

Sep-1988

Book Review: Her Mother's Daughter

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Recommended Citation

Holton, Susan A. (1988). Book Review: Her Mother's Daughter. *Bridgewater Review*, 6(1), 31.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol6/iss1/15

HER MOTHER'S DAUGHTER

by Marilyn French

Summit Books, New York
1987

*"Mother, what I feel for you
is more
and less
than love."*

from "Needlepoint" by Erica Jong

*"Oh the ties that bind mothers
and daughters together!
and the knots in the ties!
Sometimes our fingers meet
as we try to untangle
the cats cradle they make
Untangle one string and we twist another
Whose fault is it? Nobody's fault
The ties are there. It is their
nature to knot,
Our nature to struggle with them.
And often our fingers touch."*

"Dear Daughter" by Erica Jong

things better for the kids,
to preserve the children."

The lives of four mothers and daughters, Frances, Belle, Anastasia and Arden, are an interconnected web. The reader follows one strand, often not knowing for a time whose tale is being woven. And one realizes that the spider-mothers are both poisonous and vulnerable.

Anastasia moves from frightened, sheltered daughter to complex adolescent, to pregnant bride, to mother alone in suburbia as her husband "makes it." She falls into a career originally begun as a hobby to stave off boredom. It is at an interstice of that career that the story is told. As she recounts her life, she spirals from her own through those in her matrifocal heritage, picking up the meshed threads as she repeats the patterns, in her story and in her life, woven by those women before her.

Her Mother's Daughter is about a woman struggling to free herself and her daughters.

"What I wanted to escape from was not the past, but the pain, and for me they were identical, because by

the time I was sixteen, I knew my mother's story, and her mother's and I saw the bloody cord connecting us. I set my teeth to bite myself free. I would not take my place in the sacrificial ranks, would not live the way they did, would not pass on to my children — if indeed, I ever had any — a legacy of suffering selflessness. I would not repeat their experience. Above all, I would construct a new personality for myself that did not, like hers, absorb all the light and air surrounding it and turn it into darkness, into a hunched-over shadowy mass in a dim room, surrounded by the proofs of my enslavement."

Anastasia does escape — a little — does free herself and her guilt; if not totally severing the "bloody cord," at least unwrapping it from her neck so that she is free to breathe. She forges a career, and a life, for herself. Her awareness, though certainly nothing for headlines, allows her to be a more complete woman, to "have it all" — her career, her family, her lover. She comes

I needed these poems when I was trying to explain. I was nestled in a corner of a dark room, curled around the book; they were in another room drinking Chivas and recounting adolescent First Night adventures. One woman ventured to my corner, asking what engrossed me so. And my words could not detail the depth of the book nor the self-searching that it produced.

Then I found a passage by Anastasia, the main character of *Her Mother's Daughter*, as she talks about her own novel.

"I'm not writing a heroic tale, a tragedy or an epic. I'm trying to recount a life, my life, a woman's life — and lives are made up of small events that wear us down. It is not great crises that mark us, that make us what we are, but the small details of ordinary living that stiffen us into shape gradually."

Her Mother's Daughter is not an epic in the traditional sense; however in the exposition of the realities of being a woman, it is grand and heroic. It is heroic in its accounting of the sacrifices, of "the legacy of suffering selflessness." One mother sacrifices her children to an orphanage — temporarily — while she works to support them. Another sacrifices her career; another, her freedom as she marries in order to keep her children.

None of the lives in the book are "worthy of headlines"; that's what makes the story more captivating. The women are "plain, ordinary women."

"... for millennia women have dedicated their lives to saving the kids and we were continuing the tradition. Sweet, martyred and sighing; honest, angry and yelling; tender, tough and mean, whatever, however they acted, women gave up their lives, any hope of a life, to raise the kids, to make

to a place of maturity as she comes to terms with her life.

Marilyn French's prose employs magnificent metaphors and rich descriptions. She lets the reader see the "sacred in the ordinary, the everyday." Through her exposition, the generations of kitchens, the physical and emotional starvation, the suffocating need to please blend with one's own reality. The reader is transported to the dimly lit porch sheltered by screens while peering out on frightening reality.

As French exposes the "raw nerve" of "the primal, inescapable bond between mothers and daughters," the reader is impelled to explore her own legacy. I wanted to know more about the sacrifices of selfhood made by my mother . . . and my mother's mother . . . And I pledged to try, in my own awareness of the sacrifices I have made, not to "pass that cost onto the next generation."

Her Mother's Daughter begins with the tale of the "midge mother."

"Midge mothers do not lay eggs, they reproduce young from inside their bodies without benefit of clergy, state, or even any informal male assistance. And the baby develops inside the mother's body, not in a uterus, but in her tissues, and eventually, she fills her whole body, devouring it from the inside. When she is ready to be born, she breaks out of her mother/prison, leaving behind only a chitinous shell."

Her Mother's Daughter is a "subtly shaded, powerfully written" book for all women and men struggling to understand "the ties that bind mothers and daughters together . . . and the knots in the ties." ■

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