



Mr James Thoo with his wife Alicia and nine-month-old daughter Zoe, who was born after two cycles of in-vitro fertilisation. He found it cathartic to document the IVF experience during the long waits at the clinic. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

# A man's fight for fatherhood through IVF

Screenwriter James Thoo shares in his new book a rare male perspective on infertility and in-vitro fertilisation, which are still hush-hush topics



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Mr James Thoo cannot remember when he got married.

"Oh my goodness. I should know this thing," he says, flustered. He throws out figures hesitantly – eight years ago, 10 years – then settles, with a sigh of finality, on four (you find out later the year 2016 is tattooed on his left arm).

But when it comes to his nine-month-old daughter Zoe, the numbers slide out effortlessly – she was born on Nov 1 last year.

He proudly announces that she is in the 97th percentile on the infant growth charts – which makes her much bigger than average – while complaining that she rejects his homemade porridge.

The 35-year-old screenwriter turns up for his photo shoot wearing a custom-made T-shirt with a photo of Zoe and the words "future legend" in fat capital letters.

On the surface, he looks like another besotted new father, but his obsession is warranted. Zoe is a miracle, a hard-fought trophy wrested from the arms of the fickle fertility gods.

In a new book titled *Palooka: 12 Rounds To Fatherhood*, Mr Thoo chronicles the in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) journey he and his wife went

through and confronts his battered masculinity. It is a rare look at the issues from a husband's perspective, rather than that of a doctor or wife, but written with laugh-out-loud, self-deprecating humour that millennials can relate to.

The title references the slang term for a mediocre or clumsy boxer – Mr Thoo boxed professionally for a period in his 20s – and each of the 12 chapters is prefaced by the retelling of a historic or memorable match which has parallels to his fight for fatherhood.

The book's launch in May seems timely in a pandemic that has disrupted lives globally.

According to a study published in *Science* magazine last month, fertility rates are projected to fall in the short term as economies contract and couples postpone baby-making plans. Lockdowns around the world have also forced fertility treatments to be postponed or cancelled, resulting in time lost in reproductive cycles.

The book also comes in the wake of a global decline in male fertility rates over the last 40 years. One in 20 young men now have a low sperm count that makes it difficult for them to have children, according to Professor Christopher Barratt, an expert on reproductive medicine at the University of Dundee in Scotland and former director of the male fertility expert working group at the World Health Organisation, who spoke to *The Straits Times* last year.

A self-confessed "baby-whispering lunatic", Mr Thoo says he had longed to be a father since he was a boy.

After six months of trying for a baby, fertility tests revealed that he had low sperm motility, which means there are insufficient healthy sperm to fertilise an egg. It was a below-the-belt blow which he never expected.

"I guess it's embarrassing for men to cop to infertility. It is one of the most fundamental functions of being a man – the ability to sire a child," he writes in the book. "If you

can't do that, then what are you?"

His wife Alicia, a 32-year-old private banker, also had a lower-than-average number of eggs, a condition called diminished ovarian reserve.

They opted for IVF immediately in 2018 and went through two cycles over about a year, spending some \$60,000 in all.

The book's gestation took place during the long waits at the doctor's clinic, where he found it "cathartic" to document the experience. He describes the IVF process in the book as "one prolonged uppercut to the scrotum".

"You think you're just going to show up at a clinic and they'll take the eggs and fertilise them and so on and so forth. In reality what you have to do is Ethan Hunt your way through about 16 different challenges before you even get to look at the eggs," he writes, referring to the lead character in the *Mission: Impossible* spy movie series (1996 to present).

When he posted about the book on social media, friends and acquaintances sent messages like, "Dude, what the hell are you doing?" and "Seriously, you're telling people about this?", he recalls.

Because he was open about his struggles, other men facing the same issues gravitated towards him.

They tended to be acquaintances who would approach him "late in the night" during social occasions and confide that they, too, were going through IVF with their spouses, something they had not told anyone else.

"I find it incredibly sad that people are going through these problems and clearly want to talk about it, but feel that they can't," he says.

"I stay as quiet as possible and let them speak about it. And then do what I hope the book does, which is empathise and share the experience, you know, I've been through the exact same thing and I get it and it sucks. And the people who haven't been through it don't get it."

While he acknowledges that "Asian men have it the hardest when it comes to talking about things like this", he feels that being vulnerable is worth it.

"I've never had a single bad experience with telling somebody about my issues, that I'm...", he pauses and inhales sharply, then continues, "...almost completely infertile."

The "soul-crushing" uncertainty of IVF was the most stressful part of the journey, he says.

"If you said you'll have to do all these things 10 times and then in five years you'll definitely have a kid, it would have been a breeze, honestly. Because I would know that we would have a baby in the end."

"But to go through it and not know if it will ever work, or ever happen for us...", he says, his voice trailing off.

"Even when Alicia was first pregnant, up until the day she gave birth, I was still worried. Even the day after, when Zoe had jaundice."

Besides physically demanding preparations, like helping to administer 100 fertility medication injections in a month to his wife, their journey was fraught with hard-hitting moments.

During the first round of implantation, Mrs Thoo suffered a miscarriage as well as an ectopic pregnancy, where the fertilised egg implants in the wrong place. It endangered her life and she had to undergo emergency surgery.

"The emotional and mental erosion of repeated IVF failures on a person is gruelling to a level that is completely unfathomable to anyone who has not themselves experienced it. To subject someone to its psychological tolls, months at a time, is incredibly painful," Mr Thoo writes in the book.

He was keenly aware that his wife was the metaphorical prize fighter in the ring, and he, the supportive assistant in the corner whose job was to be "as positive as possible and not get mired in the self-loathing, or at least shield Alicia from it", he says.

Mrs Thoo also suffered from morning sickness throughout her pregnancy.

That is why he sees his happy ending not in the birth of their baby, but in the "renewed appreciation for my wife and everything that I do have in my life".

Mrs Thoo also noticed the transformation – from her husband initially wanting a child more, to him later worrying about her disappointment at not being able to have one.

"I think it made me love him more through the whole process," she gushes.

Both agree that couples must already have clear and open communication to weather the multiple stresses of IVF. It will "make any problem instantly significantly more manageable", he says.

With four more viable eggs in storage, they are eager to try for baby No. 2 when their doctor says they are ready to rumble.

While he is "extremely excited" about trying again for a child, he also bears "a lot of guilt" about the financial burden, which will fall mainly on his wife.

The hands-on dad has put his screenwriting projects on hold to take care of Zoe, while his wife works from home during phase two.

You can hear the hurt in his voice as he confesses that despite his efforts, Zoe prefers mummy to him. It makes him feel that he is "failing as a dad because it's really not as easy as I thought it would be".

Still, he is ready to roll with the punches of fatherhood.

"I've never met an only child who was happy they were an only child," he says. "For Zoe's sake, it would be nice to have a sibling."

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• *Palooka: 12 Rounds To Fatherhood* is published by Brango and available in hardback for \$28 (before GST) at Books Kinokuniya, Huggs-Epigram Coffee Bookshop and online at [www.jamesthoo.com](http://www.jamesthoo.com)