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2013

Keeping Abreast of the Literature...

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Recommended Citation

Sobonya, Sarah, "Keeping Abreast of the Literature..." (2013). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 42.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/42>

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Neureuther Essay
February 28, 2013

Keeping Abreast of the Literature...

I collect books about breasts. In a way I suppose this puts me in the same category as men who frequent adult bookstores or buy magazines wrapped in brown paper at small-town gas stations, although my books tend to be hardbound and have few if any pictures. The specific focus of my collection is breastfeeding, a seemingly straightforward biological process that has taken on a variety of cultural meanings. I read about women breastfeeding in small Malian villages and in New York City apartments, women who buy pumps and nursing dresses and nipple creams and those who simply tie their infants to their backs with a length of cloth and stretch their breasts up to waiting mouths. I read about women who believe that their milk is tainted by chemicals or by their own anxiety, about the idealized breastfeeding Madonna and the practical realities of sore nipples and jobs that are incompatible with pumping breastmilk and strangers who will call out a breastfeeding mother for doing “that” in public. I read about the business of baby formulas, about the still-ongoing Nestle boycott and the laws that protect (and don’t protect) breastfeeding mothers. All of this is in my books, thick and serious tomes that live in piles on my desk far more often than on a bookshelf. I use them to write proposals and papers, and when deadlines loom I even dream about them, trying in my sleep to grasp the intricacies and patterns they propose.

And yet when I think about my “breast books”, the first ones to come to mind are not these somber academic manuscripts at all. Instead, my mind goes to classic such as *We Like to Nurse* (1994), Chia Martin’s friendly little paperback filled with colorful pictures of various mammals nursing their young, or Ashley Wolf’s *Only the Cat Saw* (1996), a children’s story that

closes with an image of a mother sitting in a rocking chair and nursing her baby, or *Will There Be a Lap for Me?* (Corey 1992), which tells the story of a little boy's worries as his mother's pregnancy progresses and ends with a lovely depiction of the new baby breastfeeding. These books have yet to find their way into any proposals or papers, and when I dream about them, I dream of my past as a young mother, juggling raising a baby on my own with earning an undergraduate degree. I remember packing these books in my diaper bag along with my college textbooks and reading them to my daughter while we waited in the WIC office, or the food stamps office, or in any of the many, many offices where we spent our time as I tried to keep us warm and fed and housed. "Look," I would say when she was a toddler, drawing her attention to the book in my hand with my finger, "There's a baby monkey! And a leopard! And what's that black and white animal? Yes, it's a panda! You're right! And they're all nursing, just like you do!" And I would cuddle her close and kiss the top of her head, sweet and soft and smelling faintly of baby shampoo on a good day, or of whatever she'd had for breakfast on a more chaotic day.

As far as I knew, no other mothers in our neighborhood breastfed their children. To our closest friends, breastfeeding was something that the grandmothers in Mexico had done, not modern young mothers in the nineties. They were carefully polite but I could tell it made them nervous, and none of the other toddlers my daughter saw were nursing. I sought out books to show her that she wasn't alone, that bottles were one way to feed babies, yes, but breasts were another, and that both were okay. Even after she weaned she would look for nursing mothers when we were out and call out delightedly when she spotted one, often just a little too loudly. And I would try to catch the woman's eye and smile, because I wished more people had smiled at me.

When I decided to breastfeed my daughter I had no role models: No one I knew breastfed her child, and my mother had breastfed neither my brother nor me. So I turned to books. Books told me breastfeeding was healthier for me and for my daughter, books explained how to fix a lazy latch and how to store pumped milk safely, and books let me know that other women were also curled up on their living room couches at midnight, nursing tiny babies while reading books propped up on pillows. Once I got past the title, La Leche League International's *The Womanly Art to Breastfeeding* (1981) was my bible and instruction manual all in one. Its down-home advice and friendly tone made reading it feel like having tea with a wise older woman who had successfully breastfed at least six children, although the earth-mother tone of the book led me to suspect that she would probably have lived on a commune while doing so, where she raised sheep and made her own yogurt. When Janet Tamaro's *So That's What They're for: Breastfeeding Basics* was published in 1998 I finally had a book for mothers like me, with crazy chaotic lives and children who didn't necessarily follow the templates set by pediatricians. Tamaro managed to be not only practical but also funny, and in her book I found a kindred spirit.

It has been many years since I sought solace in my breastfeeding manuals. My daughter moved on to books about beautiful princesses and then chapter books without pictures at all, and I returned to school to earn a graduate degree in anthropology. "The personal is political" was a feminist rallying cry during the seventies, but the personal can also be the academic, or at least an entry point. Returning to the topic breastfeeding as an academic scholar years after leaving it as a mother is a strange homecoming, in which the once familiar becomes strange and new, and then through study becomes again familiar, in a new and brighter way. At first my "breast books" were shelved in different rooms on different bookshelves, children's books in one space and academic ones in another, but recently I've put them all together. My research is enriched by

my own history, and seeing the juxtaposition of lactating pandas and lactating women on the shelf reminds me to see the people behind the studies as real mothers, struggling to nurture their babies the way I once did.

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