

## BOOK REVIEWS

The collection concludes on a hopeful note: “Bloggers willing to write with transparency about motherhood provide a place of community for readers; within that community, blogs are often consciousness-raising; and, when taken as a group, these blogs change our understandings of normative motherhood. The personal motherhood blog is political” (Wilkins 152). Many of the bloggers in this collection claim, in fact, to have been changed by mommyblogs: “If we can harness all of the interest in the mamasphere and direct it towards improving the world for ourselves and our children, blogging will become a truly radical act” (Lawrence 139).

This volume should be required reading for scholars of mothering and technology. It “deliberately resist[s] the notion that only traditional scholarly knowledge is valid” (35) and will appeal equally to mothers who blog, mothers who read blogs, and contemporary news writers who seek to understand the complexity of mothering in the twenty-first century.

## **Mother Knows Best: Talking Back to the “Experts”**

Jessica Nathanson and Laura Camille Tuley.  
Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2009.

### **Reviewed by Susan Logsdon-Conradsen**

In today’s world, where a Google search for books on “parenting advice” yields over 1,150 results, *Mother Knows Best: Talking Back to the “Experts”* is a refreshing and much-needed anthology. Editors Jessica Nathanson and Laura Camille Tuley boldly challenge the overwhelming amount of “expert” advice on mothering and its underlying assumption that without such advice mothers would fail due to incompetence. By tackling controversial topics in a thought-provoking manner, their book offers a “feminist, mother-centered critique” of “expert” maternal advice.

The book includes critical perspectives on expert advice in four major areas of motherhood. A feminist analysis of politics and power dynamics unifies the volume, which emphasizes the point that mother wisdom is inherently unique. Some entries are traditional narratives, others include poetry, and several offer first-person accounts. “A Mosaic of Pregnancy Expertise” by Amber Kinser, for example, is a brilliant juxtaposition of quotes from medical texts and from mothers which demonstrates the limited capacity of traditional medical discourse to capture the true language of pregnancy. Similarly, “Creative Gestation” by Laura Major uses mother’s voices via childbirth poetry to illustrate the reality of birth.

The first section, pregnancy and childbirth, addresses the controversial issue of the “social policing” of pregnant women; it cites light drinking to illustrate the ways in which the pregnant woman is required to give up her personhood and agency. The theme of the surveillance of pregnant women, as well as a discussion of the increasing medicalization and objectification of the pregnant body, is continued in later chapters.

The second section on breastfeeding is particularly strong and offers a rare exploration of the degree to which the “choice” to breastfeed (unanimously recommended by experts) is constrained by social and economic factors. This section does not dispute the nutritional benefits of breast milk, but it provides a much-needed feminist analysis of the impact of socio-demographics on those who breastfeed. Also discussed are the psychological and physical demands of exclusive breastfeeding and the contrasting public perception of breasts as both sexual—to be exposed—and maternal—to be hidden. In addition, breastfeeding is explored through the lens of intensive “good” mothering and is linked to gender inequity. Finally, the book asserts that breastfeeding yields its own knowledge which is empowering and fundamentally different from what is offered to women by “experts.”

Section three focuses on raising children through attachment parenting. The authors address several complex and controversial topics: the medical establishment and mandatory vaccinations; feminists’ struggle with the paradox of being drawn to attachment parenting—which values mothers—while recognizing its privileged nature, how it accommodates patriarchy, and fosters gender inequity; how the patriarchic work world constrains women’s ability to choose parenting practices; and the heterosexist underpinnings of attachment theory.

The final section on being “good” mothers examines the idealistic and unrealistic standards imposed on contemporary mothers, particularly within the intensive mothering movement. The first entry addresses racism and sexism, while the second entry vividly portrays the dark side of parenting and how “expert” advice can be useless while mother wisdom can often lead to unexplainable joy in the midst of anger and chaos. A wonderful example of making homemade “turkey cookies” to prove her maternal qualifications is given in the article by Angela Hattery to illustrate the gender differences in parenting expectations and the ways in which mothers are constantly being judged and pitted against each other. How mothers are challenging normative expectations is cited in reviews of the writings of Ariel Gore and the musings of Jessica Nathanson on the need for mothers to have creative and intellectual lives of their own.

Entries addressing the politics of homebirth and the increasing medicalization of childbirth would have been valuable additions to this volume. Further,

as the editors concede, a deeper examination of identity politics and how power and privilege influence mothers' understanding of and reaction to "expert" advice would be valuable in a future anthology.

Nonetheless, by the end of this anthology a reader feels empowered and compelled to critically question parenting "experts." *Mother Knows Best* refutes the patriarchal notion that mothers need authority figures to tell them how to raise their children. It urges mothers to listen to their own authentic and authoritative voices, which may in fact be shouting that conventional advice is flat out *wrong*.

## **Mothering Canada: Interdisciplinary Voices**

Shawna Geissler, Lynn Loutzenhiser, Jocelyn Praud, Leesa Streiler, eds.  
Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2010.

### **Reviewed by Serena Patterson**

*Mothering Canada* is promoted as a "multidisciplinary, bilingual anthology of mothering research in Canada that illustrates facets of Canadian mothering through different disciplinary lenses.... The anthology confirms that issues of mothering are prevalent in the Canadian psyche, and in much need of research, communication and change."

Especially moving are pieces on mothering in rural settings: Susan Picard's wrenching poem, "Severed," Patricia Miller-Schroeder's "Mothering Under Duress: Tuberculosis and Stigma in 1950s Rural Saskatchewan," Aboriginal Donna Lester-Smith's raw grief in "A Poem to my Mother," Elder Betty McKenna and her granddaughters' "Voices from the Moon Lodge." No less powerful are the difficult pieces by Pamela Downe, "Mothering in the Context of HIV/AIDS," and Jane Arsenault "Sick Mother, No Mother."

Several visual pieces are especially evocative: the touching image of Susan Shantz and her daughter at the beginning of *Bare Life* ("*technologies of tenderness*"), Margaret Bessai's hilarious *Self Portrait of the Artist in Her Studio*, Jewell Goodwin's haunting *Heimlich*, and Michelle Glennie's Madonna and Child, *Melanie and Zack*. Elizabeth MacKinzie is as adept with words as she is with images, and this allows her *Representing Maternal Ambivalence* to be entered by the reader who is brought by the images to those places that can elude the wordsmith.

This book does not offer a complete or unified portrait of mothering in Canada. Instead, its pieces are like shards of light, illuminating aspects of the mothering experience. It is a book of treasures, filled with pieces to ponder and to share with other readers.