

## Home is Where the School Is: The Logic of Homeschooling and the Emotional Labor of Mothering

Lois Jennifer.

New York: New York University Press, 2013.

REVIEWED BY LIDDY DETAR

Jennifer Lois' *Home is Where the School Is* contributes a powerful discussion of homeschooling mothers' emotional experiences to a field generally given to discussions of academic and social impacts of homeschooling on children. Divided into three parts, Lois' book traces her subjects' choices to take on the dual role of "mother-teacher" (103) and their strategies for defending that choice in a society that often considers homeschooling a suspicious act. She explores how that decision shapes a mother's identity and her emotional experience of being a mother against the discursive backdrop of contemporary dominant notions of "good mothering" in the United States. Lois' subjects draw on notions of good mothering to articulate the relationship between the choice to homeschool and their maternal identities. Lois reads homeschooling mothers' emotional narratives as culturally constructed, and she suggests they offer an important contribution to our understanding of the meaning of motherhood in the United States.

Lois begins with a discussion of Sharon Hays' "ideology of intensive mothering" (7), locating her subjects in what Hays calls a "cultural contradiction of motherhood" caught between the discourses of maternal sacrifice on the one hand—and the key liberating tenets of twentieth-century feminism which urge women to maintain an independent sense of self (8). Lois conducted initial interviews in 2001 of 25 mothers in Cedar City, WA, who were associated with the local homeschooling group, PATH (Parents' Association for Teaching at Home). Eight years later, she conducted follow up interviews to discover how homeschooling had evolved for her subjects. While her subjects represent the white, middle-class, heterosexual, predominantly practicing Christian family population that dominates homeschooling in the United States, Lois makes an effort to show a growing diversity in the homeschooling population, and her study includes women ranging in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties with 1-12 children at home; an African-American woman; and an "Hispanic-American" working class mother.

Chapters one and two explore how mothers came to homeschool and the relationship between that choice and notions of "intensive mothering." While historically, homeschoolers have been divided according to whether they homeschool for religious or academic reasons (as if these two are exclusive),

and for how they enact their schooling at home, Lois skillfully re-shapes the conversation around how mothers “feel” and the *emotional* “choice” to homeschool, revealing common themes among mothers across religious/secular divides. This focus allows Lois to reveal her subjects’ often-painful struggles against the social stigma of homeschooling to articulate choices and identities that define them as “good mothers.”

Part II, “The Temporal-Emotional Conflict of Good Mothering” explores the intensive demands of homeschooling, her subjects’ feelings about time, and how these feelings shape their mothering identities. Lois compassionately explores her subjects’ experiences of isolation and failure. She describes two strategies—“sequencing” and “savoring”—which her subjects enact to “keep going” and justify their loss of personal self and professional identity. Through a narrative of motherhood as a short-lived “season,” and the importance of “savoring the moment,” Lois’ subjects defend their choices against critical narratives that describe them as “over-achieving” and “pathological.” Lois suggests her subjects’ reliance on dominant discourses of good mothering to defend their choices reveals how the cultural construction of motherhood likewise constructs how we understand and interpret our maternal emotions.

In Part III, “Homeschooling Motherhood Over Time,” Lois presents findings from her second set of interviews conducted eight years later. Her book offers one of the only studies to track homeschooling families over time, offering valuable insight into the question of how homeschooling evolves and therefore how a homeschooling mother’s identity continues to reinvent itself. Lois discovers a range of homeschooling outcomes: from those who stopped homeschooling, to those who decided to “do it all” despite the hardships (144). Lois’ final chapters discuss how such shifts in homeschooling re-shape mothers’ emotional narratives and therefore their strategic engagement with dominant discourses of motherhood.

Throughout her research, Lois powerfully situates herself in her project. As a woman of significant privileges, Lois was able to “blend” (27) in with the PATH community; yet she was not a mother at the time she met her interviewees. Although she had two children in the interim, Lois describes her “outsider” status (24) to the homeschooling community, subject to suspicion for her “lack” of motherhood. Later, she felt judged for her decision NOT to homeschool her own children. Lois’ honest discussion of her relationship to homeschoolers allows for a wonderfully rich exploration of her own maternal identity and life choices, alongside those of her interviewees. Lois’ presence as a mother in her text offers a potentially valuable conversation between mothers across the seemingly un-crossable divides of those who homeschool (and therefore potentially love their children “more”), and those who choose to (or otherwise must) send their children outside the home for their learning. Lois

positions herself as a researcher *and a mother* who cares deeply about her subjects', as well as her own, emotional experience of parenting. She crosses the divide between those who do and those who don't homeschool. Figuring that crossing in her work offers opportunities for collaboration and perhaps, with careful listening and conversation, even the possibility of collective resistance to those troubling dominant narratives of good mothering.

## **Mothering and Literacies**

Amanda B. Richey and Linda Shuford Evans, eds.  
Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2013.

REVIEWED BY TATJANA TAKŠEVA

In the current North-American socio-cultural context, where recent reports reveal that a staggering 42 percent of Canadian adults between the ages of 16 and 65 have low literacy skills, and a similar percentage of Americans are at either basic or below basic levels of proficiency with text, a book about mothering and literacies is a welcome publication. As difficult as it is to measure literacy, and as contested the definition of literacy may be, these statistics reveal that something is profoundly amiss in the North American public school system, as well as in the culturally dominant discourses about literacy. Although neither the editors nor the contributing authors situate their discussions within the context of these recent statistical findings and their implications, the book contributes to a body of existing scholarship that problematizes easy definitions of literacy and the role of parents, mothers specifically, as main transmitters of literacy skills and attitudes toward reading.

The editors posit an understanding of literacy that is "multiple, local and contextual" and situate their approach in the context of "larger contested stories of institutional and sociocultural relationships of power, privilege and meaning making." The book contains sixteen chapters divided into five sections: "Literacies of Pregnancy, Birthing and Adoption," "Literacies and Schooling," "Mothering and Visual Literacies," "Mothering and Literacies in Cross-Cultural Contexts" and "Public Discourses of Literacy and Motherhood." The section on mothering and literacy in cross-cultural contexts is overall the strongest in the quality of essays it contains and offers the most in terms of new ways of thinking about mothers and literacy in global contexts.

Seven essays from the collection as a whole deserve special mention as providing new insights into the relationship of mothering and literacy. Stacey Crooks' chapter on the construction of maternal subjectivity in family literacy