

BOOK REVIEW

NOT YOUR MOTHER'S
BOOK ON MOTHERHOOD

THE MOTHER IN ME:
REAL WORLD REFLECTIONS ON
GROWING INTO MOTHERHOOD

Edited by Kathryn Lynard Soper

2008

256 Pages, \$19.95

Deseret Book

AND

THE YEAR MY SON AND I WERE BORN:
A STORY OF DOWN SYNDROME,
MOTHERHOOD, AND SELF-DISCOVERY

By Kathryn Lynard Soper

2009

336 Pages, \$24.95

GPP Life

Reviewed by Lisa Torcasso Downing



The Mother in Me reminded me that when a woman narrows her focus, she doesn't see less. Instead she sees what is before her with more clarity, more distinction, and with deeper meaning.

MILK AND COOKIES. Peanut butter and jelly. Family reunions and green Jell-O. Some things are just made for each other. Take for instance, Mormon women and motherhood—the topic which editor Kathryn Soper makes the bread and butter of her collection of essays and poetry aptly

(though not surprisingly) entitled *The Mother in Me: Real World Reflections on Growing into Motherhood*, published through Deseret Book.

I'm not a feminist. At least not in that 1970s sense. I'm a card-carrying Mormon mother of three children who spent fifteen years as a stay-at-homer instead of building

a career. But I'm also, I admit with trepidation, a member of the Mormon literati. A critic and writer. Some days an accusation of my being a postmodernist could stick, but mostly I'm a keep-it-realist. I'm also one who has stayed as far away from LDS women's groups as possible. I've sampled Deseret Book publications and, generally speaking, not loved them. So when *The Mother in Me* arrived at my door, along with an assignment to review it, I approached it with caution, lifting the cover with my eyes half-closed as if half-expecting the sugar and spice contents to explode in my face. Maybe blind me, or sand down my ability to think. In other words, no one would have classified me as the book's target audience.

But then I started to read—and was absolutely charmed.

This book is authentic. I hadn't made it past Beverly Campbell's "Forward" before all my crusty pseudo-intellectualisms sloughed away, leaving me raw in spirit, and remembering what is truly large about living.

There are no apologies in *The Mother in Me*; no self-indulgent whining or glossing over the stickiness of staying home with young children. Babies die before they are born. Pregnant women eat dirt. Identities are lost. Relationships are tested. Hearts break.

The essays are so intimate, in fact, that each left me lingering in my own memories. I remembered the feeling of closing the door on the world and shutting out a career in order to center my existence on raising my small children. I remembered all the uncertainty and insecurity. I remembered feeling dismissed and inconsequential in the eyes of the world. The joy of *The Mother in Me* is that it proffers a view of motherhood that does not constrict a woman's world, but broadens it. It argues that everything good and true can play out right under our feet, here under the kitchen table or in the back yard, at the park, or on a walk around the block. Even in a patch of freshly tilled earth. *The Mother in Me* reminded me that when a woman narrows her focus, she doesn't see less. Instead she sees what is before her with more clarity, more distinction, and with deeper meaning.

I won't lie. Some essays do caramelize their conclusions in classic Deseret Book fashion. Once or twice I finished an essay and wished I could reach into the book, grab an author by her ponytail, shake her, and shout, "Your narrative *breathed* that truth. You didn't need to beat me over the head with it at the end!" But as far as



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writing “sins” go, the sin of philosophizing is a small one. There is no slow, maple-drip sweetness many may associate with memoirs by this publisher. This collection is not a lecture about what an ideal mother should be but a series of snapshots admitting what motherhood is. Reading it is living life by proxy, with all the joy and wonder, the sorrow and disappointment that enlightens our understanding and stretches our soul. It is a book about women growing up as much as it is about their raising children.

Nowhere in the book is this theme better exemplified than in Melonie Cannon’s moving tale of her summer spent as a teen among orphaned children in South America. She writes in “They Weren’t Mine to Keep”:

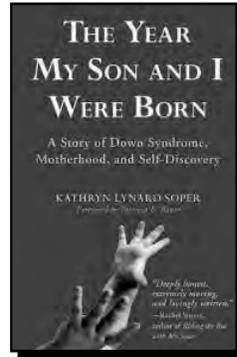
Stories were rampant of guerillas kidnapping people and taking them to the mountains to join their forces. Many women were raped, and the resulting offspring were left in dumpsters and orphanages.

I cannot describe the shock it was for a Utah girl who grew up in a Mormon home to see another world for the first time. When the rain came down in torrents, I put on my swimming suit and stood under the warm deluge, letting myself cry as much as the San Salvadorian sky.

I missed home. I missed being innocent. I missed walking through life with my eyes shut.

That summer, Cannon escorted two babies, each under a year in age, from a San Salvador orphanage to the waiting arms of adoptive parents in the United States. The older child “clung to me like a little monkey,” she writes of their journey, of her awakening to the power and importance of parenting. “I had never been held like that before, and it stirred a feeling deep inside me that I did not recognize. I was needed.”

The cadence in Cannon’s essay, the imagery she uses, seems magical. It is both gentle and confident, hopeful and fulfilling, and reflects the tone and talent of the ladies from *Segullah*. *The Mother in Me* is a vibrant, earthy, and life-affirming read that kicks mommy-guilt to the curb and allows truth with a small “t” to reveal the larger Truth. Not sugar and spice but milk and honey, sustenance for the mother’s soul.



When writers can be this honest, when they know themselves this well, when they can stand this naked before the world, then maybe, if they work hard, they can achieve this ideal.

I INHALED KATHRYN Soper’s *The Year My Son and I Were Born*. Then, in preparation for this assignment, I sought out previously published reviews and found myself agreeing wholeheartedly with the unanimous praise: The narrative is, indeed, beautifully conceived and executed; its pulse is both vibrant and frightening; its message, raw and rejuvenating. It is a tale of redemption, of hope, and eventual peace after trial. It is the definition of honesty.

And yes, on its surface, Soper’s memoir is the story of a picture-perfect mother whose frame shatters when God places an “imperfect” infant in her arms. Born brutally premature and with Down Syndrome, Soper’s little Thomas quickly becomes our Thomas. We grow to understand and love him because his mother loves him first—and because she has a phenomenal mastery of the craft of writing.

But it unsettles me to think of this book as the tale of how one mother comes to accept and love her disabled son. Certainly it is that story . . . and yet it is also not that story. In fact, every page of Soper’s narrative is a march toward her ultimate declaration that Thomas is not a diagnosis but a human being who is as valuable and as awe-inspiring as any other. *The Year My Son and I Were Born* never makes a spectacle of disability. It never reduces Thomas to a metaphor, to some symbol of what ails the world. It never exploits his life situation to further staid homilies or platitudes which are designed to make it easier for people to avoid the tough questions and the messy details, to keep a safe emotional distance, to tie a bow on the problem and give it away. In this respect, Soper’s text is iconoclastic. And pure. Breath-takingly real, it stands with no ulterior motive other than to rejoice in life.

The Year My Son and I Were Born is about

overcoming ourselves, about facing that which in our nature is undesirable, even ugly—our pride and our fear—and about succumbing to the often slow and painful process of humility so we can evolve from what we think is good into what is truly good. Soper’s circumstances—premature delivery, the NICU existence, the diagnosis of Trisomy 21 for her seventh child, postpartum depression—all these stand this stalwart Mormon mother in front of life’s mirror and demand she take a good, long look at her weakness, her failings, and her sin.

And as she looks, we look, but not at her and not at Thomas. We look into ourselves and experience the trembling that comes from knowing we are as imperfect as she. This is why we cry when we read *The Year My Son and I Were Born*—not because a sweet new life begins with difficult challenges, but because we feel intensely and personally the shock of Soper’s discovery that no matter how strong, how able, how mature a living force we think we have become, our knees can be cut out from behind by the quietest whisper from heaven.

Soper does not “overcome” or “rise above” her trial. Instead she fills it up with a wider love and truer insight until the hollowness and loneliness of that trial fades as echo. This proxy reassurance is, likewise, reason to weep.

I loved this memoir as I have rarely loved a memoir. It will live on my shelf beside Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* and hold its own. In the future, when young writers ask me how to write effective personal narrative, I will direct them to read and study *The Year My Son and I Were Born*. When writers can be this honest, when they know themselves this well, when they can stand this naked before the world, then maybe, if they work hard, they can achieve this ideal.