

INSIDE:

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By Davina Hamilton

I ALWAYS said that I didn't want to have children until I'm married. Last year, I got married – so guess what my family is waiting for now?

It's an expectation that society has placed on women since the beginning of time; bringing new life into the world and doing the womanly duty of raising and nurturing a family. I know that all too well with my mum giving me that "any news?" look almost every time I see her.

But while I do want to start a family when the time is right, not every woman feels the same way.

Sonja Lewis made the decision not to have children. After years of contemplating whether motherhood was for her, the US-born, UK-based journalist and author decided that it wasn't what she wanted.


Spurred on by her own emotions about the issue of childlessness, Lewis penned the book, *The Barrenness*. The debut novel from 48-year-old Lewis, explores many ethical, emotional and societal questions about having children, many of which can interfere with a woman's self worth and value. Though there have been tremendous strides in women's roles and choices in the past 50 years, there is still a debate and struggle between career, children, and legacies left behind. But for Lewis, a combination of health issues plus feeling that she was too far away from her family back home in the States, led to her decision to not embark on motherhood.

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Pregnant pause

Society might make women think that procreation is a must, but an intriguing new novel from writer Sonja Lewis, explores whether womanhood and motherhood have to go hand-in-hand



Mum's not the word

Big issue: but having a baby isn't for everyone

US author Sonja Lewis (right) tells **Davina Hamilton** about making a tough and emotional decision not to have children



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"ABOUT nine years ago, I did become quite obsessive about whether I was going to become a mother or not," says Lewis, who lives in the UK with her English husband.

"At that time, I had very conventional views about it. I have five sisters who all have children and I have 13 female first cousins who all have children. So I always thought that I would have children too.

"But with me being so far away from the United States, I didn't really have a great support system around me. And I also had some health issues; I had fibroids. So I started asking myself whether I really wanted to have

children at this stage of my life. I began to wonder if having children was what I really wanted or if it was something that I felt I should do because it was expected of me. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that, as much as I love children, it was the right choice for me to not have children."

Lewis's husband, who is 11 years her senior, fully supported his wife's decision. With a daughter of his own, he didn't want any more children, but supported his

wife as she went through her own emotional journey contemplating motherhood. "Before we got married, I knew he didn't want to have any more children. I was still in a phase where I was unsure about whether having children was right for me, and he was very sensitive to my feelings. For some time, we looked into adoption and various different options.

"But eventually, after about three years, I finally came to the conclusion that it was the right thing for me to just embrace

children in other ways."

Much of Lewis's contemplation about childlessness was inspired by an encounter with her late aunt, who also inspired Lewis's novel. Lewis visited her Aunt Fannie six months before she died, and she says her elderly relative – who also had no children – made her think about her own life and the legacy she'd leave behind.

"The novel is definitely inspired by my aunt's life and death," Lewis says. "It's not literally about her, but

THE VOICE

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Work first: Some women opt to focus on their careers and not have children



CHILD-FREE ZONE: Here are a few famous folks who don't have children



OPRAH WINFREY
Talk show host and media mogul, aged 57



CONDOLEEZZA RICE
Former US secretary of state, aged 56



TESSA SANDERSON
Former athlete, aged 55



Motherly love: for many women, having children is a natural decision

metaphorically, it's about how leading what people see as an unconventional lifestyle, can take its toll on a person if they're not careful.

"That's what happened to my aunt. I last saw her about six months before she died. She'd never let on that not having children meant anything to her one way or another, but on that day, she was in a nursing home and she looked at me with misty eyes and told me that she didn't want me to end up like her."

"She never went into detail about what she meant. But I took from it that she wanted me to do the best that I could to live a happy life and feel fulfilled whether I had children or not. I was taken aback by that because she didn't seem the type to have a motherly bone in her body, if I'm honest! We loved her dearly but she was difficult and stern at times. And I was determined not to earn a similar reputation."

Lewis feels that many childless women of her aunt's generation personified a hard-nosed attitude because that's what people expected from them.

"I remember the stereotypes and stigmas that were heaped upon my aunt and other women of her generation who didn't have children. They were deemed as mean spirited people and that really made me freak out because I was determined not to be that way. But then it occurred to me that those women had almost,

unknowingly internalised these negative connotations and somehow personified them. I didn't want women of my generation and those that follow to have that unhealthy belief that we cannot be fulfilled unless we are the same as our counterparts who are mothers."

Considering why, even today, there remains a sense of pressure on women to procreate, Lewis says: "I think the main issue is the tradition that makes women feel that womanhood and motherhood

going to war because she doesn't have a family of her own. Attitudes like that don't help."

"But I think the biggest issue is the internal feeling that a woman herself gets; that feeling of being in a society that places such value on being a mother, and being made to feel that you're missing something if you don't have children. I've been in situations where I've told people that I've chosen not to have children, and they've given me this look of disbelief;

"I really think we need to let go of this idea that womanhood is intrinsically linked to motherhood, because not every woman is gonna have children"

are intrinsically linked. That's been the case since the beginning of time. As a result, women who don't have children are often looked at as being different, or being incapable of making certain decisions because they're not mothers. I remember such comments were made about [former US secretary of state] Condoleezza Rice, who also doesn't have children. There were insinuations that she wouldn't be sensitive about issues like young people

it's like they don't believe that I can be satisfied as I am. I really think we need to let go of this idea that womanhood is intrinsically linked to motherhood, because not every woman is gonna have children."

Of course, it's not just women who have views about procreation. For many men, there is a great importance placed on continuing their lineage with children. In the black community in particular, there is that age-old

stereotype that black men love to procreate – or 'breed', as some put it more crudely. Lewis has found there to be some truth to this stigma.

"I do think that kind of thinking is more prevalent in the black community. I have had conversations with black men, both here in the UK and in the United States, and the whole idea of lineage and what we leave behind – specifically, children – is a very big deal to black men."

Despite many people asking her if she thinks she might change her mind, Lewis

insists that motherhood isn't for her. Feeling completely fulfilled without her own children, Lewis – who has five sisters and one brother – is nurturing towards her nieces and nephews and her godson, and believes that legacy can be about much more than having children.

"The idea of leaving your legacy behind is a big thing. But I think it comes down to how you live your life, because you'll always make an impression on the children in your life, whether they're your own children or nieces,

nephews, godchildren or any children around you.

"From a practical viewpoint, I believe it doesn't hurt to have a will so that you can ensure that whatever you leave behind will go where you want it to."

"Other than that, you just have to live the best life that you can and trust that what you leave in the world will be some fantastic memories for your loved ones."

• *The Barrenness is out now.*
For more information, visit www.sonjalewis.com

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