

Boundaries of Touch: Parenting and Adult-Child Intimacy

Jean O'Malley Halley.

Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007.

Reviewed by Patricia N. Douglas

Jean O'Malley Halley's *Boundaries of Touch* is a courageous historical account of one of the most controversial issues of twentieth century United States—adult-child touch. Informed by scholars like feminist Susan Bordo and Michel Foucault, the author traces the key historical tension between “behaviourist” and “naturalist” perspectives on mother touch, outlining the paradoxical and intimate ways science is implicated in the making of nations and gendered selves. A self-proclaimed feminist, child sexual abuse survivor, and “attachment” (naturalist) parent, O'Malley Halley engages the reader in a page-turner made robust with an array of sources. She draws not only from scholarly and historical resources, but also from interviews completed with mothers aged twenty-eight to seventy-three, as well as a large sample of twentieth century self-help parenting books. O'Malley Halley issues a central challenge to the “to touch or not to touch” debate: adult-child touch is both potentially dangerous *and* vitally necessary.

O'Malley Halley introduces the reader to the debate about touch through an historical account of the rise of the scientific “expert.” By mid-century, this key shift usurps traditional feminine knowledge, naturalizes the male/female, public/private divide, and justifies the ascendancy of a deeply patriarchal capitalist consumerism that continues to rely on the unpaid labour of women. Next she takes the reader through fascinating case studies of breastfeeding, sleeping with baby, child sexual abuse, and pleasurable adult-child touch. Through such intimate sites, advocates and “experts” of both behaviourist and naturalist perspectives appeal to science to shore up the “good” mother as white, hetero-normative, and middle-class. “Bad” mothers who fall outside this norm (black, lesbian, single, poor, disabled, etc.) become a threat to the moral order and health of the nation. They must be reformed and brought into the middle-class project of scientific mothering, variously defined by “experts” as rational (behaviourist) or intuitive (naturalist). O'Malley Halley concludes with a brief exploration of deeper questions: How might this study help change women's lives? What does the debate around touch reveal about subjectivity, power, and what it means to be human?

If anything, O'Malley Halley leaves the reader wanting more. Tantalizing tidbits from her interviews beg for more exposure as powerful teachers about the painful contradictions in mother's lives. Second, direct engagement with Bordo and Foucault is all but absent from the author's extensive case studies of adult-child touch. This leaves the reader wondering about their explicit connection outside of O'Malley Halley's use of "ideology," a term Foucault himself did not use as it implies that somewhere outside of ideology lies "truth." Further, while O'Malley Halley brilliantly exposes how the seemingly mundane choices mothers make are replete with complex histories and lived realities, it is only in her conclusion that she touches on the large questions cited above.

O'Malley Halley advocates mothering as a contingent and uncertain venture, one that involves complicated histories of power and difference and difficult choices that disrupt any truth or certainty about being human offered through the clarity of science. *Boundaries of Touch* gives mothers, activists, and scholars a stunning and thoroughly researched *must-read* that contributes to key political questions of the day around power/knowledge, embodiment, and the social control of mothering.

Urgent Message for Mother: Gather the Women, Save the World

Jean Shinoda Bolen.
San Francisco: Conari Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Louise Gonsalvez

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a sparrow asked of a wild dove. "Nothing more than nothing," was the answer.

"In that case I must tell you a story, the sparrow said. "I sat on the branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow. Since I did not have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was 3,741,952. When the 3,741,953rd snowflake dropped onto the branch, nothing more than nothing, as you say, the branch broke off." Having said that, the sparrow flew away.

The dove, since Noah's time an authority on the matter, thought about the story for a while, and finally said to herself, "Perhaps there is only one person's voice lacking for peace to come to the world." (Bolen 142)