

# THE IRISH TIMES

---

This page shows the article as it originally appeared in the newspaper. The article itself can be read on the following page.



This is the article's web address for reference.

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/2010/0713/Pg058.html#Ar05801>

The User may not copy, reproduce, distribute, or create derivative works from the Content without expressly being authorised to do so by the relevant copyright owner. © Copyright 2013 The Irish Times. All Rights Reserved.

# Giving birth to creativity

Recent research suggests that pregnancy boosts women's creative output

PREGNANCY, NOT to mention its eventual consequences, changes us. Hormones flood our bodies and we are forced to slow down and refocus. Much has been written about the effects on a woman's behaviour; from welling up at the story of a lost cat being reunited with its owner to retching at the smell of raw meat – that particular symptom turned my hapless family and I vegetarian for many months. However, one rarely discussed consequence of pregnancy is its impact on a woman's creativity. Surely an event that leads to raw emotions and fundamental changes in our thought processes will inevitably have some impact on our creative output?

Recently scientists have tried to quantify the effects of pregnancy and to measure and document behavioural changes long supported by anecdotal evidence. A team of neuroscientists led by Craig Kinsley, associate professor of psychology at the University of Richmond in Virginia, found that the specific influx of hormones during pregnancy and labour effectively rewire a woman's brain and fundamentally change the manner in which she interacts with the world.

The team also found that this transformation endures for far longer than nine months. Hormones, such as oestrogen and oxytocin released during pregnancy and nursing, dramatically enrich parts of the brain linked to memory and learning. The results of their study, entitled *Motherhood Enhances Learning and Memory: Accompanying Alterations in Neuronal and Glial Morphology*, were presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience. The research, conducted on pregnant and recently pregnant rats, found they were braver, more energetic and more inquisitive than previously. They completed complex mazes with fewer mistakes and retained knowledge for longer.

So, what of humans? Experiences seem to differ depending on who you talk to. Some women view pregnancy as a hugely creative time while others discern little change. Novelist and poet Evelyn Cosgrave speaks of her first pregnancy as a "very introspective time". She wrote poetry, much of it focused on the daughter she carried, but struggled to truly get to grips with her emotions. During her second pregnancy she started to write novels and found that the limited time available helped her to focus and let less important things slide. "I typed with one hand and fed with the other," she says.

Fellow novelist Amanda Hearty describes how the characters for her first novel, *Are You Ready*, "just came to me" during the early stages of pregnancy. She completed it in four months and had written 50 pages of the next one before daughter Holly put in an appearance. While pregnant she also completed a script-writing course and designed a board game.

Artist Margaret Corcoran painted her stunning Golden Fleece award-winning series of paintings, *An Enquiry*, while pregnant with her second daughter. The paintings follow older daughter Georgia's investigation of the Milltown Rooms in the National Gallery. Corcoran says, "They are really special to me and I don't have any because they all sold. Georgia was 12 or 13 at the time, at that transitional stage."

So, how did pregnancy affect her work? "I sat at a table resting my feet on my tool box. I had Lyric FM playing as I worked. I was quite big but experienced this very peaceful, centred, contented feeling. I had to work at pregnancy pace. I couldn't sleep so I was up at six in the morning, greeting the day while everyone else slept." The paintings are hailed as reminiscent of early Degas in style and composition.

Corcoran says she was "definitely more intuitive when pregnant. These paintings are all about children, puberty and new birth. The green background – from a Degas – represents youth. I painted from photographs so I was painting every hair on my daugh-

ter's head. I was incredibly intimate with one daughter and heavily pregnant with the other at this transient time in life."

Pregnancy-related creativity is in abundant evidence elsewhere. Helen Dunmore wrote her Orange Prize-winning third novel, *A Spell of Winter*, while pregnant. Novelist Barbara Kingsolver suffered from insomnia and is certain the condition helped her write her debut novel, *The Bean Trees*. Jodie Picoult wrote her first novel, *Songs of the Humpback Whale*, while pregnant with her first child.

Each individual pregnancy seems to affect the ability of an expectant mother to explore her creativity. Writer Rebecca Brown says she was "too ill, tired and preoccupied. Now though four weeks after giving birth I have lots of story ideas and plans." The irrepressible and hugely creative cartoonist Annie West is adamant that she "didn't do a thing for about six years. Then that wonderful thing called school appeared. Saved my career."

It seems the rats were right. Although often delayed by a preoccupation with morning sickness and demanding newborns, the creative benefits of pregnancy linger on and influence output in ways that benefit the expectant mother and her audience.

## ELEANOR FITZSIMONS



*An Enquiry II, A moment of youth*: a painting by Margaret Corcoran, one of the series of award-winning paintings which was completed while Corcoran was pregnant with her second daughter.