

Raw Content

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Raw Content is a work of literary fiction by author and academic Naomi Booth. It provides a first-person account of one woman's experience of becoming a mother, offering an important take on the psychopolitics of motherhood and mothering today. The text deals with themes of maternal isolation, intergenerational trauma, and the effects on both parents and children of making childcare a private, rather than collective, endeavour.

Historically, the experiences of those who gestate and care for babies have not been central to literature and politics. Mothers have tended to be objects in the narratives of others, rather than subjects in their own right. However, in the wake of the feminist movement of the 1970s, the experiences of mothers and other primary caregivers have become increasingly prominent in theory, memoir and literary fiction. Attending to the experiences of primary caregivers is particularly important at the present moment, when parents are often isolated and held solely responsible for the wellbeing of their children, which places them at considerable risk. Booth's novel explores the experiences of a new mother wrestling with the impact of both social isolation and her own childhood on her mental health. The text offers a vital account of motherhood as an inherently political experience shaped by power relations and the organisation of care in contemporary society.

Grace is a woman in her late thirties, working in legal publishing in York, England, when she discovers that she is pregnant. She has limited experience with children and has given the prospect of becoming a mother little thought. Soon after the birth, Grace begins to develop fears for her daughter, Rosa's, safety and to experience intrusive thoughts that she will harm her: "I saw Rosa falling through the stairwell. I heard Rosa hitting the floor. That awful thud. I know then – deep in my gut, in the ringing through my skull – that my baby is not safe with me" (74). *Raw Content* interweaves an account of Grace's mental distress with information about her own early experiences of care, specifically the challenges her mother faced in caring for her children when they were infants. "She could barely hold you and your sister, even when you were tiny," Grace's father tells her (94). Across the novel, Grace interprets a connection between her fears that she cannot protect her daughter (i.e. that she cannot be a good mother) and her own experience of feeling "motherless" (143). She yearns for certain forms of experience: "I want the midwife to take me and Rosa home with her, to cook us a meal, to tuck us up in bed together, to show me how it might be possible to keep my baby safe. Mother me. Please. Mother me into mothering" (118).

Whilst *Raw Content* establishes the relationship between Grace's feelings in the present and her infant past, it also suggests that the isolation of caregiving in the private household and the concentration of responsibility for care in one or two people play a significant role in precipitating her distress. After giving birth, Grace is quickly told by the midwife that she can go home: "I want to say to her: But I've only just arrived!" (59). Once at home, neighbours keep their distance, and family members pay fleeting visits, indexing the isolation characteristic of contemporary parenting. Grace longs "for the nocturnal company of the hospital, for the cast of midwives. To be close to those who are birthing and bleeding, who are rejoicing and grieving, to hear the cries of other women, at the dark peaks of their own labours. Motherless, I catch my breath. Deep sudden sharp pain of it" (102).

The isolation that Grace experiences in the present intensifies her awareness of a much older and formative experience of something missing. Joan Raphael-Leff suggests that the isolation of contemporary caregiving intensifies the potential for caregivers to experience mental distress. “The trend towards ever-contracting family and social stratification,” she writes, “reduces opportunities to work actively through archaic feelings in the presence of other infants (siblings, cousins, friends’ children) before the birth of one’s own”. Isolated in the private home and with little previous experience with infants, new parents are at risk of being overpowered by the return of previously unprocessed aspects of their own infantile experiences. Prompted to seek medical support, Grace self-refers for Dialectical Behavioural Therapy. Her therapist articulates the shaping role of social context and early experience: “Francesca asks me to think about my personality, and the ways in which I have learned to cope with my fears. My disorder may have been triggered by Rosa’s arrival, Francesca says, but it will have deep roots” (197).

By the end of the novel, Grace is in recovery, facilitated by a network of support including her partner, sister and therapist. Reflecting on her experiences, she works through the implications of becoming a parent in a powerful act of autotheorisation. “Having a baby,” she insists, “forces you to move backwards through your own injuries; it dissolves your superficial healing. Loving an infant is morbid regression” (224). Becoming a parent reactivates early experiences, potentially providing opportunities for working through. However, in the current, largely dyadic and privatised, arrangement of care, “all that force in too small a channel has to move downwards. Loving an infant is vortex dynamics” (224). It is easy to get sucked under by a return for which one is unprepared. Real liberation comes from recognising the way in which the psychic is patterned and structured by the social: “*This isn’t my problem!* The problem is endemic to the organisation of parenthood. To the privatisation of the task of parenting and to the nuclear family [...] nothing important should be totally dependent on one person. You should never only be one person deep” (224-5). The distress experienced by primary caregivers is closely related to the ways that society positions them as solely responsible for care. “Loving an infant is a political tragedy” (225), Grace asserts, because concentrating care in the isolated and individualised ways characteristic of capitalist political economy poses a danger to caregivers and care receivers alike.

Raw Content is a timely contribution to the burgeoning literature that seeks to write the experiences of those who gestate and care for babies into the cultural world. The text provides an intimate account of matrescence, the subjective transformation that a birthing parent experiences on having a child, an aspect of life that has, historically, been occluded. This is an important political task. However, *Raw Content* goes further, articulating a profound link between maternal wellbeing and the ways that care is organised in late capitalism. For this reason, the novel makes a significant contribution to critiquing the status quo, opening a space to imagine a different future. Beyond the level of narrative, *Raw Content* makes an important contribution to socio-symbolic change. In line with Podnieks and O’Reilly’s analysis, the text “challenge[s] traditional conceptions of mothering and maternal roles, and [...] offer[s] alternative practices and visions for mothers in the present and future”. *Raw Content* insists on the deep imbrication of the psychic and the social, the inherently political character of personal experience. The text recognises the realities and ambivalences of mothering, but it also creates a space where the factors that shape these realities can be theorised. In this way, the text works to both “reflect and help to define or (re)shape the realities of women and families” today and in the future.

Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives', in *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, ed. by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 1–30

Raphael-Leff, Joan, 'Where the Wild Things Are', in *Parent-Infant Psychodynamics: Wild Things, Mirrors and Ghosts*, ed. by Joan Raphael-Leff (Routledge, 2018), pp. 54–69

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