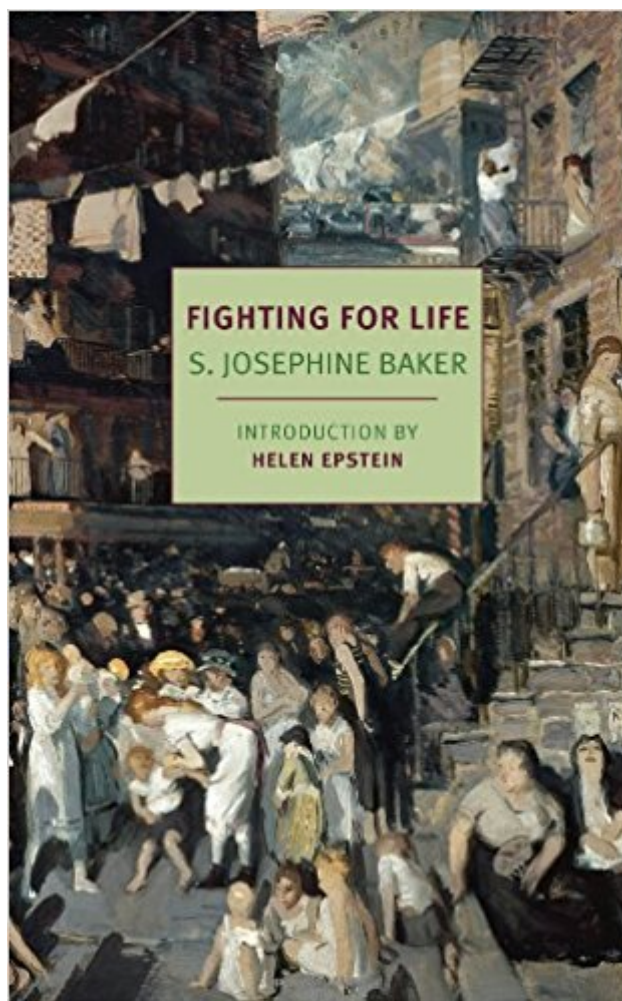


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# Fighting For Life (New York Review Books Classics)



## Synopsis

New York's Lower East Side was said to be the most densely populated square mile on earth in the 1890s. Health inspectors called the neighborhood "the suicide ward." Diarrhea epidemics raged each summer, killing thousands of children. Sweatshop babies with smallpox and typhus dozed in garment heaps destined for fashionable shops. Desperate mothers paced the streets to soothe their feverish children and white mourning cloths hung from every building. A third of the children living there died before their fifth birthday. By 1911, the child death rate had fallen sharply and The New York Times hailed the city as the healthiest on earth. In this witty and highly personal autobiography, public health crusader Dr. S. Josephine Baker explains how this transformation was achieved. By the time she retired in 1923, Baker was famous worldwide for saving the lives of 90,000 children. The programs she developed, many still in use today, have saved the lives of millions more. She fought for women's suffrage, toured Russia in the 1930s, and captured "Typhoid Mary" Mary Mallon, twice. She was also an astute observer of her times, and *Fighting for Life* is one of the most honest, compassionate memoirs of American medicine ever written.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Baker was the first director of a children's public health agency, and the first woman to get a doctorate in public health. She tangled repeatedly with Typhoid Mary. More important, her ideas saved thousands of lives and permanently changed the focus and mission of

public health. Her just-reissued 1939 autobiography proves to be one of those magical books that reaches effortlessly through time, as engaging and as thought-provoking as if it were written now. • The New York Times • “Dr. Baker shines not only for her contributions to public health and social policy, but also for her work as a woman in government administration, supervising a staff that included many male physicians. Her work made her a leading figure in public health and the New York City Bureau of Child Hygiene became a model for similar programs in other cities, as well as for the United States Children’s Bureau. • U.S. National Library of Medicine • “Rather than spending her time swanning about town, Josephine Baker became a pioneer, dedicating her life to the field of preventive health care for children. • Anthony Bourdain

Sara Josephine Baker (1873–1945) was born in Poughkeepsie, New York, and attended the Woman’s Medical College of the New York Infirmary. As the first director of New York’s Bureau of Child Hygiene from 1908 to 1923, Baker’s work with poor mothers and children in the immigrant communities of New York City dramatically reduced maternal and child mortality and became a model for cities across the country. On two occasions she helped to track down Mary Mallon, the cook who came to be known as Typhoid Mary. Baker wrote fifty journal articles and more than two hundred pieces for the popular press about preventive medicine, as well as six books: *Healthy Babies*, *Healthy Mothers*, *Healthy Children* (all 1920), *The Growing Child* (1923), *Child Hygiene* (1925), and her autobiography, *Fighting for Life* (1939). In the 1930s Baker, along with her partner of many years, the novelist Ida Wylie, and their friend Dr. Louise Pearce, moved to a two-hundred-year-old farm in New Jersey, where she lived until her death. Helen Epstein is a writer specializing in public health and an adjunct professor at Bard College. She has advised numerous organizations, including the United States Agency for International Development, the World Bank, Human Rights Watch, and UNICEF. She is the author of *The Invisible Cure: Why We Are Losing the Fight Against AIDS in Africa* and has contributed articles to many publications, including *The New York Review of Books* and *The New York Times Magazine*.

So little is written about the day to day efforts of public health practitioners, that it was a real treat to find this memoir by one of the prominent early leaders of public health in New York City. Dr. Baker was a female physician in an era when this was extremely rare. Furthermore, she became a top administrator at the New York Board of Health and supervised a department of male doctors while adroitly managing not to get derailed by the rough and tumble machine politics of New York. Many

of the public health issues and challenges that she describes are still relevant today. Although Dr. Baker was totally dedicated to public health and the underserved populations of the poor tenements of New York, every now and then a bit of elitism surfaces, which given her privileged background and the prevailing cultural views of the times, is not completely unexpected. All in all, as a practicing public health nurse, I relished the book and highly recommend it to anyone interested in public health and/or early pioneer female physicians.

This is not about the African American dancer that was the toast of Europe between the world wars, as I first thought. Dr SJ Baker was a woman way ahead of her time: brave, intelligent, farsighted, practical can-do woman. Way ahead of her time. You'll recognize the influence of her work in child preventive health practices we still use today, though they were revolutionary at the time. That may sound dull but in the doing, she crosses worlds and people (some you'll recognize) that are anything but. Many of her insights are as fresh today as when she wrote this book. In telling her story, you'll also be treated to a first-person telling of things I've only read in history books about the late 19th century through the eve of the Second World War.

What an amazing woman. Her accomplishments in infant and child welfare were enormous. Yet, there is so little recognition of her and what she did for society. The history in the book is told in a story rather than memorizing a lot of names and dates. Her descriptions were such that I felt like I was right along side her. I am glad that she wrote her memoir about her fascinating career.

The intro and memoir are fantastic. The book describes how she was a pioneer in Public Health and successfully navigated her way through a male-dominated, culturally unhealthy time. It's sad that I have a PhD in Public Health and never heard of her prior to reading this book. Conversely, all of us in the field know who John Snow is.

I would not describe this book as wildly entertaining, but it is an interesting look back into the past of the uphill battle of a female physician with big city (often corrupt) politics, suffrage, chauvinism, ignorance, and cultural differences. There are also many small details of note such as the the "automatic calendar reminder" of 1908 - just jot down a thought on a penny postcard at your office and it will arrive at your breakfast table early the next morning.

This book is a product of its age, a wonderful poorly organized ramble through the life of one of the

most driven, insightful, caring and amazing people to have graced the filthy streets of New York City. What struck me most about it, however, was just how relevant her insight and knowledge of public health is to our own time as we too are caught up in the struggles over public health and the provision of health care.

A surprisingly good book. The writing is a bit amateurish, but the author gives you an insight of public health in NYC and the nation. Public health and welfare had a reluctant priority then and now. An easy read and worth the effort. We should be pleased that the NYRB brings to the public these old classics.

A wonderful book! A must read for anyone interested in public health history. It's a shame that we only remember the dancer and not the women who made the world a safer place for babies.

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