

These New Books Bring Your Worst Postpartum Fears To Life

[buzzfeednews.com/article/ariannarebolini/motherhood-postpartum-horror-books-the-push](https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ariannarebolini/motherhood-postpartum-horror-books-the-push)

Arianna Rebolini



Madison Ketcham for BuzzFeed News

Motherhood Is A Literal Horror In These Postpartum Thrillers

In three of the year's best thrillers, classic horror tropes expose the real — and terrifying — aspects of postpartum.



[Arianna Rebolini](#)
[BuzzFeed News Reporter](#)

Posted on May 8, 2021 at 12:23 pm

Sometime around my 24th hour of labor, I asked my husband if he thought I was being punished.

“Does the universe not want this? Do you think I’m not supposed to be having a child?”

I promise you it made sense at the time. After a pregnancy marred by hyperemesis gravidarum (think morning sickness but all day, for nine months), friends and acquaintances assured me I’d at least have a smooth delivery, that usually one had either a bad pregnancy or a bad birth — what are the odds I’d have both? But then I watched, step by step, as every part of my birth plan went wrong, until I found myself questioning everything as I waited to be taken into the OR for an emergency C-section, tubes in my arm and back and uterus, my baby’s heart rate decreasing. I was depleted, delirious, flailing.

My fears were assuaged when my son was born healthy and placed in my arms. Of course I knew this was just the beginning of another hardship, but at least postpartum seemed familiar. It was grounded in realities I’d experienced: lack of sleep, being stuck at home, handling newborns. My husband was worried about the simple act of filling the hours with an infant, but I was confident. I’d helped take care of my baby brothers; I’d babysat for years. I believed I’d left the disorienting, supernatural fears behind me, with the counting of kicks and inscrutable sonograms and mysterious contractions. I was wrong.

Three of this year’s best thrillers — Ashley Audrain’s *The Push*, Julia Fine’s *The Upstairs House*, and Kyra Wilder’s *Little Bandaged Days* — find fertile ground in new motherhood. Using horror tropes — an evil child, a poltergeist, and a descent into madness — the authors expose and amplify the scariest parts of postpartum. By pushing these new mothers’ alienation, doubt, shame, and paranoia to extremes, the authors are able to mimic the experience of that fear: desperate, irrational, and overwhelming. Reading them not even two years into motherhood, I couldn’t help but recognize myself, and the fears at the core of every separate worry that plagued me: Is there something wrong with my baby? Is there something wrong with me?

For Blythe, the new mom in *The Push*, there is no way to separate being a bad mother from having a bad child; one necessitates the other. She’s worried about both possibilities when her husband, Fox, suggests they start their family. Blythe’s ambivalence toward becoming a mother is inextricably tied to a lineage of bad moms — her grandmother abused her mother, Cecilia; then Cecilia abandoned her. Before leaving, Cecilia warned, “One day you’ll understand, Blythe. The women in this family... we’re different.” Still, she goes along, and soon she’s pregnant. From the future in which Blythe is writing (*The Push* is written as a long letter from Blythe to Fox) we know she regrets the decision, though she understands both her and Fox’s willingness to push past her reluctance: “We all expect to have, and to marry, and to be, good mothers.”

After their daughter, Violet, is born, Blythe immediately suspects something is wrong, with either her or Violet. She doesn’t feel connected to Violet, and Violet doesn’t take to her. No one believes things are as bad as she says: Not Fox, who only ever sees a happy baby and

an exhausted mother, who insists that if Violet is resistant to Blythe, it's because Blythe is too anxious. Not other mothers, who only ever want to gush about their babies and insist they're happier than they've ever been. And certainly not Blythe's mother-in-law, Helen, who can't stop reminding Blythe how lucky she is to have Fox and Violet.

It seems Blythe might finally receive some relief when Helen comes over to help on a night that Fox is at a work event, and she witnesses Violet's transformation from a cooing baby into something monstrous. Violet is well behaved until Blythe takes her, alone, for a bath. Hearing shouting, Helen joins them in the bathroom to offer help.

“She'll be okay,” I said and held Violet tight to restrain her. But her teeth cut into the fat of my cheek before I could move my face away — she had bitten me. I yelled from between my clenched teeth and tried to pull her head away, but she was clamped on too tightly. Your mother gasped and pulled her granddaughter's jaw apart with her fingers. She grabbed Violet from me and said only, “My God.”

But Blythe's sense of vindication — finally, someone else is also horrified by her daughter! — doesn't last long. There is no relief in any external acknowledgment of her daughter's misbehavior. If, as she fears, Violet is evil, then that evil grew within her. If something is wrong with Violet, then isn't something wrong with her, too? “I was humiliated,” she says, before apologizing “to no one.” Even Helen's empathy has a limit: After Violet is asleep, and as the two share some wine, she grabs Blythe's hand and “soften[s], like she suddenly accepted that things were worse than she wanted to believe.” The gentleness of the gesture makes her tough love — criticism disguised as advice — especially jarring. “Look,” she says. “Nobody said motherhood was easy.” If Blythe had expected otherwise, well, that's on her.

Of course, the expected difficulty rarely aligns with the reality. The trials mothers are warned about, whether by pop culture, social media, or friends and family, are almost cartoonish: We see the harried mother, hair askew, bags under her eyes, maybe she's stepped out in mismatched shoes, and we think we understand what our own exhaustion will be. We anticipate the diapers, the crying, the constant calls to our pediatrician about every rash or cough. If we're lucky, we're warned that breastfeeding probably won't come easily, and that mild depression (aka “baby blues”) will likely hit in the week after delivery. But no one told me I might be scared of my newborn. That I might spend those first days home with him in a state of grief, resenting him as an interloper. That I'd hate every stranger who told me he was a blessing. That I'd cry more than he would; that a month into colic, after three hours of constant crying, I'd put him in his crib, lock myself in the bathroom, turn on the shower, and scream. “It's supposed to be this hard right now,” my psychiatrist said when I confessed my fears of not being able to handle it. “Every day is like going into battle.” And I thought, *Then why didn't anyone tell me?*

Who knows if it would have helped. Certainly I would have felt less alone, which is to say less afraid. “I’d read all the books,” Blythe writes, recalling the first weeks of postpartum. “I’d done the research. Nobody talked about the feeling of being woken up after forty minutes of sleep, on bloodstained sheets, with the dread of knowing what had to happen next. I felt like the only mother in the world who wouldn’t survive it. [...] The only mother who looked down at her daughter and thought, *Please. Go away.*” Are those thoughts any easier when you know others have had them, too?

I lucked out. Colic passed, and the baby who spent his first six months miserable is now (for the most part) a joy. No such luck for Blythe. The older Violet gets, the scarier she seems, and so grows the imperative for Blythe to keep her dismay hidden. After a hint of happiness at her first birthday, Violet regresses with a vengeance. She stops sleeping. She screams until she’s choking. She’s “missing the inherent sweetness of other children her age.” Blythe downplays this among fellow parents, agreeing (“as I was supposed to”) that “the moments in between the chaos made up for all the rest.” She’s saving face. “I didn’t want to be a mother with that kind of child,” she says, but she’s not dreading a hardship as much as she’s fearing censure. Violet’s teachers are concerned about her violent tendencies, but Fox rejects the possibility, just as he rejects any of Blythe’s fears that their daughter hates her, or that she’s capable of cruelty. Two disturbing deaths create a schism in the family: Blythe’s fear becomes obsession, and she’s consumed by the need to get someone — anyone! — to believe what she thinks she knows. In the process she loses everything.



Courtesy Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, and Pan Macmillan

Where Blythe fears Violet, *The Upstairs House*’s protagonist, Megan, fears herself. Hours after giving birth, she welcomes her brand-new daughter, Clara, with a warning: “[This is] the beginning of your life as a woman. Being told you couldn’t have seen what you’re sure that

you saw.” She’s just witnessed Clara reach toward a hospital window, outside of which a smiley-face balloon lingers, but “all the books” insist Clara’s eyes can’t see more than 3 feet ahead. Megan’s mother brushes her off: “You’re delirious,” she says.

As the day progresses and grows more chaotic, the balloon becomes more menacing. Megan is in and out of sleep, guests visit in rotation, nurses stop by, prod her, and leave; all the while, she’s fixated on its face, “pressed against the glass, flattened features ... the eyes half-moons, the nose too large. ... The balloon was laughing at us.” Unsettling for sure, but downright scary when Megan finally asks her mother to get rid of it, only to discover her mother can’t see the balloon Megan is looking at.

Megan can’t find validation, but she also can’t find help. She’s thrust into an incoherent world, beginning back in the postpartum recovery room.

So begins Megan’s descent into madness, a blurring of the real and the imaginary as she becomes consumed by her belief that she’s befriended the ghost of Margaret Wise Brown (author of children’s classics like *Goodnight Moon*), who’s moved into the building with the ghost of her former lover, Michael Strange. As Audrain does with Blythe’s fear of Violet, Fine pushes Megan’s instability from the expected to the extreme. What begins as a general discomfort in her new body — trying on a now-too-tight dress that she used to love, she thinks, “Funny how the things that had once made me feel like myself now did the opposite” — soon morphs into a dangerous dissociation. She leaves the kitchen and returns to find gas seeping from the stovetop, no memory of having turned on the burners. She steps out on her balcony to take a breather at 4 a.m. but can’t get back in, leaving Clara alone in the apartment. How did the door lock from the inside? She turns to mom forums for advice, only to find posts written directly to her with alarming familiarity. Had she discussed this new neighbor who, for some reason, no one else could see? Had she ever even told anyone her name?

Who could blame Megan, or any new mother, for doubting her sanity? At every turn, she’s told the thing she thinks is happening isn’t really happening, that she isn’t really feeling what she feels. Megan is miserable (“I’m lost,” she tells her sister. “It’s so much harder than I thought it would be”), but when she tries to explain this, she’s met only with the insistence that, in fact, she isn’t: “‘You will miss these days,’ say the message board mothers, the baby books, the women who’d been through it all, who knew.” Megan can’t find validation, but she also can’t find help. She’s thrust into an incoherent world, beginning back in the postpartum recovery room. Struggling with breastfeeding, Megan looks to one of her nurses for clarity but comes away more confused. One piece of advice contradicts another; a nurse contradicts herself. “I didn’t understand,” Megan recalls. “Would we figure it out, or would we need her assistance? How much of this was instinct, the two of us minnowing up through the water for air? How much was I supposed to be afraid of?”

Her words resonate. At the hospital, not yet producing milk — a common consequence of a C-section, another thing I was expected to know — I was told to just keep pumping, every hour, that the milk would come soon enough. But it didn't. For days it didn't. We supplemented with formula; one nurse told us to limit my son to 4 ounces at a time; the next told us to follow his cues. Still I pumped, barely releasing an ounce at a time; still every nurse and doctor told me I should be experiencing the opposite. All the while, my son was shrieking. Why couldn't anyone see what I was seeing? Why wouldn't anyone help? When one nurse finally picked him up and recognized something was wrong — "This baby is starving," she said, shocked, and then brought us donor breast milk — my sense of validation was short-lived. It would be months of doctors assuring me the problem I witnessed wasn't happening, that the solution I'd been trying for days *should* work.

There are so many ways to make a person doubt their very existence, screaming but never heard. When Megan finds herself stuck on the balcony, she tries shouting for help but fails. "Why was my voice still so quiet?" she wonders. Later, when she tries to tell her neighbor that a strange new woman had moved in upstairs, she directs him to a door he glides right past. She's baffled: "He wasn't listening. Jesus Christ, why wouldn't anyone listen?"

It's no coincidence that Megan's disorientation progresses in lockstep with her paranoia about Clara's safety. The first time Megan finds a forum post directed to her, it's someone catching her in a minor transgression against popular advice: "Megan, did you mean to put the bottle in the microwave?" a stranger asks after she decides she doesn't have the energy to wait for Clara's formula to heat up in boiling water. When Megan finally goes out for drinks for the first time since giving birth, she asks her new friend Margaret to babysit. She sets Margaret up with food and instructions, but when she returns, Clara is alone. She's horrified, and she realizes the gravity of the situation: Everything is a potential hazard, but she can't trust herself to determine levels of danger. Lingering beneath any decision about a newborn is the fear you've mistaken a harmless choice for a fatal one. Still, she must make decisions to function. Arbitrarily, she's decided one ghost is safe and the other is dangerous, but the distinction doesn't matter: Either way, she's left her baby in an apartment alone. The haunting has only begun.

These fears — of one's baby, of oneself — rely on isolation. In *Little Bandaged Days*, Erika stands out from Blythe and Megan in that she isn't a new mom; she's on her second baby (referred to as "B"; her older daughter is called "E"). But her experience of alienation, and the psychic breakdown that follows, rings familiar. Her husband, "M," has accepted a new job in Geneva, and she's found herself a newly stay-at-home mom, in a country she doesn't know, surrounded by a language she doesn't understand, with a husband away for weeks at a time on work trips.

When she and the children venture out into the world, she is more or less invisible. She smiles at a woman she met the day before but gets no recognition: "If she saw me, she didn't show it." She can't communicate with other adults, which isn't much more than a hassle until

she misplaces her keys at the park. “I couldn’t ask the other people at the park what had happened,” she says. “I didn’t have the words. ... I made a note to myself to learn the word for help.”

She loses important things (after climbing through a window to get back into the apartment, she sees the keys she was certain she brought to the park waiting for her on the kitchen counter) and she finds objects she doesn’t remember buying. After a day out with the kids, she discovers a dozen tram tickets in her bag. She doesn’t just lose track of time; she *loses time*. “I couldn’t remember stopping at the ticket machine. I could recall nothing of filling my bag with long strings of useless tickets.” She’s becoming unmoored from her environment and thus her reality, and she has no one to pull her back.

It’s impossible to pinpoint an exact turning point; instead it’s a gradual erasure of identities: There goes her job, her friends, her husband, her life, her sanity.

Soon she starts putting her children in real danger. She falls asleep on the couch while holding baby B, and wakes up horrified to find him half on her chest and half on the cushions, so close to death by suffocation: “It was as if I was dangling his small body over the edge of a ravine,” she recalls. She takes a shower while E and B sleep, but she can’t stop thinking of the hot cup of coffee she’d left on the table. She falls into a fugue state and comes to with bruises on her arms and face, and finds open pill bottles with their contents scattered. As with Megan in *The Upstairs House*, one of these situations is so obviously more dangerous than the others, but left to her own devices, Erika can’t parse it out: “Should I be worried now about the coffee cup or the pills? Was there some other thing I couldn’t see? Some disaster that I could not now imagine?” She’s resigned, helpless against a world of potential threats.

Woven through Erika’s story is a second narrative, an unnamed woman held in what seems to be a jail, being questioned by authorities who want to understand why she’s committed some terrible act we aren’t privy to. It’s safe to assume this woman is Erika, in some not-too-distant future where she’s done something horrible to her children. The reader anticipates the reveal while Erika’s delusions escalate, her behavior growing more erratic. She’s afraid to leave the apartment. She hoards rotting fruit. She sleeps on the floor, convinced someone is trying to break in. B wakes up from a nap “covered in little red marks, a swarm of tiny bites or kisses” but she doesn’t know how they got there. M’s intermittent returns push her further into paranoia. Everything seems fine when he’s there, which she’s grateful for, but still, “it made me feel a little slippery inside, like maybe what was real didn’t stay true and fixed from one day, from one minute, to the next.”

The convergence of these two narrators seems inevitable, seamless, even — so easily does Wilder portray the disintegration of the self. It’s impossible to pinpoint an exact turning point; instead it’s a gradual erasure of identities: There goes her job, her friends, her husband, her life, her sanity. The tension mounts to a chilling climax and ambiguous conclusion. Wilder

pushes us into Erika's confusion, never quite settling on what's real and what isn't. To varying degrees, Audrain, Fine, and Wilder each resist neat endings. Like any good horror, the books tease the possibility that the worst is yet to come. And isn't that the scariest aspect of each of these stories? As Wilder writes, "Every minute is capable of bringing such terrible things." ●



Arianna Rebolini

BuzzFeed News Reporter