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Author

Plant, Rebecca Jo

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Rebecca Jo Plant, review of Leslie J. Lindenauer, *I Could Not Call Her Mother: The Stepmother in American Popular Culture, 1750-1960* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013). Forthcoming in the *Journal of Family History*.

Scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to the history of mothers and motherhood in recent years. Whereas this literature encompasses numerous works on adoptive mothers, another group of non-biological mothers—stepmothers—has been largely overlooked. Leslie J. Lindenauer seeks to remedy this neglect by tracing the cultural history of the stepmother as revealed primarily by popular fiction, advice literature and film. She not only seeks to show how representations of stepmothers varied over time, but also to demonstrate how the figure of the stepmother served as “a lens on the changing constructions of motherhood itself over time.” (xxi) While the book meets the former objective with verve, it is not wholly successful in achieving the latter.

The book’s first chapter charts a shift from the widespread demonization of stepmothers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries toward more ambiguous and positive portrayals beginning in the mid-19th century. The wicked stepmother loomed large in the cultural landscape of the Revolutionary and early national periods, serving as a counterpoint for the emergent ideal of the Republican mother. Lindenauer astutely notes the role that the political context played in shaping depictions of stepmothers, who were deemed “tyrannical, corrupt, avaricious, selfish” and “unnatural”—terms that reflected the ascendant language of republicanism and natural rights (21). Indeed, so resonant was the image of the wicked stepmother that rebellious colonists readily employed it to describe the deteriorating relationship with England; as one critic of the Stamp Act wrote, the once “beloved Mother country” had become a “cruel step-mother, unbounded in her malice.” (8)

By the mid-19th century, however, the privileging of “natural” motherhood diminished somewhat, as the intense cultural idealization of motherhood expanded so as to encompass stepmothers as well. In fact, some writers represented stepmothers as the ideal exemplars of mother love, for they gave selflessly even in the absence of a biological connection. In the period from 1860 to 1890—an era Lindenauer characterizes as witnessing the “redemption of the stepmother”—popular magazines ran numerous stories that portrayed stepmothers winning over initially suspicious and resentful stepchildren through patience and love. Other vignettes challenged the stereotype of the cold and greedy stepmother who connived to snare a widower by featuring virtuous women lured into loveless marriages by widowers who wanted only their domestic labor.

While Lindenauer ably sketches this shift, the reasons why the stereotype of the evil stepmother waned remain somewhat murky. She suggests that large-scale shifts in the economy that threatened to destabilize the family, combined with the rise of advanced education for women and their increasing forays into public and political realms, led to efforts to shore up the familial ideal, lest women abandon domesticity. But this argument seems quite general. Could changing demographics (the fact that stepmothers became less common as the average life span rose) have played a role? Did it matter that, by the mid-19th century, that women themselves were writing many of the popular stories featuring stepmothers? Or might actual changes in parental practices, such as the decline in the apprenticing of children and corporal punishment, somehow have rendered stepmothers less objectionable? While the reasons underlying cultural transformation

admittedly cannot be precisely pinpointed, a more fully fleshed out argument would have been more satisfying, even if it had to be presented as somewhat speculative.

In the twentieth century, a variety of developments, including the rise of so-called scientific motherhood and the growing power of the psychological professions, impacted popular depictions of stepmothers. A particularly interesting chapter, which focuses on the period from 1920 through World War II, shows how representations of stepmothers (and advice directed toward them) assumed a new tone of realism. Authors began to acknowledge, for instance, that a woman might become a stepmother not just because a biological mother died, but also in cases of divorce. But this same period also saw a resurgence of images of the evil stepmother in pulp fiction and films, as in classic noir films like *Double Indemnity* (1944). The monstrous stepmothers of the mid-twentieth century tended to be conceptualized in more psychological terms, with an emphasis on the stepmother's unconscious desires and the disturbing psychosexual tensions that infused her relationships with her husband and stepchildren. Here, Lindauer effectively shows how the evolving discourse around stepmothers tracked changing ideas about motherhood more generally, as the rise of the psychological professions significantly altered conceptions of the maternal role in the mid-twentieth century.

Elsewhere, however, the connection between the history of stepmothers and that of other developments affecting mothers in general is not always evident. For instance, in her discussions of breastfeeding and natural childbirth, Lindenauer seems to be suggesting that the tendency to privilege the natural, biological aspects of motherhood waxed and waned over time, significantly influencing popular views of stepmothers. Yet this dynamic is not fully spelled out or explained. Similarly, the book devotes attention to representations of other stereotyped "substitute mothers," such as the black mammy, yet without fully integrating these discussions into the book's larger analysis.

Indeed, the book at times reads as if Lindenauer had originally conceived of a much broader focus, but then subsequently attempted to force her rich material into a narrower framework. For instance, the prologue, "A Tale of Two Stepmothers," contrasts Sarah Bush Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln's beloved and esteemed stepmother, to Abby Borden, who, along with her husband, suffered a violent death, allegedly at the hands of her stepdaughter, Lizzie Borden. But the latter is not a particularly revealing choice for a case study, given that Abby Borden remained a shadowy figure compared to Lizzie. Though court testimony indicated a strained relationship between the two, the extensive public debate surrounding this case seems more illustrative of attitudes toward so-called spinsters and beliefs about women's capacity for violence than it does of public perceptions of stepmothers.

Likewise, the first chapter begins with a discussion of attitudes toward witches in early America and how they changed in the 18th and 19th centuries, when individuals accused of witchcraft increasingly came to be regarded as victims of superstition. Lindenauer explains this focus by pointing to the considerable overlap in regard to negative profiles of witches and stepmothers, and by asserting a "relationship" between declining representations of the evil witch and rising representations of the evil stepmother. (1) But this relationship is not clearly delineated or explained. Moreover, the implication would seem to be that the figure of the stepmother, overshadowed by that of the witch, was not of great importance before 1750. But this seems surprising given the large numbers of actual stepmothers due to high mortality rates and the pressures widows

faced to remarry. Indeed, the subject of stepmothers and the cultural imagery surrounding them in early America would appear to be a rich and understudied one, which makes Lindenauer's decision to focus on witches when discussing this period somewhat puzzling.

Nonetheless, *I Could Not Call Her Mother* is a highly readable and consistently interesting study of a much-mythologized figure who has yet to receive her due in historical scholarship. Although Lindenauer does not attempt to analyze the lives of actual stepmothers, her vivid and lively account of their shifting representations gives readers a strong sense of the cultural climate that a woman stepping into this role would have faced at different moments in American history.

Rebecca Jo Plant
University of California, San Diego