

seat of the family sedan, a seminal event well-planned and gone amiss, our heroine, M, continues to stray from the paved, walled road of conformity laid out for her. True to her unconventional introduction to the world, M strives to follow her own inner voice throughout childhood. The dialogue with herself about when to acquiesce to parental commands and when not to holds the promise of strife to follow.

The use of split text to add power to the inner and outer dialogue in the chapter on her oldest sister is an exquisite example of post modernist style and is evocative of an era that demanded conformity, control, and obedience of daughters and wives. M never quite lives up to expectations; yet there are small moments of epiphany when we glimpse the promise of a future not predicated by past failures. Mother is a 50s type, obsessive cleaner of a house, a woman who can only control the externality of experience. And this is all the independence that she will permit herself and her daughters.

M's first burst of freedom is achieved through learning to ride horses from a woman who speaks in metaphor. Eventually she loses her favourite mount and stops riding. Young girls must not seek freedom and independence through riding. They must not have crotches.

The underlying theme of rebellion and the search for freedom from constraints imposed from above is echoed and re-echoed through M's narratives of small acts of defiance, culminating in her sexual liaisons with inappropriate father figures in college. She is seduced into the idea of marriage with one such man and suffers a breakdown. The marriage is doomed before it begins.

A second marriage and the birth of a daughter hold forth the promise of redemption. Salvation is hinted at in the flourishing, randomly planted garden and with the birth of her daughter. And yet... "Why did you name me Lily?" "... my mother's favourite flower was lily of the valley." "But we hardly see your mother." This is a well-told tale of a young woman's struggle to emerge somewhat victoriously from the imposition of her mother's will into the light of her own day.

A Better Woman: A Memoir

Susan Johnson
Sydney, Australia: Random House, 1999

Reviewed by Joan Garvan

Reading *A Better Woman* is like talking with one of the mothers at the local playgroup. The difference, however, is that you have all afternoon, free of

interruptions. The mother is a gifted storyteller who can create a scene right in front of you. She is uninhibited in describing graphically the grimy details as well as the personal relationships. She bares all to you and all you can say is, "Yes, yes tell me more." Well that is how I felt when reading Johnson's book. For some reason, after becoming a mother and discovering the reams of paper that are being shed on the experience, I was glued. I wanted to keep reading, and hearing, what others have to say about their experience and practice of mothering and hopefully one day I will have had my full. But not yet. I am in the midst of it and I am wondering how many are out there with me.

Motherland is a physical, emotional, all consuming place that our former selves cannot know we visit. Becoming a mother is like migrating to a foreign place with an unknown language and no return passage. Here you are and what about the history, culture, language, exchange rate, so on and so forth? *A Better Woman* is like a traveler's journal, someone who has been there and is describes her trip. Johnson is one of those who is immersed in the experience of motherhood. She uses her writing, in a sense, to work through her experiences. She says: "I am here to tell you that I can indeed be found in my books and it might even be argued that my deepest, unconscious self lives within them." In 1999, when the book was published, Johnson's two children were still youngsters under six. It seems there may be at least two more books to follow *A Better Woman*. After all, we have been there with her through her decision to have children, the births, the late nights, the relationship, and the after-effects. If you haven't heard about or experienced a recto-vaginal fistula, Johnson describes the experience graphically in case you would like to know how it feels.

We do not really hear a lot about her children, Casper and Rose. This is a book about Susan. She looks back on her former self and wonders how she could have ever guessed where she would be these years down the road. Her former self would not have believed it; mind you, she would not have changed anything. She would do it all again.

Mothering in the '80s and the '90s has brought forth a multitude of books. Women all over are grappling with the experience and publishing their findings. Johnson's is one such attempt but her story is an intimate one. Johnson does not try to understand or explain the experience of becoming a mother; rather, she describes it. I loved reading *A Better Woman* and I am looking forward to the forthcoming editions.