(S)Mother Love

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Review of "Difficult Mothers: Understanding and Overcoming Their Power." By Terri Apter. W.W. Norton & Co. 240 pp. $25.95

She was "the patron saint of self-sacrifice," Alexander Portnoy complained, and "one of the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time." Ladling out prescriptions, precautions, precepts, and borscht, she was the butt of the family joke in which little Alexander turns from a window that frames a raging snowstorm and asks, "Momma, do we believe in winter?"

The fictional Sophie Portnoy was a stereotypical Jewish mother. Her ethnic heritage notwithstanding, she was also a prototypically "difficult" mother. Most of us have seen someone like her on a page or in person. Teenage girls, psychologist Terri Apter reminds us, often bond over conversations about "impossible" mothers. For teenage boys, who rarely discuss their mothers, the subject "contains embarrassment at the emotional height of the word." And many adults never get over having had to put up with (or be put down by) them.

In Difficult Mothers, Apter (a Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge University) risks the wrath of anyone who romanticizes "mother love" as instinctual and universal by describing, candidly and cogently, the framework in which children experience their most significant "attachment." Whether she is angry, controlling, narcissistic, envious, or neglectful, a difficult mother, Apter suggests, is best understood as someone who insists that her son or daughter "either develop complex and constricting coping mechanisms to maintain a relationship with her on her own terms, or suffer ridicule, disapproval, or rejection." Expressing disgust or hostility while insisting they are lavishing love, difficult mothers, she adds, leave their kids trapped between fear and safety, implying "there is no difference between the two."

Although she has found no precise estimates of how many youngsters share the distinctive displeasures of difficult mothers, Apter guesses (based on her interviews with 176 people), that perhaps 20 percent of the population was raised in an environment dominated by them.

Difficult Mothers is aimed at adult children or those on the cusp of adulthood. "At all times in our lives," Apter writes, passionately and poignantly, "we want to make sense of the way people who matter to us treat us, to set their actions in a shared context, to read their moods, to understand how what they say and do is a response to what we do and say."

Aware of the danger of appearing to legitimize any and all criticisms by sons and daughters, Apter helps them distinguish between difficult mothers and "good enough" mothers. While the former "stand guard" over the stories they tell themselves and their children, she writes, the latter are more aware of their own anger, impatience and ambivalence, can change perspective, and find other outlets for their needs. Apter also encourages adult children to conduct "personal audits" to measure the ongoing impact of relationships with their mothers, the defenses they have (or haven't) built up, and the risks of reproducing the bad experiences they have had with the next generation.

Although she acknowledges that "the route is seldom easy," Apter believes, a bit naively in our judgment, in the power of conscious self-reflection to overcome emotion, allow the victim of a difficult mother to recover from "that sick-making sensation of seeing ourselves in the wrong for being unable to meet paradoxical demands" and move on. "The way forward," she indicates, without saying nearly enough about how to get there, "may be to accept that in her presence -- either her physical presence or the internal model you retain -- the dilemma will always be imposed, but you can decline to address its terms." Then and only then can energy be re-directed to "obtaining pleasure, satisfaction, and engagement from other sources."

Apter's willingness to take on a difficult subject -- difficult mothers -- is commendable. Her decision to restrict her attention to their adult children is, we believe, a lost opportunity. As Apter knows, mothers have their greatest impact, for good and ill, on infants and pre-teens. She cannot address them directly in this book, of course, but she might have provided an audit to help fathers, grandparents, and close friends identify difficult mothers and work through a tricky and treacherous challenge: evaluating options for intervention and amelioration.

Apter might have reached out as well to difficult mothers. After all, she acknowledges that "difficult is not a constant characteristic," difficult mothers often do "feel love and genuinely see themselves as acting in the name of love," and can become more aware of words and deeds that hinder and hurt their children. Unfortunately, she does not discuss an audit, sustained and substantive spousal conversations about parenting, participation in discussion groups for moms, and/or sessions with a skilled therapist that could lead to changes at the very time they matter the most.

We have reason to know that difficult mothers can be tough nuts to crack. But we're convinced that where there's life -- and love -- there's hope.

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