

Book Reviews

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

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Sarah Pearlman's book, "Mother Talk: Conversations with Mothers of Lesbian Daughters and FTM Transgender Children" is an in depth look into the struggles and changes that different mothers had to experience while raising a transgendered or lesbian child. Pearlman's book is an anthology, a set of stories told by different mothers from different parts of the world. This allows for the reader to see different sides and opinions cross-culturally as well as the differing perspectives of many mothers of differing socio-economic, religious, and cultural backgrounds.

This collection of accounts brings to light issues such as acceptance of their daughter's choices, selfishness regarding how the public will perceive these mothers, and depression caused by the perceived guilt of not being a good parent. One of the most interesting things to come from each of these stories is the perception that each mother has systematically "lost" their daughter, and that many of these mothers had to go through a grieving process as if their child was dead. By creating this anthology, Pearlman has illustrated a first person perspective with her book. While reading the stories, it is hard not to get a sense of empathy for these parents. The issues surrounding transgendered and lesbian individuals are mostly told from the perspective of those currently identifying or going through the process of identification, but it is not often told from the perspective of a family member.

As a first time reader, it was quite surprising to see the amount of acceptance that the majority of these mothers displayed, despite their initial shock. Pearlman has stated that these

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stories were collected during the years of 2000-2001, where societal views of transgendered and lesbian individuals were deviant and ostracized. The idea of the nuclear family is strong with a lot of these stories, most notably the mother's ideals about how their daughter should dress or act. One of the biggest shocks that these mothers have expressed in their stories is the fear and disappointment of not having grandchildren. Another fear that arises is that the child will be attacked in public by people who do not accept the fact that the daughter's are not identifying as the sex they were born with.

At first glance, a reader might go into this expecting that much of the accounts would involve angry and resentful parents that would not accept their children anymore, but this is not the case in Pearlman's book. Many of the mothers stated that they were sad and upset but mostly expressed feelings of helplessness and confusion. In the stories, it is mentioned that at the time no one had knowledge regarding transgendered individuals or that there were others in the exact same positions as they were in. This is very interesting because if we contrast this to the present, it is much easier to gain information and meet others in the same position. Today there are far more support groups and societal views have become more accepting. Reading Pearlman's book gives us a firsthand look at the struggles with societal pressures during the early 2000's, opening the reader's eyes to the fear and uncertainty that many of these mothers have expressed.

Almost every one of these stories ends with the mother having a sense of pride and acceptance in their child, expressing that despite feeling as though they have "lost" a daughter, they understand how difficult it must have been for them. The difficulties of growing up and not feeling like they are the gender they are supposed to be, or are interested in the sex that they are supposed to, allows readers to empathize with these mothers as well as their children. Again, this dispels any expectations of these mothers reacting in an inappropriate way.

The reason why this book is so important for today's society is that it outlines the issues that mothers have to deal with, not necessarily with their daughters but with family as well. One story in particular that highlights the effects on the family is told by a mother named Mariam, whose family is traditionally Lebanese and adheres to strict cultural views on how men and women should act. In her story, her daughter Leila (or Lee) comes out as being a lesbian which creates a schism in Mariam's marriage. Lee's father does not view her as his daughter anymore and proceeds to blame Mariam for this outcome because she was apparently too lenient with her as a child. Mariam has to lie to her extended family for fear of shame and ridicule. An outcome of this schism is Mariam's inability to have sex with her husband anymore.

I know it's taking a big toll on my marriage. I don't want to sleep with my husband anymore. I mean have sex with him. Maybe it's my anger. But when he tries, I think of my daughter. I think of women having sex together. I can't help it. One good thing about going to PFLAG was that a couple of times some of the women talked about this. Losing interest in sex. You know, I'm not the only one. Before I heard other mothers talk about it, I thought I was going crazy.... (p. 68)

This was one of the most interesting things to read in Pearlman's book. Not only was it an effect brought about by the news of her daughter becoming a lesbian, but other mother's had experienced the same loss of intimacy within their own relationships. Keeping in mind that every one of these women has a different situation in which different effects can occur. Pearlman's book is by no means a step-by-step guide to what a person will experience in these situations, so mothers who would be interested in this book should not look at this thinking it will have the answers to their questions. Pearlman does however create a way for mothers to compare experiences and learn that they are not alone in their experiences.

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Despite the inclusion of many different elements in this book, Pearlman could have expanded further by including more than just the mother's experiences and feelings alone. For example, this type of book could work even better if she had interviewed the entire family. It would be interesting to read about how the fathers and siblings dealt with their family member's choice to switch sexes, whether male or female. Another way that this book can be used is to help those who have let their marriage be affected by their child's choice of sex and sex partners. For example, the husband of a mother who does not understand could be recommended this book as a way to educate them about how their child or wife might be feeling.

Pearlman prefaces her reasons for creating this book based on her own experience of coming out as a lesbian to her mother a year before her mother died. She writes that her mother did not take this news well, resulting in them not speaking for a long period of time. She never really knew what her mother's thoughts or feelings on the subject were. Listening to other mothers going through the same thing allowed her to gain insight onto how this affects them. Pearlman is a psychologist who specializes in LGBT issues and through her interviews, created this book to help educate the public, dispel stereotypes, and help people who are experiencing similar situations cope with their feelings. This book can be a helpful resource for academic disciplines involving family therapy and studying how families react, much of which is found in Sociology, and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy involving for people suffering from depression, found in the discipline of Psychology.