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Love story: a vision of a world where adults and children are equals

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Before my daughter Billie was born almost nine years ago, there were all kinds of ways to insult me – Jenny Craig drop-out, boring, mediocre, a lousy lay. Afterwards, the only thing that really got to me was being called or thought of as a bad mother. The anxiety would overtake me and I would feel both vicious and intensely fragile. In my life nothing else came close to the scale and depth of feelings born with Billie. Her arrival was, and remains, that big.

Anne Manne’s recently released Motherhood. How should we care for our children? seeks to chart and, ultimately, to change Australia’s current ideas and policies concerning parental responsibilities and rights. Yet it is a book infused with the recognition of the moral, all-encompassing and metaphysical dimensions of having children. Parenthood not merely as a question of balancing work and family, women’s rights or labour policies but as, first and foremost, a question of ‘how one is to live, especially in relation to those one loves.’ For a book that is explicitly concerned with making a practical and philosophical difference to Australia’s public culture, the depth and intensity of Anne Manne’s vision of parenthood is both heartening and much-needed. Not the least because the majority of contemporary thinking on the subject still cannot quite handle the radical, transformative bigness of being a parent. Whatever their angle, the bulk of books, which now fill entire walls in bookstores and libraries, reduce the experience of parenthood to what is essentially a life-style adjustment. Balancing work and family life, what to expect when you’re expecting, setting limits, toddler taming, becoming baby-wise or, last but not least, how to get the best from your children (of the supernanny variety).

Imagine for a moment that you were planning a trip to Jupiter. Would you prepare by reading Balancing space and earth-travel or, perhaps, Guilt-free Jupiter exploration? Isn’t there more fundamental, illuminating, life and death kind of stuff that you would need to know first? And I don’t think the space travel is that much of a metaphorical stretch. After all, parenthood is a one-way ticket to another planet, and we need books and writers who will tell us as much. Tell us about a universe without gravity, where our old ideas of self and the world can exist only in a state of freefall. Which of itself is a brilliant thing, even when it is overwhelming or deliriously hard.

In her book Anne Manne takes readers well beyond the ideological, instrumentalist or purely personal takes on parenthood. Manne’s is a wise, passionate and unsettling contribution to the debate about the obligations of a good and just society to its children and their parents. She speaks of things,
which are fundamental yet also fundamentally sidelined in modern debates. Love, for instance. Amidst detailed explorations of decades of psychological research, feminist debates, public policies and literary sources describing the worlds of childhood and parenthood, Anne Manne comes back to the question of love time and time again. Love, which is the most powerful of relationships, irreducible to moralising or rationalising. Love, which cannot be snared in ‘the ideologist’s net’.

Manne’s attentiveness to the question of love is one of the gifts of this book. After all, what if not love can get parents through the relentlessness of it all – sleepless nights, abdication of self, gripping anxiety and all-consuming attachments. Sense of duty, guilt, personal ambitions or social expectations – they simply won’t last the distance. Love, on the other hand, will. ‘Like all passions’, writes Anne Manne, ‘motherlove may not speak at all to some, or wildly and destructively to others. But a tepid, tameable thing it is not.’ This is far from feely-touchy stuff, for Manne’s insistence on factoring in the emotional and moral dimensions of parenthood has tangible repercussions for public policy and debate. No program for transformation of gender roles, she argues, can be truthful if it remains blind to the questions of love; the extraordinary, all-encompassing love a parent can feel for a child, for instance. No program for genuine social change, she continues, can have any meaning if it sees us all as merely playing roles of parents, workers, spouses, or wage-earners. The image of social roles is a morally and intellectually impoverished way of describing the seismic, cathartic experience of being a parent. It is like describing sex as a procreation scenario. An act of mating minus passion, mystery and unconditional surrender.

It is the distinction Anne Manne draws between care and love that anchors perhaps the most contentious of the book’s arguments. In a small sub-section revealingly titled ‘Touch it and you die’ Manne notes that in Australia ‘anyone challenging early childcare as an unquestioned and highly desirable part of modern life risks being considered to be in companionship with the Taliban and clitoridectomies.’ Yet a significant part of Motherhood is dedicated precisely to that - an extended and thoroughly-researched questioning of the consequences of putting babies and toddlers under the ages of two into full-time childcare for extensive periods of time.

This is one minefield of a question, yet Manne puts her foot down and keeps on walking. As a mother of two, she herself had to make an agonising choice between home and external care. She did her research, exploring all the options - ‘quality’ childcare centres, home-based care, nannies (if you can afford one) and so on. Remembering the time I faced this choice myself, I can vouch for the fact that few parents, whatever their convictions, will make such a decision lightly. 5 to 1 ratio of children to a caregiver and an impossibly high turn-over of staff in most child-care facilities do not help the case either.

In the end for Anne Manne it all comes down to the fundamental difference between care and love. Care is a very different word from love, Manne writes. It is ‘cool and careful, reasoned, a word which implies distance and limits. Love is not. Love is passionate, implacable, intense, unreasoned.’ Babies,
Manne argues, do not need trained experts to manage them, but their family to love them. In the earliest stages of their lives, our children do not need distance and limits, but the passionate proximity of our unconditional love. They need warmth not cool professionalism, even if we would like to believe that childcare centres are hubs of cool professionalism in the first place. There is, in other words, no real substitute for parental and familial love.

Manne’s argument gets even more uncomfortable as the book unfolds. We have been telling ourselves all kinds of tall tales about children and their needs, she says, to serve the interests of the adult-centred world. ‘One way of distancing ourselves from the discomfort of confronting our own power over children’, Manne writes, ‘is to create a myth of an independent, resilient child who, like the cat with nine lives, always lands on its feet.’ Manne is not out to lecture parents, mothers in particularly, on the choice of work versus childcare. She abhors gender or parenting police, yet feels the need to point out that in our world, interests of parents and children do not always coincide. Sometimes, in fact, they do anything but coincide and we should not be pretending otherwise. The solution is not to blame parents or child-care, and not to force mothers primarily to care for their children at home. Rather, it is to work towards a society, where this often masked discord is genuinely addressed through public policy and economic reform. ‘I wanted to take those two utterly valuable social goods, women’s emancipation and child wellbeing, and try to put them together’, Manne writes.

The practical suggestions made in the book are by no means far-fetched or inconceivable. Extended paid parental leaves, restructuring of economic relations and working time, home care allowances and what she calls ‘active neutrality’ from the government – public policies, which support parents regardless of the choices they make. Manne argues that European social feminism has created a much more hospitable and inclusive social framework for mothers than its Anglo-American counter-part. She points out that in many countries across Europe, care-giving is respectable, the right to paid work is protected, extended parental rather than maternity leaves allow for responsibilities to be shared more equally between partners, while the gift of parental time is not exchanged for workforce participation but is offered alongside the opportunities to return to one’s previous job. Collectively, these initiatives effectively work to remove the so-called ‘care penalty’, the price in lost earnings, missed opportunities and diminished social status paid mainly by women for choosing the work of care in the domestic sphere over the paid work in the ‘real world’. Manne stresses that it is mothers, rather than women in general, who are most economically penalised in our society.

The economic penalties, however, are a pale imitation of the social stigma attached to stay-home mothers at present. A friend of mine, a highly intelligent and accomplished woman, spent the last three years looking after her two young children. The children were born when my friend was in her late thirties, an inch from being convinced she would never become a mother. Deliriously happy at home and in love with her children, my friend has recently found herself surrounded by people, women and men alike, really concerned for her psychological well-being. ‘I am not depressed’, she has to keep on repeating,
‘I am actually really happy’. ‘Do not hide behind your children’, they say back, ‘It is time to rebuild yourself, your career and selfhood before it is too late.’ My friend’s love for her children has been recast as a flight from her obligation to personal fulfilment. Her dedication is viewed as a pathological dependency. Her professed happiness is under scrutiny, doubtful at best. ‘Our devaluation of motherhood is now so deep’, writes Anne Manne, ‘that women for whom mothering is a central life goal have to keep alive the importance of what they are doing, as a desert dweller keeps alive a conception of a lake.’ Manne rejects the idea of substituting the old coercive breadwinner/homemaker gender contract with a new equally coercive ‘parents at work/baby at creche’ contract. Both are dangerous and oppressive. Manne is scathing about what she calls the ‘Groupthink’ on childcare or any kind of ideological or economic coercion when it comes to choices parents make in relation to their children.

While Manne’s discussion of parental rights and responsibilities is doubtlessly important, one of the book’s major strengths is her attentiveness to the rights and voices of children. Manne dedicates a large section within her book to what she calls ‘taking children seriously’. On the question of leaving children under the age of two in full-time childcare, she writes - ‘We do not expect an adult to easily replace a beloved person with another. It violates our sense of preciousness of individual people, and even our sense of what love is. Yet we expect this of a baby.’ Despite detailing at length findings from major research studies of child attachment, Manne shrieks from employing idioms of pop psychology. The term ‘separation anxiety’, she writes, does not really tell us what happens to a baby and toddler separated from its parents - ‘it is an emotion closest to grief’.

After my daughter Billie was born, I stopped looking at men and started looking at children, checking them out, eyeing them off. Children, I discovered, were infinitely more interesting than men. Everything about them merited my attention – the endless variations of their eyes and hair, their songs and tantrums, they ways they responded to dogs, screeching adult voices or ice-cream puddles on the ground. I have found books and discussions of parenthood in which children themselves were strangely absent, subdued or imagined as objects of care, attention or changing gender practices as painfully, pathetically flat. I liked the ones, which saw parenting as a tango, in which children were our partners, stepping on our feet, slipping out of our hands, sometimes moving to a different tune, but also always holding us back, guiding us through a frenzied swirl, breathing in our faces.

Anne Manne’s book is alive with this dance, eager to restore the power, depth and complexity to the emotional lives of children around us. She is also at pains to remind us that the way we imagine children reflects the deepest values, interests and preoccupations of our times. Romans ascribed valour to their off-springs; Puritans - purity, piety and obedience. Victorians liked to imagine children as epitomes of innocence and vulnerability. In our age, we want little more than to see children as independent and, here comes that word, competent. Just like the earlier visions of childhood, our contemporary ideas stand for and disguise a plethora of grown-up agendas.
One day when my daughter was five and attending a prep-year at school, I was asked to come in urgently by the teacher. It transpired that in front of the whole class, in a loud, unapologetic voice, my daughter asked her teacher not to treat her like a fucking baby. I had never heard Billie use that particular sentence or that particular obscenity before and, while I was surprised, I could not help laughing. I knew that, at least in theory, my laughter was wrong. I needed to present the united front with the teacher. After all, we were both adults adhering to the common principles of what was acceptable, appropriate and right. Yet I broke the rules. I didn’t want to teach my daughter disrespect, but I found that my natural allegiance in this and in many other situations to come was not with the world of adults. I think I simply identified with Billie’s need for respect, and with the way she went about demanding it.

When I tell this story now, I feel unambiguously proud of Billie. Here is my daughter low on decorum, high on outrage, what is known as a problem child with an opinion on everything. Yet it strikes me that she might just get there. Maybe not there, but close enough to the Kingdom of Far, Far Way, which Anne Manne’s wonderful book is prodding us towards. A place, where the rights and needs of parents and their children co-exist in an honest dialogue not in a state of a fake, deceiving harmony. It may be a hell of a ride, but why would we be going anywhere else?