



The Maternal Is Political: Women Writers at the Intersection of Motherhood and Social Change

Shari MacDonald Strong (Editor), Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner (Foreward), Judith Stadtman Tucker (Contributor), Sarah Masterson (Contributor), Marrit Ingman (Contributor), Stephanie Wilkinson (Contributor), Sarah Werthan Bittenwieser (Contributor), Karen Maezen Miller (Contributor), more... Mary Akers (Contributor), J. Anderson Coats (Contributor), Tracy Thompson (Contributor), Nancy Pelosi (Contributor), Jennifer Margulis (Contributor), Violeta Garcia-Mendoza (Contributor), Jennifer Niesslein (Contributor), Mona Gable (Contributor), Jennifer Brisendine (Contributor), Susie Bright (Contributor), Stephanie Losee (Contributor), Susan Ito (Contributor), Ona Gritz (Contributor), Nina Gaby (Contributor), Vera Landry (Contributor), Margaret McConnell (Contributor), Jane Hammons (Contributor), Alisa Gordaneer (Contributor), Carolyn Alessio (Contributor), Kris Malone Grossman (Contributor), Barbara Kingsolver (Contributor), Rebecca Walker (Contributor), Jennifer Graf Groneberg (Contributor), Ann Douglas (Contributor), Amy L. Jenkins (Contributor), Helaine Olen (Contributor), Benazir Bhutto (Contributor), Gayle Brandeis (Contributor), Cindy Sheehan (Contributor), Beth Osnes (Contributor), Anna Quindlen (Contributor), Anne Lamott (Contributor), Gigi Rosenberg (Contributor), Denise Roy (Contributor), Valerie Weaver-Zercher (Contributor), Katherine A. Briccetti (Contributor) ...less

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Exploring the vital connection between motherhood and social change, *The Maternal Is Political* features more than 40 powerful, hard-hitting literary essays by women who are striving to make the world a better place for children and families both their own and other women's in this country and globally.

From the mom deconstructing playground "power games" with her first-grade child, to the mother who speaks out against misogyny during an awkward road trip with her college-age daughter and friends, to the mother of sons worrying about the threat of a future military draft, *The Maternal Is Political* brings together the voices of women who are transforming the political and social: one child, one babysitter, one peace march at a time."

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Sarah says

This book was ok. I think that it might have been more powerful if you have no experience with organized feminist political action, if the idea of motherhood being political was a revelation, or if you have never thought much about the oppressive social expectations that motherhood brings. But since that is old hat to me, I found that this book didn't tread much new ground. As a feminist anthology, it is only so-so.

missy jean says

It's always hard to rate anthologies. In this one, there were a handful of unflinching 5-star essays. But half of the essays felt like an echo chamber of unexamined assumptions, so I can't rate the book as a whole very high.

MM says

hmmm, for me this was a snooze. I couldn't get through all the essays, skimming most. I really wanted to like this and find something insightful -- just didn't, really. But you know what, I'm giving it 3-stars because I did like some parts of some of the essays and plus I think it's good to articulate those concepts: maternal/political. Yeah.

Erika says

LOVE the short essays. True to life stories with loads of character threaded into commentary on ethical and political beliefs in regards to motherhood.

Brandy says

Fanfreakintastic. I received this book as a gift from a friend (thanks Bridge!) and started reading it during nursing sessions. BTW, other new moms, it's perfect for that because it's made up of short stories, each 3-10 pages, so easy to finish one and put down without stopping in the middle of something big. It's inspiring and moving and makes you feel fired up to do something with all your caring. Incidentally, the most moving passages for me were not those written by the big names listed on the front cover (Nancy Pelosi, Benazir Bhutto...) but those written by literary and "ordinary" mamas. Topics range from the peace movement, adoption, raising your kids in light of your political views, to herstories that will bring you to tears. Highly recommended to women who are mothers or who think about being them.

Karen says

Guess why I'm reading this. There is one piece that is particularly close to my heart, hand and kin.

Diana says

So far so good. A collection of essays that are quick to read (which really works right now) and make you think.

LaLa says

Don't get me wrong, not alllll the essays were perfect. That would be impossible in a collection this varied and huge. BUT a lot of the essays were luminous, funny, brave, insightful and true. And as a girl who is scared to have babies, this was a great book for me.

Samantha says

i have already re-read it several times. only a few snoozers in the bunch, the rest thought provoking, engaging, and delightful.

Heidi says

Wonderful collection of short essays that really tugged at something I've become very passionate about in the past three or so years. The ones highlighting the process from becoming interested to actively campaigning were especially meaningful to me. And, of course, Barbara Kingsolver's essay - always a treat to read her.

Johanna says

Would have loved to have this book when I was writing my thesis!

Some very good essays (looooved Susie Bright's), some pretty predictable and maudlin. At times it was a bit clunky and scattered, and there were a few essays that I think were thrown in purely for star power - Benazir Bhutto and Nancy Pelosi come to mind. But overall, and enjoyable read.

Kris Underwood says

Something definitely changes when you become MOTHER. Besides all the physical, emotional and mental

aspects; the sleepless nights, cranky babies, the thought of being able to fit into your pre-baby jeans. You become more aware of the world and your place in it, of what is happening around you. You see things with a mother's eye. One of the essays, *In Albania*, by Mona Gable, captures this new view absolutely. Here she recounts her time in Albania as a reporter during the Kosovo conflict-Balkan wars with the new eyes of a mother: "The lens of motherhood would filter everything I was to witness.....".

There were a few other essays that affected me personally. Ona Gritz's *Because I'm Not Dead*, recalling her own experiences with disability while caring for her child; Amy Jenkins' *One Hundred and Twenty-Five Miles*, Helaine Olen's *The Mean Moms* where she tackles the old mama clique subject; and Mona Gable's essay mentioned above, all resonated with me on different levels.

Among the contributors, I was happy to see I recognized all the names, having read their work someplace else or read about them in the newspapers (most likely CNN or elsewhere across the Internet); as well as having worked with a few.

Overall, it is a very necessary book- very emotional, very raw- necessary reading for every mot

Allison says

I was interested but somewhat skeptical when I decided to read this -- skeptical about any of it applying to me, anyway. I couldn't think of anything indicating that motherhood had turned me into anything much different from the same timid, wishy-washy, non-confrontational person I was before I gave birth.

The book is quite interesting. As is often the case with this sort of project, most, if not all, of the contributors are quite highly educated, politically aware and articulate, so the reader must be aware of a possible lack of range. However, the writers do include a physically disabled mother, a mother who has spent time institutionalized for mental illness, a Guatemalan woman who has witnessed horrific atrocities, and a lesbian mother trying to adopt her partner's baby, so clearly there was an attempt to achieve a variety of viewpoints.

The essays are divided into three sections: *Believe*, *Teach* and *Act*. The 'Believe' section contains terms such as 'consciousness raising' and 'if we want a mother's movement... we have to give birth to it', which I have to admit tend to provoke a slight cringe reflex in me, although who can argue that consciousness doesn't need to be raised? The women in this section write about how becoming a mother expands your worldview, in both existential and practical ways. There's nothing like emerging from the rosy glow (or the sleepless fog) of the first few weeks or months of motherhood and realizing that your employment prospects, earning potential, benefits and personal freedoms have been severely impacted to suddenly make a woman sit up and take notice of certain practices that are unhelpful, if not downright hostile, to mothers (I apologize wholeheartedly for this sentence, I'm just too tired to rewrite it any more). Trying to find suitable day care opens up many other cans of worms, including the reality of women from other countries caring for North American babies while spending years away from their own children. If nothing else, having children raises these issues on our radar, erases some of that blissful ignorance that might have accompanied a pre-child-encumbered state. Government policies on paid childcare leave, job protection, subsidized childcare, immigration -- these all become immediate and personal realities, which lead some women to start questioning, with varying degrees of loudness, the validity of certain protocols and assumptions. In "Mom, Interrupted: Toward a Politics of Maternal Mental Health", Marritt Ingman interrogates the notion of postpartum depression, asking whether it is completely a matter of hormones, or rather "a falsely medicalized perspective on a problem that is at least partly political and cultural?" In other words, maybe they should be depressed, given that "for too many

mothers, political reality is bleak". I tend to believe that actual postpartum depression is largely a matter of hormones and chemicals, but in a larger context Ingman's question is certainly worth asking. Violeta Garcia-Mendoza, in "Of Volcanos and Ruins and Gardens", writes about her decision to adopt a Guatemalan child, and the realization that "adoptive motherhood bears the secret that the lines we erect to partition ourselves off from others, to protect ourselves against the heaviness of the human experience, are arbitrary." The implication is that it is this inescapable realization that drives mothers to act politically not only on behalf of their own children, but for everyone's children.

Marion Winik's brave and unequivocal essay "Mothers Against Faith" really blew me away, given my own daily see-sawing between agonized half-belief and tormented skepticism. "Faith moves mountains, they say. That may well be true. It certainly knocks over buildings. Wonder, I think, may be a gentler way to live." I love this.

The "Teach" section, predictably, features educators with concerns about curriculum issues (stupid standardized tests), and also a woman with black sons in school, dealing with the reality of black men being viewed as athletes, entertainers or criminals rather than scholars, and a white woman living in India with her golden-haired fair-skinned daughter, who wonders why a rhyme they say at school reflects the reality of her appearance and not that of the Indian children (and I've done irreparable violence to another sentence). "All-Consumed: The Restoration of One Family's Values" by Alisa Gordaneer describes her really impressive commitment to anti-consumerism, and how she has raised her children to be avid trash-pickers, recyclers, haters of 'cpc' (cheap plastic crap), and watchers of documentaries about how factories in China cause environmental damage. Her children prefer these, apparently, to Disney movies. Seriously. I'm thinking of asking her if she wants to adopt my children before I corrupt them any further.

The "Act" section actually answered one of my questions, which was something like 'can't I go to a political activism boot camp or something?' Beth Osnes, author of "Performing Mother Activism", actually presented a workshop called Rehearsal for Activism; she acknowledges "how similar activism is to performing, in that both force you to present yourself in public and express some predetermined content." This is what I was looking for, from someone; the admission that activism isn't something you can just leap into (okay, it isn't something I can just leap into) without some kind of coaching and encouragement. The other question floating around in my mind, which was something about how to act in the face of overwhelming odds and probably failure, was addressed beautifully by "The Mother is Standing" by Denise Roy. She writes about her passage from a former goody-two shoes rule-follower to getting arrested in a Good Friday protest at a nuclear weapons facility which did not change the world, but changed her and her community. She relates the story of A.J. Muste, a Vietnam War protester who stood outside the White House nightly, and when asked if he really thought he would change U.S. policy, said "Oh, I don't do this to change the country. I do this so the country won't change me." That was one of those a-ha moments for me.

"Peace March Sans Children" by Valerie Weaver was honest and comforting, in its admission that "caring for the world or caring for the kids" are sometimes "incompatible", and that sometimes mothers of young children might need a little time off from the revolution, before coming back to "advocate from a deeper place within ourselves than we had known existed".

I'm glad I read this book. It gave me a lot to think about. And a few weeks after I had finished it, I was at a baseball game where we had some trouble with the other team's coach. The whole matter of the coach of a team of six-year-olds needing to win no matter what is a matter for another post, but at one point, when he was being fairly nasty and confrontational, I suddenly found myself up out of my comfortable lawn chair, on my feet.

I didn't actually punch out the coach, or get arrested or anything. Still... I think I might have been ready for a little activism. I am mother... hear me squeak in a vaguely threatening and self-assured manner.

Beth Cato says

I won this signed anthology in a blog giveaway over two years ago. It has just been sitting on my shelf, passed over time and again. I couldn't help but think political equaled boring. However, all the recent political stupidity regarding women's bodies has had me rather pissed off, so I decided to give the book a try. If it turned out boring, I'd just stop reading.

I didn't stop reading until the very last page.

I was pleasantly surprised at how engaging the anthology turned out to be. The voices varied in tone and topic, ranging from Benazir Bhutto balancing family and policy (all the more sad considering she was assassinated) to Barbara Kingsolver comparing herself to her daughter at thirteen. Some of my favorites included "Adoption in III Acts" by Kathy Briccetti, an intimate tale of how subsequent generations of her family had been adopted and the ordeal she and her partner were enduring to have them both listed as the mothers of their child, and "On Receiving Notice of My Stepdaughter's Pregnancy" by Mary Akers, in which she balances her love and frustration at her stepdaughter's choices.

The one weakness of the anthology is that it skews left--in some cases, far left. There's a lot of mourning over John Kerry's loss. A few essays verge on being outright antagonistic to Republicans, and sometimes the self-righteousness could be irritating. I consider myself an independent, and after reading so many liberal-themed essays in a row, I really yearned for more balance. My favorites essays were the ones that avoided those Republican/Democrat labels. Fortunately, there were many, and it's not as if any of the essays were "bad." I may not have agreed with the authors, but I found their arguments compelling and insightful.

Maggie says

I quite liked this - it made me feel better about being a crank trying to make the world a slightly better place. Inspiring.
