



LITERARY

Mama

Reading for the Maternally Inclined

Edited by Amy Hudock & Andrea J. Buchanan

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Introduction

A woman who is a mother and a professional writer sits down to write, rushing to meet a deadline. She takes a moment to reflect on where she left off and then quickly jumps back into the story. As she writes, creating an alternate world, her real world intervenes: The children demand food, the husband wonders where his good pants are, the baby swallows a button, a delivery arrives, the husband wants her attention and insists that she stop her “scribbling,” one of the kids destroys the first page of her manuscript. She perseveres, writing through the distractions for as long as she can, and then finally surrenders to the domestic chaos, telling her husband to just hand her the baby already and wondering aloud why she bothers trying to balance a writing career and motherhood.

Another woman who is a mother and a professional writer tries to convince a bookstore to host a reading for her new book

on motherhood. The manager is unenthusiastic, predicting that even in the unlikely event the writer draws an audience, book sales will be minimal, because mothers don't buy books. The woman writer suspects the manager believes that mothers don't *write* books. The woman writer eventually convinces the bookstore to schedule a reading. Despite the inconvenient time chosen for the event, it draws a good crowd and a lot of books are sold. The bookstore manager later apologizes to the woman writer for having given her such a difficult time. "I'm sorry," the manager says. "I didn't realize you were a *writer*."

The first woman is a fictional character in a story written by Fanny Fern and published in 1853. The second woman is a writer whose book was published in 2003.

Separated by 150 years, these two writers share many of the same dilemmas: how to balance creativity and motherhood, and how to be taken seriously as a writer. The question is, why is the modern mother-writer fighting the same battles her literary mother fought nearly two centuries ago?

Even well into the last century, it was widely accepted that women's minds were at the mercy of their wombs, that women couldn't think and be female at the same time. Women were encouraged to be procreative rather than creative—to choose babies over books. By the 1970s, society had changed, and for the first time, literary women were urged to choose books over babies—to deny their procreativity. It was believed the social constraints of motherhood limited creative potential. Regardless of the century and the prevailing attitude, determined mother writers chose—and continue to choose—books *and* babies: a

maternal *and* a literary life, not one or the other.

But many of the mother-writers of the past have been largely forgotten, their legacy lost for their creative daughters, who must readdress the problem of books and babies in each generation. Then, as now, many editors, publishers, reviewers, and scholars did not view motherhood as a theme, or mother-writers as having literary merit. Their works, if published at all, were rarely kept in print. Nor were they made available in the marketplace, taught in universities, stocked in libraries, or represented in bibliographies. This is as true today as it was in the 1850s.

Whether the mother writer is Fannie Fern or her modern-day counterpart, motherhood literature is not considered literary. A web search of motherhood literature brings up a host of how-to parenting books. Bookstores shelve literary memoirs about motherhood in the “Parenting” section. Mother writers often are told by publishers that the market is flooded with mother books; that mothers don’t read or buy books; that motherhood is a “trend” that is already “played out.”

Is the market really flooded? Or do the works of contemporary mother writers seem ubiquitous because of general attitudes toward the mother’s voice in literature—namely, that “motherhood” and “good writing” are incompatible? As one mother writer put it, “There are 907 books about Ronald Reagan. You would think we could stand a few more about motherhood.” At Literary Mama, we’ve been developing a bibliography of memoir, fiction, poetry, and critical commentary on motherhood that is fairly complete, and it hasn’t reached 907 entries. The market can’t really be flooded.

In the academic world, the reception to motherhood literature hasn't been much better. When today's students encounter motherhood in the classroom, they tend to be assigned texts that depict motherhood and art as being incompatible (e.g., Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper"). A recent check of the major bibliography used in literary studies reveals a strong preference for books that mine the incompatibility of motherhood and art, not their synchronicity. Motherhood is not viewed as a theme worthy of literature, unlike uniquely male stories (such as traditional war stories). Some mother professors report that colleagues react with ambivalence about the seriousness and quality of motherhood and literature. Motherhood makes many academics uncomfortable, and thus the academy doesn't always work to keep literature about motherhood in the cultural memory.

Despite all this, mother writers have always written and always will; and we've found supporters within the publishing community and academia. A recent flurry of publications about motherhood suggests that as the first generation of women writers raised by feminist mothers now become mothers themselves, they are making inroads into the publishing profession. The proliferation of women publishing work on motherhood has even given rise to the term "momoir"—a dismissive label applied to memoirs that focus on the psychological, spiritual, and emotional development of a woman through motherhood. Memoirs by Anne Lamott, Louise Erdrich, Naomi Wolf, Lisa Belkin, Andrea Buchanan, Anne Richardson

Roiphe, Phyllis Chesler, Susan Kushner Resnick, Juneé Waites and Helen Swinbourne, Faulkner Fox, Spike Gillespie, Brooke Shields, Annie Spiegelman, Ariel Gore, Katherine Arnoldi, Lauren Slater, Ayun Halliday, Martha Brockenbrough, Jan Waldron, Francesca Lia Block, Cherríe Moraga, Anne Leary, Michelle Herman, Isabele Allende, Eleanor Vincent, and many more use humor and pathos to explore motherhood as a journey of heroic proportions. Anthologies—such as *Child of Mine* (2000), *Mothering Against the Odds* (1998), *Wanting a Child* (1998), *A Mother's World* (1998), *Bigger Than the Sky* (1999), *Mothers Who Think* (2000), *Room to Grow* (2000), *Breeder* (2001), *Pregnancy Stories* (2001), *The Bitch in the House* (2003), *Toddler* (2003), *Mamaphonic* (2004), *You Look Too Young to Be a Mom* (2004), *Because I Said So* (2005), and *Rise Up Singing* (2005)—offer personal narratives that challenge and question social constructions of motherhood. In addition, we have seen the publication of the multigenre anthologies *Cradle and All* (1989), *Double Stitch* (1991), *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood* (2001), and *Birth* (2002); an anthology of poetry, *Mother Songs* (1995); an anthology of fiction, *Mother Knows* (2004); and an anthology of critical and personal essays about women as both mothers and poets, *The Grand Permission* (2003). As more women who are editors, publishers, and professors become mothers or gain interest in motherhood, we find more literature about motherhood in the bookstores.

Even the glossy parenting magazines, which traditionally featured only personal narratives about motherhood that fit a narrow formula, are expanding their approach. Many editors are encouraging writers to submit “edgy” pieces (although these

same writers report their “edginess” gets edited out). The magazine *Brain,Child* regularly publishes high-quality literary writing about motherhood. Websites such as HipMama.com, AustinMama.com, Mamaphonic.com, and others create an online outlet for writing about motherhood that is immediate and current. Their popularity reflects the large number of mothers who want to read other mothers’ literary writing. And the number of weblogs focusing on motherhood suggests a whole new group of writers and readers. Many mothers choose to blog because web self-publication lets them write and read the work of other mothers. Writers also receive the immediate gratification of seeing their work published without going through a long submission process, and have the freedom to explore topics that are often taboo in other venues. The large audience for these blogs suggests that the vein of voyeurism that is often a part of motherhood—observing children, teachers, other mothers—leads women online, often late at night, between feedings or diaper changes, to seek out other mothers’ stories. Clearly the market for motherhood literature isn’t played out.

However, will the mother-centric books and weblogs be there for our daughters? Will our daughters have access to mother-writers of previous generations? Our cultural memory seems so short. When we at Literary Mama first discussed reviewing *Mother Songs*, the only collection of poetry specifically about motherhood, many of our editors hadn’t heard of it, even though it had been published in 1995. In some ways, the cultural memory is already fading. We’re not nominating twenty-first-century mother writers for the endangered species list at a time when it seems they are coming into their own, but there may be

reason for concern. Fanny Fern and other mother writers of the 1850s, like mother writers today, challenged the status quo. They thought they had won the battle. But who knows them now?

Literary Mama was the brainchild of women writers frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of readily available literary writing about motherhood. A group of us began a quest to find more mother writers like ourselves. We found that most of the available contemporary literature on parenting fell under the categories of nonfiction journalism and how-to books, much of which had not been written by mothers. But we did discover an easily accessible medium being used by mothers speaking in their own voices about their experiences: the Internet. On parenting websites and bulletin boards, on sections of sites like Salons “Mothers Who Think,” and later on blogs, women were writing, talking, exploring the honest and sometimes-uncomfortable truth about motherhood. Still, those avenues proved less satisfactory than we had hoped: Salon’s “Mothers” section was eventually transformed into something less mother-specific called “Life”; parenting bulletin boards were dominated by chat and shoptalk, which is vital toward growing a community but not in crafting writing; the blogs, while often well written, offered individual voices and isolated experience rather than the digested perspective of literature. And while many of our favorite sites published stellar creative nonfiction, few included poetry and fiction by mothers.

Given the dearth of outlets for motherhood literature, we decided to create the place we wanted to find, with the kind of

writing we wanted to read: Literary Mama, an online literary magazine of writing about motherhood.

With twenty or so editors—mothers who are writers or aspiring writers—volunteering their time and effort, the site has become the only literary magazine on the web to publish exclusively mothers’ voices. Since its launch in November 2003, Literary Mama has grown from a small hobby site to a nationally recognized online magazine that each month attracts more than 35,000 unique visitors, a half million hits, and hundreds of essay submissions. Literary Mama was chosen as a Forbes Favorite in Forbes.com’s “Best of the Web” picks for 2005; and *Writer’s Digest* named us one of its “101 Best Websites for Writers,” saying, “Don’t let the site’s casual name fool you: These writers are serious.”

Some Literary Mama contributors are well-respected authors; others are women who are discovering themselves as writers for the first time. All of the writers speak to their own unique experience of mothering in a way that is compelling, literary, and unsentimentalized. As we say on the site, Literary Mama aims to publish work that is “too long, too complex, too ambiguous, too deep, too raw, too irreverent, too ironic, and too body conscious for other publications. . . . At Literary Mama, writers explore ideas and emotions that may be outside the usual scope of commercial writing.”

This work is continued and exemplified in *Literary Mama: Readings for the Maternally Inclined*, which features standout pieces published on the site over the last two years.

We knew that mother writers had craft and style. We knew that the theme of motherhood could inspire writers to explore the depths of the human psyche and the complex web of human relationships. We knew all of this when we started Literary Mama. But with this volume, with the work laid out on paper instead of hyperlinked, we are seeing new trends and patterns that we didn't expect. And what we are seeing is blowing us away.

The first section, "Creative Acts," emphasizes an important theme: the birth of a child as the birth of the artist/writer. In these selections, the creative acts of pregnancy, becoming a mother, caring for a young child, writing, and art come together on equal ground. Because mother writers in the past often subscribed to the traditional opposition between books and babies, "Creative Acts" suggests a new generation of mothers that recognizes the ranking of (pro)creation of the body as less significant than creation of the mind for the gender propaganda that it is. The mother writers in this section claim that creativity is creativity, whether it comes from the physical body or the mind.

"Pregnancy," the first poem of this section and the book, is a perfect example. Male writers have often used pregnancy and birth as a metaphor for creative acts of the mind. This poem uses the metaphor to reject the artificial binary of the mind and the body. "Pregnancy" details the physical symptoms of pregnancy in the shape of a pregnant body, with the content matching the body part. Other poems in this section also explore the pregnant, birthing, and nursing body, transforming these private creative acts into art.

Creative nonfiction pieces in this section, such as Joanne

Hartman's "Evolution of a Muse" and Nicole Cooley's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Being a Mother and a Poet," describe the writers' transformations into motherhood as inspiration for, rather than impediment to, their writing. Hartman uses an innovative form, employing key moments with her child as the impetus for writing and detailing her writing process. Cooley's piece mixes poetry and prose in stanzalike sections.

This coming together of writing and motherhood is not without uncertainty. Barbara Crooker's poem, "The Blue Snake Lies Curled in my Bowl Like Oatmeal," employs an extended metaphor that links the child with a creative product, exploring the conflict the poet feels between her writing and her mothering work.

Mothers of older children, too, discover personal illumination as well as ambiguity about motherhood and art. Lizbeth Finn-Arnold's "Out of the Woods" explores how Walden Pond and Henry David Thoreau help her to see her children as valuable to her creative work. Karen Vernon's "The Gift" and Jennifer Lauck's "Not So Perfect" address the ways in which family members can discourage creativity. Both pieces encourage mothers not to squelch their own or their children's artistic impulses, even if it means being different from those around them.

The second section, "Mothers Raising Women, Defining Mothering," begins with the poem "Casi's Face," by Gabriela Anaya Valdepeña. The poem introduces a theme that appears often in women's writing about their daughters, the girl child as a mirror for the self: "I see me, but taller; me but prettier, / and with your father's chin." The poem "LiLi," by Laura A. Lopez,

celebrates a daughter caught in song, using the daughter's moment of creation for poetic inspiration.

Many of the writers in this section investigate how raising their daughters inspires reflection on identity and transformation. Deesha Philyaw Thomas's "The Girl is Mine" explores how motherhood is defined as the author grapples with issues of adoption and nontraditional family structures. The speaker in Rachel Iverson's "Nighttime with Dorothea" navigates the boundaries between mother and daughter, sometimes collapsing them, sometimes holding them firm. The dangers and joys of a daughter's growing independence appear in the two fiction pieces in this section: Cassie Premo Steele's "Chocolate" and Peggy Duffy's "The Girl at the Side of the Road." And the poems "Eclipse," by Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, and "Beautiful Daughter," by Mary Moore, detail the separation mothers feel from their adult daughters—even as the mothers admire their children's independence. All of these writers use setting—specifically the outdoors, with its elements of danger—to highlight themes of separation. These pieces illustrate how as children grow, mothers grow, forcing both generations to confront the larger world in new ways.

The third section, "Mothers Raising Men, Exploring Mothering," shows mothers grappling with the ambiguity of their concurrent closeness to and distance from their boys. Ona Gritz's poem, "Boy Child," and Jennifer Eyre White's nonfiction piece, "Analyzing Ben," attempt to reconcile the writers' stereotypical views of boys with what they see in their growing children.

Many of the writers in this section see themselves as outsiders in their boys' worlds. In "When You're Ten," Lisa

McMann tries to reconcile the image of boys holding weapons in war-torn countries with the vision of her son taking his first shooting lessons. She, like Amy Burditt in “Albion Street,” sees the dangers inherent in learning to be male in a culture that defines manhood in narrow ways. .

Two poems, Linda Lee Crosfield’s “Packing the Car” and garrie keyman’s “Son of a Bitch,” explore the separation the poets feel between themselves and their sons. Crosfield begins her poem with a metaphor that links her son’s removal of boxes from her home to the removal of evidence from a crime scene. Crosfield not only deals with the painful separation of a child leaving home but the separation gender education demands. Keyman also experiences separation, but with a bittersweet anger: “they never told me / to stop pushing.” The poem’s title suggests that she blames both herself and the traditional role of mother for the distance between them.

In contrast, “How to Make a Meat Pie and Other Tales of the Ambitious Mother,” by Lisa Rubisch, sets up a parallel experience, where the mother and son both have temper tantrums over something they cannot have: The child longs for someone else’s toy, and the mother wants both a career and to be with her son.

In the “Sex, Fertility, and the Body” section, writers challenge the duality between [should this be “duality of”?] the virgin and the sex goddess, the angel and the whore. Most people balk when asked to discuss the sexuality of their mothers because mothers are supposed to be sexless and utilitarian. KerryAnn Cochrane’s poem “Matermorphosis” demonstrates how even mothers themselves internalize these social messages. Jennifer

D. Munro's "The Dogs of Sayulita" and the Naughty Mommy's "Becoming Mine" reveal settings outside the house, away from where mothering takes place, as allowing liberating moments that enhance sexuality, as if the home itself stymies mothers' libidos. The fiction piece "Camping," by Barbara Atkinson, and the poem "Sanctuary," by Peggy Hong, both explore longing and desire—again outside the home—for unattainable men.

In the next section, "Mothers, Fathers, Parents," mothers learn to be parents from their own parents. Whether they reject or accept what they have learned, mothers recognize that their past families shape their present families. The section opens with "The Impatient Mother," by Ona Gritz, a poem that collapses the past and the present, the mother and the mothered. The speaker portrays herself as being possessed, demonlike, by her mother's impatience—thus becoming her mother—then shifting to align herself with the child forced to endure the impatience.

Kimberly Greene Angle writes in the nonfiction piece "Forecasts" of her father's love of rain and tornados, and how she survives the storms of her parents' alcoholism. "Nebraska," by Holly Day, "Eyes in the Back of Her Head," by Gayle Brandeis, and "Blueberries for Mom," by Meagan Francis, each explore the effects of growing up with mothers who were wounded, lost, missing, or otherwise displaced. Suzanne Kamata's "Gan" explores a cross-cultural relationship when a mother-in-law's health emergency sparks a marital crisis. In "Mama's Orange Robe," Cathleen Daly uses a 1970s housecoat to symbolize her mother's powerful ability to make her father's absence (and their family's difference) bearable. "Word-Girl," by Mary Moore, offers an extended metaphor in which the generative acts of speaking

and creating children become one, as the speaker explores how her mother's words shaped the child she once was. And in "Motherkind," S. A. Miller attempts to understand her abusive mother when she encounters a warm, loving mother figure so different from her own.

The final selections in this section address illness, death, and secrets. "Gray," by Sybil Lockhart, and "Mitzraim," by Liz Abrams-Morley, show women of the so-called "sandwich generation" struggling to be caretakers to both children and aging parents. The narrator of "Acts of Contrition," by Lisa Meaux, finds secrets hard to bear; she refuses to continue the family tradition of not speaking of mental illness, choosing instead to support her son's recovery. "Dad, in Red," by Sonya Huber, traces generational patterns when the artist narrator attempts to fulfill her father's last wishes: to have his ashes mixed into her paint. Genetics matter, these writers tell us, as does early socialization. How much they matter is perhaps never more apparent than when we are raising our own families.

The sixth section, "Surviving Illness and Loss," highlights what is at stake in the journey of bearing and raising children. At the most basic level, the job of mothering is to keep another person alive. It's the struggle between life and death. Women often write about miscarriage and loss, but Megeen R. Mulholland's "Miscarriage of an English Teacher" reveals the writing process as part of the poem's structure. The speaker revises her writing as she struggles to capture the essence of her experience with miscarriage, illuminating the distance between creative body and mind. "Johnny," by Heidi Raykeil, explores the death of a newborn son and the writer's battle to come to terms

with her loss. The poems “Namaste,” by Rachel Iverson, “Hospital Quartet,” by Phyllis Capello, and “Dear Friend,” by Vicki Forman, detail the vigils mothers keep with ill children. And, finally, Rebecca Kaminsky’s “Down Will Come Baby,” a story of postpartum depression, rings true for many mothers and fathers who suffer from this serious and life-deadening illness.

The work in the final section, “Healing the Past to Live in the Present,” examines the connection with nature or with other humans in a wide range of settings—homeless shelters, concentration camps, mental institutions, music conservatories. The opening poem, “Answers,” by Lisa Suhair Majaj, asks us to consider what we carry with us from the past, how we remember the past, and how that past leads into our futures. Cindy La Ferle’s “Fragile Season” tells the story of a mother, struggling to define herself after her grown son has left home, who finds solace working in a homeless shelter. In “Why My Garden,” Ericka Lutz, prompted by the need to understand the Jewish heritage she is attempting to pass on to her daughter, goes on a journey to the ruins of Birkenau and Auschwitz. After confronting the quiet evil of humankind, she considers planting fragments of the ruins in her garden, assimilating the enemy. The fictional piece “The River,” by Amy Hudock, is also about a journey, but one into and out of madness. This story reworks the tale of the mother artist who kills herself—like Edna in *The Awakening*—to reveal greater possibilities for mothers who write, paint, create. “The Plant,” by Andrea Buchanan, explores the notion of nurturing—plants, ourselves, our children—as something that can be learned in her story of grappling with the nature of pain. All of these

stories celebrate the heroic internal work that must be done to overcome the past and fully embrace the present.

The basic story arc of motherhood is the same as it always has been. In fact, it might surprise those who think of motherhood as a nonuniversal experience to recognize in that arc the classic hero's journey: separation (the physical transformation of the pregnant body marking a gestating woman as different from other women), initiation (giving birth, the identity-shift of motherhood), and return (rejoining society as a mother, with all the cultural expectations that status carries). What's different about the mother writing of today versus centuries ago—such as the current preference for frank honesty about mothers' previously private experiences, from birth and breastfeeding to sex and anger—has more to do with the cultural zeitgeist than with anything fundamentally new about the story of motherhood itself.

However, one crucial difference between Fanny Fern's world and the world of today's mother writers is that of access. Contemporary mother writers around the world can easily and quickly share their work. Literary Mama is produced entirely via email and the web; many of the editors who communicate with each other every day have never met in person or even spoken on the phone. We've never met the majority of the writers we publish. Yet through the immediacy of the Internet, we are able to know one another—to read each other's stories, to collaborate on large-scale projects, to encourage and inspire one another.

Our goal at Literary Mama is to take writing about motherhood seriously. By publishing writing exclusively by

mothers, we assert that motherhood as a theme is worthy of great literature—and that mothers are capable of writing it. Our literary foremothers began this work generations ago. With *Literary Mama: Reading for the Maternally Inclined*, we hope to further our role in midwifing the literary mothers of the future. For these are writers who do not deserve to be forgotten.

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