

Rachel in the World: A Memoir

Jane Bernstein

Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2007

Reviewed by Barbara Schwartz-Bechet

One of the strongest bonds that exists is between a mother and a child. But can that bond remain strong when only the mother is able to openly express love? This appears to be the case for Jane Bernstein whose emotional memoir, *Rachel in the World*, describes her daughter, a spirited, talkative girl with mental retardation. In this second book about Rachel, Bernstein presents her experience of rearing two daughters, one of whom has a mental disability. Much more than a memoir of Rachel, the book also probes feelings of love, grief, and acceptance as a mother enables a daughter with a disability to take on the world.

An accomplished writer and professor, Bernstein facilitates her daughter's coming of age, while Rachel tries to distance herself from her mother, like any normally developing teenager. Like many young people approaching adulthood, Rachel looks up to her older sister Charlotte as an example of someone who takes risks and seeks independence. Bernstein's task, as a writer and a mother, is to understand and accept the fact that her child will become an adult who will live with a disability.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on Rachel from the fifth grade to graduation at age twenty-one. When Rachel is five, her father and older sister Charlotte leave the family while Bernstein remains with Rachel. Through compelling narrative, Bernstein describes her gradual understanding of her own needs and those of her daughter. Bernstein's aim in this section of the book is to help other mothers see the "big picture"—what the future offers adults with disabilities. The "big picture" is not presented in negative terms. Instead, Bernstein uses the terms "functional" and "transitioning" in positive ways and suggests that fighting for the rights of one's child is never wrong.

In the second part of the book Bernstein chronicles the frustrations and roadblocks, the helplessness she feels as she helps her daughter live the best possible life. This is a mother's journey as caregiver, advocate, and friend: "No one would ever search as hard as I had been searching to find her soul." Bernstein allows the reader to enter her world of triumph and heartbreak. She finds time to refresh herself on one sabbatical and several brief holidays. She finds appropriate placements for Rachel, first in Israel and then in the United States. Bernstein's victories are short lived, however. She learns, for example, that Rachel is not washing or changing her clothes, that she is rude to the people she lives with, that she does not understand when she hurts someone's feelings, that she is not always doing her job properly.

Rachel in the World evokes empathy for both mother and daughter and