

Our Families, Our Values: Snapshots of Queer Kinship

Robert E. Goss and Amy Adams Squire Strongheart, Eds.
New York: Harrington Park Press, 1997

Reviewed by Nicole Willey

If only this book were in the library of every so-called “family value” proponent. With 20 articles in sections titled “Procreative Privilege,” “Families of Choice,” and “Relationships: Trials and Tribulations,” this anthology puts homophobic lawmakers and Biblical scholars to shame. The articles, often personal and usually academic (if not in tone, in research), blend experience and scholarship to raise important questions that challenge anyone who has a stake in the types of relationships in which all humans are enmeshed.

The “Lavendar Tribe,” here defined as “transgendered, transexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay, a person with AIDS or one who loves any of us,” and their kinship/friendship/family ties are the basis for this study. The “Tribe” is put forth as a “people” with common interests and bonds, and then deconstructed by questioning of how such a diverse group could possibly share (or would want to share) common values. While this question is interesting, and perhaps unsolvable, as many show (see Nancy Wilson and Victoria Kolakowski as two examples of a direct answer), basic human rights are at issue. To my mind, the more interesting challenge that this collection poses is why would the “Tribe” want “family” as it is currently defined by a patriarchal and heterosexual culture?

The right to and desire for kinship is never a question. Rather, it is the structure and naming of the “family” that many writers in this anthology question. Robert Goss makes an extensive argument for “procreativity” as a right that all people have. He also challenges us not to assimilate the nuclear model of family, but to “queer” the idea of family. Brad Wishon believes that queer relationships and families are teaching the way of liberation to all couples, creating a paradigm that can give liberation to heterosexual couples as well. Mary Hunt questions the very idea of couples, making it clear that until any family of choice is accepted (regardless of number of adults and sexual connections) no one is safe from the tyranny of “normative sexuality.” She believes that any partnership including two adults, same-sex or not, can become another version of the heterosexual model, further entrenching patriarchal patterns. Questions of assimilation to patriarchal structures are further complicated by issues of race and AIDS (see especially Mary Foulke, Renee Hill, Richard Hardy, and Jane Spahr).

The real question for this reader, addressed only in passing, is why is the Judeo-Christian Bible and its traditions are the main force these authors are deconstructing, thereby proclaiming it as normative? True, Buddhism is

engaged by Michael Sweet, and Joseph Kramer discusses alternate rituals for gay men, but the Bible is the main rallying force behind these essays. As Mona West explains in the opening to her essay: “Whether or not we consider ourselves religious, and whether or not we consider the Bible to be the inspired word of God, our reality is that the Bible is used against the Queer community to condemn our lifestyles, exclude us from religious communities, perpetuate violence against us, and deny our basic human rights” (51). Point taken, but the Judeo-Christian focus of this book may alienate some readers. On the other hand, these scholars collective re-reading of the Bible may be appreciated.

Overall, any problems with individual arguments are counteracted by other essays, and this is what makes an anthology of this kind work. The editors, Goss and Amy Adams Squire Strongheart, have carefully included a wide variety of perspectives that the reader will find refreshing and informative.

Thinking About the Baby: Gender and Transitions into Parenthood

Susan Walzer
Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998

Reviewed by Wendy Faith

This bracingly incisive book focuses a sociological lens on the gender polarization between heterosexual spouses that coincides in American culture with the onset of parenting. Through a study of interview data from fifty new mothers and fathers, Susan Walzer reveals that parents unwittingly replicate Victorian-based images of motherhood and fatherhood that persist in the tacit sentiments of older family members, the clichéd messages of television programs, and the patent advice of baby-care “experts.” Reinforced by gendered wage disparity, these images promote the idea that child-rearing is the primary responsibility of mothers while only an auxiliary activity of fathers.

By accentuating the numerous social pressures that help to shape parental consciousness, Walzer smartly debunks the humanistic assumption that maternal and paternal divisions of labour are reasonably negotiated between self-determining partners. She contrarily maintains that parents—“driven by complex feelings of accountability, anxiety, insecurity, and entitlement”—rationalize the preexistent “models of mothers as ever-present nurturers and of fathers as providers and part-time playmates.” Especially commendable is her analysis of these roles, which circumvents the tiresome nature versus nurture polemic. While accepting in principle the claim that gestational, hormonal, and