

Elizabeth Smart: A Fugue Essay on Women and Creativity

Kim Echlin
Toronto: Women's Press, 2004

Reviewed by Sandra Campbell

In eloquent prose and delightful narrative, Kim Echlin offers a rich and multilayered perspective on the extraordinary life of writer Elizabeth Smart (1913-1986). Smart's passionate love affair and first pregnancy triggered an explosion of her creativity that led to her first novel, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (1945). This groundbreaking work offers a powerful voice and an aesthetic form that reflects authentic female experience.

Echlin begins with a question: "Why has a woman's experience of raising children and pursuing a creative life largely been concealed?" From here she moves into an exploration of Smart's unwavering commitment to write from her uniquely female experience. Echlin draws on interviews with Smart's family, friends, and work colleagues, as well as her own experiences as a passionate mother and a passionate novelist. (Echlin has published two novels, *Elephant Winter* and *Dagmar's Daughter*). As she explores Smart's journey to live, to love, and to write, Echlin shares her own stories and those of the long line of women writers who have struggled to be taken seriously. This rich context offers a mirror on women's ongoing creative struggles in a world still defined by the values of patriarchy.

Smart's personal struggle was deeply lonely and heroic. In her early years, she dared to step out of the conventions of her upper class Ottawa family to join bohemian artists in England, France, and Mexico. Yet, even her own artist friends were blind to women's potential to be creative, and most were blind to Smart's unique struggle to create. Smart's attempts to live a creative life were so savagely undermined by fierce betrayals in her relationships with her mother and her lover, George Barker, the father of her four children, that she determined to raise her children alone and in dire poverty. Still, she struggled to write from her lived experience.

While Smart was able to disregard some conventions that might shackle creativity, she was continually silenced by the powerful convention that women must put the needs and desires of others before their own. Echlin cites this poignant example from one of Smart's poems: "Why am I so frightened? / To say I'm me / And publicly acknowledge / My small mastery? / Could I stand up and say / Fuck Off! Or, Be My Slave! / To be in a very unfeminine / Very unloving state / Is the desperate need? Of anyone trying to write."

Today, many writers/mothers still feel the power of convention to prevent their telling of important stories. Echlin's insightful exploration of Smart's life

suggests that women must struggle to write with clarity and tenacity of their authentic lives. This is why her book is so important.

Child Custody, Law, and Women's Work

Susan B. Boyd
Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2003

Reviewed by Sherri Goldstein Cash

In *Child Custody, Law, and Women's Work*, legal scholar Susan B. Boyd traces the history of Canadian child custody law, exploding the myth that courts favour mothers in custody decisions. Historically held to a higher standard of morality than men, and with female nurturing and domestic work undervalued, if not invisible, mothers are highly vulnerable to losing custody in cases that go to court. Moreover, Boyd argues that the contemporary principle of gender neutrality in custody law is detrimental to women because it fails to recognize the ways that childcare work is deeply gendered. She demonstrates that dominant notions of gender as well as class, sexuality, cultural difference, race, and disability shape mothers' chances of maintaining custody of their children. By extension, Boyd's focus on child custody law illuminates wider issues of power, gender, and work in the family, the legal system, and society.

Drawing on important court cases, legislation, and official reports, Boyd's historical account opens in the nineteenth century, when the exclusive paternal right to custody began to erode with an argument that young children should reside with the mother. A major legal shift began in the 1970s with the women's movement and a "father's revolution," influences that made gender neutrality a principle of custody law. The result has been "joint custody" or "shared parenting." In ignoring parents' gender, however, judges have also ignored the sexual division of labour in the family before divorce, thereby rendering invisible mothers' roles as primary childcare providers, as well as the emotional and psychological consequences mothers and children experience when patterns of primary care are significantly altered. Concurrently, the court's attempt to maximize children's contact with fathers has resulted in blindness to fathers' abuse of mothers, as well as to allegations of paternal child abuse. Overall, Boyd contests claims of maternal bias in the courts, demonstrating that fathers who petition for custody have done "quite well."

Yet, there have been some recent "promising signs" for mothers, notably the emergence of a presumption that primary caregivers should maintain custody "unless proven unfit." While Boyd admits that this presumption is problematic, she concludes that currently it is beneficial for mothers and children. In advocating this view, Boyd's argument seems to revive the