How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of a Woman’s Life

From Toddlers-in-Tiaras to Cougars-on-the-Prowl

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Changing the Playing (or Reading) Field: Reconceptualizing Motherhood Through Humorous Parenting Texts

In June 2012, Star magazine ran a magazine cover in which celebrity mothers holding their young children were captured, unbeknownst to them, in photographs. The headline running across these photos reads: 'Star Report Card: Best and Worst Moms!' Below this are questions meant to entice the reader to purchase the magazine to find out more about how these celebrity moms measure up to one another: 'Who chooses booze over storytime? Who lets her kid smoke? Who hasn't seen her son for months?'

Worse yet, juxtaposed against each photograph is a letter grade that the magazine has assigned to each mother and, even more troubling, in some cases the photographs are annotated with judgmental asides. While Sandra Bullock earned an A+ and escaped having such snarky commentary adorn her photograph, the other three celebrity moms sharing the cover (J. Lo, Christina Aguilera, and Angelina Jolie) were not so lucky. For example, the cover calls out Angelina for allowing her child to eat Cheetos through the use of an arrow pointing to an open snack bag. More problematically, the magazine puts words into the children's mouths, adding text boxes like 'I want my nanny!' to the photograph including J. Lo's child, and the word 'Ouch!' next to Christina's child (along with an arrow pointing out that he has a bruise on his face). As discussed in the last chapter, cultural texts are quick to judge mothers - as is evidenced here quite literally with the use of a report card that purports to rate one's motherly skill. Just like the tone of the pregnancy self-help books, this practice of grading celebrity moms denotes society's tendency to infantilize women, issuing a report card as if they were grade school children. The magazine cover ratings also reinforce competition among women, a major issue affecting women's behavior during this stage of motherhood - and beyond. Now, granted, Star magazine isn't exactly of the caliber of Time magazine, but at the same time, it is read by 6.1 million people
a week. As such, even if it is complete drivel, it's consumed by a large audience that is exposed to its problematic messages.

As discussed in the previous chapter, reading materials directed at women often contain some incredibly troubling messages. Traditional self-help books have for decades capitalized on the insecurities that often accompany pregnancy and parenthood, creating a long list of texts by 'experts' providing advice to women entering into that stage of their lives. These books are often fear-convoking, didactic how-to manuals that prescribe 'correct' ways to raise children. Recently, a wave of mommy-crafted texts or humor-based parenting products has surfaced that claim to counter these 'one-size-fits-all' professional perspectives. This chapter analyzes various mother-written (and often comedic) self-help books alongside of motherhood memoir, fiction novels concerned with motherhood, and parodic parenting books to see how these contemporary texts are redefining motherhood and responding to ideological messages concerning parenting.

Fearful bookshelf companions: the consequences of the expert self-help books

In the previous chapter we argued that one of the problems with the 'expert'-written self-help books and other parenting products is that they propose to know more about parenting than the parent purchasing them. Products specifically aimed at mothers tend to be marketed in a way that further questions their female consumers' efficacy with the inclusion of product instructions and condescending medical passages. Like the pregnancy guides, these parenting texts aimed at mothers continue to foster fears about not succeeding in this role. Further, these texts also tend to associate the stage of motherhood with fear. Entire books have been written on this latter topic: for example Susan Douglas and Meredith Michael's *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*, which was discussed in great detail in Chapter 6, and Judith Warner's *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, which makes this focus explicit in its title. Warner's text discusses the 'widespread, choking cocktail of guilt and anxiety and resentment and regret' that 'is poisoning motherhood for American women today.' As a nod to Betty Friedan's 1963 *Feminist Mystique*, Warner calls this new feeling plaguing middle-class women 'The Mommy Mystique', and explains how it operates:

The Mommy Mystique tells us that we are the luckiest women in the world – the freest, with the most choices, the broadest horizons, the best luck, and the most wealth. It says we have the knowledge and know-how to make 'informed decisions' that will guarantee the successful course of our children's lives. It tells us that if we choose badly our children will fall prey to countless dangers – from insecure attachment to drugs to kidnapping to a third-rate college. And if this happens, if our children stray from the path toward happiness and success, we will have no one but ourselves to blame. Because to point fingers out at society, to look beyond ourselves, is to shirk 'personal responsibility'. To admit that we cannot do everything ourselves, that indeed we need help – and help on a large, systematic scale – is tantamount to admitting personal failure. Comforted by the Mommy Mystique, we are convinced that every decision we make, every detail we control, is incredibly important.4

Warner notes that this feeling of guilt is a particularly American problem. Through autobiographical accounts detailing her experiences raising children in both the United States and France, she highlights the very different cultural expectations in place for mothers in these two countries, and the effects that these different societal expectations had on her emotional wellbeing.5 While other feminist scholars have blamed specific outside influences for the pressures that American mothers face, Warner suggests it's not that clear cut:

It's not the 'fault' of the media. Or the Christian Right. Or George W. Bush. Or Phyllis Schlafly. Or Dr. Laura Schlessinger. Or Mrs. Doubtfire.6 It's us – this generation of mothers. And it's the way our culture has groomed and greeted us. Mixing promise with politics, feminism with 'family values', science and sound bites and religion, and above all, fear into a combustible combination that is nothing less than perfect madness.

One of Warner's most noteworthy observations is that although this current culture of motherhood 'inspires widespread complaint, it has not led to any organized movement for change [...] women not only haven't united to fight for change, they have tended to fight one another instead – namely, by buying into the media-stoked Mommy Wars.' While she suggests the answer to this problem is widespread, government-funded, systematic change, her call for women to fight for change may have been answered in the strangest of places: the publishing market. The mother-authored and parodic parenting texts discussed here, although far from revolutionary and certainly not a stopping point, may be a small baby (or mommy) step in the right direction.
We were originally eager to read these ‘mother’-authored texts as a response to the fear-invoking self-help books discussed earlier and hoped to find them operating in very different ways (with vastly different tones, layouts, and content). Although there are differences, and these texts may be, indeed, preferable to the ones described earlier, the similarities between the two groups are problematic and telling. These texts do often critique the expert texts that came before them, suggesting that mothers should embrace their own parenting styles and choices, and they most definitely offer more honest portrayals of parenting. However, at times they fall into the same traps as the fear-mongering expert texts: they promote the author’s specific parenting preferences and make assumptions about mothering that rest on the outdated notion of a universal woman’s experience. But, to be clear, there is much to celebrate in these texts, and we will begin by discussing some positive motifs that circulate through them and some benefits of their non-traditional formats. Then we compare these texts to the parodic parenting books they now compete with.

This new wave of parenting texts is a direct result of the information exchange and publishing trends enabled by Web 2.0 technology. In fact, many of the authors of the texts discussed in this chapter got their start in the blogosphere. There is a growing body of scholarship on the rise of ‘mommy blogging’, and academics have debated not only the phrase itself (the use of the word ‘mommy’ in the title) but whether this form of online autobiography can be considered empowering. For example, Dawn DiPrince states that mommy blogs fail to live up to their potential to rewrite the script concerning motherhood, arguing that collectively, these blogs reify the normative motherhood narrative with gritty and sometimes profane clickbait delusions, rather than actively work against the systemic issues that limit the lives of mothers: lack of quality childcare; breastfeeding discrimination; unpaid maternity leave; wage disparity for women, working mothers and women of color. Mommy blogs emphasize a narrative of voluntary stay-at-home motherhood [...] that is essential to capitalism, which only thrives when a certain percentage of adults are removed from the workforce. Mommy blogs use narrative to keep women content while they are being forced out of the workforce through lower wages and lack of child care choices.

And while it’s certainly true that mom blogs rarely spark collective activism enabling systemic change that improves women’s experiences on a larger scale, other scholars have argued that these blogs are positive resources for the women who read them. For example, Aimee Morrison argues that these blogs foster communities that value ‘the emotional, physical, and intellectual labor of parenting’. In ‘Good Mothers, Bad Mothers and Mommy Bloggers’, feminist scholar Rebecca Powell praises the ways in which these blogs allow readers ‘to witness the negotiations of motherhood’, depicting motherhood as a fluid rather than fixed position. Similarly, May Friedman, author of Mommyblogs and the Changing Face of Motherhood, argues that these engagements in the ‘mamosphere’ reveal the desire contemporary mothers have to hear what diverse mothers are saying about parenting, rather than monolithic prescriptions concerning what so-called good mothers should do.

As a result, many of these blogs enthusiastically reject the idea of striving to reach all of the impossible standards set for mothers today. Competing against the comical memes and viral videos on the Internet, it is not surprising that many of these writers turned to humor and satire to deliver their cultural commentary. Today it is not difficult to find a wealth of comedic mom blogs with titles alone that will prompt a chuckle: Divine Secrets of a Domestic Diva, Parenting (Illustrated with Crappy Pictures), You Know It Happens in Your House Too, and so forth. And these are not simply a US phenomenon, as evident by the popular mom blogs published in Canada (Up Mommy Creek, Time-Out 4 Mom, Sleeping is for Losers, Chaos Theory) and the slew of popular mummy/mum blogs with avid readership in the United Kingdom (for example, The MadHouse, Slummy Single Mummy, The Tired Mummy, The Mini Mes and Me), Australia (The Imperfect Mum, Crash Test Mummy, Muddied Up Mumma, My Mummy Date), and elsewhere.

While many mom blogs start out as relatively small-scale, single-authored endeavors, many of the most popular ones gain sponsorship or morph into more collaborative works. One such example is the blog Scary Mommy, which began in 2008 as one woman’s personal blog, then soon became a collaborative venture featuring multiple authors, and later was acquired by a media company. And, as mentioned earlier, some blogs eventually morph into profitable paperbacks. One such example is the blog Moms Who Drink and Swear, which began in 2008 as a Facebook group, then transitioned into a popular blog still running today, and later, in 2013, became a bestseller for Penguin Books. Another example is Stefanie Wilder-Taylor’s blog, Baby on Bored, which resulted in her bestselling books, Sippy Cups Are Not for Chardonnay (discussed later in this chapter), Naptime is the New Happy Hour, and Gummy Bears Should Not Be Organic, as well as her role as the host of Nick Jr.’s late night comedy show, Parental Discretion.