

THE LONG YEAR
Writers On The Early Days Of Parenting

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*When it comes to parenting,
the years are short, but the days are long
—folk saying*

I. Mothering by the Book

When I was pregnant with my first child, I read three memoirs of early motherhood: Anne Lamott's *Operation Instructions*, Roberta Israeloff's *Coming to Terms*, and Louise Erdrich's *The Blue Jay's Dance*. All three explore the joy of mothering, but most fundamentally each one strives to articulate *how hard it is*—a truth the authors seem to feel is under reported. They present early motherhood as a fragmented, ambivalent time. A time of love, but also of loneliness, and endless demands by baby. They affirmed my fears about parenting, and I dug into the books eager for details on what might lie ahead and for clues on how to manage the challenge. Despite their overarching similarities, each memoir offers a slightly different perspective.

Lamott—thirty-five, single, and a recovering alcoholic when she gives birth in 1989—writes of hard times with her infant son in a witty, irreverent and often self-mocking style. “It feels like I’m baby-sitting in the Twilight Zone,” she reports after three weeks of parenting. “I keep waiting for the parents to show up because we are out of chips and Diet Cokes” (48). Dismayed by her post-birth stomach, she says it “is like a waterbed covered with flannel now. When I lie on my side in bed, my stomach lies politely beside me, like a puppy” (36). After coping with days and nights of baby’s colicky crying, she says: “I just can’t get over how much babies cry. I really had no idea

what I was getting into. To tell you the truth, I thought it would be more like getting a cat” (66). After another night of crying she confesses “it occurred to me to leave him outside for the night, and if he survived, to bring him inside in the morning. Sort of an experiment in natural selection” (48).

In *Coming to Terms* (1982), Israeloff is also surprised by how much her baby cries, but she has none of the humor or distance of Lamott. Her situation is desperate. She feels her baby’s cries as a physical assault. “His cries crawled into my ears like snakes” (112). When she can find no way to soothe him, she is undone, overwhelmed with angst and feelings of incompetence. Nursing turns out to be an unpleasant surprise: “Ben sampling the nipple as if it were a fine cigar before chomping down with such vigor that I winced” (107). She doesn’t feel the flood of love for her baby she had expected, and she doesn’t just “know what to do” as the doctor tells her she will. She is desperately lonely. More than once she daydreams of her getting rid of her baby, throwing him out the window, or having some terrible accident. She imagined him “falling out of my arms, thought the glass . . . a foot caught in a flame, an accidental drowning” (113), and then is flooded with guilt. Her husband is her ally, but when he goes to work, there she is again, alone with the baby. She says, “All the illusions I had proudly toted around about myself—that I was selfless, nurturant, able to sacrifice without minding – went smash, out the window, a lie, a con, a scam” (124). It takes three months before “a tiny door opened and I could see beyond it to all the possible pleasures in store” (125).

In *The Blue Jay’s Dance* (1995), Erdrich also reports being driven to the edge—suicidal rather than homicidal:

Hormones, milk, heaviness, no sleep, internal joy, all jam the first few months after a baby is born, so that I experience a state of tragic confusion. Most days, I can't get enough distance on myself to define what I am feeling . . . I walk through a tunnel from one house to the other. It is dark, scraped out of the emotional mess of life, as gray and ridged as an esophagus. I'm being swallowed alive. On those days suicide is an idea too persistent for comfort. (113-114)

She writes about these moments from a time in the future. While she remembers the stark despair, she also now can name the emotions as melodramatic self-pity:

'There isn't a self to kill,' I think, filled with melodramatic pity for who I used to be. That person is gone. Yet once I've established that I have no personal self, killing whatever remains seems hardly worth the effort. For those dark and stupid days I have developed a mantra to ward off the radical lack of perspective that is also called depression. (114)

We understand that bad as it was, it was just a phase. In fact, the overarching tone of Erdrich's book is not one of despair but one of beauty. She writes in languorous prose of long afternoons in the woods watching wildlife; she creates a chatty kitchen-talk tone by including recipes of food her husband cooked for her, even offering an entire meal where every dish features fennel. Cocooned in this warmth, I felt that dark moments were events I could anticipate and prepare for, not an inevitable immersion in despair, but a phase of bumpy moments that could be gotten through.

In her opening pages Erdrich calls much of the advice given to pregnant women “chirpy and condescending.” Too often, she says, we are “treated like babies having babies when we should be in training, like acolytes . . . like serious applicants to the space program” (12).

I read the *What to Expect* books, but the memoirs resonated at a deeper level, seemed to capture the complex, essential truths of parenting in a way that the traditional parenting books did not.

Armed with the trio of warnings from Erdrich, Lamott, and Israeloff, I prepared for labor and delivery as if training for a marathon, with exercise and diet and strategies for “the race,” and I made plans for a pre-emptive strike against my own possible depression in those first months of parenting. My husband, Tom, fresh out of law school, was able to postpone starting his new job until two weeks after our son’s birth; my mother offered to come for the next two weeks; and my best friend since first grade just happened to have a conference in Portland the week after that. I scheduled visits from my sister, brother, and in-laws judiciously so that I wasn’t alone with the new baby for more than a week at a stretch for the first three months of his life. I had some trying times in those early months – the baby would often cry inconsolably through our late afternoons and his frequent nighttime nursing left me sleep deprived and exhausted—but my moments of despair were tempered by the knowledge that others had survived worse. I had a blossoming mother-love, and the knowledge that company was just around the corner.

I recommended the trio of memoirs to every pregnant woman I knew. I told my friends, “They tell you what you really need to know—the good, the bad, and the ugly.”

II. A Second Reading

Five years later, when we decide to adopt our second child, I reread *The Blue Jay's Dance*. This time, I pay more attention to the introduction. Erdrich and her husband (and fellow author) Michael Dorris had six children. The first three were adopted by Dorris before he met Erdrich, and then adopted by her when they married. Erdrich later gave birth to three additional children, all girls. *The Blue Jay's Dance* is a memoir about birthing and raising those girls through their first year, the baby in the book being a composite of the three. The older adopted children are rarely mentioned after the introduction; they are not the focus and the reader is not supposed to want more of them. But of course, I do. As a potential adoptive parent, I want them very much.

So when I happen upon Dorris's work in a bookstore, I scan the shelf looking for a book about the adopted children. He has a whole row of titles, but eventually I find *The Broken Cord*, a memoir about one of their adopted children who had fetal alcohol syndrome. Because we almost adopted a baby girl exposed to alcohol and other drugs, because we still might adopt a child with some drug and alcohol exposure, FAS is much on my mind. I pull the book off the shelf and squat down in the aisle.

It turns out that Erdrich has written an introduction, so of course that is what I read first. God help me.

Erdrich admits that in a fit of anger at her oldest son's oppositional behavior she told him not to call her Mom. He forgets many things; but this he never forgets. For years he calls her Louise, despite her apologies, explanations, and pleas for forgiveness. My

eyes water; I feel my nose turning red. I peruse a few paragraphs from the middle and the end of the book before I put it back on the shelf. I can't bear to read more.

From somewhere, somehow, I know that two years after Dorris's book was published, the boy died. A few years later Dorris and Erdrich separated, and then Dorris committed suicide.

On the walk home I am haunted. Why did Dorris kill himself?

A few minutes research on the web reveals sad and sordid tidbits of a story shrouded in mystery. The adopted son of the book died in 1991 in a hit and run pedestrian accident. He was never very good at remembering to look both ways before crossing the street. Then there were a series of accusations and a supposed extortion attempt by another adopted son. In 1994—as Erdrich was working on *The Blue Jay's Dance*—Erdrich and Dorris took that son to court for extortion. And lost.

The year *The Blue Jay's Dance* was published, 1995, Dorris and Erdrich moved to Minnesota, and then they separated. Intimations of pending charges against Dorris for abusing their youngest children became public in 1997. He committed suicide before the charges could be filed.

Once I know a bit of the family's history, I leaf back through *The Blue Jay's Dance* and find it is full of tiny references to the cruelty and pain of the older children. The first hint is the dedication: Erdrich dedicates the book to her husband and their daughters, with no mention of the adopted sons. In her introduction she says their older children hit adolescence “like a runaway truck” (4).

Then I come upon a whole page of trouble: “We are living out the turmoil that attends both supporting and letting go of teenagers who have unfathomable behavioral

problems” (122). One son has been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome; the two other older children suffer from un-diagnosable emotional desperations. She says:

For us, each day, a thousand swords hang by a thousand hairs. Michael visits counselors, begs special favors from exhausted teachers. We plead, cajole, humiliate ourselves for and desperately love these children, hoping there will be a miracle, a change, that some form of therapy or just the craziness of attachment will heal and take them through these precarious days. (122-123)

Nothing works. Her husband’s face is “exhausted with our second son’s cruelty” (123). Erdrich takes long walks with Dorris. “Sometimes we hold hands so hard we leave nail marks in each other’s palms” (124).

How did I miss this on my first reading? I am reminded how powerfully our minds are selective, taking what seems relevant or interesting and rejecting the rest. Clearly Erdrich could have written much more about the challenges of their teenagers. I imagine she had hard decisions to make as she wrote the final version of a book which is not about them -- and yet they were there, part of the warp and woof of her life. If she erased them from the story entirely it would be a lie; if she wrote them in too much, they would divert the reader’s attention away from the story on which Erdrich wants to focus—the story of a birth year.

I also wonder how much all that “background noise” changed the very tenor of her mothering experience. She must have looked at her little ones and worried about how

they would handle adolescence, wondered what challenges the world or hormones or the human psyche would churn up for them. She must have pondered how on earth she could help them avoid—or prepare to fend off—the desperate turmoil in which her older children found themselves. It could have changed the way she parented them . . . and the way she wrote the book. Once I ask myself these questions the central metaphor of the book’s title comes alive with new meaning.

The title—*The Blue Jay’s Dance*—always struck me as bucolic, an ode to a quiet life of bird watching, but think again about the nature of blue jays. Theirs is anything but a quiet life. The title comes from a scene late in the book, where a blue jay has been knocked to the ground by a hawk. The jay jumps up, squawking and prancing like a trash-talking boxer despite the hawk’s impossibly greater size and power. This tactic works. The hawk looks befuddled, then flies off and leaves the jay to live for another day. Erdrich decides she must take this blue jay as a role model: As a parent, she must fight back against the impossibly large challenges life throws at her in order to protect her child and teach her how to survive in the world:

Past the gray moralizing and the fierce Roman Catholic embrace of suffering and fate that so often clouds the subject of suicide, there is the blue jay’s dance [. . .] that manic, successful jig—cocky, exuberant, entirely a bluff, a joke. That dance makes me clench down hard on life. [. . .] I must dance for her. I must be the one to dip and twirl in the cold glare and I must teach her, as she grows, the unlikely steps. (195-196)

Erdrich writes this section in the context of a depression which has come over her with the death of her grandparents. She may also be dealing with her troubled adolescents, but she sees her suicidal impulses as caused by the double loss of grandparents. At this moment she rejects suicide because of her daughter; she needs to protect her daughter and model for her a way to fight back. Would Erdrich see life as full of hawks and feel the need to teach her daughter to bluff and bluster if the litigious children and charges of sexual abuse weren't also in the picture? Or is there always something, close to home or just in the news that creates a sense of impending danger. Is it something that comes with parenting, this sense that the world will throw impossible challenges your way?

If the first dangers we perceive as pregnant women are threats to the self—a worry about being stretched too thin, pushed too far, risking exhaustion, unhappiness, desperation, failure—a second set of challenges quickly arise generated by love for the baby: fear of threats to the baby, and threats to our bond with the baby.

Enter Lia Purpura's memoir, *Increase* (2000), a slim book of lyrical journal entries written during her pregnancy and the birth year of her only child. Like Erdrich's book, it covers those crucial first twelve months of mothering a baby. But Purpura's life is much calmer than Erdrich's. There are no sibling rivalries, no litigating son, and no fight with a husband over the true location of home. But even so, her book still reverberates with the dangers inherent in mothering.

Purpura titles her memoir *Increase* and focuses much of her writing on her happy sense of expansion as she brings a new life into the world. Her love for this new wondrous little being enlarges her heart and allows her to love her husband and her world

even more. But the risk of painful loss increases as well. Purpura repeatedly returns to her sense that even as she and her son are forming and deepening their bond, he is also growing away from her. The impending, inevitable, greater losses to come loom large in her mind. And the possibility of an early wrenching loss begins to haunt her.

Very early in her journal she writes that she and her husband hear “a rustling up from the sewer.” It is a raccoon coming out before dark:

It walked in the mincing, menacing way on its small feet, pacing and loping in front of the sewer, mounting the curb, crossing the street and crossing again, back and forth like a leopard in a cage; but it was the noise it made [. . .] a strange chuckling and hissing admixture, like a large bird’s throaty click and then a higher-pitched warm-blooded quaver. [. . .] I was certain that [. . .] something was wrong. I knew that nothing could be more wrong than a young one missing. That this was a mother pacing and grieving. There could be no match for the fear, for the rage, which brought her out into the light, beside herself with remorse, which looks, I could see now, everything like craziness or disease. (5-6)

A mother’s fear, rage, and remorse can be so intense as to mimic craziness. “Nothing could be more wrong than a young one missing.” Purpura aches with the awareness of impending loss, and this angst suffuses her writing.

While Erdrich’s feisty blue jay illustrates the survival motif of her book, Purpura’s raccoon comes to symbolize her core issue: the two-sided coin of mother love and mother loss. Both animals’ behaviors capture a sense of fear and desperation. If one

is more about a panicky defense against a turbulent world and the other about helpless rage, both show us the flip side of love, the prospect of pain that hovers on the edge of tenderness.

III. But What About Me? -- Reading about a Writing Life

Even the most committed mother must at times suffer ambivalence, if not downright frustration, about the demands of parenting. Blue jay or raccoon, feisty or crazed, sooner or later we remember we have needs separate from and often constricted by our infant children. Social, professional, and spiritual desires all make an appearance, but for writers the demand which seems both the most persistent and the hardest to meet is the demand for time and psychological space to write.

When Purpura catches another glimpse of the raccoon, she wants nothing more than to write about it, and she knows she could . . . if it weren't for baby:

And here I want so much to stretch into description—give the bulk of the animal wedged into the tree's dark crook, the color of its mask, not so black in daylight, more a deepening gray, almost a wetness splashed over the face, but I'm waiting for Joseph to wake up. The fussing I hear means any minute, or it means an hour from now he'll rise and I feel the space around my musing contract, cinch tighter with each moment like a puddle drying, and I'm daunted by the futility of entering the rich emptiness, the place of slow faith, where idea

comes late, disguised as afterthought or near dismissal, [. . .] I will need to be more cunning. (61)

Indeed. More cunning.

Erdrich feels a similar conflict. In *The Blue Jay's Dance*, she writes of a time close to baby's one-year mark:

I've just begun a thought, I'm writing my way in, when she laughs herself awake and bolts up, expectant, her grin wide, her eyes wild and magnetic, an electricity of hope rising off her. [. . .] Her smile is so touching so alight. I put my head down on my desk and within the dark cave of my hands a shout gathers. I'm at the moment. I will turn to her and lay aside this story, but with loss. I will play with her but part of me won't be there. [. . .] I'm torn between wanting to be with her always and needing to be -- through writing and through concentration—who I am. (215)

Is this sense of being fundamentally changed, of not being able to be *who we truly are*, inherent to parenting, or at least early parenting? When I was pregnant my grandmother sent me a pretty little card with the comforting words, “You will do everything you used to do, just a little less of it.” I was surprised and pleased that she recognized my unspoken concern; it told me that perhaps she herself had had similar qualms about entering motherhood. And yet, as a mother, I see she was only partially correct. When Patrick was an infant I tried to write when he napped, but like Purpura, knowing that he

might wake at any moment changed the kind of writing I could do, and like Erdrich, I felt acutely that material was lost with each interruption.

My favorite description of a woman who chose a life of the mind rather than the life of a mother is actually fictional, told by the character Chava in Marge Piercy's novel *He, She and It*. When Chava's husband dies after four years of marriage, Chava leaves her son with her husband's family and returns to her own parents' home alone to pursue her dream of studying the Torah. When trying to explain why, she says:

For those four years, my life was what will we eat, is his shirt clean, feelings of the bed, pregnancy, then my son, Aaron, colic, dirt, feeding, seeing him grow and unfold. The flesh closed over me, and I drowned . . . when the grief subsided a little I began to remember who I had been, before I had loved, before I was a wife and mother. My old dreams came back. (290-291)

I have found few real women who speak so honestly about the down side of motherhood. But you know there are many who could make that same chilling statement: "The flesh closed over me and I drowned." I think of those women who murder their children. Or photos of vacant-eyed women surrounded by a dozen kids in Appalachia.

But what about writers? Dorris Lessing and Charlotte Perkins Gilman are two who come to mind. Both left a husband and child (two children in Lessing's case) to pursue a less familial, more intellectual life. Gilman seemed to have had little choice: when the arrival of her baby threw her into a deep depression she was diagnosed with a nervous disorder and sent for a "rest-cure" which almost completely destroyed her. This

“cure” led her to write *The Yellow Wall-paper*—a chilling first-person account of a slow descent into madness—in an effort to show how damaging such a treatment could be. When she realized she could not stay healthy in a wife-mother role, she left her husband, taking her daughter with her. When her husband remarried, she was vilified by many for choosing to “give” her daughter to him and his new wife. She lived a long and productive life as a famous lecturer and progressive social theorist, remarrying, but never again attempting to raise a child. Many critics now read *The Yellow Wall-paper* as a fictionalized version of mistreated post-partum depression, and maybe it is. Perhaps with kinder, gentler care Gilman might have found a way to enjoy motherhood, but it seems equally possible that motherhood was simply not compatible with her most fundamental needs.

Like Gilman, Lessing too suffered a terrible injustice—at least seen through today’s eyes—in the post-partum advice she was given. She was not allowed to hold her baby right after birth. When she asked for him, the nurse said, “You’ll have more than enough of him soon what are you in such a hurry for.” After Lessing made a fuss, they brought him in for five minute visit, but not until twelve hours later. Then, “No sooner had the baby’s lips made contact with the nipple, she took him away again. ‘That’s enough for the first time’” (218- 219). For a week they kept her in bed, and restricted her visits with her babe. She writes: “I lay helpless in that bed, breasts stinging and full of milk, listening to the babies’ frantic crying down the verandah” (219). When she took the baby home she was told to nurse him only once every four hours, no more frequently no matter how he cried, which he did until the next feeding at which point she ran out of milk before he was full. Writing about this experience years later, Lessing concludes

angrily, “Never has there been a regime more guaranteed to make young women anxious, feel inadequate, inefficient, lacking nor one more likely to make women lose milk, and—it goes without saying—all pleasure in the process of having a baby” (221). She did not bond well with either of her first two children, and did not enjoy parenting. “There is no boredom like that of an intelligent young woman who spends all day with a very small child,” she writes in the second volume of her fascinating autobiography, *Under My Skin* (236).

Lessing presents circumstances less dire than Gilman’s, but her rejection of motherhood felt equally imperative to her. Her husband and her children left her feeling bored and restless. She abandoned her family emotionally long before she left them physically. She spoke of a growing sense of “secret doom” (263).

Eventually she was awakened to a political life in the Communist movement and it became her all-consuming interest. It made her feel alive, and so she left the mundane and limiting wife-mother role behind. Ironically, she soon remarried and had another child. This third child she did raise. And when she divorced the father she kept the boy and raised him as a single mom, on her own terms, as a writer. What seemed an anathema to her was placing mothering at the core and center of her being. She needed another identity. Years later she says that in her first marriage she was, “raw . . . uncooked. [. . .] I simply wasn’t born” (262).

Virginia Woolf, herself childless, argued in *A Room of One’s Own* not for childlessness but for fewer children. She said, “You must, of course, go on bearing children, but, so they say, in twos and threes, not in tens and twelves” (113). She argued for “the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think” (114); if you

could have this habit and this courage, along with a room of your own in which to write, and a modest amount of financial security, writing would be possible. Not an easy list, but not out of the question, either.

With her third child, the one she kept, Lessing ignored professional advice, checked out of the maternity home early, and fed her baby when she pleased, bolstered by Dr Spock's newly published book and her authority-defying husband. "But you'll ruin him," the nurse cried when Lessing told her she nursed the baby on demand. "His character? Have you thought of that?" (364).

Lessing bonded better with this third baby than with her first two, and yet she clearly feels her core happiness was a result of her new found political activism not her renewed motherhood . . . she had come alive with new friends, deep commitments, heartfelt conversations. Her life was meaningful and rich where it had been superficial and shallow. If she also had a beautiful baby, that was nice, but the baby was not the cause of her happiness. Her happiness allowed her to be in love with her baby, not the other way around. It didn't hurt that this baby was "amiable and easy" (369) in contrast with her first two, although I suspect that some of the child's pliability had to do with the way she raised him. He did not restrict her life, she says, and if she was fighting for time to write it was not her mothering obligations that impeded her but her chatty activist friends who didn't respect her statement that she reserved her mornings for writing (369).

Eventually she moved to England, abandoning her second husband and her activism for a writing life, but she took her child with her. She raised him on her own while forging what turned out to be a successful writing career.

The prolific Pulitzer Prize-winner Toni Morrison published her first book when she was newly divorced, working full-time, and the sole parent of two young children. Kate Chopin wrote many wonderful books after her husband died, despite her six children. Ursula Le Guinn managed to publish a new book every year or two while raising her three children. In addition to Purpura, Erdrich and Lamott, Isabel Allende, Barbara Kingsolver, Cristina Garcia, Dorothy Allison, Mary Gordon, Kate Braverman, and Linda Hogan all have children. When I am feeling uncertain about the wisdom of my choices, when I worry about the impact of mothering on my writing, I remind myself of the powerful books these women have produced.

Meet Erdrich in 2001, six years after *The Blue Jay's Dance* was published. She is now a forty-six-year-old mother raising three teenage girls ages twelve to seventeen, and . . . a new infant. She sits in a comfortable chair with her three-month-old daughter Azure strapped to her chest as she chats with a reporter. She is all peace and equilibrium. She explains why she chose to have another child: "It's so deeply biological, and it's so limbic-brain oriented. I love being a mother. I have a comfort level with a certain chaos in my life." (*Time*, April 9, 2001.)

What happened to the talk of manic jigs and being swallowed alive? Did she forget? Perhaps so. I'd like to think this is in part the power of the older mother. (Erdrich is a forty-something mother of a newborn, like me! Aren't we unflappable.) But she could also be a media-shy author, one burnt by bad press around Dorris's death, putting on a public face in place of the more intimate one she is willing to reveal in her own writings.

In 2003 she is back to writing non-fiction, this time a memoir about traveling with her eighteen-month-old infant and the baby's father. *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* isn't about the angst of motherhood; instead it focuses on issues of heritage, land, and books. Perhaps she has made peace between her writing and mothering selves at last.

IV. Reading Fatherhood

“Why is all the talk about how hard it is to be a mom?” asks my husband. “What about how hard it is to be the dad?”

The stores are overflowing with books about mothering: *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*; *Mother Shock: Loving Every (Other) Minute of It*; *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*; and *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Our Lives and Why We Never Talk About It*. Sure, there are sugary-mama books too, but it's impossible not to pick up on an angry, truth-telling, socio-political theme in today's literature on motherhood.

An Amazon.com search for books on fatherhood turns up 457, a respectable list, but only one-third as long as the one for books on motherhood, which includes an astounding 1,258 titles. Also, the titles convey a different focus—heavy on tongue-in-cheek how-to books such as *The Idiot's Guide to Fatherhood* and *Keeping the Baby Alive Until Your Wife Gets Home*, as well as on books praising dads and fathering, among them *The Joys of Fatherhood*. The recent popular book, *The Bastard on the Couch: 27 Men*

Try Really Hard to Explain Their Feelings About Love, Loss, Fatherhood and Freedom, seems like a fun read, with some complaint about the difficulty of fathering, but for the most part sociopolitical critique and anger seem to be missing.

Still, I'm sure my husband is not alone in feeling that he is paying a hard price as he tries to be more involved than his own father was. He is extraordinarily good with Patrick—playing, talking, comforting, and simply spending time with him. Tom goes to school meetings when he can, and he does at least half of the laundry, cooking, and cleaning in our home. He has some flexibility in his work hours, but his employer, like many, does not offer any parental leave policy. If we adopt another child, he will have to cobble together time off and make it up with working early, late, or on the weekends. “The second shift” is a phrase coined for working mothers, but Tom feels the weight of a second shift himself.

Months after I do my Amazon search for books on fathering, after we've adopted our second son and are back in the thick of parenting a newborn, I finally find *Crawling—A Father's First Year* by Elisha Cooper (2006).

The cover photo—three pairs of bare feet sticking out from under a fluffy down comforter—seems designed to amuse and perplex, hinting, perhaps, at the feelings towards parenting which will be portrayed in the book itself. Framed in the center of the photograph, between one set of adult feet, is the baby's diapered butt and kicking legs: a birthing image, if an odd one. But there is a problem here: the rest of the baby is under the covers. How is it breathing under there? This photo—which at first seemed cute, quirky, and funny—now appears to have a darker symbolic side, hinting at suffocation and hostility. Even imagining the photo-shoot is worrisome.

Only one foot of the other adult is showing. This seems fitting—if one of the adults works fulltime that person is only half present. Or perhaps it symbolizes the dad’s feeling of being marginalized—sharing the bed and getting pushed over to the side, both literally and figuratively, the baby now the center of the wife’s attention.

But of course night time is when the working parent is home, perhaps most fully present only in those night time hours. The baby in the bed threatens to ruin both sex and sleep. If the night life isn’t working, then that person risks a miserable parenting experience.

This photo captures something important: negotiating what goes on in the bed is a crucial factor in determining the tenor of the early parenting experience. Of all the parenting memoirs I’ve read, no other book cover has hinted at this issue. In fact, when I look again, the other covers don’t hint at a dad or a bed at all. Lamott and Purpura feature just a baby—one an actual photo of a cutie pie face, and the other abstract blocks of color which suggest a baby in blue nestled into the side of an apple. The Israeloff and Erdrich books feature a mother holding a baby—one a watercolor sketch of mom and babe snuggled in an chair, the other a painting of the back of mom standing and looking out the window at a watercolor of green trees, with back of baby’ head peaking up over mom’s shoulder. Cooper’s book, before we even open it, promises to be different. The first paragraph makes good on this promise:

There’s a head sticking out of my best friend. This is insane. Anybody who says this moment is the most precious wonderful thing in the world is delusional. This isn’t a miracle, it’s assault. I’d call 911 but we’re already in a hospital. (3)

He is not the first person to write about the pain of labor and delivery, but women writers tend to take a more stoic view. Even if the depth of pain surprises them, they don't share Cooper's sense that labor is shockingly, terribly wrong—the *it's an assault, call 911* feeling.

On one hand, his outrage on behalf of his wife and his frustration at his own helplessness are endearing. But at the same time there is something a bit off-putting about this opening. Am I the only reader who frowns at that first sentence: *There is a head sticking out of my best friend?* For me it conjures some sort of mutant movie image, not a birth. I see a head sticking out of a buddy's arm or torso. And while I know Cooper is doing it on purpose, to make a point about how truly odd it is to see a baby come out, and to be dramatic and funny, I think he misses the real image completely. Or perhaps I am willfully refusing to get his point. Is this how men see birth?

Three pages later, all is well. The baby has arrived, Elise is beaming, and he too is in awe of his new child. In a wry voice that we come to know as his trademark, he says, “all the pain that had been in that room was already being repaired, the night of tension disappearing in a soothing wash of forgetfulness, memory stitched together so that we could inaccurately look back on this experience with fondness. Indeed, a miracle” (6).

Perhaps the most interesting parts of the book, for me at least, are the moments that offer “the man's perspective” hinted at in the cover photo. Cooper does indeed grapple with feeling the lesser parent, or as he puts it, his “sous-chef” role. Elise nurses the baby, and, well, he doesn't. A few weeks into parenting he says, “When morning comes I feel like I'm meeting Elise at the end of the marathon and we're standing around

and talking about what a long hard race it was though the fact is that I took the bus” (25). He struggles to find a meaningful role for himself. “Being Zoe’s father seems defined by what I *cannot* do. I can’t soothe her. I can’t nurse her. I can’t put her to sleep well” (26).

This struggle with feeling inferior, shunted aside, and worst of all *not competent* seems to be the male equivalent of the first phase of the parenting challenge reported by women: the exhaustion and frustration that leads to thoughts of child abuse and suicide. I don’t mean to say that Cooper is never frustrated by the baby. Clearly he is, but it’s not a major and recurring theme in his early parenting experience the way it is for the moms.

Nonetheless the one major instance where he reports feeling the urge to hurt the baby is profoundly significant. It comes, not surprisingly, at a time when he can’t get the baby to stop crying. He takes her outside to calm her, but he is upset and everything he does just seems to make the baby madder. They glare at each other as she cries and he yells under his breath, “Stop it! Stop crying!” The absurdity of it all just makes him angrier. He is on the verge of throwing her into the bushes when he remembers his goats. As a boy he had responsibility for some troublesome goats, and once, when the goats were eating his father’s apple trees, he became furious and grabbed the goats by the neck one by one and dragged them back to the barn. He says, “I remember the sound of their hooves scattering the dirt” (40). It scared him that he got angry so easily. He learned then that he had a temper, he could snap and all too quickly “turn into a brute” (40). He is caught short by the realization that he is on the verge of treating his daughter the way he treated the goats, and he brings her close into his arms. It hits him that what he is really fighting is not his three month old daughter, but his own short temper. The real work, he

comes to see, is not so much to get his daughter to stop crying as it is to get himself to calm down. He says that what saves him that night is the realization that:

At some deep level I am flawed [. . .] knowing that the flaws I have are my own, and that this girl and I will be joined together for a long long time, for years, and that if I can just ride it out for the next five minutes, and for the five minutes after that, we will be okay . . . (41)

An invaluable lesson.

Cooper does touch on a fear that parenting will change who he is and how he can live his life. Several chapters describe his insistence that they go out to dinner with baby—from dives to Chez Pannise. They bring Zoe along, even when she is about to explode, because not going out, or only going to family-friendly restaurants would be defeat. He will not turn into one of *those* parents.

In a chapter called “Sports Center and the Beastie Boys,” Cooper talks about the joy of continuing his bad-boy habits as a father. After Elise leaves in the morning, he turns off the Bach cello suites and changes Zoe out of the frilly clothes Elise has picked for her. They spend hours watching Sports Center and football while eating PB&J tortillas and drinking coke. He and a friend pose the friend’s baby to look like she’s drinking a Miller Highlife forty, then video tape her with glee. He curses like a sailor at the television and at passing drivers. He worries that Zoe will “turn into a bad-food-eating, coke-drinking, rap-playing, sports-watching, profanity spewing misanthrope”

(75). But he quickly confesses it doesn't worry him much, in fact, "my greater fear is that she won't" (75).

His glee at being able to retain his wild ways, as well as a road trip he takes with a male buddy later in the book, complete with peeing out the window, reminds me of another memoir newly on the market, *Mommies Who Drink* (2006). The author, Brett Paesel, is an ex-actress mom who longs for the good old days of sex drugs and rock and roll, and maintains as much of that life as she can, unapologetically cherishing a happy hour mom's group. (The book features a bare-shouldered woman wearing a lamp shade on the cover.) What is petulant self-indulgence, what simple good fun, what a healthy refusal to morph into a goodie two shoes? I can't say. But I confess to a worry that these new parents seem obsessed with the party life. Americans are sometimes accused of living a perpetual adolescence, and Paesel and Cooper do seem to offer evidence in support of this argument. In any event, I prefer Cooper's version, drinking multiple bottles of wine at Chez Panisse with baby snoozing at his side, over Paesel's habit of escaping to a bar while the kids hang with a nanny. What Paesel's book tells me is that Cooper's desire to retain what I think of as an adolescent singles lifestyle is clearly not only a man's desire. Why don't my other mommy memoirs speak of such things? Are the writers more serious people? More dedicated artists? Or are they living in a different era, those books written in 1982, 1993, 1995, and 2000. Is 2006 such a different world? Has a new hedonism cropped up post 9/11? A subject for another inquiry.

When Cooper moves into familiar territory—how to maintain his art while parenting—I smile in anticipation of some wry humor about soldiering on through a sleep-deprived haze. Like Erdrich and Purpura he sets up a scene where he is trying to do

art with baby in the background. He begins to draw, periodically checking to make sure the baby is still asleep and . . . it works!

Parenting, he says, has taught him a flexibility that makes him a better artist! Parenting has “given me *more*. More space to let my mind wander, more time to picture what I am going to paint, to the point that when I return home [from an outing with baby] my well is spilling over” (50). Oh, I am tempted to hate him. Suddenly, his life—Yale graduate, successful artist, living in the Berkeley Hills, strolling down to a café for a coffee and scone and *New York Times* every morning before coming back home to paint—seems way too easy, too privileged! Okay, I’m jealous. Later he makes it clear that in fact he has been putting in relatively few hours parenting. And I comfort myself with the thought that his art thrives under these circumstances in part because Elise has the baby for much of the day.

He is in the unusual position of sharing parenting with his wife during the day. She is a graduate student and he works at home as a writer and illustrator of children’s books. He is neither a stay-at-home dad nor the stereotypic working man who is away from home between eight in the morning and six at night. He hovers somewhere in between, and it’s never quite clear how much time he does spend with the baby. But he frequently ends up at the playground with the baby surrounded by mothers and their children. Trying to merge into these groups of mothers proves to be impossible, a point of great bitterness for him.

Moms do not welcome him into their informal groups and women on the street are likely to make condescending comments that imply that simply because he is a man

he doesn't know what he's doing. Unsolicited advice makes him bristle. In one of the few moments when he addresses the reader directly, he tells us to back off:

To those who see a father struggling with a crying baby, he's fine. Well, he's not fine, but he's working things out. He'll be okay. Give him a hand if he asks, or a smile. Do not reach out with a tissue and wipe the baby's nose. And please, don't give your advice, your condemnation dressed up as help. (42)

Cooper also does a nice job of covering some of the same territory as the other first-year memoirists, in particular the overarching fear. He says, "Worry is the wrapping that comes with the baby" (69). He offers no animal metaphors. He never identifies with a feisty blue jay or a loss-crazed raccoon, but he does worry about protecting his daughter and unlike the other authors, he writes about a time when his daughter is in danger and he fails to protect her. A friend's dog bites baby Zoe in the head. A huge gash, lots of blood, a rush to the emergency room, and many stitches later, they go to the grocery store to pick up some Tylenol. Zoe sees a picture of a dog on a bag of dog food and points excitedly, clearly not the least bit turned off of dogs as the result of her experience.

Cooper is flooded with relief. He closes his memoir:

I am in a state of grace. I can do no wrong, even when I have done nothing right. I am drained and full. This child breaks my heart, then fills it. She fills me with love and worry and confusion and desperation that nonetheless come to rest in a place of peace. (163)

He was simply lucky that time. But sometimes luck is all we have. Sometimes luck is enough.

V. Reading the End as the Beginning

And so, all five books on the first year of parenting end with a mix of awe, confusion, worry, and gratitude. All the authors grow increasingly able to handle parenting as their babies turn into toddlers. And all the memoirs carry this message as a sub-text: parenting is hard, yes, but that very hardness is what makes it so rewarding. You are forced to stretch and grow. Your understanding of yourself and your relationships deepens; your awe and wonder at the world are renewed, you are more fully and more vibrantly alive.

Even Israeloff—she of the infanticide impulses—becomes a happy mom. By the twelfth month she can say, “With time, the work doesn’t become any easier, but the rewards increase beyond measure” (161). She focuses on her sense of living a paradox, much like Cooper—feeling empty and full, needy and needless—as well as the sense that all too soon her son would leave home. She says wistfully “Eighteen years isn’t very long” (162). In her epilogue, writing as the mother of a 22 month old, she is glowing:

Ben has enriched our lives in every way that David and I suspected and hoped having a child would. ‘Enrich’ is a pale word to describe the transformation he brought. Because of his existence we have had to adjust our vision so profoundly

that we see nothing as we did before. It's as if he taught us a new, more complete language which makes all others wooden stammerings; it's his light which illumines the dark corners into which we had never thought to peer. (170-171)

And in the final paragraph she asks herself the new question on her mind: does she want another child? Her answer is her book's last line: "I'm not saying no" (172).

Lamott grapples with the impending death of her best friend as her son turns one year old. The lack of justice and the randomness of joy leave her befuddled. Her son's accomplishments strike her as bittersweet: "He can entertain himself happily for twenty minutes at a stretch with coffee cans, paper bags, etc. I can see that he won't need me much longer" (238). She doubts her religion and yet still hopes her son will find faith. She feels fundamentally perplexed and without answers. She says "The mystery of this still leaves me scratching my head" (249). But her final image is of her son, who "peers around from behind the closet door, babbling absolutely incoherently, grinning at me like some crazy old Indian holy man" (251). There are no sensible words, no rational explanations, and yet he holds all the answers.

Erdrich ends with a meditation on her daughter's drive to learn to walk. It becomes, for Erdrich, the thing her daughter can hold onto and use to find equilibrium in a rocky world. Walking is the way into the world and the way to make peace with trouble:

She will walk to think or not to think, to leave the body, which is often the same as becoming at one with it. She will walk to ward of anger in its many forms. . . .

She'll walk until her sense of balance is the one thing left and the rest of the world is balanced, too, and eventually if we do the growing up right, she will walk away from us. (223)

There is a bittersweet tinge here, but clearly Erdrich's main concern is that her daughter be able to cope. She admires her daughter's drive, and she anticipates a long road between now and the day her daughter leaves her.

Purpura's last journal entry is a long beautiful contemplation on the many meanings of the word "refract," the breaking and redirecting the course of light—a wonderful ending metaphor for her parenting experience. To be transformed, to see differently. Her final lines contemplate broad shafts of sunlight coming into their house after a long rain:

like semaphores they redirect the child from stairs' edge, table's corner, broken glass I rush to clear. Fleet, broadside, the light issues forth. His hand in and out of the puddle of sun, my own work dipped too, taken up in the afternoon's long momentum, in its scattered deflection, in the veer, curve, and shift. (141)

And so at the end of the first year of parenting, all five authors embrace awe, paradox, danger, beauty, and change. Fear and loss lurk. Ready or not, long afternoons and speeding years are on the way. Here they come.

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PARENTING overview laurence steinberg high-risk neighborhoods claire smrekar influence of parents' level of education joan m. t. walker claire smrekar influence on child's educational aspirations and attainment joan m. t. walker claire smrekar. OVERVIEW. The study of parenting and its impact on children and adolescents has long been a central concern to scholars interested in child development and education. These writers are notable authors of children's literature with some of their most famous works. Verna Aardema (1911-2001) - "Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears." Rafael - "Abalos (born 1956) - "Grimpow." Tony Abbott (born 1952) - "The Secrets of Droon, Danger Guys." Deborah Abela (born 1966) - "Max Remy Superspy, Grimsdon." Joan Abelove (born 1945) - "Go and Come Back." Chris van Abkoude (1880-1960) - "Pietje Bell series, Little Crumb." Socorro Acioli (born 1975) - "The Ghost Dancer."