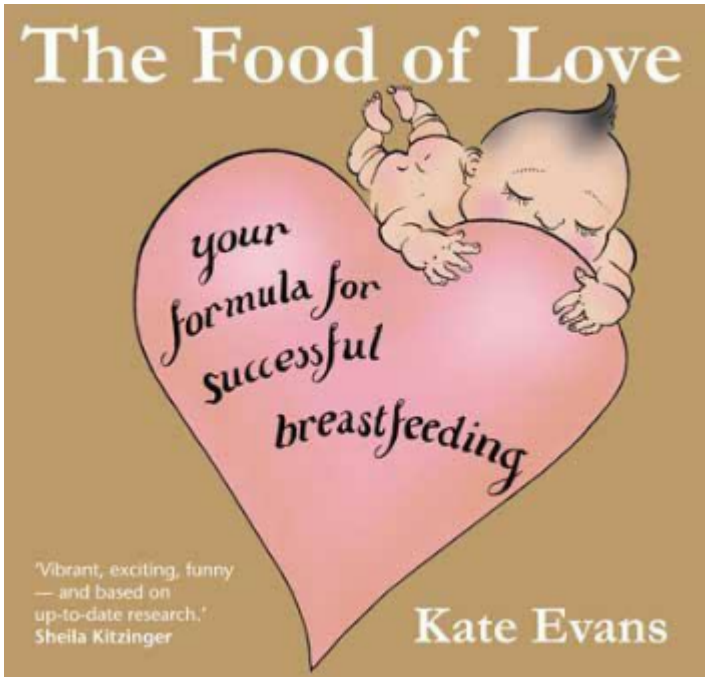
AIMS For a better birth...

A Conversation with Kate Evans, author of The Food of Love

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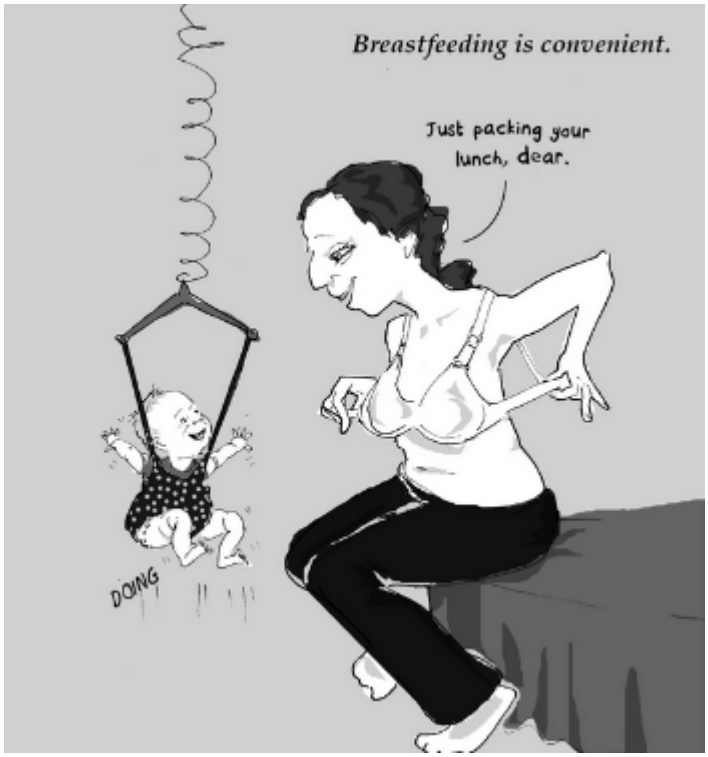
Interview by Catharine Hart

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by AIMS, Kate.I love that this book doesn't try to sound authoritative, as a lot of baby books do. You start off at the very beginning before even the contents page saying:

"Now this book doesn't have all the answers. This is your baby, who isn't the same as the one in the books. You will arrive naturally at your own style of parenting, and feel free to take any advice about babycare, including all of this, with a pinch of salt."

The Independent newspaper described it as a "refreshingly different approach"- your style is so original, very honest and not at all preachy.

Aw, thank you! Yes, what I'm really proud of are the bits where I encapsulate ideas that are not able to be said in words. I can get them across using pictures. These are the things that really stand the test of time, the universality of birthing and breastfeeding experiences. I try my hardest not to be too prescriptive, because there isn't one experience that women are going to have of feeding and breastfeeding.



There are also some really great personal experiences you have captured here, in a graphic novel format, for example your Mum's experience, when she was trying to breastfeed and the student nurses came into her room to observe her because "they had never seen breastfeeding before".

Yes - they said to my Mum "We've brought all the student nurses to watch breastfeeding because they won't have another chance" (!!) - although I've drawn them clustered in a circle around her, I haven't drawn this accurately - apparently they were actually lined up in a row across the room!

Our theme for this AIMS journal is breastfeeding within the UK maternity services. Here in the UK we still have one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in Europe as well as globally.[1,2] You touch on many aspects of our culture in the UK and how it can affect breastfeeding.

Yes, I don't know if any other country in Europe reserves the kind of vitriol which the popular press can direct at breastfeeding supporters. You don't see this in any other area of public health. You don't see the press calling dentists "Nazis", when they advise limiting sweets for children, or say how dare they talk about tooth decay and enamel, it will just make people feel guilty! Because there isn't any one way to "do it right" and there are conflicting schools of thought about how you should raise your baby, you're always going to be "doing it wrong" according to someone. This is a really culturally destabilising scenario. Because babies and the way that we raise babies are a really ingrained part of our culture, and the way that our culture sustains itself. Human culture is meant to evolve within groups of people who have all shared baby-raising practices. It seems fundamentally and biologically wrong for you to be unsupported and at odds with the people around you when you are raising a baby. So, nowadays, when you have both isolation and choice around which practices you adopt when you have a new baby, it's not surprising that women often feel sensitive and that they're being judged.



UNICEF reports that in the UK, around 80% of women give up breastfeeding before they would have liked to,[3] which suggests our maternity services are not offering adequate breastfeeding support at all.

Formula feeding adverts aren't exactly helping either. I mean I am targeted with adverts for formula milk on the internet, and I'm 52 years old and a breastfeeding advocate!

Yes, you make the point very well - breastfeeding makes both "mothers healthier and their bank balances healthier", especially now in a cost of living crisis with the cost of formula milk being £12-15 a tin, which can come to around £700 a year.

Yes, I don't call it a "cost of living" crisis – let's be clear – it's a "cost of billionaires" crisis! I don't actually think formula milk should be a commercial product to be sold for profit at all either, if we really believe "fed is best" it should be free, but women must also have informed breastfeeding support.



You're not saying you know there's only one way to do this - when I trained as a midwife, some of the advice was quite prescriptive.

It can be a really rocky road getting breastfeeding established, I had that with my second child. It was hilarious because I say in my book "your baby is unlikely to have read any of these books" – when I wrote this, I was mainly thinking about baby care manuals which talk about how your baby is 'meant' to behave – but after I had my second child, she probably had a lip tie and reflux - she was totally not on board with breastfeeding on demand! So she hadn't read my book either!

We have a cultural idea that babies are 'meant' to cry. If you ask children to do an impression of a baby, they will usually reply with "WAA WAAA". There are babies who thrive on a routine of course, but what I object to is the idea that if you respond to your baby 'too quickly', your baby will be 'undisciplined' and that will make you a 'bad' parent.

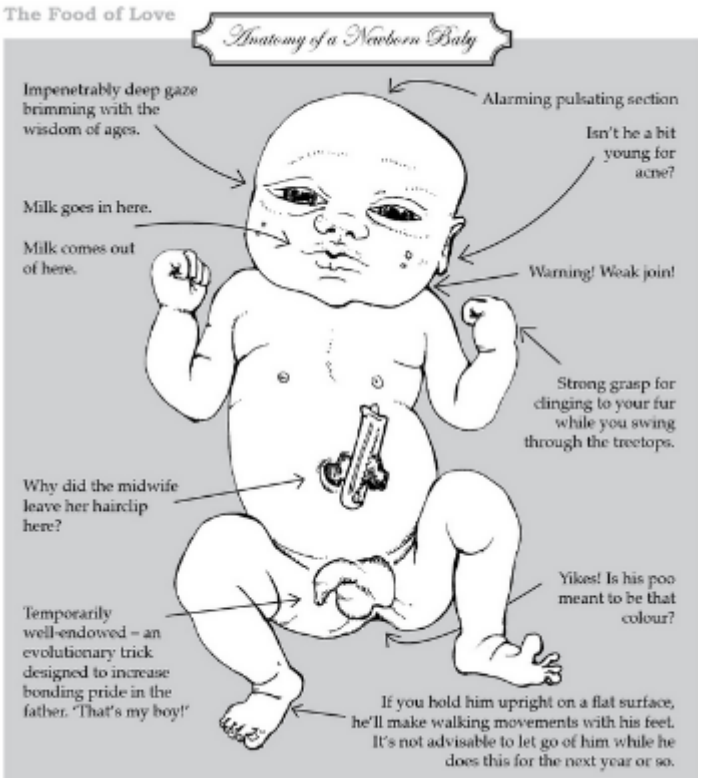
You mention attitudes towards breastfeeding in other cultures, including ones where women may cover other areas of their bodies, yet generally public breastfeeding is common and accepted widely in these cultures.

Yes, because I am currently writing a book about Jane Austen, I have recently been researching dress in 18th century Britain. In those days women would be feeding, perhaps with a shawl to cover them, *everywhere*. In public spaces where there would have been babies, you would have seen babies fed, it would have been common. Historically, new mums would also have probably had more immediate community. There is also the tradition of 'confinement'. It can sound medieval, but during your confinement, until about 6 weeks after the baby is born, the expectation was that other people would come in to help look after your household.

Is there anything you would change or amend if you were to republish *The Food of Love* today?

I would definitely change the advice on not drinking alcohol at all when breastfeeding. There is more research now into this topic, discussed by Jack Newman for example.[4] It's important to be aware of your alcohol intake in pregnancy or breastfeeding, but it's probably not true that you shouldn't breastfeed at all after drinking small amounts of alcohol, although awareness would still be needed around safe co-

sleeping for example.[5, 6]



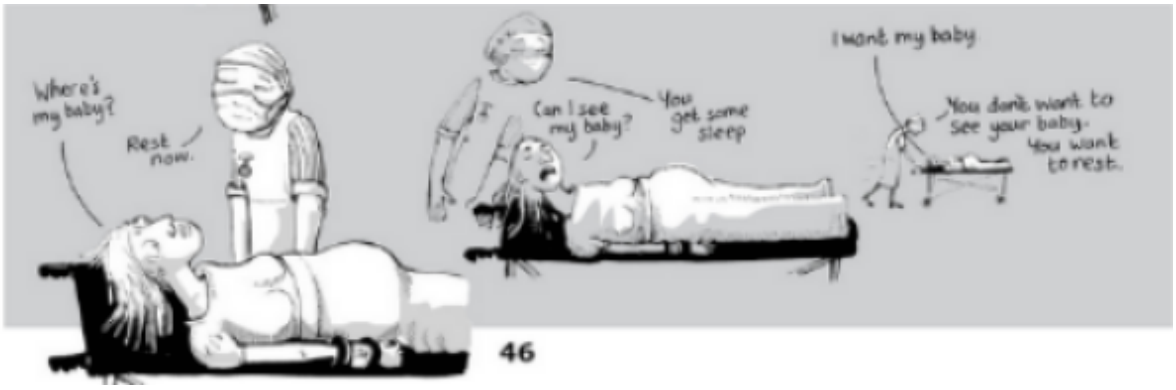
Your amazing illustrations – WOW - as you write "if you're feeling too brain-dead for reading, there are loads of pictures to look at instead". There is so much humour in the illustrations and they are so accessible, I found it really a joy to read, even if you're a bit sleep deprived! I love the "Mama Sutra" – covering different breastfeeding positions and your quote "breastmilk always comes in cuddles".

Yes, I designed the hard copy of the book purposely so it will stay open at the same page for you because of the spine – so you can read it with your hands full! I think I was influenced by also being around babies from a young age - my mum had a baby when I was 13, although apparently my sister and I weren't actually much help to her at the time!

When I wrote *The Food of Love*, as well as *Bump: How To Make, Grow and Birth A Baby* I wanted to be quite completist and provide some kind of 'manual'. If I was to reissue the books I think I would use mainly the artwork instead, creating something a bit more impressionistic. What is timeless in the book, as well as the comedy, is the general attitude. A political and philosophical idea of *meeting your child where they're at*, and this can be also thought about in terms of relations with other humans. This is very much the antithesis of trying to *control* other people.

I was looking to address specific problems by putting so much information into both books. But nowadays so many people will look online for answers for specific scenarios. So if I reissued my books maybe I wouldn't need to get so many words in there, but what needs to be celebrated is a *space* where you find out what your child's needs are and you meet them, at the same time as recognising that you yourself have needs and have other people around you, who can meet your needs. There aren't hard and

fast rules about how your baby's needs are best going to be met. I'd like to create books that give indicators, but there will always be a baby or baby/mother dyad that confounds any hard and fast rules, where they will have their own way of making it work.



The Food of Love and Kate's subsequent book *Bump: How To Make, Grow and Birth A Baby* are published by Myriad editions and are both available to buy directly from Kate via her website (clickhere) – you can also order personalised signed copies (dedicated to a mum or baby of your choice!) directly from her.

For Jane Austen fans, Kate is also currently writing a book on Jane Austen, to be published later this year.

1The Lancet (2016) 'Breastfeeding: achieving the new normal': www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2816%2900210-5

2 Nuffield Trust (2024) 'Breastfeeding': https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/breastfeeding

3 UNICEF (2025) 'Breastfeeding in the UK': https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/about/breastfeeding-in-the-uk/

4 Newman, J. and Pitman, T. (2014) 'Dr. Jack Newman's Guide to Breastfeeding', p.383, 2nd edition, Toronto, HarperCollins Publishers. For advice about alcohol and breastfeeding see also La Leche league GB https://laleche.org.uk/alcohol-and-breastfeeding/

5 Drugs and Lactation Database (LactMed®) [Internet]. Bethesda (MD): National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; 2006-. Alcohol. [Updated 2025 Jun 15]. Available from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK501469/

6 The Breastfeeding Network 2021 - last updated 2025) Alcohol and Breastfeeding. https://www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/wp-content/dibm/2019-

09/Alcohol%20and%20Breastfeeding.pdf