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One single rugby ref and his baby

CAPE Town writer Joanne Jowell was dimly aware of who Jonathan Kaplan was – the Green Point-based international rugby ref.

Both she and he are Jewish, share acquaintances, and they've bumped into each other socially over the years.

But she's not much of a rugby fan, and didn't really know him.

When she saw he'd posted on Facebook the image of a foetal scan, which is apparently today's way of announcing you're pregnant, she was happy for him. She assumed he'd married and started a family.

But then one of the comments referred to the fact that he'd be a single parent – and Jowell was intrigued. She discovered he was having a baby with a surrogate mother, a donor egg, and his own sperm.

How on Earth would a single professional rugby ref, approaching 50, handle the colic, choice of dummy and the delights of nappies?

This was a story she wanted to write. "Never mind the birth of the baby," she says, "I was more interested in the birth of the father."

So when Kaplan contacted Jowell and asked her to write a book about his experience, she didn't hesitate.

The result is this engagingly honest and readable account of Kaplan's determination to be a father, and what he did when his dream came true.

He was born in Durban, the eldest of three boys, and his parents split up when he was about six. A few years later his mother moved to Joburg with the two younger boys, and Kaplan stayed with his father in Durban. So although he had two parents, he was, for almost as long as he could remember, the child of single parents.

He always wanted a child or children of his own, and as his stellar rugby refereeing career wound down in 2013, when he was in his late 40s, he decided it was time to do something about it.

His relationships never seemed to last more than two-and-a-half years, so it didn't look as though he was going to father a child in the conventional way.

In December 2013, he contacted Kim, a woman from an egg donation and surrogacy agency. And the process began.

There is a huge need, Kim tells Jowell. The agency probably gets two or three inquiries a day from people seeking surrogates, and perhaps one or two a month from women wanting to be surrogates.

South African laws in this area are strict. The surrogate, who is usually aged between 30 and 40 and

Vivien Horler



must have a child of her own, can't be paid, although her expenses can be covered. The egg donor, who must be between 19 and 34, gets about R7 000. The agency cannot be paid for the surrogacy, but is paid for egg donation services.

The client or clients – those looking for a baby – must be under 50 years old. They visit the agency's website and seek a suitable egg donor who is pictured as she was as a young child. As for the surrogate, as long as she's healthy, her looks don't count – the baby will have none of her genetic material.

Why do donors and surrogates do it? Kim says it isn't the money – they simply want to do good. Of course being a surrogate parent is way more involved than merely donating some eggs. In Kaplan's case the surrogate mother, Jacqui, who was married and had two daughters of her own, simply loved being pregnant but did not want any more children. Eventually Jacqui became pregnant, and Kaleb was born on June 1, 2016 by Caesarean section, with both Kaplan and Jacqui's husband present. The next day Kaplan took his son home.

To start with he was a somewhat hands-off father: he had a night nurse for five months, and a daily nanny. His time with the baby was in the hours between when the night nurse left and the nanny arrived, and similarly in the evenings.

Kaplan would prepare his son for his bath, blow on his tummy and exchange chuckles, and then hand over the baby to the nurse. When, at five weeks, Kaleb smiled at him, Kaplan was smitten.

Winging It is a readable new take on a familiar theme. Read this and other reviews by Vivien Horler on her website thebookspage.co.za

WINGING IT: JONATHAN KAPLAN'S JOURNEY FROM

WORLD-CLASS REF TO ROOKIE SOLO DAD

JOANNE JOWELL
Macmillan



Jonathan Kaplan and his son, Kaleb.