

# Book Reviews

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## ***Things My Mother Told Me***

Gillan, Maria Mazziotti.  
Toronto: Guernica, 1999.

### **Reviewed by Melissa Hamilton Hayes**

Gillan begins this collection of narrative poems with something her mother told her: “When you do something with your hands . . . you have to put your love into it, and then, it will be sacred. See?” (7). In fact, this is what Gillan does in her poetry. Poetry may not be as tangible as her mother’s homemade bread or summer vegetable garden, but Gillan infuses her poems with love – love for each word, each turned phrase, each recollection of a dying mother or a newborn baby—to create something sacred.

Although the title implies a focus on her mother and their relationship, Gillan’s poems are wide ranging in subject. This collection is about strained relationships, superstition, love, food, husbands, wives, and the pain of growing up smart and shy in a world that values outgoing girls with blond ponytails. In fact, a large part of this book is about growing up as an Italian Catholic girl in Paterson, New Jersey. We learn about Gillan’s immigrant roots and Catholic heritage, her youth and emergence into womanhood.

This collection also concerns Gillan’s life as a mother and recalls experiences both rewarding and heartbreaking. She writes of her strong daughter and her granddaughter: “you are sharp and smart, all energy and pepper, / a quicksilver girl with an open heart” (88). In “My Son Tells Me Not to Wear

Poet's Clothes" she expresses her frustration and anxiety as a mother: "I cannot / find a way to make him understand that I love him ... it's as though I am chasing / him down a path but he's always faster than me" (10).

Her own mother's life and words, however, serve as framework for Gillan's volume. The poems tenderly recount her mother's life, the gifts she gave and what she taught her daughter: "treasure my children and keep them close . . . I know what my mother meant when she told me my children were the only treasure I'd ever need" (95). Early poems in the collection recount her mother's prolonged illness and eventual death. In these powerful poems, Gillan uses lyrical free verse to capture the images and feeling of love between mother and daughter, a daughter's pain in letting go of a dying mother. In "Brushing My Mother's Hair," "Singing to My Mother," and "My Mother's Garden II," Gillan captures the physicality and tenderness of care between an aging mother and her grown daughter and the visceral quality of their attachment. This is a moving collection that reveals Gillan as both mother and child.

### ***Double Jeopardy: Motherwork and the Law***

Turnbull, Lorna A.  
Toronto: Sumach Press, 2001.

#### **Reviewed by Fiona Joy Green**

In commonplace language, Lorna Turnbull—Assistant Professor of Law, feminist, wife, and mother of three children—critiques North American law for placing women in double jeopardy. Through the effective use of statistics and specific decisions made by provincial courts of appeal and the Supreme Court of Canada, she shows how the structure and practice of Canadian law and, to a lesser extent, American law takes power away from women. Her impressive study of legal cases regarding pregnancy, breastfeeding, and taxation demonstrates how the subordination of mothers is initiated and perpetuated by the law.

Chapter one describes how the law fails to provide adequate support for those in caregiving roles. Chapter two defines law, its hierarchal structure and adversarial system, and the various ways feminist thinkers have challenged the supposed separation of law from the political sphere. Chapter three explores how the law embraces the social characterization of "good" and "bad" mothers and is not responsive to mothers' lived experiences. Focusing on the Canadian income-tax system, Turnbull provides specific examples of double jeopardy for mothers who are employed and unemployed.

Chapter four explores how legal and cultural attitudes towards pregnancy