MEDIATED MATERNITY

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PORTRAYALS OF BAD MOTHERS IN LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

LINDA SEIDEL

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Linda Seidel

LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

Published by Lexington Books
A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

10 Thornbury Road, Plymouth PL6 7PP, United Kingdom

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Seidel, Linda.
Mediated maternity : contemporary American portrayals of bad mothers in literature and popular culture / Linda Seidel.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-7391-7117-2 (cloth : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-7391-7118-9 (electronic)
1. American literature—21st century—History and criticism. 2. Mothers in literature. 3. Motherhood in literature. 4. Mothers in motion pictures. 5. Mothers on television. I. Title.
PS231.M68S45 2013
810.9'3520431—dc23
2013010023


™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

For my son

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the friends, family members, colleagues, and students who have had to listen to me talk about bad mothers for the last three or four years. In particular, I am indebted to Monica Barron, Becky Becker, and Janet Davis for encouraging me to take a sabbatical and write something. I must also thank Truman State University for giving me a sabbatical in spring 2010, which allowed me to get a good start on my research. In addition, thanks should go to Monica Barron's feminist criticism students, who read and responded to an early version of the *Gone Baby Gone* chapter, and the faculty and alumni who attended my lecture on Nancy Grace and gave me useful comments: Brenda Higgins's observation that much of the animus against Nancy Grace can be attributed to sexism proved especially fruitful. I also want to thank all of the people who suggested relevant sources—including (but not limited to) Laura Gruber, who gave me a copy of Waldman's *Bad Mother*; my son, who sent me the relevant *Washington Post* articles about Banita Jacks; and Elizabeth McBride, who flagged "The Criminalization of Bad Mothers" in the *New York Times.*

I owe a large debt of gratitude to Joanna B. Marshall, who read my manuscript and offered perceptive advice on how to improve it, and to my Lexington reader and editor who did the same. (Any remaining flaws are mine alone.) Finally, I want to thank my ex-husband Robert for being a better mother than I ever was and my son Rob for turning out so well.

Introduction

Mediated Motherhood

When I went to see *Any Day Now* (2012), a film about the efforts of a female impersonator named Rudy (Alan Cumming) and his partner Paul (Garret Dillahunt) to adopt a neglected boy with Down's syndrome, I was not doing research for this book. I had already sent a draft of my manuscript off to my publisher, and I considered my research to be more or less complete. The occasion was my son's birthday, December 20th, and I had flown to Washington, DC, on a rainy winter day to see him. We both love movies and so I had suggested taking in a show at the E Street Cinema before dinner. *Any Day Now* seemed to offer a story of some interest to an aging feminist and her gay son, even if the plot summary released by the theater suggested a somewhat sentimental treatment.

The film opens in Southern California in 1979, complete with the bad clothes of the era. When Rudy, the feisty drag queen with a heart of gold, befriends Marco (Isaac Leyva), the boy down the hall in the low-rent tenement where they both live, it quickly becomes clear that Marco's drug-addicted mother Marianna (Jamie Anne Allman) is not up to the job of meeting her parental responsibilities. Soon the mother's drug use gets her arrested; Marco is relegated to foster care, from which he escapes; Rudy acquires a partner who just happens, conveniently, to be a lawyer; and the new couple pluck Marco from the street and launch a campaign to keep him permanently. The gay men are good parents who counter the arguments of homophobic child advocates with heroic resolve. They are presented as persecuted, embattled, and determined. Marco and his would-be fathers are all viewed as victims when the still-drug-compromised mother is allowed (one might say *forced*) by the system to regain custody of her son. She neglects

him once again, he wanders off, and a newspaper clipping read aloud by Rudy tells us that Marco's life has ended under a bridge. A corrupt system and a bad mother cause the death of a child and the heartbreak of the men who loved him.

In this litany of woe, no one suggests that the mother could have been rehabilitated, that she, too, is a victim in need of help as much as her son. She is written off. No one wants to take care of *her.* She exists as the demonic foil to the good gay men who can do her job better than she can. If the film reveals homophobia to be irrational, counterproductive, and unfair (everyone loses because the gay men are not allowed to parent Marco), misogyny is the taken-for-granted default position (bad mothers are bad women whose misdeeds produce tragedy, but whose human complexities need not be taken into consideration). Hatred of the bad mother is still politically correct. As my son said to me, no one wanted to know *her* story or figure out what she needed. Although she is portrayed more as an unwitting pawn of a homophobic system than as a deliberate villain, the depiction of her failure to nurture Marco helps the film accomplish its apparent ideological mission: why shouldn't two smart, loving men be allowed to raise the child of an obviously incompetent woman?

Admittedly, the film's blend of sentimentality and sexism is not unique. If I was disappointed to find that the pro-gay sensibilities of *Any Day Now* are not also pro-female, I was not especially surprised. The single autonomous female may now be regarded as the equal of her male counterpart in American culture, but the way in which she is judged changes immediately when she becomes a mother. An adequate fulfillment of her responsibilities in this role may not be perceived as much of an accomplishment, but the *failure* to meet these responsibilities quickly opens her to blame and vilification if anyone notices her lapse. Indeed, *all* mothers are open to suspicion.

While motherhood is endlessly discussed and portrayed in the United States today, cultural representations of bad mothers are often rendered problematic by conventional social expectations of women. Despite the efforts of feminist scholars like Elisabeth Badinter (2011) to deconstruct the notions that women naturally possess maternal instincts or the desire to sacrifice themselves for their families, many people remain sentimentally invested in these ideas. Thus, because the bad mother is not supposed to exist, many mass media representations tend to demonize her as an aberration. At the same time, we are fascinated with her, a stock character whose currency is endlessly renewed. Through her bad example, she tells us what not to be or do. According to drama critic Jennifer Jones (2003, xv), author of *Medea's Daughters*, "Representations of criminal women have reinforced traditional gender roles far more often than they have challenged them." Perhaps that is especially the case when the criminal woman's crime involves being a bad mother. Here lies the crux of the matter for me: I am interested in the impact

of cultural constructions of bad mothers on our expectations of motherhood. To try to get at this impact, I will look at contemporary American representations of bad mothering in the social context in which these portrayals have taken shape in order to learn how bad mothering is believed to be produced. In addition, I think that we can learn something about our cultural ideology with respect to women and families by looking at depictions of bad mothers. I will argue that portrayals of bad mothers not only help to establish what the good mother is by depicting her opposite, but also serve to illustrate what the culture fears about mothers and would, perhaps, root out if it could. These fears include the ancient horror of female power symbolized by Medea as the murderous mother willing to kill her children in order to achieve her own goals (Jones 2003). Because Casey Anthony appeared to exemplify this notorious outlaw behavior, she became, for a little while, a fascinating figure for many people, if reviled by most. Some of our fears about mothers, though, may not go back to ancient stereotypes but have taken shape more recently in response to social and technological innovations. Now some people worry that too many women may choose not to become mothers at all, as birthrates in some developed countries have plummeted (Badinter 2011); that drug-addicted pregnant women may be harming their fetuses (Belluck 2012); or that working mothers are relegating their children's care to poorly qualified nannies and babysitters (Jones 2003, 76–77).

When I began this project, I thought I would argue that in a world where motherhood was compulsory for all women, some of us would inevitably fail to do our jobs. We might know that we were not cut out for the position, but we would feel that our identities as women depended upon the attempt. This had been my experience coming of age and getting married (another requirement that had to be met) in the 1970s. Of course, contraception already existed, but it was supposed to be used to plan one's parenthood, not escape from it. Now, I find that my assumptions were outdated. Although childlessness retains some stigma (Badinter 2011, 12), the force of that stigma appears to be diminishing as more young women remain childless (Belkin 2011a) and more adults in rich countries choose to live alone (Klinenberg 2012). Women (economically privileged ones at least) now have more options. Marriage and motherhood are no longer compulsory.

On the surface, these developments would seem to be all to the good. Yet the results have not all been positive for mothers. Now that we can pretend that motherhood is simply each individual woman's "choice" and that this choice weaves no thread through the larger social fabric, we can also pretend that we owe her nothing, that we need not contribute to her well-being or that of her children except in the most minimal way (Juffer 2006, 213). The new mother, in the United States at least, is on her own, with less social support than ever, but more pressure than ever to do her job well. As culture critic