

shame, rage, and the years of grieving for their lost children. *Gone to an Aunt's* is a scholarly work that is accessible to undergraduate students. This is an excellent text for women's studies and sociology courses, students as well as general audiences and readers.

**"Bad" Mothers:  
The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America**

Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, Eds.  
New York: New York University Press, 1998

**Reviewed by Jill R. Deans**

This recent anthology is an amalgam of social and historical criticism useful to researchers, students, and anyone interested in the culture of blame that taints twentieth-century American motherhood. Editors Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, whose own accomplished scholarship appears in the book, have gathered some impressive contributors, many well-known, others emergent, speaking from a range of disciplinary view points from the historical to the legal, the personal to the political.

Divided by era (early, middle and late twentieth century), the volume demonstrates how ideas and stereotypes—like Philip Wylie's poisonous concept of *momism*—took hold and shaped public and professional opinion. It provides origins for the culture of expertise that continues to influence perceptions of "good" and "bad" mothers today. Different articles often refer to the same culprits—the Philip Wylies, Margaret Mahlers, social workers, therapists, and more recently, the courts, fetal rights groups and the media. Overlap between articles, however, builds consensus that the power of "choice" to determine and define motherhood, as Rickie Solinger describes it, does not always belong to mothers.

While the anthology consists primarily of critics, it also contains a short selection of actual mom-bashing, presumably to historicize from a more primary angle. This section, however, offers a mere taste of what the critics are reacting against. Individual articles work better to prove the injustice of those who blame mothers for everything from violent children to communism.

Widely-published scholars like Elaine Tyler May, Katha Pollit, and Betty Jean Lifton contribute overviews which are more thoroughly explored in their own books. Still, they represent important touchstones for such issues as childlessness, fetal rights, and adoption, respectively. Paula Caplan's "Mother-Blaming," an excerpt from her popular book *Don't Blame Mother*, might be a

centerpiece, if it weren't stylistically divergent from the rest of the volume which is more scholarly in tone and depth. Less familiar names were chosen, undoubtedly, for both their readability and the rigors of their research claims. Elizabeth Rose's historical analysis of Day Care and Nursery Schools, for example, is an excellent preview for her own upcoming book. Here she explains the class-based distinctions in the 1920s and 30s that influence perceptions of the "bad" mother, the working mother who is forced to "neglect" her child and the affluent mother who "smothers" her child with attention.

While many of the articles approach the politics of blame in important but predictable ways, citing the tension between "experts" with power and voiceless mothers, Annalee Newitz confronts women who speak out, act out and even resort to murder to upset motherhood as a defining category. She uses recent examples of filicide to "begin thinking about the kind of woman who does not need violent crime in order to choose childlessness, and who does not think of childlessness as a violent crime." Newitz's piece works well beside articles like Umansky's on the Karen Carter breastfeeding case, and Annette R. Appell's on contemporary child welfare which also feature mothers "out of control" on some level.

None of the authors "mean to downplay real violations of parental duty," as the editors put it, but all work to illustrate how a system of power and control over the domain of motherhood can prevent some healthy choices and enable destructive alternatives. Exploring how and why we evaluate women as mothers in this century, can help to unpack the ever-contentious debate around the American family and the role of women in the next—some old issues for a new century.

## **When Mothers Work: Loving Our Children Without Sacrificing Ourselves**

Joan K. Peters  
Addison-Wesley, 1997

### **Reviewed by Denise Bauer**

This book's subtitle is what attracted me; its promise was fulfilled. Joan Peters, a doctoral candidate, journalist, novelist and college teacher of writing and literature, persuasively and for me, reassuringly argues that working mothers *should* work. Working and having an identity and life independent of familial responsibilities, she claims, creates "freer mothers, stronger marriages (and) happier children (131)."