

reviews

One Big Happy Family: 18 Writers Talk About Polyamory, Open Adoption, Mixed Marriage, Househusbandry, Single Motherhood, and Other Realities of Truly Modern Love, Rebecca Walker, ed. Riverhead Books (Penguin), 2009. 288 p.

If Rebecca Walker has resisted the role of feminist daughter, she has also distanced herself from popular perceptions of feminist motherhood. In a 2008 interview about parenthood with London's *Daily Mail*, she declared, "Feminism has betrayed an entire generation of women into childlessness" (para. 44) and stated her "strong feeling" that every child needs a two-parent home (para. 5). In an era when feminists struggle to be heard in debates over reproductive freedom, gay and lesbian marriage, and parenting rights, her pointed embrace of traditional motherhood seems troublingly out-of-step.

Walker's newest anthology *One Big Happy Family: 18 Writers Talk about Polyamory, Open Adoption, Mixed Marriage, Househusbandry, Single Motherhood, and Other Realities of Truly Modern Love* may be her attempt to clarify her positions. Far from a celebration of nuclear families and biological connections, the collection portrays a range of family structures for a popular audience. While the political valence of this project is uncertain, some of the pieces included—perhaps particularly those most at odds with Walker's stated ideals for family life—offer vivid, thoughtful representations of the complex and often politicized nature of parent-child-partner relationships.

The introduction to *One Big Happy Family* emphasizes its potential role in public discourse about family life, but it would benefit from a more thorough explication of Walker's goals and the essays' relationships to one another. Walker presents herself as a curator of diverse family histories, declaring the completed anthology "the ultimate reference book for all of us [...] a modern anthology version of Dr. Spock" (xiv). However, the "reference book" focus of this introduction reads as incongruous with the personal essay approach taken by the authors included.

The essays are not organized into chapters or by theme; each stands on its own, leaving it up to the reader to draw the connections between them. Most focus on the challenges and joys of parenting outside a strictly traditional family structure, though two feature couples without children. In addition to the topics in the book's subtitle, nannies, sperm donors, equally shared parenting, live-in in-laws, home birth, and home schooling all serve as focal points.

Walker has assembled a set of contributors with impressive writing credentials, making most of these short essays a pleasure to read. ZZ Packer's "The Look," a chronicle of her changing feelings about her biracial infant's light skin, is both humorous and uncomfortably direct in confronting readers' assumptions about race, domestic labour, and multi-ethnic families. "Woman Up," asha bandele's narrative of single motherhood made necessary by her husband's incarceration, veers from tragic to

inspiring: “How could I live with the fact that my husband embodied the idea that there was both someone and no one to witness her with me, raise a hand and testify, speak in tongues about the most beautiful thing we could ever have?” (26) Several other contributors, including Neal Pollack, Dan Savage, Min Jin Lee, and Judith Levine, are well known for their writing on issues of family and sexual politics.

Some of the essays seem to suffer a bit from the hybrid nature of Walker’s project: half personal narrative, half field guide. Jenny Block’s “And Then We Were Poly” gives a fascinating and sometimes torrid play-by-play of the path she took to open marriage, but it ends with an awkward passage theorizing about the reactions Block’s daughter may eventually have to her parents’ unconventional relationship. Two of the best essays here, Dan Savage’s “The Enemy Within” and Dawn Friedman’s “Sharing Madison,” which deal with two very different open adoptions, were previously published (in Savage’s book *The Commitment* and *Salon*, respectively). Their polished combination of personal reflection and subtle social commentary reflects an easy balance that Walker’s “reference book” as a whole never entirely achieves.

Neither the structure nor the content of *One Big Happy Family* emphasizes the political implications of the family structures depicted. Walker’s selection from Savage’s book, for example, avoids the discussion of gay marriage rights that is one of the major themes of that text. An anthology on this topic, however, can’t help but draw its readers into the changing face of sexual, racial, and relational norms in family life—and the inability of mainstream society and the American legal system to keep up with these realities. While Walker’s frustration with feminism seems to guide her public representation of herself as a mother, her book highlights the need for continued feminist action—continued demand for institutions to recognize the personal in the political—on behalf of all types of families, particularly as American feminists may have a window of opportunity for political change under the Obama administration.

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Work Cited

Walker, Rebecca. “How My Mother’s Fanatical Views Tore Us Apart.” *Daily Mail Online* 5/23 (2008) [<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1021293/How-mothers-fanatical-feminist-views-tore-apart-daughter-The-Color-Purple-author.html>]. (6 May 2010).