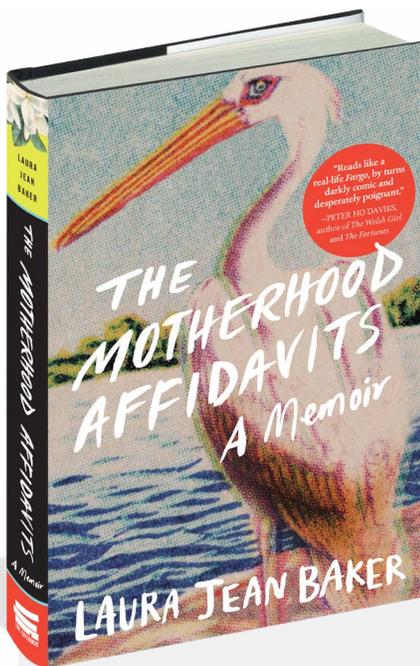


The Motherhood Affidavits

A Memoir

by [Laura Jean Baker](#)

Reading Group Guide



Hardcover

\$24.95 US

288 pages

ISBN 9781615194391

Publishing April 3, 2018

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The Motherhood Affidavits is an unconventional book, in both content and form. What other memoir compares the addictive highs of childbearing to those of heroin and meth? And most memoirs written by or about mothers rely mainly on memory, but this deeply personal narrative is interwoven with meticulous reportage of other people’s alleged crimes. Baker uses this hybrid form to ground—and illuminate—her own story within a larger social context, raising vital questions related to childbearing, parenthood, marriage, addiction, economic hardship, criminal justice, and personal accountability. This guide takes a closer look at how the book is crafted and explores ways its deeper themes might resonate with readers.

1. Joyce Carol Oates writes, “Laura Jean Baker has written a beautiful and brave memoir of motherhood and its discontents, which are indistinguishable from its joys.” What unexpected or “brave” decisions has Baker made in her portrayals of her children, her family life, and of motherhood in general?

2. Many of the criminal defendants portrayed in the book are mothers, and Baker frequently quotes from their sworn statements. To the extent that the book itself can be read as Baker’s own affidavit, what “crime” or “crimes” of motherhood is Baker guilty of, and is the purpose of her “statement” to plead guilty or seek exoneration?

3. In Chapter 2, Baker writes: “Babies had rewired the pleasure center of my brain. Like my aunt who was addicted to eating and QVC, my brother to drugs, my stepbrother and a half brother to booze, all I could fixate on was landing more pleasure.” Addiction is a driving force in this book—and not just in the drug-addled lives of Ryan’s clients. Do you accept the author’s assertion that she was addicted to pregnancy? How has addiction, in any form, touched your own life, or the lives of those you know?

4. In what ways does Baker, a highly educated university professor married to an attorney, find herself estranged from her own socioeconomic group—and more aligned with the criminal underbelly of her community? In what ways have you perceived, if not experienced, the blurring of traditional demographic lines in your own social circles?

5. Baker is a professor of English and writing who specializes in memoir, women's stories, crime narratives, and literature for children. She is also a published poet with an early background in journalism. Consider the rich prose style of *The Motherhood Affidavits*. What elements of language and storytelling does Baker employ, and for what purpose?

6. In every chapter, the author invokes a children's picture book, such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *The Carrot Seed*, and *Goodnight Moon*, among others. Why would she embroider a narrative for a mature readership with such innocent references?

7. Viewed through a certain lens, you might call this memoir a portrait of a marriage. The author relied on collaboration with her husband to accurately depict his work in criminal defense and to capture the emotional truth of their marriage. How would you characterize Baker's relationship with her husband? What is unusual about it? Do you see husband and wife as enviably close, codependent, or working at cross purposes? Do you ever fear for their marriage?

8. Health concerns permeate *The Motherhood Affidavits*, from reproductive to mental health. In chapter 6, Baker writes, "Our babies were born in lavishly good health, but Ryan, who probably needed more postnatal care than I, appeared like a man subjected to a host of communicable diseases." She is referring to both his physical health and to "some liberal sickness that was killing him now." How does Ryan embody many strains of illness, be they social, political, or systematic?

9. In many ways, this book is about shame and humility, emotions to which most of us (not just the obviously guilty) are vulnerable. Have any life stresses—whether familial, marital, romantic, financial, or professional—ever driven you to behave in shameful ways? Does this make the characters in this book more relatable?

10. Rob McNally, “the quintessential junkie” whom the author interviewed herself, is among the most vividly drawn characters in the book. He is also the only client of her husband’s who makes multiple appearances. What range of feelings does he elicit in you? Do you understand Ryan’s and the author’s affinity for him? As a character, what larger purpose does he play in the book?

11. Throughout this book, we meet an expansive list of characters beyond the author’s immediate family, ranging from her childhood friends to criminal defendants of all stripes. As she zooms in and out, sometimes only briefly, on these people, who else, besides McNally, makes an impression?

12. At the end of Chapter 10, Baker writes: “Before Reginald Price, Ryan was a pushover, a guy running an outreach program, legal aid nearly free of charge, a philosophy of the heart. But after Reginald Price, Ryan was more hard-hearted than ever before, which is exactly what we needed him to be.” Have you ever made moral or ideological sacrifices in the interest of self-preservation, or simply to feel healthy and sane again?

13. Baker, the daughter of a self-described feminist, seems acutely aware of how her feminist colleagues perceive her. In the last chapter, Baker writes, “I’d become a caricature of what feminists I knew rallied against, a woman defined by reproductive function . . .” What do you suppose feminism means to Baker? And what role, if any, does it play in her life?

14. In the last chapter, Baker writes: “When the crime is sex, only women are caught red-handed. The body is evidence.” She’s referring, of course, to the “crime” of pregnancy. Throughout the book, Baker’s peers judge her for her zealous procreation. How does Baker receive these judgments? Does she wholly reject them or does she, in some way, hold herself accountable to them?

15. In the final lines of the book, Baker writes, “I squinted in all directions and then dashed for my getaway car, a van with a SWIM MOM bumper sticker and upholstery kid-stained beyond detail, except that I wasn’t getting away. I was going home.” Why do you think Baker ends her story like this? What do you imagine happens when she returns to her family? Have you ever felt trapped with the consequences of your own actions?