

because we, as a culture, dictate that only the biological mother is capable of fulfilling them” (11). Empowered mothering, in contrast, “recognizes that both mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy” (12). In each of the five sections, the essays explore topics related to alternative mothering styles. They show how women of all races, classes, and sexual orientations are exposed to, accept, resist, or negotiate the dominant discourse of “sacrificial motherhood.”

I was especially interested in the essays on African-American mothering which construct a mothering style that differs completely from the white middle-class ideal of intensive biological mothering. The essays show how traditional African-American women-centered mothering, community, and other-mothering benefit women, children, and communities alike.

Another essay that stands out is Paula Caplan’s “Don’t Blame Mother – Then and Now.” Caplan discusses the mother blame inherent in the dominant psychological discourse and how it characterizes anything related to mothers as pathological and devoid of value. She uncovers the scapegoat function that mothers fulfill in North American society, assigning them the blame for such social problems as crime. Her harsh criticism of psychoanalysis, and the ways in which psychiatrists decide who is “normal,” is refreshing for every mother torn between her interest in education or paid work and her alleged duty to live only for her children.

This first Canadian volume of scholarly work on empowered mothering is a must for anyone interested in the contradictions that underlie the experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood.

## **The Grand Permission *New Writings on the Poetics of Motherhood***

Patricia Dienstfrey and Brenda Hillman, eds.  
Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003

### **Reviewed by Teresa Ottewell**

Patricia Dienstfrey and Brenda Hillman’s anthology, *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood*, is a compelling collection of women’s writing that belongs on the bookshelf of every mother who yearns to find ways to “get through the day with an intact sense of self.” *The Grand Permission* speaks succinctly to the experiences of women attempting to maintain a creative, soul-affirming existence amidst the conflicting time and emotional

demands inherent in the role of mother.

The editors asked 32 contributors to describe the dynamic connections between motherhood and creativity. Through the insightful and intimate exploration of self and (m)other, the authors' perspectives on the challenges of early parenting, on managing shifting priorities, on the loss of personal space, time, and freedom, and on the profound personal growth and development that motherhood offers, will resonate with any mother involved in creative pursuits.

Maxine Kumin opens the anthology by recalling her struggle to be regarded as a legitimate artist in 1950s middle-class America, when most female poets were childless (she had three children) and where the domestic form (which Kumin and fellow poet Anne Sexton used when writing about children, mothering, and emotion) was considered inferior. Toi Derricotte's stunningly frank account of being eighteen, middle-class, pregnant, and black in the 1960s strikes a strong chord about the perceived shame of a young mother in the pre-feminist era. Derricotte could not write of her experience until her son was sixteen.

Writers also consider the difficulty of being bound to structure and form, poetic or (m)otherwise, during motherhood. Mary Margaret Sloan writes that all boundaries were clear before she had a child; as a writer she "could withdraw into my solitary fastness of silence, to observe, think, read, and dream from my own point of view." Once her child was born, however, she felt "the rupture of my personal boundaries, the conquering of my keep of quietude, the assault on the solitary, inner directed self I hadn't even realized I possessed. . . . how could I even know who I was, or what I was thinking, or what I wanted to do if I weren't able to occupy my single point alone, if I had to share it with another person?" For Kimiko Hahn, being a mother-poet allowed her to be more fragmented, which brought her to writing Japanese *zuihitsu* poetry, a form that literally means to follow the impulses of the brush. Hahn states "fragmentation suits me because I love long pieces into which I can come and go as I please. Compartmentalized not unlike my own life of mother, wife, teacher . . . writer."

Alicia Ostriker writes that we learn to speak through our mothers, for "language is female. Silence is masculine. Masculinity is silence." Lullabies, baby talk, storytelling, rhyming games, and staccato toddler conversations become the poetics of motherhood in Frances N. Phillips's essay "Allowance." In our daily caregiving roles, these authors assert, we are all creative, even if that means being creative with our time and energy management. Dale Going writes that she "never figured out, as mothers who write must, how to act and reflect in the same time/space. How to live/how to write, without the slash." Going's observations capture the experience of creative mothers everywhere who cannot find the "uninterrupted time in which to be receptive to revelation."

In *The Grand Permission*, the rich inner and outer experiences of the writer/mother are wonderfully articulated. Beautiful and eloquent, the anthology is a delight to read.