

Book Reviews

The 21st Century Motherhood Movement: Mothers Speak Out on Why We Need to Change the World and How to Do It

Andrea O'Reilly, ed.
Bradford, ON: Demeter Press 2011

Reviewed by Rachel Treloar

The stated purpose of *The 21st Century Motherhood Movement* is to challenge stereotypes of mothers and motherhood, largely by highlighting more than eighty motherhood organizations from around the globe; in fact, it is a veritable explosion of those stereotypes. The book offers a powerful portrait of activist mothers who are working—as the subtitle claims—to change the world. The organizations featured here use diverse strategies such as performing essentialist motherhood (Mothers of Acari) or drawing strategically upon child welfare discourses. Others are more provocative (“Bad Mother’s Club”) or stealthy (“Feminist Mothers Discussion Group”).

In her introduction, editor Andrea O'Reilly, a professor of Women's Studies at Toronto's York University and the driving force behind the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI), situates twenty-first century maternal activism in its historical and ideological contexts. This contextual analysis sets the stage for her compelling argument that the current movement, which she calls matricentric feminism, is a new social movement, distinct not only from the feminist movement but from each of the particular issues and causes it comprises. As a mother-centred movement and philosophy, matricentric feminism brings together the perspectives of maternalism, liberal feminism, and an ethic of care. Tracing the tensions and debates around maternal activism, including its place within the feminist movement, O'Reilly contends that mothers come together as activists out

of common struggles. Maternal empowerment, she argues, should not just be concerned with empowered parenting, it must also include attention to a mother's agency "in the context of her own life" (13). "Why can we not simply demand that motherhood be made better for mothers themselves?" (15), she asks. O'Reilly argues that not only are mothers' needs often ignored to the detriment of their ability to successfully fulfill their many responsibilities, thus leaving primary caregivers vulnerable to social and economic risk; mothers also "remain disempowered despite 40 years of feminism" (25).

The anthology is divided into seven sections: *Becoming a Mother*; *Maternal Identities*; *Maternal Advocacy*; *Maternal Activism*; *Violence, Militarism, War, and Peace*; *Social Change and Social Justice*; and *Writing, Researching, and Performing Motherhood*. Each of the 81 chapters features a particular organization. While the diverse issues these groups have taken up vary from birth options to environmental and anti-military activism and issues of human rights, what connects them is their members' passion, focus, and often their remarkable audacity or courage. Although most organizations are currently active, a small number are included for their historical significance to contemporary maternal activism. Each individual chapter outlines the history, mandate, and activities of the organization, as well as some of the challenges it has faced and how these were addressed and overcome. In addition, each chapter articulates how the organization is linked to the broader motherhood movement.

Although a number of the organizations covered in this book were familiar to me, I learned something new from each chapter. Without exception, each chapter illustrated the interconnection of maternal practices and activism. This book, a masterfully and collectively written work that is both a significant contribution to the field and a clarion call to action, will hold special appeal for readers interested in motherhood politics. It might be better suited to an electronic (and updatable) format, however. At 976 pages of small print, it is a massive, unwieldy tome.

Parenting Out of Control: Anxious Parents in Uncertain Times

Margaret K. Nelson.

New York: New York University Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Clare O'Hagan

A book that adds to our knowledge and understanding of the issues and challenges facing parents and the strategies parents adopt in contemporary, high-