



To Hell with All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife

Caitlin Flanagan

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From Caitlin Flanagan, The New Yorker's most entertaining and acerbic wit--a controversial reassessment of the rituals and events that shape women's lives: weddings, sex, housekeeping, and motherhood. Caitlin Flanagan, the hilarious and hotly disputed social critic, compares the rituals and experiences that shaped the fifties housewife with those that have forged the modern woman, and arrives at some surprising conclusions. In her signature prose--bitingly funny and brutally honest--Flanagan examines everything from the contemporary white wedding craze to the epidemic of undersexed marriages. Whether she is reporting on the mommy wars, the anti-clutter movement, or America's new nanny culture, her book reveals both the high cost women pay for devoting themselves to the people they love, and also the matchless rewards that come from such a sacrifice. Caitlin Flanagan began her magazine-writing career at the Atlantic Monthly in 2001 with a series of essays on modern family life that became an immediate sensation and the subject of an ongoing and heated national discussion. Now a staff writer for The New Yorker, her essays are passed from friend to friend, challenged and championed in the media, and often made the subject of book group discussions. With its insightful observations and trenchant conclusions, TO HELL WITH ALL THAT will generate controversy and serious media attention while it also delights and enlightens readers across the country.

To Hell with All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife Details

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Lynn Weber says

Caitlin Flangan is possibly the most controversial author writing today: someone who writes for high-level culture magazines like the New Yorker and the Atlantic and yet is truly hated by many intellectuals. Her infamous Atlantic essay on nannies pissed off the entire world---including me, though I didn't take note of her name at the time. Later I read her column on Twilight and was startled to realize that the writer of this wonderful piece was also the writer of that awful nanny piece.

Flanagan has kind of repudiated the nanny piece, but she still pisses off a lot of people because she writes positively about traditional family structures. She dares to say, for example, that a mom who spends day in, day out with her child is likely to have a kind of closeness with that child that a mom who doesn't won't. But, all things being equal, isn't that kind of obvious? I'm the fourth child in my family but I can admit that parents with only one or two children seem closer to those children than those with more, all the while being very grateful that my parents had four. And I realize that the trade-off in intimacy with parents is more than made up for by the great gift of siblings.

In other words, we don't need to fear the truth. It's okay to say that something is lost when a mother works. Every set of social change brings with it losses AND gains, and we can admit to the losses because we know the gains are worth it. And Flanagan certainly isn't afraid to admit to the gains as well. She tells how her own mother, who was very traditional and whom Flanagan adored, threw down the sponge one day and went back to work, against her husband's wishes. She can tell how she herself hired nannies so she could write. Critics act like they're catching her out with these facts, but the tension between these things is exactly what Flanagan is writing about.

Her writing is the kind of writing I like best: smart and accessible, insightful and not afraid to tease out the complexity of social relations. She's also damn funny.

Julie says

Caitlin Flanagan is undoubtedly an amusing writer--but she holds herself out as an annoying "i'm better than all of you" example of I don't even know what--anti-feminism? neo-feminism? martha-stewart-is-my-idolism? i haven't quite figured it out. But I do like to read her articles and so I have grudgingly given her three stars, rather than that the 2 for "it was ok." it was better than that--but nothing more than another entry in the i-can-bring-home-the-bacon-fry-it-up-in-the-pan-and-after-that-i-can-love-my-man genre.

Lori says

Flanagan has a sharp wit and can write some enjoyable prose. But she really comes across as a Stepford Bee-otch in this book, so it was hard for me to appreciate. On the one hand, she has all the fond rose tinted memories of childhood that I love as well. I recall a simpler time (don't we all?) when I spent long happy days in the company of my mom doing things around the house and around the small town where we lived. I

remember when things felt organized...when weekends were generally weekends (not errand death marches or extra time spent at work) and when kids were not expected to assume schedules that would intimidate society debutantes. Our constant craving for organized activities, structure and "school" for toddlers drives me insane. Yes. I stay home with my kid. Yes. I enjoy it. Yes. I chose to because I wanted to give her a few years of "childhood" the way I remember it. And yes. I feel this has been the best choice for MY family (not necessarily for yours...that is your call.)

So it is occasionally nice to hear something positive about being an "at home mom".

But...Flanagan is not going to be the standard bearer for women who choose to stay at home with their kids. There are two glaring problems with Caitlin Flanagan.

1. She apparently stays at home with her kids mainly so she can drive them to the nonstop activities I mention above...or so she can get on the phone to hire people to come into her house and do the work that middle and working class "housewives" do. (As in cooking, cleaning, taking actual care of her children and basically everything. I never really did figure out what Caitlin Flanagan did at home herself. How can you write a tribute to the domestic arts and hands-on mothering if you don't do your own housework and even fail to clean the puke off your own child? (the nanny does that) Caitlin Flanagan...thy name is Carol Brady!)
2. As much as she waxes poetic about her late mother's housekeeping mojo and all the benefits inherent in having a parent at home with you during the formative years...in the end she seems to harbor a true disdain for moms who don't work jobs outside the home. Lucky Caitlin can call herself an "at home mom" because she doesn't have to go to an office to work. However she does not have to be one of us frumps (with no life) either....the kind she pokes fun at during a school event for one of her kids. No. Caitlin is "important." She's writing a book! And she writes articles for major periodicals...from home...while her nanny wipes puke...and her housekeeper cleans the bathroom...and her "organizer" deals with the endless clutter that makes most of us regular mommy folk feel like a high level explosive containing Little People just detonated in the middle of our living room.

So read this for a few good yucks. We can all benefit from poking fun at ourselves from time to time. And it is kind of refreshing to know that many women are conflicted by the myriad roles and expectations that are currently in place. But, unless you are upper middle class or higher, don't expect to relate to this book.

Callie says

I am so NOT enjoying this book, but since I'm 3/4 finished, I'm sure I will skim to the end of it. She's a good writer, but I just really can't relate to what she's talking about. Her stories are those of the problems with nannies, overscheduled kids, keeping up with the Joneses-Mommy Edition, etc. She is describing just the kind of life that I'm so trying to avoid. The book is quickly becoming annoying...

Ok, I finished it out of obligation. Flanagan is a good writer, I'll give her that. I just didn't enjoy the things she had to talk about. So, maybe for "upper middle class" (her description of herself and cohorts) people that

can relate to what she's depicting, it might be an enjoyable read. In the end, I found it to be actually quite sad that the life described here is what many people aspire to.

Christy S says

This is a witty, wise account of what it means to be a mother, a wife, a woman in 2006. The audio is read so well you would think it is the author reading, though it isn't. One chapter is an exceptional description of the bizarre, intimate, and confusing relationship between a woman and her nanny. I also loved Flannigan's use of books and mindsets through the decades to create the culture of the American housewife today: something built of should be's, feminism, instinct, and consumerism. Very clever.

Thomas Litchford says

Caitlin Flanagan writes about motherhood without the sentimentality. In this book she covers every aspect of modern womanhood from overblown wedding ceremonies to the difficult decision to work outside the home. She writes about her twins' nanny, and she writes about Martha Stewart. She sees through the BS.

And she's funny. She willingly self-deprecates in the name of writing the truth.

It's true that this book is really an essay collection cum memoir, but it's nonetheless super enjoyable. If we're going to figure out the modern family, we need voices like hers.

Jacqueline says

I read this years ago and liked it. As it was still sitting on my shelf, I thought I'd see if I still found it amusing, now married, in a home, contemplating a family etc.

Welp, no. Obviously it's not a surprise that a book with this subtitle is heavily invested in gender essentialism...but it's just done so inanely! Women love pretty things! Men can't possibly be expected to match socks!

She gives the sad masses of American mothers cultural lessons, yearning for the aristocracy and the great WASPs of times past. REAL rich people do things like this, ya bunch of slobs.

And, oh, the hypocrisy. She berates the second wave feminism for its demonization of housework, argues that many women WANT to be domestic goddesses and take care of hearth and home. That wrestling with your husband over who's going to make the bed is a foolish game anyhow. And then announces that she has never (not even once) changed her own sheets. She is proudly, assuredly, a 'stay-at-home mother' — but with a full time nanny who also does all of the cooking and cleaning. See also:
<http://www.slate.com/articles/life/sa...>

And yet....she's just a damn good writer, and some of the essays ARE so funny and moving.

Lotte says

Almost everyone will find a hook (or several) in this volume of essays on modern family life. Flanagan explores mothers, wives, work, sex, weddings, infertility, housekeeping, chaos, control, nannies, tax code as a moral issue, babies, children, death, and life. She does not proclaim to know much and that makes this volume more meaningful; Flanagan simply invites readers to explore with her and see where she lands. (I found myself on a happy discovery of memories as her childhood was my childhood, clear down to frequent babysitting jobs as young teens. She mentions the following in one essay and I concur with one twist: every home had a copy of *The Joy of Sex*, except for the LDS homes. I always wondered if they didn't dare own one or or didn't dare keep it on the family bookshelves.)

Mike Lindgren says

Well, ah, I had read and enjoyed some of Flanagan's writing in the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic*, so somewhere along the line I must have seen that she had written a book, and added it to the "gift list" that I share on Google Docs with my parents. So that's why my Dad said, very skeptically, "is this really the book you wanted?" when I opened it.

Well it is the book I wanted, I suppose, and to hell with what anyone thinks. It was funny and thought-provoking, albeit "counter-revolutionary" as I kept saying to my baffled Marxist brother. It is counter-revolutionary, in a sense, though; Flanagan seems to want to roll back the clock to a pre-feminist age. I found myself wondering what the women at Feministing -- whom I admire -- would make of these essays, and whether it's possible to agree with both of them, or if that makes you a hypocrite or something. Oh well. A better read than many more highly vaunted pieces of cultural criticism, to be sure.

Lacy says

I enjoyed reading this book, it was amusing and actually made me thankful just to be me -- but the book itself really irritated me. Other than the first chapter about weddings... it's just not my thing, I guess. It was SO boring and ridiculous I didn't think I would make it to chapter two. Not EVERYONE today thinks their wedding has to top their friends or break the bank. Blah! Seriously, weddings should be simple and personal.

I have so much to say about this book -- obviously, so does the author. I kept waiting for her to get to the point, for her to "choose a side" so to speak, but it was more of a "lay it all out there and you decide" kind of thing. In the end, I don't think the author really knew what she wanted or what she thought was right.

I was SO completely annoyed with this woman claiming to be a "housewife" and yet she has a full-time nanny, maid, and professional organizer helping her along the way. She has NO clue, literally NO clue. I did not feel sorry for her for ONE minute nor do I respect her. She whined about how hard it was, yet she did none of the WORK.

It's not only her I'm bothered by, but by millions of other women who think it has to be a certain way. Your way of mothering, whether you work outside of the home, or not, is your choice and is based on your

family's unique circumstances. I believe it can be done both ways as long as the mother puts her children first. (Meaning that may dictate the type of career she chooses and amount of hours she works.)

Near the end of the book I was disgusted with her. Never changed sheets a day of her married life???? Who is this woman?! However, I appreciate what she said in the last two chapters. I like how she said basically that life is what you make it; what YOU want it to be. I hope she really feels how she said she did in the last paragraph. She seems more like a "do what I say, not what I do" kind of person though. Finally, some insight into what is really important. I'm happy that she is okay and gets a "second chance" to put time into what really matters.

I like how this book made me feel, because I realized how good my life is and how blessed we truly are. I love to live in a smaller town with simpler ways. I love that I didn't grow up feeling pressured to have a career. I love that I don't spend all my days running all over town taking my kids from sport to hobby to whatever. We are simple. We do our own thing, without regards to what other people do or think. How refreshing!

When you actually DO the work involved with being a stay at home mother -- everything: the good, the bad, and the ugly (no nannies, maids, or professional organizers) you become a stronger, better, happier person. You LOVE the people you serve. Until I read this book, I didn't realize how content I am being a stay at home mother. I feel privileged (not oppressed!) to make my home a happy, safe, organized place for my children and husband to live in and actually spend time at and get away from the stress of the world outside. I am old-fashioned, I guess, and thankful to be so. I take great pride in fixing homemade meals for them, doing the laundry and even mending it. (Yes, I was lucky enough to take Home Ec!) This is where I choose to be right now and I believe if you're "bored", you're not doing it right.

There are 5 people in this world whose lives are better because of me.

Marija says

Okay, so she quit work to stay at home with the kids. Except she hired a maid and a nanny to do all the work. And she has the nerve to rail against Betty Friedan and the 1950s feminists for being unhappy in their housewife lives. What the heck does this author DO all day?

She did have some interesting sociological and historical insights, but most of the book was spent talking about how incompetent she is around the house, so much so that she's never sewn a button and doesn't make meals from scratch.

I guess it's nice to have money....

Don't waste your time on this one.

Heather Taggart says

This was a breezy read, for sure, but overall I am not impressed. I feel like I was anticipating some big conclusion that never came because Flanagan just drifted amongst topics on a whim. I appreciated her

attempt to address the struggles of both housewives and working mothers, but I think it was ultimately a failed attempt.

I think this book tried to be too many things at once. If it had been purely memoir, or purely academic, that would have worked much better than the hodgepodge of writing this turned out to be.

Katie says

The book started out strong with some really interesting research. I agreed with so many of her points, but really felt like she kept missing the mark. I didn't appreciate her attack on Steven Covey and think that she simply doesn't really understand his philosophy. She has a witty writing style and MOST, not all, of the book was enjoyable. I skipped some. I ended up disagreeing with some of her conclusions. She seems to think that the only benefit of a mother staying home with her children is that they will be with the person who loves them the most. I think there is much more to it than that and believe the position of stay-at home mom or at-home parent (as she calls it) deserves.

Ashley says

From the first few pages of this one, I figured I would have issues with this one. And I did. But in the spirit of listening to opposing viewpoints I did finish it and found myself liking Flanagan a teensy bit more than I did in the beginning.

First off, I take issue with someone who has taken one path (i.e. working mom or stay at home mom) and seems unable to see the other side. Flanagan did even worse on this front, flip flopping from a diehard SAHM'er to a proud working woman once she starts writing and getting published. I also give her the side-eye (fair or not) for having a nanny while staying at home. And a housekeeper. And a professional organizer. Yes, she had twins. Yes, her husband seems to work a lot. But you can't be such a fervent SAHM'er while having a nanny to sweep in from the background to help out with the kids, the dishes, the cooking, etc. Most SAHMs don't have those luxuries and you lose a lot of credibility (in my opinion) because then you're not really in the same boat as the typical SAHM.

Overall, I didn't find Flanagan to be a very credible opinion-giver on this topic. She sort of, almost came around at the end when she talked about each woman doing what is best for her and her family. Which is firmly the camp I'm in. Do I think I'd be a good SAHM? Not particularly; I like the fulfillment I get from my work. And that's ok with me. You may be different. And that's ok with me, too. Flanagan isn't an authority to listen to on this issue - but you are.

Stephanie says

The writing is amusing and engaging, but this book is just irritating.

Flanagan tries to laud and defend the decision of women to stay home with their kids through her own example. She makes some decent "division of labor" arguments, but it's just impossible to take her seriously because this book is the story of how she made such a noble decision to stay home with her kids... and then

hired a nanny to take care of them and a maid to do all the housework (not to mention hiring an organizer -- who knew this was a job? -- to cut through her clutter). She says herself that she and her husband don't fight over who changes the sheets because the maid does it, or over who cleans up their kids' puke because the nanny does it. So, to me, this book ends up not really being a defense of being a homemaker: instead, it's a manifesto for marrying someone rich enough to hire a staff.

The book ends with an awkward, tacked-on chapter about her ordeal with breast cancer, in which she suggests that her husband takes loving care of her and pulls his weight with the kids during her illness only because she had saved up enough goodwill currency through her years of housework (performed by the maid?). As if women who don't bake recipes from Martha Stewart don't deserve to have their husbands bring them soup after chemotherapy?

Overall, if you're interested in reading about the difficulties and ennui of being a "housewife" who's a rich white woman with a bunch of servants, then this is the perfect book for you -- otherwise, not so much.
