

Mothers and Death: From Procreation to Creation

Élisabeth Lamothe, Pascale Sardin, and Julie Sauvage, eds.
Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2008.

Reviewed by Gill Rye

This collection represents one volume of essays drawn from a conference on “Mothers and Death” held in Bordeaux, France in December 2005. The editors are members of a research network on the subject of the maternal based at the University of Bordeaux. The essays gathered here explore representations of the links between motherhood and death in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature (novels, short stories, memoirs, drama, poetry) and, in one case, art.

The collection is divided into four parts: “Historicizing Mothers and Death,” “Writing between Good and Evil,” “Of Mothers and their Daughters,” and “Overcoming Loss.” The contributors analyze literature from Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, France, South Africa, and the United States, including the work of Laure Adler, Kate Atkinson, Margaret Atwood, Samuel Beckett, Annie Ernaux, Nancy Huston, Camille Laurens, Somerset Maugham, Toni Morrison, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Olive Shreiner, and Virginia Woolf. The essay on art considers the work of Salvador Dalí, Robert Smithson, and Vincent Van Gogh – each had a sibling who died prior to his own birth – in light of psychological work on “replacement” children and survivor guilt syndrome. Other topics include abortion, miscarriage, infant death, infanticide, matricide, violent, ambivalent, “evil” mothers, and the (literal and figurative) death of mothers. Contributors explore how these themes are treated in creative work, and, in some cases, how actual experience fosters creativity.

In her essay on the work of Atwood, Huston, and Morrison, Élisabeth Lamothe argues that each novelist acknowledges mothers’ evil and ambivalent feelings, “exploring the subterranean depths of the maternal unconscious.” Three essays in the section on mothers and daughters probe the metaphorical death involved in the psychological separation and differentiation of mother and daughter. In Lucy Edwards’s study of Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, the “matricide” of a “persecuting mother” is seen as necessary; in Pascale Sardin’s analysis of Beckett’s *Footfalls* triptych, the individuation of “the suffering daughter of a deadly mother” is ultimately incomplete and impossible; and in Julie Sauvage’s treatment of Kate Atkinson’s *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, both matricide and infanticide figure in the severance process.

The death of the mother is particularly poignant in Nicole Ollier’s study of Plath and Sexton, both of whom were mothers who committed suicide and whose work explored motherhood as a loss of self. The final essay, by Chantal

Lapeyre-Desmason on Adler, Ernaux, and Laurens and the death of a child (by abortion in Ernaux's case), concerns writing as need and risk in relation to the authors' traumatic experiences of giving birth to "both life and death."

As with most collections of conference proceedings, the quality of the contributions is inconsistent, but this volume contains some interesting essays on an important and prevalent theme in contemporary culture. While individual essays are suitably theorized, a more substantial, theoretical introduction would have given the book more weight, and an index would have been helpful.

The Maternal Is Political: Women Writers at the Intersection of Motherhood and Social Change

Shari MacDonald Strong, ed.
Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008.

Reviewed by Rachel Epp Buller

Today it goes without saying that motherhood is a political act. Whether or not to breastfeed, co-sleep, baby-wear, or send your child to daycare—all of these are choices fraught with political implications. While a few of the essayists in *The Maternal Is Political* discuss politics in terms of these mothering life style choices, many more consider their entry into motherhood as a time of political awakening. For a majority of the writers, motherhood shifted their viewpoints from seeing themselves as individuals unable to make a difference, to realizing that mothers have access to a collective well-spring of power, if only they work together to tap into that power.

Editor Shari MacDonald Strong divides her collection into three sections—"Believe," "Teach," and "Act"—and she compiles cohesive groupings of essays under these headings. Judith Stadtman Tucker's opening contribution, "Motherhood Made Me Do It, Or, How I Became an Activist," provides a strong grounding for the volume. While Strong includes essays by important women, including Benazir Bhutto, Barbara Kingsolver, and Nancy Pelosi, many of the strongest essays are written by lesser-known writers. Each mother reading this compilation will feel drawn to different essays. For this reviewer, Jennifer Brisendine's text on teaching high school English in the era of No Child Left Behind and Valerie Weaver-Zercher's "Peace March Sans Children" are especially powerful.

In her introduction to the book, Strong pinpoints motherhood as a time of political awakening but separate from political party allegiance. She asserts that she has "tapped into something more primal, more global, more far-reaching