

Mommy,” Darcy Mayers describes how she “collared” her children, scared them, and wanted them to be scared. She asks readers not to judge her actions, but her tale of physical and emotional abuse is disturbing. “The Pink Post-It Umbrella” by Devorah Lifshutz is also troubling. As she recalls how she smashes her son’s favourite toy, “sandwiches” his body between a wall and table, and “braces” her hands around his neck, she seems like a mother on the verge of a nervous breakdown. These narratives would be more appropriately placed in a volume that explores maternal stress and frustration.

Regrettably, *Walravens* also includes several essays that do not relate to the theme of the collection. For example, in one narrative the speaker laments her decision to divorce her husband because she worries about maintaining her middle-class lifestyle. In another tale, a woman gives details of visiting a food bank and the bureaucracy of the immigration system. The serious issues raised in these essays—economic dependence on men, discrimination, and poverty—are not addressed in terms of motherhood.

Torn offers many tales from well-educated, successful, and professional women who have the opportunity to decide between staying home to raise their children or pursuing their careers. Unfortunately, the voices of less advantaged mothers who grapple with other factors (i.e., depression, breastfeeding, premature children), and come from various backgrounds (i.e., lesbian mothers, othermothers, transnational mothers) are not heard in this volume. Without this diversity, the book becomes another text geared at privileged women who have the opportunity and the means to “opt out” of their careers.

Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women’s Literatures

Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O’Reilly, eds.
Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Jenni Ramone

This far-reaching collection of essays is committed to revealing mothers’ stories while establishing firm connections between the fields of Motherhood Studies and Literary Studies. The collection reaffirms a key aim of Motherhood Studies: to create an empowering practice and theory of mothering for women, countering the patriarchal master-narrative of motherhood that maintains notions of the ideal mother and the dangerous binary of good/bad mothering.

In these essays the study of maternal texts is always informed by the practice of mothering. One example is Elizabeth Beaulieu's analysis of Rita Dove's poetry of maternal ambivalence, far from the socially acceptable representation of motherhood as selfless yet satisfying. The analysis is framed by an honest discussion of the author's personal response to the poetry, which changed once she herself became a mother. This is characteristic of the volume as a whole: rigorous academic discussion is framed by a practical engagement with the social, cultural, legal, and psychological impact and significance of mothering.

The collection addresses many kinds of stories, ranging from well known literary texts—works by Margaret Atwood and Jamaica Kincaid—recent bestsellers—Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*—poetry—Sharon Olds's verse on mothering and sexuality—published memoirs, and birth stories posted online. The essays are held together by the contributors' common commitment to overturn the dominant critical engagement with daughter-centric stories, to reveal instead the mother's voice. This is done either by privileging the many recently published matrifocal stories—stories where the role of mother is central—or by bringing a matrifocal perspective to stories of mothers and children, and acknowledging the role of mother as culturally significant and of social value.

The four sections of this collection refer to the lived reality of motherhood. The essays consider absence (mothers who are missing or abusive), ambivalence (a common aspect of mothering), agency (temporal and geographical shifts in the power of mothers, i.e., lesbian mothers' legal rights in specific locations), and communication (why and how women talk about their experiences of labour and birth, and discussions of mothering in postcolonial and diasporic contexts).

Although the contributors come from various disciplines, the collection is coherent and the maternal voice is heard clearly. Postcolonial, postmodern, psychoanalytical, and gender theories are addressed, but feminism—not surprisingly—is the dominant discourse. Feminist theory is problematized in interesting and accessible ways in both the editors' introduction and in numerous essays, and the argument that feminism and mothering are sometimes antagonistic, sometimes supportive, helps to justify the need to study motherhood as a distinct field of enquiry. The collection offers genuinely new perspectives on a number of texts frequently studied and researched, but, more importantly, it brings together lesser-known texts and new media to inform and promote Motherhood Studies and the teaching and ongoing research into texts of all kinds by and about “mothering, motherhood and being mothered” (1).