

Book Reviews

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Pearlman, S.F. (2012). Mother-Talk: Conversations with Mothers of Lesbian Daughters and FTM Transgender Children. Bradford: Demeter Press.

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Sarah Pearlman's book "Mother-Talk," is an anthology of twenty-four interviews performed in person and by mail with mothers of lesbian and FTM (female-to-male) transgender children from around the world who came out during the 1970-1990's; a time where any opposition to society's masses was greatly discouraged. Pearlman's personal experience of coming out to her mother as a lesbian, and facing certain rage and rejection prompted her to make this acceptance easier for mothers who normally feel alone and at a loss upon learning their child's sexuality. The purpose of the book is to highlight the struggles associated with coming out as gay or trans to one's parents; the common thoughts and reactions among family members, the difficulty in telling others, and the coping mechanisms which accompany the excruciating feelings of loss and change in the family makeup. The interviews are divided into six categories: Devastation, loss, not the only issue, adolescence, keeping the connection and activism; highlighting the major themes throughout the book. The division of these chapters provide a smooth flow throughout the book from one mother's experience to the next, as well as gradually moving through each chapter highlighting specific aspects of each mother's experience.

The style in which Pearlman chose to write her book creates a very personable and endearing read; subjecting the readers to each mother's individual experience and grievances. The initial interview questions were extremely helpful in providing a basic structure to each particular story, and the narrative aspect allows for each mother's individuality and personality to

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shine through their interviews. With the general interview guidelines present throughout the book, it was easy to see the commonalities shared between the mothers coping with lesbianism, and the mothers coping with their FTM children.

While both sets of parents go through grief while attempting to accept their children as being part of the sexual minority, other aspects such as religion and family beliefs can emphasize the devastation phase, making the chance of acceptance an extremely long and difficult period. In one case, Pearlman interviews a Lebanese-American mother of a lesbian daughter who, after attending several support group meetings, concluded she was being “pushed to accept her daughter’s lesbianism, and that other parents could not understand the traditional values and obligations” of her culture and extended family, along with the associated social consequences (p. 69).

Pearlman dedicates several of her final interview questions to activism, which accomplishes two things: (1) the importance of having and engaging with a relatable support group, and (2) sheds light on just how difficult of a time most of the mothers truly have in acceptance. Nearly all of the questioned parents were somehow involved with PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), or had been urged by their child to seek support. All but one of the mothers found this to be an extremely helpful way of coping; hearing other parents thoughts of feeling alone or abandoned, and their own struggles and accomplishments. Pearlman also reveals that by simply hearing the transgender and gay people’s perspectives can aid parents tremendously in the acceptance of their own child.

The core concerns for mothers of lesbian women seem to range from the negative impact of their own religion or belief system, the uncanny realization that they may never have a son-in-law or grandchildren, and a lack of similarities, which creates a lack of involvement in their

child's life. These feelings, or a failure to accept their daughter's lesbianism, can all lead to the loss of an expected or desired heterosexual mother-daughter relationship. One mother speaks out and states that she "wanted a daughter to be close to" (p. 122), one who she could bond with, and that shared her interests. Furthermore, it becomes clear that although there are striking similarities between the struggles faced by the mothers of lesbian daughters and mothers of FTM children, there are certain aspects that differentiate the two experiences.

Pearlman distinguishes between two possible scenarios for parents of transgender children: (1) the child first discloses to their parents as lesbian, and then after becoming more involved with the gay community, realizes they wish to identify as transgender; or (2) they've felt trapped in the wrong body since they were young children, and have always known there to be something wrong concerning their gender. In one heart-breaking interview, a FTM transgender man halfway through his transition confessed to his mother that every year for his birthday, beginning at age five, he would wish to wake up as a boy. In both cases, the biggest milestone to overcome is the loss of a daughter; beginning with the changing of their child's birth name along with the swap of pronouns. With most of the FTM individuals disclosing to their parents in their late teen years, twenties and thirties; the pronouns prove to be imbedded in memories and a somewhat automatic response proving to be extremely difficult to overcome for many of the parents. However, in some cases it was more difficult for the mothers to watch their born-daughters transition to a man; complete with a deeper and raspier voice, hairy legs and a thick neck, or as one mother put it, "somebody that looks like your former daughter's twin brother" in many aspects (p. 205). With the loss of a daughter, comes the gain of an adult son, which causes the mother to lose her anticipated mother-daughter relationship.

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Education seems to be another congruent factor with how quickly a family accepts their child. There are some, notably fathers, who never completely grow to accept their kin, and can be extremely disrespectful to their child's wishes. Meanwhile, others find it "a piece of cake", and have no hesitation when it comes to attending support groups or becoming any type of activist for gay rights (p. 36). As for the mothers in particular, besides perhaps one or two, the majority of women interviewed were well-educated and extremely open-minded. However, despite their accepting beliefs, some strongly felt their limits were being pushed. For others, it was more difficult to try and ignore or avoid the problem solely to salvage their desired relationship with their child.

While Pearlman's most prevalent intended audience appears to be mothers of lesbian and FTM children, there are several other intended areas where this book could be useful including "the fields of lesbian, gay, transgender ... family and gender studies – informing clinical practice and helping other mothers as well as lesbian daughters and FTM trans children to understand their own mothers, their [mother's] changed lives, and their [mother's] determination to remain connected" with them (p. 14). I believe this book is also an extremely informational tool that can be utilized by any student in a post-secondary discipline regarding human sexuality or the sociology of gender.

Pearlman's main purpose of this book was to bring about a "deeper appreciation of the challenge to comprehend and accept a child who will live a life outside of social norms" (p.16), and to highlight the complexity of accepting the loss of a daughter who has either changed sex, or now identifies as a lesbian. Her book also proves to be an extremely informative source to the growing phenomenon in today's society in the area of basic human rights and sexuality. One limitation I found was the majority of the chosen mothers seem to fall into the well-educated

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realm of society, utilitarian and pro-choice families. I wonder about those disclosing to relatively old-fashion families and how their experiences and feelings may differ. Overall, I found “Mother-Talk” an extremely astonishing piece of literature, very emotional, eye-opening, informative and captivating. I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in learning about the personal experiences of those involved in the lesbian and transgender community.