

Instead, by describing her fears and emotional turmoil in a raw and honest manner, leavened with humour, she provides an insider's view of what it is to be a fallible mother.

Included in Brockenbrough's narrative are memories of childhood, family, dating, and marrying Adam, her partner. These memories are well placed and serve to contextualize Brockenbrough's emotions and the reasoning behind her sometimes hysterically funny behaviour. She shares changes in personal perspective and how these changes come about—argely the result of the unfamiliar turmoil she experiences in her role as a new mother. We read of Brockenbrough's decision to follow her childhood dream of pursuing a writing career and not return to her former job. She also weighs her relationship with Adam—before and after the arrival of their daughter—and, for perspective, includes commentary from Adam, himself.

A down-to-earth writer, Brockenbrough addresses many niggling fears and concerns that parents-to-be may have, continually reminding readers that, despite best intentions, parents are ultimately human and babies are not automated washing machines that function in accordance with parenting books, guides, and manuals:

One of the baby books I read said that most parents understand their baby's cries after three weeks. That wasn't reassuring at all. Not only was I really tired and pretty much useless when she was three weeks old, I also had only a fuzzy idea of what she needed. Because the book said I should have known better, I was a confirmed failure. As a failure all I would do to soothe her was try a little of everything. I actually nursed her and changed her diaper simultaneously once. And once is the number of times I will ever do *that*. (130)

In this delightful book, Brockenbrough writes as a friend who shares her experiences and offers kind counsel: “it is not going to work out the way you think it is going to work out, all the books and manuals are not going to be all that helpful (but read them anyway), and in the end it is all going to okay!”

Great with Child: *Letters to a Young Mother*

Beth Ann Fennelly.
New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.

Reviewed by Jane Satterfield

In the 30 years since Adrienne Rich's groundbreaking *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience*, there has been an explosion of literature about

motherhood. From acerbic “hip mama” narratives like Ariel Gore’s *Breeder* or Kate Moses’s anthology *Mothers Who Think* to stern cultural studies like Judith Warner’s *Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, these accounts deal with motherhood as institution and experience in varying ways, blending first-person accounts with broader social analysis. An award-winning poet (Fennelly’s first collection, *Open House*, won the 2001 *Kenyon Review* Prize; her second, *Tender Hooks*, collects some of the most striking poems about motherhood and childrearing in recent years), Fennelly’s approach to a familiar subject is a welcome departure; her subtle lyricism and fierce intellect find perfect expression in the epistolary tradition.

“These are letters I would have welcomed when I was pregnant,” Fennelly writes, explaining her decision to share private letters written to a former student. Newly pregnant, with both parents dead and living far from friends, Kathleen became understandably panicked, wondering “who would help her, who would coach her through?” Partly “to stop her from leaking mascara on my shoulder,” Fennelly pledged to write daily, welcoming the opportunity to “shape my own reflections about pregnancy and child rearing,” quickly discovering that the exchange wove the two women into “that grand circle of women giving and getting advice about children.”

Fennelly’s witty prose accommodates life’s bewildering contradictions, as when she writes about the changes pregnancy brings to a woman’s life and a couple’s marriage:

It would be difficult to overstate how crazy and stupid lack of sleep can make a person—now get two such folks together and throw in a baby, especially if it’s a screamer, and you’ll find why sleep deprivation is a successful technique in cult indoctrination. Oh yes, the couple is now indoctrinated in a cult, the Cult of Baby, and their sleep is “a dirty torn cloth,” as the poet Alicia Ostriker writes.... For the mother, there are the physical changes, her depression about the extra pounds, the loose muscles that trickle out a drop of pee when she sneezes. Add to that her compromised wardrobe, the epaulettes of spit-up.... No wonder she has a lower sex drive, which frustrates the husband, who is already dealing with the fact that if his wife is breast-feeding, his former beauty queen is now a Dairy Queen.

Fennelly’s musings on her correspondent’s questions about life and art lead her beyond superficial observations, toward “stresses beyond these that aren’t mentioned so often”—the “eddies of discontent that begin to swirl in the formerly calm waters of the marriage”; the “judgmental” nature of the culture of motherhood; the “misogyny sometimes directed at women who produce not only children but creative work as well”; and “the erotics of motherhood.” *Great with Child: Letters to a Young Mother* is a compelling portrait of a modern woman’s journey through new psychic landscapes and an essential contribution to the literature of motherhood.