

Surprise Child: Finding Hope in Unexpected Pregnancy

By Leslie Leyland Fields

Waterbrook Press, 2006, 160 pages

Reviewed by Dave Andrusko

When I noticed that I had dashed off eight or nine typewritten pages worth of notes about a book that is only 160 pages long, I smiled, realizing this only confirmed what I had known by the time I finished the Introduction to *Surprise Child*. Leslie Leyland Fields has written an immensely important book, one that prods your mind, touches your heart, and speaks to your soul. *Surprise Child* is a small masterpiece that all pro-lifers should read and then read again and then share with others.

The rough outlines of her story are as simple as the tangle of emotions an unexpected pregnancy can bring in its wake is complex. Already the mother of four (three boys and a girl), she had finally got the job she wanted: a tenure-track position as an assistant professor of English at a state university.

Although she had written two books and edited another largely about life as a commercial salmon fishing family on a remote island, a college professorship is not necessarily something you'd expect for someone who lives nine miles north of nowhere—a "house on a cliff over the salty North Pacific waters of the Gulf of Alaska on Kodiak Island."

And then, her life firmly on track, wham, she's pregnant in her forties. Seemingly a blink of an eye later, she is pregnant again.

Surprise Child is loving in spirit and life-affirming in every way that matters. When you finish the final chapter, you'll feel like cheering, as if you'd just watched *Rocky*. The stories of the 25 or so women chronicled in the book are a testimony to the power of the human spirit and the strength that faith in a loving God provides.

But *Surprise Child* is also brutally, unflinchingly honest.

Fields has interviewed women who had no intention of being pregnant, or who had made their peace with infertility or an inability to carry a baby to term, or who had arranged their lives around the sure knowledge that changing diapers was just a distant memory.

There are no doubt women who "knew" there would never be childbearing days (or were convinced they were history), only to discover otherwise, who meet this sharp U-turn with equanimity. This book is not about them.

Surprise Child tells the story of women (of any age) who watch with dread to see whether a line will appear in the pregnancy test stick. When the results are positive, they feel (as Fields did initially) overwhelmed by the "darkness of anxiety, resistance, and fear."

Surprise Child is written by Fields for women like Fields. As she writes, resources for women in her circumstances were few and far between and none particularly helpful. She writes to convince women that they have what it takes to carry their baby to term, regardless of circumstances or the siren call to abort.

As I told her in a phone interview, as a man, a husband, and a father of four, reading the book I felt like I was eavesdropping on a conversation between women. But Fields told me that some of the most poignant early responses to *Surprise Child* have come from men. "I never knew" might be a good summary of their

comments.

Thus the book is also for the men in these women's lives, for crisis pregnancy center volunteers, for church members who might be lulled into thinking that an unexpected pregnancy poses no challenges for a woman of faith, for extended family—all of whom might not have the faintest clue about the existential dread that can wash over women.

Fields, for example, was utterly devastated. A woman who loved being a mother, all she could think was that "Just as I had emerged into relative light and safety," her life had been dramatically changed. She was "starting all over."

"What did I do in those first minutes?" she writes. "I stood over the test stick frozen, my breath gone for seconds, Then suddenly with a convulsive shake I sucked in the air I had lost; my heart went mad with drumming; my hands fisted, then went limp. And then I began to run shouting, looking for someone to help me carry this."

Surprise Child provides priceless advice to women and girls facing an unplanned pregnancy. However, nothing is more valuable than her shrewd insight into the rush of emotions that threaten to steamroll a woman when she discovers she is pregnant with a child she had not anticipated.

"You are trying to live out the next two or three years of your life in these thirty minutes, in one day," Fields writes. "Everything you fear visits you in one crushing blow. You feel weak, vulnerable. You think you cannot do it. You are right—it is impossible to live it all, to answer all these deep needs and fears in a single hour or a single day or week. As each day passes, some of your fears will fade; some will disappear entirely; some may slowly become reality. But in this moment, you do not need to answer all the questions. There will be time in each day to find answers, to find reasons to hope."

In that same Introduction, Fields will fast-forward to tell the reader, "Each one here had her life interrupted, each one here has a child who came to her unbidden, and each one now cannot imagine her life without the child." But just because we know there is a happy ending does not diminish in any way the power of Fields' riveting narrative.

She intertwines the stories of women who faced down their deep apprehensions with an explanation of her own unborn children's development and, concomitantly, her own feelings as the pregnancy advances. Like the other women in the book, Fields had been absolutely convinced she "can't be pregnant."

They "can't" be because their boyfriend doesn't want the baby, or because they already have four children under five, or because they are about to be the first one in their family to go to college, or because their husband is about to be deployed to Iraq, or because they have an eldest child with significant disabilities, or ... "So many bad situations!" Fields writes.

But Surprise Child tells us that for all this, women can and do persevere. Their stories are miniature profiles in courage, the kind that humble the reader.

Fields is not a Pollyanna. She fully realizes that women do take the lives of their unborn children, misled into thinking that the road to "freedom" and "growth" passes through the abortionist's curettage. In fact, the exact opposite is the truth.

More than one woman whispered to Fields that the child had "saved my life." In some cases, this was literally true.

Leading lives of self-destruction, they suddenly realized that they could no longer do drugs or go on alcoholic binges. Others became better, richer human beings because they "did not give into fear."

I could go on for pages but let me conclude with a lengthy quote from Fields, one that captures the heart of her message of encouragement.

“You did not listen to those who may have urged you to end this pregnancy. You have changed your life, sustained other losses to bring this baby to light and air. And now you have something to show for these months and sacrifices: beautiful bone and flesh and blood of your very bone. But there is more. You are more than you once were. You emerge from this birth more resilient and resourceful, wider and deeper than the woman who stared unbelieving at a test stick forty weeks ago. You’ve traveled so far and done so much. Rest now in all you have created and become.”

You can learn more about Leslie Leyland Fields and order the book by going first to www.surprisechild.com.