



human existence: “there is no solution, no cure, no rehabilitation, there is my body that just is. Fired into the world, my Deaf body has become the house for me.”

THE M WORD *Conversations about Motherhood*

EDITED BY KERRY CLARE

Goose Lane Editions

REVIEW BY DEBORAH OSTROVSKY

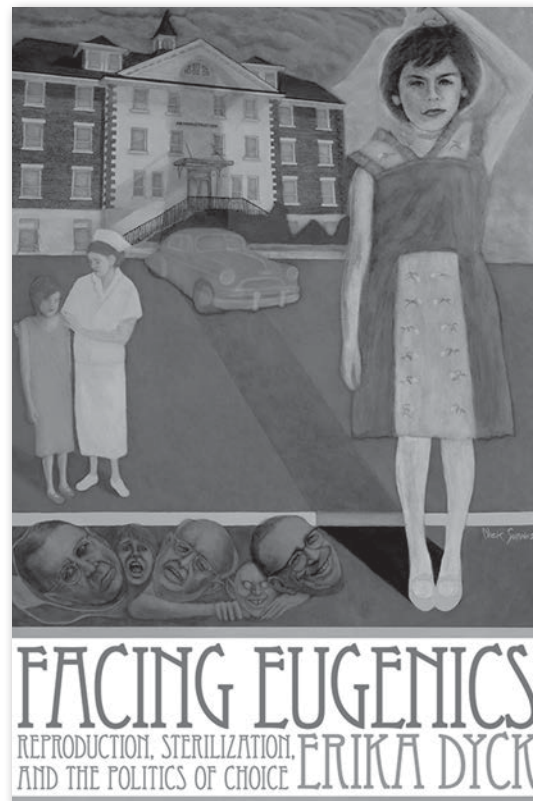
Once, at a children’s play group, a woman I’d just met asked me how I liked being a mother.

“It’s like living in an amusement park—on the edge of a minefield,” I answered, with my colicky toddler in tow.

My acquaintance smiled politely and bolted. I’d so wished that we could have started talking. Thankfully, *The M Word: Conversations about Motherhood* is a discussion about those amusements and minefields, a book about women who, as editor Kerry Clare writes, “don’t have the luxury of choosing their mothering story or how it will play out.”

There is a strong Canadian tradition of public discourse on motherhood, from the late journalist June Callwood’s interviews with unwed teenaged mothers to Marni Jackson’s memoirs and anthologies like *Double Lives* and *Between Interruptions*.

The M Word adds 25 thoughtful voices to the mix. Some have struggled with infertility or miscarriage. They include



those who are stepmothers, single mothers and lesbian mothers. Still others have adopted; others cling to mothering identities despite horrific loss.

Nicole Dixon and Priscila Uppal, in their essays about living child-free, tackle the misconception that choosing not to have kids is a selfish decision. They claim environmental reasons (think: scant resources for the world’s growing population). Uppal, in particular, is scathing about our parenting culture’s consumerist obsessions. These are precisely the women I’d love to meet around the sandbox.

Clare has compiled a book as pitch-perfect as her story reflecting on motherhood after an abortion years before. Christa Couture’s stunning essay, “These are My Children,” about losing infant sons, is a heartbreaking literary marvel. Carrie Snyder and Heather Birrell write bemusedly about the balancing act between writing and child-rearing.

You won’t keep this book; you’ll pass it on to friends whose current vocation

is changing diapers, or to friends who want a child, or those who don’t. *The M Word* is vast in scope, featuring beautiful conversations I can finally share.

FACING EUGENICS *Reproduction, Sterilization and the Politics of Choice*

ERIKA DYCK

University of Toronto Press

REVIEW BY MAYA KHANKHOJE

Facing Eugenics is a social history of the emotionally loaded and politically controversial issues that surround human reproduction. Erika Dyck, an associate professor in the department of history at the University Of Saskatchewan, is eminently qualified to document and analyze how and why “Alberta distinguished itself in Canadian eugenics history as having the longest and most aggressive sexual sterilization policy in the country.”

Chapter 1 discusses how, during the early 20th century, privileged middle-class values tainted perceptions about who was fit to bear children and who was not. Forced sexual sterilization was perpetrated on people deemed infirm, mentally incompetent or biologically defective. Immigrants, single mothers and Aboriginals tended to be targeted. Proponents of the eugenicist movement included highly respectable people like Tommy Douglas, later regarded as the father of medicare, as well as “agrarian feminists” who took their cue from animal husbandry.

Chapter 2 documents the problems with eugenics policies in regards to racial profiling, flawed IQ tests and lack of informed consent. Chapter 3 redefines legal concepts such as infanticide, abortion and contraception. Chapter 4 debunks the perceived links between masculinity and vasectomies.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 showcase patient activism through the struggles of Doreen Ella Befus, Leilani Muir and Jane Doe. Bemus, mislabelled a moron and therefore sterilized, became an award-winning community activist. Muir, whose IQ was severely underestimated, was sterilized without her knowledge during an appendectomy. Baffled as to

why she couldn’t conceive, she sued the Alberta government when she found out the truth, and received a million-dollar settlement. Jane Doe was a pregnant teenager whose “therapeutic” abortion signaled a change in Canadian government attitudes towards family planning.

Chapter 8 is the book’s pièce de résistance. In it, Dyck illustrates how “the politics of reproduction often spill outside the confines of legislation.” She also attempts to peel away the layers of assumptions people tend to have about population control, degeneracy, responsibility, intelligence, mental health and progress. The forceful message delivered is that “there is no uncomplicated moral high ground in these discussions.”

THE BIG LIE *Motherhood, Feminism, and the Reality of the Biological Clock*

PROMETHEUS BOOKS

Tanya Selvaratnam

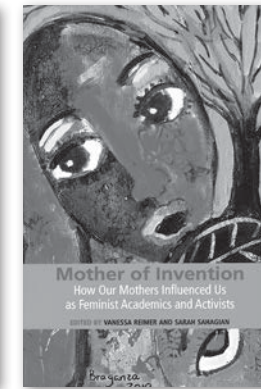
REVIEW BY GINA WONG

The big lie: Delaying pregnancy and motherhood is a viable choice for women. The truth: Having been duped into believing this, many women are facing infertility.

This is the message Tanya Selvaratnam delivers in *The Big Lie: Motherhood, Feminism and the Reality of the Biological Clock*, her emotional depiction of her struggle with infertility and the toll it took on her. She shares her anger, rage, sadness, frustration, disbelief and disappointment after feeling lulled into a sense of false security about her fertility.

Selvaratnam, a feminist, contends that second-wave feminism proclaimed that “women [have] the freedom to do whatever they want in the world,” including having unprecedented control over their reproductive lives. In fact, however, biology eventually takes precedence over reproductive freedom.

This book brings together a historical account of women’s rights and the upsurge of feminism as well as facts about infertility. For instance, the leading



factor in infertility is egg supply. By the age of 30, women no longer have 90 percent of the eggs they had at birth. And, by the age of 42, the chance of natural conception is less than 10 percent. The story also includes the many falsehoods often told to clients of fertility clinics.

Readers of Selvaratnam’s story will be astonished by the end of the book, as her story shifts, unpredictably, from where it began. Starting with great hopes of creating life, Selvaratnam eventually faces her own mortality after a routine ultrasound for IVF, when she is diagnosed with two types of cancer. Then, after successful cancer treatment and readiness to move ahead with IVF, she and her husband separate.

Readers will be captivated to read through to the end, as she describes how the early detection of cancer from the ultrasound ultimately saved her life. The ultimate big truth is that life is fraught with more unexpected twists and turns than we imagine.

MOTHER OF INVENTION *How Our Mothers Influenced Us as Feminist Academics and Activists*

EDITED BY VANESSA REIMER AND SARAH SAHAGIAN

Demeter Press

REVIEW BY WENDY ROBBINS

In an essay about contemporary motherhood in *The Wall Street Journal*, author Erica Jong concluded, “Do the best you can. There are no rules.” This is the central theme of a groundbreaking collection of 15 essays about mothers who have produced feminist academic daughters and, in one

case, a son. Like everyone else, feminists are “of woman born.” These powerfully diverse “motherline” narratives describe non-conformist “mother outlaws,” traditionalists (whether Christian fundamentalist, Chinese conservative, or feminine-mystique-era), mothers who suffer from mental illness, and others whose mettle is forged in the context of violence, either in the home or in the international political theatre. The mothers rarely

are self-identified feminists, although several, including a Black teen and a “big body” Chicana, offer models of heroic resilience and independence. Even unliberated mothers succeed in encouraging their offspring to dream big and “stick up for yourself.”

Each mother is portrayed with compassionate understanding by her adult child, who has learned to look through a feminist lens at the constrained choices that shackle women under patriarchy. Moving far away from mother-blame or matrophobia (disidentification, fear of becoming one’s mother), these personal narratives tell nuanced and compelling stories from the perspectives of those who have studied and are now contributing to feminist theory about motherhood.

It is often said that second-wave feminists gave motherhood a raw deal. Not here. The book contains an informative theoretical introduction, highlighting work on motherhood by Adrienne Rich, Fiona Green, Paula Caplan and York University’s Andrea O’Reilly, founder-director of Demeter Press. It also references sources of life-writing theory.

This book could serve as a textbook and is also a good read for all of us who are still negotiating the fraught terrain of contemporary parenting. Freud’s Oedipal father-son conflict model is being replaced by a woman-centred family narrative that extolls neither total maternal self-sacrifice nor glamorized celebrity maternity, but instead celebrates an ethic of care, mutual empowerment and human agency. ❀

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