

# BOOK REVIEW: Recreating Motherhood

By Marsha Riben

Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society by Barbara Katz Rothman, New York: W. W. Norton, 1989, \$18.95.

Recreating Motherhood might just cause you to recreate or reconceptualize your thinking. It did me. It also taught me an interesting new lesson: never judge a book by an excerpt.

When I first skimmed through, reading of course the parts about adoption, I thought, "Ah ha." The very title of the chapter, "The Give and Take of Adoption: Solving Problems with Problems," (for which CUB is generously thanked for its contribution) told me that Rothman had not bought into the myths of adoption. And I was right:

" . . . for every pair of welcoming arms, there is a pair of empty arms . . . recognizing the reality of the relationship that is ending takes nothing away from the reality of the relationship that is about to start. This is not a sum-zero game . . . The reality is that birth mothers do not always give up their children with a deep sense of the rightness of what they are doing, but because they are pressured into it . . . (because of) the powerlessness of their youth . . . the stigma of their inappropriate fertility, and most often they suffer the powerlessness of poverty as well."

As I continued skimming, the next thing I saw was that Rothman is anti-surrogacy for all of the right reasons, and I said again, "Ah ha." And I was pleased.

Rothman is a sociologist and a feminist with a background in childbirth. You may remember her as the author of The Tentative Pregnancy. The supply and demand imbalance (of babies) and modern medical technology, she states, is being charged with causing us to rethink our definition of what constitutes being a mother. Actually, it's the brokers who prey on the infertile, not the medical technology which is the culprit. However, the question is: Is a mother she who supplies the egg, she who gestates the embryo, she who maintains legal responsibility for the child, or she who raises the child?

At this point I decided to stop skimming and do a thorough reading of the book. It was then that I became confused. I found myself alternately agreeing (with her empathy towards birthmothers) and disagreeing (with her downplay of genetics). At first I thought perhaps it was I who was confused, wanting to have things both ways. It was not until I read it through a second time that I realized that the confusion was not mine, but was Rothman's inner, perhaps very personal, conflict between the woman/mother in her and her misguided vision of what it takes to be a "liberated" woman. She seems to believe that in order to achieve equality of pay scale and other rights, women need to be the same as men in every way. She therefor sets out to prove the thesis that pregnancy creates a social, not merely a genetic, relationship and that it is the social relationship which determines motherhood and thus can be interchangeable with fatherhood.

"It is with mothers, of course, that fetuses have the most direct relationship . . . the movement of the fetus within is also felt by people in physically intimate contact with the mother . . . The closer - literally, physically closer - other people are to the mother, the closer they are physically and socially to the fetus . . . It is also an interaction."

I tried to unravel this modern-day chicken-and-egg riddle. If someone else's egg were implanted into your uterus after having been fertilized in a petri dish, how would you feel toward this life that your body carried and nurtured for nine months but which was not genetically yours? Would your body trigger into action all of the same hormones which would then trigger all of the same emotions we feel when we are carrying a child who is "our own?" Could you "will" yourself not to love this child? Would your breasts not fill with milk in anticipation? Would your heart not fill with love?

But, before we conclude that the gestational mother is the "real" mother, let's examine another scenario. What if, unbeknownst to you, while in for some gynecological procedure your eggs were flushed. This may in fact be happening with or without consent in many clinics throughout the country. Or, suppose you were at the end of your child-bearing years, having a tubal ligation, or a hysterectomy, and a doctor asked your consent to remove some of your eggs, which were useless to you but could "help" a childless woman to have a child. If you knew or later discovered that there was a child produced from your genetic material but not carried in your womb, would you be curious to see that child, to see who he or she resembled?

