

## Virginia Haussegger

She is not the ogre she might seem, but that doesn't stop a number of women I know avoiding contact with Anne Manne. They don't want to discuss her, don't want to listen to her, and keep her book *Motherhood* at the bottom of their reading pile. It's a bit like going to the gym: they know they should do it for the sake of their health, but exercise requires a shifting of priorities – and so does reading Manne. She guilts women into feeling they must rethink their choices.

As one corporate high-flyer and new mother said to me recently when I spotted Manne's book gathering dust under her bed, "I had to stop reading it. I'm about to go back to work and put Jack in day-care. I already feel like a bad mother. She's freaking me out!"

As a non-mother I have no such reason to be threatened by her. But that's not to say Manne doesn't worry me. She does. And her *Quarterly Essay* worries me a lot. But let me be clear. Far from shooting the messenger, I want to applaud Anne Manne – thunderously. We need to hear her and we desperately need to have this discussion. Frankly I wish this gently spoken, considered and thoughtful woman would occasionally yell through a megaphone, so that more would take note.

What worries me most is that much of what Manne argues is right. I take issue with aspects of her argument, and will come to that. But, in short, Manne is arguing for a social revolution and she is right to do so. We do need to raise the place of children in our lives, if women are to go on having them. And we need to raise the value of mothering, if women are to continue doing it. We also need to look beyond economic measures and the GDP as indicators of Australia's general wellbeing. However – and this is where it gets tricky – attempting to devalue the personal and emotional benefits of paid work, or the satisfaction derived from "competitive achievement," isn't going to fix the problem, or help find foot-soldiers for the much needed revolution. Women enjoy and crave the

challenges of demanding and interesting work just as much as men – let's not forget that.

I'd like to say that somewhere in Manne's drubbing of the "sanctification" of work and the glorification of child-rearing is a "middle-path" approach. But as it stands in Australia right now, it would seem women need to either love being at home with young children, or love being at work without them. Personally I don't think either is true. I suspect there are times when women both love it and hate it – on the same day. Which is why I don't have a problem with the model put forward by British sociologist Catherine Hakim.

As Manne points out, Hakim believes women fall into three general categories. A small percentage will always be fully career-focused, and an equally small percent will always be "home-centred." The biggest group in the middle will be "adaptive," that is, they like a bit of both worlds: working and raising children. Those women accommodate that dual pull by restructuring their work hours around family needs until their kids are older and they can work more. Hakim's overview is neither radical nor necessarily conservative. In fact, like Anne Summers, her analysis strikes me as "bleeding obvious." Nevertheless, when the Howard government invited Hakim here five years ago for a lecturing tour of Australia, there were rumblings of protest. The reasons were more to do with Hakim's perceived attack on feminists for being "dictatorial" about women's choices than with what she was here to say.

And this, too, is where Manne runs into trouble – on the issue of choice. Her strong advocacy for mothers to stay at home full-time with their children, at least during their infancy, has dictatorial overtones. Women don't like that. Already battered and bruised by the myriad contradictions they face when contemplating how they might juggle having a baby, raising a family and keeping a foothold in the world of work, many new mothers don't want to hear about the dangers of long hours in child-care. Just as hungry career aspirants with big ambitions don't want to hear the sound of their fertility window creaking shut.

Manne's *Quarterly Essay* discussion of the under-reported and often ignored data on the effect of long hours in child-care, on toddlers and babies in particular, is startling stuff. The high levels of the stress hormone cortisol found, even in children in high quality care, must surely alarm all parents. As should the evidence Manne cites about retarded development and learning difficulties. Even though I would have thought much of this was – to quote Summers again – "bleeding obvious." I mean, wouldn't any parent assume that touching, holding, loving, sharing, smiling and being joyous with babies is necessary for their healthy

development, their sense of security and their ability to form intimate attachments? Perhaps not.

The “scare” element in what Manne has to say about child-care is strong. Is it a “tactic”? No, it’s a truth: a most uncomfortable one. And for that, Manne will be ignored by some who don’t want to hear it, and shouted down by others who don’t like it. Like Manne I too have been accused of running something of a scare campaign, when I went public about my own battle with age-related infertility. While frightening young women into a “get breeding” regime was the last thing on my mind, I nevertheless feel all the public thrashing I received was worth it each time a young woman tells me she read my articles, or book, and now has a baby, or is thinking about it. Sometimes the use of scare tactics – albeit unwittingly – is what’s required to jolt some serious review about priorities, and what matters most.

Manne is right about the very vexed nature of women’s so-called “choice.” I have been astounded and dismayed at how brutally we bludgeon women over the head with that ugly phrase, “Well, it was your choice.” By throwing these profound life-cycle issues of fertility, family, child-care and career interruption back at women as if these are private matters to be grappled with behind a closed kitchen door alone, can be extremely isolating. Worse – many women wallow around in that isolation, beating up on themselves when they don’t cope well and their various needs collide. In my travels interviewing women about their fertility choices, I found that never once did a woman look beyond her own private world for some kind of help to make sense of the various life collisions. The lack of structural supports, and the paucity of policy to help accommodate these important life choices, didn’t seem to feature in women’s thinking. While many spoke of work cultures that paid much lip-service to “flexibility” and “family friendliness,” none of them really expected – or got – substantive support.

The workplace’s intolerance of absence became more apparent the longer women stayed at home with their children. Those who chose full-time home mothering for more than a couple of years became sadly disillusioned with their careers and the considerable investments they’d made in them. While Manne is right to suggest the marginalisation of women in the workforce is something “usually shrugged off as one of life’s inevitable compromises,” the dreadful thing is it’s not just men but women who are doing the shrugging. I repeatedly heard women sigh and say, “But, it was my choice.” Yet, the sentiment that perhaps made my skin crawl most was the old nugget, “Well, someone’s got to do it,” when speaking about caring for a young family and managing a household.

And this is where I find myself at odds with Anne Manne. Yes, motherhood has long been devalued – no question about that. Yes, women pay a high price for making the choice to stay at home with their children. Yes, child-care has become increasingly commercialised, and for some even profitable. Yes, the true “worth of a wife” has become more apparent as women join the workforce (yet that has done nothing to improve her status). And yes, the “care penalty” for caring for others, be it elderly or children, is harsher than ever. And yet what concerns me most is that, at the core of all this, is a strange apathy – from women. Manne doesn’t address this.

Early in her essay, Manne makes her case against the American feminist Linda Hirshman quite clear. And while far from wanting to be branded a “local Hirshmanite,” a re-reading of that noisy woman’s now infamous 2005 essay in the *American Prospect* is worth the trouble. Sure, Hirshman is shrill, and her Rules are silly. Instructing women to have no more than one baby; to “marry down” or marry young as “younger men are potential high-status companions”; and to embrace the power of money by losing “their capitalism virginity” as soon as they leave college, is part humour and part polemical rant. Women can see through that. But as in many polemics, once you wade past all the screaming headlines, into the body of what she has to say, there is a sobering message. That message, to put it in the Antipodean vernacular, is simply this: men are getting away with blue murder, and women are letting them.

Hirshman has clearly never been into the boardroom of an Australian corporation. So when she says, “the public world has changed, albeit imperfectly, to accommodate women among the elite,” she is being way, way too kind. However, she is on to something when she says, “[but] private lives have hardly budged.” Then she hits a potent mark with this stinging claim: “The real glass ceiling is at home.”

Hirshman quite rightly frets about feminism stalling. While she is specifically interested in the “opt-out” generation – those well-educated, well-heeled young college graduates who can afford to stay at home, cook pies and raise kids – her focus on the failure of feminism to radically change the domestic world is valid and pertinent to Australia.

Why are almost all the women I know still doing the lion’s share of domestic work, when most of them are equally or more highly professionally qualified than their men? Is it because the role of attending to the home chores, the household management and the raising of young children is the sole province of women? Is domesticity inherently female?

One of the women I interviewed for my book almost spat at me when I posed

this last question. Maya was an aspiring QC whose career was “on hold.” She was folding underpants at the kitchen table as we spoke: “It’s the most thankless, god-awful existence. I never wanted this role. I hate housework. I hate being at home. It’s completely toxic.”

Not everyone, it seems, can be lulled by the joyousness of being at home with toddlers. Not when they’ve had a taste of how intoxicating career adrenalin can really be. Right now, I have no idea how we can make folding the washing feel more fruitful. But I do suspect we can do an awful lot more to bring men into the mix. This is where the revolution needs to go. To that end, Manne’s essay should serve as a good, solid kick-start.

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