Book Reviews

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Meisner, Natalie. (2014). Double Pregnant: Two Lesbians Make a Family. Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.

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Natalie Meisner's autobiographical book, "Double Pregnant: Two Lesbians Make a Family" takes societal conceptions about the very definition of a typical family and flips them on their head. The author contrasts themes of nature to draw attention to the alternative conception method used to impregnate both herself and her wife, Vivien. A fascinating paradox may be observed throughout the book wherein the artificial process by which herself and her wife become pregnant is frequently accompanied by anecdotes of landscapes, animals, and other forces of nature. This contrast of the seemingly unnatural to the natural world around us promotes critical thinking surrounding the practice of conception.

Furthermore, Meisner uses the central theme of "normalcy" to question the nature of what is considered "normal" within Canadian culture, and in turn challenges the very notion of what it means to be a family contemporarily. Although no overt sociological perspectives appear overtly within the book, feminist undertones may be observed in some instances, particularly regarding gender and gender roles, which are easily dismantled when observing same-sex couples and families. The unique struggles experienced by lesbians attempting to create a family are apparent within the book, however, Meisner still manages to bridge the gap between heterosexual and queer families with humor and authenticity, and it is evident that twenty-first century ideals about what makes a family are becoming more inclusive.

The theme of nature appears consistently throughout the book, forcing the reader to critically analyze their preconceptions about what is “natural.” The author consistently uses animal metaphors to describe her state of mind as well as her feelings, sometimes referring to herself as a “disgruntled cat” (p. 103) or even likening her reaction to bury herself in work in the face of bad news to that of a puffer fish (p. 126). Certainly, the process of creating a family and the desire to bear children is a natural social phenomena observed cross-culturally – the pressure and expectation of women to naturally desire children was one which, initially, Meisner rejected in favour of pursuing an academic career and social life. The pressure for women to create a family is rampant within Canadian culture, and so the author’s initial rejection of this expectation could be interpreted as one of the first “nature” contrasts within the book: a woman going against her nature to pursue other passions and interests.

Once the author and her wife decide that they want to create a family, another contrast to what is “natural” appears. As opposed to a heterosexual couple, the two women don’t have access to sperm, which, as it turns out, is essential to the offspring creation process. “Speed dating for sperm donors” (p. 10) then ensues, ultimately landing them in picturesque Banff in one of their first attempts to create their family. The setting of this encounter solidifies the theme of nature in an entirely new way. Not only is the theme solely referring to the process by which the author and her wife will become pregnant, but now the contrast is heightened by placing the women in a setting which epitomizes “nature” for many Canadians. The complex relationship between creating a family (something women are meant to naturally desire) in a way which completely differs from standard male-female procreation, within a setting that is the quintessential nature getaway, can be seen as one within which the boundaries between what is natural and unnatural become blurred.

The nuclear family is the archetypal family form which most would consider the standard for “normal” within Canadian society. When most people hear the word “family,” that is what they envision; a mother, a father, and a couple of children, typically white. Meisner’s family dynamic challenges this very notion. An interracial lesbian couple (plus a “biomad”) does not fit into the societal norm of people looking to create families, and yet time and time again throughout the book, Meisner and her wife prove to be just that – normal. Her focus throughout the autobiographical account of her pregnancy focuses on the shared experiences of herself and her wife with those individuals which would fit within the norms previously referred to. Despite being vastly different in many ways from what is common or acceptable, the experiences Meisner and her wife went through mirror that of nearly every woman who has gone through the conception, gestation and child birth process. One of the few unique aspects (outside of the obvious) of their situation, as the author points out, is “that we’ll never be able to say to one another (as I’ve often heard women say to their husbands): You have no idea how this feels” (p. 114).

Interestingly, however, this difference serves to even further bridge the gap between couples like Dr. Meisner and her wife and heterosexual ones. This is not a comparison which paints the couple as “alien” or “other.” It is quite the contrary, in fact. This statement of feeling empathy with one’s partner is one which solidifies the foundation of love within any relationship. By demonstrating the presence of such an emotion in a poignant and honest way, the author is able to portray a relationship that would seem “abnormal” to some, in a way that is relatable. As Meisner often points out within her book, she is fortunate to live in a society where LGBTQ rights are certainly more progressive in comparison to other countries. Homophobia is, however, still something which exists (for example, when *The Man Who Built Banff*’s wife was

curt with the couple, Meisner's automatic thoughts were that she disagreed with their relationship, as is a fear for many queer individuals when faced with similar attitudes from strangers). This simple statement of empathy and understanding between a couple is one which cuts through any dissimilarities between lesbian and heterosexual couples, however, and contributes to the author's depiction of their relationship and family dynamic as "normal."

Meisner's intended readership is potentially vast. As an autobiographical account of her experience as a queer woman navigating the road to motherhood, it may certainly be inferred that some of her intended audience would be potential parents in the LGBTQ community. However, as the overarching themes about the journey to becoming a parent are universal regardless of sexuality, it would do the book a disservice to state that it's only audience would be individuals in the queer community. The book would also prove a useful tool to social workers and sociologists focusing on contemporary family structures, as it challenges the norms and expectations that are most commonly accepted in Canadian society today.

Within her book, Natalie Meisner bridges the gap between the normal and abnormal, and blurs the lines between what is natural and unnatural. For all intents and purposes, and as described by countless doctors and nurses throughout the book, both Natalie and Vivien's experiences with pregnancy were normal. Once pregnant, even their gestation and birthing processes were as natural as any heterosexual woman's. Despite having an alternative conception method and a family structure which strayed from the nuclear family, the women both experienced the process in a typical way. They struggled with fertility, a miscarriage (a tragic occurrence many women unfortunately go through), worried about the health of their future children, and struggled through the process of childbirth with the support of their partner. If you were to omit the genders of the partners and outline the story of how their family came to be, it

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would read similarly to nearly every other family's story. Meisner's account of her and her wife's double pregnancy begs the question: if the experience is the same, of what importance are the genders in determining normalcy or what is natural? If the experience is the same, is it possible society has it wrong and we're not so different after all?