

DANGEROUS IDEAS ABOUT MOTHERS

EDITED BY CAMILLA NELSON & RACHEL ROBERTSON



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Scrutiny

What's Behind the Rise of the Mummy Bullies?

Camilla Nelson and Rachel Robertson

Mothers are a topic on which almost everybody has an opinion. Just as soon as your pregnancy becomes visible, you'll find that strangers will give you unwanted advice. You will be redirected from the confectionery aisle to the fruit and vegetables, be told to drop weight or put it on, or be admonished for frowning because feeling bad is 'bad for your bub'. People might even tell you you're carrying a girl because, according to conventional prejudice, a girl bump is ungainly whereas a boy bump sits 'high and tight'. And all of this will be amplified on social media, where it often seems as if everyone else is 'loving being a mum' – or, better still, a 'mumpreneur', with a heavily monetised online presence and thousands of followers who blithely tag each other 'great mums', apparently oblivious to all the other mothers for whom things might not be so great. Though women have taken to the internet in droves to dispute media-fed notions about what it means to be a 'good mother', efforts to break down barriers invariably provoke unwanted backlash. Whatever mothers decide, they report being criticised by others. Then report being criticised for criticising.

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Take, for example, the short-lived ‘brelfie’ campaign, designed to help mothers feel comfortable breastfeeding in public by inviting them to post breastfeeding selfies on Instagram, which was attacked for encouraging an atmosphere that marginalised formula-feeding women.¹ Or else Facebook’s ‘Motherhood Challenge’, which saw ‘great mums’ post their happy snaps in swarms, but was branded for being insensitive to women who have postnatal depression, women who wanted to show the less glamorous side of motherhood, women who chose not to have children, women who wanted to have children but couldn’t, and women who didn’t want to be mothers but were – not to mention people who just happened to prefer cats.²

And the women who prefer cats have every right to feel annoyed, because the reality is that if you are a woman you will be judged against the maternal ideal whether you like it or not. One of the under-examined cruelties of western culture is that if you are female but not a mother you will often be made to feel as if you need to apologise for your very existence.

In short, the explosion of interest in child rearing has pitted women one against the other. In the morass of conflicting claims to expertise, authority and – let’s face it – sanctity, it’s easy to miss the fact that it’s no longer particular groups of mothers that are being singled out for social stigma – single, LGBTIQ+ or teen mums, for example. Rather, what we’re seeing is the emergence of a moralising atmosphere in which all women appear to present a problem.

Even celebrity mums on the tabloid front pages are met with an avalanche of criticism for allowing their children to become too fat or too thin, for breastfeeding too long or not enough, for kissing their kids on the lips and not the cheek, or for feeding them sugar buns for breakfast.³ The ‘mumpreneur’ – so often touted as the answer to the ‘crisis of the family’ under capitalism – is similarly besieged either for exploiting her children or using her iPad as a babysitting alternative. Then there’s the rise of the mummy bullies: ‘Stop the Mean Mums’ runs the front page of Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* on the day of writing, followed by an article about the emergence of ‘mummy shaming’, in which the source of the problem is deemed to rest not within a culture that reduces women to potentially malfunctioning baby incubators, but within the mothers themselves.⁴

Dads may feature sporadically in panics over parenting, but the use of the gender-neutral verb ‘parenting’ (despite good intentions) obscures the reality that it is the mothers who are singled out as bearers of potential damage. It is no longer just a question of whether you should or should not eat prawns, soft cheese or – heaven forbid – junk food while you are pregnant: the question of what you should or should not feel has now come under intense scrutiny too.⁵ Warnings over health concerns often drive media panics on a national scale. Recently, for example, a report on women’s health by the Chief Medical Officer in the United Kingdom translated into media reports characterising obese and overweight women as a ‘national threat’ on a level with climate change, cybersecurity and terrorism. Or, in the weaponised sound bite extracted from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, fat mothers are a ‘ticking time bomb’.⁶

In a risk-conscious society, plagued by uncertainty about the future, women are – apparently – not to be trusted to raise the next generation. And it seems as if anything, from the UK riots to the living conditions of Indigenous people in Australia’s Northern Territory, can be blamed on bad parenting.⁷ This faulty logic appears with alarming frequency in the columns of right-wing pundits such as Janet Albrechtsen, who claimed – in response to findings about the use of tear gas, spit hoods, restraint chairs and water hoses against children in the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre – that the problem did not emanate from the officers who inflicted the abuse, or the government department responsible for the administration of youth justice, but from the parents of the abused children. The parents, wrote Albrechtsen, had created a ‘cycle of despair’ in which ‘the most basic norms, caring for your children, taking responsibility for them, have been destroyed’.⁸

Rhetorically speaking, the logic is clear. If parents, and particularly mothers, are the cause of our social ills, then there’s no need to look to real or material causes such as poverty. Inequality ceases to be an economic issue and becomes a matter of changing one’s mind or shifting one’s attitude. Civic measures do not remedy social injustice; all you need is self-help and a bit of elbow grease, hedged with the sorts of ideologically loaded appeals to ‘freedom’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘choice’ that have dominated political rhetoric since the turn of the millennium.

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In this language of anxiety, care becomes a skill to be outsourced to an expert, rather than a collective responsibility or ethical imperative.⁹ The care of children becomes less about answering the material needs of children, and more about performing a socially sanctioned response to a growing list of spectral threats and dangers. Television, advertising, consumerism and the internet are invariably represented as central menaces in a dangerous new world crammed with speculative terror. ‘Children soaking up screen time on an expanding array of digital devices are losing the art of conversation, developing speech impediments’, declares the *Daily Telegraph*.¹⁰ Teenagers are ‘ignoring real-world friends and family to pick fights with strangers on Facebook’.¹¹ ‘Staring at tablets, phones and computers is making kids half-blind.’¹² Where other mothers (not to mention women more generally) used to be a source of support, they are increasingly positioned – like the ‘mean mums’ – as bearers of potential harms, such as sugar, artificial food colouring or unregulated iPhone use. The care of children is associated less with responding to children’s needs, and more with the monitoring and surveillance of your child’s every move.

It should come as no surprise that, just as the scrutiny of mothers reaches new heights, the welfare nets that once provided material support for families are assiduously dismantled. Public services that previously supported families have been rolled back or slashed, with the deepest impact on women struggling to survive in an ever-widening division between the haves and have-nots. Quarantining the welfare benefits of Indigenous parents did not rectify the chronic shortage of doctors, nurses and teachers available to Indigenous communities. Cutbacks to the parenting payment did not result in increased employment for single mothers. Children in single-parent families are still three times as poor as children in other families, and Indigenous women encounter higher poverty rates than any other social group.¹³

What the scrutiny of mothers conceals is the reality of a world in which every woman is defined through the ideal of maternal care work, regardless of whether she is – or even wants to be – a mother. Moreover, despite all the newly minted gender-neutral rhetoric around equality and shared parental responsibility, women continue to carry the primary burden of child care and do most of the housework.¹⁴

In the opening essay of this book, Anne Manne turns the ethics of care upside down. Instead of asking what ethics of care a mother should give, she asks how does society treat mothers, and what ethic of care does society owe them. Manne focuses on the consequences of Julia Gillard's changes to the parenting payment – bearing the Orwellian subtitle 'Incentives to Work' – which had no demonstrable impact on the employment rates for lone mothers, but left already struggling women unable to pay for clothes, food, heat and electricity, causing some to default on rent, driving others into homelessness. Manne argues that the gendered doublethink that gave rise to these legislative changes has been inspired by the emergence of neoliberal feminism: a term increasingly used to describe the strange fusion of feminist and neoliberal ideologies that has (among other things) constructed the corporate workplace as the mythic site of women's emancipation.¹⁵ Manne argues that market forces have not eroded so much as reshaped the ethical imperatives that traditionally drove feminist beliefs about social justice. The immaterial labour of women – that is, care work – is at best ignored and at worst devalued, while paid work is endowed with a magical quality. The problem with Julia Gillard's 'Incentives to Work' amendments is that they effectively legislate the 'second shift' – that is, they further entrench the gendered double standard whereby women bear the double burden of child care and paid employment.¹⁶ Manne argues that any feminist politics that does not value the immaterial labour of women is fatally flawed – the mantra of 'Incentives to Work' needs to be replaced not only by a recognition of the unpaid work that women do, but also by a radical and more equitable redistribution of care work.

The theme of legislating inequality takes a deadly turn in Alecia Simmonds's essay 'Domesticating Violence', which scrutinises one of the most secretive institutions in Australian society – the Family Court – in which social, economic and cultural gender inequality is regularly legislated into patriarchal right. In a searing chapter, Simmonds reads the coronial inquest into the murder of Luke Batty as the 'extreme end' of a cultural script that has been imposed on all separating families. This is a court system in which custodial mothers habitually face arcane and byzantine procedures, astronomical legal costs, unqualified professionals and dangerously long delays,

not to mention reactionary gender ideologies which grant rights to perpetrators of domestic violence that, as Luke's mother Rosie Batty said, are 'not right for the child'. Although a formalist reading of the law places the 'best interests' of the child above the interests of the separating parents, the law also mandates that the child's best interests lie in contact with the father, with the burden of proving otherwise placed on the abused mother and children.

The social reality of serious gender inequalities in the division of care work takes on a dangerous inflection when they reach the Family Court. As Simmonds argues, 'Law is complicit in what Carol Lacroix terms a "cult of gratitude" that has developed around fathering: child care and housework are not seen as men's work, so if a man gestures in any way towards these they are celebrated for being co-operative and caring'. More dangerously still, in the Family Court, any gesture of care or concern by a mother for her child is immediately rescripted as hostility to the father, and the appearance of maternal emotion of any sort is replayed as female hysteria – with devastating consequences.

In the third chapter, Catharine Lumby turns the lens of scrutiny to media panics over children's screen time, examining the way in which mothers, and particularly working mothers, become the target of media hyperbole. She interrogates the gendered assumptions that structure the way we understand the 'correct' role mothers should play in 'protecting' children from screen media (ditto, in the post-nuclear family, anyone who is placed in the care role, regardless of gender) and points out that, while sitting in front of a computer all day long isn't healthy for anybody, 'the notion that reading a book is automatically more intellectually stimulating or productive than reading or watching something on a screen is simply banal'. Media literacy – the capacity to identify 'fake news', negotiate 'filter bubbles' and juggle information across multiple platforms – is a crucial life skill. Lumby's research demonstrates that children and teenagers are using media to question, explore, create and analyse, and that screen time is very often social time, connecting teenagers to community and the world.

In the following chapter, Camilla Nelson further explores the gendered tangle of the internet, addressing similarly intense debates over children and consumerism. In popular culture, childhood stands for 'innocence' and motherhood stands for 'love'. As words,

they signify values and relationships that have traditionally gained meaning in contrast to the ‘corrupting’ influence of money. And yet, as Nelson points out, the ways in which we are accustomed to think about love and money obscure the ‘powerful though often ignored symmetry between families and the market’. Nelson focuses her analysis on the media figure of the ‘mumpreneur’, often touted as the poster woman for the family under late capitalism, and on the ways in which the market is currently reshaping the post-nuclear family. She draws attention to the gender and class hypocrisies at work in consumerism, as well as the new digital economies that appear to have a way of harvesting the immaterial labour of women and children and turning it into cash. The problem, she argues, is not just that money doesn’t measure sentiment but that sentiment appears ‘to require the sanctification of money’.

If the term ‘parenting’ obscures the inequalities at work in the gendered division of care work, so too can use of the word ‘mother’ – not to mention that ubiquitous verb ‘mothering’ – be used to entrench similar sorts of inequalities. In part two of the collection the theme of Dangerous Dilemmas gives way to the experience of Dangerous Lives, and the essays in this section consider the battles faced by carers of all genders who do not fit the normative maternal script that society has laid out for them. As the authors make clear, depoliticising such lives isn’t helpful. Nor is it possible to detach the deeply personal stories they tell from the politics at work in the moment of writing. In a powerful essay, Quinn Eades writes about the experience of parenting at the time of the same-sex marriage vote, putting pen to paper in the week that Malcolm Turnbull declared that a non-binding postal survey would be used to help decide whether to expand the civil institution of marriage to include already existing LGBTIQ+ families. That week a poster was put up in Melbourne’s Heffernan Lane quoting the now infamous paid-to-publish research alleging that ‘92% of children raised by Gay Parents are abused, 51% have depression, and 72% are obese’. The poster, along with its imaginary, hate-filled statistics, immediately appeared all over Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. ‘This is what we’d all been frightened of’, writes Eades, ‘that the Far Right would bring the fight to our homes (because that is what they’ve always done)’.

Eades's extended meditation on the impact of the moral panic on his own trans-parented family not only draws attention to the extent of the harm inflicted, but also exposes the social fears, anxieties and indeed pathologies that exist around anybody other than a married heterosexual woman having children.

No less powerful, and too often ignored in the mainstream of public discourse, Rachel Robertson and Christina Fernandes contribute a dialogue about their experiences of mothering a child with a disability. The title of their chapter, 'You Have No Fucking Idea', is not intended to offend but rather to suggest a sense of the differences between mothering a disabled and a non-disabled child. Robertson and Fernandes describe being 'out of sync' with other mothers, and explore this feeling in relation to the hidden work that parents of disabled children are required to undertake – negotiating with medical professionals, educators and government bureaucracies, and the sustained pressure to explain or justify that seems to coexist with mothering disability. Robertson and Fernandes have no interest in creating a redemptive narrative around disability and mothering; instead they leave space for discomfort in an attempt to 'resist that which is devalued and stigmatised in our children and ourselves'.

Further complicating the idea of mothering, Josephine Wilson raises the issue of mothering without giving birth in an essay that weaves her personal experiences of adopting her daughter from China with reflections on the complex and often disturbing dilemmas inherent in overseas adoption. In 'Once upon a Time, in Motherland' Wilson points out that so much that is deemed to be natural or taken for granted about motherhood is experienced as arbitrary or institutional in adoption, but she also suggests that to adopt is to open oneself to questions that ought to belong to all parents. Questions about ambivalence, difference, damage and doubt, questions that challenge received ideas about what it is to be a mother, what it is to love a child, to attach and to belong in a family and a culture.

Cultural belonging is also a key theme in 'Speak English!', Zora Simic's lyrical tribute to her mother, which provides a moving account of a woman's experience of immigration as well as a challenge to the logic of assimilation – particularly, the idea that speaking a language is a prerequisite for belonging. As Simic points out, close to half the

Australian population either was born overseas or has one or both parents born overseas. There are 300 separately identified languages spoken in this country and one in five people speak a language other than English at home. And yet, as she argues, 'the first draft of this chapter could have been written in 1986, minus the urgent tone of the trailblazing scholarship of that era'. In her resolve to capture what it was like to mother in 'a country where most people did not speak her language, and for me to be mothered by someone who eventually did not speak mine', Simic grapples with the myriad ways in which language shapes both memory and reality. Her mother – and the hybrid languages they shared – remains a formidable presence in the essay.

Questions of cultural understanding and representation are also pressing themes in Timmah Ball's essay on Indigenous women. In 'The Only Thing You See Is a Story to Tell' Ball explores the diversity of Indigenous women's experiences of mothering, beyond the narrow range of stories told in the media. She looks back to the struggles of her mother's generation, to the contemporary experience of her cousins, many of whom have settled early to motherhood, and to her own experience as one of a mob of 'urban tiddas reinventing ourselves in inner-city enclaves, breaking stereotypes as our cultural capital flourishes' with 'no plans to breed'. In this diversity, writes Ball, one thing that Indigenous women share is the experience of scrutiny. 'Aboriginal women are often scrutinised with cruel judgment, told we are doing something wrong by a range of well-meaning whites quick to tell us they're here to help.' At its worst such scrutiny becomes a form of 'trauma porn', filled with menace and intrusion, relentlessly objectifying, orchestrating stories of undifferentiated distress 'without any sense of care'.

In a collection of essays on dangerous ideas about mothering, the question Ball raises about choosing not to mother is vital. In 'Feisty and Childfree', Hazel Smith challenges the silence that surrounds voluntary childlessness, meditating on the social and cultural stigmas that are all too often applied to women who choose not to be mothers. These women are invariably constructed as selfish, shallow and self-absorbed, and are seen – by a relentless, albeit unspoken, judgment – to have 'failed' at normative femininity. The idea that

motherhood is something that all women do – and should desire – is seldom, if ever, questioned. Those who challenge this presumption, through ‘choice’ or otherwise, are seen as a threat. Smith notes the relative lack of literature about women ‘choosing’ to be childfree, and ends the chapter with her own poem – ‘The Club’ – which traces her feelings of exclusion from the circles of women who ‘choose’ to be mothers. But, as Smith also makes clear, women without children in heterosexual relationships like hers are coded as deficient in ways that women without a partner may not be. It often seems that single women are constructed as ‘problems’ due to the presumption that singleness equates with childlessness, and this, of course, is simply not the case.

Being single and a mother has its challenges. Emma Jane initially intended her essay on single mothers to be a ‘corrective to claustrophobic stereotypes of single mothers as objects of pity’, a piece of writing which ‘extolled the virtues and odd fringe benefits of solo parenting’, and insisted that ‘romantic-sexual adult intimacy was only barely compatible with the raising of small humans’. But, on writing, she found herself drawn to a sense of aloneness in being a sole parent that often goes unremarked, if only in the interest of simply ‘getting on with things’. The gaze of cultural scrutiny invariably focuses on the relationship between mother and child, or on the child alone, while mothers continue to be cast as ‘objects’ – as in One Nation candidate David Archibald’s suggestion that single mothers are too lazy to ‘attract and hold a mate’ and are creating a ‘rapid rise in the portion of the population that is lazy and ugly’. Jane’s moving and comic portrait of a queer single life focuses the reader’s attention on the wellbeing of a mother as a discrete and autonomous human being.

No less dangerous in a book about mothers – or so it sometimes seems – is an essay on fathers. And yet, without a doubt, one of the significant forces shaping the role of mothers in western society is an emerging generation of fathers who appear to be taking more active roles and responsibilities in their children’s lives. In his thought-provoking chapter (required reading for every would-be dad) Matthew Beard declares that the days are long gone when society expected nothing more from dads than to pay the bills and teach their children how to ride a bike. Men are invited – and perhaps even expected – to

participate more in domestic life. But to do so they must also learn that balancing this range of fragile, conflicting and recently acquired identities is fraught, and that the shifting role of fathers is taking place in a world that assigns a different value to men's and women's work. 'I've lost count of the number of times I've been praised for doing something as mundane as settling my son back to sleep during the night while my equally exhausted wife stands next to me receiving zero plaudits', he writes.

The final section of the book turns its attention to the dangerous stories that our culture tells us about mothers. It opens with Maria Tumarkin's subtle essay about the over-memoirisation of motherhood, in which she finds herself arguing against something that is both 'culturally ubiquitous and continuously de-legitimated'. Rejecting familiar criticisms of literary mothers as 'narcissistic', 'exploitative' and 'self-serving', while resisting the temptation to tell other women how to write about their lives, Tumarkin finds herself grappling with the sheer popularity of the memoir genre. She confronts both the realities and distortions occasioned by writing for a commercial market, as well as the limited narrative approaches that popularity allows. There is, writes Tumarkin, a certain kind of 'vomit-on-the-blouse candour, the smell-of-my-baby's-foot lyricism' that fills her with unease. She worries that what we are seeing enacted in these texts is the 'formal and intellectual domestication of motherhood', and hurries off in quest of new ways to write about mothering that do not fit the familiar narrative shape to which we have become accustomed.

Danielle Wood turns our attention to the familiar motherhood stories found in fairytales, and to the bad, wicked and neglectful mothers found in children's literature. In looking beyond the witches bearing poison apples, Wood makes the startling discovery that the wicked mothers of contemporary children's fiction all too often equate with the absent mother. She speculates that one reason for the persistence of the figure of the bad or neglectful mother in children's literature is that she is something of a narrative convenience. While the good mother is 'beside the narrative point, having no character arc of her own', more often than not dead before the action even begins, a neglectful mother is a useful plot device – 'especially if her notable

lack of vigilance puts her child in harm's way'. Wood asks if there is any room for the good – or even good enough – mother in children's books and what would she be like.

Psychology plays a significant role in the stories that are told about mothering. In 'From Containing to Creating' Petra Bueskens tracks a profound change in how psychoanalytic literature has described mothers, starting with the early works of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, in which mothers are seen as 'objects' (for their child), before moving on to the more recent works of Alison Stone and Lisa Baraitser, in which mothers are cast as subjects in their own right. Bueskens argues that this shift mirrors the movement of women from the domestic into the public sphere, and draws links between psychoanalytic theories of maternal subjectivity and the way mothers are redefining social spaces, work practices and gender norms through the material act of bringing along 'their breastfeeding babies, their nappy bags, prams and breast pumps, "their" sick and needy kids, "their" school pick-ups and drop-offs'. She shows how the everyday practices of mothering paved the way for recent cultural developments such as Greens senator Larissa Waters breastfeeding her daughter Alia in the Australian Senate, and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern giving birth in office.

Feminism – a protean form of thinking that grapples with the differential relationship to power of roughly half the human race – is a method of analysis that is implicitly and explicitly addressed in every chapter of this book. In the final essay, Natasha Weir makes these connections between mothering and feminist analysis overt, examining the cultural imaginary of motherhood and its entanglement with feminism over the last five years. In the public debates about motherhood – the so-called mummy wars – it is often assumed that feminists are anti-motherhood, that they stand with the 'career mums', rather than with those who 'choose' to stay at home. Underscoring this seemingly oppositional imaginary is the assumption that feminism, rather than being a mode of political analysis, should be a prescriptive guide to life. So too our historical moment is relentlessly described as 'post-feminist', as if the goals of feminism have already been achieved, or, as Angela McRobbie famously put it, 'taken into account'.¹⁷ And yet, as Weir points out, women continue to earn significantly less

than men and are grossly under-represented in positions of leadership; pregnant women are routinely discriminated against, particularly in the workplace; and, in the home, they continue to perform most of the caring and domestic work. All of this occurs in a culture in which family violence is the leading preventable cause of death, disability and illness for women in their child-bearing years. Ideas about what constitutes a 'good mother' – although they have become more flexible – also remain. As Weir concludes, despite the emergence of a small handful of 'bad mummy' public personas, the cultural imaginary of motherhood remains deeply ideological and profoundly contested.

In the era of mummy blogs, Pinterest and Facebook, *Dangerous Ideas about Mothers* analyses the issues that do not feature in more pious discussions of mothering, from divorce and overburdened court systems to children, consumerism and media consumption, to the 'big business' of mummy-dom, to shifting ideas about fathers, as well as giving space to the work – and profound criticisms – of women who choose to remain childfree. Coerced by the media, interrogated by other mothers, frowned upon, even, by those who are perhaps closest to them, the mothers of today face a barrage of criticism. This essay collection puts forward the proposition that seemingly trivial or narrowly mother-focused questions – such as whether 'to brelfie' or not – are actually questions for all women, not because of any research findings about the alleged benefits of breastmilk or social media, but because the increased cultural obsession with mothering turns out to be just another way to judge all women, and find them wanting.