

Review

Rebecca Feasey, *Mothers on Mothers: Maternal Reading of Popular Television*, Bern: Peter Lang 2016, 266pp, £56.96 (hardback), ISBN 978-0343-1826-6.

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Rebecca Feasey's monograph emerged at a time in which discussions of women's reproductive health dominated western news media. The election of Donald Trump, and the attendant rollback on reproductive rights his Presidency promised, combined with the mobilisation of the Repeal the Eighth campaign, reignited conversations about bodily autonomy, gender, and choice. The public 'concern' afforded (potentially) pregnant bodies at this time, did not, however, coincide with a related discussion of motherhood and the structural disadvantages many mothers' face. Consequently, motherwork – the labour involved in motherhood – continues to be obscured, trivialised and undervalued. Feasey's *Mothers on Mothers*, sets out two important aims. First, to make maternal experiences visible. Second, to examine the relationship mothers have with one of the key institutions responsible for constructing cultural understandings of motherhood and concealing the realities of motherwork: popular television.

As she notes early on in the book, the field of motherhood studies is committed to amplifying the 'maternal voice', by capturing the lived experiences of pregnancy, motherwork and the maternal role. Feasey adopts this feminist project, and also seeks to 'give voice' to mother audiences using the data gathering processes of her predecessors in the social sciences. Such an approach allows Feasey to make an important contribution to media studies, where feminist work on *representations* of motherhood has dominated the field, while few have considered the ways in which audiences might respond to these images (particularly those whom texts claim to be representing). It is, therefore, at the intersection of media and motherhood studies that Feasey stakes her claim.

The first chapter usefully outlines the ways in which she attempts to capture the lived experiences of participants, and more importantly, the other methods available that she deliberately chose to avoid. Writing candidly about the logistical considerations in conducting audience research, Feasey elects to use an online questionnaire to gather

information. She helpfully details the practices of recruiting participants in such a way that allows the reader to understand the conditions of production under which the knowledge is generated. Similarly, she makes explicit the editorial decisions made when it comes to presenting data gathered from her questionnaire, such as correcting grammar etc. for clarity and readability. Such transparency is of course crucial in all research, but particularly important when attempting to present the thoughts and feelings of participants. To that end, the book might have also benefitted from including a copy of the final questionnaire as an appendix in order to fully appreciate and understand the data collected. The decision to 'edit' responses for clarity is a peculiar one, given the ways in which much of the data is presented in the chapters that follow. Numerous direct quotes from the questionnaire are presented in long sequences, presumably in order to allow the reader 'direct' access to the participants' thoughts and feelings, but this can make the information difficult to digest – and one wonders if some of the data might be better off presented quantitatively. For example, 12 quotes are included in one section to demonstrate the popularity of television presenter, Tess Daly. Such material might be better presented quantitatively with additional information regarding the proportion of respondents etc.

Some of the most thought-provoking and significant findings appear in Chapter 3 which discusses the ways in which Feasey's participants failed to identify with maternal representations. Despite demonstrating their preferences for certain kinds of onscreen mothers and mothering practices, many felt that *their* experiences were not typically represented. Again, some quantitative data might be useful here so that the reader can understand what percentage of respondents felt this to be the case (77 excerpts from participants are included as evidence of the significance of this finding), however, it is also valuable to read the justifications/context informing many of the participants' reasons for this lack of engagement or identification with their onscreen counterparts. The complexities of the responses from participants provide useful insights into the experiences of mothers and indeed, the ways in which mothers view motherhood more generally. This lack of identification with maternal representations is further explored in Chapter 4 where audiences reflect on 'negative' responses to mothers onscreen, in which many find the soap opera genre to be particularly problematic in terms of representation. The book's conclusion provides a space to consider the problematic nature of this representation further. When asked 'to think about depictions of motherhood in terms of the scope and breadth of maternal types represented', most respondents acknowledged a dearth of disabled, queer and adoptive parents onscreen, but an overrepresentation of working class and/or teen mothers (often in soap operas). For many this was a problem, because the representation was in some ways 'exploitative' of marginalised mothers, and perpetuated a culture of 'judging' mothering practices.

Mothers on Mothers provides a number of useful functions for both the field of media studies and motherhood studies. For media studies, it offsets the body of work that has typically relied on purely text-based approaches to maternal representations by considering what they *mean* to audiences. For motherhood studies, it reminds us of the

value of studying the image-making institutions that naturalise value systems and cultural norms regarding idealised motherhood. Such work is crucial in advancing our understanding of the disharmony highlighted in much of the work in this field (Oakley, 1979; Miller, 2005; Wolf, 2002) between mothers' expectation of motherhood and their material reality.

Biographical note:

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