



Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother

By Shari Thurer

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This groundbreaking and irreverent history of motherhood is worth a hundred advice books for any mother who's ever been made to feel guilty or frazzled by society's impossible expectations. Analyzing data from the psychoanalyst's couch to the hidden history of wet nursing, psychologist Shari L. Thurer wends her way from the Stone Age to the age of Hillary Rodham Clinton, painting a vivid, often frightening picture of life for mothers and children in a time when their roles were constructed by men. Along the way, she debunks myth after myth—exposing the not-so-golden ages of Classical Greece and the Italian Renaissance, and revealing the pervasive ideal of Dr. Spock's selfless, stay-at-home mother as the historical aberration it actually was. A work of impassioned scholarship and astonishing range, **The Myths of Motherhood** does nothing less than recast our conception of good mothering.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In an enlightening, disarming survey of motherhood across the centuries, Thurer draws on feminist theory, psychoanalysis and cultural history to show that each society has its own norms, beliefs and expectations for mothering. She finds that pervasive misogyny and female infanticide subverted ancient Greek motherhood, while in the Middle Ages, fierce maternal love--personified by the archetype of the Madonna selflessly devoted to her Son--coexisted with child abandonment and widespread inhumane treatment of children. The "good mother"--properly married, subservient, modest, forgoing her own needs and desires to rear her children--was invented during the Protestant Reformation, asserts Thurer, a Boston clinical psychologist. Encouraging a diversity of mothering styles, she suggests that mothers today can be personally ambitious without endangering their children and advocates a family model based on "shared sacrifice," with new forms of public and private support to ease the burden of mothering.

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From Kirkus Reviews

Psychologist Thurer offers a historical smorgasbord of societal attitudes toward mothering, from the paleolithic period to the present. She views the Stone Age as a golden period for women: The prevalent divinities were powerful, complex mother goddesses, revered for their seemingly magical ability to bear children. By 600 bc, the patriarchy's ascendancy signaled the beginning of a long downward spiral for the status of mothers and, by extension, of children. In classical Athens, misogyny was particularly virulent; women were marginalized, and infanticide appeared to be the preferred form of family planning. Medieval and Renaissance Europeans venerated images of the Virgin Mary and her divine child, but in real life, deaths of infants (particularly girls) due to neglect and abandonment reached epidemic proportions. Throughout much of later European history, women who fit the mold of the submissive, fertile wife were idealized, albeit patronized, while unwed mothers were vilified and sometimes put to death. By the early 20th century, as medical advances made survival of birth more likely for both mother and child, "scientific motherhood" arrived. A stream of manuals offered advice on raising physically and emotionally healthy children, paving the way for psychological theories that blamed women for all their offspring's emotional ills. Recently, though, says Thurer, the image of mothers has been revitalized by feminist authors who portray them as loving but with a realistic range of emotions. Mom is finally becoming a person. Many of Thurer's conclusions, particularly those concerning early history, seem open to question, based as they are on scanty evidence. And there are some distracting factual lapses. (The Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary means that from the time she was conceived she was without original sin--not that she was conceived asexually.) Nonetheless, Thurer effectively demonstrates how transient any one view of mothering really is. -- Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Review

"A refreshing, eye-opening look at the history of motherhood."

—**San Francisco Chronicle**

"A comprehensive treatment of motherhood has been long overdue, and this fits the bill, in spades."

—Susan Brownmiller, author of **Against Our Will** and **Femininity**

'A positive, sensible, and readable history directed to women in the throes of the experience . . . designed to reinforce Ms. Thurer's assertion that the modern mother cannot possibly do worse than her predecessors.'

—**The New York Times Book Review**

“A history from the point of view of mothers and children is a rarity. And this one is rich, far-reaching, and fierce, as well as clever and accessible. From the Ancient Goddess to the Holy Virgin to the Devouring Mother to the Doctor Spock mother and now the Activist Mother, we discover, despite the myths, that she was the childbearer and rearer and was usually good enough not to have suffered the slings and arrows of misogyny.”

—E. M. Broner, author of **A Weave of Women** and **The Telling**

“Psychologist Shari L. Thurer unmasks the mythmakers . . . but [her] own advice is the most sound. The only good mother is a woman content with herself. So let’s throw out our unattainable ideals about mothering and worry first about the status of women!”

—Ellen Chesler, author of **Women of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America**

“**The Myths of Motherhood** is an across-the-board, much-needed tribute to the well-being of the at-home mother that looks honestly at her frustrations, concerns and joys.”

—**San Francisco Chronicle**

“A fascinating history of 30,000 years of mothering.”

—**New Woman**

“Anyone interested in societal attitudes toward Mom, Dad and the kids, from the Stone Age on, will be fascinated.”

—**The Seattle Times**

“Thurer effectively demonstrates how transient any one view of mothering is.”

—**Kirkus Reviews**

“An enjoyable and highly informative account of the mostly lamentable fate of the institution of American motherhood . . . intriguing and consciousness raising.”

—Sophie Freud, MSW, Ph.D. author of **My Three Mothers & Other Passions**

“Shari Thurer gives us a deeply satisfying book. While the information in it excites the brain, the insights soothe at the heart. I am giving copies of this book to my children, my parents, my students, my friends, and, in ultimate affirmation, myself.”

—Faye J. Crosby, author of **Juggling: The Unexpected Advantages of Balancing Career and Home for Women and Their Families**

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Robert Young:

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