This is a timely and much needed book. The volume offers a multiplicity of narratives of motherhood and childhood. Mothers have long been subjected to surveillance, but in 21st-century global North contexts, motherhood has emerged as a site of intense scrutiny and as a highly individualised practice. Mothers are held to account for a host of societal ills, from juvenile delinquency to societal breakdown (de Benedictis, 2012). Mothers must meet rising demands to be labourers and consumers while, at the same time, they must continue to provide the majority of care for their children (de Benedictis, 2012). Failure to match up to these demands renders them precarious in relationship to their status as ‘good mother’ (Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2017).

But, as Puar (2012) reminds us, precarity is differentially, rather than equally, experienced. These stories are of mothers for whom precarity is deeply felt in neoliberal-ableist times (Goodley et al., 2014). They are mothers who have failed to meet the demands of the politics of normal, that is, to be a good mother who produces a desirable child; they are mothers of disabled children. While issues of class, race, gender, (hetero)sexuality, poverty and colonialism are, crucially, written through the accounts, in the book, disability studies is always front and centre. Here, disability studies is framed as an exploration into the ways in which societies represent and respond to disability; disability is understood as being situated in historical and contemporary (bio)political contexts (Lalvani, 2019). The stories are located in the perspective of disablism in which people with impairments experience less favourable treatment in contemporary cultural contexts and, at the same time, the stories draw attention to and confront ableism in society, understood as the ‘persistent devaluing of disability’ as ‘an inherently negative state of being’ (Lalvani, 2019, p.7).

Above all, this book is unashamedly a collection of personal stories about motherhood, mothering and mothers. I say ‘unashamedly’ because there is still a lingering resistance to story-telling about disability and mothering as social science research (Douglas et al., 2021). In disability studies, personal accounts have been resisted by
those who fear that they may only serve to reinforce tragedy driven and deficit models of disability (Oliver, 1990). Feminist researchers have long since noted the discomfort personal stories invoke, while at the same time offering compelling arguments for a place for accounts of lived experience and of the psycho-emotional aspects of disablism (Morris, 1992; Thomas, 1999). And yet, as O’Reilly (2016) has noted, feminist motherhood studies has yet to be fully legitimised within the larger feminist project.

Notwithstanding the need for personal accounts of mothering in disability studies, story-telling is inevitably a risky business. Telling stories demands affective labour on the part of the teller, and raises complex issues of who owns the story and of who has the right to tell stories about whom (Thackray, 2017). And telling stories may not be enough – they must be to some purpose, as the stories told here are, they must be focused on social change (Runswick-Cole and Ryan, 2019).

For me, the key contribution of this book is the focus on social change, which is achieved through collective action. This is a collection of stories in which the authors individually and collectively shed a light on their lived experience and on their attempts to navigate institutional systems and cultural contexts to seek inclusivity and acceptance for themselves and for their families. Individually and together, the stories demand us to think differently about the category of motherhood, and who may lay claim to it.

The stories share much in common. The accounts are linked by themes of seeking acceptance and inclusivity; of guilt and of shame; stigma and exclusion; silencing and blame; choice and decision-making; uncertainty and fear; joy and celebration; collective action and campaigns; and of love. Schools, the clinic and communities emerge as common sites of surveillance in which the shadow on the norm darkens mothers’ and children’s lives, but also as sites of (collective) resistance. Accounts of able-bodied and able-minded privilege sit alongside pervasive discourses of inadequate/bad/blessed/saintly/super-mums. And yet, by being-in-common with one another, by sharing their experiences and resources, the authors’ counter-narratives of resistance emerge as a practice of ‘commoning’, of sharing for the public good (Linebaugh, 2009). Taken as a whole, the book can be read as an invitation to join an emerging ‘maternal commons’ to resist the demands put upon mothers of disabled children in 21st-century neoliberal ableist contexts (Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2017). Whatever your relationship with the categories of motherhood, disability and childhood, I encourage you to read the book and to accept its invitation.

REFERENCES


