

Because the things which new mothers discover are obvious enough to anyone who has been there, we must first learn to laugh at ourselves and at our own ignorance. I am not suggesting that the only alternative style of writing available is the Erma Bombeck approach of housewife satire.

Rather, there must be something in between drowning in our roles and laughing them off altogether. But Chesler is so vigilant, so tenaciously serious that she feels ingenuine and she certainly isn't instructive. Neither is she very joyful. Although the book claims to be about the despair and joy of motherhood it feels mostly like a hummer. For example, Chesler always refers to Ariel in a serious tone. She calls him her 'teacher' but never her 'playmate'. Once again the photo on the back reflects this tone.

But as Chesler also tells us, such flatness or depression is not unusual among mothers. In fact, in several discrete places in her diary she writes rather poignantly on the conspiracy of silence which surrounds motherhood — if only she had taken it to heart.

Whether you're accepted back depends on your ability, your willingness to live without any confirmation that you've undergone a rite of passage. You, who have undergone an experience of total aloneness in the universe. You, who are totally responsible for another life. You must keep silent, pretend to return to life as usual. (p. 133)

When I insist I'm depressed, suicidal, friends look worried and look away.

What if I don't "make it"? What if I only pretend to pull myself

together? What if everyone settles for my pretense?

I grow mistrustful, silent. Why try to share what I feel? It disturbs people too much. It reminds mothers of their own drowning, long repressed. (p. 155)

Chesler is also articulate on one of the roots of the problem. She discusses the superwoman syndrome that has been bandied about so much in recent years. And she expresses herself quite beautifully in these simple uncluttered lines.

I know that somewhere there must be mothers who in one week go back to their regular clothes; who appear at their desks as if nothing ever happened, whistling. (p. 163)

But once again she fails to take her own insights to heart. Chesler doesn't seem to realize just how oppressive the superwoman mythology is in her own life.

On a lighter side, however there are a few amusing passages in her diary, although Chesler seems quite void of humour when writing them. One concerns her image in the feminist community now that she is 'with child' and what's more, a male child.

When I was lecturing in Ohio today, one professor stood up and said "Dr. Chesler, here you are, obviously pregnant, Could you please make some comment on this fact?" She thinks my being pregnant somehow repudiates either my feminism or my doctorate. (p. 77).

Instead of replying with some smart remark (Hasn't feminism taught her that this is the only way to deal with stupidity?) she seems apologetic. (I recall one feminist colleague who

stepped up to the podium pregnant and promptly announced to a tittering audience that she wasn't really pregnant, she just swallowed a basketball.) And when Chesler finds out *via* amniocentesis that her child will be male she admits:

I'm terrified of what some woman might feel about me having a son. Before women I stand accused. It pleases me to have a son. (p. 53)

Yet there is no facetious tone in these lines. She fails to see the humour in her fantasies or fears. Chesler does reveal a faint trace of humour in her discussion of the child-care problem, however.

Hello, Baby Nurse Employment Agency? Please send over four part-time child-care workers. Warm people, with some feminist awareness, please. Two men, two women ... What? I'd have to pay each one a full-time salary of one hundred and seventy-five dollars? For five days. *No problem.* That's only seven hundred dollars a week. (p. 154)

If only she could sustain this tone and delight in her own consciousness-raising.

Finally, one of the more pervasive themes running through her diary and the one which Chesler handles with the most depth and intensity is her relationship with her mother. Throughout most of the diary, Chesler paints her mother like some witch or demon — unloving, inattentive and cold. But towards the end of the diary she begins to express some empathy for her mother, some acceptance arising from her new-found role at the other end of the stick.

It will be like this always. My mother will never be my

willing servant, my approving parent. But we will always begin again. One of us will call the other, act as if nothing has happened.

In conclusion, *With Child* is neither fish nor fowl. It is not some poetic work of art which has literary licence to transcend lineal thought (like her *About Men*). It is not a carefully articulated essay which analyzes feelings in a more traditional mode. Rather, Chesler's diary is a mere meandering of the mind, with only a few hits, from someone who I'd hoped would give us more. Certainly women deserve someone who can articulate the ambivalences and depth of feeling involved in the contemporary motherhood experience.* Unfortunately Phyllis Chesler is not that writer.

*In fact, the only book I know of which does this successfully is Jane Lazarre's *The Mother Knot*. Dell pub. (1976).

A World of Women, Anthropological Studies of Women in the Societies of the World

Erika Bourguignon, ed.,
Praeger: 1980, pp. 364

Meg Luxton

In the last few years, cross-cultural studies of women have generated a dynamic and provocative body of literature. As the field of sex and gender studies has developed, the traditional theoretical and conceptual frameworks of anthropology and comparative sociology have been transformed. In its initial stages, this field contributed by pointing out how women have been ignored — left out of the majority of studies — and it went further by producing a wide range of

ethnographic studies to redress this imbalance.

As sex and gender studies developed, the various researchers involved deepened their analysis so that now, women's studies are right in the forefront of the social sciences. It is a pioneering discipline, pushing back the frontiers of knowledge. As a result, when I received this new anthology, I looked forward to reading it with great anticipation.

Unfortunately, the book is very disappointing. If it had come out 10 years ago as part of that early literature describing women's lives, it might have been exciting. It

includes 12 articles by different researchers describing aspects of women's lives in various Islamic, Afro-American and North American Societies. This is its one strength — it does make a contribution to comparative ethnographic studies. I particularly liked Rosemary Joyce's life-history of an Appalachian Ohio grandmother and Risa Ellovich's study of intra-ethnic variation among Dioula women in West Africa.

However, the strength of both these articles lies in their presentation of individual case studies of specific women. Sarah

Penfield, Awa, Mariam and Fanta give the book some life and personality and the authors make some interesting generalizations from the experiences of these women to the ways in which social change affects women in general. But these articles are not sufficient to carry the book.

In addition to the ethnographic studies, Bourguignon, as editor, has written two articles to introduce and conclude the book. In her introduction, she states that the book was organized around three themes:

'The three themes are the role of women in the subsistence economy, the utility and applicability of

the concepts of the public and domestic domains, and the impact of culture change on the lives of women and their status.' As a collection, the book does not contribute significantly to any of these themes. The articles fail to address the debates that have emerged on all three themes over the last few years. In her conclusion, Bourguignon argues that the findings of the book 'challenge a number of stereotypes' and she goes on to list half-a-dozen examples. But the stereotypes she challenges are out-dated and, as a result, this book too is out-dated. It is certainly not a reflection of the best work being done today. ©

Des Écrivaines à connaître: des livres à lire



Illustration by Gail Geltner

The Meaning of Aphrodite

de Paul Friedrich,
*University of Chicago
Press, 1978, 234 pp.*
Michel Despland

La mythologie grecque a la particularité de compter autant de déesses (ou à peu près) que de dieux, et ces

femmes sont en général hautes en couleur. Friedrich commence par noter une carence: aucune parmi les études disponibles ne porte sur Aphrodite. Et pourtant le seul nombre de sanctuaires

qui lui ont été consacrés aurait dû attirer l'attention des savants. Ici encore des préjugés sexistes sont probablement responsables: Aphrodite est perçue par les graves savants du siècle dernier et de ce siècle

comme un sujet frivole ou élémentaire, donc peu intéressant.

Le livre de Friedrich réussit une profonde réhabilitation: Aphrodite a enfin reçu la place qui lui revient dans les