

others rejoice in the way their world has expanded with the arrival of a longed-for child. Amy Lavender Harris exults, “We named our daughter Katherine Aurora because she is made of pure light. Like a star spiralling from a distant supernova, she travelled from the furthest reaches of the cosmos to belong to us and be our girl!” (132). (*Full disclosure: the writer of this review is a mother of two daughters.*) Being a mom-writer, however, not only brings new inspiration, but also new relationships to nurture and protect, as Sarah Yi-Mei Tsiang reveals in “Mommy Wrote a Book of All My Secrets,” her young daughter’s lament after listening to Tsiang read poems sparked by some of their intimate moments. Yet clearly the existence of this book reveals that nurturing the child also means nurturing the writer—ideally, a “win-win” situation. As Deanna McFadden declares, “I love my son—desperately, wholly.... I revel in him, but it’s not enough—it’s not enough, this being a mother” (“The Girl on the Subway” 158). Being *pro-creative* is no substitution for being creative on multiple fronts; the fascinating book that is *The M Word* is certainly proof of that.

Motherhood and Infertility in Ireland: Understanding the Presence of Absence

Jill Allison

Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 201.

REVIEWED BY ABIGAIL L. PALKO

The subtitle of Jill Allison’s ethnographic study of the experience of infertility in Ireland draws the reader’s attention to absence, and absence is a crucial experiential motif throughout her work. But, as she discusses, an equally definitive characteristic of infertility in the Irish context is its multiplicity of irreconcilable contradictions. Speaking of the dilemma of surplus embryos potentially created by *in vitro* fertilization, one interviewee shares, “That’s why it’s such a problem because your views are contradictory” (169). This sense of conflicting opinions and moral stances characterizes the experience of ART—and more broadly, infertility—that Jill Allison examines. In her conclusion, Allison notes, “The most important discovery for me, as a researcher, and the most complex analytical issue, has been the consistent presence of conflicted feelings, contested ideals, and ambivalence that is evident in narratives as people describe the difficult decisions they make in relation to reproduction and infertility” (182). *Motherhood and Infertility in Ireland: Understanding*

the Presence of Absence delineates these contradictions and this ambivalence through an insightful empathy and a clarity of analysis; in this study, Allison offers a crucial intervention in constructions of maternal identity.

Motherhood and Infertility in Ireland is based on interviews with forty women; ten of them participated with their partners. It is a feminist medical anthropological exploration of understandings of fertility and infertility as constructed experiences; it contextualizes discussions of these difficulties within the social and political environment in Ireland, attending to the additional influence of the Catholic Church's rhetoric and involvement in public life. Allison is sensitive to the real impact of her interviewees' experiences on their lives and relationships. She is deliberate in her acknowledgement that she is co-constructing knowledge; her theoretical formulation of the presence of absence, she explains, develops out of observations made by Elsa, one of her interviewees.

By naming the absence that is present, infertility, Allison shifts the lens through which we view Irish history and cultural attitudes toward mothering. This shift expands our understanding of who comes to call herself a mother and how; Allison identifies grief as the frame through which women make sense of the losses inflicted by infertility by allowing them to "reconfigure themselves as *having* children who did not come" (75; emphasis in the original). Such a reconfiguration expands the category of mother to include those who have attempted to conceive, even if they have not carried a pregnancy to term. This expansion of maternal identities is particularly salient in the Irish context. This is a book of great importance for Irish Studies scholars, particularly those interested in the family and its formation, as well as motherhood scholars.

Not only does Allison perceptively represent the Irish context, but she skillfully draws multiple cross-cultural comparisons. Furthermore, Ireland offers an ideal case study, as she explains, due to its codification of woman as mother in the 1937 Constitution. As such it facilitates an examination of the gender implications of the experience of infertility and the process of using assisted reproductive technologies (ART) to conceive children. For example, speaking of gamete retrieval, she notes, "For men the process is 'sexualised' and carries connotations of sexual deviance.... for women the process of egg collection is completely medicalised and devoid of sexual connotation, carrying, in addition, an attendant notion of risk and sacrifice" (109).

She deals with the ethical/moral considerations throughout, demonstrating a thorough understanding of the Catholic Church's stance and its impact in her focus on the "nuanced history of church and state relations" (123). Herein lies the only disappointment with the book: in her emphasis on the imbrication of the Church in women's reproductive decisions, she overlooks