

Laura Seymour

Labor Pains And Birth Stories edited by Jessica Powers (Catalyst Books, 2010) and *Msllexia* Issue 52: Jan/Feb 2012

The most recent issue of the key women's writing journal *Msllexia* devoted its collection of new writing to the theme of maternity (pp. 27-41). Such an anthology is created in each issue of the journal: as with other literary magazines (for instance the journal *Fuselit*) women submit poems and short stories relating to a stipulated theme. This review examines the anthologizing turn with respect to maternity in both *Msllexia* and an interesting small press in America, Catalyst Books, which has a line focusing specifically on anthologies of maternity, generating submissions both through the press itself and through the related e-zine 'The Fertile Source'.ⁱ

Jessica Powers, Catalyst Books' editor, resists the commercialising aspect of the anthology; though anthologising work around a theme can often merely constitute a marketing strategy, Powers notes that her work is a 'labor of love' rather than a profit-making enterprise.ⁱⁱ Resisted, too is the threat often posed by the anthology that what we will experience is a granular, disconnected narrative, a collection of skits betraying a writer's overall lack of commitment to the theme. Powers' anthologies, of which we will concentrate on her most recent, *Labor Pains and Birth Stories* (2010) comprise a set of redemptive testimonials whose very shortness create an intensely-variegated mood.

A similarity between the books in Catalyst Press's maternity collection and *Msllexia's* special collection of maternity poetry and fictional prose is their prism-like quality. Often very disparate testimonies are juxtaposed, reflecting the shock of the new encounter integral to maternity. Furthermore, authorial voices in lonely or intensely private moments are thereby belatedly bonded with each other, opening out the pains of private experiences into a therapeutic public sphere. The narratives in *Msllexia* for instance range from that of a prostitute guiltily stealing her daughter's savings to fuel alcoholism, to a happy mother witnessing the potentially fatal accident of a strange child. *Labor Pains and Birth Stories*, too, ranges in its scope through tales of IVF, surrogacy, adoption, stillbirth, post partum depression, and the infinite variety of birth itself. Each collection preserves different maternal

Laura Seymour Book Review: *Labor Pains and Birth Stories* and *Msllexia* Issue 52

subjectivities within the anthologising rhetoric of the same: though all the texts have maternity as their ‘theme’, the very principle of selection (maternity as theme, maternity as experience) is challenged by the fertile multiplicity of viewpoints. Both collections also preserve a sense of what is left out, of the fact that no narrative is definitive: rather than presenting for instance one ‘abortion’ tale, one ‘home birth’, and so on as paradigmatic representations of compartmentalised versions of maternity, each narrative voice is celebrated as an irreducibly individual one.

Symptomatic of *Msllexia*’s mission as a magazine where women share experiences, tips and encouragement about writing *as* women, in *Msllexia*’s collection, maternity’s age-old capacity of stopping women from having the time to write is inevitably engaged with. It is challenged, confirmed, ignored, or implicitly sifts into the narratives’ unconscious thoughts. In her biography, Nova Weetman notes ‘She finds motherhood has paradoxically helped her writing as she no longer wastes time procrastinating’ (p. 34). Elsewhere, Amanda Craig states ‘Being published is a bit like child-birth: you’re never the same afterwards, and you discover you have a lot in common with those who’ve also been through it’ (p.13). This trope of maternity as potentially antagonistic to writing, or alternatively as itself a form of maieutic birth underpins much of *Msllexia*’s new writing. The collection’s editor Kate Figes emphasizes the unifying force of maternity, presenting the maternal as a single point of affective identity between multiple subjects (an ‘emotional vortex’, p.28), concluding ‘There is far more that unites us as mothers than divides us as women’ (p.28).

Msllexia’s collection opens with a jolt in Sue Dawes’ dematernalising (‘Mind the Gap’, p. 29): ‘When my children fly the nest, I will pull the construction apart, twig by twig, so they cannot return’ (an opening Figes also mentions as spectacular). Dawes’ narrator documents her bellicose surmounting of post-partum writers’ block by explaining that she uses her writing to erase children, noting that, now her sons have moved out ‘I am sure my writing will improve when I have more time to think. I realize that not everyone thinks infanticide is an appropriate subject for short stories’. Her delight at her sons’ departure is unapologetic; though readers half hope for a final sentimental twist where we are told she misses her sons after all, we are met simply with the cynical twist of sentimental cliché: ‘Children are a gift and it is time for someone else to unwrap mine’. *Msllexia*’s collection also includes more comfortable maternal narratives, notably Liz Lefroy’s ‘The School Concert’, a poem which turns her child’s school hall into a giant womb evoking the unabashedly all-encompassing loving mother (‘my life burst out of me | flooded the hall red with all the years’) totally (and

punningly) ‘in tune’ with her son in a poem panting with hyperbeats: ‘my love for you| crescendoed into beats so loud they surely| drowned out your perfect notes’ (p.31). Later in the collection, Robin Tyler’s immensely likeable classics professor finds condoms in her son’s drawer, covering them with socks, in an hilarious simile ‘like shoveling dirt over a fresh grave’ (p. 40). Particularly eye-catching in the *Msllexia* collection is Cary’s Bray’s quietly absurd ‘Just in Case’ (pp. 37-8), depicting a mother bereaved of her newborn daughter. Bray’s prose is extremely deft; here, she evokes the suddenness of her daughter’s death, which occurs in the tiny blank space after the word ‘asleep’:

She told you stuff about being a good mother. I wanted to be a good mother.
Would you notice if your baby was unconscious, or would you assume that she
was asleep? When I noticed, a doctor came, then another. (p.36)

We are left with the sense that the daughter’s death was always-already too late: there is no time even to writing it down, and when it does come to writing it down, the death has already happened. ‘Just in Case’ is a breathtaking exploration of the mother’s incredibly methodical thought processes as she finishes with the screams of a live baby in a carefully-chosen suitcase.

Powers contends that when books with their sole theme as maternity are presented to publishers they are perceived as an economic ‘risk’, something she seeks to redress:

It's obvious to me that this is a theme that writers return to again and again. The majority of writers are parents, after all, and sexuality (i.e., fertility) is something we all grapple with on some level, even priests and nuns who take a vow of chastity. So it seemed like a universal theme with endless possibilities. And that's proven to be the case.ⁱⁱⁱ

Powers is a master of the private story therapeutically unearthed: in her ‘Afterword’ to *Labor Pains and Birth Stories* (pp. 221-2) she describes herself as very literally bringing a hidden narrative to light from its womblike compartment: ‘I was about six years old when I riffled through my mother’s file cabinet while she was busy somewhere else in the house and, by happy coincidence, found the journal entry she’d written about giving birth...’ (p.221). The re-filing that is done in *Labor Pains and Birth Stories*, the grouping of these unearthed narratives into themes, is often excitingly incongruous. We move for instance from Martin Edwards’ gentle description of hypno-birthing (‘Millenium Baby Countdown’, pp. 145-56) which ends with an admonition to ‘peace out’, to a series of visceral descriptions of breaking waters, panic, and sudden intubation.

Perhaps the most startling piece in *Labor Pains and Birth Stories* is Jennifer Mattern's 'Largesse' (pp. 41-7), where *copia* is both linguistic and fleshly. Mattern explores and performs all connotations of 'largesse': from beneficence, to showing-off, to nobility, to being, very literally, massive. For her, pregnancy entails a permanent move to gianthood: her self-aware voice deplores those skinny mothers with their 'take-it-or leave-it aesthetic of the hasty addition of a purse or a belt or a shawl' (p.42). 'Largesse' has the structure of a gentle joke: Mattern eats, and mischievously transmutes all criticisms of her obesity into a healthy gamut of metaphors, evoking herself as everything that is copious from 'manna from heaven [...] loaves and fishes' to even a 'prize hog' (pp. 42-3) only to give birth to an incongruously absolutely tiny baby. Yet her baby is nevertheless, in the perfect reversal of this reversal of her expectations a 'cornucopia [...] larger than life' (p.47).

Msllexia's collection is arguably overly dominated by the concerns of mothers as hard-pressed writers: the maternal appears almost infallibly in its capacity as an obstacle to intellectual endeavour (Robyn Tyler humorously invokes only to subvert the notion of contraception as the gateway to an intellectual life when she describes the condoms she has found: 'The foil is black and blue-similar, oddly, to the logo of the university where she's a classics professor' (p.40)). On the other hand, in *Labor Pains and Birth Stories*, writing is a more transparent vehicle for the maternal subject, and the harmonious relationship between the two endeavours is rarely contested. This harmony between writing and maternity is a trend in Catalyst Books' maternity series. Corbin Lewars' *Creating a Life: The Memoirs of a Writer and Mom in the Making* (Catalyst, 2010) witnesses the transmission, templating, and collection of the authorial self: writing facilitates both her self-exposure and the recuperation of the self as maternal as Lewars therapeutically writes her way through her experiences of anorexia, miscarriage, and rape as a child, and into a happy readiness for motherhood. Monica Murphy LeMoine's memoir of stillbirth *Knocked Up Knocked Down* (Catalyst, 2010) deploys the postcard format both to evoke the pervasive trope of a 'journey' and also generically to express LeMoine's sense of alienation from the plans she'd made for the baby. In *Labor Pains and Birth Stories* itself, Michelle Richards describes a journey into both motherhood and poet-hood via post-partum depression, in a narrative punctuated by her Plath-esque poetry in 'The Mending Cry' (pp. 32-40); in particular, her interaction with an impossibly idealised other self is reminiscent of poems such as Plath's own description of convalescence 'In Plaster'. Whilst Plath writes of the threat posed to her by her immortal Other, the 'new absolutely white

person and the old yellow one', Richards concludes of her daughter 'Emily Margaret is perfect and I don't have to be' (p.37).

In her introduction to the *Msllexia* collection, Figes, states 'Good writing about the mixed emotions and realities of motherhood is rarely celebrated. All too often it is either belittled as piffling domestic drama or vilified as being anti-mother' as the dearth of books on the maternal subject testifies (p.27). But this collection, and *Labor Pains and Birth Stories* evidence that maternal subjectivity is being celebrated despite these constraints.

ⁱ See <http://fertilesource.com/>, also linked on the MaMSIE Facebook page.

ⁱⁱ Email to Laura Seymour, February 13, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Email to Laura Seymour, February 13, 2012.