

Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood

Naomi Wolf
New York: Doubleday, 2001

Reviewed by Michelle Moravec

Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991) was the closest thing that women of my generation had to *The Feminine Mystique*, so I had great hopes for her latest work *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood*.

Misconceptions is really three books in one. In part one, which accounts for almost half the book, Wolf documents her nine months of pregnancy. In part two, she discusses the medical model of childbirth that predominates in the United States. Finally, part three allows Wolf to explore the impact of motherhood on her life as a feminist.

Although she promises to “explore the hidden truths behind giving birth in America today” (13), Wolf offers little that is new in *Misconceptions*. Her indignant disbelief that pregnant women experience misogyny within the medical establishment and society makes one wonder where Wolf has lived, since numerous feminist authors before her have documented their own experiences of misogyny. And while she raises some potentially interesting issues – how pregnancy makes a feminist reconsider her position on abortion, for example – they are subsumed by sensationalism as Wolf imagines her fetus “lurching” (31) against her lungs when she voices pro-choice sentiments.

Wolf's ability to skillfully synthesize and interpret scholarly research made *The Beauty Myth* both powerful and popular. *Misconceptions*, however, is based on a loose compendium of random research and anecdotal evidence drawn from Wolf's personal experience and undocumented conversations with her friends. While she condemns the omnipresent *What To Expect When You're Expecting* for its “drawings of suburban white women in rocking chairs” (23), Wolf does not broaden her focus to include a more diverse group of women. If Wolf, a woman of privilege by any measure, had such negative experiences during pregnancy, how does she envision the pregnancy experiences of less privileged women?

Part three, entitled “New Life,” would seem to offer Wolf the greatest potential “to show how the experience of becoming a mother, as miraculous and fulfilling as it is, is also undersupported, sentimentalized, and even manipulated at women's expense” (2). But rather than serve as a revolutionary cry, “A New Life” reads as a lament for feminist principles, each of which is sacrificed at the alter of “fairness” (237) as woman after woman Wolf interviews resigns herself

to becoming the primary caregiver in her household. In “A Mother’s Manifesto,” five short pages in a book of 287 pages, Wolf does little more than compile a “wish list” of demands such as “real Family Leave,” “on-site day care,” and “tax deductions and benefits” for family members who care for “the new mother and baby” (284). Ironically, the same woman who “helped to launch a new wave of feminism” – according to the dust jacket of her book – offers a “motherhood feminism” (284) that looks more like a consumer-rights than a feminist movement. Unfortunately, Wolf’s book will do little to overturn the misconception that motherhood is not a feminist issue.

Naked Motherhood: Shattering Illusions and Sharing Truths

Wendy LeBlanc
Sydney, Australia: Random House, 1999

Reviewed by Shelley M. Park

Naked Motherhood alludes to the story of the emperor who had no clothes. As Wendy LeBlanc suggests in her introduction, “[a]ll of us collude with the conspiracy by pretending we can see [mother] fully clothed in all her mythological finery. We fear we will look foolish and inadequate if we admit we find motherhood difficult or cry out for help when we feel we can cope no longer on our own. Our mothers walk naked – and they do walk alone” (1). As the mother of two elementary-school age daughters, I often have bemoaned the lack of social support for mothering, as does LeBlanc. Although the mothers whom LeBlanc surveys in this social scientific study of mothering are from Australia and New Zealand, the notion that effective mothering is easy is an illusion that needs shattering in North America, as well. The demythologizing of motherhood begins, as LeBlanc suggests, by sharing our struggles as well as our joys. Mothering is a humbling experience. And we need to share these truthful, sometimes painful, sometimes embarrassing, stories of humility.

LeBlanc’s book is divided into eight chapters, each intended to expose the “gulf between [a woman’s] expectations and the actual experience” of motherhood (13). The first four chapters are arranged, roughly, in the chronological order of a new mother’s experiences. Chapter one explores the difficulties mothers may face with pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and sleep deprivation; chapter two examines loss of freedom and spontaneity; chapter three surveys post-partum changes in (physical, emotional, and social) self-image; and chapter four discusses the mother’s “emotional roller coaster.” Chapters five