family after learning of Adam's Down syndrome? Would he seriously have done so? What stopped him?

What is the Seeing Thing? Why did this keep happening to Ms. Beck during her pregnancy? What did she believe caused it? What could be some other explanations for these events? Were they real? How did Ms. Beck come to the conclusion that these events were real? What are the people Ms. Beck often saw around her? What did she call them? Why? How did they impact Ms. Beck's life? Were they real? Why did they disappear when Adam was born?

Who is Sibyl Johnston? Why did she come to Ms. Beck's rescue? Why did they become friends? Why did Sibyl happen to know so much about children with birth defects? How did this help Ms. Beck? Who was Deirdre Hennesy? Why did she come to help Ms. Beck? Why did they become friends? How was this friendship helpful to Ms. Beck?

What is Harvard? How did Harvard have such a large impact on Ms. Beck's life? What is different about the way people think at Harvard? Why did this cause Ms. Beck such a great deal of fear? Why did Ms. Beck find it amusing when some of her colleagues thought Smurf was a scientist? What did this prove about most of the people at Harvard? How did Ms. Beck's thinking change during her pregnancy?