

## Family Reunion: Poems About Parenting Grown Children

Sondra Zeidenstein, ed.  
Goshen, Connecticut: Chicory Blue Press, 2003.

### Reviewed by Marion Gold

As parents, we sometimes celebrate our children's achievements as if they were our own. That privilege of ownership is withdrawn, however, when our children reach adulthood and their successes and failures belong to them. In fact, the parent-adult child relationship can be difficult. Often adult children misinterpret our best parenting practices, or do not appreciate our thoughtful parenting; sometimes parents go astray and become the enemy. Not everyone who reaches adulthood can say with equanimity, as Gloria Steinem declares in her memoirs, that as long as parents are not deliberately harming their children, they should be forgiven for their behaviour. In truth, the connection between parents and adult children is based upon memories of past experiences that, over time, are restructured.

Sondra Zeidenstein, editor of *Family Reunion: Poems About Parenting Grown Children*, has done parents of adult daughters and sons a great service in offering us a forum in which to engage our thoughts on the evolving nature of our relationships. Many of us already enmeshed in the complex web of adult-to-adult child love and friendship have discovered that the path toward mutual acceptance is fraught with the distortion of the past. Within the pages of *Family Reunion* we can engage in dialogue with many poets and perhaps ease our angst over perceived injustices. Here we read Myra Patterson's words in "Mother's Day, no children," for example. Patterson writes: "Truth is, my kids are living their lives, all grown. I have only to sit, to walk, to lie down, to eat fresh strawberries, breathe, love, and let go." We all should try to let go graciously, in fact.

In her introductory remarks entitled "Notes toward a Conversation in Poetry," Zeidenstein admits that she has always learned much about herself through literature, and especially through poetry. She poses questions in these "Notes": "Why shouldn't I expect to find poems that express the extraordinary sorrow and rage I felt when my daughter was finally determined to separate from me? Are there so few poets, particularly women, with adult children? Are so few of us moved to write about these relationships, these emotions?"

Parents engage in conversation with others from time to time, exchange confidences usually on a one-to-one basis, and often feel isolated and inadequate, particularly during the formative years of our children's lives. It is not surprising, then, that we are even more reticent to discuss the quality of our relationships with our adult daughters and sons. *Family Reunion*, however, can inspire us to muse, to discuss in groups, and to write poetry about the multiplicity of emotions

that refract from a parent's heart to an adult child and back again.

## Letters to Virginia Woolf

Lisa Williams.  
Lanham, MD: Hamilton, 2005.

### Reviewed by Roxanne Harde

In *Letters to Virginia Woolf*, a non-fiction work of 43 letters, Woolf scholar Lisa Williams focuses on mothering and violence and probes the significance of Woolf's life and writing. Williams is at her best in those letters that describe birthing and raising her son, the miscarriages she suffered before having him, and the fertility treatments she underwent in order to conceive. Her experience of mothering gives her a deeper understanding of and appreciation for her own mother. When describing great joy or great pain, Williams's prose is eloquent and direct; her first letter moves from a sunny fall day with her son in a New York City park to the devastating events that happened that very day, 11 September 2001. This letter opens with a quotation from Woolf, as do several letters, and Woolf's rumination on war and life from *Three Guineas* inspires Williams even as it enriches her insight into her own responses to the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. The last letters circle back to where the book begins as they discuss the first anniversary of what we now know as 9-11 and draw from Woolf's writings on war to make clear that Woolf, and Williams, are connected to history and life, disconnected from nationalism and war.

*Letters to Virginia Woolf* is not consistently successful, however. The letters are divided into six parts that do not cohere and the whole seems fragmented. Williams's ruminations—on 9-11, her body, and her child; her adolescence and the Vietnam War; her parents and their divorce; and her Woolf scholarship—cover a good deal of her life, and the divisions seem arbitrary and unenlightening. Further, I expected a scholar who has spent a good deal of her adulthood immersed in Woolf's writing to have more acuity with language. Woolf is generally a model of concision; Williams has a tendency to repeat images, words, and phrases, including clichés. How many times does one need to pause over a mother's beehive hairdo; how many times does one need to "revisit the landscape of my childhood"? Woolf's descriptions are cogent; Williams's prose is overwrought at times. A sun, for example, "seemed to stretch her arms languorously over hills and streams," and a mother's "hair splintered into many threads while the evening light hovered round her." When not weighted down with descriptions, Williams's prose soars and the two short poems she includes show a sharp acuity often lacking in this book. I will be sure to seek out her poetry on the strength of those poems alone.