

This article was originally published in Sunday Independent

January / 2011

- You can find more information [here](#) -

## GOOD BABIES

Written by Emily Hourican

---

There seem to be two standard questions everyone, from the postman to the district nurse, asks when meeting my new arrival, little Bridget Nancy, for the first time. Let's deal with the second first (that's what having babies does to your brain... lateralises it...); "is she a good baby?" they ask.

"Well yes," I say, 'pretty good I think. I mean, she hasn't robbed any banks or told me to eff off yet...' But of course that isn't what they mean. They mean does she sleep for ten hours a night and require a brass band to wake her. Because, weirdly, that, rather than smiling, gurgling, waving, or any of the rest of the limited but enchanting spectrum of a small baby's repertoire, is our criteria for 'good.' Babies who sleep are 'good', babies who don't are... 'tricky', 'demanding', sometimes 'difficult.' We don't actually say 'bad,' but hey, it's hovering there in the background, just a child psychologist's instructions re positive reinforcement away.

But let's go back to the first question. And that of course is, "you must be delighted?" Because I had two boys, and now I have a girl, so I must be delighted. And I am delighted – delighted she's healthy, delighted she's adorable, and yes, I admit, delighted she's a girl. Mainly because it's new and interesting, and because I hope to have someone to watch **Gossip Girl** with in years to come, rather than because I didn't want another boy. But I have realised that having a girl brings baggage, in a way that two little boys did not.

First there's the clothes thing. Even sensible friends, those who know well that I already have enough baby clothes to cope with octuplets, even if they are all faded blue and slightly stained with mashed banana, turn up with half of Baby Dior in fancy shoppers, encased in layers of crisp tissue paper and tied up with velvet bows. "I couldn't resist," they say, defiantly. Two women, both the proud mothers of three boys, have recently handed over their secret stash of dainty, frilly items, saying rather regretfully 'I bought these in case...' One American pal even sent over a pink Baby Gap tutu, because she'd heard there was a waiting list for that piece of froth here. (Seriously, a waiting list for a tutu...). Where the boys had serviceable dungarees and t-shirts in dark colours (to hide stains), this little one already has a wardrobe to rival Jordan's fantasy trousseau.

But it's not all froth and fashion. I have received several copies of Yeats' ***Prayer For My Daughter***, and although the givers haven't quite italicised the lines "May she be granted beauty and yet not/ Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught..." they may as well have; it's the central piece of the poem. Now, I've always thought the sentiment a bit off. Sort of craven and mealy-mouthed. After all, if you're going to be beautiful, why on earth not be absolutely stunningly, ridiculously, ***stupidly*** beautiful? Beautiful enough, in Chandler's lines, "to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained glass window". Would anyone think of suggesting that a boy should be good-looking, but not ***too*** good-looking. Or, worse again, smart, but not ***too*** smart? I thought not, but beauty in women has always been a bit problematic; a blessing only until it becomes a curse.

Then there are the couple of hard-core feminist pals who have given me copies of Natasha Walter's ***Living Dolls*** and a lecture on the evils of early stereotyping, quite as if I had been caught in the act of dashing off to buy Primark's padded bikini tops for pre-teens, or t-shirts with the Playboy Bunny logo picked out in pink sparkles. They warn of minefields ahead and counsel endless vigilance against the forces of consumer sexism. And they haven't even seen the pink tutu yet...Yes, clearly there are layers to having a girl that I hadn't suspected.

I don't recall any of this soul-searching when the boys were born. I simply assumed they would grow up to become strong, manly Empire-builders, probably with a tendency to leave their dirty clothes on the floor and exaggerate minor ailments, but nothing more alarming than that. And maybe that's just the problem? The boys get the benefit of the doubt, while the girls get microscopic scrutiny and a ready-made set of expectations. Looks like 'good', for a girl, doesn't stop with sleeping ten hours for long. In which case Little B is going to need all the rest she can get...

-

About the author:

**Emily Hourican** is a journalist and author based in Dublin, Ireland.

More information can be found in [emilyhourican.com](http://emilyhourican.com)