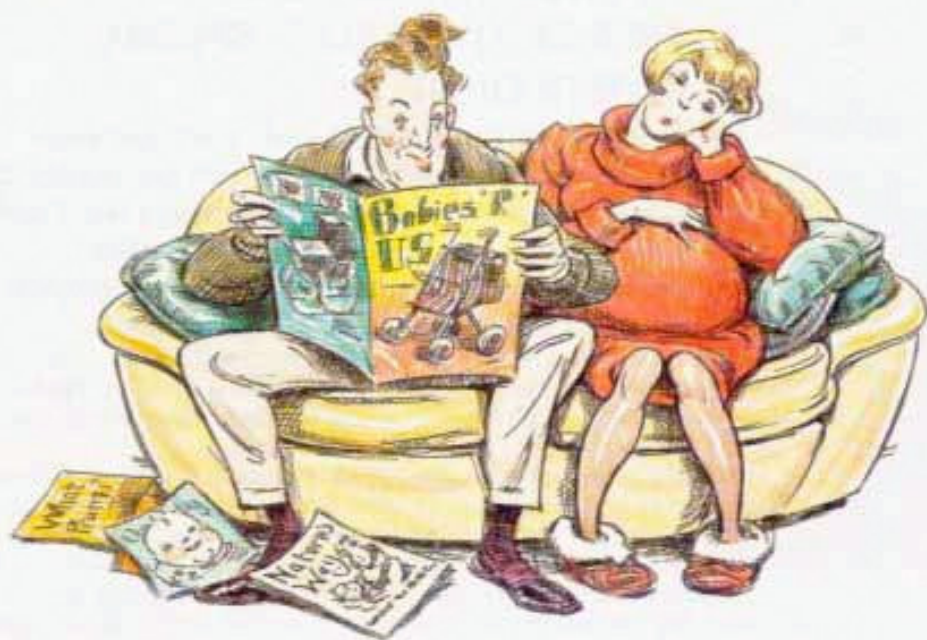


MAN ENOUGH?



Great expectations

Gone are the days when all a father had to do was hand round the cigars and celebrate. Phil Dourado describes his expectant emotions

American novelist John Irving, author of *The World According to Garp*, has a consistent theme running through his books: a father's sense of wonder that he has helped bring his children into the world, coupled with a morbid fear that some chance turn of fate will snatch them away or disable them in some horrible way.

"Beware of the undertow," Garp warns his youngest child as they paddle on the beach. For years the boy mishears the repeated warnings. Out there under the water, he imagines, is a vast, malevolent Under 'load waiting to swallow up defenceless children.

The same Under 'load of anxiety gripped me seconds after Sandy, my partner, first said: "I think we're pregnant". First came a surge of elation, and then there was the toad, hopping hornily out from behind. What if there were complications, it said. What about Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy, spina bifida and a hundred other syndromes that can take hold before they're born?

It took just a second for this flurry of unwelcome thoughts to jostle past. But it was long enough to dampen the elation and it must have shown in my face.

"So, you're not happy," she said.

"I am. Totally. Just shocked, that's all," I replied limply. Then I realised just how generous she had been in her choice of words. She

had the option of the exclusive "I'm pregnant", as in "You've done your bit, the next nine months are up to me". But she went for the all-embracing "we".

I don't want to give the impression that expectant fathers (that's what the National Childbirth Trust calls us) are always this morbid. But there's an underlying current of anxiety, a sense that too much of what is happening is outside your control.

I guess it's a combination of a father's instinct to protect his child and a sense of impotence (ironic, given the circumstances) that, until he or she is born, they're beyond your ability to protect. All you can be is a supportive bystander. The rest is down to your partner. Not that some of the "New Mannish" other halves at the antenatal clinic would agree.

We've come a long way from the days when a man planted his seed and kept his distance until the baby was brought for his approval, swaddled and clean, nine months later. Everything in between was seen as women's business, for the wife and the midwife to deal with.

Now most men feel it is their duty to share the experience right up to being in the delivery room when it's all happening. Giving birth, for the father, is no longer a matter of passing around the cigars in the waiting room.

Some expectant fathers, however, appear a little over-zealous in their conversion. Take

the couple next to us in the antenatal waiting room: "So, remember," he says, "when they ask, we want no epidural. We want everything as natural as possible. And we should ask about that electric device that's supposed to block the pain - it sounds dodgy to me so I think we should rule it out..."

Sandy leans over. "Sounds more like a takeover than a partnership," she whispers. "Any of that from you and you're dead. If I'm screaming in agony, I want the electric thing." Assertive fathers-to-be please take note: our role is to support the decisions rather than to impose them. After all, it's her body.

Unless, that is, her decision is to keep on smoking and drinking right up to the birth. I did find a packet of Rothmans hidden in Sandy's wardrobe, which led to a bit of a showdown.

Another change fathers-to-be have to cope with is an unsettling shift in self-definition from being someone's son to being someone's father. Essentially, this comes down to the big R word: "Responsibility".

In material terms it means abandoning toys like the Mazda MX-5 we'd both been dreaming about. The second toy to go was the planned home gym. The spare room will no longer be spare and the equipment's too expensive. My thirtysomething waistline will have to continue to expand.

Most men see pregnant women as sexually neutral or out of bounds. But when it's *your* pregnant woman, carrying *your* growing child, it's a different thing entirely. Knowing that she is carrying a part of you adds a new intensity to your relationship which goes a long way beyond her extra curves.

It doesn't always start that way, however. When my partner discovered she was pregnant, she went through a phase in which she became fascinated by the changes going on within her. She'd spend hours deep in thought, stroking her stomach. Such understandable introspection can leave you feeling an outsider. Luckily it only lasted a few days. Then the unexpected passion took over.

With four months gone, the high points of being a pregnant man definitely outweigh the low points. It may well be uphill from now on; there'll be increasingly sleepless nights and then the birth itself. And that, after all, is only the beginning. Friends tell me we will soon be discussing the merits and drawbacks of different models of Maclaren baby buggy with the passion we used to reserve for MX-5s and MGs. Sports cars? Who needs 'em? ■