

are not mothers provide an outsider's perspective: adolescent and grown daughters, and the legal and medical establishments. Of particular interest are chapters dealing with those whose stories have not been, or are not often, told. A lesbian mother reflects on her daughter's coming to terms with her "different" family. A researcher describes the dynamic between mothers and daughters in families with a disabled parent. A filmmaker reclaims her historical roots by telling the stories of black mothers in their Nova Scotia communities. Another researcher recounts black women's experiences of motherhood to counter the pathologizing of these families in the "male" literature. A white mother reflects on the role of family narratives in her black daughter's identity formation. All of these voices demonstrate the richness and diversity in the experience of those mothering and those mothered.

The editors facilitate this reflection process in their organization of the chapters into four sections. The first section deals with issues of socialization and education, the second with maternal values and identities, the third with personal and historical narratives, and the last with public and state policy. As such the book flows from the social to personal to public themes, providing a conceptual map accessible to students.

The editors also provide helpful and specific suggestions to instructors for promoting reflection in course activities: through reflective journals, case studies, and thematic research projects. This section includes guidelines for assignments, evaluation, and how certain chapters can be used.

As I pointed out earlier, to read this book is to engage in an ongoing inner dialogue, comparing and contrasting one's own stories and rethinking one's theoretical understandings. The book is alive with the voices of mothers and daughters. It delineates issues in fresh and engaging ways and it models reflection. This book makes an engrossing read and an excellent course text.

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The Other Mother: A Lesbian's Fight for Her Daughter

Nancy Abrams

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999

Reviewed by Colette Morrow

According to the author, Nancy Abrams, *The Other Mother* is her attempt to make sense of the years that she was prohibited access to her young daughter,

Amelia, by a psychologically unstable ex-partner, Norma, after the couple's relationship ended in the early 1990s. Norma, the biological mother, is able to keep Amelia from Abrams through emotional manipulation and by exploiting legal conventions that do not recognize non-biological mothers' parental rights.

Abrams's task is challenging because much of her story defies comprehension. It is difficult to understand, for example, how Norma exerts so much influence over her partner that Abrams consents to parenthood despite Norma's mental illness, the couple's precarious finances, and Abrams's lifetime resistance to having children. However, Abrams's project is sustained by the introspective, confessional style that she adopts. The often inexplicable becomes intelligible as Abrams uses unhappy childhood memories to analyze her partnership with Norma and her mixed feelings about parenthood. The therapeutic tone developed in these reflections makes plausible Abrams's observation that "mistakes aren't mistakes while they're happening" and "that even a love that goes wrong may hold its own brand of healing" (21).

Nevertheless, some episodes in Abrams's tale defy such neat resolution. After Abrams rescues little Amelia from the psychiatric hospital where Norma has confined her while undergoing treatment there herself, Abrams hesitates to pursue custody of the girl. Abrams delays two months although she has bountiful evidence that Norma's instability has harmed Amelia and that Norma will not be able to reassume responsibility for the girl soon. She seeks temporary custody only because Norma checks herself out of the hospital prematurely and threatens to retrieve Amelia.

Certainly Abrams's assessment that as a non-biological lesbian mother she will engage in a long, expensive, and likely unsuccessful legal battle is accurate. But her conclusion, that surrendering Amelia to Norma is as motherly as pursuing custody, is unsatisfying. Briefly explaining her decision, Abrams seems to suggest that "not going on" is a *lesbian* performance of motherhood that disrupts heterosexist definitions of family. The basis for this claim is that she finally sees herself as Amelia's "real" mother only after she loses the child.

However, Abrams's argument is not convincing theoretically or in the book's terms. While a child's best interests often are served by dropping a custody dispute, Norma has put Amelia at risk for physical injury and has damaged the child emotionally. Here the introspection that earlier helped make sense of Abrams's dubious judgments now turns against her, for readers know that her typical approach to Norma employs passivity and appeasement. In the end, her decision not to seek custody perpetuates that pattern. If Abrams's analyses had been less solipsistic throughout, had presented Amelia's character more fully, and had included an in-depth exploration of her relationship with the girl, Abrams would be more persuasive. Instead, Abrams acquires a sense of "real" motherhood in relation to herself rather than Amelia, and this will strike many readers as counterintuitive.