



One and Only: The Freedom of Having an Only Child, and the Joy of Being One

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Debunking the myth that only children are selfish, maladjusted “little emperors,” a prominent journalist makes a funny, tough-minded, and honest case for being and having an only child.

A humorous, tough-minded, and honest case for being and having an only child .

Journalist Lauren Sandler is an only child and the mother of one. After investigating what only children are really like and whether stopping at one child is an answer to reconciling motherhood and modernity, she learned a lot about herself—and a lot about our culture’s assumptions. She brings a passion and a laser-sharp intelligence to the subject that cuts through the anxiety, doubt, misinformation, and judgment about what it means to be an only child and what it means to have one. In this heartfelt work, Sandler legitimizes a conversation about the larger societal costs of having more than one. If parents no longer felt they had to have second children to keep from royally screwing up their first, would the majority of them still do it? And if the literature tells us that a child isn’t better off with a sibling than without one, and it’s not something parents truly want for themselves, then whom is this choice serving? *One and Only* examines these questions, exploring what the rise of the single-child family means for our economies, our environment, and our freedom. Through this journey, Sandler has quite possibly cracked the code of happiness, demonstrating that having just one may be the way to resolve our countless struggles with adulthood in the modern age.

One and Only: The Freedom of Having an Only Child, and the Joy of Being One **Details**

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Karri says

Really enjoyed reading the quotes from various researchers on the "only child" issue. I knew I'd have just one child while I was pregnant for my son. Loved it, but follow the "one and done" motto. Having him fulfilled my desire to be a mother. Having a goal and then achieving it doesn't have to lead to more of the same goal. I ran a marathon in my 20s and had no desire to run another one. It's just that simple! I would love to have my son as a baby again, but no way would I want a different baby. My mother often told me she gave up her life to have kids. I made the decision to have a life AND to also be a mother. It was a joint decision w/ my husband and it was right for us. Having none, one, or multiple kids is a personal choice and no one has any right to dictate that choice. There is no "right way" regarding having or not having children. I'm extremely proud of the young man my son has turned out to be, the amazing career I enjoy, and the wonderful 17 year marriage I have. Having one child has enabled all of this b/c of the type of person I am and knowing one's limitations is a good thing! Me with multiple children just wouldn't work nor would it be pretty...just ask my husband or son. I'd be a basket case for sure!!! I say it proudly to whomever asks: ONE & DONE!

Lori Thorrat says

I can identify with this book in so many ways; my mother was an only; and I'm the mother of an only. While I can certainly identify with the authors plight in making her own decision, this book did not really illuminate for me how to help raise an only; which is what I was really looking for.

For myself I really didn't choose to have an only. I wanted more children but my husband really didn't, we couldn't really afford it, and my health kept getting in the way of my own lobbying efforts to change my husbands mind. My reasons for wanting another child are wrapped up in family. My son's next closest relative, age-wise, was my younger brother who was 35 years his senior. He unfortunately died in a car accident a few years ago; he never had children. In fact no siblings on either side of our family have procreated. My son will truly be alone as an adult.

It's taken me a long time to come to terms with stopping at one. Unlike the author, the only person to criticize this decision was my mother, an only herself. I have to say some of the family dynamics that are described are things that I have experienced in my own upbringing and I don't feel are exclusively an only issue.

I would concur that the level of scrutiny an only child receives does make for more intense parenting; my husband and I catch ourselves sometimes being too concerned over something that in a larger family would likely not have been raised to the level of scrutiny we apply.

And in our own experience, our child bucks the assertion that onlys are somehow smarter or more mature. Academically, our son is right where he should be for his age and if anything he's a little immature.

Bottom line, I found the demographic and sociological studies interesting, but over all the book did little to illuminate the world of onlys for me. In addition I felt the book was a tad disorganized and the sometimes

chatty style rather annoying. I can see why one reviewer felt that this work was nothing more than the authors justification for her own decision but I feel that there is a lot more substance and thought provoking information in it.

Literary Ames {Against GR Censorship} says

This is propaganda, pure and simple. Designed by the parent of an only child to make herself feel better about her choice by collecting countless positive (quantitative) studies to dismiss the negative only-child (qualitative) experiences of Sandler's friends and other interviewees, while debunking supposed stereotypes and replacing them with reasons why everyone should do as the Chinese do: have only one child, and in the process, shaming those that have more. In the end, I feel this is a biased, self-congratulatory piece of questionable value, of which I learned nothing new.

Talking about only children right now is highly relevant. Today, there's a continuing trend of having fewer children and there's a rise of only children in developed countries. This is due to high childcare costs, women deciding to have children later, lower fertility rates, the global recession, and economic pressure on families to have two working parents. This topic is in need of discussion so we can figure out how to handle a changing (decreasing) population and work out the advantages or disadvantages of being an only child in the twenty-first century. Sadly, Sandler neglects the disadvantages.

The too briefly described research Sandler refers to is troublesome as she relies upon large scale studies, one of which had 13,000 participants, leading me to question how much time was spent with each person, how accurate the data is when individual circumstances tend to be overlooked, and whether the conclusions drawn could be trusted. Few quantifiable results are quoted by Sandler, yet over and over again we're told only children are more intelligent, but when it's revealed this status only adds one to three IQ points, that assertion no longer seems quite so certain when the difference is so minimal. Are the other positive differences she quoted also as minimal?

As far as I could tell, none of these overwhelmingly positive studies actually asked the participants how they felt about being an only child, and when the author quoted interviews and asked her only-child friends, unhappy negatives start rearing their ugly heads. Some of the stereotypes Sandler has been aggressively attempting to quash are truisms among them, though she quickly whips out another positive study or two to devalue those cases. Belittling these personal negative experiences and dismissing them with positive research is unforgivable, no matter how positive her own experiences as an only child, it denotes a lack of respect for others in favour of her own agenda. Sandler neglected to criticise the studies in the same way, which I'd expect if she was evaluating all the research fairly. By taking all of the research into consideration, one could conclude that things like intelligence and self-confidence go up (quantitative studies) while happiness goes down (qualitative interviews).

Yes, not all only children are selfish, lonely, spoilt and maladjusted - but *some* are, there's no point in denying it. And yes, it's more environmentally friendly to have one, and it's glaringly obvious one child will receive more resources like more money, time, space and attention from their parents than having to share with siblings. And they will benefit from those things, although how and how much they benefit will differ according to individual circumstances. However, other factors such as socialising with and being able to relate to their peers is important because spending too much time with adults can alienate them from their peer group. I'd argue attending school isn't enough, as Sandler suggests it is, proximity and access to other children outside school hours is necessary, too. Activities outside the home and exercise are other factors to

consider as I'd postulate that those who do these socialise more with a variety of people, rather than with just their parents.

On and on, Sandler repeatedly preaches her 'only children are more intelligent and prosperous' mantra, and cherry picks famous onlies and cites the 1979 Chinese One-Child policy for their recent economic improvement to back up her claims, which is more than a little reductive, if you ask me. Really, Sandler's subtitle should be, *'Why You Must Have an Only Child, and Why Being One Can Make You Smart and Successful'*. However, upon closer inspection those famous people and Chinese case studies all had pushy parents who provided strict educational schedules for their children lasting from the minute they woke up to bedtime, thereby surpassing the norm for the average child whether they had siblings or not. Most Chinese can't afford more than one child anyway, but rather than just a wish for their child to have it better than themselves, I started to wonder if there was an air of competition between parents to make their child successful, or whether it was to improve their retirement as it's tradition to move in with their child and care for their grandchildren when they reach that age. There's also the enormous pressure on that single child to perform and succeed so they're able to provide for both their parents when the time comes. In any case, you could argue privilege gives these children opportunities to prosper because their parents have clearly invested a substantial amount of time and effort, regardless of finances, and are able to reap the rewards.

Full disclosure here, I'm an only child, and one with negative experiences. Sandler would hate me because I don't conform to her views. As one stereotype goes, I *was* late to walk and talk, but my reading level was years ahead of my peers. Early schooling taught me that being an only set me apart as teachers frequently asked us to talk or write about our siblings and pets - I had neither, and that made me feel like I had and experienced less than everyone else. Despite many children living on my street, they were all a year or more younger though I made the best of it, still experiencing loneliness on the dark, cold, rainy winter days, of which there are many in the UK. Unfortunately, when I was seven we moved 100 miles away to where no children lived near me. Cue more loneliness and a growing preference for the company of older children (usually by several years) and adults. I've never been comfortable with those of a similar age to myself; school was hell - I frequently truanted in my teens, and age 18 onwards my friends have been more than 10 years older than me. I'll also confess that I'm selfish, but only children can hardly claim the monopoly on that trait. And hey, I was spoilt as far as toys, clothes and my mother's attention were concerned. I was lucky.

When I think of others I've known who are onlies, most them also had negative experiences for a variety of reasons, but one thing was very clear: they fit into two types. Some were able to cope or be happy in their own company, and others weren't and would do anything to avoid it. Before reading, I had wondered if being an only child meant there was an increased likelihood of becoming an introvert, which would feed into Susan Cain's *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, and because of this I've been comparing the two books. They don't compare. Cain, despite being an introvert, manages to confer balance when discussing her subject matter by acknowledging both positives and negatives of being such, and Sandler as an only child fails in this. Her bias is so pronounced it's impossible to draw parallels when I can't trust her interpretations of her much vaunted sociological studies.

A monumentally bad first impression was made after reading the opening chapter. I should've gone with my instincts and discontinued reading then. That chapter was *the* most biased, one-sided diatribe against negative stereotypes associated with being an only child, never stopping to consider that there may be some truth to them for some or allow for other aspects that, in tandem with being an only child, could produce those stereotypes. Challenging myself to read on was a mistake, and I've struggled to finish. Currently stuck @ 41%.

Only children may find they know about most of what is discussed but could find parts of it insulting.

Everyone else on the other hand, may find *One and Only* informative and helpful, or offensive and upsetting if they've chosen to have more than one child themselves.

**eARC provided by the publisher in return for an honest review.*

Erin says

My experience of this book can be best summed up by the author's own words in the last chapter:

Despite all the rational information that supports my reluctance to have another kid, all the research demonstrating that only children are fine, all the data suggesting the additional sacrifices another kid would require, making the choice not to have another child is still fraught with conflict. It's an emotional struggle that, it turns out, no set of numbers and analysis can erase.

This is book most of us will only pick up if we're already 90% there on having an only child, whether by choice or by circumstance. If that's you, you're understandably concerned about whether you can raise an only child into a good person. In the culture of the United States, there's a social understanding of the only child: a spoiled, selfish, maladjusted "mama's boy" or "daddy's girl" type of kid. If you're there, go ahead and pick up this book. I think it will help.

There's enough research and numbers to reassure me that not only is it possible to raise an only child into a good person, it might actually be better for the child. That's what I wanted to know, so I'm glad I read it. However, as the author stated in the quote above, there's an emotional struggle that goes beyond the numbers, and I just have to hope that as the research settles into my brain it will seep down to emotions.

Speaking of that research, here's Sandler's excuse for a bibliography, which is nothing short of baffling to me. If I had consulted as many sources as she did, conducted as many interviews, I'd want to compile it all in one place! I'd want you to bow to the might of my research prowess! Instead, she offers this:

Throughout this book, I cited specific sources for data, so you would know in context where I was getting my information. That said, I wanted to offer a sketch of some important works I consulted, a brief tour through my binders and bookshelves.

That's just sloppy and lazy and calls into question the credibility of the entire book for me.

Finally, there's one issue that Sandler brought up in the beginning but never came back to, and it happens to be one of my biggest concerns of having an only child so I really wish she'd put some effort into it: the only child as an adult with aging parents or no parents. I've watched my mother deal with end-of-life care and decisions for 4 elderly family members over the last few years, and even with clear instructions and documentation from the people concerned, there's nothing easy about being the one to make the call. I don't know what it would have been like for her without her sister to talk to and cry with and gut-check with, and I don't want to sentence my son to that. I wish that Sandler had dug into that, especially since she mentioned it in the beginning of the book.

All that said, I'm glad I read it because I emotionally needed someone to pat me on the shoulder and say this

was going to be ok. But I'm disappointed that what could have been a five star book didn't do better.

Dominic says

When I was younger, I thought I would have a brood of eight children. Maybe I picked eight because it is my lucky number or maybe it was completely arbitrary, but I was then so enamored with the state of papahood that I knew, simply, I wanted to have several children. By the time I got married at 25, I was more realistic, looking forward to only 3 or 4. When my wife and I experienced infertility and the chance of being a father in any capacity seemed to diminish slowly but steadily, I think my wiring was altered.

When Jude miraculously materialized in 2012, I was not only elated beyond belief, but even at that very time, a part of me wondered if it took so long to make this one, what were the chances of a second? Almost two years later, I am deeply in love with my son and our family of three, but also so utterly exhausted most of the time, that I wonder if he *should* be our only one. It feels wrong to say it, but I sometimes wonder if I'm only going to continue to lose bits of myself as parenting continues. And what does this say about me and my love for my son that I can admit this?

So when I stumbled across this book at a local bookstore, I was hoping to find my feelings and experiences echoed in its pages--and hopefully, too, some validation for feeling overwhelmed, guilty, conflicted, and sometimes just not good enough. It turns out Lauren Sandler's book was exactly what I needed. *One and Only* is not a memoir nor diatribe, but a cultural critique and sharp reflection. And as such, it has several outside sources that she boxes with and builds upon. Although she flat out says her book is not an argument for why couples should stop at one child, she sure makes a compelling case all the same. It felt great to see arguments I have personally made (about overpopulation, about community vs. cocoonism, etc.) spun together so well into one modern volume and then see others extended upon to only make my own argument stronger. Around Chapter Five, the book spoke to me most. From then on, I couldn't stop reading the book.

Her audience is a *certain* type of parent or would-be parent. For this reader, I was pleasantly pleased to see an honest and clear portrayal of modern feminist thought in action. (Go feminist moms and dads!) Others, though, will bristle at some of her perspectives. Yet this is exactly her point: Can we just stop with the generalizing? Only children aren't all the same and neither are all parents, so why expect everyone to fit into little boxes? And can we value our children *and ourselves* enough to think as hard about having a second child as we do about parenting them? That there are oodles of literature about the raising of children and very little about the actual decision of having multiples speaks volumes in and of itself. Sandler points out so many of the gender, cultural, economic and even environmental factors that come into play with each new bundle of joy that enters a home, that I find her very thorough and her book very valuable.

Just days before I began *One and Only*, I was speaking with a friend and she said that her friends she knew who never had children just have a sort of immaturity about them. She said, "It is like they are their own children." After raising an eyebrow and waiting a second, I realized what she said was actually really lovely--and I think Sandler would agree. We hardworking parents have to remember that just because we have a kid or kids to take care of and love deeply, we are still our own children, too, and we have a responsibility to ourselves *and our brood* to continue to demonstrate self-actualization and love of our community, our jobs, our partners, and our lives.

Eve says

As an only child who is mother to an only child, I was eager to read this. But to be honest, my rating is based only on the first 26 pages. Here are a few reasons why:

- Page 10: In discussing those who often are politically conservative and have large families, author Lauren Sandler writes: "A wide stripe of thinkers...believe parents like *myself* who deeply value an extra-familial identity will simply be outbred over time by the fruitfully *conservative*." (Emphasis added. Should be *me* and *liberal*, as in the latter case there is nothing reproductively conservative about the Duggars.)
- Page 18-19: Is the Viennese neuropsychiatrist named Erwin Wexberg or Erwin Wexler? I shouldn't have to Google to figure out the correct name, but my curiosity got the best of me. (It's Wexberg.)
- Page 25-26: On page 25, the author refers to a 1972 article and says, "Next year my mother would become pregnant with me." So presumably she was born in 1973 or 1974. But three years later, when her mother fears another pregnancy, it is noted on page 26 that the year is 1979. (Perhaps Ms. Sandler was very mature for three?)

And I'm not even getting into the typos.

Lest you think I'm being overly picky, let me explain that I cannot enjoy a book if it is riddled with errors like this. If Lauren Sandler can't get these things right, what else is she missing? I couldn't go on.

Monika says

One and Only was such an encouraging read! As a fellow mother to an only child, it felt good to read that my concerns and fears are shared by other parents of onlies. I also gained understanding into a few of the reasons why adult onlies sometimes make such impassioned cases against their friends and family members having singletons.

A recurring theme in the book is "contrary to popular belief." I almost thought it should be the book's subtitle! It seems most of the myths about only children (and their parents) are purely anecdotal and not supported by research. I love that Lauren Sandler points out faulty and subjective reasoning when it occurs, especially when it's one of the many, common arguments against having an only child. Sandler also explores some of the sociological reasons behind the thought that onlies are unnatural. No matter what studies show, this perception seems to be deeply embedded in our culture. It's very hard to counteract. Sandler portrays this struggle well, and I felt a camaraderie with her because of that.

I wish Sandler had been a little bit more specific in her language in the chapter "The Fruitful Mandate." She used all-encompassing phrases such as "the faithful" and "church communities" when the specific behaviors and beliefs she was referring to apply to the Christian right. The people she interviewed and quoted regularly made this distinction, but you have to read between the lines to realize Sandler does, too.

The conclusion, "Against Folly," was amazing. Sandler's voice really shines through in these pages, and it's easy to feel a connection with her. And there is a powerful, powerful quote by Alice Walker's mother which touched me personally. The conclusion wraps everything up nicely; a difficult task, considering how

multifaceted the topic is.

I received a copy of this book from the publisher via NetGalley. I did not receive any other compensation for this review.

Lena says

While I've never sought any kind of validation for being an only and, so far, thinking that I'd want an only-- Lauren Sandler confirms what I've always been thinking: It's awesome being an only child. I can admit that some of the chapters were inundated with information to the point of tedium, yet it didn't stop me from going through the pages eager to hear the next story about how yet another only "turned out ok." Sandler also put me on to a lot of great articles in her book. I'd say it's worth reading and even more worth thinking about.

Ellen says

I was a little disappointed in this one. I'm in the process of coming to terms with the fact that my son will likely be an only child, so I've been reading through a variety of books on the subject of parenting only children. I enjoyed Lauren Sandler's previous book, so I was excited when this one came out this spring.

The material was interesting (after all, I'm seeking out justification to soothe my own irrational guilt), but it felt like a book that just couldn't decide what it wanted to be. It wasn't a memoir, and it wasn't totally nonfiction. The author's personal experiences were scattered in with interviews and reviews of research, making things feel a bit disjointed. I think the book would have been stronger as a "pure" memoir, or more research-focused with some sort of framing device for the personal anecdotes.

Amber says

I still don't know what all the hub bub is about. Scratch that... I do know, but it's ridiculous. Lauren Sandler presents factual food for thought. As she herself writes, "If I choose to stop at one, that's not a referendum on anyone's choice not to. The whole point is to live the life you want." This book has provided me with a lot of things to think about as I make the choice of what's best for my family. I get so much crap from people on the outside. It's a shame that they won't pick this book up and ponder what's presented.

Two other quotes of note:

"Don't parent by fear or by guilt. Don't live by fear or by guilt either."

"Making a home where parents live life according to their own mores is worth a thousand tiger mothers."

Shelly says

One and Only: The Freedom of Having an Only Child, and the Joy of Being One is an excellent book. Lauren Sandler interviewed a wide range of people and professionals from all over the world, looked at studies, and shared some personal experiences of having and being an only child.

Amanda says

When venturing into the Mommy Wars, it's wise to state your position up front. When it comes to me, Lauren Sandler is preaching to the choir. I am white, affluent, college educated, liberal, urban, green, a writer, and have an only child (a girl!) by preference. The only difference is she lives in the hip neighborhood of NYC (and I live in the hip BOSTON neighborhood) and she worked for NPR while I've only ever listened to NPR.

I am just like her and the book is for people just like her (and me).

I should also state that I'm not an only child. Nor do I have the angst, ambivalence, and existential teeth-gnashing that she seems to have about choosing to have only one child. My husband and I chose one child for many thoughtful reasons, personal and political, and we've never even hesitated over it.

Maybe that's why I haven't had the pushback she's gotten. I've had some very rude people tell me that "only children grow up *odd*" but that's it. My daughter has never asked for a little sibling.

That's out of the way.

The articles covering this were all given inflammatory headlines, because the media long ago learned that any statement about women, sex, and motherhood garners *all the attention*. But her treatment of the subject was so even handed that it was a little tedious sometimes. (Note for non-parents: It is a truism, when discussing parenthood, especially motherhood, that any choice you make is seen as an attack on anyone who doesn't make the exact same choice. And if you dare to list the reasons you made that choice, it's an open invitation to an argument.)

I found the hybrid memoir and scholarly book a little uneven to navigate at times. Her prose is clear and lovely, so you don't stumble on it, but I did have to hop-step sometimes on the swings from intensely personal domestic bliss ("w're in the dining room, drinking coffee and watching Dahlia improvise some ballet move to a Flaming Lips song") to dry academic ("When scientists conducted a meta-analysis of 115 studies comparing....").

All that said, the part of the book that works best is her careful and methodical debunking of the stereotype of the lonelyselfishmaladjusted (all one word) only child. She shows not only that there is a significant body of work that disproves this ridiculous notion, but also the deeply ingrained prejudice that makes researchers doubt their own findings.

Her focus on parental happiness is lovely, too.

When she steps away from the child-centric and into the sociological issues, she fares slightly less well. Each

chapter -- on religion and fertility, feminism, the environment -- reads more like an introductory essay to what should be an entire book on the issue. To be fair, she wasn't writing those books, but I would have preferred a little more heft to those chapters, especially the compelling environmental case for only one child.

She makes up for this slight failing by including a nice listing of sources and books and studies at the end. Not the bibliography I wanted, mind you, but more than I was expecting.

Her worst fault, though, is that she's preaching to the choir, to me. She assumes her readers are all NPR-listening, kale-eating, college educated white people who live in cities. She makes little forays out into the other worlds -- most compelling are her visits to China and her discussions with the devout -- but she's there as a visitor. To be fair, she knows it and makes her acknowledged privileged status very clear, chapter after chapter. Hell, it's the *subject* of many chapters, at least in part. However, her complete lack of any black subjects except Condi Rice (that I noticed, I didn't take notes) is kind of an enormous and glaring problem.

Still, it's a nice introduction to some very complex issues which, frankly, all parents ought to consider before they even have ONE child, much less a second one. And it's a handy resource to refer someone to the next time some idiotic asshat tells me that I'm scarring my child because I didn't give her a sibling.

Christina says

I picked this book up out of curiosity -- in full disclosure, I'm not the book's intended audience, as I have nine children, not one. But I was curious about the research the author might have done into the subject, and as a graduate in Family Sciences, I'm always up for delving into social sciences and research.

Unfortunately, this book was very soft on science and Sandler was quite biased in her interpretation of what research she did bring out, making a huge deal of very slight differences in some studies that showed that only children do slightly better in certain areas than singletons while dismissing other studies out of hand. Some of the studies cited also had some very limiting parameters. In one place, I found it ironic that right after discussing how only children tend to internalize the pain of their parents' divorce or other trauma, feeling responsible for sparing the parent's feelings without a sibling to share the burden, Sandler then relied on a study that showed that only children supposedly do better after divorce than those with siblings, citing a study that relied on what parents reported of how their children were doing. Hmmm.

She brings up population science and the fact that most of the developing world is below population replacement in almost an "aside" matter, then quickly dismisses its implications, while then spending an entire chapter talking about carbon footprints and declaring authoritatively, "The more children we have, the more we speed up the earth's destruction" as if that's established science. Later on, she gleefully notes that if everyone had just one child, our world's population would be just a third of what it is today in just one hundred years, as if that would be a good thing for our economies and our societies. Her willful ignorance and refusal to consider scholar's opinions when they disagree with her is disappointing in one who calls herself a journalist.

Her reliance on anecdotes and reports from her friends is hardly good scholarship, though it does advance interesting issues. One thing that was quite unappealing was her elaborations on the lists of famous and/or accomplished people who were only children and how that must have made them successful. Sure, but how easy would it be for anyone to come up with a list of famous people with a sibling or famous people with lots

of siblings to counter her list?

Another flaw in the book was its constant navel-gazing. Sandler writes over and over about her own experiences as a mother to a singleton, her own angst and worry and concern, the comments of others, etc, etc, etc. Frankly, by the end of the book it got repetitive and boring. An engaging memoir, this was not. Basically, some of it sounded simply like the whining of a deeply conflicted woman, trying to explain how she isn't being selfish to have just one, she's actually saving the planet! She's allowing herself the freedom to self-actualize, to pursue causes and to change the world. We also get a really wonderful segway into her thoughts about how much she supports her own right to have an abortion yet feels conflicted because after her daughter's birth, she realizes what an unaborted fetus might become, but still she is fighting the cause of a woman's right to freedom and right to choose . . . yeah, trying to wrap my head around her reasoning was inconceivable, but then, I'm just one of those people she constantly sneers at in the book.

Which brings me to the book's fatal flaw: Lauren Sandler is supposedly a champion of liberal enlightenment, of self-actualization and choice, of freedom to pursue whatever lifestyle you desire, up to and until she starts talking about people who choose something different than her -- oh sure, she seems a little less judgmental of those who have two or three children, but anything more than that is cause for sneering comments. The Duggars, people of faith who have children for religious reasons, even Al Gore and his "four-child family's aggregate carbon footprint" are a cause for sneers. She writes with an "us-vs-them" mentality towards those who are more fertile. She's enlightened and free, while those with faith are derided. She writes of a bi-polar America, one free and enlightened and not pro-creating, and another backward, conservative, and having faith. She is singularly shallow when she writes of talking with those who have faith, dismissing whatever happiness they derive from their children (and it is quantifiable according to research) to the fact that they have a support system who bring them casseroles when they have new babies and not to any inherent happiness that having children or faith might bring. But her attitude is hardly surprising, given the prejudice she shows in this declaration: "And so we have one America with the values and birthrates of the developed world, and another with the values and birthrates of a society we evolved beyond generations ago." It's easy to see who is "evolved" and who is not in her view. It's too bad that such a liberal-minded thinker couldn't manage to treat with a little bit of tolerance and open-mindedness those who have more children than she deems appropriate.

Also subject to her judgments are women who choose to stay home with their kids, especially those with advanced degrees who waste their educations and become dependent on a man in the process of taking care of their children.

Still, the book did bring up a lot of issues that deserve more in-depth understanding and that I've read quite a bit about. I was surprised at the information about China and how in one generation, it has become the preference to have one child because it is too expensive to have more and it is considered selfish to do so.

I did find some things very interesting about the book. One is this quote on page 179, right after she discusses how people like herself (liberal, enlightened, evolved, remember?) are breeding themselves out of existence. She asks a scholar, "'Should my desire to defend Enlightenment values and a secular future for my kid lead me to have another one?' . . . He grins at me and laughs. 'That's adorable,' he says. Of course, none of us secularists breed to change the world. We'd need faith to do that.'"

I also thought it was interesting that a paper in 1981 found that "only 4 percent of singletons fall into the category of people who say that religion has a very important role in their lives. 'It is the unique quality of being an only,' she writes, 'which contributes to smaller family size goals, and greater secularism.'"

I also found it interesting that the author quoted Alice Walker's advice several times, making me wonder if she'd ever happened to read this: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/art...>

Rebecca says

The following quote sums up this book nicely for me:

“Children are a desire, not a calculation. Which is why I believe that if you truly desire more than one child, you’ll make it work. People always have. And if you don’t, well, there’s a big stack of numbers on your side. If we’re going to be rational about it, surely the economic verdict suggests we should stop at one.”

As another reviewer stated (and also in my own experience), this topic can be controversial, and Sandler doesn’t pretend to be objective. Rather she takes a side on the issue, arguing that one child is better for her, better for her child, and better for the environment. Personally, for now, I agree with her. I don’t believe that Sandler is trying to dictate that everyone should have one child (based on the quote above), rather I believe she is making a very direct argument to refute the stereotype of only children as lonely, selfish, and maladjusted.

I also would have preferred Sandler to write the book more along the lines of “only children are just as good as those with siblings”, but I can understand why she didn’t. It feels like the stereotype of only children is so entrenched that to prove only children are just as ok as those with siblings, you almost have to prove they are better. Similar to how women in traditional male-dominated careers have often had to be better than men to simply receive the same recognition and advancements.

I have had firsthand experience with the ingrained stereotype of only children, from strangers and friends alike. When a friendly stranger asked if I plan to have another child and I said no, she literally told me 3-4 times I would change my mind, I wouldn’t want to do that to my child. I also have had people I like and respect imply that to raise my only child not to be selfish; I would simply have to be a better parent than 90% of other parents of only children. While it was meant as a compliment to my parenting skills, it’s heartbreaking to have someone I trust suggest that (1) I have put my child at a disadvantage right off the bat and (2) I will have to work harder than everyone else to fix that disadvantage.

And that exact heartbreaking feeling is why I can also understand other reviewers’ vehement criticisms of Sandler’s work, because she directly argues only children are better. None of us like to think that we aren’t giving our children the best in every way. As parents of only children, we cringe when others imply we are supposedly “selfishly” withholding the absolute best thing we can do for our child by not providing them a sibling. I can only assume that parents of multiple children cringe when Sandler points out that quantifiable, documented, research has shown time and time again that only children benefit from their parents undivided time and financial resources by scoring higher (albeit only slightly significantly) in areas of achievement, motivation, and personal adjustment. Thus it is likely that this book will continue to either receive high praise or deep scorn from most reviewers.

My own personal take-away from this book, is that overall being an only child (or a parent of one) is no better or worse than being in a family with siblings. Each has their own set of challenges, and their own benefits. It is really none of my business to judge anyone else’s family size, and I know I have changed my reaction to larger families as my sensitivity has grown. I found this book deeply reassuring as a parent of an

only child, and I can only hope my review will raise awareness among those in larger families that only children are just as great as everyone else.

*ARC provided by the author for an honest review.

Sebastian says

As the only child of an only child of an only child, you know what? I turned out pretty fine. That is not to say I turned out perfect, far from it, but then again, to quote *Bladerunner*, who does?

In all likelihood, my child will also be an only child and you know what? She has been turning out more than fine so far. Nevertheless, as I watch her grow into a happy, open, communicative, darling little human (quite the opposite of the singleton stereotype), I do carry in the back of my mind the irrational burden of “what if” and “wouldn’t it be” and “but what about”.

Sandler’s book has helped me see that all of us in this situation carry around the same gray cloud of uncertainty and fear. What’s more, it has shown clearly that this cloud *is* irrational, and that I can stop worrying (to the extent it is possible to squash down what is an irrational fear) and enjoy being the parent of a beautiful, clever, creative and outgoing fourth-generation only child.
