

In the Middle of Everything *Memoirs of Motherhood*

Michelle Herman
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005

Reviewed by Jane Satterfield

In her 1994 book, *Women Writing Childbirth: Modern Discourses about Motherhood*, Tess Cosslett showed how deeply embedded cultural assumptions shape women's attitudes toward mothering. When women compose childbirth stories—in person or in print—as narrators they are always “making use of, but also questioning existing ideologies.” Childbirth is both a turning point and a narrative crisis that “destroys, confirms or creates a woman's sense of identity.” This narrative crisis—and the mother's subsequent recreation of identity—provides a focal point for Michelle Herman's *In the Middle of Everything: Memoirs of Motherhood*.

A writer and professor, Herman's memoir begins aptly, not with birth, but in the middle of things—the end of an ordinary, chaotic day in the Midwestern home she shares with her painter husband (“the only person I ever lived with, other than my parents, and now our daughter”). Herman and her daughter Grace, then eight, share a familiar mother-and-child bedtime scene: the child singing Britney Spears lyrics, talking about her first crush, asking her mother about the nature of love. This simple appeal takes Herman back to her past—her Brooklyn childhood of the 1950s and '60s, a romantic life of dating, and her passionate pursuit of an artistic vocation—vividly recreated in careful detail to explore the particular confluence of place and time that shapes this mother's and her generation's identity.

An accomplished storyteller, Herman's multilayered narrative moves back and forth in time from early adolescence, when her mother suffered a temporary but debilitating depression, to her own imperfect present. Herman's efforts to mother are met with unexpected challenges—her daughter's hunger strike at three months and a near-breakdown triggered by “separation/individuation issues” at age six. Having succeeded—having “managed to completely fulfill my daughter”—Herman confronts the difficult truth that it might not be so clear whose needs she has satisfied.

At the centre of *In the Middle of Everything: Memoirs of Motherhood* is Herman's voice—witty, insistently inquisitive, and deeply engaged in daily life. As she reflects on the joys of teaching, the enduring value of friendships, the dynamic evolution of mother and child, and her own misguided assumptions about every aspect of life, Herman's narrative affirms her conviction that love “improves you.” She suggests that the problems associated with motherhood are, in fact, “problems of humanhood: the experience of being alive and joyful,

or suffering, or in doubt or in a cloud of gloom or worry, or living through a moment of quiet, perfect pleasure.”

From Motherhood to Mothering *The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born*

Andrea O'Reilly, ed.
Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004

Reviewed by Monika Lee

This book is a thought-provoking array of disparate though wide-ranging essays, some of which are only tangentially connected to Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). The strength of the volume, however, lies in the diversity of perspectives and disciplines addressed: sociology, law, feminist theory, literary criticism, sexual politics, poststructuralist theory, and autobiography are all brought to bear on the discussion. Unfortunately, this reader was often left wishing for more thematic consistency or focus on the subject of the collection. The volume's introduction, for instance, might have established some of the lines of Rich's book's huge influence on culture and critical thought. Nonetheless, O'Reilly's introduction is readable and provides a comprehensive overview of the terminology of motherhood/mothering that has emerged from the legacy of Adrienne Rich's "ovarian" text. Insofar as O'Reilly documents her emotional and visceral response to *Of Woman Born*, the introduction is quite compelling; her reactions of outrage and awakening are clearly more than individual responses, for they have arisen in many of Rich's readers. O'Reilly also provides the requisite preview of the essays which constitute the rest of the book.

Even essays little concerned with Adrienne Rich are well worth reading. Margaret Morganroth Gullette's, "The Broken Shovel: Looking Back at Postmaternity at Co-Parenting," has little overt connection to Rich, but is a well-written and moving retrospective account of feminist co-parenting. Similarly, Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke's essay stands out as nuanced and provocative, although it too treats *Of Woman Born* only tangentially. Watson-Franke provides an anthropological overview of the few extant matrilineal societies in the world today and the ways in which these societies are empowering of mothering.

The collection is divided into three parts with part one, "Motherhood as Institution: Maternal Power and Maternal Outrage," focusing on the political implications of state reproductive control. Diana Ginn's essay offers a persuasive analysis of connections between Rich's ideas and Canadian court decisions