

the first Canadian-born Black to graduate as a medical doctor from the University of Toronto, and her reunion with “lost” Black relations in the United States. This is a story of a mixed-descent Black family which exemplifies the ancestry of many who have “passed” for white.

Although she has known for thirty years of her multi-racial heritage, Slaney insists she is white and continues to “pass.” She tells of attending a workshop for women writers of colour where the presenter mistook her for white; henceforth she felt unaccepted by people of colour. At the same time, she recounts that white people repeatedly ask why she is dark-skinned. When she attributes her skin colour to a fallacious Spanish great-grandmother, she fails to recognize this rejection of her whiteness. In another instance, she visits a church of light-skinned Blacks in Detroit. When the congregants assume she is Black, she believes they are mistaken and clings steadfastly to her desire to be white, despite all indications to the contrary. At every juncture, Slaney fails to prove that she is not a light-skinned Black woman passing for white.

Slaney’s unwillingness to interrogate her own identity is disappointing. She wants to be proud of her ancestry but is unwilling to embrace her complex identity as a woman who is part Black. In fact, she claims the “one drop rule”—that Blackness is determined by one drop of Black blood—no longer exists. Regrettably, Slaney misses an important opportunity to celebrate her multi-cultural identity, and to serve as an example for others of mixed-racial heritage. It is especially unfortunate that she chooses instead to deny her Black heritage and proclaim her whiteness.

The Mommy Brain: How Motherhood Makes Us Smarter

Katherine Ellison.

Jackson, Tennessee: Basic Books, 2005.

Reviewed by Cyndi Brannen

In *The Mommy Brain: How Motherhood Makes Us Smarter*, Katherine Ellison provides neurological evidence to help women justify their decision to become a mother *and* demonstrates how mothers often realign their full-time career goals once their heightened intelligence takes over their previously selfish—and sluggish—brains. Ellison herself was once a globetrotting reporter who shifted her career focus in order to write from home while raising her children. The result, obviously, is *The Mommy Brain*. Given her position

of privilege—she can, after all, stay at home and write books—it is not surprising that she has a very positive outlook on motherhood. This perspective guides her review of studies on how motherhood enhances the brain.

She opens the book by exploring the pervasive belief that motherhood makes women stupid, that we become hyper-focused on our offspring to the detriment of our co-workers and non-parents everywhere. From this point forward, Ellison works diligently to counter the “placenta dementia” view. She does an excellent job of summarizing complex neurophysiological studies in ways that are accessible to others like her—women who are university educated and highly literate.

My criticism of the book lies in Ellison’s position that motherhood is universally beneficial for women. Yes, it is true that studies have found that mothers have higher levels of certain neurochemicals, namely oxytocin, and that there are increased areas of activity in mother’s brains in certain situations. However, most of these studies are based on comparative analyses with animal experiments. Arguably, human mothers have more complex environments to deal with than a rat mom faced with the challenge of retrieving a fruit loop for her offspring. Ellison almost entirely ignores the complexity of human motherhood throughout the book. For example, she ignores the differential impacts of breastfeeding and formula feeding on a mother’s hormone and stress levels (see Groer, 2005).

When she is not summarizing studies, Ellison uses profiles to support her view of the brain-boosting impact of motherhood. Almost exclusively, these stories focus on highly successful professional women, many of whom engaged in major career downsizing after having children. There are a couple of examples of less privileged women who demonstrate “mommy brain,” but there is no discussion at all of women who may not benefit from motherhood and the ensuing negative outcomes that they and their offspring face. Animal and human studies clearly indicate that maternal stress or social disadvantage, such as alcoholism or a lack of resources, can have negative neurophysiological impacts on both mother and child (for a review of prenatal stress impacts, see Ruiz and Avant, 2005).

Without a discussion of how socially and economically excluded mothers might be frustrated and stressed by mothering—and how these experiences can actually negate the neurological benefits of motherhood—*The Mommy Brain* stands as another well-written book helping middle-class women justify their decision to have children. However, Ellison does a solid job of summarizing the science behind her position, and I would highly recommend reading the book to gain insight into this fascinating area of research.