

The Mother Dance

Harriet Lerner
New York: HarperCollins, 1998

Reviewed by Renee Norman

Having danced my way through one of Harriet Lerner's other books *The Dance of Deception*, I sashayed eagerly through her latest offering, *The Mother Dance* (1998), and it was worth the energy on several levels.

Since my own work is centred on women's autobiographical writing, including the mothering theme, I especially appreciated the personal voice Lerner uses in this latest dance. The book is full of amusing anecdotes, disarmingly authentic confessions of incompetence, and the message that as mothers, we are not perfect and that is okay. Lerner deconstructs some of the mothering myths (such as "mothers never express hate") which some of the fathers have perpetuated. Reading her wise words while sidestepping the explosive landmines buried in life with three daughters aged 11, 14, and 16, *Mother Dance* was a timely read, one which made me feel better about my mistakes and motherly indiscretions. Lerner conveys one of the basics of mothering: you do your best, then hope your children do not rewrite it in into *Mommie Dearest*. And she offers a great deal of support through her dance of words, support backed not only by personal experience, but by references to other work such as Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, and her own expertise as a therapist.

The book is divided into four parts: the prelude—pre and postpartum; the theme—living with children; variation on the theme—older and bigger children; and finally, a glissade into other issues such as how we will feel when they leave for college (called launching).

Lerner is careful to include lesbian mothering, stepmothering, blended families, and single mothering in the configurations of the dance. Chapter titles such as "Will Your Child Become a Serial Killer?" demonstrate her humour and practical, no-nonsense approach.

As I picked up the book in between hanging laundry or devising a course outline, I often felt I was in therapy with Lerner. Taking into account these interruptions, the book is uneven, as Lerner tackles everything from birth to empty nest and all the possibilities in between. At times, the book veered wildly off the mother dance. It is also about gender roles, marriage, families, and relationships, all part of the mothering experience, of course. But Lerner sometimes pulls herself back to the central topic as if she has herself realised that she suddenly danced way beyond mothering. In fact, the book should be titled *The Family Dance*, since Lerner rightly refuses to let fathers off the hook.

Most interesting is Lerner's underlying therapist philosophy, that our family histories and stories shape us, our parenting techniques, and how we

relate with our own children. I particularly related to her Jewish upbringing as it reminded me of parts of my own. Harriet is a self-confessed worrier, and she fights with her husband. For every psychiatrist or psychologist you ever have wanted to send to therapy, Harriet does the heart good by freely writing about the times she has dispensed great advice but has not taken it herself. Mother dance or family dance, Harriet's dancing is at times like all of ours, full of good intentions and really loud yelling.

Creating Balance in Your Child's Life

Beth Wilson Saavedra

Chicago: NTC/Contemporary Books, 1999

Reviewed by Carol Hult

Pressured to help our children adapt to a fast-paced world, we have filled their days with lessons, sports, and homework. But does relentless activity serve their best interests? In *Creating Balance in Your Child's Life*, Beth Wilson discusses the importance of including both scheduled and unscheduled time in our children's lives. It is essential, she writes, to teach our children about balance and to allow them "unrushed time" in which to play, imagine, and feed their spirits.

The signs of over-stressed, out-of-balance children are everywhere: stomachaches, anxiety, shortened attention spans, chronic fatigue. Wilson cites the need for children to be offered time to rest and recharge. She says a parent needs to "trust the cadence" of her child's development. Wilson's challenge to me, as a mother of three, is to identify and nurture each child's unique strengths.

To help us understand temperament, Wilson offers several tools including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. While this personality test is often used in educational and corporate settings, it also allows parents to see the vital aspects of a child's nature. That knowledge can be applied to decisions made daily on the child's behalf: choosing schools and activities, setting TV limits, structuring unhurried time. Rather than defining balance universally, we need to respect individual needs. A quiet, intuitive child who is tuned into the feelings of others may need small class settings and regular time alone to think things over. A lively, extroverted, intellectual child may need plenty of active stimulation but also ways to slow down.

Several chapters explore key components of balance. "Nourishing with Nature" describes how a connection to the natural world helps children to connect with themselves, with others, and with a higher source. "Communication and Balance" discusses the significance of actively listening to our