

***Blessed Events:
Religion and Home Birth in America***

Klassen, Pamela E.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Reviewed by Amy Mullin

Blessed Events explores childbirth as a life-shaping experience. Pamela Klassen is a feminist scholar of religion who home-birthing her own children. The book is based on the author's interviews with forty-five home-birthing North American women from a variety of religious traditions (predominantly Christian, Jewish, New-Age, and atheists). While the women are mostly middle class and Euro-American, they vary not only in their religious affiliations but also in their commitment to feminism. Some are feminist activists, others are ambivalent about feminism, and still others view themselves as appropriately subordinate to their husbands. What they share is an interest in and respect for women's experience in childbirth, and a commitment to women's right to exercise control over the place of birth and the choice of birth attendants. Most of the home-birthing women were attended by certified nurse midwives and direct-entry midwives, but a few were attended by doctors or family members.

The two major issues Klassen explores are tensions between feminist and traditionalist understandings of the meaningfulness of childbirth and how agency "may be afforded to or denied women as they derive religious meanings from childbirth" (4). While she respects the women's narratives, and presents each sympathetically, Klassen is not uncritical. For instance, relying upon work in religion, anthropology, and feminist theory, she contests their understanding of home birth as natural.

After an introductory chapter explaining her theoretical approach and her method of selecting and interviewing the women, the second chapter explains what it means for relatively privileged North American women to home-birth. She discusses the history of changing childbirth practices in North America, and the social, legal, and financial repercussions faced by women who choose to home-birth.

The next chapter takes on the controversy over the safety of home-birthing, and debates about whether it involves self-sacrifice or selfishness on the part of women. Klassen shows us how risk is conceived differently by advocates and critics of home birth, before moving on to an analysis of how religion and spirituality are involved in women's interpretations of their birthing experiences. In this chapter, Klassen both explains and contests the distinction between religion and spirituality in scholarship and in popular discourse. The next three chapters analyze the meaning home-birthing women give to their homes, their bodies, and their pain. For instance, the women view

their bodies as animals, machines, and sources of spiritual power. Pain is seen as uncontrollable, intermixed with pleasure, something to be endured, something that can be overcome, and a source of enlightenment. Klassen is careful to explore both the potentially harmful and the potentially liberating ways home-birthing women make sense of their childbirth experiences. The final chapter explores the political significance of women's choices about childbirth.

Blessed Events will appeal most to those in the alternative birth movement, but it will be of interest to anyone committed to exploring female embodied experience, as well as those interested in relations between religion and spirituality. While the interviews themselves are intriguing and Klassen writes clearly, the book is sophisticated theoretically and will be most fully appreciated by those fascinated by how the experiences of home-birthing women both reflect and shape politics, culture, and religion.

***Mothering Daughters:
Novels and the Politics of Family Romance,
Francis Burney to Jane Austen***

Greenfield, Susan.
Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002.

Reviewed by Bonnie A. Nelson

In *Mothering Daughters*, Susan Greenfield offers illuminating interpretations of *Evelina*, *The Italian*, *Wrongs of Woman*, *Belinda*, *Adeline Mowbray*, and *Emma* and argues that these early novels emphasize “the centrality of mother-child attachment and ultimate separation that psychoanalysis inherited” (20). She also explores such topics as breastfeeding debates, women's rights to child custody, and “the role of maternity in colonial and abolitionist discourses” (14).

Greenfield connects the great resemblance of *Evelina* to her mother with the historical question of legitimacy. “The father has the lawful right to name the daughter, but the mother's imprint proves a more reliable record of marriage, kinship, and legitimacy” (37). Greenfield includes a fascinating discussion of “imaginationist” theories which erroneously “suggested that a mother's imagination and desire affected her child in utero, primarily in negative ways” (48). Burney, Greenfield argues, turns such theories upside down when *Evelina*, “through her uncanny resemblance to her mother ... is able to correct the injustices perpetrated against both of them” (42).

In “Gothic Mothers and Homoerotic Desire,” Greenfield offers a psychoanalytic reading of *The Italian*, a work she believes “linger[s] on the daughter's physical desire for her parent” (57). Using the term “homoerotic” rather than