

button: ‘Puberty is when things really come to a head.’ ‘This is when things really get hard’ (193)—and I nodded in agreement when Lombardi discusses sports: “some psychologists have argued that sports provide the safest way for men to express their emotions in our current social climate—men can jump up and down in excitement, they can get tearful in victory and defeat, not to mention have permission to hug, smack each other’s butts, jump in piles on each other, and otherwise physically and emotionally connect with other men” (216). Lombardi suggests that “car talk” is a viable way to discuss difficult subjects with boys.

The author’s overarching message is that most women raise boys in similar ways, but in silent and parallel universes. She depicts mothers as valuable and underutilized resources who can help boys become men capable of functioning in today’s world. Mothers also are presented as largely rational, thoughtful, and loving beings who feel “strongly that they [are] creating more sensitive, caring men for the next generation of women.” This may be a generalization, but here, for once, mothers of boys are represented positively.

## **Reaching One Thousand: A Story of Love, Motherhood and Autism**

Rachel Robertson.

Collingwood, Victoria, Australia: Black, 2012.

REVIEWED BY ALISON QUAGGIN HARKIN

When one of my sons was diagnosed with autism and a cognitive disability, I became fascinated with memoirs by mothers whose children had autism or other disabilities. Many of these memoirs were moving, but, after I had read a few, I began to notice a certain sameness to the narrative arc. They tended to present a linear journey, during which the author overcomes multiple challenges to become a super mom who devotes her life to her child, no matter what the cost to herself. Both the linearity and the sense of “overcoming” did not feel like the truth—or at least not the only truth.

Rachel Robertson’s beautifully written *Reaching One Thousand: A Story of Love, Motherhood and Autism* offers a very different kind of narrative. In an introduction and twelve personal essays, she explores ways of understanding autism, her own life, and her autistic child, whom she calls Ben (not his real name). In addition, Robertson, who teaches professional writing and publishing at Curtin University in Western Australia, reflects on the process of writ-

ing a memoir, reminding her readers that all life stories are only fragments of a larger, messier experience. In “On Pomegranates and Life Stories: An Introduction,” she explains: “This narrative can’t be a simple chronological story ... because my life is one of disruption and disjunction. The ‘soaring curve’ of an imagined life has been broken and re-made in a different shape. It is earth-bound, not soaring; sharp-edged, not curved. In this, I think, it is actually like most people’s stories” (6).

The author demonstrates the creative power of such “disruption and disjunction” in the first essay, “Reaching One Thousand,” which was joint winner of the 2008 Calibre Prize. It is a meditation on how Robertson—who struggled to learn mathematics as a child—seeks to understand Ben’s passionate love for numbers. At the same time, she reflects on her relationship with her own mother, her mother’s remarkable gift for mathematics, connections between the generations, and various ways of engaging with her son.

Robertson reveals the similarities between her own and Ben’s lived stories more explicitly in the essays “Pumpkin Scones” and “Raw Experience.” In the former, she recounts her childhood feelings of sensory overload and isolation, a memory triggered after Ben—despite his sensitivity to sound—attends a school disco party and spends the evening dancing alone. “Raw Experience” includes descriptions of Ben’s intense awareness of smells, as well as a lovely dream-like sequence in which the author remembers a childhood home: “In the early morning when the magpies woke me, there was a smell of lemon, eucalyptus and hope” (39). Useful and relevant information from scholarly works on autism is included in this essay (as it is throughout the book) to elaborate upon Robertson’s observations.

In two essays, Robertson examines the experience of receiving an autism diagnosis and what happens afterward. “The Cage” describes testing and the official diagnosis of Ben’s autism, while “Bonus” details the manner in which government services are provided to carers of people with disabilities in Australia. For me, “The Cage” is not quite as engaging as most of the other essays, perhaps because the health professionals depicted in it seem somewhat anonymous (which may have been the author’s intention). Similarly, because “Bonus” focuses—quite reasonably—on government policies in Australia, North American readers may find it less relevant to their own situation. Nevertheless, both essays provide a thoughtful look at parents’ frustrations as they deal with complex rules and regulations.

Perhaps most memorable for me is Robertson’s frequent examination of ways in which we might recognize and attempt to change neurotypical (i.e., non-autistic) views of people with autism. For instance, in “Frog in Girlland,” she states that while the “lack of pretend play is seen as evidence of limited imagination” (170) in children with autism, “[i]f you are an autistic person

in a neurotypical world, simply getting through each day can be an act of creativity” (170).

I know I will reread *Reaching One Thousand*, and I recommend it for every mother’s bookshelf. I am grateful to Robertson for clarifying my own ongoing liminal experience with my son—the sense of being “separate from ordinary life; [of standing] on the sidelines watching other people live normally” (102). While this liminal space may feel isolated at times, it also offers unexpected possibilities for celebrating and interpreting the past, the present, and whatever the future holds—and isn’t that what all mothers hope for as they and their children grow and change, both together and separately?

## Mothering and Literacies

Amanda B. Richey and Linda Shuford Evans, eds.  
Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2013.

REVIEWED BY HALLIE PALLADINO

The literate-illiterate binary has a stranglehold on the way we understand written communication. In *Mothering and Literacies*, editors Amanda B. Richey and Linda Shuford Evans shatter that binary, dispensing with literacy in the singular. Instead, their more inclusive notion of “literacies” sheds light on how mothers are impacted by social expectations surrounding literacy and demonstrates the ways mothers develop and wield their own literacies in response to specific mothering challenges. The unifying premise of this book is that public discourses about mothering powerfully influence literacy researchers, policy makers, and educators and we ignore them at our peril.

In her introduction, Linda Shuford Evans warns against “the malpractice of focusing on literacy as a subject or a skill rather than as part of a child and a way of life” (9). When Evans’s son was in second grade, a school initiative designed to encourage reading turned him from an enthusiastic reader into a reluctant one. Because he tested above his grade level, her son was obliged to read books written for much older children. This homework of tedious reading soon replaced their family’s treasured story time. Evans still regrets that she fell “into the complicity of allowing schools to define the value of our family literacy practices, *even when I knew better*” (9).

The drawbacks of institutionally imposed literacy curricula are enumerated throughout this book. One notable example is contributor Stacey Crooks’s critique of the strange paradox encapsulated by the motto “You Are Your Child’s First Teacher.” This not-so-gentle admonition demands that moth-