

Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America

Cynthia R. Daniels, ed.
New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998

Reviewed by Wendy Schissel

Cynthia Daniels's contributors respond to a significant demographic fact: more than 50% of American children will live without their fathers at some point in their lives. Some of the authors of *Lost Fathers* see in this statistic a rationale for family dysfunction and youth criminogenesis. Some see it as a measure of the new plurality of families. Some authors point out the gender, race, class, or biodeterminist bias of reading fatherlessness as a negative. Still others, including Daniels, see the rhetoric of fatherlessness as a way to move public focus away from the hardships of single motherhood and the feminization of poverty back to a masculinist focus.

Among the good, the bad, and the ugly politics of this collection many things become clear. The good may be found in Robert L. Griswold's astute "The History and Politics of Fatherlessness" which advocates a demythologizing of an ideologically coherent fatherhood past. Juxtaposed against Griswold's thoughtful history is David Popenoe's bad sociology. In "Life Without Father," rife with the politics of hate directed against children but masquerading as advocacy for children, Popenoe cites fatherlessness as the "major force" behind juvenile crime and teen pregnancy. Problems abound in this paper from its sensationalized language to its poor statistics. Teenage boys of single mothers are not "notoriously prone to trouble" (38) as the good sociology of Mike Males (not cited) proves. Contrary to what Popenoe would have readers believe from the "evidence" and "recent research" he never cites, juvenile violent crime in the U.S. is not increasing.

The ugliest suggestion in the entire collection is that marriage and fatherhood are perceived in our society to be the only ways to tame the savage beast that is male. This powerful, bioevolutionary assumption is alive and well in the heterosexist rhetoric of "family values." Even uglier is the reality of systemic racism in those "values." In the best essay of the collection, "The Absent Black Father," Dorothy Roberts explains that "if missing fathers are perceived as the cause of society's ills, it is largely because Black culture is considered the benchmark of social degeneracy and female-headed households are the emblem of culture. It is the absent *Black* father who epitomizes the male component of family breakdown and its deplorable repercussions" (46). It is poverty that causes so much fatherlessness in America, not degeneracy, racial or otherwise.

It appears that many of the debates over fatherlessness are just new ways of avoiding necessary structural changes. As the final, fine essay of the book "Fatherhood and Its Discontents: Men, Patriarchy, and Freedom" by Drucilla Cornell makes clear, we need public policy that acknowledges and supports the multiple family forms that respond to economic hardships and puts the focus where public policy should be: on children and their care.

No Parent is an Island

Paula Johanson, Illustrated by Julie Van Alstine
Calgary, Alberta: Temeron Books Inc, 1995

Reviewed by Farah M Shroff

This collection of short stories is a fun and at times, touching look at the lives of the author's family. Paula Johanson writes about being the mother of twins in two very different parts of Canada: downtown Victoria, British Columbia and a remote farm north of Edmonton, Alberta. The book contains autobiographical stories that reflect upon Johanson's everyday experiences of mothering.

Many of the stories are humorous. Once, Johanson finds her children covered in Vaseline. They had tried to crawl away but had covered themselves and the floor in Vaseline and could not make a get-away. She describes many other such mischievous moments and has a page called "My Christmas Wish List" that includes business cards that read, "Don't tell me I'm a good parent-offer to BABYSIT." Most new mothers would benefit from a stack of Johanson's business cards.

Johanson's chapter on the birth of her children echoes much of the literature on hospital birth: traumatic, overly controlled by uncaring obstetricians, unnecessarily invasive. Having her partner and a friend with her during the intense and painful delivery makes an enormous difference. Nevertheless, shortly following the birth of her babies, she experiences severe depression which she attributes in part to insensitive hospital care. She also describes her experience as a new mother as being in "splendid isolation," meaning that for weeks in a row she would speak to only three adults. Many of her friends ignore her and others speak patronizingly to her. She describes being treated as someone with a very low IQ. In Johanson's case, these forms of mother-mistreatment result in clinically diagnosable mental health concerns, for which she seeks therapy over the course of one year.

For the first few years of her children's lives, Johanson is a stay-at-home