

PREFACE

Breastfeeding is intensely personal. It is a decision/commitment/struggle that a mother confronts daily, sometimes hourly, over weeks, months, or even years. Breastfeeding is intensely emotional. It impacts how you sleep, what you wear, how you feel—the nursing relationship is always on your mind. It is as much who you are as what you do. And because of how breastfeeding has been integrally connected to our conceptualizations of motherhood, it is also a touchy subject. Thus, to ask a mother, “Do/did you breastfeed?” is a loaded question, often more sensitive and intrusive than inquiring of one’s political stance or religion.

With that in mind, I will state my intentions. My objective here is *not* to make readers of any infant feeding path feel inadequate, guilty, or emotionally troubled. This text is about identifying the cultural and institutional obstacles that impede women who want to breastfeed or do not get to nurse as long as they intended to do so, for the mother who was dissuaded by unhelpful mother-in-laws that deemed it “too hard,” discouraging partners, or by well-meaning, ill-informed pediatricians that recommended weaning so that Mom could go on antibiotics. Or, the common situation of a breastfeeding mother who returns to work and discovers that the dedicated pumping space is actually just the women’s restroom, her boss frowns upon missing work to pump, or that coworkers keep barging in, interrupting the pumping process. It is also for mothers who have painted their nipples purple with Genetian Violet in an attempt to curb thrush so painful that it brought tears to their eyes at each and every latch. This book is on behalf of any mother who has ever

been stared at, ridiculed, or asked to “cover up” while nursing in public or asked “not to breastfeed around Grandpa because he’s not used to such things.” Or had friends and family exclaim in surprise that “You’re *still* nursing?!” We can also celebrate the joy of hitting nursing milestones, milk dribbling down a grinning baby’s chin, the first time a child purposely signs “milk,” or a partner’s amazement that you can feed the baby with your body.

Both struggles and positive experiences are usually ignored in public discourse, overlooked as if they do not matter. Instead the health benefits of the “liquid gold” are divorced from the women who produce it. Yes, breastfeeding is (and needs to be) considered a public health issue, but it is also deeply embedded in constructions of motherhood and womanhood. It is a Feminist issue. It is also an issue for populations beyond expectant and new parents, as culture profoundly influences success. Our understanding of breastfeeding is derived from personal experience, as well as from mediated influences. At the center of this book is the assumption that media shapes our culture, and with that, our cultural perceptions of infant feeding.

I cannot write a book about breastfeeding without providing my own experience and intersectional position. I am an educated, Caucasian, heterosexual, married woman who had children relatively late (singleton term babies without complications at birth). I breastfed my oldest daughter until she was almost two, when I was well into my second trimester. I nursed my youngest daughter for much longer. On her third birthday, we mutually decided to be done. While I was privileged to have a supportive partner and enough flexibility to express and store milk at work, breastfeeding was not without struggles. I had some latching issues, mastitis with each child, and battled thrush for more than a year. I was fortunate to be set up for success. At the same time, I have witnessed friends whose breastfeeding goals were thwarted by a lack of support or health care providers. I have experienced living in a community in which breastfeeding is not the “norm,” and resources are difficult to come by. Just as troublesome, I have observed the tactics of formula companies to derail and undermine breastfeeding rates through free samples, social media advertisements (ads), and complimentary dayplanners distributed at the first prenatal appointment. This book is about the constant negotiation between the various players in breastfeeding success. Through secondary and primary research on media’s constructions, I argue that culturally, we have been swimming against a current of cultural resistance

to adequately improve breastfeeding experiences and overall rates. How we, as a culture, perceive breastfeeding not only impacts how we treat and support women now, but also influences future generations.

Murfreesboro, USA

Katherine A. Foss

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Foss, K.A.

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