

The mother of all careers



Motherhood, the Elephant in the Laboratory

Edited by Emily Monosson

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There are a few universal axioms for women who combine motherhood with successful scientific careers: 1) it is essential to have good, reliable childcare; 2) it helps to have a supportive, involved spouse and 3) it will take a lot of hard work. In *Motherhood, the Elephant in the Laboratory*, a collection of short essays by scientist mothers, these themes are echoed repeatedly — with resignation or bitterness, with cheerful acknowledgement and occasionally with insightful embellishment. However, in spite of the provocative title, women scientists running academic research laboratories are underrepresented in the discussion.

For most of the authors, achieving work-family balance meant leaving the laboratory for alternative careers — writing, consulting, government service, science policy or education. The greatest value of the book may be in describing alternative career paths open to both women and men with doctoral degrees in science. The editor, Emily Monosson, states that one of her goals was “to initiate discussion on redefining the concept of ‘career’ scientist.” The essayists lay bare myths and realities about obtaining jobs in academia, where many more PhD graduates are trained than will become faculty members. Their first-hand accounts of stepping off the mainstream academic track illustrate how they have used their scientific knowledge in unanticipated careers and in raising families. All good, but there also seems to be an implied message that it is not feasible to rear happy, healthy children while having a high-flying career as an academic scientist. We would strongly dispute that interpretation.

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The idea for this book emerged from a posting on an AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science) mailing list where Monosson sought advice from colleagues, confessing “to an elite group of scientists that [she is] a mother who struggles to succeed as a scientist and a scientist who finds it difficult to be an ideal mother.” She managed to garner nuggets of wisdom from a variety of colleagues. In a piece entitled “Extraordinary commitments of time and energy”, Deborah Harris, a physicist at Fermilab, highlights skills acquired from parenting that are advantageous in the work place: adapting to shifting sleep schedules, prioritizing and making choices, learning to pick your battles and realizing that most jobs can be done equally well by other members of a team. Kim Fowler, an engineer at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, extrapolates from the advice of a pediatrician that the diet of a child needs to be balanced in the long run, but not over a single day: “If I can’t gain the balance I seek in a day, I look for it within a week or a month.” And while all working parents realize that the delicate balance between work and home can be thrown off kilter when a child is sick, the challenges of having a child with a chronic illness or a severe disability are movingly articulated by Joan Baizer, an associate professor of physiology and biophysics, who states that she “now never, ever leave[s] anything (grant applications, lecture writing) to the last minute, since for so many years I could not count on there being that last minute — maybe I would be called to the emergency room.”

The stories are anecdotal and, appropriately, Monosson does not try to draw overarching conclusions. Some of the authors were heading for academic careers, but jumped off the track because of poor mentoring, family circumstances (for example, a husband getting a more high-paying job that required relocation) or a desire to spend more time with their children than an academic position would allow. A few persisted. Neither those who chose alternative careers nor those in academia present unalloyed descriptions of their experiences; both traditional academic and alternative career tracks require compromise.

By ordering the essays according to PhD year, the book reveals changing values and opportunities over time. But it is striking that the overall situation for women in science has changed incrementally, and not dramatically, over the past 30 years. Although many agencies and institutions have promulgated family-friendly policies and flexible working arrangements, these essays reveal a wide range of attitudes among mentors, advisors and spouses. Most shocking in this regard was an account by Gina Welsey-Hunt, a 2003 PhD., who reported that her postdoctoral advisor fired her for becoming pregnant. This reveals a fourth universal axiom, which may be the most important take-home message from this book: regardless of career choice, it is imperative to pick one’s advisors and mentors well — for both women and men embarking on scientific careers.