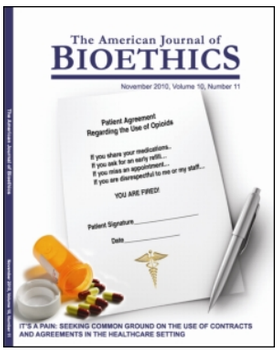

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Review of Emily Monosson, Ed., *Motherhood, The Elephant in the Laboratory: Women Scientists Speak Out*

Sarah Rodriguez[a]
[a] Oncofertility Consortium and the Center for Bioethics, Science, and Society,

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Book Reviews

Review of Emily Monosson, Ed., *Motherhood, The Elephant in the Laboratory: Women Scientists Speak Out*[1]

Reviewed by Sarah Rodriguez, Oncofertility Consortium and the Center for Bioethics, Science, and Society

I read this book with interest—both professional and personal. First, the professional: I am studying ideas of fertility and infertility since the turn of last century as well as the role of women in the reproductive sciences over the course of the 20th century. Second, the personal: I am the mother of two, a 4-year-old son and a 18-month-old daughter. For both reasons I was looking for voices regarding the female experience of combining motherhood and academic work in science.

In 2006, Emily Monosson, a toxicologist, writer, and mother, posted on the American Association for the Advancement of Science listserv a quotation she pulled from the *New York Times* from a woman expressing the difficulties of balancing a career and motherhood. Though Monosson initially felt she was outing herself, she posted the quotation along with a note seeking other women's opinions because she felt desperate to know she was not alone in her struggles to balance motherhood with a scientific career. The responses, Monosson wrote in her 2008 book, were "immediate, enthusiastic, and emotional" (2). Though some of the women who responded were uncomfortable about publicly discussing their difficulties, many of the women "felt that by posting their comments to the list, they might encourage others to come forward, initiating a broader discussion about combining motherhood and a career in science" (3). Monosson's decision to take some of the stories the women told on the listserv and publish them in a book was to illustrate the variety of ways women have combined these two roles—for example, through the traditional academic tenure-track route, through part-time academic positions, through working at government agencies, through teaching in secondary schools, and through volunteering—and to initiate, as many of the women also desired, a broader discussion of what it means to be a career scientist. Contributors to the book, Monosson writes, "volunteered their own stories with the intention of empowering others to speak out not just about their struggles and concerns for the future but also about personal and professional successes achieved while balancing family life and a life in science" (19). Many of the women express in their stories their desire for a mentor, a woman who can serve as a role model for how to balance work and motherhood—much like Monosson sought when she sent out her original posting on the listserv.

The book is divided into four sections, with each section a decade, beginning with the 1970s and ending with the 2000s. Each decade contains stories from women who came of age in their scientific careers during that decade. The women tell their stories briefly, and, distressingly, their stories are largely the same—nearly all express the frustrations of working within the structures of academia and the continued covert and even overt sexism surrounding women's choices to become mothers. Sadly, the narratives change little even as the decades advance. As Aviva Brecher, who received her Ph.D. in 1972, notes in her essay, it is "astonishing" that women are still asking "the same questions about how to successfully manage and blend careers in science with the demands of motherhood and family life that we struggled to solve thirty years ago" (Brecher 2008, 25). Indeed, some of the stories could swap decades, such as the story from a woman who lost her postdoctoral position when she became pregnant—only the year was 2006, not 1976 (Wesley-Hunt 2008).

Tellingly, the overwhelming majority of these women either are not working in academia or, if they are, they are not in "traditional" full-time, tenured or tenure-track positions. A few are adjunct, several work in government positions or in secondary schools, and some cull together work from grants on their own or continue working in the sciences as volunteers. Part of this perhaps stems from who responded

1. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008. 219 pp. $ 27.95. Hardback.

Address correspondence to Sarah Rodriguez, Center for Bioethics, Science, and Society, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, 303 E. Superior, Lurie 10-231, Chicago, IL 60611, USA. E-mail: srodriguez@northwestern.edu

to Monosson's initial call on the listserv; perhaps part is also because of the desire expressed by Monosson as a reason for this book: to initiate a discussion about what a successful career in science looks like outside of the traditional tenure-track route. As Monosson describes, the essays she has collected from women with science careers inside and outside of academia provide a broader "and more inclusive definition of success (beyond attainment of tenure) in science," and such a definition "might lead to a more inclusive and perhaps more welcoming scientific community" made up of people in a variety of roles (9). By challenging the traditional tenure-track route as the only definition of success, Monosson and the women whose voices are collected in this volume define themselves as successful, too—albeit successful in ways typically not valued because they are not accompanied by numbers: the size of a grant, the number of publications, the counted heads of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows.

While the structure of academia comes under a good deal of deserved scrutiny in this book (and arguably the critiques leveled here could and should be extended to most of the work world), the book is not without its own flaws. To begin with, there is an underrepresentation of single mothers. All but two of the women with children have spouses—very supportive husbands, I might add—and all are heterosexual (two women who are single and do not have children were included in the book because they are the daughters of a woman in the book). In addition to the majority of the contributors being married and heterosexual, nearly all have biological children. Indeed, even the mother who did adopt has biological children as well. A more inclusive set of voices from more single mothers, lesbian mothers, and adoptive mothers, for example, would have strengthened the book and revealed diversity of choices and in strengths. Additionally, since the book is calling for a broader definition of a what a successful career in science looks like, and since so many of these women note the desire for a mentor in their lives, it would have been nice to see a broader definition of motherhood that included foster mothering and mentoring.

Though women in an academic and in a laboratory setting face unique challenges, overall the most fundamental of their challenges extends far beyond the laboratory and even academia. Socially and culturally, women are still most often seen—and most often still see themselves—as the primary caretakers of children. Whether or not one agrees that this should be so, the larger issue is that women who desire to be mothers and have careers should no longer be asking, as Monosson quotes Gloria Steinem's 2007 address to graduates of Smith College, "how can I combine a career and a family?" but, rather, why are women still in a position where they feel the need to ask this question (Steinem 2007)? Indeed, after reading this book, I found myself asking why am I, in 2010, still asking this question? Monosson's answer to women being able to stop asking the question is the same as Steinem's: Men need to be asking the question as well, and we as a society need to value children and parenting in ways that support both the needs of the family and the demands of work. Monosson ends her book much in the way as its origins began: by calling on others to join in the discussion of how to make careers in science—and academia more generally, I would add—more accessible, attainable, and successful.

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Review of Andrea Gillies, *Keeper: Living With Nancy, A Journey Into Alzheimer's*[1]

Reviewed by Emma Zimmerman, Institut de recherches cliniques de Montréal and McGill University

Bioethics is in need of contemporary literary metaphors; *soma* is not so much overused as it is out of date, no longer reflecting our present worries. So it is that the The Wellcome Trust's Book Prize in Medicine in Literature is not only an appropriate new endeavor for an organization committed to medical humanities and public engagement but also a

1. London: Short Books, 2009. 256 pp. £11.99 Softcover.

Address correspondence to Emma Zimmerman, Neuroethics Research Unit, Unité de recherche en neuroéthique, Institut de recherches cliniques de Montréal 110, avenue des Pins Ouest, Montréal, Quebec H2W 1R7, Canada. E-mail: Emma.Zimmerman@ircm.qc.ca