

**GOOD ENOUGH  
MOTHERING? FEMINIST  
PERSPECTIVES ON LONE  
MOTHERHOOD**

Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva, ed. London: Routledge, 1996.

**BY HEATHER KELLY**

The central theme of this collection of essays is not so much a consideration of whether households headed by lone mothers provide "good enough mothering," as it is a series of critical analyses of social and state policies as they are promulgated in regard to lone mothers, specifically in Britain, with some comparison with policies of other European countries and, occasionally, of the United States. Many of the essays focus on the *Child Support Act*, British legislation adopted in 1991 and ostensibly designed to ensure that the children of lone mothers are sufficiently supported. Critics see the Act as a purely economic policy, effectively working to transfer the maintenance costs of lone mothers and their children from the state to the absent fathers, with the women themselves no better off, and often living in worse conditions than when they relied solely on government benefits. The Act is examined in terms of parental responsibility, and the results of forcing that responsibility on (often unwilling) fathers. There is also considerable discussion of the deliberate marginalization of lone mothers who live within a "culture of dependency," and of the "underclass" they are supposedly creating. This particular discussion portrays how the powers-that-be attempt to link lone motherhood with criminal behaviour, especially that of male children of lone mothers.

In "Deconstructing Motherhood," Carol Smart advances a revisionist history of motherhood. She points out that motherhood has always been incorrectly viewed as a natural condition for women. She breaks down the pattern of "sexual activity, pregnancy, birth, mothering, motherhood" into

its component parts and demonstrates how one need not lead necessarily to the next, as was long assumed. Smart notes that, after the Second World War, with increased numbers of women in the workplace and improved access to options like birth control and abortion, motherhood became one among a number of options. Women were, in fact, often choosing to be lone parents. The current dilemma is that recent political trends toward so-called "Family Values" and the re-establishment of the nuclear family as the ideal, alongside the increasing marginalization of lone mothers as a source of social ills, render improvements made in the past four decades only temporary. While Smart is writing about the state of affairs in Britain, she could as easily be describing the situation in Canada, where state support of the unemployed, large numbers of whom are lone mothers, is one of the first targets of deficit reduction.

The next three essays are statistical analyses of the feminization of poverty and the marginalization of lone mothers in a global economy. Carolyn Baylies describes how single-parent homes are included in a United Nations report under the heading "Weakening Social Fabric," and lone mothers viewed as "scroungers [off the state]" who are creating a "warrior class" of young sexual predators, due of course to the fact that they lack paternal influence. This perspective claims that over-generous state support intensifies the problem and that the only antidote is to cut benefits even further. Such a position places us squarely back in a nineteenth-century matrix of workhouses and the ostracism of lone mothers. Baylies points to the need to look at the variety in the occurrence of lone motherhood, in the context of "differing circumstances of state and economy and mediated by differing political and religious ideologies." One governmental policy applied to all and sundry is not appropriate.

In line with lone mothers' identification as the source of much that is wrong with contemporary society,

the essays by Mary McIntosh and Sasha Roseneil and Kirk Mann describe the "moral panic" that began sweeping Britain in the early 1990s. This panic was directly linked to the public's perception that lone motherhood was at the root of the problem of moral decay, an idea widely disseminated by the media. McIntosh is fascinated by the assumptions about married motherhood that are revealed by "the attempt to demonize lone mothers." A closer examination of two-parent families, she feels, would not support their collective idealization. She is highly critical of underclass theorist Charles Murray, as are Roseneil and Mann.

An interesting and informative book, *Good Enough Mothering?* is, however, problematic. In light of the fact that the authors concentrate on Britain, there is little to be gleaned here about the situation as it pertains to Canada. For the marginalized lone mother in this country, there is small comfort in the knowledge that their counterparts in other countries are dealing with similar discrimination. The other problem is that this book is written by and for sociologists. The essays provide critical analyses based on sociological theory, couched in theoretical language. The nature of government policies and a general disregard of the actual needs of lone mothers would seem to call for a grassroots voice to be heard. However, this book would likely be, to all intents and purposes, inaccessible to those very women it needs to reach. Perhaps a less academic approach would have been more successful.

**LESBIAN MOTHERHOOD:  
AN EXPLORATION OF  
CANADIAN LESBIAN  
FAMILIES**

Fiona Nelson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996.

**BY KATE CAMPBELL**

The strength of Fiona Nelson's contribution to the growing literature on