

Book Reviews

Double Lives: Writing and Motherhood

Shannon Cowan, Fiona Tinwei Lam, and Cathy Stonehouse, eds.
Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008

Reviewed by Cayo Gamber

Books on writing often discuss the competing demands made upon a writer, from the groceries that must be purchased to the tax papers that must be filed. Among the day-to-day demands that vie with the writer's efforts to attend to her writing, however, none are more pressing than the demands associated with parenting. As this collection of essays by writing mothers makes clear, children often win out over writing. A baby's wide-eyed delight, a child's fever of 104 degrees, a daughter's art project, a son's late-night call will interrupt the writer at her craft and almost invariably take precedence over her work.

The contest between the call to parent and the call to write has not been adequately discussed, as the editors of *Double Lives* assert:

Even today, writers who become mothers are more or less exiled from literary community by default, unless they hide or suppress their parenting life. Many famous mother writers avoid talking about their mothering in public. Despite the reading public's fascination with the writing process, the endless books of interviews with writers, revelations about the writing life, books about how to write or become a writer, almost nothing gets said about the effect of raising children on writing and how writer-mothers have coped. (xviii)

This varied and compelling collection of personal narratives analyzes the impact of motherhood on one's writing life and one's life as a mother.

Key words and phrases—mother, writer, subsumed, struggle, ambivalence, joy, surrender, longed-for quiet, breasts, hands, mess, sleeping, sleep-deprived, words, no words, family, career, tea, caffeine, time—echo across these narratives. In "Elements," Fiona Tinwei Lam insists,

[t]o write, mothers have to combat the continual erasure and submersion that mothering entails: the submersion of needs, ambitions, identity, and the erasure of privacy and personal boundaries. To reappear as a writer required a carving out of a mental and emotional space for oneself through time away from mothering, to be free to dream, read, and then eventually write, eventually building the kind of momentum that will drive a project to completion. (89)

Each of these mother-writers/writer-mothers describes the waves of submersion into motherhood and emersion into one's own writerly skin that are required to find the time and place to reflect, write, revise, and, finally, submit their work for publication.

This gathering of writers is as wide-ranging as their interests and includes women who are established writers, newly published, academics, freelancers, working class, privileged, poets, novelists, single mothers, partnered, mothers of one, mothers of six, biological mothers, non-biological mothers, heterosexual, lesbian, and ethnically diverse mothers. All the writers included in the volume are honest, insightful, and inquiring. For example, Cori Howard humorously describes her current life as a writer-mother:

Mostly, I'm miserable because I screamed at my son and at my husband. The story will get done. It just does. I feel sick that I screamed at my son to stop singing. I want him to sing. Just not when I'm working. Sadly, I'm sure I'll yell at him again. My husband knows I'll yell at him again and pretty soon, I'll be yelling at my daughter. So when my kids grow up, they'll think of writers as intense, spacey types who spend a lot of time staring at computer screens and yelling. Good. I don't want my kids to be writers. It's no way to make a living. (34)

Theresa Shea, on the other hand, observes that her efforts to write and to parent can be complementary:

Experience has taught me I do my worst mothering when I have other plans. It seems the children demand even more when they sense I've removed myself from them rather than surrendered to them. But experience has shown me that I parent better when I'm writing, because then I don't feel like I'm "just a mother." It's a dicey combination, juggling the needs to care well for my children and to write. (120)

Most striking is the common concern that underpins these narratives: a general anxiety about the value accorded to writing, the value accorded to mothering, and the writer-mother's overarching desire to affirm her worth through publishing and parenting.