

Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women Are Choosing Parenthood Without Marriage and Creating the New American Family. Rosanna Hertz. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. 2006. 264 pp. ISBN 0-19-517990-0. \$26.00.¹

The shape of the American family is changing and, in her excellent book *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women Are Choosing Parenthood Without Marriage and Creating the New American Family*, Rosanna Hertz explores one of the new structures emerging in the evolution of the families.

To study the dynamic of single women choosing to embark on motherhood alone, Hertz conducted in-depth interviews of 65 single mothers. These are not the single mothers sometimes

¹This review was written on the basis of uncorrected page proofs (bound in paperback form). Page numbers noted in the review may differ from those in the published version.

portrayed in the media as welfare recipients or unprepared teenagers; as Hertz describes her sample, they are generally middle-class women who grew up expecting they would be able to balance marriage, motherhood, and a career. Yet, as Hertz explains, “Something conspired to disrupt the trajectory of love to marriage to children” (p. 3).

In analyzing the histories of these women, Hertz identifies four distinct pathways to motherhood: women who bought anonymous sperm from fertility banks; women who used known sperm donors; women who adopted children from all over the world; and women who “chanced pregnancy” by using inconsistent contraception. In each case, the women were faced with hard choices, and most postponed the decision to have a child alone at least once. Hertz describes the phase before single motherhood as a “liminal state,” a time in which these unmarried women imagined their lives as single mothers, visualizing the process before taking action.

Hertz introduces us to a world of families where men are essentially optional. Those women who chanced pregnancy and those who chose known donors often absolved the fathers of all responsibilities as breadwinners and authority figures. In such cases, many women negotiated fiercely for contractual protection giving them sole custody and responsibility for their children. If the fathers or donors wished to be involved with their children, their success as “good dads” was understood as maintaining some social involvement with their child but making no other claims.

Women who used anonymous sperm donors or adopted children faced a different set of challenges. Because the identity of the biological parents or donors is often protected, the single mothers do not have to worry that anyone will show up to demand their parental rights, but they do have to find a way to create some image or identity for the children to associate with their fathers and, by extension, themselves. As Hertz explains, a number of single mothers who used anonymous donors expanded the boundaries of kinship in creative ways and sought other children from the same donor to connect their children with siblings. Finally, in choosing international adoptions,

Hertz argues that single mothers are at the forefront of creating transracial families in the United States, adding a whole new layer of challenges and joys to the process.

Whereas motherhood was a choice for these women, employment was not. Hertz details the processes they go through to figure out ways to sustain careers while raising their children. Help with child care becomes crucial to their survival, and these single mothers find creative means to build teams of caretakers and kin networks around their children. They also often cultivate relationships between their children and male role models and friends; in this way, Hertz suggests that exposure to men and masculinity have become a new form of cultural capital for the children of single mothers.

Hertz describes the women in her study as “reluctant revolutionaries” putting their children first. As she explains, “These women may live their lives and create their families in non-traditional ways, but they do not want their children to suffer the consequences of these choices. They also want their children to live ordinary lives—that is to say, a middle-class orderly life where their children fit” (p. 133). Many of the single mothers in this study continued to hope they would find a partner and marry—creating their own nuclear families. In the epilogue, Hertz follows up with the women and offers a glimpse into how their lives and families have changed several years later.

There is a lot to admire about this book. In her well-written and interesting account, Hertz offers a vivid illustration of a new form of family taking its place in the United States. In taking the journey with her, we get a close-up view of the struggles and joys these women face when choosing to be single mothers. Anyone interested in studying the dynamics of families should read this valuable book and consider Hertz’s assertion: “The bottom line of this book is clear: we can no longer deny that the core of family life is the mother and her children” (p. xviii).

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