

maternity] they were putting forth ... of the pretty little cottage and this glorious experience." When asked about identity, another mother responds, "You've got to be able to provide yourself with some kind of nurturing ... so that you can get refreshed." As I suspected, feminist maternal theory emerges from maternal scholars' openness to mothers' voices, because the dominant culture has turned a deaf ear to what mothers have to say.

## **The Bitch in the House**

Cathi Hanauer, ed.  
New York: Morrow, 2002

### **Reviewed by Michele Pridmore-Brown**

*The Bitch in the House* presents an eloquent barometer of professional/writing women's domestic lives at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Editor Cathi Hanauer writes in her preface that the book is born of anger (hence the title), but anger seems largely absent from this collection of essays by 26 highly successful women writers, including *New York Times* best-selling authors and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists. Aside from the science writer Natalie Angier, a self-described feminist warrior, the tone is postfeminist: musing rather than strident; resentful at times, rueful at others; sometimes sassy; sometimes revelatory; often rationalizing as in the case of an anonymous writer who meticulously tallies the costs and benefits of an open marriage.

Perhaps this constitutes its radicalism: the singular angel of the house identified by Virginia Woolf as the *sine qua non* of Victorian patriarchal culture has not so much been transmuted into a bitch but into a cacophony of voices that, in disparate ways, muse over the burden and promise of freedom from pre-scripted lives and pre-scripted gender roles. Cynthia Kling, for instance, describes the antithetical pulls of the marriage contract and eroticism. Some contributors lament their romantic choices—co-habiting with laid-back spongers, for instance—while others praise the enabling qualities of long-distance relationships. The writer Daphne Merkin ultimately opts for the risks of loneliness over those of intimacy. Twice-divorced Karen Karbo points out the risks of entering uncharted territory: of being "not just the cow with the milk, but also the farmer with the money to buy it." Helen Schulman poignantly describes being caught between the equally visceral demands of ageing parents and young children, her husband tellingly relegated to a spectral role in this conflicted drama. At best, the women have a modicum of control over the messiness of their lives, over the competing claims of work, love, and family. None, however, would exchange the mess for the domestic straitjacket of their foremothers.

Ellen Gilchrist, the oldest contributor at 64, who, unlike the others, did not take her writing seriously until age 40, after she had raised four children, makes the prosaic yet important observation that happiness begins with good health. Indeed, all these women's lives are in some sense predicated on the biological fortitude necessary to wrest a professional life from the entropic vicissitudes of too-short nights, of too little time, of too many demands. To be sure, aside from Gilchrist, those women who do have children delayed having them until late—and then had only one or two. Like most successful professionals, they established their careers first (in the case of Schulman, producing four books before a first child at age 35)—and only then entered the trenches of the work versus family fray, in which, as Gilchrist again puts it, guilt is too often the “nuclear weapon” and “mutually-assured destruction” the aim.

E. S. Maduro, the youngest writer at 24, humorously describes her outrage when, for the first time, gender stereotypes trumped the kind of gender equality she thought fundamental to her relationship with her live-in boyfriend: upon visiting his parents, she found herself relegated with his mother to the kitchen, washing dishes in seething silence while her boyfriend tinkered on the piano. For many of these women, as for most of the Occidental world, gender relations have not kept pace with the advances of feminism. Most women, as surveys relentlessly indicate, still end up doing more than their share of housework and diaper changing. In short, the job of nurturing others, whether ageing parents, young children, or a sick spouse, still falls disproportionately to women, no matter how professionally successful. The career costs are potentially huge, but Laurie Abraham actually describes feeling resentfully bereft when her husband does more than his share of nurturing their two children and so receives more than his half of their affection! Abraham herself is well aware of the inconsistencies revealed by her resentment.

Marriage, observes one young contributor, is a Faustian deal. Merkin writes that “little girls in [her] day were bred to dream Wife dreams and ... still do, give or take a few adjustments.” Certainly, many of the contributions, to this reader's surprise, bear this out. For Merkin herself, marriage ends up being a flimsy defense against existential loneliness. For Kerry Herlihy, who chooses to raise a child in a multi-generational house and dispenses with marrying the father, who in any case already is married, marriage is not economically, socially, or emotionally advantageous, let alone feasible. Marriage is merely one option (or non-option) among a panoply of options; single motherhood by choice is another. Nonetheless, whether marriage is mere artifice or a real bastion against loneliness, the human need for connection is still, for many of these post-feminist women, encapsulated in the marriage plot: whether as poignant absence or as conflicted presence or as social/emotional compromise. One contributor, writing under the pseudonym Hazel McClay, writes that, at 36, she chose love over passion: a man in the heart over passionate sex. She could not, she writes, have made the same choice at an earlier age.

The most poignant contribution, entitled “The Fat Lady Sings,” makes a

mockery of Daphne Merkin's contention that marriage is "the only practicable game in town for most of us." The Fat Lady, aka Natalie Kusz, is the foil to all women who revel in their sexual capital. By virtue of her girth, she exists outside the economy of desire and, as such, is written out of the game. Her girth forecloses the kinds of choices and intimate connections available to so many of Hanauer's other contributors. On the other hand, the fat lady *can* sing, as the title indicates: she is no longer just an object, a fat body taking up too much space, in other people's realities. Her writing voice, her very subjecthood, is a vital force. Indeed, despite an emotionally-deprived poverty-stricken childhood in Alaska, and the vicissitudes of very young teen-motherhood, she is economically self-sufficient and professionally successful, as her inclusion in this collection indicates.

One of the limitations of this collection is the absence of lesbian voices, despite the fact that lesbians are increasingly invested in the family-making enterprise. In Vermont, they can marry. Many are choosing to reproduce. Many are deeply embedded in the family versus work dynamic and their family arrangements model for the rest of us a more equitable division of domestic labour. The book is not about otherness, however; it is about heterosexuals, normative types within the professional class, the placeholder for the former angel of the house. It offers up a collective computing of the costs and benefits of feminism for this professional, highly educated class of women. To be sure, while the volume clearly comes out on the side of the benefits, a generous dose of therapy sessions appears, for some contributors, to be the flip side of choice. Angst aside, however, power over the future (over the re/production of the species, over family formation, over societal norms) has clearly shifted to these women. What they have sacrificed is time-for-self, but as Hanauer writes in her preface, she would choose her life again—the stresses of having it all, love, kids, and career—in a heartbeat.

## **Giving Birth in Canada, 1900-1950**

Wendy Mitchinson

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002

### **Reviewed by Deborah Davidson**

Historian Wendy Mitchinson's *Giving Birth in Canada, 1900-1950* inspires the sociological imagination. Her book documents the history of giving birth in the first half of the twentieth century, a little examined period of childbirth history in Canada. During this time, childbirth—at home or in hospital—came under the increasing control of the medical professions. Mitchinson acknowledges feminist arguments that focus on the ill-effects of medicalization and the search for women's agency in childbirth. She focuses, however, on the medical