



## **Swimming Upstream: The Struggle to Conceive**

David Rawlings and Karen Looi  
Peacock Publications 2006/ ISBN  
1921008253 / Price: £...

Any book with a section “how to use this book” is bound to fall into the “self-help” category. But this is more than a manual for those with problems conceiving, it is a balanced combination of “what to expect” and “what you may be able to do about it,” David writes the former, from his own experience, but not as his personal story (as many such books have a tendency to do) and Karen, an infertility counsellor, writes the latter in grey-toned blocks at strategic points – usually ends of chapters. Titled “What’s in the Toolbox?” these shorter sections are an attempt to combine practical advice with insight into, and empathy for, the couple’s situation. So each author comments on the same issues, but in a different way. Although this separation works quite effectively I found the grey

background a bit offputting. I hope that most readers will be younger and have better eyesight than this reviewer.

David and Karen have “identified four major areas that affect a couple’s life and looked at them from a man’s perspective.” This is in itself a departure from most books on infertility and deserves credit for giving the male a voice and a set of issues to consider and hopefully start to resolve. I am surprised that the authors chose to underplay this aspect, both on the cover and in the title. It does not detract from the book and, on reflection, I like the inclusivity – women should find much in the book to help their understanding of the whole process as well as the problems and issues their partners face. Family and friends, trying to help and understand what a couple is going through may benefit too. While it does not shout out as a man’s book – the sperm on the cover are the only clue if you do not already know – it ought to fill a gap in the market as male-friendly reading.

Worth mentioning, only since it gives the book a certain flavour, is that both authors are Australian. This does not affect the content in the least - infertility is not a respecter of national boundaries - but I was momentarily struggling to understand, in the section on managing Christmas parties, how there might be an outside group as well as an indoor group, allowing for withdrawing from one if the conversation was too focused on children. I found such antipodean clues illuminating, not detracting. The other unspoken aspect of Australia was perhaps in the notion of the strong male who "fixes" his own problems, gets on with his "mates" and guards his masculinity dearly. All the more need for a book like this to work with and challenge such attitudes, whether one believes the stereotypes or not, and of course those characteristics can be found in males of any country.

The four main sections are: *the effect on you* (the man); *the effect on your partner* (the woman); *dealing with other people*; and *treatment and choices*. These divisions are logical and easy to find your way around if, as the authors suggest, you dip in rather than read cover to cover. The issues covered include, and I quote from the bookmark:

- Why men don't talk about problems conceiving
- How a struggle to conceive affects your ability to plan for the future
- The social isolation and putting on a brave face in a child-centred world
- "Just relax" and other Top 10 Last Things You Want to Hear
- Dealing with special occasions like Christmas and christenings
- The effect on a couple's sex life
- How this experience can affect your faith
- Having trouble conceiving second time around
- Considerations around adoption and sperm and egg donation

I would have added a bullet point about how counselling can help couples. The subject certainly is covered and counsellors portrayed in a favourable light, not surprisingly given that Karen is one. It is impressive also that the word "infertility" is avoided throughout the book except in relation to clinical contexts, as it gives an impression of defectiveness (in one or both partners) and of something definite, whereas in reality the journey is one of complexity and indefinite outcome. Problems conceiving/-getting pregnant/-trying to start a family is the terminology they use. Could more clinicians or indeed counsellors be persuaded to watch their language in this respect?

Stylistically, the book allows for either a straight-through read or reference to topics, which still make sense without reading the whole book. Male metaphors turn up regularly, such as "game-plan" and other sporting references; guerrilla warfare - harder to fight because you don't know where the enemy is - provides an apt image of male confusion and frustration in the face of difficulties conceiving. Such metaphors express experiences in a way that males can relate to. It sometimes feels similar to material written for teenagers which adapts the language to that age group - and while there is a risk of being patronizing, which is not the case here, its use seems appropriate as it emphasizes the primary aim of the book which is to get through to men, many of whom aren't used to dealing with feelings.

It is a strength of the book that, although there is a certain amount of generalization, the reader can relate his individual experience to the way each topic is presented and is likely to be receptive to the ways of coping that are also offered (the toolbox). Humour is an integral part of the text, but not overdone or likely to offend; it is well integrated with the overall style which can be serious, reflective, poignant and sensible as well. There are quotes from the author and other males set into the structure of each chapter which tell it like it is. "She is

running our sex life. She is basically telling me where and when to turn up.” (- John, 33). I find this directness refreshing and would expect readers to engage more readily because of it – males particularly. For readers who skim texts, the quotes alone can convey much of the ideas. But the longer passages too deal sensitively, uncompromisingly and thoroughly with the issues likely to be faced by a couple.

My own favourite sections to highlight were these. The “fertility myths,” being so ingrained in our culture, cannot be over-emphasized and were rightly placed at the beginning. The section on beliefs and religion made me consider this difficult area from angles I had not thought of. The section on Donor Issues was short but nevertheless incisive about how to approach making such decisions and allowing for partners’ different speed of acceptance. I found the end section touched me by its sensitivity and optimism (-“what positives can you take from an experience like this?”). Looking back over the contents, I found no obvious issues which I felt had been omitted. What was omitted was a reference to BICA in the UK resources section, or even ANZICA. I hope the book sells and gets a second printing, where this may be rectified.

While infertility counsellors would be expected to know and work with much of what the book covers, and therefore don’t have a need to read it, I hope they do anyway. It is likely to give them greater insight into how a man often copes (or doesn’t cope) in different ways to a woman. It would be an appropriate book to recommend, as I have already done to couples generally, men in particular and also in cases where a man cannot attend in working hours. Any female counsellors concerned that their perspective is too female may also find this book gives them more gender balance, but even if not, it’s worth a read.

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**David Rawlings** has written an article on p.xx which draws from material in *Swimming Upstream*. **He is offering BICA members a discount on the normal retail price ....[www.swimmingupstream.com.au](http://www.swimmingupstream.com.au)**