

### **Narrating Motherhood: The Power of Storytelling**

**Martin, BettyAnn, and Michelann Parr, eds. *Writing Mothers: Narrative Acts of Care, Redemption, and Transformation*. Bradford, ON: Demeter P, 2020. 258 pages. ISBN 978-1-77258-223-9. Pbk. \$34.95.**

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In alignment with the intentions of the Canadian Demeter Press, dedicated to publishing interdisciplinary works on motherhood studies, *Writing Mothers* is a truly mother-centered collection of essays. This is made evident on almost every page from the cover design to the authors' biographies: the cover artist, Irena Zenewych, explains that her mother's recent death inspired the image (7); one editor dedicates the volume to her children, the other to her mother (3); they thank their children "for the many relational opportunities they provide to know ourselves through motherhood" (5); and while every author's bio highlights information about the respective contributor's academic accomplishments, some of them state that they are mothers and grandmothers as well. An unusual feature of traditional edited collections, an appendix titled "A Travel Guide for Your Journey," encourages women to keep writing even when they have young children and urges mothers to "establish a holistic writing schedule," which takes into account the dynamics of their family and their own interests (245-47). Thus, the editors unequivocally demonstrate that while *Writing Mothers* contains academic analyses besides personal essays and most of its contributors have an academic background, it is not a purely ivory-tower project that looks at motherhood only from a scholarly vantage point but is very much rooted in the everyday joys and struggles of mothers.

All throughout the volume, the editors emphasize the sense-making and world-making potential of narratives, among them the ones written about and sometimes *despite* being a mother. BettyAnn Martin and Michelann Parr acknowledge that even though writing about

motherhood is gaining more and more traction among academics, as the interdisciplinary field of motherhood studies keeps acquiring legitimacy, writing *while* being a mother still has its challenges. These might be rooted in the fundamental unnarratability of the traumatizing aspects of motherhood or simply in the practical difficulties or the sheer exhaustion of parenthood. Each contribution is referred to as a “story,” whether it is a literary analysis, an overview of a budding social movement, a critical evaluation of cultural tropes, or a straightforward personal narrative. The choice to dub them “stories,” along with the use of “story” and “re-story” as both transitive and intransitive verbs (30-31), is undoubtedly a gesture that emphasizes the collection’s spotlight on the power of (re)telling and (re)writing narrative(s).

The book is organized into three “movements,” that is, into the “narrative acts” of reflecting, reimagining, and rewriting, which constitute consecutive stages in the revision of how motherhood is traditionally constructed and narrated (242). The first stage, “Reflecting: A Way In,” evaluates outdated ontological frameworks and thus engages with the tension between mothering ideologies and the lived experiences of being a mother. It also features stories that deal with the weight of memory and the process of emplotment that attempts to make sense of (often) traumatic experiences. In “Motherhood In Medias Res,” BettyAnn Martin wonders whether fragments of memory, snippets of everyday experiences, small rituals, and her children’s personality quirks can come together to form a coherent narrative of the family’s past and present. The piece includes anecdotes, poems, and even a recipe, to accentuate the onslaught of events, both trivial and momentous, from which we struggle to create a story.

Comparably, “Slow Motherhood” by Marjorie Jolles reflects on how the meanings of time change and evolve in mothers’ lives and stories. Jolles criticizes our culture’s inhumane obsession with women’s bodies vis-à-vis time, evident in the notions of our ticking biological clocks or the surveillance of the pregnant body that measures gestational age in weeks and days.

Later, this concern with time evolves into expectations toward new mothers to provide enough “tummy time” or plan their children’s naptimes according to a rigid schedule, and finally culminates in the quantification of the child’s development, propagated by the education system, medicine, or child psychology. Meanwhile, maternal time—the personal, internal sense of time—is missing from these conversations, asserts Jolles. The slow parenting movement encourages (affluent) parents to reject the siren song to schedule as many activities into a child’s day as possible. Not only does Jolles suggest that the prescriptive nature of slow parenting puts even more pressure onto already over-burdened mothers, but she also argues that the call to create a slow-paced childhood full of magical adventures cements women in the private sphere and is only available to privileged families.

Lianne Leddy’s chapter continues the conversation along the lines of white privilege. Leddy, a scholar, mother, and a citizen of the Serpent River First Nation, experienced the clash between Indigenous mothering practices and Western cultural constructs of motherhood when her daughter spent more than two weeks in a neonatal intensive care unit. The harrowing hospital incidents she recounts describe experiences that are alienating at best and stem from white supremacy at worst. Leddy also analyzes the contradictory discourses of breastfeeding that at once position bottle feeding as a safer alternative and hail nursing mothers as morally superior to those who cannot or will not breastfeed. In another deeply personal chapter, Mandy Fessenden Brauer ponders ways to make sense of her mother’s tragic death that forces her to think about her mother’s life; she also wonders whether it is at all possible to recover from her traumatic childhood. As this section’s focus is on the past as a potent constituent of the present, Brauer attempts to “story” this childhood and to use writing as a means of coping with her memories and forgiving her mother for abusing her physically and emotionally.

The next stage, labeled “Reimagining: A Way Through,” considers ways of creating new meanings out of maternal experiences, and argues for thinking beyond accepted but not

necessarily productive forms of maternal and familial care. Its first chapter, “Raising Ourselves” by Cassandra Hall, attends to a mother’s own childhood trauma, thus continuing the thematic thread from the previous section. Hall asks to what extent it is possible to “restory” a painful past in order to be a caring mother. Envisioning modes of alternative, non-normative, that is, queered care, Hall calls for what she terms *femme care* that “does not rearticulate the violences of normativity” (103).

Daena Goldsmith investigates mommy blogs and their tendency to embrace or reject the ideology of intensive mothering, meaning the belief that the process of childrearing should be so child-centered as to efface the needs of the mother. Some blogs by mothers of autistic children—a term Goldsmith uses deliberately—reinforce the notion of the mother as the primary caregiver who must at all times feel responsible for her child’s development, while other blogs facilitate counternarratives that refuse to imagine the ideal mother as hyper-involved and ever-shameful. In “Distressed Caregivers or Criminals?,” Michelle Sadler and Alejandra Carreño argue that marginalized, non-white, and especially Indigenous women in Chile are framed as negligent mothers as soon as they show signs of non-compliance with mainstream society’s heightened expectations and often punitive regulations that supposedly put the interest of the child first, often misinterpreting or ignoring non-mainstream childrearing practices as well as the precarity of these women.

What follows is a traditional literary analysis both in its structure and argumentation: whereas Andrea O’Reilly examines Emma Donoghue’s novels, in which mothers fight heroically to find redemption for themselves and their children under extreme circumstances, Victoria Bailey enters into conversation with Virginia Woolf’s essays to reflect on the position of “mother-writers” (mothers who write professionally). She is sharp in her analysis of the pressures that make female writers with small children constantly struggle to find time and “a room of their own” while also performing the tasks of ideal motherhood and womanhood.

Hinda Mandell investigates the cultural validation of husbands who are reluctant to get involved in parenting, and playfully celebrates female solidarity since it might help the wives navigate their almost dysfunctional marriages.

The final stage, “Rewriting: A Way of Becoming,” considers how (grand)mothers can claim narrative authority and be transformed in the process. Its two chapters are deeply personal and are excruciating to read as their approach to life-altering tragedies stands in stark contrast with some of the earlier chapters’ occasionally lighter themes, flippant attitudes, sarcasm, or humor. Michelle Hughes Miller addresses the responsibilities of being a grandmother while facing a serious illness, and Michelann Parr recounts her difficult pregnancies and life with a chronically ill child. Both display gut-wrenching honesty in trying to do the impossible: they use writing as therapy, as an attempt to put into words the unspeakable pain they have had to learn to live with. They also reflect on stages and aspects of motherhood that are underrepresented both in motherhood studies in general and in this collection in particular. They open up a window through which the reader can get a good glimpse of what being a grandmother or the mother of teenage and adult children is like, what having to come to terms with a child’s death or dying, or their own declining health mean for women as parents and/or writers.

This excellent volume brings together contributors from different academic backgrounds and walks of life; therefore the thematic foci, styles, and structures of the chapters show a great diversity. What the individual chapters mean by “writing” also ranges from authoring fiction or nonfiction to keeping diaries or composing letters or even text messages. Significantly, in accordance with the publisher’s ethos of inclusion, the volume departs from the ills which tend to plague collections that are supposedly about mothers in general but in fact prioritize white, heteronormative, affluent, and able-bodied women: many of the authors of *Writing Mothers* stand up for—as indeed they themselves often are—gender non-conforming

caregivers, parents who live on the fringes of society, people with disabilities, and people from a range of economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Despite the rich diversity of content, the volume, with its carefully planned sequence of stories, never fails to give the reader the experience of an uninterrupted, smooth journey. It is highly recommended not only to those interested in gender studies or motherhood studies, but also to parents who want to make sense of their “new” experience through reading—and maybe ultimately writing—about motherhood.

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