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Robert Payne, *Reimagining the Family: Lesbian Mothering in Contemporary French Literature*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021. vii + 214 pp. Bibliography. \$65.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781788747714; \$63.95 U.S. (pdf); ISBN 9781788747721; \$63.95 U.S. (epub) ISBN 9781788747738; \$63.95 U.S. (MOBI) ISBN 9781788747745.

Reviewed by Jessica Garcés Jensen, University of Southern Indiana.

Robert Payne's *Reimagining the family: Lesbian Mothering in Contemporary French Literature* provides a thoughtful and nuanced analysis of literary experiences of lesbian mothering in ten works published between 1970-2013—a critical period for same-sex families in France which preceded the legalization of same-sex marriage and adoption in 2013, and lesbian and single women's access to fertility treatment in 2019. Payne describes this diverse corpus comprised of a variety of fictional and autobiographical texts as capturing lesbian mothers' "journeys to motherhood" (p. 185). He illustrates how these works "contribute to the debates on same-sex families and to what is meant by motherhood and the family in twenty-first century France" (p. 2).

The first chapter establishes the study's theoretical framework within psychoanalytic, feminist, and queer theories of mothering. Payne provides a clear overview of psychoanalytic approaches to mothering over time, revealing its "relatively limited theoretical paradigm for thinking about same-sex parenting" (p. 28). He then explores evolving feminist thought on mothering from Simone de Beauvoir and Nancy Chodorow to Julia Kristeva and Andrea O'Reilly. Finally, he reviews social scientific studies on same-sex families from the late twentieth century to present various angles of the sameness-difference debate within the context of the same-sex family. Payne systematically establishes how the family has been understood and "reimagined" over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and presents the theories and debates with which his corpus engages.

Chapters two and three analyze narratives that give voice to lesbian mothers who have children in heterosexual relationships and engage with traditional definitions of a mother. Chapter two examines three texts, Jocelyne François's *Les Bonheurs* (1970), Axelle Mallet's *Le Choix de la reine* (2009) and Paula Dumon's *La Vie dure: Éducation sentimentale d'une lesbienne* (2010) that depict lesbian mothers who initially end same-sex relationships to have and raise children, but ultimately assume their sexuality. Through textual analysis, Payne demonstrates how each work "engage[s] with the heteronormative claim that one cannot be a lesbian and a mother and the patriarchal belief that her sole or primary concern is her children's welfare" (p. 53). Payne

convincingly argues that these works “expose the norms of the family and the challenges facing lesbian mothers in the period before same-sex parenting became a political issue” (p. 84).

In the third chapter, Payne examines maternal ambivalence in the context of lesbian mothering by concentrating on two works from Hélène de Monferrand’s trilogy, *Les Amies d’Héloïse* (1990) and *Les Enfants d’Héloïse* (1997). Payne first engages in a formal analysis of the epistolary novel *Les Amies d’Héloïse*, examining Monferrand’s use of the letter “as a space for debate” (p. 92) within which to question “norms of gender and sexuality” (p. 94). Monferrand positions her writing within the classical epistolary tradition using intertextual references to the novels of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Pierre Choderlos de Laclos to inscribe her works within the literary canon. Payne concludes that Monferrand seeks to “normalize lesbianism and lesbian writing” (p. 101), while “rewriting ideas about women received through literature” (p. 104). Moreover, Monferrand “challenge[s]”, notably through humour, the common belief that women love their children absolutely and instinctively” while suggesting that an ambivalence can be felt by children towards parents as well (p. 115).

The fourth and fifth chapters examine five contemporary twenty-first century texts that represent planned lesbian families and reimagine family structures that move beyond monomaternistic and biologicistic ideas of mothering: Éliane Girard’s *Mais qui va garder le chat?* (2005), Laurence Cinq-Fraix’s *Family Pride* (2006), Brigitte Célier’s *Maman, Mamour, ses deux mamans: Grandir dans une famille homoparentale* (2008), Myriam Blanc’s *Elles eurent beaucoup d’enfants et se marièrent: Histoire d’une famille homoparentale* (2012), and Claire Bénard’s *Prince Charmante: Que fait-on quand on tombe amoureuse d’une femme?* (2013). These works explore the plurality of same-sex family structures created through non-medically assisted artificial insemination, co-parenting with a gay couple, co-parenting with a gay man (who dies from AIDS before the child’s birth), artificial insemination with an unknown donor, and fertility treatment sought abroad. Payne first analyzes how these works portray lesbian couples arriving at the decision to form a family together and confronting many legal obstacles. Then, the chapter moves to examine varied perspectives voiced on role of the father in these families. Finally, Payne considers how these works reflect on the role of biology in mothering. “What comes out most of all from these texts, however, is the importance, and difficulty, of constructing a maternal identity for non-biological mothers, as well as for members of the extended family” (p. 153). In the fifth chapter, Payne returns to an in-depth discussion of difference, sameness, and equality and how this corpus engages in the sameness-difference debate. He demonstrates how the texts interact with the separatist, difference-as-progressive, normalizing, and historical arguments within this debate. Payne suggests that these texts strategically use identity politics to push for legal changes and gain visibility.

*Reimagining the family: Lesbian Mothering in Contemporary French Literature* is the first study of lesbian mothering in French literature, providing a valuable contribution to studies in LGBT+ literature, women’s writing, and mothering among others. The book is thoughtful, well-researched, and creates a foundation upon which future explorations of lesbian or queer parenting in French literature will be built.

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