

**Recollections of My Life as a Woman:
The New York Years**

di Prima, Diane.
New York: Viking, 2001.

Reviewed by Batya Weinbaum

Diane di Prima writes about being both a mother and a poet. Coming of age in New York in the 1950s, di Prima participated in the Beat literary movement, edited a literary journal with then Leroy Jones (now Baraka), associated with dancers, hung out in the Village, kept journals, and had babies. En route to her job at the legendary Phoenix Bookstore, she walked her months-old baby girl in a stroller down the streets of the Village.

Di Prima's story of connecting with the physical desire of her body to have a child, all the while feeling that a man was "incidental and unimportant to the process" (157), resonates with the experience of many women today. She set out to find a father for her child, refused to use birth control, and for the first time in her life felt at war with her art. "I was a poet, I had work to do" (161) had been the dictum guiding her life. Then, her guiding sense changed: "But this simple thing that was looming ahead of me, just a little way down the road, this inevitable, as I felt it, next step in life: to have a baby, to become a mother, this seemed to hold the essence of what I needed now to know. To be. In order to be a woman and a poet. There should, it seemed to me, be no quarrel between these two aims: to have a baby and be a poet" (162).

Unfortunately, di Prima experienced conflict. Former male mentors and friends would lecture her inappropriately. She felt she had "enough to do after childbirth just recovering without being subjected to unwanted pressure and moralizing" (167). For inspiration and strength, di Prima drew on her female lineage. Her mother had raised her on Pearl S. Buck's novel, *The Good Earth*, in which "the woman has her baby in the field and goes right back to work" (168). Her mother raised her to believe that women had to bear more pain than men. Hence, she felt empowered and invincible as she birthed her first child, "more than a little arrogant and impatient (168). She finally was whisked away into an elevator and "shoveled into a cot in a labor room" where she was surrounded by "six or eight screaming, moaning, or semi-unconscious women" (169). Even the brave poet had to lose some of her bravado then.

This book—which focuses on one woman's struggle to be both a mother and a poet—will be useful in courses on motherhood.