

Mothers in Children's and Young Adult Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Postfeminism. Ed. Lisa Rowe Fraustino and Karen Coats. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2016. 270 pages.

When it comes to mothers we all have a story to tell. Lisa Rowe Faustino and Karen Coats note the vast number of publications concerning mothers in disciplines such as psychology, history and within adult literature criticism. How strange then that the construction of mothers in children's literature, where, by the nature of the subject we would expect them to be so very central, has been largely, until now, overlooked in terms of children's literature criticism. This somewhat overdue collection of essays succeeds in addressing a vast and, at times, slightly eclectic, combination of scholarly debates surrounding mothers and mothering over the last two hundred and fifty years or so. The collection, the acknowledgments inform us, was conceived once Karen Coats had sat in on Lisa Rowe Faustino's own course on mothers in children's and YA fiction at Hollins University, and the two editors (and contributors) have brought it up, rightly enough, to demand that we sit up and take note.

When I say that the essays are eclectic, this is meant as a compliment rather than a criticism. These thirteen essays include diverse subjects such as maternal pedagogy in the eighteenth century, nineteenth-century Backfisch books aimed at 14-17 year old girls, mothers in Kindertransport fiction, animal mothers in picturebooks, depictions of minority mothering, and the mother in contemporary dystopian fiction. Readers are faced with an arresting combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar; while on the one hand Pullman's Mrs Coulter or Collins' Katniss might be recognisable, on the other hand, they might be less well informed of the pedagogical maternal influences in Anna Barbauld's writings for young children in the 1770s, when she sat on the nursery floor to encourage chat and learning through play. Fraustino and Coats manage this range thoughtfully in their separation of the

book into four different sections, broadly covering eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pedagogy; cultural shifts in the twentieth century including motherhood in minority groups; a more fragmented third section including animal mothers in picture books, an interrogation of the 'ideal' mother in *Coraline* and *Peter and Wendy*, and the mother in modern fantasy; culminating in an arresting fourth section on the fraught postfeminist mother who needs to lower her expectations, the 'having-it-all' generation, and the increasing absence of mothers in twenty-first-century young adult fiction.

For all that the essays may seem disparate, they are in fact wonderfully connected. The complexities of motherhood abound in the discussion of community mothering, other mothering, pedagogy and the pressures that society's idealised concept of motherhood inflict, inform all the chapters to varying degrees. While the essays in the first section to some extent focus on the raising of daughters to marriage, Koeun Kim shows us that in Juliana Ewing's *Six to Sixteen* the 'exemplary mother was able to teach her daughter the pleasures of intellectual activities and constant occupation' (48) and that it was intellectual engagement that would most likely form the basis of a happy marriage. Similarly, Julie Pfeiffer, in her discussion of the Backfisch novels, tells stories of girls aged 14-17, prepared for marriage by being sent to live with single women (usually aunts) who were financially and socially independent meaning that the focus of these texts was on women mothering each other without 'the distraction of husbands and children' (73). These novels, Pfeiffer convincingly argues, not only encouraged intellectual development of the young girl, but also insisted that mothering was not just the duty of the biological mother, but of a community of mothers, and that single women could mother too. Lauren Cosey and Karen Coats continue this exploration into community mothering in their analysis of Jacqueline Woodson's *Show Way*, where Big Mama mothers countless children and educates them towards emancipation with her stories and quilt making.

Several of the essays interrogate the myth of the all-giving, self-sacrificing mother that is all too evident in our children's literature and our media more generally. Dorina K. Lazo Gilmore uses a quotation from Shari Thurer's *Myths of Motherhood* at the beginning of her contribution, which lays the foundations for many of the essays; 'A sentimentalized image of the perfect mother casts a long, guilt-inducing shadow over real mothers' lives' (Thurer xi). Gilmore offers a fascinating contrast between the all-giving white sacrificial mothers in Munsch's *Love You Forever* and Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* and the resilient, deeply drawn black mothers who are allowed to express emotion and individuality in Joose's *Mama, Do You love Me?* and Leiner's *Mama Does the Mambo*. The fictionalisation of the mother is also discussed in Robin Calland's essay, where he investigates the portrayal of the mother in picture books and information books about animals: while in the natural world animals often leave the weaker offspring to die, in children's books the emphasis is again on an idealised mother figure who offers eternal love and sacrifice, thus the texts 'sacrifice scientific accuracy to ideology' (154). Fraustino crystalises these arguments in her assertion that popular books 'about the mother-child relationship contribute to the subliminal construction of the desire for the traditional good mother that continues to fuel a backlash culture against women's rights' (218).

Children's literature's portrayal of the mother, then, has implications for an entire culture, and this collection brings this to the fore. It challenged my thinking as a critic and as a woman who had taken children to school before sitting down to digest this book. I stopped to tell everyone about these essays, from the mother at the school gate to childless friends to grandfathers. It matters for all, because this collection exposes motherhood in children's literature. Mothering can be community based and empowering, as demonstrated with the earlier texts, yet all too often it is dangerously over-sentimentalised, and thus is implicated in

'the mummy wars'. Let us hope this book marks the first in a long line of studies of the mother in children's literature.

Works Cited

Thurer, Shari. *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.

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