

# Mama, PhD: A Companion for Mothers and Scholars

Finding community isn't easy for scholars who are also mothers. Most tenured faculty are men; most women faculty don't have children; most other working moms envy academics their flexible schedules. Isolation makes a hard time even harder.

Hence the importance of *Mama, PhD: Women Write about Motherhood and Academic Life*, edited by Elrena Evans and Caroline Grant (Rutgers University Press, 2008). Neither a guidebook nor a critique (though tips and criticism appear in its pages), this set of 35 personal narratives has the feel of thoughtful, reflective friends sitting at the kitchen table comparing notes.

They probe their successes and failures, fears and desires, frustration and ambivalence. They're open about the messiness of trying to combine motherhood with an academic career. Their stories are diverse. Some rose to academic prominence, some chose lower-prestige or part-time positions and some left higher education. Some are still mid-journey or torn about whether to start a family.

## Mind-body problem

Higher education, supposedly progressive, lags behind the corporate world in support for procreation. Several of the writers suggest it's rooted in the mind-body problem. In keeping with Descartes' maxim, "I think, therefore I am," people on campus are supposed to be disembodied brains—or as Elisabeth Rose Bruner writes, "a head on a stick."

Pregnancy unmistakably involves the body. That makes it an embarrassment. One common response is to stare at the belly and forget that the head can still carry an intelligent thought. Jessica Smartt Gullion describes being marginalized in grad school as her pregnancy progressed. Her department chair retracted her teaching assistantship, claiming a maternity break would disrupt the class.

Even in Women's Studies, motherhood was negated or ignored. "We could all converse with passion about the right not to have a baby. But none of us could talk about what it was actually like to have one," she writes.

Irena Auerbuch Smith notes an unwritten rule that female scholars be thin, exemplifying the life of the mind. Elrena Evans describes the "floating head" syndrome that aggravated a complicated pregnancy. "I should have been afforded the dignity of being treated as a whole person, not just a floating, disembodied head," she writes.

Children after birth are still quite physical, complete with peanut butter and spit. Life is a messy patchwork of mind and body. Bruner says it's time to reattach our heads to our bodies. Leslie Leyland Fields, mother of six, affirms her truth: "one body indivisible."

## Guilt and failure

At a conference session on motherhood and academia, Anjalee Deshpande Nadkarni began sobbing. She apologized, "I'm sorry—it's just so hard. I mean, when do you stop feeling like a failure at everything?"

"I'll let you know," the panel chair replied.

Sensations of guilt and failure color story after story. When you're with the kids, you're not a good academic. When you're buried in work, you're not a good mom.

Complicating matters are the myths: We're either perfect or inadequate; we should be able to do it all—an earlier generation removed all the barriers. Nicole Cooley writes, "I was one of those people who believed that having a baby would have no impact on my life. I thought I could balance everything."

Well-intended mothers like Martha Ellis Crone tell daughters they can be anything they want. The unintended corollary: If you can't make it work, you're doing it wrong.

They learned you have to make choices, and every choice carries costs and risks. Jennifer Cognard-Black feels she orphaned her child for her work. Aeron Haynie says she'd advise her daughter to become encumbered by her heart's desire sooner instead of waiting, as Haynie did. Other moms left academe to write or consult; they fight the perception of failed scholars and dropouts.

"As mothers and academics, we need to consciously shrug off the feelings of failure," Julia Spicher Kasdorf writes. Nadkarni says, "Being comfortable with failure is knowing that the only successes that count are precarious and temporary. It is accepting that every seeming failure is the foundation for growth, and it pays to laugh at it."

## Wire monkey

Infant rhesus monkeys were given milk-dispensing machines as surrogate mothers. Those with cuddly terry cloth machines developed fairly normally. Development was seriously impaired for those nursing from bare wire mesh.

"The monkey gets just enough to stay alive, but not what it needs to be okay," Susan O'Doherty says. Academic mothers don't want to be wire monkeys to their children, meeting only their barest physical needs.

When women try to do more as parents, the university often becomes a wire monkey to them, with policies that let them survive on campus but not what they need to thrive.

Six weeks of paid maternity leave doesn't fit semester courses. Stopping the tenure clock is no use if nobody informs you of it or you get penalized for asking. Leave isn't an option if they suspend your health insurance. On-campus childcare is cosmetic if the wait list is two years long.

Their stories include problem pregnancies, miscarriages, difficult childbirth, postpartum depression and an autistic child. Along with supportive colleagues and students, some faced rigid, insensitive chairs who accused them of expecting special privileges.

"The academic world offers only an illusion of flexibility for women who wish to work in it and be mothers," says Alissa McElreath, once advised by a senior woman colleague not to "get too caught up in that mommy thing."

Automatic, no-stigma accommodations for childbirth for both graduate students and faculty are a step in the right direction. Part-time options and flexible career tracks would go even further.

Some women challenge the culture in a spirit of joyful transgression, acknowledging personal lives in conversation and pictures. Until the culture changes, Natalie Kertes Weaver advises: Organize your life around what matters most to you, and fit the rest in the remaining time or let it go.

—SGC

