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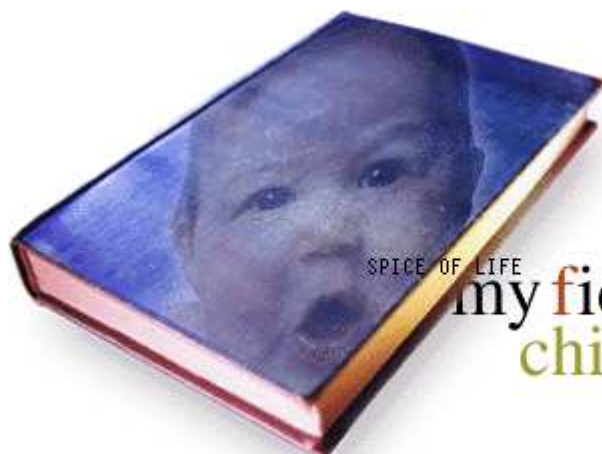
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Why it's time for Mothers Who Think



EVERYTHING I'VE EVER TRIED TO WRITE ABOUT

MY CHILDREN HAS TURNED TO HALLMARK MUSH.

BUT THE FICTIONAL MOTHERS IN MY STORIES HAVE

BECOME MUCH MORE COMPLEX AND FULL.

**BY CHITRA DIVAKARUNI** | My friend Sarita had a beatific pregnancy. Almost from the moment of conception, her skin took on a dewy glow, a wise serenity settled over her features and she didn't throw up even once. She had enormous amounts of energy -- from wallpapering the nursery to assembling Learning Toys that seemed to require a degree in engineering to researching support groups for breastfeeding mothers, she did it all. She gained the ideal amount of weight, all in the right places, and lost it all about three days after giving birth. Her non-pregnant friends were suitably awed. We watched her don her Lycra running suit, strap her baby (who slept, most cooperatively, whenever she required him to do so) into one of those jogging strollers with oversized wheels and take off with scarcely an extra jiggle of her gluteus maximus. "If she can do it ..." we said to each other, and we all went home to try it for ourselves.

Needless to say, when I finally did manage to get pregnant, it didn't work out quite like that. At first I thought I had the sleeping sickness, the way I'd keel over at the oddest moments. Once I even fell asleep on the subway during commute hour. (Fortunately, all the bodies around me kept me propped up.) After the doctor confirmed my condition, I checked in the mirror each morning for that rosy glow to appear. But all I got was pimples and baggy eyes. I couldn't even drown my sorrows in gallons of guilt-free ice-cream, as I'd looked forward to, because I developed pregnancy diabetes. Not that I really wanted to anymore: I had the most terrific case of morning sickness that lasted around the clock and appeared at such

regular intervals that my students (at that time I was teaching in buildings that were miles away from the nearest restroom) set their watches by it.

It just wasn't fair.

"Never mind," consoled Sarita as she nursed her infant. (She was back at work now but had successfully negotiated for the afternoons off so she could continue doing things like this.)

"Once the baby arrives, you'll forget all these little problems instantaneously."

She was right. My baby was premature and colicky and developed infant jaundice and didn't sleep a wink for the first three months, or so it seemed to his father and me as we walked him up and down the night corridors of our house. By the time he settled in, I could barely remember my name, let alone the conditions of my pregnancy.

"But think of how much writing material you've gathered," said Sarita.

"Yeah, enough to fill a dozen cautionary manuals," I muttered, glaring at her. But inwardly I thought, Yes, why not. At least that would be one thing I could do better than my friend.

But when I tried to write about my son, I discovered, to my dismay, that I couldn't. I just didn't have the words -- or the distance -- to convey how he smelled, that unique mix of baby powder and milk, or how it felt when he finally put his head down on my shoulder and his body grew still and heavy with sleep. Everything I wrote turned into Hallmark mush. Fortunately, I've deleted it all, so future generations of archivists will have no records.

It's taken me about five years and another pregnancy (Sarita was right, mothers have the shortest of memories; we must be genetically programmed that way) to realize that, much as I'd love to, I'll probably never be able to write about my children in any deep, meaningful way -- like [Anne Lamott](#) and Perri Klass do with such seeming effortlessness. But fortunately, not all is lost. Because what I've discovered is that I can write about mothers.

I don't mean writing about myself as a mother, though I've done that to some extent in this column. I mean putting mothers as central characters -- characters admittedly and intentionally different from myself -- in my stories and novels. I'd done that before, too, believing (as to a degree I still do) that if one observes carefully enough, one can write about anything. But looking back I realize how tentative those portraits were, how slight. How I'd approached those women from the outside, imposing my limited understanding of motherhood on them.

Now I'm more confident about it. I'm sure my understanding of motherhood is still limited, but at least I've learned something

about its ambivalences. How it truly is one of nature's primal experiences. (Sorry, guys!) How the violent pain of giving birth breaks open things in you, and not just physically, so that you never see the world as quite the same again. How you can love a child so much that you're ready to kill -- literally and with a personal viciousness way beyond what the cliché indicates -- anyone who harms her. And how at the same time you want to shake her until her teeth rattle in her head. How your child can (and, gleefully, does) push buttons you didn't know you had, rousing you to a level of fury (or pushing you down into morasses of guilt) you didn't know you were capable of. How you want to give your children the best part of yourself, and yet preserve your Self from their consuming need. How motherhood, wonderful as it is, isn't for everyone.

My writing is made more complicated by the fact that I'm exploring the experience of being Indian, of being brought up in a culture where many still consider motherhood a woman's supreme destiny, and the inability to get pregnant her supreme failure. This is one of the major themes of the novel I'm working on right now. I think I'm not exaggerating when I say (OK, Sarita, you can claim you told me so!) that I wouldn't be writing this book had I not had children myself.

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