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## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

March 5, 2010

### Maybe teen mums are onto something. I'm just saying

By Leah McLaren  
From Saturday's Globe and Mail

*British author Hilary Mantel shocked the world this week by making a case for teenage motherhood. "I was perfectly capable of running a home when I was 14," she told Stella magazine, "and if, say, it had been ordered differently, I might have thought, 'Now is the time to have a couple of children and when I am 30 I will go back and I'll get my PhD.'"*

British author Hilary Mantel shocked the world this week by making a case for teenage motherhood. "I was perfectly capable of running a home when I was 14," she told Stella magazine, "and if, say, it had been ordered differently, I might have thought, 'Now is the time to have a couple of children and when I am 30 I will go back and I'll get my PhD.'"

Instead of doing that, the 57-year-old writer completed her education and started her career before discovering she had been rendered infertile in her 20s because of a severe form of endometriosis.

Mantel, who won the 2009 Man Booker Prize for her novel *Wolf Hall*, went on to say she finds Western society's stigmatization of teen motherhood profoundly hypocritical and even misogynistic. Young women's instincts to procreate, she said, "are suppressed in the interests of society's timetable." A timetable that she believes has been set by and for men.

It's not the kind of talk that's going to land a gal a spot on Oprah's book club, is it?

Certainly, Mantel was roundly excoriated around the world this week - the British Department for Children, Schools and Families condemned her views and Jezebel.com accused her of "sidestepping all developmental and financial logic."

But I think Mantel makes a fair point.

Okay, 14 is awfully early to be sporting a baby bump. But why is there such a stigma around having babies young, in your late teens, say, or even early 20s? In terms of physical readiness, there is actually a strong argument for it.

Putting off having children, on the other hand, carries risks. I know many childless women in their 40s (and 50s and 60s) who now regret that they didn't "get on with it" when they had the chance.

The problem is that Western society doesn't allow women a realistic time period in which to reproduce without heartbreaking trade-offs. There is, as any working mother will tell you, simply "no good time" to have children, and yet we insist on trying to cheat the clock - hoping to get a little bit more educated, more successful or better-travelled, before buckling down to meet our biological destiny (assuming that's what we want).

As secular, middle-class Canadian females, we are strongly encouraged to go about things in the following order: First,

get a good education, then establish a career, subsequently secure an appropriate life partner, finally, have kids.

Sounds easy, right? Well as any PhD candidate or single woman in her late 30s will tell you, the first three can take a bit longer than expected.

The agonizing difficulty for women is that our window of socially sanctioned fertility (roughly age 25 to 40) inconveniently coincides with our window for career development and increased earning power. In this sense, Mantel is on to something: The schedule seems more naturally geared toward men, who go on being fertile well into their 40s and beyond and can better afford to spend the first two decades of adulthood focused on work to the exclusion of all else.

It would make much more sense, on many levels, for women who are inclined toward early motherhood to have babies first, and go on to complete education and build careers later.

The problem, we are told, is that we will not be "emotionally ready" for parenthood, and that it will steal our youth and leave us feeling exhausted and overwhelmed. But show me a fortysomething working mother who doesn't feel exhausted and overwhelmed and I will show you a woman on very effective mood stabilizers.

Louise Moody, executive director of Humewood House, a young-parent resource centre in Toronto, works with teen mothers at risk every day. Her own story is an inspiration to them. After having her first child at 19, Moody went on to complete a university degree and have two more children. "I think it would be very difficult to have done it a different way. When I was 19, I didn't have to give up my life to have a child. I was 19 - I didn't have a life yet. I established one later."

Yes, there is life after teen motherhood. A 2008 Statistics Canada report found that while teen mothers were less likely to complete postgraduate education, those who did were actually more likely to be employed full-time than their counterparts from similar socioeconomic backgrounds who had children later. Perhaps we should stop gawking at young mums and offer them more support as a society, in the form of increased child-care benefits and incentives to return to school and work.

Listen carefully: I am not saying your adolescent daughters should drop out of high school tomorrow and get themselves knocked up. I am saying that the socially sanctioned timetable we have at the moment leaves much to be desired.

In researching this column, I spoke to several women who chose to have and raise children in their late teens and early 20s. All have gone on to good jobs. Most have subsequently married. Some chose to have more children in their 30s. All resented the stigma associated with young motherhood, but none regretted their choice or reflect on it as a terrible sacrifice. "Being a young mom was actually great," Dianne Carruthers, a West Coast-based fortysomething who had her first child on her own in her early 20s, told me. "There is something to be said about being naive. I had so much energy and there was the invincible long view - the future still held many possibilities."

In the words of Juli Hodgson, a 50-year-old interior designer in Vancouver who had her first child at 18 and the second at 22, "I didn't get to travel much, and I had to work hard, but I realized later that I prefer not to carry a backpack and stay in hostels. So I travel now and stay in hotels, which I like." Her message to young women who want kids? "Don't wait, it's not worth the headache."

It may not be everyone's view of teenage motherhood, but it's theirs. The least we can do is respect that.

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