

When Mothers Kill Interviews from Prison

Michelle Oberman and Cheryl Meyer.
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Reviewed by Joanne C. Minaker

The notion of a mother killing her own child shakes the foundation of our core conceptions of love, trust, and altruism. And yet, those women spoke to us not as monsters, but as people who were capable of kindness ... and who undertook, day by day ... the central task in their lives, as in our own: creating a bond of love and connection with others. (141)

In July 2011, Casey Anthony was found not guilty of killing her two-year-old daughter, Caylee, a case which seemed to captivate national television viewers for three years. The legal verdict failed, however, to exonerate Anthony as a “baby killer” and a bad mother in the public imagination. She was on trial in the courtroom, in the wider society, and on social media. Many asked “how could a mother behave like this?” The mother who takes her child’s life is a woman who is deemed doubly deviant, having broken criminal law and transgressed femininity. Other high profile cases, such as Andrea Yates and Susan Smith, strike a similar chord. They simultaneously contradict and reify a belief in women’s presumed natural role as nurturing, caring mothers.

In cases of maternal filicide—when a mother kills her child—popular and media discourse conflates *what she has done* with *who she is*. In *When Mothers Kill: Interviews from Prison*, Michelle Oberman and Cheryl Meyer offer a different, seldom-heard perspective. The authors argue that “[s]o great is the horror of their acts in killing their children that we tend to view them as non-mothers. We reduce the days, months, and years of their mothering to the fact they killed their children” (84). Based on their interviews with 37 women incarcerated in the Ohio Reformatory for Women for killing their children (out of approximately 1,800 inmates only 69 women were so charged), Oberman and Meyer encourage readers to direct their attention to the behaviour of the women rather than malign the women themselves.

By telling untold stories, the book seeks to humanize the women incarcerated for filicide. Nancy, who smothered her newborn baby, admits, “I am not a vicious person, but I did this with my own hands” (13). Indeed, the interviews are “as enlightening as they are terrifying” (2), and the book’s great-

est contribution is its recontextualizing of the problem of maternal filicide. When viewed from a wider socio-economic context, the story of maternal filicide offers a cautionary tale about marginalized motherhood and illuminates how the women's own mothers affected their lives, especially as young moms. *When Mothers Kill* depicts young mothers who felt isolated and vulnerable, but had only an intrusive state agency to turn to for help rather than a caring community or positive family relationships. The analytical discussion in chapter six on social and institutional structures that framed the mothers' lives raises important questions about the role of state institutions and agents as precursors to the women's crimes. The authors' claim that lack of social supports impinged upon the young mothers' ability to cope with the stress of motherhood. Oberman and Meyer demonstrate how the mothers, as children, "moved into and out of reach of the system, in part by their own choices, and in part because of the narrowly defined duties of those who held up the safety net" (103). This poignant remark underscores the complicated encounters between women and the state and the narratives gathered here show that the boundaries between women's victimization and their offending are often blurred (for example, 26 women were themselves abused).

Although the authors have done well to situate the women in socio-economic terms, more attention could have been paid to questions of race and ethnicity. It is notable that Anthony, Smith, and Yates—all cases with much media coverage—were all white women. Oberman and Meyer recognize the salience of socio-economic status, yet with 40 percent of the sample being women of colour, the reader is left to ponder the importance of race and what role inequalities of class, race, and gender play in the systems in which mothers' lives are embedded.

Oberman and Meyer offer a book that treads new ground and will be of interest to scholars, practitioners, social workers, and criminal justice professionals who work with and/or study mothers who have "few of the resources they need to build stable lives" (83). This book lays bare the fundamental need to address the underlying systemic social issues—gender violence, racism, and poverty—that lie at the heart of the challenges faced by marginalized mothers. Only then will children and their mothers begin to find the social supports they need to build loving, trusting, and healthy relationships.