

## At Odds in the World *The Memoirs of Fredelle Bruser Maynard and Joyce Maynard*

The classic mentor narrative is hierarchical. This, as should be obvious, is a masculine narrative.... Recently, however, other models, other stories have emerged, in part because of the emergence of women's stories of mentorship, sometimes less fraught with the psychological complexities, the Oedipal complexities of male mentor narratives, sometimes not.

—David Lazar (1994: 25)

This paper examines the connection between mothering and mentoring in the work of writers Fredelle Bruser Maynard and daughter Joyce Maynard and argues, with Adrienne Rich, that “[f]ew women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough; the power of our mothers, whatever their love for us and their struggles on our behalf, is too restricted” (1995: 243). Not surprisingly, there are few examples of mothers and daughters who have shared the vocation of writing.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, there are fewer instances when mothers and daughters have made public—through writing—their personal relationships. The complex and dynamic bond between Fredelle Bruser Maynard and Joyce Maynard<sup>2</sup> can be studied through their respective memoirs. Fredelle is author of *Raisins and Almonds* (1972) and *The Tree of Life* (1988). Her first volume, published when her daughters were already young adults, remains strikingly mute on the experience of motherhood. Only after a space of 16 years, once they had become mothers themselves and were established in their respective careers, could Fredelle write frankly of herself as “a most imperfect mother” (1988: 237) to daughters Rona<sup>3</sup> and Joyce. Joyce is author of a number of works in which she reflects on her relationship with her parents. I am concerned chiefly with her memoir *At Home in the World* (1998), which obviously has led

to my title. Here, Joyce writes with a new, self-proclaimed honesty of the mother who “put the pen in my hand” (ix), whose drive and ambition made her into the writer she has become.

Many readers will recognize Joyce Maynard as the American teenager who in 1972 published an article in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “An 18-Year-Old Looks Back on Life.” From that auspicious beginning, Joyce went on to a career as writer and journalist.<sup>4</sup> Upon publication, the media made much of *At Home in the World* for its graphic description of Joyce’s brief and youthful liaison with the famously reclusive novelist J. D. Salinger. While some may be titillated by Joyce’s rendering of a relationship doomed to fail from the beginning, I read her memoir for what it tells of a fraught love for her mother and a unique literary apprenticeship. In all likelihood—and despite her own career as journalist (print and television) and author of books on childrearing<sup>5</sup>—Fredelle Bruser Maynard will be less familiar to readers than her famous daughter. By nature less of an exhibitionist than Joyce, Fredelle was less prolific and more discreet when writing of family relationships.

In this paper, I probe the problematic connection between two women, one of whom is mother and educator while the other is daughter and student. The painful tension that results from this blending of roles is palpable in the public writing of both women. Joyce values the skills her mother taught her, making her a precocious intellectual, while Fredelle encourages the dependence and love of her younger daughter. But a close study of the intimate revelations offered in their respective memoirs points to an unresolved tension between daughter and mother. The education of a daughter always is rife with difficulty, even more so when the mother hopes to educate her child in ways that will ensure her independence of mind and ability to earn a living. Joyce appreciates and practices the writing her mother so deliberately taught her, but she always yearns for more. This is perhaps an example of “double vision” as Rich describes the “girl-child” who, despite a true and irreplaceable connection between herself and her mother, longs “for a woman’s nurture, tenderness, and approval, a woman’s power exerted in our defense, a woman’s smell and touch and voice, a woman’s strong arms around us in moments of fear and pain” (1995: 224). The remarkable relationship between Fredelle and Joyce—possibly unique among female writers—reveals the personal cost to both parent and child when mother chooses to educate her daughter to compete and succeed “in the world.”

In this reading of the memoirs of Fredelle Bruser Maynard and Joyce Maynard I do not mean to conflate writerly selves with the actual women. Fredelle who speaks out from the pages of *The Tree of Life* and Joyce who narrates her personal journey in *At Home in the World* are separate from the real Fredelle and Joyce, writerly constructs that bear resemblance to their actual creators but remain a part from them at the same time. This paper focuses on the public record—available in each writer’s memoir—of otherwise private relationships.

Toward the end of *The Tree of Life*, Fredelle admits “I wanted my daughters to be successful writers and—successfully, but at some cost—pushed them towards that goal” (241). Indeed, fearing her daughters’ failures would become her own (1988: 241), Fredelle was, by her own admission, a strict taskmaster: “When I was a young mother, I knew all about the dangers of spoiling a child... So I made, and tried to keep, a lot of rules. I ran a tight ship” (1988: 241). Early in her own memoir, Joyce corroborates this image of a mother who carefully coached her children to write: “Before we knew how to form alphabet letters ourselves, we gave dictation. We spoke; our mother wrote down what we said and told us how to make it better. Soon enough, she gave us a typewriter” (1998: 39).

Parent and child understood early on that their relationship combined traditional nurturing with practical mentoring. While she attended to her daughter’s physical and emotional needs, Fredelle fostered a facility with language that could lead Joyce to a career as writer. Fredelle’s overweening desire for her daughter’s success was rooted partly in professional and personal frustration. As Rishma Dunlop has noted, “The roles of intellectual women have an uneasy history, played out against prescribed social relations. For women committed to intellectual work, achieving coherence with their social lives is difficult and contradictory” (1998: 115). Despite her own brilliance—she earned a Ph.D. from Radcliffe and graduated summa cum laude—Fredelle was refused a position in the Department of English at the University of New Hampshire, where her husband taught. In the 1950s, the University’s strict policy against hiring faculty wives launched Fredelle on her successful career as writer and journalist. Throughout her life, however, she railed against the academic hiring of men whose qualifications and intelligence were inferior to her own.

Moreover, marriage to painter Max Maynard always was difficult. An alcoholic whose behaviour was erratic and irresponsible, he grew increasingly bitter and depressed over the years. Money was ever in short supply, since Max had earned a BA and throughout his university career would never receive adequate remuneration to support his family. Fredelle later described them as an “odd pair” (1988: 29) whose marriage lasted 25 years.

For Fredelle “a child represents a second chance at being a perfect person. Inevitably, there’s pressure on the child to go farther, achieve more” (1988: 241). Unaware until much later of her motivation – since mothers identify more strongly with daughters than sons, “seeing them more as extensions of themselves, ... Ego boundaries between mothers and daughters are more fluid, more undefined” (Hirsch, 1990: 183)—Fredelle encouraged her daughters to become writers, partly because writing was a skill she herself had found useful in establishing an alternate career, and because she and Max took “sensual pleasure” in language: “For them, language was music. They loved the sound of the human voice delivering the best the English language had to offer” (Maynard, J., 1998: 13).

Although Fredelle does not describe her teaching methods, Joyce does:

... in a circle of shabby furniture, surrounded by my father's paintings, my sister and I read our manuscripts aloud for our parents. With file cards and yellow legal pads in hand, they take notes and analyze, one line at a time, every metaphor and choice of adjective. They talk about the rhythm of our sentences, the syntax, the punctuation. My father is a careful and demanding editor, but my mother's criticism is the most exacting. Her instruction is incomparable ... (1998: 39-40)

Unlike Joyce, who casts Fredelle in the dual roles of teacher and nurturer to show how her mother's insistence on mentoring shaped their love, Fredelle focuses on her emotional relationship with her daughter. In her memoir, Fredelle does not distinguish between the practical and emotional sides of mothering and soon appropriates her daughter's pain as her own (1988: 163).

In an important chapter entitled "Two Daughters," Fredelle explores her connections with Rona and Joyce. Written in the form of two letters, Fredelle's most intimate voice is heard here. For her daughters she summons her "singing voice. It is the gift of life—of my rich lonely childhood, a marriage which forced me to confront my deepest feelings, *my suffering love for my children*, my experiences of failure" (1988: 134, [italics mine]). She writes to Joyce:

Only in these last years have I begun to understand how I trained you to need me, because I needed you. Second child, second daughter, you were born when I had no more hopes for my marriage ... I loved you with a passion I did not then see as dangerous. You were the child who would redeem a disastrous marriage, gratify my parents, enrich and justify my life. (1988: 159-60)

Throughout *The Tree of Life* Fredelle seeks to be "truer" (xxi) to life and experience than she had been earlier in *Raisins and Almonds*, which she had come to regard as a sunnier, less authentic memoir (1988: xxi). A commitment to honesty—despite its attendant pain—is palpable in her words to Joyce. Fredelle writes as the woman who has given Joyce life, has mothered her and prepared her for the writing life. Moreover, she writes as a woman bequeathing her "singing voice" (1988: 134) to the daughter she loves and on whom she has placed "her most ambitious expectations" (Maynard J., 1998: 39).

In her letter to Joyce, Fredelle conflates facets of herself—mother, mentor, and writer—to interpret their abiding connection. A willing "rescuer" (1988: 166), Fredelle has required that Joyce function as "rescuer" (1988: 166), poised to summon mother at will. Writing to her daughter in *The Tree of Life*, Fredelle comes to recognize the folly and cost of such interdependence and offers Joyce liberation. She writes with courage as she examines the ties that have bound her and Joyce, but does not relinquish those ties. Instead, she embraces a view of

herself as imperfect mother and mentor and offers that self to her daughter.

In *At Home in the World* Joyce is determined “to tell the story of a real woman with all her flaws” (3). Like Fredelle—whose second volume of tough and honest (1988: xxi) memoirs appeared after her parents and ex-husband had died—Joyce’s commitment to a true account of herself is possible only after the death of her parents. And, like Fredelle, in her latest work Joyce revisits and revises previous representations of people and events. In a prefatory note, she claims: “As painful as parts of this story may be, particularly to people who knew and loved my parents, I believe my mother and father would understand and even celebrate my having found, at last, the freedom to write as I do now” (1998: xiv). Joyce’s narrative is framed by her parents, whom she invokes as spiritual overseers of her memoir. As Fredelle did earlier, Joyce acknowledges the blurring of boundaries between herself and her parents, a lifelong problem between “my mother and me ... [whose] view of all things ... has always been mine” (1998: 6, 113).

Joyce also inherited her mother’s drive and ambition. From the age of 12, she was “consumed with a desire to win contests, earn money, earn recognition from the world and, above all, from my parents” (1998: 41-42). Fredelle encouraged Joyce, much as her own mother fostered her development. Fredelle and Joyce describe Rona Bruser as having sought professional success for her two daughters. In spite of a traditional Jewish reverence for men—which led her to accept an impoverished life as wife to a loving but unsuccessful shopkeeper in a series of small Saskatchewan towns—she was “a woman of fierce ambition and pride in her children” (1998: 12). At a time when Jewish girls were raised to be wives and mothers, Rona Bruser—perhaps by default, since she had no sons of her own “launched Freidele [later Fredelle] in the study of elocution, the oral presentation of poetry” (1998: 12). Fredelle’s father would submit her poetry to local newspapers for publication. When later she went on to win scholarships that took her to the University of Manitoba, the University of Toronto, and Radcliffe, both parents knew education would lead Fredelle away from her roots, since few Jewish men of the time would marry a woman with a doctorate. Despite her anxiety, however, Rona Bruser celebrated her daughter’s academic achievement.

Joyce basked in similar encouragement. As a young adolescent, she joined her mother’s meetings with students:

I am so proud of my glorious, brilliant, funny, outrageous mother. I take in every word she tells her students about writing. In between these classes, I sit beside my mother on our couch when she’s marking student papers, and read all her comments in the margins. ...

By the time I’m twelve or thirteen, I’ve heard enough of my mother’s comments that when one of her students reads a paper, I know just what she’ll say. Everytime I sit down to write, I hear her voice. (1998: 20-21)

In addition to practical advice, Fredelle imparts her view of writing as valuable. The belief she shares with her daughter—that writing is one of life’s most significant undertakings—is an inestimable gift meant to celebrate Joyce’s abilities and enhance her confidence.

In fact, Joyce’s success at age 18 launched her career as writer. Her achievement was coloured, however, by ambivalent feelings: “With the publication of this article, I have not simply accomplished something for my own self. I have vindicated the sacrifices and the terrible disappointments my parents have suffered over the years” (1998: 69). Ironically, Fredelle’s similar need to please her parents also took the form of academic success, publications, later marriage and children. Evidently, Joyce internalized Fredelle’s belief that achievement belonged as much to her parents as herself.

Joyce was not alone in her ambivalence. As her daughter surpassed her greatest hopes, Fredelle felt shocked. A week following the *New York Times* publication, Fredelle wrote to Joyce who was a freshman at Yale University:

I have thought of you a great deal this past week, with a mixture of feelings you can imagine: pride, love, anxiety, joy, excitement, apprehension. Also a certain startlement. I never doubted that you would achieve brilliant success, most probably in writing. I just didn’t think it would happen so suddenly or so soon, and with such dramatic reverberations. Did we cast you on the tide? Were you ready to be cast? Where will the current carry you? I don’t know, but the tide is moving.... (1998: 77)

Having schooled her from a young age, Fredelle took pleasure in Joyce’s accomplishment. But daughter and mother both were unnerved by rapid success and the publicity it generated. The tone of Fredelle’s letter suggests a mother who feels abandoned by the daughter she always has loved and needed, as she would admit later in *The Tree of Life*. Joyce, on the other hand, felt torn: proud but uncertain, confident but cautious. At the time of publication, she was a teenager who had been raised “deeply isolated in the insular world” (1998: 129) of family. In all likelihood, mother and daughter felt threatened by a success that soon would weaken the insularity and protection of family life.

Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto describe the psychological dyad of the mother and child as

a unique and potent relationship.... It explains why mothers (even in their oppression by patriarchy) are so all-powerful in relation to their children, and why the mother-child relation is likely to be so bound up with powerful feelings. Mother and child are on a psychological desert island ... each is continually impinging and intruding on the other. (1982: 63)

Actually, “An 18-Year-Old Looks Back on Life” marked a division in the “unique and potent” relationship between Fredelle and Joyce. Soon they ceased to be partners: Fredelle’s own writing career was established and Joyce began to consult with editors on writing projects. Moreover, Joyce was no longer tied to her bedroom at home in Durham, New Hampshire, once the only place she could settle herself to write. In fact, when given the assignment by the *New York Times*, she had returned home from Yale since:

All my life I have associated writing with my parents’ house. Every entry I ever produced for the *Scholastic Magazine* contest was produced in my bedroom. Every time I finished writing something there, I would call to my parents. My father would make tea and my mother would set homemade cookies on a plate and wheel a tea cart with the tea and cookies and cups into our living room. I would read out loud to them ... Finally they both agreed I had done my best, and my mother would type my work and mail it to the contest.

When I learn that I have an assignment from *The New York Times*, I know that to be successful, I have to go back home to write. (1998: 63)

Soon, however, Joyce was writing magazine articles in a dormitory room at Yale and later in an apartment in New York. Less dependent on her mother for practical assistance, she nonetheless was bound to her emotionally. When, for example, her relationship ended with J. D. Salinger—his hypocrisy and caustic assessment of her parents confused and later angered Joyce—she sought the solace of Fredelle. If she no longer required her mother’s advice on writing—how to write crisp, limpid prose; how to pitch ideas to editors; how to write for particular audiences—she still needed her mother “with the groping passion of that little girl lost” (Rich, 1995: 225).

Joyce’s adult relationship with Fredelle was “strained” (1998: 226), partly because as “life increasingly resembles my mother’s, I find myself resenting her so deeply that it’s now almost impossible for us to be together” (1998: 227). Joyce’s own unhappy marriage and financial difficulties recalled those endured by Fredelle. By 1977, at the age of 24, Joyce was married and soon pregnant with a daughter (born 1978). She and her husband, Steve Bethel, subsequently had two sons (born 1981 and 1984 respectively), as they struggled to maintain their household on her earnings as a writer and his as a painter. On her part, Fredelle was perplexed by her adult daughter and deliberately distanced herself from Joyce (1998: 251).

The confusion between parent and child had its roots in a relationship that early on melded mothering and mentoring. As the needs of mentor-protégée receded with maturity, the mother-daughter bond was altered irrevocably. Moreover, Fredelle came to relish the new independence of late middle age—she was now a practiced writer and content in a new relationship—while Joyce

came to reject “the teacher” and idealize “the mother,” a fantasy of maternal perfection that “has led to the cultural oppression of women in the interest of a child whose needs are also fantasied” (Chodorow and Contratto, 1982: 73). As Marianne Hirsch explains,

The adult woman who is mother continues to exist only in relation to her child, never as a subject in her own right. And in her maternal function, she remains an object, always distanced, always idealized or denigrated, always mystified, always represented through the small child’s point of view. (1989: 167)

In fact, the relationship between mother and adult daughter did not end once Joyce was launched in her own career. Rather, it transmuted into a connection based on similar personal circumstances. Ironically, but not surprisingly, when they reached an impasse in their love, Fredelle and Joyce sought to resolve their difficulties through writing.

Within the culture of patriarchy, it is extremely difficult to be either mother/mentor or daughter/protégée. Patriarchy requires and endorses passive mothering and continues to undermine a mother’s desire for her daughter’s autonomy. Herein lies the dilemma of a mother who would offer her daughter a practical education and a daughter who looks to her mother for unconditional and unending love. In New Hampshire of the 1950s, Fredelle Bruser Maynard—differentiated from the community of women by citizenship, religion, and education—undertook what Rich terms “courageous mothering” (1995: 246) which required “a strong sense of *self*-nurture in the mother” (1995: 245) herself. Fredelle’s will to challenge convention—on her own behalf and that of her daughters—showed her remarkable ability and fortitude.

Rich elaborates: “The most important thing one woman can do for another is illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means . . . trying to expand the limits of her life. *To refuse to be a victim*; and then to go on from there” (1995: 246). When the academy refused her entry, Fredelle sought professional opportunities elsewhere. Although eminently suited to a life of scholarship, she applied her hard-won skills to magazine writing and eventually became a respected journalist. Her volumes of memoirs attest to her wisdom and creativity, gifts that sustained her throughout life. Under difficult personal circumstances, she first eked out and later earned a living that helped support her family. Her achievement was and remains significant.

By her own account, Joyce adored her mother “fiercely and deeply” (1998: xiv), took pride in her brilliance and professional accomplishments. Their adult relationship was difficult, however, when Joyce could not acknowledge that daughters “need mothers who want their own freedom and ours” (Rich, 1995: 247). In *At Home in the World*, Joyce regrets that her early work resonates with Fredelle’s voice while I read that blending of writerly voices as a startling success for a young woman. Joyce, in fact, had the benefit of a mother who struggled



to articulate her own voice—and who sought to make that same struggle less arduous for her daughter. For

[t]he quality of the mother's life—however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create liveable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist. (Rich, 1995: 247)

Fredelle's "bequest" is Joyce's writerly voice, rich and sonorous with knowledge and experience of the past. That mother and daughter describe a troubled, often painful relationship is not surprising, given the gargantuan task Fredelle undertook in spite of patriarchal resistance to worldly education for girls. Fredelle came to accept the limitations of her role as mother and mentor and in *The Tree of Life* wrote to free her daughter from the bind of their relationship. Joyce, too, came to see that her life's work—writing—was a realization of her mother's wishes for her and a testimony to their love. If she had been raised differently, she admits in *At Home in the World*, "I might not possess the tools to tell this story" (xiv).

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<sup>1</sup>Mothers and daughters who are both writers include Anita Desai and Kiran Desai; Florence Randal Livesay and Dorothy Livesay; Linda Spalding and Esta Spalding; Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley.

<sup>2</sup>For the sake of clarity, I refer simply to Fredelle and Joyce throughout this paper.

<sup>3</sup>Rona Maynard is editor of *Chatelaine*, a magazine for Canadian women.

<sup>4</sup>Joyce Maynard's publications include *Looking Back: A Chronicle of Growing Up Old in the Sixties* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973); *Baby Love* (New York: Knopf, 1981); *Domestic Affairs: Enduring the Pleasures of Motherhood and Family Life* (New York: Time Books, 1987); *To Die For* (New York: Dutton, 1992); *Where Love Goes* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995); and *At Home in the World: A Memoir* (New York: Picador, 1998).

<sup>5</sup>Fredelle Bruser Maynard's publications include *Raisins and Almonds* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972); *Guiding Your Child to a More Creative Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973); *The Child Care Crisis: The Real Costs of Day Care for You—and Your Child* (Markham, ON: Viking Penguin, 1985); and *The Tree of Life* (Markham, ON: Viking Penguin, 1988).

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