

Calling on a goddess

Jodi Panayotov's candid journal kept during her quest to fall pregnant is now a humorous tell-all book. By Vicki Englund.

If there's one word to describe Brisbane author Jodi Panayotov, it's "determined". Against heartbreaking setbacks that would have seen many other women give up, she refused to relinquish her dream of becoming a mother. Another goal was to have the book she wrote about that challenging journey published. *In Vitro Fertility Goddess* (Blink Press, \$24.95) was released nationally in September.

At the age of 37, Jodi suffered a miscarriage and picked herself up to try again. After a second miscarriage however, she started to think it might be more than bad luck and sought specialist medical advice. One by one, medical complications threatened to end her and husband Michel's dreams of becoming parents. But one by one, they overcame the hurdles.

"I had hyperthyroidism, endometriosis, and very irregular cycles thanks to my hormones being out of whack," explains Jodi, now 44. "As well as that, I found out much later through herbalist, Ruth Sharkey [the much touted "baby maker" from Sharkey's Healing Centre on the Gold Coast], that I had abnormally high temperatures which would prevent conception."

Despite this difficult course of events, which coincided with Jodi's biological clock starting to tick quite deafeningly, the book detailing her journey is not all doom and gloom – quite the opposite. *In Vitro Fertility Goddess* offers many chuckles and irreverent humour. There are also the moving moments when Jodi lays herself emotionally bare.

The book's genesis was a personal journal which Jodi kept while alone with her thoughts as Michel, international editor with Radio National Breakfast, was

working nights. In the hope that a slower, more peaceful lifestyle might help achieve another pregnancy, Jodi had taken extended leave from her flight attendant's position, and the couple had moved to the Gold Coast away from Sydney's Balmain. With no confidantes close by, Jodi tried to work through the emotional rollercoaster she was on via her writing. "I just needed to have this outpouring because you can't say some of that stuff... You can't even say it to your husband."

The "stuff" she refers to are the ungracious thoughts she was having at the time towards

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pregnant women or mothers brandishing babies and young children. Jodi laughs as she recalls, "You can't really ring someone up and say, 'I just saw some pregnant woman who I wanted to kill'. They'd think you were mad! And I was alienating people who I did try to speak to."

The decision to share the journal with a readership came when Jodi found there were no books in which she could find solace. "There didn't seem to be any books that I could relate to," explains Jodi. "Then during the waiting period for my IIV treatment, I was given a booklet. It was really bland and didn't actually deal with any of the real emotions. I looked back on my journal and thought that I could do something with it."

While expressing herself via the journal was a healthy outlet, Jodi admits her characteristic determination transformed into something a little darker and unhealthy as she found herself becoming completely obsessed with anything and everything related to infertility issues. In the book, she details logging on to websites such as

www.tryingtoconceive.com, where equally obsessed women boasted of their success stories of eventual conception and swapped gruesome details about bodily functions.

A quote from the book about the site says: "TTC, as far as I can tell, is a type of fetish club for females utterly preoccupied with vaginal mucous and basal temperatures, who use disturbing pet names for sex, their partners and their periods."

Jodi, who was once an occupational therapist in the psychiatric field, soon realised her preoccupation was similar to Obsessive-compulsive disorder. "You wonder how you'll get back out of the obsession, because you're not interested in anything else. I totally lost interest in reading books. The only thing I wanted to read about was if any



Jodi Panayotov writes of her rocky road to having a baby.

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celebrities had had miscarriages [so I didn't feel so alone].”

Meanwhile, Michel was trying to keep it together and give unending support to his increasingly frazzled wife. “He was aware of what was happening to me, but he didn't have any control over it,” Jodi muses about the turbulent time. “He just rode along with whatever I was doing, and I'd say, ‘Okay, we've got to go off and sign up for IVF’. He really didn't have a large part in those decisions. He was just at the point where he thought that if anything would have got me out of the state I was in, he would have followed it... Anything to try and get the normal wife back.”

On having her first injection for an IVF cycle, she writes: “Next day had to face horror of M giving me first injection, which I know was relief for him to insert needle rather than penis.”

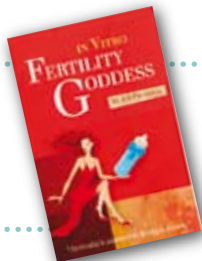
Jodi is well aware that her two-and-a-half year journey is relatively short compared with some women's tales of being on the IVF treadmill for a decade or more, some never achieving their dream of parenthood. She talks in the book about the unknown dark place in the future had a baby not materialised, and expresses doubt that she would have put her journal forward for publication if she hadn't had her baby.

The good news for the couple was that IVF worked for them and they now have five-year-old daughter, Nina. However, even when Jodi was carrying Nina, she suffered complications. So *In Vitro Fertility Goddess* not only deals with the conception difficulties and associated anxieties, but also traces the pregnancy through to birth. **AP**

Herbal healing

Jodi eventually had her daughter thanks to IVF treatment, but she credits herbal tonics with helping her achieve the successful pregnancy. Jodi's hormonal irregularities caused painful periods in cycles ranging anywhere from 24 to 54 days. She took a herbal mixture recommended by Ruth Sharkey, the now retired herbalist from Sharkey's Healing Centre on the Gold Coast (now helmed by Stacey Roberts), for five months leading up to the IVF treatment. “It really made a huge difference to my system – my cycles became very regular and there was a lot less pain with my periods,” she says. Jodi was advised by doctors to stop taking the herbs prior to the IVF treatment. She did so, as she and Ruth felt she was in the best shape possible to enable the medical process to take over. “I think the herbal tonics ensured healthy eggs and allowed the IVF drugs to work well, because my cycle was already in-sync,” says Jodi, who became pregnant on her first IVF attempt.

After more than two years of trying, Jodi became pregnant with her daughter, Nina, now five years old.



In Vitro Fertility Goddess by Jodi Panayotov (Blink Press, \$24.95) is available at bookstores and can be purchased online at www.invitrofertilitygoddess.com, where you'll also find more articles by the author.