

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,

Sarah. Often ahead of her time, in 1929 the never-married Van Waters adopted a young girl she met through her work with the Juvenile Court in California, another act that would resonate with current trends.

Freedman is quick to point out that Van Waters's maternal impulse to "save" those around her did not extend to saving herself. Thematically, Van Waters built her life around helping others, yet found it extremely difficult to stop and take care of herself—another postmodern theme in women's lives. Taking care of Van Waters often became the task of Geraldine Thompson, her lifelong friend, benefactor, and "Guardian Angel" (Freedman, 1996: 234).

The only troubling part of Freedman's biography, in fact, deals with the unfortunate lack of primary source material covering the forty-year Van Waters-Thompson relationship. Due to a 1949 political attack against Van Waters's suitability as Superintendent, Van Waters burned Thompson's letters, destroying a lifelong record of their devotion. Van Waters's motivation in burning the letters centered around her political opponents' allegations of institutionally-approved lesbianism at the Women's Reformatory. Freedman deals expertly with the gap in her sources and freely admits that her research into that particular area of Van Waters's life proved difficult.

Estelle Freedman deserves recognition for bringing Miriam Van Waters's life of maternalistic service to our attention. Put *Maternal Justice* on your reading list.

## **Single Mothers and their Children: Disposal, Punishment and Survival in Australia**

Shurlee Swain with Renate Howe.  
New York. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

### **Reviewed by Elizabeth Yeoman**

Elizabeth Smart, celebrated poet and single mother of four, wrote of getting "twenty year's hard labour for a big begetting sin" (1978: 122). This book examines in detail the forms this hard labour took in Australia between 1850 and 1975—the earlier part of this period being a time when society was so harsh that abandonment and even infanticide often seemed like the only alternatives, and the latter date representing the abolition of the legal status of illegitimacy. The author describes this historical period as a "time when the survival of single mothers and their children depended on their silence" (1978: 5). The silencing took many forms, from denial of benefits and the refusal of accommodation, education and employment, to ostracism, to what amounted to imprisonment in 'homes' and the removal of babies for adoption by 'good' families.