

field of maternal mental health. Identifying the areas in which we, as mothers and scholars, need to work to bring about change for our daughters, our sisters, our friends, and our future grandchildren is daunting. Knowing that The Motherhood Initiative and Demeter Press support a transcendental future for positive maternal experiences is empowering. You're not a bad mom. You're a modern mother living in an outdated patriarchal society; you work hard and your voice and those of your sisters in academia and motherhood need to be heard. Come: read the work that's been done and know you're not alone.

How to Expect What You're Not Expecting: Stories of Pregnancy, Parenthood and Loss

Jessica Hiemstra and Lisa Martin-Demoor, eds.
Victoria, BC: Touchwood Editions, 2013.

REVIEWED BY SOPHIA BROCK

How To Expect What You're Not Expecting: Stories of Pregnancy, Parenthood and Loss, is a collection of nineteen narrative essays that tell stories about hope, sorrow, grief, acceptance and resilience. The collection is arranged into four sections which cohere around the central themes of the book: 'what you have is what happened'; 'the wounded past cannot deny the beautiful future'; 'the desire to understand'; and 'the possibility to love'.

Poignantly referencing the title of the well-known *What To Expect When You're Expecting*,¹ this volume offers readers a series of evocative, engaging and often moving perspectives on the simultaneously personal yet universal experiences of intense parental grief and loss. Unifying the stories is the experience of grieving for the loss of what 'could have been': grieving for the child that can be so vividly imagined but cannot be conceived; mourning the child that is conceived but is never born into life; and giving birth to a child only to have to say goodbye. The narrators of these stories speak of the loss of dreams—of the thwarted potential for closeness in the relationship between parent and child; the foreclosure of the dream of a 'normal' family when their newborn has a disability. Equally intense is the lasting bereavement at being unable to know and raise a child who has been adopted; the loss of virginity and innocence at the hands of an abuser, or the experiences a teenager misses out on when they have a baby. Many of the contributors wrestle with the loss of who they potentially could have become had their circumstances been different.

This collection, however, is not just about loss. It is about resilience, hope, courage and determination. While it may seem easier to cling to and draw on

clichés about the continuation of love after death, of hope, and of redemption, this is not what these stories do. Instead, they demonstrate the complex web of emotions we are forced to navigate when it comes to intensely confronting experiences of loss. After reading the collection of essays we are reminded that while no two experiences are ever the same, we as humans are all subject to, and will inevitably experience, the turmoil, rawness, and reality of grief and loss in one form or another.

What is appealing about this volume of stories is the range of ‘voices’ and mediums through which the writers’ experiences are conveyed. Poetry and prose, for example, interweave in Blomer’s essay as she recounts the experience of a journey across Canada and her personal struggles as a mother of a child who has Prader Willi Syndrome. Some stories are linear in their representation of experience, while others move between past and present, melding reflection and recollection with insights that can only emerge with the passage of time and distance from the crucible of loss.

While many of the essays are framed by the experience of grief, they offer valuable lessons about what it means to love and the many pathways through grief and loss. However, as readers immerse themselves in the collection, it becomes clear that we are being given the opportunity to read and share in these stories, not necessarily to come away with ‘lessons learned’. Rather, we are being offered the opportunity to see through the window of an individual’s experience, which may then evoke empathy in those who have not experienced such loss, or may offer connection, compassion and encouragement to those who have experienced loss. Authors such as Arthur and Rock reflect on the inability to measure sorrow, loss or grief, and the inappropriateness of comparing losses. Their stories reinforce the belief that no one can prescribe or morally dictate another’s right to mourn and grieve in whatever way they feel appropriate.

The contributors to this book are not sharing their stories to be idolized, glorified, or pitied. Instead, through their personal experiences they invite us to connect with and learn from the fears, the struggles, and the torments that are part of the fabric of human existence. Yet despite the emphasis on loss and struggle, there is an overwhelming tone of resilience throughout this collection, and we are reminded of the capacity of human beings to move forward with their lives even when they are faced with inconceivable and crushing loss. Tragedy has the potential to have a transformative impact on people’s lives, but that is not to say we necessarily need tragedy in order to provoke transformation, or that people’s lives did not have rich meaning before they experienced tragedy and transformation.

Readers will be constantly reminded of the power of relationships, and strength of connections with other human beings, as a mechanism to help

centre the self and provide stability and clarity. Yet conversely, these relationships and connections have the power to shake, destabilize, and rock the core of who we are. In many of the essays authors reflexively explore their sense of identity, and how it interacts with and reacts to loss and language. For example, Harris asserts that: “writing inevitably leads to the void in the centre of my life, a void woven of three interlaced absences: the absence of the child, the absence of words for his absence, and above all the absence of the feelings that might generate words” (146).

Harris and other contributors in this collection have a fluctuating but significant relationship with language and writing. Language can emphasize and accentuate voids, as well as help mend them. The very process of writing about their journeys provokes a change in the way some contributors view their experiences. Therefore, language and the process of writing can have a transfiguring and enduring power in framing and telling a story, but we are also reminded of how, sometimes, language alone cannot communicate the profundity of certain experiences, emotions and losses. For some authors, where language may fail, art provides strength. Hiemstra uses her painting and her writing as a way to provide herself with grounding, to construct something that she can then lose. Art has the power to create, move, and mask vulnerability - to immortalize, transform, and to embody. Art can also offer itself as a catalyst to enable us to travel through and exist within grief, loss and pain.

Along with the importance of language and art, the essays in this collection also emphasise the connections that can be made between the physical body and nature in order to generate meaning. Voices, heartbeats, rhythms, smells, light and darkness. Dying leaves, mounting layers of snow, fireflies, feathers, sea-shells, sand, the emergence of spring. Repeated motifs, metaphors and analogies throughout draw the reader into the authors’ experiences.

Hiemstra and Martin-Demoor have contributed to and assembled a group of essays that will provide a resource of encouragement and connection for those who have experienced loss, as well as insight and empathy for those who have not. The collection explores the inescapable nature of grief and its presence in everyday life; resilience and the capacity for people to move forward with their lives after tragic experiences; and the capacity of love, hope, art, and language to carry, reflect, and transport us through and within the experience of grief.

¹Murkoff, H. E. and S. Mazel. *What To Expect When You're Expecting*. Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins, 2009.