

Book Reviews

Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns

Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly, eds.
Toronto: Second Story Press, 1998.

Reviewed by Brigitte Harris

The 18 chapters in this engaging, multi-authored book present diverse ways of investigating and making meaning of “mother,” “mothering,” and “motherhood.” Qualitative methods—autobiographical, biographical, ethnographic, phenomenological, historical, case study, and participatory research—elicit women’s stories. These stories demonstrate the complexity of women’s experience and their meanings of mothering. Each chapter presents women’s stories and a lucid discussion of the literature, providing a basis from which to question, criticize, support, refine, and rethink existing theories. Reading the book engaged me in an active reflective process.

The reflective process, both collaborative and individual, is illustrated throughout the book. For example, Andrea O'Reilly describes how her course leads students to “dismantle” the patriarchal mother-daughter estrangement narrative to build a new relational narrative. Elizabeth Diem engages in participatory research discussions with mothers of problematic adolescent daughters which allows them over time to “unravel” the disempowering myth of the perfect mother. Martha McMahon reflects on how the loss of her mother brought insight into her choice to not have children, questioning conceptions of motherhood by examining her subjectivity as a non-mother. Her use of “creatively reconstructed letters to a friend” is a particularly effective means of allowing the reader an “in” on her deliberative process. Rishma Dunlop questions patriarchal assumptions negating the embodied knowledge of female experience and demonstrates the power of writing, especially poetry, to capture and examine women’s lived experience.

A particular strength of this book is in the insiders’, outsiders’, and

marginalized voices it presents. Motherhood issues are examined from the perspectives of mothers: academics, teachers, and foster mothers. Those who 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

Mourning the Dreams: How Parents Create Meaning from Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Early Infant Death

Claudia Malacrida

Edmonton: International Institute for Qualitative Methodology Press, 1998.

Reviewed by Sharon M. Abbey

Having experienced the perinatal deaths of two of her own babies, Claudia Malacrida's recent book *Mourning the Dreams: How Parents Create Meaning from Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Early Infant Death* examines how other parents create sense or meaning out of the deaths of their pre- and at-term infants by interviewing 25 white middle-class Canadian parents who had suffered similar losses. Malacrida speculates that the untimely death of perinatal babies has traditionally been regarded as a topic better left unexplored because it is intrinsically tied up with the sacred cows of both motherhood and death and also because it has ambiguous connections to contested issues of abortion and choice. By uncovering many of these silenced stories, this book is intended to "illuminate the complexity and profundity of perinatal loss" (Malacrida, 1998: 1) as well as to help others gain some perspective of their own loss as they deal with their feelings of isolation and inappropriateness.

Acknowledging that there is some ambiguity about how to name perinatal death, Malacrida uses the term to include miscarriage within the first trimester, pregnancy loss, stillbirth and death of a new-born infant. She is critical of medical definitions that refer to infant loss prior to 20 weeks of pregnancy as "fetal wastage" or "spontaneous abortion." Regardless of the duration of the pregnancy, she argues, such a loss is experienced as a death to be mourned and profoundly changes the lives of family members forever. For the mothers, in