

its birth, and now feel like a proud father carrying it out to the world for all to see.

*Twice Alive* celebrates the majesty of birth and the developing child. Chapter by chapter, it travels with the mother through each trimester of pregnancy, the sometimes-experienced overdue phase, birth, and the child's first year. Each chapter begins by describing the particular gifts and challenges of each stage, followed by journal entries from the time when Osnes was pregnant with her daughter, Melisande, and ends with a suggested "to do" list that is both inspirational and practical, and includes designing your own birthing celebration, organizing meals to be brought after the birth, and forming a mothers' group. This is less a "how to" book than a companion that shares with its readers the intimate experience of mothering that is seldom talked about but is deeply felt. Not limited to a particular faith, this book roots itself in the soul-harvest that is reaped through the process of becoming a mother. Discoveries abound of the mother-like qualities of God and visa-versa.

As any mother can testify, new motherhood is extraordinary and, if attended to with a listening spirit, can be a time of great spiritual awakening for a woman. As Osnes says, a new mother "is in such close proximity to the ultimate creative spirit that she can feel its hot breath on the back of her neck." Osnes reminds us to prioritize the importance of early motherhood by pushing away the invasive business of the world, by lying on our backs in the grass with our babes on our chests, and by letting the warm blessings of the sun spill over us. I grew profoundly nostalgic while reading this book, particularly when I realized that the precious lessons and gifts of that insular time are no longer fresh in my memory. Osnes reminds me of how far I have traveled, what I have endured, and how much wiser I am now that I am a mother. As she explains: "Now you have twice a stake in the future. You have twice the reason to care about the legacy our generation is handing down to the next and twice the strength to make a difference. You have twice the accomplishments to cheer, twice the obstacles to conquer, twice the shoes to tie, twice the laughter and tears. If you feel twice as deeply and soar twice as high then, indeed, you must be twice alive."

## **A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother**

Rachel Cusk  
London: Fourth Estate, 2001

### **Reviewed by Emily Jeremiah**

Rachel Cusk brings a novelist's craft to bear on the experiences of pregnancy, birth, and parenting, and she does so with clarity and elegance. She writes

rhythmically and evocatively, deploying crisp and potent images to communicate complex emotional states. This is an appealing and important memoir.

*A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* is structured thematically and artfully. Anecdotes—the sharp, funny, uncomfortable accounts of an antenatal class and of a mother-and-toddler group—blend with reflections on literature, representation, and society. Cusk acknowledges her debt to Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, whose fluent meshing of the personal and political she echoes here.

The structure of the book enacts a central insight of Cusk's: that motherhood consigns one to a realm of shapelessness, timelessness, bordering that "world of milk and shadows and nothingness" (84) which is early infancy. In rejecting linearity, Cusk exposes maternity as a rich, cumulative process. She also, perhaps, suggests a Kristevan "semiotic": "In motherhood a woman exchanges her public significance for a range of private meanings, and like sounds outside a certain range they can be very difficult for other people to identify. If one listened with a different part of oneself, one would perhaps hear them" (3). Cusk's multi-layered, lyrical writing encourages the development of this "different" listening part of the self. In doing so, it offers a contrast to the conventional literature on birth to which Cusk as a mother is exposed. Her dry and witty examination reveals the limiting assumptions and the hectoring certainties on which such texts are founded.

Cusk points out that which is irreducible about birth and she poses a challenge to certain poststructuralist accounts of maternity that stress constructedness at the expense of materialism. Her notion of the body and mind intertwining during pregnancy recalls such thinkers as Elizabeth Grosz. She does not ignore bodiliness, but neither does she lapse into essentialism or biologism; she shows how maternal bodies are represented and managed by institutions and discourses.

Cusk also explores humorously the question of childcare, raising the awkward issues of class and economics it involves. She is perceptive, too, in her treatments of the public/private divide and of childcare as "isolating, frequently boring, relentlessly demanding and exhausting" (7). She is tough and unsentimental and, at the same time, frequently tender and moving.

Cusk acknowledges in her introduction that she has not written much about her particular circumstances, or the people around her, and this leads at times to a rather bare feeling, and the misleading impression that Cusk as mother inhabits a vacuum. There are brief glimpses of friends and family, but the relational aspect of mothering—which has become key in recent theoretical debates—is not examined. Cusk's subject position, as a heterosexual, white, middle-class woman with an apparently loving and supportive partner, is also not explicitly or extensively investigated. But despite these omissions, this remains a powerful and provocative book and a significant contribution to the literature of maternity. It is recommended reading.