

# Mama, PhD



*Women Write about Motherhood  
and Academic Life*

Edited by Elrena Evans and Caroline Grant

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to the children who lived this book*



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## Lip Service

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JENNIFER COGNARD-BLACK

When I'm at dinner or out for drinks with colleagues, I sometimes joke that my daughter has been orphaned by my profession. It's a line I picked up from one of my students, a young man named Toby—a student who has the odd distinction of having taken me for seven separate courses (he started college-level work when still in high school), who is the youngest son of my department chair, and who, like me, is the product of two academic parents—that rare and aw(e)ful upbringing. Once, when Toby and I met to discuss his senior project, we got distracted and started talking about what it was like to grow up in a houseful of PhDs—about playing “grading” with our siblings (I gave my younger sister As or Fs on her doodles, depending on if I liked them), about learning to drink coffee with lots of sugar and fake cream (all that was available in our parents' offices), and about whooping or skulking through the halls of various college buildings, waiting for Mom or Dad to finish up with a student. At some point, Toby said, “Yeah. I was orphaned by the profession, man. I raised myself.” And though he continued, teasing about how he'd carefully learned to avoid using “lay,” “lie,” “laid,” or “lain” in any sentence (another thing we have in common: both sets of parents are English professors), I was too struck with what he'd just said to hear much else. Without meaning to, Toby had just laid (he would say “put”) his finger on my own heart's bruising: this tender belief that my own commitment to the profession has forsaken my daughter.

Yet to say that my daughter Katharine has been orphaned by my profession is, frankly, a line out of a pull-on-the-heartstrings Hollywood tragedy—a line that takes the responsibility off my own shoulders and blames, instead, my line of work. If I am honest in the telling, I must write that my daughter has been orphaned by me—by my own choices.

Ask me what the most important thing in my life is, and I'll tell you that it's Katharine. Every night when I kiss her—even if she's already asleep when I get home—I rub my nose in her hair, smell her weedy, warm, little-girl smell and whisper that I love her more than anything. It is my ritual. But take an inventory of my days, my weeks, get inside my head and see how I'm consumed with what needs to happen next—with the papers I need to grade, the novel I need to read, the manuscript I need to edit, the colleague I need to have lunch with—and it's clear that the most important thing in my life is an ongoing mental tally. My work, my work work work. It's clear that putting my family before my work is just lip service—lip service I pay to a version of myself that I project to others. And this version of myself is one I cherish as any reader and writer of fiction cherishes one of her favorite characters. (There's a Web site where a reader can take a quiz and be told which nineteenth-century heroine she most resembles. I'm Anna Karenina: passionate, articulate, taciturn, tragic.)

Lip service—it's an odd phrase. A service is, simultaneously, a ceremony, an examination, a good turn. Funeral service. Escort service. Full-service gas station. To be of service. As a verb, service is synonymous with examine, tune, check, overhaul, and repair, although the Latin suggests a harsher and more candid origin, *servitium* from *servus* or "slave"—the condition of serving, of being a servant. In English, the word has evolved to connote complex and sometimes contradictory meanings. Its tone is devout or reverent (God's service, divine service, a marriage service) but also crass, wanton (to service someone sexually). One can perform a public service, join the Secret Service (or just the Service), polish a tea service, tune in to a broadcasting service, or work in the service sector. A broken ATM is out of service; a landscaping bill is for services rendered; and a plucky or semi-sarcastic restaurant "server" might comment that she is "at your service."

Lip service, then, is the service of lips—the lips wait on, work for, or serve up something for their owner or for others; the lips perform their duties by forming words, by being licked or by smacking loud, or (if lower) by being bit and (if upper) by keeping stiff. And since *lip* is a word that also contains multiple meanings—it is simultaneously an edge and an impudence, an organ of both speech and birth—this saying (perhaps) suggests more than words that cross the mouth but duck the heart. Perhaps lip service might mean something more than false sentiment, a politician's pledge, a mother's wish.

In an English department of thirteen, I am the only female faculty member with a child. In the Arts and Letters Division encompassing five distinct

disciplines, I am one of only four women with children. And while my college (small, public, liberal arts) has hired more women in recent years for tenure-track appointments—one might say the college has used the lips of its PR office to insist the school is servicing the gender gap—a significant number don't have children, don't want children, and some wish to remain single. Moreover—and I must admit that I'm about to give a little lip, to be a little lippy—although my college is fastened to a shoreline in southern Maryland (and thus is both beautiful and remote), it offers no campus child care; there is an explicit policy that states faculty are not supposed to hire students to take care of their children on campus grounds ("liability"); faculty and department meetings are routinely held over the dinner hour; and the maternity leave, well, it leaves much to be desired. The assumption here is clear: a faculty member has someone at home to take care of any dependents. Yet, nationally speaking (and sans data for same-sex couples), there are still only about a million stay-at-home dads in the United States—which means that my college is also assuming something else: that faculty are men with wives to rear their kids.

But my college is not wholly to blame. Of my closest female friends in graduate school—who have all subsequently had children—only two of us have stuck it out: finished the dissertation, taken the tenure-track job. The others never graduated or are now, themselves, "nonworking mothers." Academia just isn't an appealing place for moms: the hours are too long, the demand to publish too great, the need to professionalize too overwhelming. Our jobs are really three in one, after all: we teach; we are expected to be active in our fields; and we must contribute as invested campus citizens—and in addition to all that, we're also expected to come to our work as a vocation, as a calling (not as a "job"). Last spring, at a Teaching and Learning lunch I attended on living a more committed life, I was told by three senior faculty members to "just say yes." Just say "yes" when asked to chair a committee, organize a reading, write a letter of recommendation, participate in a student-run conference. Just say "yes" to attending music and theater and sports events. Just say "yes" to mentoring yet another one-on-one, year-long senior project, to being yet another club advisor, to writing yet another article for a campus publication. In other words, just say "yes" to forever blurring the boundaries between work and family, work and self.

But saying "yes" in this context smacks of giving mere lip service to living a committed (campus) life—to be a yes-woman is to wear a coat of many-colored caricatures: Cool Teacher; Smart Scholar; All-Around-Good-Gal. A committed life would be, in my definition, a life lived ever aware

that we are food for worms—that what we humans have in common is the vacant skull, those eyes starved wide, all that will remain of us after death.

In *Dead Poets Society*, a movie that has been accused of being nothing more than piously uttered platitudes in “service” of a sentimental Hollywood tragedy—and yet a film no English teacher I know of fully accepts as fiction—Robin Williams’s character, Mr. Keating, urges his students to seize the day, boys, *carpe diem*. Mr. Keating’s definition of a committed life is to sound one’s barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world, to contain multitudes, to suck the marrow out of life (he borrows his best lines from Whitman and Thoreau). In other words, Mr. Keating wants to teach these boys to say “yes” to life—but it’s not a “yes” that exchanges selfhood for service (in the most limited sense of service, that condition of slavery). It’s a “yes” that considers the magical and precious service one’s lips might offer: lips that speak true words, that are vulnerable, that kiss in tenderness, that bear a baby. Saying “yes” to a lived life, a life of full presence and attention, is belied when the “yes” comes after a question to spend more time away from the ones we love, more time away from the tasks we see as joy rather than duty.

Over the past eight years, I have been a yes-woman of the worst kind. In the same month I had a positive pregnancy test, I began the second chapter of my dissertation. Thereafter, as my belly grew and my fingers moved further and further away from the keyboard—as my internal due date forced me to defend my thesis earlier than I had intended—Katharine took a backseat to my work: I didn’t sleep as much or exercise or eat as well as I should have. Even on the day I gave birth, I cranked out just under forty job applications before driving to the hospital. And I gave up breastfeeding too early so that I could attend the Modern Language Association conference without having to pump between my job interviews.

From the first, people marveled, called me a supermom. I’d finished a dissertation on Victorian women writers in just nine months; I’d successfully defended that dissertation exactly two weeks before I gave birth; I went on the job market—applying for eighty-eight academic positions—in the first two months of Katharine’s life; I did six on-campus interviews before Katharine was six months old; and I landed a tenure-track job in English at an excellent liberal arts college. Since then I’ve coauthored a textbook; coedited a collection of letters; published my dissertation as a monograph; placed six short stories, two articles, and four encyclopedia entries; taught nine new courses; taken students to England twice; won two teaching awards; received a junior faculty research award; obtained four additional

grants to support my work; chaired a collegewide committee; hosted seven visiting writers; presented ten talks and conference papers; and been given the Student-Life Award for committed teaching and supportive mentorship. As this “service record” suggests, I’ve spent the past few years measuring, measuring—tallying myself up. It’s not even mathematics, the elegance of numbers over lines or numbers against lines—a numerical stretch toward eternity. My list is just a tally, hash marks, the work of a stick in the dirt or a pen to a napkin—a slim language of pettiness and doubt. And, of course, my sum has been added up in the expected way: this past spring I got tenure and am now on my first sabbatical, writing my first novel. I am the tally’s aggregate: well liked by colleagues, popular with students, and considered productive by members of my discipline. To those who don’t know me well, I’m amicable, admired, responsible, and hardworking: almost a nineteenth-century character, a Jane Eyre of the ivory tower—a poster-child for my institution as well as, I worry, other junior faculty members’ basic nightmare.

But this service record merely constitutes the qualities of the me on the CV, on the English Department Web site, on [ratemyprofessor.com](http://ratemyprofessor.com). The actual me is often a wreck—insecure, driven by fears of rejection and disapproval. I don’t need Dr. Phil to tell me that I’m a workaholic, that I suffer from a classic case of the Imposter Syndrome—that feeling many academic women have of being not quite/not right, not a true master of their material. The actual me is often a slipshod parent, a partial partner, an inconsistent friend, an absent family member. In the same years that I’ve made all those lines on my CV, I’ve also missed being there in the room for Katharine’s first word (“book,” not a surprise—I’d planted it); being there when she took her first step; being there when she had a temperature of 104 degrees and had to go to the hospital. I’ve missed taking her to the county fair, to the pumpkin patch field trips, to architectural workshops for kids in Washington, D.C., or to an outdoor Artsfest held each autumn close to the college. I haven’t helped Katharine with her homework, haven’t picked her up from school; and, most days, I haven’t bathed her, brushed her teeth, or put her to bed. Instead, my spouse—initially a stay-at-home, dissertating dad and now an administrator at my college—has borne the brunt of raising our child, of enabling my mania. (Katharine’s name for her father is “Madaddy.”) And even beyond neglecting Katharine, I’ve missed flying back home to Nebraska to attend both of my nephews’ first birthday parties; I’ve been in and out of my younger (and only) sibling’s life, often making her feel like someone who occupies my heart’s margin; I’m

currently estranged from the woman who has been my closest friend in my department (I wasn't there for her when she most needed me); and I've slowly disconnected from my spouse—after fourteen years of marriage, we have almost entirely separate lives now, lives driven and dictated by this demanding schedule that I, myself, have created.

At that Teaching and Learning lunch last spring, after we'd all been encouraged to become yes-folk, a young colleague of mine from Education called across the room to me. "Jennifer—I want to hear from Jennifer. She's a mom; she's a great teacher; she's successful; she's published all those books. How do you do it? How? I want to know your secret." It was a terrible moment; without meaning to, this woman (a new mother herself) asked me to strike solace from rock—from my own heart's waste. Tears cornered my eyes. How could I explain the dry ticks that marked my career, marked the time spent away from my daughter? I said, "Oh, Angela. When I'm at work, I feel guilty about not being with Kate. When I'm with Kate, I worry about the work I'm not getting done. I have nothing to offer you. No wisdom. Nothing at all." A few heads nodded; most faces turned away; they'd glimpsed that honest bone, the shape of my skull. The leader of the session said, "Thank you for your honesty, Jennifer," and the conversation moved to a lack of day-care options on or around campus, moved away from this moment when I might have serviced my lips to tell more truths.

For I'd like to put my lips to real service. I'd like to repair some of the damage I've done with my mouth's raw wound: that there is a part of me that doesn't know who she will be if she's not praised for being a supermom, a super teacher, a super writer, a super colleague, a superwoman. I like those labels. That I don't always know how to be around Katharine—I'm not easy with children; it's not innate. That I take my spouse for granted, have built my career on his patient, broad back. That I won't have another child because I'm too selfish—I want to write this novel I'm working on; I want to travel the world wide; I want to sleep through the night for the rest of my nights. That I fear the frost-thickness of my own heart, how cold I can be to others and their private pain. That I judge others, too, with my absinthe eye. And that I want to make Katharine the most important thing in my life—I want it as I crave sky's color at twilight, as I need to believe in love and in souls—but that I don't know how.

I do not have the slightest idea how to live each day with Katharine at its center.

And yet if I am to tell the full truth, I must also acknowledge that my choices are even more complex—for they are the direct result of trying to

live beyond mere lip service to personal politics. I am an English professor, but I am also an active member of my college's Women, Gender, and Sexuality Program. In part, I fell in love with my spouse, Andrew, because he was the one man I'd met who wanted to turn gender on its ear. He and I took each other's last names when we got married (a real headache for him, especially with the Selective Service, an institution that didn't want to select the service of a man who would change his name through marriage). Andrew has never minded that I'm the primary breadwinner, the career woman, the one who brings home more of the bacon and is often too tired to fry it up in the pan. And he cherishes the time he spends at home with our daughter, even though he cringes each time another parent calls him "Mr. Mom" at the playground. Andrew provides me and Katharine a genuine service, a selfless service: he has rescued Katharine from being an orphan, and he repairs me—my spirit—almost daily. Support incarnate.

And so I end with this beginning: I use my lips (via my fingers) to ask a question. Is a child deprived if she is raised primarily by her father, or is it the mother who deprives herself by choosing service over lips? For it is my lips that serve my heart, and when I don't press them to my daughter's head—when I don't make the time to do that enough—I have only the memory of having done so, a mental record of previous miracles. The miracle of my body holding hers becomes a book of faith. And just as the Christian must have faith in miracles through the symbolic record of them, the written memory, I must have faith in my love for Katharine, in her love for me—a love that is both transcendent and everyday beauty. My memory of that love—my record of it—is whether it exists, whether it will continue to exist. And I service myself, my lips, to keep it in existence, to keep it alive. Living. Present. Now.