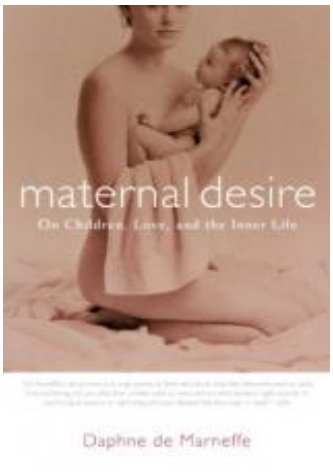
Maternal Desire

by Daphne DeMarneffe



About the Book

By reminding us that, for most women, having and rearing children provides a sense of meaning and fulfillment that nothing else in life offers, this groundbreaking book not only challenges feminist doctrine but asks us to reconsider fundamentally the status and perception of motherhood in our society. Drawing on sources that range from classic literature to contemporary clinical studies to her own experience as a working mother of three young children, Daphne de Marneffe writes with grace and lucidity as she explores the pleasures of motherhood--its emotional, intellectual, and spiritual rewards--and projects a radical new vision of women's lives today.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you think that motherhood and a mother's right to enjoy mothering need to be defended, particularly at this time? Do you agree that motherhood is taboo in some circles?

2. De Marneffe takes pains to emphasize the difference between so-called natural instincts and pervasive social ideologies that have acted to normalize women's behavior. How does she tread this line? Her detractors might say that because de Marneffe emphasizes the importance of motherhood to women, she jeopardizes the progress the women's movement has made in decoupling women from their historical role. After reading this book, how would you respond to such a criticism?

3. What do you consider the foundations of a strong parentchild relationship? How do you think the experiences of motherhood and childhood change as increasing numbers of women bear children later in life?

4. De Marneffe at one point notes that every feminist has her own set of feminist beliefs because our convictions are so intertwined with personal experience. Do you consider yourself a feminist? From what material have you built your own version of feminism?

5. If you have children, how do you relate to de Marneffe?s description of maternal desire? If you are not a mother, how does this book make you think about your own impulses to have or not have children?

6. Why do we speak of a mothering impulse rather than a parenting impulse? Do you think this book has important things to say to men as well as women?

7. Were you the child of a stay-at-home mother, or did you mother have a job outside the home? How does this help you think about what kind of parent you want to be? Based on your experience, what do you think is best for children?

8. De Marneffe argues for a nuanced understanding of motherhood and the social role of women, in contrast to the voice that calls motherhood an impediment to women?s independence. Is it only at this point, decades after the 1970s "women?s liberation" movement, that critiques like de Marneffe?s can begin to surface?

9. Have you ever felt guilty for wanting to mother? If you are a working mother, have you felt the need to deemphasize your motherhood in your work-life interactions? Does this book help you claim your identity as a mother?

Author Bio

I was born in Boston in 1959, the second of three children born within three years to a psychiatrist father and a housewife mother. The term housewife tends to conjure images of boredom in modern minds, but perhaps the most significant fact about my childhood was how much my mother enjoyed caring for us. My siblings and I benefited from her love of drama and creative spirit, spending hours learning the entire songbooks of the musicals of the day.

When our parents divorced in 1967, my mother went back to college, and eventually became a teacher. I shuttled back and forth between my homes in Arlington and Cambridge, and ultimately attended Harvard College, where I studied psychology and social relations and pursued a passion for the theater. While writing an honors thesis on the moral thinking of prostitutes, I realized that I was drawn to looking through a psychological lens at unorthodox subjects, a theme that has recurred in all my subsequent research. Working during college and afterwards variously as a dishwasher, waitress, housecleaner, receptionist, accounts payable clerk, research assistant, and freelance writer, I eventually decided to become a clinical psychologist and began attending UC Berkeley in 1985.

I married in 1991, gave birth to our first child in 1992 and finished my Ph.D. in 1993, when I began working part-time as a therapist for children and adults. I was licensed as a clinical psychologist in 1996, a month before our second child was born, and continued practice until mid-1998, when our third child was born. I pursued my scholarly work on the side, writing articles and book reviews on topics such as gender development, feminism, hysteria, and false memory syndrome. With the birth of our third child, I became increasingly curious about the practice of mothering itself, and decided to direct my intellectual energy toward understanding it better. **Maternal Desire** is the result.

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