GOOD ENOUGH MOTHERING? FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON LONE MOTHERHOOD

Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva, ed. London: Routledge, 1996.

BY HEATHER KELLY

The central theme of this collection of essays is not so much a consideration of whether households headed by lone mothers provide "good enough mothering," as it is a series of critical analyses of social and state policies as they are promulgated in regard to lone mothers, specifically in Britain, with some comparison with policies of other European countries and, occasionally, of the United States. Many of the essays focus on the *Child Support Act*, British legislation adopted in 1991 and ostensibly designed to ensure that the children of lone mothers are sufficiently supported. Critics see the Act as a purely economic policy, effectively working to transfer the maintenance costs of lone mothers and their children from the state to the absent fathers, with the women themselves no better off, and often living in worse conditions than when they relied solely on government benefits. The Act is examined in terms of parental responsibility, and the results of forcing that responsibility on (often unwilling) fathers. There is also considerable discussion of the deliberate marginalization of lone mothers who live within a "culture of dependency," and of the "underclass" they are supposedly creating. This particular discussion portrays how the powers-that-be attempt to link lone motherhood with criminal behaviour, especially that of male children of lone mothers.

In "Deconstructing Motherhood," Carol Smart advances a revisionist history of motherhood. She points out that motherhood has always been incorrectly viewed as a natural condition for women. She breaks down the pattern of "sexual activity, pregnancy, birth, mothering, motherhood" into its component parts and demonstrates how one need not lead necessarily to the next, as was long assumed. Smart notes that, after the Second World War, with increased numbers of women in the workplace and improved access to options like birth control and abortion, motherhood became one among a number of options. Women were, in fact, often choosing to be lone parents. The current dilemma is that recent political trends toward so-called "Family Values" and the re-establishment of the nuclear family as the ideal, alongside the increasing marginalization of lone mothers as a source of social ills, render improvements made in the past four decades only temporary. While Smart is writing about the state of affairs in Britain, she could as easily be describing the situation in Canada, where state support of the unemployed, large numbers of whom are lone mothers, is one of the first targets of deficit reduction.

The next three essays are statistical analyses of the feminization of poverty and the marginalization of lone mothers in a global economy. Carolyn Baylies describes how single-parent homes are included in a United Nations report under the heading "Weakening Social Fabric," and lone mothers viewed as "scroungers [off the state]" who are creating a "warrior class" of young sexual predators, due of course to the fact that they lack paternal influence. This perspective claims that over-generous state support intensifies the problem and that the only antidote is to cut benefits even further. Such a position places us squarely back in a nineteenth-century matrix of workhouses and the ostracism of lone mothers. Baylies points to the need to look at the variety in the occurrence of lone motherhood, in the context of "differing circumstances of state and economy and mediated by differing political and religious ideologies." One governmental policy applied to all and sundry is not appropriate.

In line with lone mothers' identification as the source of much that is wrong with contemporary society, the essays by Mary McIntosh and Sasha Roseneil and Kirk Mann describe the "moral panic" that began sweeping Britain in the early 1990s. This panic was directly linked to the public's perception that lone motherhood was at the root of the problem of moral decay, an idea widely disseminated by the media. McIntosh is fascinated by the assumptions about married motherhood that are revealed by "the attempt to demonize lone mothers." A closer examination of two-parent families, she feels, would not support their collective idealization. She is highly critical of underclass theorist Charles Murray, as are Roseneil and Mann.

An interesting and informative book, *Good Enough Mothering?* is, however, problematic. In light of the fact that the authors concentrate on Britain, there is little to be gleaned here about the situation as it pertains to Canada. For the marginalized lone mother in this country, there is small comfort in the knowledge that their counterparts in other countries are dealing with similar discrimination. The other problem is that this book is written by and for sociologists. The essays provide critical analyses based on sociological theory, couched in theoretical language. The nature of government policies and a general disregard of the actual needs of lone mothers would seem to call for a grassroots voice to be heard. However, this book would likely be, to all intents and purposes, inaccessible to those very women it needs to reach. Perhaps a less academic approach would have been more successful.

LESBIAN MOTHERHOOD: AN EXPLORATION OF CANADIAN LESBIAN FAMILIES

Fiona Nelson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996.

BY KATE CAMPBELL

The strength of Fiona Nelson's contribution to the growing literature on

lesbian mothering is in the clarity with which the voices of the mothers she interviewed come through to the reader, as they relate their experiences firsthand. Nelson interviewed 30 Albertan lesbian mothers (including both biological and non-biological mothers) and explores questions of family formation, domestic life, and the factors which led these women to their decision to have children.

In her introduction, Nelson explains that the possibility of lesbian mothering, particularly through donor insemination, is a result of an "ideology of reproductive choice" facilitated by increasing access to contraception and new reproductive technologies. Reproductive choice, then, means not only the freedom to avoid pregnancy, but the also freedom for previously excluded women, such as infertile women, single women, and lesbians, to become pregnant. Although she presents a compelling analysis, Nelson underplays the years of feminist organizing and lobbying which led to an ideology of choice being available to women, and tends to credit medical technology as the sole motivating force. Clearly, it is not only the development of artificial insemination techniques which have led to the increase in the number and visibility of lesbian mothers in the past decade. Factors such as campaigns for the social recognition of lesbian and gay families and women's increasing access to paid employment are not examined.

According to Nelson, the ideology of choice means that, increasingly, motherhood is the result of a conscious decision, rather than simply an unquestioned expectation. She contends that because pregnancy cannot "just happen" in the context of a lesbian relationship, but has to be carefully planned, lesbians are an ideal group to look at in an examination of women's reproductive decision-making (and in so doing she tends to overlook the extent to which many heterosexual women grapple with reproductive decisions). Although the question of what constitutes mothering and motherhood is a central focus of the book, the question of what a lesbian is remains curiously uninterrogated. Despite the fact that a number of the women in her sample became pregnant through having sex with men, Nelson asserts that "[l]esbian women in lesbian relationships will never accidentally find themselves pregnant." Presumably, Nelson relied on self-identification in order to classify her respondents as lesbian, but as much recent literature on lesbian identities indicates, one cannot assume that all self-identified lesbians share a common set of sexual practices or relationship arrangements.

In looking at women's reproductive decisions, Nelson concludes that there are not significant differences between the decision-making process of lesbian mothers and that of heterosexual mothers. She identifies three central areas of consideration in this process: a stable relationship with a partner, emotional readiness, and financial security. Of these three factors, Nelson found that financial security was a "marginal" concern for the women she spoke with, while stable relationships and emotional preparation were far more crucial. This, I think, is where the limitations of Nelson's sample are most clearly manifested. All of her respondents were in couples, and had their children while in a couple, so obviously this was an important value to them. However, interviews with single mothers might have shown that being in a couple is not always a primary consideration in the decision to have children. In addition, all of her subjects were white and middle-class, most had post-secondary education, and all were employed, except for two who were students. Interviews with women with less access to economic privilege might have indicated that for some women, financial security is of paramount importance in making reproductive decisions. In order to fully explore this issue, it would have been illuminating to interview lesbians who had considered having children and ultimately decided against it. In an era of increasing attacks to publicly-funded health care, child care, education, and social assistance, it seems hasty to dismiss economics as a marginal consideration in the decision to have children, particularly for lesbian mothers, who do not have access to statistically higher male incomes.

The anecdotes in Fiona Nelson's *Lesbian Motherhood* make for engaging, poignant, and sometimes humourous reading for anyone who has children or has considered doing so. However, do not look to this book for the wide-reaching exploration of lesbian families in Canada promised by the title. Although the regional limitations of her sample are understandable, the invisibility of single and working-class mothers, the somewhat idealistic representation of lesbian couple relationships, and the sweeping generalizations made about the experiences of heterosexual mothers severely limit the conclusiveness of this research.

REDEFINING MOTHERHOOD: CHANGING IDENTITIES AND PATTERNS

Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly, eds. Toronto: Second Story Press, 1998.

BY BRIGITTE HARRIS

The 18 chapters in this engaging, multi-authored book present diverse ways of investigating and making meaning of "mother," "mothering," and "motherhood." Qualitative methods—autobiographical, biographical, ethnographic, phenomenological, historical, case study, and participatory research—elicit women's stories. These stories demonstrate the complexity of women's experience and their meanings of mothering. Each chapter presents women's stories and a lucid discussion of the literature, providing a basis from which to question, criti-