

The Baby Trail

by Sinead Moriarty



About the Book

Makeup artist Emma Hamilton is thirty-three when she and her husband James decide it's time to start a family. She has it all mapped out: Go off the pill in December, have sex, get pregnant by January, have the baby in September. With the help of a personal trainer, she figures she'll be back to her fighting weight in time for Christmas. But when three months of candle-scented sex fails to produce the desired result, Emma decides that maybe Mother Nature needs a helping hand.

Soon her life is a roller coaster of post-coital handstands (you can't argue with gravity), hormone-inducing (sanity-reducing!) drugs, and a veritable army of probing specialists (torturers, more like). It's out with alcohol and spontaneous sex, in with green tea and ovulation kits. Emma and James try everything from fertility drugs to in vitro, but all their carefully laid plans seem to go south -- along with Emma's rapidly plummeting self-esteem.

The members of her support team are unquestionably loyal, but distracted by their own personal dramas. There's Babs, her younger sister, who prescribes Emma half an Ecstasy pill to treat her depression. Her friend Jess is pregnant with her second child and gives Emma an earful about the downside of motherhood. The glamorous Lucy, Emma's closest pal, fears she might be stuck in her "single rut" forever -- that is, until she meets Donal, a rough-around-the-edges rugby player who passes out on their first date but quickly proves that he is worth a second chance. And last, but certainly not least, is James, Emma's rugby coach husband, who quite unhelpfully manages to give himself a groin injury just when she is ovulating.

But just when Emma feels as if her obsession may have alienated all of her loved ones, including James, events take a ninety-degree turn that will have unforeseen consequences for everyone.

Sinead Moriarty brings a wicked sense of humor to a subject of feverish concern for women worried by the loud ticking of their biological clocks in this sizzingly funny, yet deeply moving novel.

Discussion Guide

1. Why do you think Emma wants to have a baby? She resolves to get pregnant at New Years saying, "It was high time I had a baby. I was thirty-three and although I may have felt--and, truth be told, behaved--like I was twenty-five, it was time to knuckle down and get up the duff" (3). It sounds as though she wants to have a baby because she feels as though she should, and that's not hard to believe, given the incredible amount of pressure to have kids she picks up from her social circle. Still, there are other moments, holding her goddaughter, for instance, when even observers can tell she's feeling "broody." What compels her to undergo all the painful medical treatments and devote her life to baby making?
2. How does Emma's character change over the course of the novel? She says herself, "I had been a thoughtful person before I had become an obsessive psychotic" (296). Do you think Emma's appraisal of her behavior is fair? While her Mum thinks she's been tough to take, James doesn't seem to think she's lost her character. He says, "But you are you. You've just had a really difficult time lately" (301). Do you think Emma's behavior crosses the line during her treatments, or would any woman who wants a baby that badly act similarly?
3. Were you surprised when Emma decided not to continue with IVF? What do you think the final straw was? Had she lost her faith in modern medicine? Was she tired of waiting? Did she feel that the treatments were unhealthy?
4. Adoption seems like the perfect solution for Emma, who desperately wants a child but can no longer handle the invasive medical procedures. James, however, has some qualms. He's afraid that their adopted child might bring unforeseen complications into their lives. Do you think James has valid concerns? Were Emma's counterarguments convincing? Can an adopted child be a true substitute for a biological one?
5. In Emma's world, it is almost universally assumed that a woman will want to have children. Emma says this even of Lucy, her exceptionally career oriented friend: "She wants to meet a guy, settle down and have a family" (44). The lone hold out is Amanda Nolan, who regularly tries to persuade Emma not to have kids. Emma says, "I liked her for being different: it made a nice change from hearing and reading that you're not complete as a person until you have a child" (146). Do you think this attitude is as uncommon in general as it seems to be in Emma's world? Do you think there are more Amandas out there than there used to be? Or more Lucys? Does it surprise you that "modern" women, such as we see in this novel, have such traditional desires?
6. Emma isn't shy about sharing her opinions, and she is clearly her mother's daughter in this regard. On many topics, Emma and her mother hold polar opposite positions. Emma's mom thinks Emma rushed to the doctor when she had trouble getting pregnant; Emma thinks having more information can only help. Emma's mother thinks Babs will shame the family name with her use of "hard" drugs; Emma accepts ecstasy from her younger sibling and dances the night away. Do you think their differences in opinion can be attributed to the generation they grew up in? Are either Emma or her mother right or wrong about any of the topics they disagree on?

7. According to Emma's version of events, James has very little to do with deciding whether they will try for having a family. When Emma tells him she is ready to try for a baby, "He seemed pleased--if a little surprised that I was feeling broody as I'd rough-handled nephew over the Christmas holidays." The two of them agree that Emma will be a good mother, but neither of them comment on whether James will make a good father. Do you think James is as invested in having a family as Emma is? Does she expect him to be, or is it assumed that the family is her domain?

8. After Emma plans their anniversary trip to Lourdes, she tells the unenthusiastic James, "I'll go on my own. Just like I go to all my appointments on my own. Just like I take all my drugs on my own. Just like I get the bad results on my own" (260). Do you think James is unsupportive of Emma? Does he grow more or less supportive over the course of Emma's treatments? Is there any way he could have shared the stress of her experiences more fully, or can he, as a man, never really understand?

9. During a night out to celebrate Lucy's recent promotion, Jess reveals that she is pregnant with her second child. Instead of being excited, as Emma would be if she discovered she was pregnant, Jess is depressed. Being a mom isn't all she thought it would be. Jess and Lucy argue over who has it worse: the new mom or the single girl. Do you think either of them won this argument? Why do each of them assume that the other has it so good? Emma is reluctant to believe new motherhood can be all that bad - why do you think she assumes that she'll fare better than Jess?

10. Emma goes through a frightening array of medical treatments over the course of the novel. Were you surprised by the amount of pain, expense, and stress she has to undergo in order to get help for infertility? By the end of the novel, she has very little faith in her doctors, who tend to assume that she'll have little trouble getting pregnant and that the treatments will not be painful. How do these assumptions make things more difficult for Emma? How could medical staff be more considerate of women struggling with infertility?

11. During her treatments, Emma rarely discusses her troubles with friends and family, like Imogen, who tend to assume that since she is not pregnant she must not be trying. How do these assumptions weigh on Emma's mind? When people assume that she hasn't been trying to get pregnant, why doesn't she correct them and share her story? What would it mean for her to admit that she's had trouble getting pregnant? How might people's assumptions on this topic demonstrate the way culture holds women responsible for all aspects of pregnancy and child bearing?

12. Late in the story, Emma talks to a couple of people who can empathize with her. Mrs. Curran and Policeman Mooney both know what it is like to have trouble with child bearing. What do you think these conversations mean to Emma? How do they help her come to terms with her troubles?

13. Throughout the hard times, as Emma tries to keep everything in perspective, her chief support is her sense of humor. What did you think were the funniest scenes in the book? How does Emma's sense of humor reveal the absurdity in her own behavior, her relationship with James, and the medical treatment she received?

Author Bio

Critical Praise

"Hilarious and touching. Sinead Moriarty is a fun, fresh new voice in women's fiction."

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Publication Date: March 22, 2005

Genres: Fiction

Hardcover: 320 pages

Publisher: Atria

ISBN-10: 0743496760

ISBN-13: 9780743496766