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MOTHERING ALONE: RETHINKING SINGLE MOTHERHOOD IN AMERICA

KATHRYN EDIN AND MARIA KEFALAS'S *PROMISES I CAN KEEP:
WHY POOR WOMEN PUT MOTHERHOOD BEFORE MARRIAGE*
BERKELEY AND LOS ANGELES: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2005

ROSANNA HERTZ'S *SINGLE BY CHANCE, MOTHERS BY CHOICE:
HOW WOMEN ARE CHOOSING PARENTHOOD WITHOUT MARRIAGE
AND CREATING THE NEW AMERICAN FAMILY*
NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2006

RUTH SIDEL'S *UNsung HEROINES: SINGLE MOTHERS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM*
BERKELEY AND LOS ANGELES: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2006

BARBARA KATZ ROTHMAN

I think maybe some of us misunderstood what second-wave feminism was about. I for one thought it was all about the end of gender-as-we-knew-it. I thought that girls and women would no longer be trapped in femininity, and boys and men no longer trapped in masculinity. My husband and I used to occasionally dash into a toy store and run through, moving things out of the aisles marked "Boys" into the ones marked "Girls," and the other way around. It was as important to us that dolls and kitchen sets landed in the Boys aisle as it was that trucks and pirate sets showed up in the Girls aisle. At home, we shared child rearing, leaving notes on the diaper box, the only place we were both guaranteed to see. We seemed to have spent those years passing a baby over a subway turnstile as we dashed to and from work, or slipping a sleeping baby through our cat's cradle of intertwined arms as we took turns sleeping through a difficult night. Those were the days.

It seems, some thirty-odd years later, that I was mistaken. Second-wave feminism now seems to have been about making it possible for women to pump milk in law offices and laboratories, for richer women to hire poorer women to feed that milk to babies, for (some) women to "have it all." There may well be more men raising children as single fathers and as gay couples, but overall, it seems that the men who are partnered with women have increased their child-rearing responsibilities very slightly, and many,

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many more women are raising children without any men around at all. In some grand calculus, the percentage of overall child care done by American women compared with American men is probably about where it was before second-wave feminism.

But it does all *feel* rather different. Single motherhood has changed, from an aberration or a tragedy to a way of life, a perfectly ordinary way to raise children. And that is what each of these books is addressing: how single motherhood has shifted in the United States, to a choice, a value, a different attempt at the American dream.

Sidel starts—and it’s good to begin with Sidel, the senior author here and one who has been wrestling with related problems for a long time—with a heartbreaking quick tour of single motherhood in the United States, from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Hester Prynne*; to Ronald Reagan’s attack on “welfare queens”; Dan Quayle’s even more bizarre attack on Murphy Brown; Clinton’s attack on all poor mothers, known as welfare “reform”; and finally (written well before Obama was a gleam in our collective eye), to George Bush’s calls for abstinence rather than sex education and marriage as a strategy to end poverty. Quite the country we’ve been living in. Another few pages in and we have the statistical portrait of single mothers: there are more of them than there used to be, and there are more of them among the poorer and darker people of the United States. Another few pages on methodology, and we get to the heart of the book by page 19: in-depth interviews with fifty women who became single mothers without intending to. Some fell into pregnancies and thought the relationship would continue; some were widowed, separated, divorced. Some were right in the midst of their single motherhood while being interviewed; some were reflecting back from marriages, or from the vantage point that grown children give a woman. If *Single Motherhood* is a place, a position one occupies in the United States, these women have all been there—but not on a planned journey.

Rosanna Hertz fills the lacuna Sidel left, focusing her work on the women who went there on purpose, who actively and deliberately chose single motherhood in the United States. Given all we know about how very hard it is to actually raise children, by which I mean doing the daily work of child rearing; how hard it is to maintain economic responsibility for a family in the United States, even in the pre-collapse economy; and how unthinkably hard it is to do all that at once, one has to wonder: who does it on purpose? Who walks right in and decides to become a single mother in this country? Hertz interviewed sixty-five such women, single mothers

who were over the age of twenty when they had their first child and were “economically self-sufficient” at the time of the interview. (In a wonderful epilogue, Hertz goes back to interview these women several years later, showing where their lives have taken them.) While all describe themselves as middle class—hey, this *is* the United States, and we don’t acknowledge class here—65 percent held at least one advanced degree beyond the Bachelor’s level. A range of ethnic/race groups, some variation in sexual orientation, jobs as “varied as lawyers and waitresses” (226), but when all is said and done, these are pretty much what we think of as middle-class women. They were not without support, had financial as well as social capital.

Between Sidel and Hertz, we thus have 115 in-depth interviews with single mothers. The work is a remarkable tribute to the value of in-depth qualitative research interviews. The data is rich; the lives jump off the pages.

Reading these two books, one is struck by all of the wonderful quotes, the beautiful and sad and strong and funny and powerful and powerless words. But for me, there was one sentence that largely sums up the whole thing: “Being a single mother is the hardest and most rewarding thing I have ever done.” This comes from Sidel (129), quoting Sandra, a thirty-three-year-old African American mother of a four-year-old. But really, which of these 115 mothers would not have said something very much like that? And remove the word “single” and could you find one in 100, one in 115, one in 1,000 mothers who would not say that? Having children is hard. And it is rewarding. For most of us, there won’t be much in our lives that is harder or more rewarding. Such is the nature of raising children.

And I do get a bit stuck right there: it is, I still think, about *raising children*. When you interview women who are doing that, it looks like it’s about “motherhood.” When you interview single women, it looks like it’s about “single motherhood.” But if you interview grandmothers raising grandchildren, or men, as fathers, grandfathers, uncles, singly or in partnership, actively and really (no-kidding-around, doing all of it, not just some fun parts) raising children, it becomes increasingly clear that the issues are all about raising children. The question I want to understand is less the ones these books and our mass media generally are asking, which is, Why are these women doing this alone, or how well are these women doing this alone? and more this one: Why is it, over and over again, wave after wave of feminism notwithstanding, that it is women, overwhelmingly *women*, who are raising children?

There’s an odd moment of almost-answer in Sidel’s book, a place where her biography and mine intersect oddly. She and I were both raised by single

parents. Sidel's mother died when she was five; my father when I was eight. I remember saying to my mother—out of the mouths of babes!—that we were lucky she wasn't the one who died. I had been "Daddy's girl," looked like him, loved him a lot, went fishing with him, was probably less close with and less enamored of my mother. But I wasn't stupid. I knew who was there when you got home from school, who got you up in the morning to get you to school (OK, late a lot, she was not having an easy time of it as a twenty-six-year-old widow), who made dinner and Halloween costumes and knew how to work the thermometer when you were sick. My father, wonderful as he was, showed up evenings and weekends, home from work, there for fun.

What I couldn't see was that when he wasn't alive to go off to work, our money supply dried up. Social Security helped (more then than it does now). But so did my mother's uncles, who got together, figured out a budget, and each chipped in to keep the household afloat so that she, widowed in 1956, could stay home and be our mother.

Sidel had a different story. When her mother died, she says, "we were fortunate to be able to have a housekeeper who arrived weekdays around eleven in the morning and stayed until after dinner" (19–20). I figure Ruth Sidel and I are about the same age, of the same era. In our childhoods, when women were single parents, you had to send in money. When men were single parents, you had to send in a woman. Sidel is clear that the housekeeper wasn't the parent: her father "was in charge. He made the decisions; he set the tone" (20). But that is probably true of most fathers of that remarkable 1950s world. Men were "in charge," but someone had to make the beds and change the diapers, make dinners and break up sibling spats, see to it that toys were picked up and put Band-Aids on scraped knees. And that person was a woman. Pretty much, it still is. It is, in a way, rather shocking how very little motherhood has changed, at least for women who are not relatively wealthy and able to hire in mothering services, how little motherhood has changed for women who are doing the mothering themselves.

What has changed is marriage.

This is shown in each of these books. Hertz talks about different ways in which single mothers organize their romantic relationships, do or do not intersect their sex and love lives with their lives as mothers. And Sidel too talks about the men—the men the women thought would stick around, be there as fathers. And yet it's still not clear just what happened to marriage.

For that, turn to Edin and Kefalas. They've got 162 women to draw on, in interviews that were generally even longer than those done by Sidel or

Hertz. But what they add, methodologically, is fieldwork, rich and involved placement in the community. Edin moved right in and lived there among the women they interviewed; Kefalas too did serious fieldwork, community involvement, participant observation. “We gathered our data in the kitchens and front rooms, the sidewalks and front stoops of those declining neighborhoods where the growth in single motherhood has been most pronounced” (196–97). As wonderful and powerful a tool as qualitative interviewing is, it does not capture as much as participant observation can. The picture that they draw is thus even richer, more contextualized.

And the argument that emerges when they examine single motherhood is less about the motherhood end of it—hard work and rewarding—and more about marriage, arguably also hard work and considerably less rewarding. They quickly review the leading explanations for “the retreat from marriage”: “the increasing economic independence of women, the growing generosity of welfare, and the declining pool of marriageable men in America’s inner cities” and dismiss them as wrong or, at least in the case of the last, William Julius Wilson’s argument, as inadequate, explaining only a small part of the decline in marriage. What has really changed, they argue, is the very meaning of marriage itself, becoming (citing Andrew Cherlin) both less significant practically and more important symbolically. Americans do seem to generally understand this shift in marriage and are less likely to fret over sex outside marriage or over people living together “in sin” (how quaint that sounds to most of us) or to urge people who are married to stay together “for the sake of the children.” People should marry and stay married because—and only because—they love each other. Marriage is a central, crucial relationship, too important to waste on the wrong person.

This is not news. Ask your next undergraduate class about marriage, and the students can tell you all that. What is new is Edin and Kefalas’s pointing out that “*now there are few differences between the poor and the affluent in attitudes and values toward marriage*.” For the poor and affluent alike, marriage is now much less about sex, co-residence, and raising children than it used to be” (200; italics in the original).

Raising children is still, for most women and relatively few men, the central social relationship for much of their lives, the hardest and the most rewarding part of their lives. Most women fall into it at some point—they get pregnant; they slide into this relationship. Those are the women whom Sidel spoke to. Some who don’t, the women Hertz interviewed, realize that not having marriages need not and should not stop them from a valued

relationship with children, and they seek out their motherhood. For many women—and all three of these wonderful, insightful books show us this inherent messiness—life takes you where it takes you; things happen; decisions get made that perhaps never were really “decisions,” let alone “choices.” Children happen. Mothers raise them.

The part of the gender revolution that my husband and I thought was happening, the part where the dolls were going in the Boys aisle in the toy stores, that’s the part that never happened.

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