

In *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection*, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy sets out an expansive account of the current state of research in anthropology, psychology, and sociobiology, about why mothers do what they do. Studies in the behaviour and biochemistry of both humans and animals, as well as historical assessments of mothering behaviour in distinctive social and cultural situations, point to a fresh understanding of the state of motherhood. Blaffer Hrdy goes one step further and examines new evidence surrounding the behaviour of infants that suggests that the child actually plays a significant role in molding the mother's actions to suit its needs. In effect, "Babies are geared to making sure that maternal care is forthcoming and ongoing" (536). Importantly, babies appear, in the long run, to be more interested in the quality of the care they receive than they are in who provides it. Blaffer Hrdy writes extensively about the crucial role of "alloparents," individuals other than the child's parents who provide care. In modern human society we call these individuals daycare workers, babysitters, grandparents, and so forth. It is refreshing to see, however, that alloparenting is not an exclusively human phenomenon. She cites primate studies in which data from groups, who practiced infant sharing, are compared with groups who did not. "Babies born to infant-sharers grow at a faster rate, and ... their mothers give birth again after much shorter intervals without compromising their own health or infant survival. Crudely put, mothers with good daycare had the highest fertility rates" (448).

Mother Nature is a dense, academic work which covers a vast array of research in careful, footnoted prose. At the same time, however, Blaffer Hrdy succeeds in presenting a readable text that is comfortably accessible to the layperson, and often highly entertaining. Blaffer Hrdy models capably the feminist academic paradigm of placing the person of the researcher visibly in the work without compromising the scientific validity of the work. Sometimes reading a book will make me want to teach a course in which I could use it as a textbook. Other times reading a book will make me want to rush out and buy more copies so I can give them to friends for their reading enjoyment. *Mother Nature* is the first book that has ever made me want to do both.

Childhood in America

Paula S. Fass and Mary Ann Mason, editors
New York: New York University Press, 2000

Reviewed by Sarah V. Young

The editors of the text, *Childhood in America*, have made a superb contribution to the area of children's history, a field of research which generally has been

neglected. Paula S. Fass and Mary Ann Mason draw upon widely diverse historical, philosophical, legal, and literary sources for this catholic anthology (of 724 pages), and they are to be commended for their ambitious effort. The book is divided into eleven parts: childbirth and infancy; boys and girls; adolescence and youth; discipline; working children; learning; children without parents; the vulnerable child; the child and the state; sexuality; and the child's world.

The authors have chosen to simplify their perspectives rather than dazzle us with jargon and lengthy analyses. Consequently, the text is fun to explore and full of surprises. From one page to the next, we encounter fictional children, narratives by children about their lives, childrearing advice from European and American sages, salient legal and social documents, and excerpts from classic treatises on children and the family. Because of its readability and clarity, the book will be of interest to laypersons as well as to those who teach and study child welfare, family issues, social policy, human growth and development, and social history.

People who yearn for the "good ole days" probably will find many of the excerpts in this text to be unsettling. The authors show that historically children were valued largely for their economic contributions, often subjected to conditions of work and servitude that were appalling. By the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, children had become emotional assets to their families. More recently, the authors contend, children provide primary long-term emotional ties for many adults. As noted in the introduction to this text, asking where we have been can help us to know more about where we are going in terms of the scope, meaning, and value of childhood.

As a social work educator, I found the sections on working children; children without parents; the vulnerable child; and the child and the state to be particularly compelling. I would use the selected documents and personal accounts in these sections as source material for further research and also as timely topics for generating class discussions. Finally, the historical perspectives of this text should be required reading for those involved in the development of family and child services. As Mary Ann Mason notes, with the growth of the State's involvement in protecting children, we might even see more progress toward the notion of legal rights for children apart from those of their parents—a move that, for many children, could contribute to a more secure childhood in America.