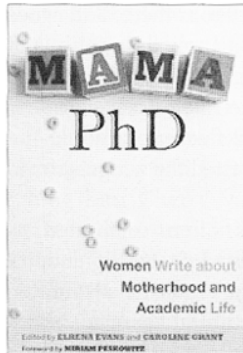


Mama, PhD: Women Write About Motherhood and Academic Life Elnora Evans and Caroline Grant, Eds. {RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS}



Academia—the fabled ivory towers of intellect and deep contemplation—can be a pretty clueless environment, as it turns out. The traditional medieval image of a scholar as an isolated, priestlike figure poring over books in isolation and living a life entirely of the mind is an archetype that universities still expect men and women pursuing their PhDs to emulate. Ambitious,

driven, intelligent women can certainly create places for themselves in this old-boy's club—until they get pregnant. When the life of the mind meets the realities of the body, things can get very messy indeed.

Mama, PhD collects the experiences of 40 women who have wrestled to balance academic careers with motherhood.

The essays in the collection encompass four main themes, broken into different sections: The first focuses on tricky decisions about whether to pursue motherhood while also pursuing advanced degrees. Part two explores the disconnect between the roles of mother and professor, as well as some of the profound synergies that can arise when playing both roles. Part three tells the stories of “recovering academics,” women who have deliberately chosen new directions after struggling with these two demanding roles. And the book wraps up with visions of how motherhood and academia should be compatible goals, and provides practical strategies for women embarking on these dual paths.

The contributors reflect the demographics of academic programs across the nation—mainly white, heterosexual women who are more likely to be studying humanities than sciences. Many of these authors share the experience of being initially shocked by the sheer physicality of pregnancy and motherhood. Already ambitious and brainy overachievers, they explain how they attempted to schedule in pregnancies much as they would squeeze in an extra study session—and how they were caught entirely off guard by the messy realities of swollen bellies, aching joints, fluctuating hormones, emergency C-sections, leaking breasts, vomiting infants, and unreliable daycare. Meanwhile, the reactions of the authors' peers and supervisors range from unconcealed revulsion at the bodily changes that pregnancy brings to icy admonitions to not get too distracted by “that mommy thing.”

While the overall story arcs are sometimes similar, each writer beautifully articulates the personal details of her own experiences. Some of these moments are startlingly beautiful and surprising: Jennifer Eyre White describes how, when catching a moment to breastfeed her baby, she realizes that “one of the beautiful things about being a female engineer is that the [women's] bathrooms are always empty and peaceful.” Angelica Duran evokes the excitement of her toddler's motivation to learn his numbers and letters so that he can help operate the keypad that moves the compact-storage shelves of the rare book library. Leslie Leyland Fields recounts the intense fear of professional rejection when, in front of a conference hall full of hundreds of people, she answers the question, “How do you stay grounded?” by revealing, “I have six children.”

Whether working to conceal their family lives in order to maintain professional credibility, fighting with administrators for fair and flexible treatment, defiantly toting infants into the offices of their advisers, or dropping out of academia to search for different ways to combine intellect and motherhood, the contributors to *Mama, PhD* offer themselves up as potential role models to women wondering how to tackle these two demanding responsibilities. “We

want the essays in this book to start a conversation that will continue to both inspire, and, more importantly, provoke change,” explain editors Elnora Evans and Caroline Grant, adding that creating more family-friendly policies will likely make universities a less exclusionary environment.

For those who are not on the professor/mommy path, the punchy, short essays are nonetheless interesting reads. Outsiders defiantly dispel unhelpful myths. Women contemplate the achievements of their mothers while worrying about how their choices will shape the lives of their daughters. The elite are brought down a notch, but find themselves a little more savvy as a result. —KATURA REYNOLDS