

An Interview with Janna Malamud Smith

MMO talks with the author of A Potent Spell

Janna Malamud Smith is a psychologist and author. Her recent book, *A Potent Spell: Mother Love and the Power of Fear*, addresses some of the psychological and social consequences of mothers' intense mental focus on protecting their children from harm. Smith also provides an overview of changing cultural attitudes about maternal responsibility, and suggests that cultural authorities have routinely exploited mothers' fear of child loss to contain women in secondary social roles. Her previous works include *Private Matters: In Defense of the Personal Life* (1997).

MMO: Your previous book was on the nature of privacy. *A Potent Spell: Mother Love and the Power of Fear* centers on a different kind of personal experience — the intensive “emotional and cognitive” work that mothers invest in protecting their children. What inspired you to write about this topic?

JMS: There was no one experience that made me focus on the relationship between mother love, fear, and decreased mobility in mother's lives, but the general experience of raising my kids led me to discover what I felt was a disconnect between my experience and popular cultural assumptions about motherhood. Also, I work as a psychotherapist, and while raising my children, I felt a large disparity between how my profession had traditionally viewed mothers — as so harmful, and my own observations and feelings. I wanted to examine this disconnect in a larger context, and I also wanted to address what was wrong — how our culture has historically undermined women's power by exploiting the sense of vulnerability mothers feel in attachment to their children.

MMO: The subtext of so much “expert” child-rearing advice is that mothers will damage their children — both physically and psychologically — if they deviate from the prescribed parenting methods of their time. One of the elements you address in the book is that mothers have the power to destroy their children as well as protect them, and how this may have influenced attempts to exert authority over mothers' behavior by manipulating the fear of child loss.

JMS: It's absolutely true. The “omnipotence” of motherhood has a dark side. Mothers can harm or kill infants and children. They rarely do it; yet it's frightening to contemplate and may be one of the reasons cultures so consistently attempt to control mothers, and to threaten them. One of the experiences that sparked my interest in exploring the complexities of mother love and fear was seeing a performance of *Bacchae* [a classic Greek drama by Euripides that culminates in a mother unwittingly killing her son during the course of an ecstatic ceremony]. I was deeply moved by the story, and I wanted to understand why. There seemed to be many threads in the drama that connected to motherhood and power, and how mothers' power is expressed or usurped and obscured. Untangling the meaning of the play was central to writing the book, even though only a short section of the text is actually devoted to an analysis of *Bacchae*.

MMO: Our culture generally lacks an established context and common language to articulate the true psychological, emotional and social complexities of motherhood. How did you approach this in writing *A Potent Spell*?

JMS: It's important to understand that this language is missing for a politically important reason. One way to undercut the power of any group is to obscure the truth of their experience. We typically think about that as a silencing of voices. You might say it's against the interests of the dominant culture to let groups who are marginalized or oppressed own a vibrant language to describe their reality. Instead, we construct descriptions and expectations of motherhood based on ideologies and stereotypes that preserve the status quo.

Our society doesn't take notice of mothers' experience because we don't want to. Here's an example: in the growing literature on maternal attachment, there are yards and yards of references that relate to the experience and development of the child. But I've yet to find any resources on the meaning of maternal attachment to mothers. Something critical is missing, not just in our language but also from our cultural, scientific and political consciousness.

MMO: You note that new mothers are often overwhelmed by a sense of vulnerability when they realize what it means to be responsible for caring for an utterly dependent infant. You also suggest that developing an awareness of the emotional weight of the mother-child bond may be core to the transformative quality of motherhood. Given that this experience is so common — and may even be universal — why don't we as women, and society as a whole, have a greater shared understanding of its nature and impact?

JMS: Our interest in the experience of motherhood and its relative personal and cultural importance to women is new. Until very recently, it just hadn't crossed our minds that motherhood should be given serious consideration as a distinct aspect of womanhood — For the greater part of history, there was no concept that a woman should be anything other than a mother, and motherhood has been considered intrinsic to femaleness.

The capacity to give meaning to motherhood as a discrete experience in women's lives depends on a larger cultural understanding that a separation exists between who women are as women, and who women are as mothers. The effort to build this understanding is just beginning. In contemporary society, we are sometimes unwilling to notice how new and fragile our efforts to gain broad acceptance of women outside the context of motherhood actually are.

MMO: You write about the concept of the "free mother" — a mother who has the freedom to make active choices about how she leads her life as a woman. Can you explain how this concept differs from more radical feminist formulations that suggest women can only achieve equality if they are completely liberated from the biological and cultural constraints of child-bearing and child-rearing?

JMS: I personally know a number of women who felt the only road to freedom was not to have kids. And it's sad, really, that women sensed their opportunities for equality were so limited that some felt there was no other choice but to forgo motherhood. These women were attuned to the fact that cultural conditions surrounding motherhood are deeply resistant to fairness and equality, and they rejected the idea of making an asymmetrical sacrifice.

MMO: Our culture takes a dim view of the idea of "free" motherhood — in your book, you note that most popular representations of non-conforming mothers are commonly associated with abandonment, neglect, moral lassitude, premature death and the wholesale dissolution of family life. A mother who places "her life" above "family life" is rarely depicted as content, or as deserving happiness, affection or a rich and rewarding life.

JMS: Shame is a powerful mechanism in our society, and when we encounter negative representations of mothers who have stepped outside the bounds of cultural expectations we should be mindful of that power. We use shame to keep people in line. Linking the desire for a more expansive life to such shameful behavior is a very effective way to coerce mothers into compliance with the status quo.

MMO: You describe the “free mother” as “one who feels she is in fact living her life, and has adequate food, sleep, wages, education, safety, opportunity, institutional support, health care, child care, and loving relationships”. Most of these variables are in short supply for all but the most fortunate mothers. What needs to change in our society to provide an environment that supports free motherhood?

JMS: You can probably answer that question as well as I can! But I think the most important thing to keep in perspective is that we are at a starting place, and that while the current conditions are not advantageous, there is some cause for optimism. When we talk about motherhood and freedom, we need to begin by being aware of how recent the changes are that allow women to possess any sense of entitlement to equality and autonomy. Because this is so brand new, we haven’t figured out how to reshape our social structure to bear the newness of it.

Whenever a society experiences this type of shift, there is a strong resistance to altering established social and political patterns. Even though it may be obvious some systems and institutions no longer serve a productive function in the changing world, reinforcing the existing framework is often seen as preferable to promoting changes that may challenge the existing distribution of social and political influence, particularly by the groups that hold the greatest power.

We can expect to hear time and time again that what lies on the path ahead is far more dangerous and destructive than the restrictive conditions we’ve endured in the past, and these regressive messages can be very effective in slowing progress. We have to hang on to the hope that we can move ahead. We have to be brave enough to imagine that there is always potential to improve the human condition, and not lose sight of the conviction that we all have a legitimate claim to justice and equality. If we look around the world today, an honest assessment would confirm, as the World Health Organization and United Nations have suggested, that most mothers labor more hours than men, earn less, have fewer political rights, are more frequently the victims of intimate physical violence... and so forth. There’s much work to do. We mustn’t be distracted by sentimental claims about the good old days, or mythologies that claim that the good mother is submissive and disproportionately self-sacrificing.

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