

BOOK REVIEWS

a pawn for political and economic interests, the differing expressions of the holiday vying for control over what made a model mother in the early twentieth century.

The Good Mother Myth

Avital Norman Nathum, ed.
Berkeley: Seal Press, 2014

REVIEWED BY MARGARET MCDONALD

The Good Mother Myth is an engaging five-part collection of the storied maternal experiences of thirty-six women, edited by Avital Norman Nathum with a forward by Christy Turlington Burns. This collection, bound by the common purpose of debunking the ‘good mother’ myth does so admirably with a strong sense of advocacy and purpose. Each short story paints an engaging self-portrait of women who see themselves as the antithesis of the ‘good mother’. Their vignettes reveal shortcomings, contradictions, and an active push back and liberation from the archetypes of mothering and motherhood. Each story is presented in an entertaining and at times sardonic writing style that captures these women’s poignant reflections on their struggles with motherhood (or in one case a move from fatherhood for a transgender parent) and their reflection on who they are and who they are to their children, friends, and families. In *The Good Mother Myth*, these women share their perspectives and experiences on career and family challenges, adoption, teen parenting, mental illness and parenting, anxiety, panic disorder, divorce, single parenting, only children, joint parenting, abuse, transgender parenting, gay marriage and parenting, adoption, abortion, fertility treatments, sexuality, maternal guilt, and more. The book is filled with vivid descriptions conveying the dilemmas, challenges and joys of mothering. Their stories rally against conventions and discuss their personal expectations and how these are at times set too high and at times used to motivate and improve their own lives and the lives of their children. Each story is also about alignment between views of the authors and the ethos of ‘mothering’ and being a ‘good mother’ within our society. The stories carry the common attribute of being well crafted, readable and both powerful and refreshingly honest. The thirty-six authors are drawn almost exclusively from American women who are active bloggers/writers/scholars/artists/filmmakers/feminists, accounting in part for the consistent, accessible voice and writing style and the clear focus on advocacy. Each author sets out to answer the question: “Who am I in relation

to the ‘good mother’ and how have I come to understand and embrace my difference?”

Despite being a highly readable contribution that articulates and embraces alternate ways of mothering to destabilize stereotypes, I was left at points wanting to go deeper into the stories and personal histories of the authors. Perhaps knowing a little more about each of the writers would give a better sense of the context, geographical locale, etc. that would deepen the connection of the reader to the author’s message. One way this may have been achieved would be to have the biographical portion of the book interwoven into each piece, or to provide fewer entries with greater depth around the backgrounds of each author’s life, although this would have been a difficult call given that each entry was very compelling. I also found *The Good Mother Myth* to be limited in its theoretical underpinning. Incorporating a theoretical framework of post-structuralist and post humanist perspectives to these powerful stories would draw this work closer to academic audiences and connect it to the larger issues of equity, the image of the mother and child, the role of technology, and marginalization of women and children. As an academic, I am left wanting a stronger link between these engaging commentaries and current theory to help us all move beyond description and into deeper epistemological ontological thinking around what it means to mother/love/nurture. Perhaps this is the job of the reader or other scholars who might take these stories as examples of American feminist advocacy and link them to the work of feminist post-structuralist theorists like Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, or Donna Haraway.

Mothers of Bedford

Jennifer McShane, Director

New York: Women Make Movies, 2011, DVD, 96 minutes

REVIEWED BY NAOMI M. MCPHERSON

Located in New York State, Bedford Hills is a maximum-security prison for women who are serving sentences from five years to life. The film notes that 80 percent of women incarcerated in the U.S. are mothers of children whose ages range from infancy to adolescent to young adult. Director McShane makes a powerful case for providing Children’s Center programs in all prisons for women. Filmed over a four-year period, McShane follows five women as their lives and their relationships with their children unfold within prison walls.