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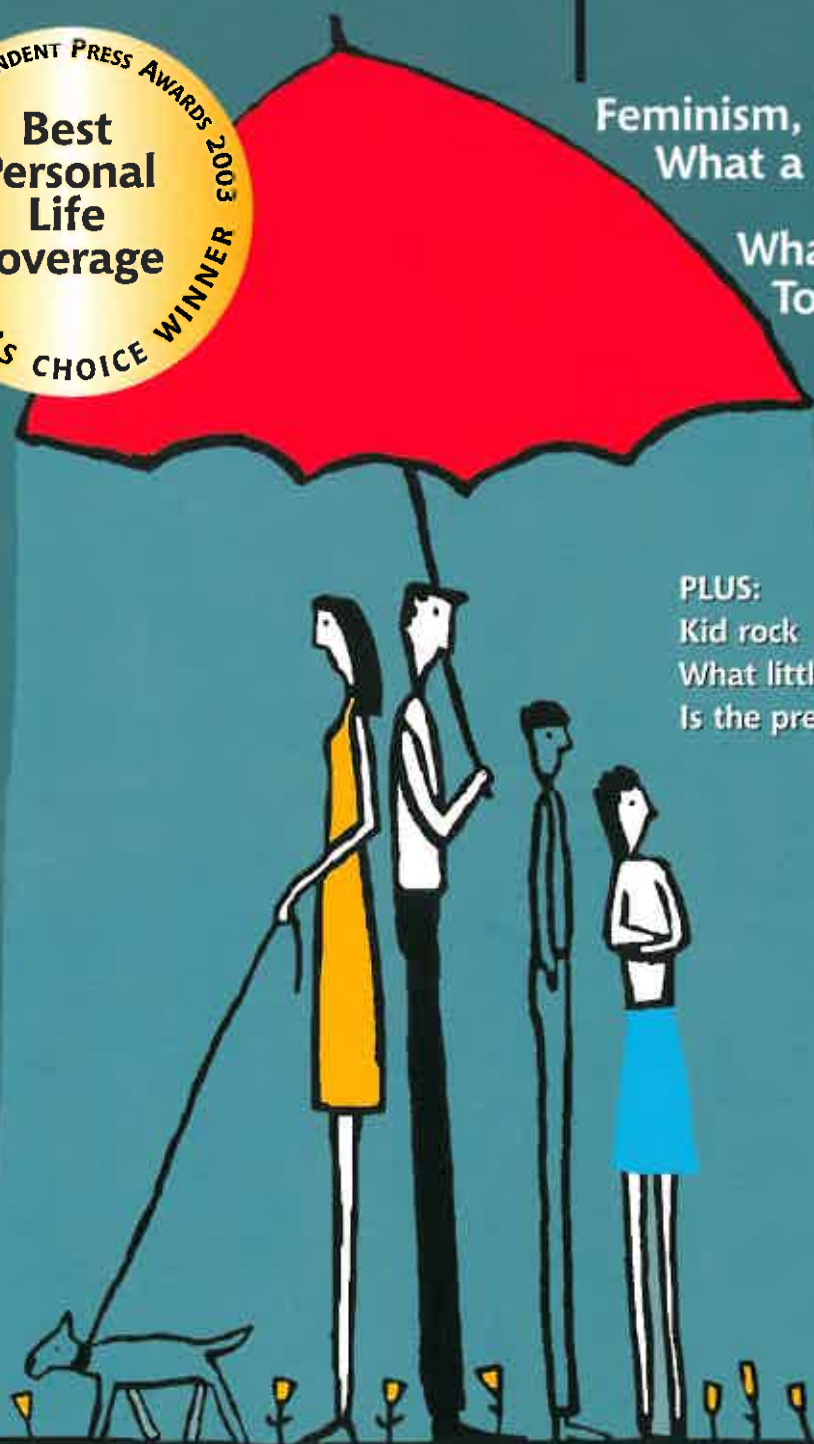
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FEMINISM, MOMISM, AND WHAT A WOMAN WANTS

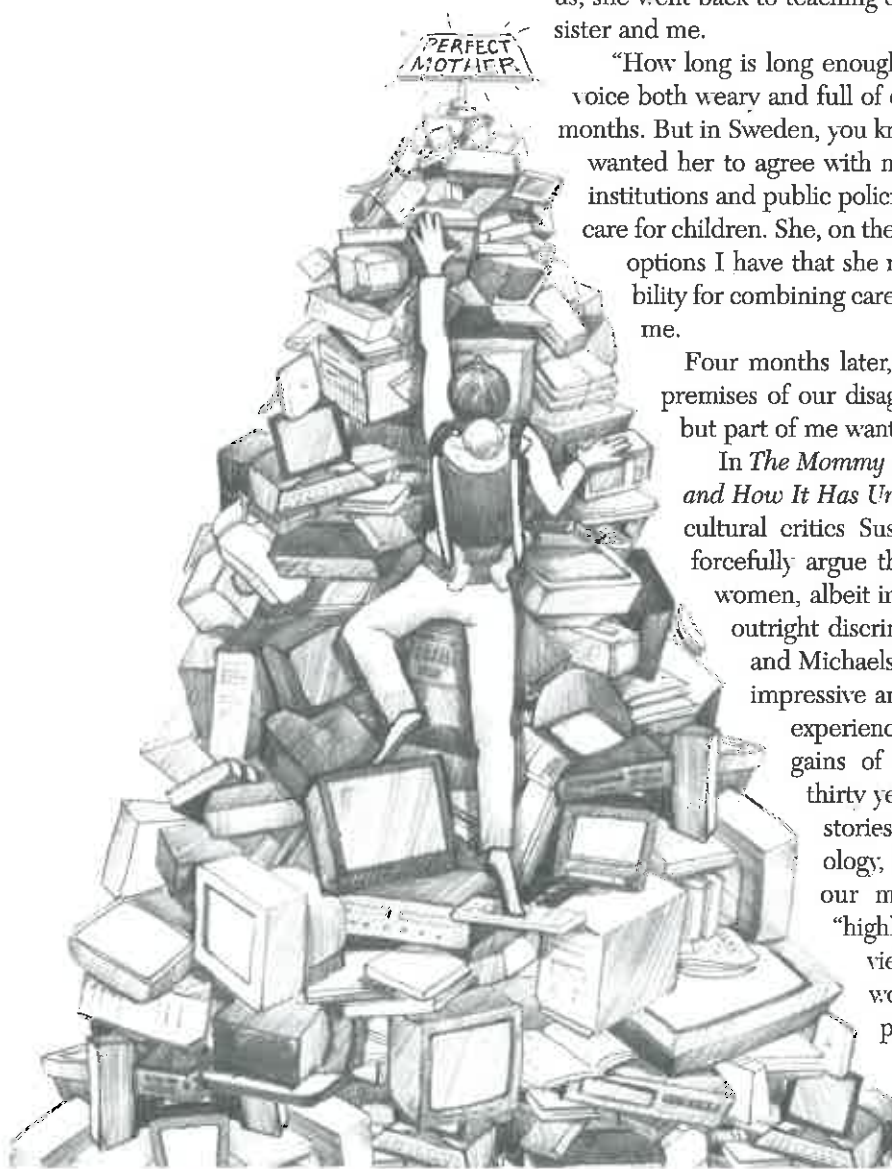
by Heather Hewett

DURING THE FIRST few weeks of new motherhood, during which I alternated between disbelief and wonder at the depths of my exhaustion, I made a comment to my mother about the inadequacy of a friend's six weeks of paid maternity leave. My mom gave me a look of bewilderment. As a member of that generation of women who kicked down doors for the rest of us, she went back to teaching one week after giving birth to both my sister and me.

"How long is long enough?" she asked, to which I replied in a voice both weary and full of outrage, "At the bare *minimum*, three months. But in Sweden, you know, women have more than a *year*." I wanted her to agree with me, to acknowledge that our country's institutions and public policies still make it difficult for mothers to care for children. She, on the other hand, was thinking about all the options I have that she never dreamed of having, all the flexibility for combining career and children in a way that works for me.

Four months later, I keep coming back to the different premises of our disagreement. I know it's not that simple, but part of me wants to know: who's right?

In *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (Free Press, 2004), cultural critics Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels forcefully argue that our country continues to oppress women, albeit in different, more subtle ways than the outright discrimination of my mother's era. Douglas and Michaels, both academics and mothers, cull an impressive amount of research that suggests we're experiencing a powerful backlash against the gains of the feminist movement. Examining thirty years' worth of mass media images and stories, they show how an insidious new ideology, the "new momism," has taken root in our midst and flourished. This ideal, a "highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood" maintaining that "a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children," has upped the ante for what it takes to be a mother. In smart, sardonic prose, the authors demonstrate



how much moms are up against today, from the impossible-to-achieve advice of childcare experts to the increasing list of mothering no-no's to the anxiety that you can't ever let your kids out of your sight.

In the tradition of feminist writers Susan Faludi, Arlie Hochschild, and Ann Crittenden, Douglas and Michaels thoroughly document the rise of the new momism since Betty Friedan's landmark bestseller *The Feminine Mystique* inspired a revolution among housewives and mothers in the 1960s. They show how seemingly innocuous cultural phenomena such as celebrity mom profiles, TV commercials, sitcoms, parenting books, and Martha Stewart have worked together to produce a romanticized, flawless, and utterly unattainable ideal of motherhood. These images of the perfect mom (who is, quite naturally, white, middle-class, married, and firmly ensconced at home) leave no room for selfish wants, ambivalence about mothering, or even the occasional outburst at one's children. It's the reincarnation of the feminine mystique, only with a twist: women are expected to be subservient not to their husbands, but to their kids.

The authors deftly link the new momism with an increase in sensationalist news stories about "delinquent" mothers—mothers on welfare or crack, and at its most extreme, mothers who murder their children—that dramatize the horrible consequences of failing at motherhood. Stories like the Baby M case (in which surrogate mother Mary Beth Whitehead reneged on her contractual agreement) and the "epidemic" of crack babies (an epidemic largely imagined by the press) dominating the news in the late '80s became morality tales centered

around the villain of the bad mother. These deviant mothers, suggest the authors, became symbols of "the potential deterioration of The Family writ large, a warning to all mothers about the utter fragility of motherhood itself."

Ultimately, these stories helped justify the increased surveillance of all mothers, cautioning the good mother to be constantly on her guard against herself: "As a mother, were you being sufficiently vigilant; were you, at every turn, resisting the selfish, stupid choice in favor of the selfless, smart one?" Likewise, media panics in the 1980s about threats to child safety (abduction cases and day care scandals) helped to foment parental fears. As more and more mothers worked outside the home (their numbers peaking in 1984), the media helped shape the perception that it's not safe to leave one's child alone, even for a minute. Nor is it safe to put him in day care, or hire a babysitter. In the face of such dangers, how can a responsible mother decide to work? Women have choices, yes, but there's only one *right* choice.

The new momism isn't just a product of the media, which has mixed intentions, both noble (exposing day care corruption) and self-serving (making headlines). Many others—politicians, pundits, and childcare experts—have contributed to its creation. Right-wing attacks on women and the collapse of governmental institutions have fueled this "deeply and powerfully political" message about motherhood. Douglas and Michaels critique the new momism in a sarcastic, snappy back-talk that funnels their anger into biting humor and zingy one-liners. Their "call to arms" invites all mothers to resist:

As we get assaulted by "15 Ways to Stress Proof Your Child," "Boost Your Kid's Brainpower in Just 25 Minutes," "Discipline Makeovers: Better Behavior in 21 Days," and "What It Really Takes to Make Your Baby Smarter," not to mention "The Sex Life You Always Wanted—How to Have it Now" (answer: put the kids up for adoption), let's develop, together, some really good comebacks. And let's also take a second look at these "wars" we're supposed to be involved with: the "war" against welfare mothers, the "war" between working versus stay-at-home mothers. While these wars do often benefit one set of mothers over another, what they do best is stage *all* mothers' struggles, in the face of the most pathetic public policies for women and children in the western world, as a catfight. Then the politicians who've failed to give us decent day care or maternity leave can go off and sip their sherry while mothers point their fingers at each other.

The authors model the Erma Bombeck school of mouthy, attitude-driven "rebellious mothering" and ask us to join in. It's consciousness-raising, twenty-first-century style, though I wasn't around in the 60s, I felt its powerful pull.

While the authors' rhetorical strategy serves them well, it sometimes takes on a life of its own, making me occasionally wonder about their claims. For example, in their chapter on attachment parenting (one place where I, as a new mom, really wanted to hear more), they describe the philosophy of childcare authors William and Martha Sears:

Reattach your baby to your body the moment she is born and keep

question whether facts are distorted, even slightly, in service of an argument. This is particularly true when the authors have done such a fabulous job of amassing important research and correcting others' misrepresentations of the historical record.

Why might a woman buy into the new momism? For one, Douglas and Michaels suggest, it provides a set of child-centered values that enables mothers to "defy a society so driven by greed and self-interest." It also targets women in their most vulnerable place—their love for their children. But as powerful as these ideals may be, how much do they affect the way women think about motherhood and how they make life choices? Don't a whole host of motivations, those generated by internal as well as external forces, influence each one of us in our decision-making?

Clinical psychologist Daphne de Marneffe probes more deeply into the psyche of mothers in *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life* (Little, Brown and Company, 2004). De Marneffe, also a mother, might well agree that there's a constellation of forces out there promoting certain ideas about motherhood as well as very real cultural and economic constraints forcing women to make particular choices. But she's more interested in how women experience motherhood, how they perceive their options, and how they come to make the choices they do. Like feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow, de Marneffe is interested in exploring how mothers experience motherhood. And while the author identifies herself as a feminist, she's a therapist, not a social critic. Her goal is therapeutic: to help free women so they can "tap into

their own human happiness."

Unlike Douglas and Michaels, de Marneffe sees our culture pushing mothers toward the workplace, not away from it: "It was once true that the price of women's admission to social life was that she leave her ambitious, striving self outside the door," she writes. "But today, she is much more likely to be urged to leave outside, or at least politely hide, her intensely emotional concern about caring for her children." When mothers are required to "sequester" and "compartmentalize" their maternal desire, de Marneffe argues, this interior division infiltrates both the workplace and our sense of self. Women are anxious these days, she says, because of our culture's limited concept of motherhood:

Over and above the concrete losses and tradeoffs, women's fears are heightened by a rhetoric surrounding motherhood that conceptualizes mothering as antithetical to self. Women observe the absence of any satisfying formulation of why mothers might *want* to mother—not as some sort of unthinking surrender to women's conventional or "natural" role, but as an actively pursued and authentic means of self-expression—and that very absence tends to confirm some women's suspicions that stepping into motherhood is like stepping into a void.

Our cultural disdain of mothering carries over into our attitudes toward stay-at-home mothers, whom we often assume have acquiesced to traditional notions of motherhood. This is not the case, says de Marneffe; these mothers haven't rejected the gains of feminism but rather the model of the "Supermom," of trying to do it all. But our culture persists in

seeing this choice as self-abnegating instead of active, self-fulfilling, and creative.

De Marneffe sets out to explore this occluded territory of mothering to put the words "mother" and "desire" back together, and to describe motherhood in such a way that it is "consistent with feminism and free from sentimentality and cliché." More than anything, she wants to question the truism that motherhood necessarily conflicts with a woman's autonomous self.

What, then, is maternal desire? De Marneffe emphasizes what it is not: it is not "duty," "compulsion," "concession," or "acquiescence." Nor should it be confused with housework or femininity, as she claims some feminists have done. As for what it is, she lists the following: the "embodied, aching desire" to be with one's children, the "longing" to nurture them, and the "sensual, physical pleasure of caring" for them. It is also the "wish to participate in a mutual relationship" and to ground oneself in "meaning, morality, even aesthetics" about time, service, community, and relationships.

But this left me with questions. I wanted de Marneffe to define her subject a bit more—not necessarily in a way that brings it back to gender (though I couldn't stop wondering why *maternal* desire?)—but in a way that brings it back to the body and emotion. Perhaps because her subject is so slippery and resistant to theoretical language, the author includes reflections on her personal story, the individual moments when she has experienced the strong pull to be with and care for her children. These beautiful, lyrical passages—along with references to works by writers Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, Sharon Olds, and A.S.

hood turned into a memoir in the sassy, “rebellious mothering” tradition of Anne Lamott’s *Operating Instructions* and the writers in *The Bitch in the House*. Fox writes in the voice of your best friend: smart, funny, and not afraid to tell you what motherhood is *really* like. What angers her are all the inequalities that crop up in her marriage to a good guy who’s the sensitive type, an “avowed feminist,” and a great cook. As she explores the disparity between her ideals and reality, she wonders about the world we live in: “is it me who’s crazy, or is it everyone else?”

When Fox and her husband Duncan met, they were relatively equal—both graduate students, both hard workers, both ambitious. But by the time they have two children, Duncan has a tenure-track teaching job in Austin (where they moved for his job), and Fox feels like she’s going crazy trying to balance caring for the kids, doing housework, adjunct teaching, and writing. While she’s happy with all the choices she has

made, most of all motherhood—“I chose and continue to choose it with joy”—she’s also very unhappy, and guilty that she can’t snap out of it. “What did I have to be unhappy about?” she asks, listing all the wonderful parts of her middle-class life: two healthy children, a great husband, a house, a job (“albeit badly paid”), and enough money. Still, she’s angry. She’s angry that she spends more time with the kids than he does, that she does more housework, and that Duncan’s book (which he needs to write for tenure) takes priority over her book of poems.

She begins to keep track of all the time she spends with the children when her husband is doing something else, writing “Frequent Parenting Miles” at the top of the page. “I kept domestic score for six months on my Frequent Parenting Miles chart because something—perhaps several somethings—seemed terribly askew, unfair, and traditional in our house, and I couldn’t figure out what had caused

it, how to prove its existence to Duncan, or how to stop it,” she explains. She plans to “cash in” on all the hours she spends parenting their children alone because, she figures her husband owes her:

Truth be told, during my highest moments of resentment, I figured Duncan owed me the minute Joseph was born. Duncan had ejaculated—which hardly seemed arduous—and I took it from there, though Duncan did make a series of delicious meals while I was pregnant. For equity’s sake, though, I figured Duncan should be doing 75 percent of the baby-care during the first six months to pay me back for pregnancy and labor. Then we could move on to a straight 50/50 split for the rest of our lives. This was without consideration for breast-feeding, though. Given that we both thought breast-feeding was a good idea and only I could do it, a fair deal might have been Duncan doing literally everything except breast-

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feeding for eight months, then doing 75 percent for an additional six months, and then we could shift into 50/50 for perpetuity. The calculations for two children—one infant and one toddler—would be decidedly more complex.

While Fox and her husband believe in the “joint project” of raising kids, their lives don’t reflect their feminist ideals; and even more infuriating, Fox sees the inequities of their relationship mirrored and normalized in the couples around them. Frequent Parenting Miles become her way of ensuring that the extreme imbalance will end (which it does) and that she and her husband will work things out (which they do). While a part of her wishes she didn’t have to keep track (“I wanted, or half-wanted, to be transformed by love, made less petty and more generous”), she’s too honest and self-aware to deny her relief when her self-protective, judgmental “old self” refuses to remain silent.

Fox’s unhappiness also stems from the societal pressure she feels to be a perfect mother. Her description of early twenty-first-century motherhood echoes what Douglas and Michaels argue: that the requirements for good mothering have become higher, more extensive, and less yielding. In Austin, attachment parenting has swept the ranks of educated, progressive, and countercultural parents. For some of these mothers, attachment parenting seems to provide another way of resisting all that’s wrong in the larger world: “processed food, regimentation in public schools, long-houred jobs, and the competitive, sped-up pace of mainstream culture.” But Fox finds the dictates of attachment parenting, which is touted as both “ancient” (because “unspecified

groups of native women in Africa and Asia had apparently practiced it successfully for eons”) and “modern” (because it “solidly rejected American postwar admonitions to feed and put baby to sleep on a strict schedule”) to be exhausting and oppressive, particularly so for women. She feels out of place in the female weekday world of moms and kids, hates Gymboree, and avoids the park, where the other mothers, all seemingly more “selfless” than she, make her feel intense guilt.

What brings her back to herself is spending time with her children, who simply want their mom to be herself. That, and writing a book in the hope that her story will “resonate for other women in similar and different circumstances.”

There’s one thing that still puzzles me: how can de Marneffe and the authors of *The Mommy Myth* be talking about the same world? Particularly when Fox’s memoir seems to corroborate the pernicious presence of a new momism. Two against one, yes? De Marneffe can’t be right too.

And yet, if I think about it, I’ve felt pressures *both* to stay at home and to work, to throw all of my energy into motherhood and to reserve at least a

little for myself, depending on whom I’m talking to, where I am, and how I’m feeling about the whole project of trying to do both (which swings wildly depending on how much sleep I got the previous night). You just can’t win as a mother. Our culture asks too many divergent and contradictory things. Even relatively fortunate middle-class mothers (which is, after all, who we’re talking about here) can easily be overwhelmed. And when you take into account all the mothers in our country with their particular struggles and stories, the range of experience is probably much greater than even these three books would suggest.

So before coming to any grand conclusions about motherhood—about *parenthood*, because fathers are struggling with many of the same issues—in early twenty-first-century America, we probably need to hear a few more voices on the subject. And not just people who think they have the answer (whom I’m always suspicious of), but ordinary moms and dads who, in a country that stubbornly refuses to help families, somehow manage to stay grounded in themselves and in touch with their kids despite oppressive cultural dictates, onerous economic demands, and never enough time, day after day, after day.

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While working on this review, I spent a fair amount of time reading passages from all three books to friends and family members. Because the topic was so personal, I found myself reading eagerly, passionately, and, in some cases, quite heatedly. I quickly realized I was using these books as a way of revisiting the many years of pre-baby conversations I’d had with those around me—with my friends, about how to put together a life with children, partners, and careers; with my mother, about how children will change my sense of self and my priorities, whether I like it or not; and, most of all, with my husband, about how we’ll share parenting, build our respective careers, and still find time to spend with each other. But those were largely theoretical discussions; it’s all much more real, and far more difficult to figure out, now that I have a baby.