

Motherland: Writings by Irish American Women About Mothers and Daughters

Caledonia Kearns, Editor.
William Morrow, 1999

Reviewed by Bridget Matthews-Kane

When I was in high school, my father gave me a dog-eared article that analyzed the dynamics of the Irish American family. As I read it, a mix of fascination and horror crept over me because it seemed as if someone had been following my family around, observing our every move, listening in on our conversations and, even worse, creeping around inside our brains. How was this possible, I wondered? Wasn't I, the great-granddaughter of Irish immigrants, far enough removed from Ireland to have shed these personality traits and patterns of behavior? I put the article aside, but continued to ponder how ethnicity could influence the most immediate, personal, and seemingly unique relationships in my life.

Perhaps my fascination with this led me to pick up Caledonia Kearns' *Motherland: Writings by Irish American Women About Mothers and Daughters*. This well-chosen anthology contains fiction, autobiography, and political writings from well-known authors such as M.F.K. Fisher, Anna Quindlen, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Mary Gordon, newer voices such as Lisa Carey and Karin Cook, and more neglected, out-of-print writers such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Ellin Mackay Berlin. An appendix supplies succinct biographies on the book's Irish American and Irish immigrant writers. While weighed more towards contemporary stories, the well-chosen assortment contains twenty-four pieces from the past seventy-five years.

As the subtitle suggests, the stories focus on relationships between mothers and daughters. Besides this central theme, issues of guilt, faith, loyalty, tradition, silence, secrets, and storytelling resonate through the book. The range of contributions is matched by the quality. Several of the best stories come from memoirs; in an excerpt from "A Likely Story: One Summer with Lillian Hellman," Rosemary Mahoney recounts her childhood with her alcoholic mother and in an excerpt from another memoir, Mary Cantwell's "Manhattan, When I Was Young," the author relates her bout with postpartum depression. Another particularly fine piece is Maeve Brennan's short story "The Eldest Child," about the loss of a new-born infant. Included as well are humorous pieces: an excerpt on guilt and goldfish from Martha Manning's "Chasing Grace: Reflections of a Catholic Girl, Grown Up;" a clever piece by Jean Kerr, "The Child as Houseguest," on returning adult

children; and M.F.K Fisher's story of her mother's relationship with the local librarian, "Mother and 'Miss E.'"

While this fine collection presents a unique opportunity for readers to trace the faint patterns of ethnic behavior through the anthology the same way I, years ago, traced them through the whole of my own family, the universal appeal of these accessible and moving tales is sure to please a more general readership simply interested in the complex and rich relationships between mothers and daughters.

Maternal Justice: Miriam Van Waters and the Female Reform Tradition

Estelle B. Freedman

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996

Reviewed by Beth Ann Bryant-Richards

Estelle B. Freedman's biography of women's prison reform leader Miriam Van Waters offers a glimpse into women's involvement in social work in the decades following the Jane Addams generation. Freedman manages to cover an amazing amount of historical ground in her superbly researched work. Although Freedman undoubtedly intended her book for a scholarly audience, any reader would enjoy this compelling story of a remarkable and charismatic woman.

Freedman begins her narrative by examining Van Waters's early days as a caretaker of her family, which sets a pattern for her entire life as a mother figure for incarcerated women. The author takes us through Van Waters's childhood, which she spent as a minister's daughter with a strong sense of responsibility for others. Our extremely bright and curious heroine excels as an undergraduate at the University of Oregon and remains there for a master's degree. Her matriculation at Clark University in Massachusetts, however, finds the young idealistic Ph.D. student under the thumb of an egotistical, conservative advisor. Van Waters's struggles to gain a solid foothold in the midst of academic quicksand would resonate with any late-twentieth century graduate student.

In part as a result of her difficulties at Clark, Van Waters turned her professional sights away from academia and to work in juvenile delinquency and women's prison reform. Beginning with her career in California and throughout her days as the Superintendent of the Massachusetts Reformatory for Women in Framingham, Van Waters took her role as surrogate mother with utmost earnestness. She mothered teenaged girls in Juvenile Court in California, her professional colleagues and personal friends, her younger siblings and family members, adult women inmates, and an adopted daughter,