Maggie Nelson’s latest memoir, *The Argonauts*, takes a critical look at maternity, parenting, and both the transqueer and heteronormative-nuclear family. These generally broad constructs are explored alongside Nelson’s personal decision to give birth to and raise a child with her fluidly-gendered partner, artist Harry Dodge. Similar to the not-exactly-linear form of her 2009 memoir *Bluets*, Nelson maneuvers back and forth between literary and cultural criticism, poetry, philosophy, and the deepest of personal experiences, supplying readers with marginalia references for quotes from erudite writers like Roland Barthes, D.W. Winnicott, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Love gives this book its shape. Nelson begins by documenting the beginning of her relationship with Dodge, which in turn is used as a springboard for interrogating both the merits and limitations of language. These might at first seem like two unrelated topics (love and language), but in Nelson’s hands they become mutually inclusive cultural matters. From the very first page one can recognize Nelson’s ability to link cultural theory—our world understood through complicated, often invisible ideas—with the messy, protean reality of our physical lives. Here, their first sexual contact (Nelson being “fuck[ed]…in the ass…against the cement floor of [Dodge’s]…bachelor pad”) makes way for philosophical transformation.

“Before we met,” Nelson writes about Dodge, “I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein’s idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed…its paradox is, quite literally, *why I write*, or how I feel able to keep writing.” This personal truth, the importance of “words [being] good enough” wavers, however, after she meets and falls in love with Dodge, who has “spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are *not* good enough.” (“Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow. We argued and argued on this account, full of fever, not malice. Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnameable falls away, gets lost, is murdered…”) As a result of these regularly held ontological debates, both Nelson and Dodge are left humbly transformed: “I looked anew at unnamable things, or at least things whose essence is flicker, flow,” Nelson admits. “I stopped smugly repeating *Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly* and wondered anew, can everything be thought.” This friction surrounding language and Nelson’s relationship to Dodge, and how we can *choose* to live our lives versus how so many of us actually do (unthinkingly and/or unintentionally broadcasting a lack of curiosity and/or
tolerance for difference) is a parable for understanding the whole book—hope for Nelson, in terms of equality, freedom, and happiness, resides in her (our) intellectual adaptability to changes in personal, cultural, and political landscapes.

The corona of cultural and literary theory that is blended into the personal is what gives this book its unique position among other memoirs. Indeed, The Argonauts derives its name from Roland Barthes comparison of the phrase “I love you” to the Greek mythological ship, the Argo:

Just as the Argo’s parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the Argo, whenever the lover utters the phrase ‘I love you,’ its meaning must be renewed by each use, as ‘the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new.’

This confession is significant not only for its relationship to the book’s title, but also for Nelson’s need to set straight a belief in this connection between language (in utterances like “I love you,” all the way through solipsistic theories of being) and personhood—how our words must adapt, must change, must grow, so that through them we can continually renew ourselves. In essence: how we speak and think gives way to how we live. This is what Nelson and Dodge are learning together.

Nelson, who has dedicated the majority of her professional life to the study of theory, applies a keen, analytical eye to contemporary culture. However, early in the book there is the sense of lost interest in pointing an unwaveringly antagonistic finger at heteronormativity and mainstream domesticity. The Argonauts becomes Nelson’s voyage through the phrase “I love you” as someone now more curious (as opposed to critical) for what the world of the domestic, and the daily “I love you’s,” entails. Instead of relying on the cynicism of the critic, Nelson questions her previously held philosophies in the name of her new love with Dodge and their growing family. What is conformity, maternity, parenthood, queerness, and kinship? What do these constructs look like for the LGBTQ community, and how are they rendered in a post-Prop-8 world, in a cultural landscape depicting gay rights as marriage equality and various other basic civil liberties? Instead of answering all these questions outright, Nelson sets about the task of asking them: “But what about it is the essence of heteronormativity?,” Nelson finds herself asking when a friend smugly accuses her family’s portrait as being the most heteronormative thing she, the friend, has ever seen. “What about my pregnancy?” Nelson wonders. “Is that inherently heteronormative?..How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity?”

Nelson’s voice here is the one most consistent throughout the book—the voice that calls into question anyone who has made it their business to declare anything as truth, whether it be on the side of radical critics proclaiming traditional domesticity a pitfall for progressive politics, or conservative traditionalists seemingly content with the status quo. Should this be the case? Nelson asks. Or should that? Or is it possible to give in to tradition and challenge it at the same time? What begins as a personal exploration of
language and love (Nelson and Dodge’s relationship), becomes a question (or many questions) concerning the possibly problematic gap between traditional domesticity and queer politics. Nelson seeks to build a bridge between these ostensibly opposing forces.

Having said all this, summarizing *The Argonauts* has proven to be a challenge, as the nature of the book defies easy definition. Given Nelson’s penchant for seeing the blurred lines surrounding various constructs (gender, marriage, parenthood, sexuality), this defiance makes sense. The book is as much social commentary and criticism as it is personal memoir, as lyrical as it is prosaic; there is the practiced tone of academic discourse and the confessional voice of personal narrative. To be perfectly honest, this chaotic mixture threw me during my initial read. Nelson, with her flagrant use of quotes and references to theory, invites the reader into the intimate quarters of both her professional and personal lives, as the two realms (academic and familial) tend to overlap. She uses the likes of Winnicott, Barthes, Butler over and over and over again with no formal introductions, no background information—we are expected to be, in some way, familiar with these theorists and their schools of thought, except that when we are not it can feel disorienting, like we’ve been catapulted into the middle of a conversation for which we are underprepared. The overall effect is paradoxical—on one hand there is this intimate confidence insinuated between the reader and Nelson, but on the other, the highly formal language of the academic critic has a distancing, insouciantly aloof quality to it. These juxtaposing tones took time to warm to—a stylistic tool used to say this is no sentimentalizing memoir; this is an account of one adept social critic using her life as a text for cultural examination.

What ultimately makes this book powerful is its honest exploration of change—the growth of our minds over time, our shifting experiences in a tangible world, and how these moments of becomingness oftentimes closely correlate to our changing bodies. As the narrative progresses, Nelson moves away from collaging social theory and moves into descriptions of her own prenatal body and postnatal epiphanies. Motherhood and domesticity allow Nelson to see “that a studied evasiveness,” or an overreliance on intellectualism, “has its own limitations, its own ways of inhibiting certain forms of happiness and pleasure. The pleasure of abiding. The pleasure of insistence, of persistence. The pleasure of obligation, the pleasure of dependency. The pleasure of ordinary devotion.” This ordinary devotion centers on the daily love Nelson feels for her family. Transformative love isn’t pure intellect, whether it is perceived as a radical statement or the most mainstream of experiences—it is a combination of feeling viscerally alive with the cerebral recognition of giving oneself over to another, an act of surrender that leaves one, hopefully, happier and healthier, a part of the flow.

By the end, Nelson looks beyond the chorus of theory and focuses on the physical pain and labor of childbirth. She sees D.W. Winnicott’s understanding of a growing child’s fear of being unable to hold on to its environment (a fear described as “going to pieces” and “falling forever”), as a metaphor for any point on life’s spectrum. Nelson’s version of this
metaphor is most directly evoked by her constipation. To Nelson’s astonishment, a pregnant mother’s “growing baby literally deforms and squeezes the lower intestines, changing the shape, flow, and plausibility of one’s feces.” During pregnancy, her shit comes out as “Christmas tree ornament-type balls.”

Then, all through my labor, I could not shit at all, as it was keenly clear to me that letting go of the shit would mean the total disintegration of my perineum, anus, and vagina, all at once. I also knew that if, or when, I could let go of the shit, the baby would probably come out. But to do so would mean falling forever, going to pieces.

This moment of fear (instigated by Nelson’s physical discomfort) speaks in a grander way to our individualistic culture’s anxiety surrounding the loss of self, of compromising (“going to pieces”), for the sake of another. But, Nelson suggests, this very giving over of the self (both bodily and mindfully) is its own form of individual rebirth, and for her it is the creation of her son Iggy that engenders the complexities (and mirth) of a new family, a more adaptive set of priorities, and a more open, perhaps forgiving, view of domesticity.

It’s Nelson’s admitted newfound propensity for joy with Dodge and their sons that she must attend to by the book’s end, and this attending to is her initiation into motherhood. Motherhood, Nelson argues, even in at its most mainstream, its most traditional and middlebrow, is a queer act indeed. Perhaps nothing changes the individual and the world more than the strange experience of birth, one child at a time. We don’t have adequate language for this experience yet, but we should be open to interpretations, new and old alike.