

What not to fear when you are expecting: Self help literature in a risk society

Nearly two decades ago the sociologist Barbara Katz Rothman argued that many women "take pregnancy as a reading assignment" (1986: 45). The abundance of literature in the form of magazines, pamphlets and books available for the expectant woman or couple upholds this claim. Yet it appears that this form of literature has evaded detailed analysis with few exceptions. The following article attempts to analyse the role that pregnancy and childbirth self-help literature plays in defining risk knowledges for its audience. It will be argued that texts such as *What to Expect When You're Expecting* warn women about hazards which they face during their pregnancy and impending birth. These women are told about invisible killers lurking in their ignorance. Yet, blame is allocated to those who fail to inform themselves about the risks that they face. It will be argued that contemporary handbooks for the expectant woman make it clear that responsibility for a good pregnancy and production of a normal infant remains with the mother, with many tending to highlight the most extreme views on the risks that the expectant woman and her unborn child are faced with.

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