

## Book Reviews

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### **Between Interruptions: 30 Women Tell the Truth about Motherhood**

Cori Howard, ed.  
Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2007.

#### **Reviewed by Elizabeth Howells**

In the July-August 2012 issue of the *Atlantic*, Anne-Marie Slaughter's "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" engendered what the *Huffington Post* described as a "typhoon of debate" for exposing the myth of the work-life balance for women. In describing how "the feminist beliefs on which [she] had built [her] entire career were shifting under [her] feet," Slaughter concludes that it is dishonest and irresponsible for high-powered women to espouse that professional success can be achieved without great compromise or grave consequences. Her discussion explores the "unresolvable tensions between family and career" for women today and also suggests a paradigm shift as a solution to this profound dilemma. Cori Howard's *Between Interruptions: 30 Women Tell the Truth about Motherhood* forms part of this dialogue.

Organized in five parts, thirty women (many professional writers, editors, journalists, and media figures in Canada) describe their personal experiences with difficult realizations and tough choices as professionals, mothers, and women. Echoing Slaughter's concern, Howard questions: "How can you put yourself and your kids first at the same time? ...It's hard to be satisfied when you are brought to believe you will have a fabulous career, a fabulous family, a fabulous social life and a fabulous house, and when you suddenly find yourself with all those things, you realize it's not at all fabulous; that having those things mean losing yourself; that motherhood has much more inherent value and joy than we were ever taught to believe; that having a job and kids and

an 'equal' relationship or marriage is highly stressful, and not always possible" (17). Like Slaughter, Howard points to the mixed messages experienced by the current generation of women on the rise at work and in the trenches at home.

Through the lens of "Ambition," the writers in part one of the volume examine the impossible struggle for work-life balance for real-life mothers who are also aspiring foreign correspondents (Jiminez), stay-at-home writers (McKay), editors who become freelancers (Delap), first time sacrificers (Shaben), reformed jet-setters (Deol), and mothers who act like fathers of the previous generation (Olson). All of these essays (and those that follow) address not only ambition, but also the cost of that ambition and the psychic scars that result from the attempt to reconcile the divide between the separate public and private spheres. Jobs are quit, marriages are lost, and regrets are voiced in these narratives.

Under the heading "Anxiety," the writers in part two examine similar themes and, like Joanna Streetly in the opening selection, identify the transformation and loss of identity concomitant with new motherhood when a "radical new dimension of [one's] psyche" is discovered. Part of this anxiety, as the next two essays explore, is a function of finding a support structure in new friendships for these new selves (Renzetti and Onstad); another part is recognizing the new needs of these new selves, such as facing one's own separation anxiety (Zeppa), overcoming an onslaught of doubt and unrealistic expectations (Kelly), and rejecting universal myths and narratives about the experience of motherhood (Ryan).

The ambition and anxiety of the first two parts give rise to "Guilt" in part three. Lawrence becomes "unhinged" at not being the perfect breastfeeding mother; Bendall challenges perceptions of mothers with one child; Myers wrestles with the judgement of prior generations to find her own reconciliation with the nanny complex; Woodend finds release in running when her body eschews sex; while Mate's guilt about her parenting takes the form of railing at and resenting her husband.

The essays in part four, "Devotion," explore variations on the previous themes by exploring the paradoxes, ambiguities, and angst, as well as the joy, promise, and possibilities of birthing and parenting through adoption (Olding); the fertility and parenting struggles of a lesbian couple (Rose); the escape from reality in post-partum nesting (Moss); the mixed feelings about extended nursing (Guin); giving oneself over to motherhood (Kreviazuk); and recognizing and supporting the autistic child (Klar-Wolfond).

Finally, part five brings the themes together by exposing struggles through motherhood and cancer (Lynk); surviving in Greenland (Rice); comparing notes with one's mother (Kogawa and Kogawa-Canute); leaving home to

support one's children (Sampang); finding the story of one's journey (Mayor); and coming full circle to discover what is gained and what is sacrificed (Conlin).

Ultimately, this collection offers an alternative take on domestic narratives. In fact, editor Cori Howard teaches classes on the "momoir," and this collection offers excellent examples of the genre. Perhaps all domestic narratives need not conclude with weddings, but can begin with motherhood.

### **The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood**

Barbara Almond

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.

#### **Reviewed by Maya Bhavé**

In her latest book, *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*, author Barbara Almond daringly explores the taboo subject of maternal ambivalence. She probes the "maternal spectrum of disturbance" that ranges from "good-enough" mothering to "vampyric mothering" (in which a parent survives psychologically through a child) to the darkest side of motherhood, child murder.

Almond, a medical doctor who specializes in psychiatry, gleans her data from her own busy private practice. Her book is unique in its pairing of detailed clinical data with narrative frameworks from novels, including Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*. Such a methodology encourages readers to connect Almond's intimate qualitative data with literary interpretation. The author systematically deconstructs the mother-child relationship, exposing thoughts and beliefs that most women struggle to acknowledge, let alone articulate, given their tendency to focus on the "bright side of maternity," or what she calls "motherlove." Her hope is that by examining maternal ambivalence through a "psychoanalytic lens" women will come to see it as normal within the mothering process, and subsequently find ways to deal with feelings of ambivalence.

Almond does an excellent job of exposing the guilt, anxiety, and shame of mothers. She illuminates the concept of "monstrosity" within the mother-child relationship by dissecting complex layers of unexplored feelings that range from incessant worry about not being able to love a baby or having such