

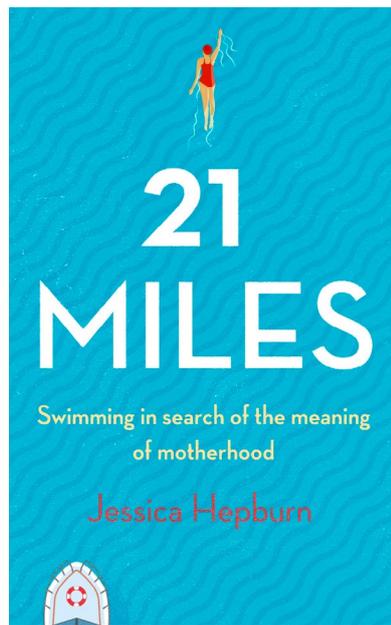
21 Miles

Swimming in Search of the Meaning of Motherhood

JESSICA HEPBURN

is one of the UK's leading voices on fertility, infertility and IVF; speaking widely in the media on the subject of assisted conception and alternative routes to parenthood. Her first book *The Pursuit of Motherhood* followed her journey through numerous fertility clinics as she underwent eleven unsuccessful rounds of IVF. *21 Miles: Swimming in Search of Motherhood* is her beautiful new book which documents the challenge that she set herself following that decade of trying to become a mother.

Jessica describes *21 Miles* as “coming out of a really difficult place”. For Jessica that was her gruelling IVF experience but this is such a rich book that could relate to people in any painful situation who, like Jessica, feel that they have to do something different with their lives. Others may not set themselves such a radical feat of endurance as swimming the 21 Miles of the English Channel from England to France(!) but **this story is about determination, commitment and, most movingly, the kindness of strangers.** Everyone who is on a journey will resonate with the process of finding your people and then the sense of community as others help you towards your goal.



On reading the book I found out there was so much I didn't know about about swimming the channel! Jessica acknowledges that many people don't realise what an undertaking it is - it is actually one of the toughest physical endurance challenges on the planet. I felt less intimidated as Jessica freely admitted “I'm not really a swimmer. I hate the cold. I hate exercise”. I could totally relate to the one redeeming feature of the project that she identified as being the fact that channel swimmers get to eat - a lot!! Jessica says:

“When I discovered that, that actually swimming the channel is a license to eat, this was like amazing. So I came up with an idea. What if I were to write to a range of famous

and inspirational women? Some mothers and some not who would meet with me and eat with me to help me get fat to swim the channel as well as discussing the question, does motherhood make you happy?”

With characteristic generosity of spirit, part of the book is the documentation of her interviews with 21 influential women about their experience of being, or not being mothers. The interviews within the book are far-ranging - from the documentary maker who finds the longing to be a mother a mystery to the businesswoman who reputedly has it all but knows from painful experience the pressure that the loss of a child can put on a relationship - and all of this is woven together beautifully with the physical and emotional challenges of the preparation for the channel swim.

Jessica was surprised by the way in which the preparation process reminded her of the IVF experience and reflects that it wasn't something that she was prepared for. She describes a moment in the book where she is training for the swimming she says:

“One of the ways that you can train is, you can do a relay across the channel with other people so you swim it in legs rather than swimming it all yourself and we do this relay and it doesn't quite go to plan. I won't give away too much, but what I realized in that moment is that something that channel has just like IVF because the sea is ultimately in control and it doesn't matter how much you train or how much you want it she will decide whether she is going to let you get across. That is exactly the same with IVF. You have to accept that

however hard you want it, even if you go through 11 rounds of IVF, it is ultimately out of your control”.

As a reader this was one of the messages of the book that really hit me - understanding the IVF journey on this kind of epic scale. People acknowledge the IVF journey as tough, which it clearly is, but they don't often talk about the way in which the experience puts you in direct communication, and even conflict with, nature and can prompt you to ask some very deep questions about the nature of existence.

Jessica says:

“I suppose it's about a sense of surrender really, you know, surrender to this thing that is bigger than you. Also something that I explored was that I am just a tiny part of the wider universe. I know we are the centre of our own universe and when we're on this journey about our own pursuit of motherhood it can consume you and feel like it is everything. I think one of the things that is so hard about it is you do not know what the outcome is going to be and you're constantly having to sort of accept that you can't control the outcome. The other really difficult thing is that there are things that we think may or may not be within our reach depending on how our life goes - having a nice house, going on holidays, having a good job - but having a baby is never something that you worry about achieving. That's just what animals do. It's part of being human. And then you suddenly realise you might not be able to do that. Connection is incredibly important for human beings and families are the quickest

route to that. There is no question. So if you don't have that, you have to find other ways of making connection because I do think it's essential to human happiness”.

Connection is at the heart of the book. Each woman had given Jessica a word to take with her on her swim - each one gorgeously reflecting its giver (such as “grit” from the internet entrepreneur and “eschatological” from the



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Queen's chaplain). But, more than that, it encapsulated the theme of support and the real warmth and compassion that is at the heart for the book. I was so moved by 21 Miles and the section where Jessica summons the words of the women she had met to carry her through exhaustion and on towards her goal had me sobbing unreservedly. The image of setting out on an epic journey with only the words of strangers to sustain you and that collective wisdom being enough to get you through has stayed with me.

There is so much wisdom in 21 Miles: Swimming in Search of the Meaning of Motherhood. EM Forster said we read to know we are not alone and I am sure that this book will help so many people to know that there are others who understand their journey and that they are supported by a wide and wise community.



JESSICA'S WORK CONTINUES WITH 'FERTILITY FEST' - THE WORLD'S FIRST ARTS FESTIVAL DEDICATED TO THE SCIENCE OF MAKING BABIES

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