

their 20s and 30s frequently switch places with their grandmothers, with the younger woman becoming the nurturer, care giver and confidant of the older woman. Edelman speaks eloquently of the emotional discomfort and pain that “greying” granddaughters experience as they see the health and strength of their grandmothers fail, and how a granddaughter’s grief over the death of her grandmother does not have a forum. The death of a maternal grandmother means not only the passing of an era and the realignment of the female line, it also brings the loss of a multifaceted relationship, the loss of the granddaughter role and the loss of a direct connection to one’s childhood.

Before reading this book I had not thought much about the triad of my mother, my grandmother, and myself, or of the ways in which this trinity has influenced each of our lives. Like many of the other granddaughters in the book, I too was distanced from my grandmother, and often experienced a difficult relationship with my own mother. But, unlike Edelman, I did not have the good fortune of spending time with my maternal grandmother, who lived across an ocean, and died almost 25 years ago. We only saw each other for very brief periods of time once every few years, and my lone recollection of my Granny is of my last visit with her just before she died when I was 15. Although I did not have a strong relationship with my grandmother, reading Edelman’s book has provided insight into my relationship with my own mother, and the significance of the triad I am in as a daughter and mother. I am more aware of the role of each one of us in my child’s development and sense of self.

Overall this book is beautifully written, and Edelman braids her own memories with those of other granddaughters and with psychological research, making her book a smooth and easy read. My only criticism, which is minor, comes from my position as an academic. I found Edelman’s citation of sources to be unclear. Although she provides a good bibliography, the notes at the end of the book are not obvious in the text. It is not until I reached the end of the book that I found notes corresponding to references made within the text. Having said this, I strongly recommend *Mother of My Mother* to anyone interested in her own development as a woman, daughter, and mother, and to the role she may have in the development of future generations.

### **The Reality of Breastfeeding: Reflections by Contemporary Women**

Amy Benson Brown and Kathryn Read McPherson, editors  
Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1998.

### **Reviewed by Bernice L. Hausman**

In this volume, readers get a variety of short takes on breastfeeding in the latter

half of the twentieth century, mostly by white, heterosexual, middle class American women. The general story goes like this: breastfeeding is painful at the start (detailed exquisitely in the first section, “Latching On”), but in most cases it gets better and moms (and dads) learn to love the experience. The impression after reading the entire volume is of pain, problems, and (eventual) exaltation.

Is this, in fact, the “reality” of breastfeeding? In the introduction the editors write that because “nursing is natural [but] ... not instinctive,” “having some initial physical difficulties is therefore extremely common” (6). But these very difficulties are amplified in a culture that promotes bottle feeding, denies that breastfeeding is anything but natural, and, most significantly, assumes an idea of the autonomous person that is incommensurate with the physiology of lactation. As Alice Edwards writes, “The connection between fetus and mother and later between mother and nursing baby belies all our advanced, Western ideas about the self” (68). The question of whether breastfeeding is instinctual is not what is at stake here. Rather, what is significant is the cultural context in which this practice of the parturient female body takes place. For this reason, I liked the final section of the anthology, “Moving On: Family, Work, and Political Issues,” as in it the authors develop the most *conscious* discussions of the social contexts of nursing.

Perhaps the editors are right that women need to be forewarned of possible pain and difficulty and need to be highly motivated to persist in the face of common breastfeeding problems (or those that arise in the “special problems and situations” of Part II). But while I particularly liked those essays that represented the specific breastfeeding challenges I experienced—it was like comparing notes at a La Leche League meeting—the insistent reiteration of these makes overcoming them seem like heroism. We are, in fact, dangerously close here to idealizing maternal nursing—part of the pendulum swing of common stereotypes about breastfeeding (it’s painful; it’s magic). Only when we cease to perceive and experience lactation through these extremities will more women (and men) be able to accommodate it as an unexceptional aspect of maternal experience.

Until then, however, we need *The Reality of Breastfeeding* to make the experience legible for all of us who grew up without a discourse or set of representations to make it real. One of the best essays in the collection describes a mother who pumps and nurses her baby in a NICU (neonatal intensive care unit) in the early 1980s. The nurses screen off the room with sheets and cardboard so that no one can see what she is doing. When she leaves with her healthy baby, she sees an orderly with the electric pump on a cart: “It is covered with a white sheet, like a corpse” (30). Short gems like this make reading through the descriptions of cracked nipples and exhaustion worthwhile.