

underplay or deny the combined wisdom of therapist and stepmother. For instance, “Do a Two-Minute Reality Check” introduces a contemporary approach to dealing with those “evil stepmother/father” emotions, where sitting “with what is” becomes a way to the “emotional truth of your situation.” For instance, “Oh, I’m hurt at getting no positive reinforcement from my stepchildren despite all I do for them; I’m angry at my wife’s ex for not ponying up his share of the child support” (7). These are real issues. However, there is no discussion of how to share your “reality check” with your family—or even how to use it for your self-knowledge. I would have preferred more space devoted to the process of the “reality check”; the decision to create sixty-four brief lessons, instead of expanding some of the book’s more fundamental or difficult points, gives the text a slightly superficial feel. Perhaps this point-form method of presentation is designed to appeal to that very feeling of helplessness that the stepparent role can generate, by providing a lengthy checklist of things we can do, or do better. Or perhaps this book is meant to be dipped into, at odd moments, for a bit of inspiration and illumination. There is a spiritual subtext to this work, as we are urged to “Search for the Soul Growth” in the stepparenting role, for “those of us who are stepparents have been given the special opportunity to grow our souls through the experience of interacting with and helping to *care for and guide* someone else’s children” (40). It is hard to argue with that—however vaguely “New Age” the advice. I do agree that to find your role as a stepparent, you must recognize and put aside “smallness” on all levels. Despite its compression, this brief book is a first step towards a process of greater understanding of the complex nature of stepparenting in our age’s self-conscious, “self-made” family.

## **Lesbian Step Families: An Ethnography of Love**

Janet M. Wright

New York: Harrington Park Press, 1998

### **Reviewed by Dawn L. Comeau**

In *Lesbian Step Families: An Ethnography of Love*, Janet Wright, Assistant Professor and Chair of the Social Work Department at the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, draws on personal experience as she explores a previously neglected area of research about lesbian families. Wright’s book is based on her research for her dissertation: an ethnography of five lesbian step families.

Wright defines a lesbian step family as “two women who self-define as lesbian, at least one of whom brings a child or children from a former

relationship with her into the present family situation” (3). She is clear to indicate that she uses the words “lesbian” and “step” as adjectives. She rejects the term “step-family” because she believes it implies that step family structure is something “other than family” (3). Her research contributes to scholarship that documents and validates alternatives to traditional patriarchal nuclear families.

Wright addresses three primary areas of interest in her research. She explores how two lesbian women negotiate parenting, when one is the biological mother with legal rights, and the other embodies an undefined social role that resembles the traditional step mother figure. Secondly, she examines how two lesbian women in a step family structure influence and affect their children’s perception of male and female, and their understanding of adult unions. Furthermore, she analyses how these families cope with oppression and their marginalized status as lesbian step families, and how this impacts their family identity.

Wright reviews literature on feminist theories about motherhood and family structures, homophobia and heterosexism, and discourses on step-families that neglect to include lesbian perspectives. She continues with a comprehensive outline of her research methods and a description of the families that participated in her study.

The majority of Wright’s research focuses on the unique experiences in her participants’ lives due to their lesbianism and their step-family configurations. In order to maintain a healthy functioning family, she finds that her participants rely upon a “tolerant community, a significantly open lesbian/gay population, other lesbian families to socialize with, any legal status for lesbian/gay families and people, and a connection with supportive heterosexual friends, family, and acquaintances” (192). This includes presenting themselves as a “normal” family to “create acceptance based on similarity” while concurrently celebrating their lesbian family uniqueness and pride (193).

This uniqueness includes her participants’ abilities to create families without male adults. Thus, their family structures lack the presence of male privilege. As a result, children witness women accomplishing both traditional and nontraditional tasks according to desire and time—not gender assignment. Wright also considers the integration of a new parent into a preexisting family. She elaborates on the process of transforming the role of “step-parent” from outsider status to one of inclusion, and determines various methods of integration based on the age of the children in the family, length of the couple’s relationship, and their desires regarding familial responsibility and obligations.

Wright’s in-depth exploration of lesbian step families is an important contribution to feminist research, social work studies, gay and lesbian studies, and the gay and lesbian community. She accomplishes her goal, which is to disseminate knowledge that will assist in creating healthy, functional, lesbian step families. Her work is invaluable. I highly recommend it.