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BOOKS & CRITICS

BOOKS

RHYMES WITH RICH

One woman's conscientious objection to the "mommy wars"

BY SANDRA TSING LOH

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Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families
by Leslie Morgan Steiner (editor)
Random House

More and more these days, reading women's writing fills me with a vague, creeping, slightly nauseating feeling. Lying in bed the other night, cradling some seltzer water, my stomach gurgling, the word for my malaise suddenly came to me: "afflufemza," wherein the problems of affluence are recast as the struggles of feminism, and you find yourself in a dreamlike state of reading firstperson essays about it, over and over again. We've always had rich mothers, of course; it's just that the boundaries between the privileged and the unused to be clearer. Back in the eighties, for instance, I was among the many couch, or at least futon, potatoes who used to love *Dynasty*—the Mothra-versus-Godzilla grapplings of the Carringtons and the Colbys, of Joan Collins's deliciously nasty Alexis and Linda Evans's nurturing, oddly affectless Krystle. Alexis was the Execu-Bitch; Krystle, the Saintly Wife. It was the eternal female ur-struggle, ever campy, ever watchable, ever conveniently framed for us—out there in the distance—by that swoopily hammy Bill Conti score, those soaring trumpets, those glittering Denver skyscrapers.

Twenty years later, gone are big hair, big diamonds, and big shoulder pads. In their place, among America's most affluent mothers, is a kind of gnawing, grinding anxiety—and a mediacentric conviction that this fretfulness is somehow that of every woman. Or so it appears in the just-published *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families*, edited by Leslie Morgan Steiner. The cover flap describes the angst thus:

> With motherhood comes one of the toughest decisions of a woman's life: Stay at home or pursue a career? The dilemma not only divides mothers into hostile, defensive camps but pits individual mothers against themselves … Ranging in age from 25 to 72 and scattered across the country from New Hampshire to California, these mothers reflect the full spectrum of lifestyle choices.

OK, let's slow down for a minute and unpack this description of Everymother before, with iced mochaccino latte in hand, we hurriedly whisk on. There are, in fact, great varieties of American mothers left out of Steiner's anthology. They're women for whom work is not a "lifestyle choice"

but a necessity—a financial one, gauchely enough, and not an emotional one. Why do they work? To keep the electricity on. Such women would include, oh, single-mother waitresses, hotel maids, factory workers, grocery-store cashiers, manicurists, even countless low-level white-collar functionaries, from bank clerks to receptionists to data processors. Imagine a nanny wondering about her lifestyle choice: *Why have I always had this burning dream to spend sixty hours a week taking care of other people's children? Is it because of unresolved communication issues from a lonely childhood? Would I experience more personal fulfillment—find more of my true "voice"—in department-store retail? Perhaps these are issues I should examine this week in therapy, before I put my call through to Po Bronson.*

But clearly no one at Random House thought to red-pencil this, because it's a given today, in non-zine, non-blog, hardcover-anthology women's writing, that "Everymother" implicitly means "every mother from the well-defined e-mail list of people like us"—media professionals who have now become their own class and tribe. A female member of the mediacracy can now seize the bully pulpit for all women without needing to give even lip service to those women whose lives, unglamorously enough, are more blue collar than blue state. (Actually, that's not entirely true: they do occasionally give lip service, in the most bizarre and self-aggrandizing ways. More on that in a bit.)

However, even when one excludes most American mothers, there's still plenty of material for a book. Life at the top may be privileged, but it is not simple. Take the mini-autobiography proffered by Steiner, a graduate of Harvard and Wharton, the general manager of *The Washington Post Magazine*, and the former Johnson & Johnson executive who was responsible for the international launch of Splenda. Her dilemma, she explains, was being married to an investment banker who kept getting ever more attractive jobs in ever new places. The crisis came when he was "offered the presidency of a hot Internet start-up," which would require a family move to Minneapolis. The pain of it had Steiner lying on the parquet floor in her beloved Upper West Side, fighting tears: "Within a ten-minute walk lay my son's favorite playground, my sister's apartment, my in-laws' condo, Gymboree, a pediatrician as kindly as Big Bird, five or six Starbucks, the Reebok gym, and at least a dozen museums." But no. "My husband calmly explained that we were very lucky and really had to go. Millions of dollars in stock options, he said."

(Again, for comparison, I don't want to go red state on you but a military wife might take the news of a move differently, perhaps even thinking something like, *Yes, moving is inconvenient, but sacrifice is part of the duty our family owes our country* … which in the "mommy wars" universe would be a strange notion full of foreign words.)

Steiner's female-empowering argument is that her only choice, as a mother, was to return to full-time work at a plum *Washington Post* advertising job in order to gain the economic leverage needed to have a say in household decisions. It is a leverage that Steiner's own depressed, rum-and-Coke-swilling, stay-at-home—if brilliant, Radcliffe-educated—mother never had, since Steiner's cheerful lawyer father was the one who worked. And, well, what with the battling upper-class incomes and the pretty continual flap, almost as though in a wind tunnel, of Ivy League sheepskins, it was at this point that even I—a media professional who has the freedom to type, at my desk, about the waitresses who labor hourly for minimum wage—began, from my relatively privileged position in the cosmic sisterhood, to feel the cultural disconnect of the downwardly mobile.

Never mind that—with such *Mommy Wars* essayists as *Publishers Weekly* editorin-chief Sara Nelson, ten-year Viking editor Dawn Drzal, *Washington Post Magazine* deputy editor Sydney Trent, and *Lizzie McGuire* creator Terri Minsky—it's conceivable that in the next wave of cultural rightsizing we could have a genre of women's literature written entirely by media executives; it's just that, even when the media moms quit work to raise their children, they're still able to spend a lot more than I do, on a daily basis.

It began with little things, like Georgetown mom Page Evans's frustrating day juggling three-year-old daughter Katherine's ballet class with six-year-old daughter Peyton's kiddie yoga class ($15 per session). There was stay-at-home mom Monica Buckley Price's resignation about her husband's having to work out of town, co-executive-producing *The Joan Cusack Show*, in order to cover her autistic son's expensive Santa Monica preschool and therapy bills of $700 a week. On the Upper West Side, Drzal's small son mistakenly consumed a brunch centerpiece of two pounds of Barney Greengrass eastern Gaspé smoked salmon. In yet another gastronomically sophisticated part of Manhattan, workingfrom-home mother Susan Cheever's baby literally hurled foie gras and made playthings with quenelles de brochet. (I wondered if there was any Random House editor for whom that image had given a moment's pause: "Baby hurling foie gras … Let them eat cake … Marie Antoin—hmm.")

Then came the onslaught of designer labels. Not since Daisy Buchanan wept over Gatsby's shirts have individual items of clothing been so emotionally fraught. There were the traditional "Armani success suits" (which one abandons when one leaves office life), "Merrell Jungle Slides" (as casual wear, worn to pick up the kids), a "new BCBG suit" (bought for speaking engagements, though the cost of it unfortunately offsets the honorariums), a favorite "forest-green wool Regina Rubens" (to cheer oneself up enough while returning to one's publishing job in Manhattan). The autism piece, while poignant in its descriptions of Price's son's condition, happens to be titled "Red Boots and Cole Haans," a reference to the mom's "funky new Anthropologie outfit" and Cole Haans, which loom touchingly large against the preschool children's tiny Stride Rites (the piece recounts a much happier day than at Gymboree, when the son soiled his "fabulous blue-and-white-striped Petit Bateau outfit"). No surprise, then, that the battle between stay-at-homes and career moms is described unfailingly in terms of outerwear and accessories. In "Sharks and Jets," Evans writes, "I imagine Jerome Robbins choreography. The stay-at-home moms in their park attire of rubber clogs, khakis, and T-shirts. The working moms in their pencil skirts, pressed blouses, and Ferragamos." Stay-at-home mom Catherine Clifford finds it difficult to retain her equanimity with "the mom who groused jealously that she couldn't afford not to work, then grabbed her Kate Spade bag and headed off in her new Mercedes SUV." (The image of Upper West Side—or, for geographic diversity, Georgetown—women hitting each other over the head with Kate Spade bags was hard to shake.)

All right, some might argue—so what? Affluent mothers have problems too—call it the Anxiety of the Mommytocracy, if you will. And people shelling out $25 for a hardbound book of essays are more likely to be intrigued by the lives of blue-coast elites than by those of poorly dressed office managers in Toledo, married to traveling salesmen, whose children eat pimiento-flavored Tuna Helper. Indeed, what's wrong—what's unfeminist, even—with celebrating not just the affluent but the powerful? What's honestly wrong with, to quote Naomi Wolf's glowing blurb for *Mommy Wars*, using "real women's voices to animate what is often a frenzied but ill-informed debate, thus bringing the texture, warmth, hope, and angst of real mommies—and real wars—to the table"? (Well, it could be argued that one of the problems is that Naomi Wolf feels this sampling is representative of real mommies.)

It's not like affluent moms don't have their "work" cut out for them too: "Every day at noon I would pack up the babysitter with tiny cartons of soy milk and cinnamon graham crackers, lest my son accept a forbidden cookie," Dawn Drzal reveals.

> Then I would go food shopping, setting out for a distant organic market or ethnic enclave to hunt down new prepared foods or a particular exotic ingredient for his meals (which my husband and I enjoyed as well). When the babysitter left at six, she would deposit him in his high chair, freshly bathed, and he would happily watch me sautéing onions or marinating tofu or cooking his favorite dinner, red lentils with garlic, onions, and ginger.

Calgon, take her away!

Further, to read these accounts, it's clear that even privileged women can suffer surprising emotional fragility. Conversations at cocktail parties are particular minefields. When high-powered career women shed their outer Armani layers to become stay-at-home moms, they suffer, over the fondue, risk of the dreaded "greet and turn," or "turn and pivot." Relatively high up on the pyramid of needs is a sense of "selfness," illustrated nicely here by Page Evans:

> "So, what do you do, do you work?" a fifty-something gray-haired man in a black turtleneck and tweed jacket asks. We're standing in a claret-colored living room at a book party in Cleveland Park, and the bartender has just handed him a glass brimming with bourbon over ice.
>
> "I'm basically a stay-at-home mom," I say.
>
> "Oh, well, that's such an important job. Kids grow up so fast, don't they?"
>
> "Yeah, they do," I say.
>
> And that's the end of it. Turn and pivot.
>
> But wait. Wait! Don't you want to know what I think about what's going on in the world? I want to scream out. I've spent the past seven years trying to improve my mind, to prove that I'm more than "just a mom." I see more plays, read more op-eds, take classes, visit museums. I'm in a book club. I write essays.

In another illustration of hard-fought (even, here, arguably hard-hearted) selfness, Terri Minsky describes having a demanding TV career that could put her in L.A. for months at a time, while her family remained in Manhattan. At one point, her two woeful children ask, "Mommy, do you love your television show more than us?" When she says "no," they counter with, "Mommy, then why are you with the show and not with us?" And what she thinks, but poignantly cannot say, is, "I want to do this. I need to do this. This is who I am, and it's taken a lot of therapy not to apologize for that." She then tells a roomful of network executives that her son eventually supported her need to self-actualize, and the moms among them burst out crying.

This would all be fine if proffered as the self-exploration of a consciously affluent class, or even as, heavens, *Dynasty*style escapist literature (I'd love to hear Joan Collins deliver that Minsky line). But

Steiner goes further, arguing that although stay-at-home moms do, in their own intimate way, add value to their communities, "without the money, the power, and the loudspeaker successful careers bring, women will never have the collective bargaining power to make the world better for ourselves, our children, and all the women who can't leave abusive husbands, the ones who wear veils, the moms who earn less than minimum wage cleaning houses and don't have choices about birth control or prenatal care or any other kind of care."

Again, to slow down and unpack (although it's almost enough just to note the delicious, vaguely hand-waving phrase "the ones who wear veils"): Steiner's enumeration of "money, power, loudspeaker" suggests that little good can ever be done by women suffering any combination of poverty, obscurity, or—most horrific of all—lack of media access. In Los Angeles, some of our most powerful community movers are the *promotoras*, Latina health workers, whose unusual access to, rapport with, and ability to get signatures from brown-skinned working-class families make them critical players in current demands for more accountability in failing inner-city schools. Again, I see that within the "mommy wars" universe, my previous sentence holds many strange and unfamiliar phrases.

Leaving that aside, the question remains: Once they have the proverbial loudspeaker, how much social good do affluent, successful, powerful women really do (other than treating their wonderful full-time nannies like members of the family)? I didn't notice any successful career women in the book mentioning specific campaigns they're waging on behalf of the less fortunate, nor did I catch to what women's or children's charities proceeds from the book will be given. (I would love to know the inner dynamics of this collective-bargaining arrangement of which Steiner speaks, whereby a turbo woman's pursuit of a glamorous career somehow makes the world better for her minimum-wage sisters.) These days, I suppose, it is feminist enough an action to edit a women's anthology, get on *Oprah*, sell a million copies, and make a pile of cash, all of which you keep, presumably so that your investment-banker husband can't move the family again. (One of our most famous and successful women, Oprah Winfrey, actually does have furthering the social good as part of her personal mandate. But that's a value many seem to forget. A colleague of mine, Rebecca Constantino, at Access Books, which creates and updates libraries for underserved children, received an Oprah Angel award for her work. Constantino noted wryly to me that her appearance on the show drew less than $500 in cash contributions, but 1,000 calls asking how to get on *Oprah*.)

Most troubling of all is not how little good is being done by affluent, successful, loudspeaker-bearing career women, but that they seem so unaware of who even needs help, even if those in need happen to live all around them. While our prominent female essayists are parsing fashions and feelings and moods—while they are probing, as Wolf puts it, the "angst of real mommies"—there are some elephants undealt with in the room. Consider the opening incident of the book, at a party at Washington, D.C.'s elegant Sulgrave Club, where Steiner is discussing her "mommy wars" book idea with a fellow publishing professional:

> Another neighbor, a stay-at-home mom whose kids go to school with mine, joined us. This woman is the head of the parent-teacher association at our public elementary school, as constant and welcoming a presence on the playground as a greeter at Wal-Mart. My friend, a former *Washington Post* reporter who makes her living posing provocative questions, asked our neighbor what she thought of my book idea. Specifically, what she thought of moms who work. Without breathing, the

stay-at-home mom answered, “Oh, I feel so sorry for them.”

My cheeks flushed like a child with a fever.

I think it’s worth noting (because apparently no one else will) that Washington, D.C., public schools are 96 percent minority and that Leslie Morgan Steiner is white—a racial juxtaposition not atypical for this anthology. Except for, most notably, two African-American essayists who live in suburban Maryland (the one mentioning race citing it as less of a factor with her white in-laws than her turbo-powered career), the twenty-seven contributors to this anthology are almost all white women who live in major urban centers: Washington (whose public schools, to repeat, are 96 percent minority), New York (85 percent minority), and Los Angeles (91 percent minority). While these mothers tend to be, as indicated, top media professionals, the overwhelming preponderance of brown schoolchildren is something no one seems to particularly notice. The troubles of the poor and the brown don’t seem to lap up much around the ankles of any of these mothers, whether they’re shod in Chanel slingbacks or Cole Haan loafers. (Almost as though in an afterthought, there are a handful of exceptions in the back of the book.)

Of course, I suppose there’s a chance that the Washington public school Steiner’s kids attend is 4 percent white, and that she’s just admirably color-blind. But it’s more likely, given the increasingly Johannesburg-like patterns of American urban racial polarization, that the school she’s referring to is enclaved—that is, that it’s the quality elementary school, in the big brown city, where the kids of the white well-to-do go. (“Enclave” being my verb for the self-sorting occurring in our large urban areas.) I’m not singling Steiner out for unusual behavior here; anxious, educated (particularly Ivy League–educated), upper-middle-class parents generally, and understandably, want their children to go to the better schools (Steiner’s stay-at-home neighbor is forced, in contrast, to send her children to what Steiner calls a “mediocre public high school”). I may even have things just half right: Steiner’s kids’ school may happen to be overwhelmingly minority and excellent, and the snotty PTA president may, in fact, be a colorful, headscarf-wearing immigrant from Zimbabwe.

But what is safe to say is that in the often embattled No Child Left Behind world of U.S. public schools—where the poorest inner-city children may deal with ever-changing arrays of substitute teachers, class sizes in the fifties, and textbooks published in the ’60s—it’s not the worst problem a mother can have if her over-involved PTA president, when pressed on a hot-button topic at a party, is a tad judgmental. Because, in point of fact, female PTA über-presidents tend to *be* judgmental. That’s the alchemy of rabidly focused women. There’s no one like an obsessive, hormonal female busybody to whip a school-wide gift-wrap drive to record-setting heights (“A new gym? No, Cheryl Ann—you didn’t!”). At least that’s how it is in our enclaved, high-achieving whiter schools in L.A., the ones upper-middle-class parents line up frantically before dawn to get their kids into. (This phenomenon was humorously described in the *Los Angeles Times* last year in a first-person essay by a *Times* staffer. As seems typical for today’s journalists, this mother didn’t feel it worth noting that the school the parents were knocking elbows to get into was the affluent, 79-percent-white one within a sea of poor browns.) Indeed, the most-whispered downsides about our enclaved L.A. schools these days are the overachieving parent associations (often, if not always, powered by a team of tennis-playing stay-at-home moms). I remember one such public elementary I visited, impossible to get into anyway, whose Booster Club required 500 volunteer hours per year per family! The parental pressure is such that the poor brown schools actually start to look like attractive alternatives. At one point I found myself thinking, *Sure, if we went to this “bad” school, most of my fellow parents would be Hispanic migrants who work three jobs … but at least I*

wouldn't have to deal with that crazy-ass Booster Club!

But look—I don't wish to start another war. I don't want to sow festering seeds of class and racial discord. I come only to heal. And in that spirit, I have a modest proposal: mix it up, people. In Los Angeles, I'm happy to say, I myself have experienced zero mommy wars. (My daughter goes to a non-white-enclaved public magnet school, where she is the only blonde in her class of twenty-two.) It's not just because of the absence of Kate Spade bags or Ferragamo shoes (neither of which I could identify anyway without checking the label). I've never smarted at catty remarks from other moms, partly because those catty remarks, if made … *would have been in Armenian*. *Which I do not speak*. Or Spanish. Or Tagalog, Japanese, Russian, Arabic. Ours are the old-fashioned kind of Sharks and Jets. We have so much diversity in race, you don't really notice the diversity in shoe designers. I find it quite refreshing not to know what nanothoughts the other mothers are thinking at every nanosecond. For the moment, the highlights are enough—which seem to be, to gauge by my fellow parents' smiles and nods, that we are all quite delighted, as though we've won the lottery. After all, our L.A. public school has buildings, electricity, books, and teachers who actually seem to like what they're doing. Hurray!

I agree that mommy wars are not good for any mothers, that such wars are time and effort wasted. But what are these wars really about? Susan Cheever would have it that the catfighting is actually due to suppressed rage over the age-old inequities between women and men:

> Women do the lion's share—perhaps it should be called the woman's share—of the child care and household work in this country … What worsens our predicament is that women lack core representation in our government … There isn't much support for women who work—support like office child care, flexible hours, and reasonable maternity leaves. There isn't much support for women who stay home—like tax breaks, financial protection in case of divorce, subsidized medical care, or even licensed child care.

For mothers who can afford full-time baby nurses and $20,000-a-year private schools? Who would no sooner partake of universal day care ("Women, unite! Universal day care!") than they would of their corner brown-skinned public elementary, where their nanny's children go? I don't think so. (Wealthy, powerful left-leaning women will never be able to admit that they have much more in common with wealthy, powerful men than they do with their poor, disenfranchised pseudo-sisters.) I do, however, like Cheever's notion that "working and stay-at-home moms today are like the famous psychology experiment in which too many rats are put in a cage with too little food." Although I think the cage is the three square miles around 76th and Broadway, and the problem is too *much* food (if not actually Barney Greengrass eastern Gaspé smoked salmon).

More compelling for me is the take of Molly Jong-Fast, candidly self-described product of New York elite day schools, trips to Europe with the nanny, temporary withdrawal from Effexor, and, last but not least, Erica Jong and Howard Fast. (In a delightful bit of historical trivia, Jong-Fast notes that her mother was actually voted "Mother of the Year" in the early eighties. Fascinated, I had to look up whom else the Father's Day/Mother's Day Council has so honored. You might enjoy knowing that other Mothers of the Year have included Kathie Lee Gifford, Joan Rivers, Sally Jessy Raphael, Ivana Trump, and Anna Wintour—causing me, still the hardcore *Dynasty* fan, to cry out, "What, no Leona Helmsley? It's an outrage!") Jong-Fast writes about trying to be in two places at once, at work and at home: "It's the schizophrenia of modern-day motherhood. It's the

schizophrenia of affluence and more pointedly the schizophrenia of feminism. Why can't we admit that life is about sacrifices?" That seems the right pairing. "Affluenza," a term coined almost thirty years ago already, describes the vague depression brought on by the stress of overwork, a superfluity of material things, low self-esteem, and the grinding pressure of always having to keep up with the Joneses. Or in this case, the Janeses—thus giving rise to affluenza's modern-day post-feminist version: "afflufemza."

Sara Nelson of *Publishers Weekly* describes her mommy wars so:

> About half of the mothers of kids in Charley's class are working at least part-time. There's Maria, who designs handbags; Lauren, who works in advertising; Paulette, who writes children's books. The mother of Charley's friend Nick is an independent management consultant. And for the most part—and I gather this is unusual in the fiercely competitive world of New York private schools—there's little conflict between the employed mothers and the ones who stay home…
>
> Still, there is some tension bubbling under the surface. One morning one of the stay-at-home mothers referred to herself, quite pointedly, as a "full-time mom." Those three words made my blood boil. I've been a mother every second of every day for the past ten and a half years, whether I'm researching an article or pushing a swing. Would anyone dare to suggest that a woman who worked in a factory, or as a cop or a firefighter—a woman who worked at least partly so that her children could have food and shoes and the occasional trip to Toys "R" Us—was any less a mother than my school acquaintance, who'd had the privilege to opt out of the workforce?

No, but apparently someone *would* dare to suggest that elective employment in the upper reaches of the publishing world is on a par with wage slavery and required-second-salary public-sector work. Which got me thinking how wonderfully refreshing it would be for Nelson to transfer Charley right away into a racially and socioeconomically mixed New York public school, with the children of mothers who actually are the factory workers and cops and firefighters she so admires. Even Steiner's snippy PTA über-mom at the Sulgrave Club would be invigorated by a relocation to one of the many poorer, browner Washington, D.C., schools, where she wouldn't have to rub elbows with those irritating Leslie Morgan Steiners. Then that PTA über-mom could really roll her sleeves up. Think what she could do: rebuild an entire school from the ground up—clearing out the asbestos and bringing in landscaping, violins, top-of-the-line computers. At her dogged persistence, the other parents would simply be amazed, awed, grateful. What a better world such demographic mixing would bring, for all women and children. And what a relief for the "mommy wars" moms to be finally liberated, into the wilds. Certainly all those catty remarks would be easier to restrain when the mommy close at hand is a Jamaican waitress taking the bus to her job, wearing not her forest-green Regina Rubens but the uniform of Howard Johnson.

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