

Special Delivery: Mother-Daughter Letters from Afar

Joyce Slayton Mitchell and Elizabeth Dix Mitchell
Culver City, CA: EquiLibrium Press, 1999

Reviewed by Ruth Nemzoff and Rebecca Norman

Dear Becky,

I have just finished reading a disquieting book, *A Special Delivery: Mother-Daughter Letters from Afar*, by Joyce Slayton Mitchell and Elizabeth Dix Mitchell. The book contains correspondence between an American mother living in New York and her pregnant, unmarried daughter living in rural New Zealand.

As the women exchange news of their daily lives and the impending birth, they demonstrate the difficulties of intergenerational communication. The mother sends carefully crafted, self censored messages to her daughter. The daughter says what she will and the mother continues to send circumspect advice and counsel. Throughout my reading, I wondered what this seemingly accepting mother would say of her daughter to her best woman friend. In fact, in the only letter to a friend included in this collection, Joyce vents her frustration over her daughter's choices.

I found myself unsettled, thinking about the price both generations pay for independence. This book shows the fine line between expressing things tactfully and being silenced. I wonder what you will think of this book.

Love, Mom

Dear Mom,

I read the book you sent me before I read your letter. Boy, was I relieved to hear that you too had mixed feelings about the book!

While there is always a perverse pleasure in reading other people's mail, I found these letters to be superficial. Given their circumstances—living on opposite sides of the globe and expecting a new child—one would think these women would send one another letters wrought with emotion. Instead, they skim the surface of their lives, briefly summarize events, and do not provide an honest account of their feelings. I hope that when I was teaching in Italy last year you did not feel so divorced from my life.

I, too, found the mother's letters to be disquieting. Beneath the mother's carefully worded suggestions to get married and to give birth within driving distance of a hospital, a reader can easily sense disapproval. After a lifetime spent encouraging her daughter to be independent, her letters belie an inner struggle over where support ends and enabling begins. Their brief discussion of household finances (where Elizabeth snaps at her mother, reminding her

that she is 30 years old and capable of conservative spending) is the only time daughter and mother seem to be speaking to one another directly, rather than dithering over the details of daily life. Are most mothers so estranged from their daughters? While these thoughts can be teased out of the book, I wonder whether many readers will continue to the end.

Much-love, Bec

The New Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship

Paula J. Caplan
New York: Routledge, 2000

Reviewed by Gill Rye

The cover of *The New Don't Blame Mother* announces that “this book has the power to change your relationship with your mother or daughter.” This is a self-help book, an updated and revised edition of Caplan’s original bestseller first published in 1989. The author is a clinical research psychologist and, in popularizing her subject, she does not hesitate to blame therapists for contributing to the mother-blame that permeates society.

The second edition includes a preface that takes account of newly published material in the field. Here, Caplan also points to recent social changes, such as developments in reproductive technologies and new trends in parenting and family arrangements that impact on the ways mothers continue to be blamed in society. The discussion relates primarily to the United States and Canada (and due praise is given to the activities of ARM).

The thesis of the book rests on two assumptions: first, that most mother-daughter relationships are not merely ambivalent but frequently a source of great pain; and second, that one of the major causes of such difficulty is the extent to which society blames mothers for everything that is wrong with their children. In *The New Don't Blame Mother*, Caplan seeks to help mothers and daughters help themselves by learning from the experiences of others and by thinking positively. Social attitudes towards mothers are analyzed through the polarized myths of the Perfect Mother and the Bad Mother. The Perfect Mother is an unlimited, natural nurturer; the Bad Mother is, at once, the mother who stays home and the mother who has a paying job outside the home. Whether “perfect” or “bad,” mothers are blamed for not conforming to stereotype.