

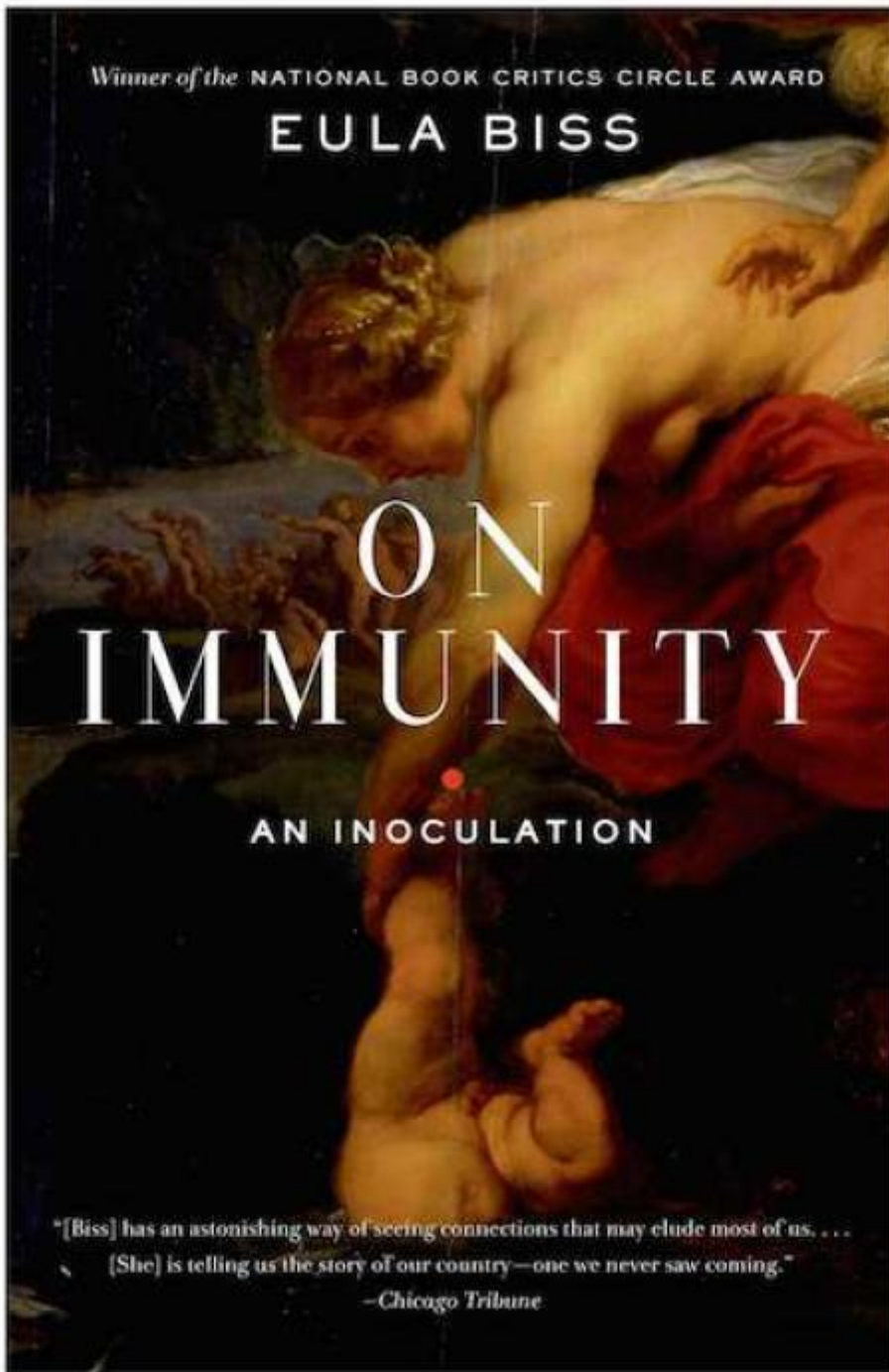


ASSET

SHARE AND MOVE TO FACE NASTY BUGS

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Not differently from many other mothers, I actually started to delve into the world of

vaccines when my first daughter was born. Before that, I only have old and indistinct memories about vaccines as one of the several youth's unavoidable steps. After discussing in forums with other parents ? before the advent of social network ? I realized that what I used to dismiss as a non-relevant matter, was indeed a topic able to ignite passionate discussions, with data-quoting attacks and mutual excommunications on either side of the barricade.

To me, it looks like the parents' world had suddenly split into two factions, one favourable to vaccines and one ? the *anti-vaxxers*, as we began to call them since then ? opposing them. The best word to describe those discussions is *exhausting*.

Having a scientific background, my first approach was to bring evidence of the efficacy of vaccines. And then data on the extremely low incidence of adverse reactions. And then on the cost/benefit ratio. And then on the epidemiology and mortality of diseases. And then? And then I realized how emotions ? the strongest one being the protective instinct toward our own children ? could thwart any attempt to keep the debate on a rational level.

I was thus eager to find a kind of narrative that ? besides the objective scientific evidences ? could put me into contact with the emotional world of those who do not vaccinate. Parents I felt empathically close to but whose reasons I could not rationally understand. I was missing the joining link between these two worlds, or at least a proper key to interpret their positions.

The book from Eula Biss [7] ? *On Immunity: An Inoculation* ? immediately proved to have the right features: it is written not by a medic but by a mother. It is not meant to persuade or make some people feel guilty. On the contrary, its aim is to empathize, raise doubts and explicitly address fears. The author feels awkward about lining up with one side or the other, since her view of reality is not of the black-or-white type. She does not identify herself in the oppositions ? natural vs. artificial, pure vs. contaminated, emotional

mothers vs. rational paediatricians ?
presented as ways to interpret society
because of her refusal of the underlying
metaphor of war. It is also important to note
that recognizing similar metaphors and using
less violent ones is a key pillar of the success
of alternative medicine, as we will discuss later.

In this essay, the author describes the world
as she sees it, thus offering a perspective on
the society she is immersed in. Even if we are
on the other side of the ocean, we can
recognize some common traits with the
context she defines: an amplified sense of
what a parent could (should?) do to protect his
sons, together with the feeling of helplessness
in front of certain situations; the discussion
between mothers, who seems to compete in
order to prove their superior knowledge of
these hot topics; the idea that we consider
ourselves more as vulnerable targets for
diseases than as possible vehicles that can
spread germs.

To explain our feeling regarding vaccines, the
author uses mythical figures like Dracula, who
infects with his bite while sucking blood from
innocent victims, as a metaphor for the syringe
that, by sinking through the skin, contaminates
the pure ones. Biss offers an interesting
reading of the language implied by these
metaphors. She explains that we need
something that allow us to talk about our
feelings, thus ? as in the case of alternative
medicine ? if we feel intoxicated, then we need
something able to purify us, if we feel
inadequate we need something that
strengthen us. And so on. To sum up, when
we feel bad, we need something absolutely
good. Most of the pharmaceutical drugs ? she
explains ? are both good and bad (dose
makes the poison) but when we look for
comfort, we want something natural, since the
equivalence between good and natural is by
now well established in terms of common
sense. Advertisers know it well: living in a
technological world, our craving for what is
uncontaminated, primordial and ?bio?
increases. Therefore, allowing children to
develop immunity in a ?natural? way, without

external support, looks quite promising and fascinating.

Actually, vaccines are an exact match for this criterion, since they are a protected and controlled way to train our immune system to fight some specific pathogens. Viruses are artificially domesticated, but the response deployed by our immune defence is absolutely natural, being it stimulated by our own organism and not in the lab of a pharmaceutical company. The sole 'unnatural' trait of vaccines is that they do not provoke diseases as real viruses would do. Obviously, this is their precise purpose, but this mechanism is often claimed by anti-vaxxers as a proof of the lower effectiveness of vaccines. Thus, on the one hand people do not get vaccinated because of the fear that the injection could contaminate their children, while on the other hand this 'unnatural' immune response would be less effective.

Biss also discusses the belief that vaccines are for those 'not like us', a category that each time refers to different groups like immigrants, people with risky behaviours or the poor. A perspective that hides a perception of ourselves as those that always make the right choice, in contrast with the others and their wrong (or at least unaware) decisions. We do not perceive our health status as protected by herd immunity; thus, we are less likely to contribute to the general protection. But society is interconnected and our wellness depends from other people's choices, in ways that often elude our senses. Therefore, it may happen that a fully vaccinated child from the middle class helps to fill the gap of the partial immunisation of a poor child, as well as vaccine coverage amongst the poor will contribute to the privileged classes' protection.

By reading Biss' book, my perception about myself and my role in the society has changed. The boundary between others and me seems now a little more blurry; the other people are *different* and, in some way, are also *me*. Such a perception emerges also during pregnancy, when the body is not only *mine*

. And it is just in this occasion that one realizes that such interdependence is wonderful and a bringer of life.

It can be said that the word *man* should be substituted by the more proper *humanity*, since I live because other people live and so that they may live.

Sara Letardi

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addressing-fears-vaccine-controversy

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