

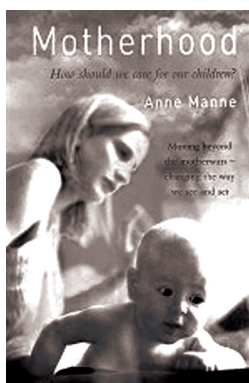
*Motherhood: How should we care for our children?*

By Anne Manne

Allen and Unwin

\$29.95, 392pp, 2005

ISBN 1-74114-379-9



In today's high-pressure, high-cost environment, bringing a child into the world is no small feat. Rearing a child can be a trying and emotional endeavour in a milieu where men and women often strive for the right to be dominant in their relationships and in society in general.

The responsibility is particularly acute for women. Aside from the physical rigours of having a child there are myriad societal, financial and gender issues that obstruct the childrearing path.

Anne Manne, in her book *Motherhood: How should we care for our children?* casts a controversial look at the issues. A feminist for many years, Manne has finally been confronted—after the birth of her own child—with the growing incompatibility between traditional feminism and child rearing in today's society.

Covering the debates surrounding early institutional child care, the problems of reconciling work and family life, the crisis of fertility and the impact of new capitalism on parenthood, Manne concludes that an overwhelming number of parents would prefer that children have their mother care for them at home while they are very young.

The key message in this book is that nothing can replace the relationship between a mother and a child, not even a paternal relationship. Manne argues that women and society need to acknowledge the bond between mother and child as being one that should be encouraged and facilitated.

Instead, she says, society has become accustomed to lumping women with obligations, instead of choice. Government and society have forced women to look at having a child as a trade-off: either return to work early and sacrifice the mother-child relationship, or stay at home and relinquish career and self-development prospects.

Examining the alternatives being offered to women to that of being a stay-at-home mum, Manne struggles to contain her disdain for the child care system in Australia. She argues that child care has become such a potent symbol of the emancipation of women and the feminist tradition that academics have shied away from criticising the weaknesses of such a system. As a consequence, women are forced either to embrace inadequate and costly child care to help them to remain 'accepted' in society, or choose to be ostracised so that they can nurture their child through its infancy. She points out that it is the traditional feminist ideal of women forsaking their children for their career that has established this degrading state of motherhood.

Manne oscillates between being factual and pragmatic to emotional and confronting in this book, and as a result presents a strong—at times overwhelming—argument that mothers should be the first (and ideally the only) people to take care of their children in their formative years. Her experience of motherhood provides the backbone for her views on the subject, and much of her opinion is supported by fact.

However the book is, at times, weak. Even though it appears well researched, the belligerence of her argument gives way to the selective nature of her research and

her subsequent failure to embrace adequately both sides of the child care debate.

Another significant absence in the book is a comprehensive discussion of the role of men in motherhood, so to speak. While she is quick to criticise feminist ideology and the shortcomings of the state, there is little or no discussion of the role of men in parenthood and how this affects the choices that a woman makes in relation to her children.

The book establishes itself as an excellent work outside of the norm. It challenges the roots of feminism, is relentless in its criticism of the child care system, and most importantly, admonishes the state for having too much control over how people live their lives: in this case it is the lives of mothers and their children that are being compromised at the hands of government policy.

Ultimately, Manne concludes that while feminism has merit in itself, it needs to be adapted to be more embracing of the notion of motherhood and be more aware of the needs of children. Equally, the state must pursue 'active neutrality' in its family policies, so that women feel supported regardless of how they choose to bring up their children, rather than support being a privilege to those who make the 'right' choices.

Reviewed by Arti Sharma