Madonna and child: towards a new politics of motherhood

Melissa Benn; Jonathan Cape, London, 1998, £12.99, ISBN:0-224-03821-4

Melissa Benn's book explores modern motherhood, that perennial subject of media debate. Many mothers around the country told Benn that the media fails to represent them accurately. Indeed, the modern mother is left in the strange position of being 'swamped with information and perspectives on who she might be, but robbed of authentic reflections of what she feels' (p. 21). So Benn's book, part social history and part interview, is offered to give voice and background to those invisible women and to think again about all that invisible work.

The book has many strengths (including the pleasure of watching Benn give Julie Burchill enough rope to hang herself with). Benn gives a useful overview of the past, of nineteenth century women's lives and leading feminist thinkers. She arrives at the present asking, how is it now, modern motherhood? Do women have it all? Can they? Should they? What do we think of the fact that society still 'foists most of the jobs associated with parenthood on women and yet gives them no credit for it' (p. 234)? Her tentative conclusions are rather disheartening. (Surprised?).

Benn is particularly good on the importance of time. As she says, 'Women with children talk about time all the time: feeds, sleep, how many days they are at work, what they manage or don't manage to do at home' (p. 64). I applaud her for exposing the myth of quality time: 'To be a good parent one has to be there....There for the casual non-sensical, all-important chat over messy lunches, plays in the park. There at bedtime. There during illness. There for the sports days, plays, carol concerts' (p. 78). Just like, she notes, to be successful at many kinds of professional work you have to be there, there for the end of day meetings, there for the lunches in the pub, there in a crisis, there during overtime. Unsurprisingly, those of us who are trying to do both well are attempting the impossible. Every study of working mothers shows that they are stretched to the limits of their endurance. She concludes, 'What mothers need to enjoy the best of both worlds is above all else, more time' (p. 250). Amen to that.

If I have a problem with this book, it is with its style. Or styles. It struggles to bring together its various strands. (Part of its message, maybe?). It is not angry polemic — as she rightly points out, women today are rarely angry, 'cool ironic humour has become the chief means of public discourse' (p. 101) — nor is it detached social history (we know, the personal is political), so what we get is a mixture that verges on passion through the inclusion of personal testimonies. Sometimes this works very effectively. Benn recounts spending an afternoon somewhere rough interviewing some mothers whose particular experience of motherhood (shit jobs, no childcare) underlines Benn's point about the media: In what sense does *She* magazine speak to these women? 'The absolute last words I would use of these women were 'juggle', 'frantic' or 'agenda'' (p. 17). Too bloody right.

But the book's style can get a bit cheesy and I did get put off by her own accounts of mothering. Early on, she describes getting up in the night and standing by the cot 'Tense on the balls of my feet. Happy. Exhausted' (p. 4), and soon after she tells us how she spends half hours at a time gossiping with her mum about the girls and their antics. I don't mind these intimate details for being unashamed, I mind them for being unrepresentative. I didn't find it jolly or rewarding being woken at night, and I don't know any mothers who do. Lucky her for the supportive mother, they aren't givens either. But I notice that Benn does an odd thing of distancing herself from the grim side of mothering by describing herself as a 'professional'; she has a 'professional' interest in housework, she talks about her 'professional' understanding of feminism, and I wonder why? The personal is OK as long as it doesn't taint you? The essential Melissa Benn is actually a writer who happens to have kids? And then there's a curious chapter where she introduces a fictionalized true life story, a composite of many women she's met. Why then is this Everywoman someone who also works in the media and has two small girls. All a bit un-self-reflecting. Or too self-reflecting in fact.

The biggest disappointment, though, is not Benn's fault. Her point that the last 30 years has taught us that the so-called natural division of labour is really a range of skills that can be 'redistributed by those who have a will to do it' (p. 243) should make us happy, but the fact is that 'the boredom, chaos, invisibility and sheer lack of value associated with being with young children over long periods of time is too hard for most men to overcome' (p. 244). Why foresee any will to change the status quo then? In fact, her analysis begs a crucial question. When she identifies as obstacles to a meaningful committed fatherhood men's sense of primary allegiance to the workplace (or other activities outside the home), is she identifying some utterly basic instinct? Some hunter gatherer drive? Or is it just socially sanctioned selfishness? (I think we could do with a bit of angry polemic myself.)

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Ideologies of breast cancer: feminist perspectives

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Breast cancer occupies an ambivalent position in the popular imagination. It has an extraordinarily high profile relative to other cancers, and is profoundly newsworthy, although often in highly sexualized ways, as explored by Cherise Saywell, Lesley Henderson and Liza Beattie. It is also the focus of a broad range of popular participation fund-raising and awareness-raising events, as is discussed in