

1-2007

Uniquely Alike: A Review of Great with Child: On Becoming a Mother

Melanie Springer Mock

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/eng_fac

 Part of the [Creative Commons](#)

REVIEWS

Uniquely Alike: A Review of *Great with Child: On Becoming a Mother*

MELANIE SPRINGER MOCK

January 2007

    No comments

By Debra Rienstra (Putnam, 2003; \$14.95)

It rarely matters which text we are discussing: nonfiction about the AIDS epidemic, the latest chick lit, a novel set in India. Inevitably, my book group will begin comparing its birthing stories, as if -- magically, inexplicably -- an elderly male Hindu protagonist reminds someone about the time she dilated ten centimeters.

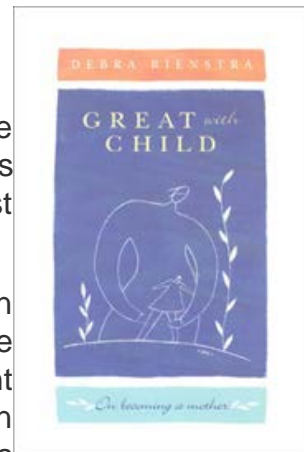
Our comparing pregnancy and labor activity reached its fever pitch last summer, when two in our group were expecting, and one had recently delivered her child. The discussions generally followed a well-trod path: pregnant woman describes her recent symptoms of fatigue and bloating and kicking. Someone else remembers her own pregnancy, with more debilitating fatigue, gassier bloating, and a sure-footed fetus pounding her uterine walls.

And so it goes, a tournament of maternal fitness in which competitors fight to show who the strongest mom is: the one who suffered nine long months of morning sickness? Or the one who had two months' bed rest? The woman who refused the epidural and gave birth to her nine-pound behemoth? Or the woman who embraced medication, but whose squeamish husband fainted before she started pushing? In time, the one-upping stories give way to debate about what it means to be a real mom, about whether being given anesthesia means giving in.

Meanwhile, the poor Hindu protagonist is long forgotten. And so too is the fact that, though I am a mother of two beautiful boys, I'm the only one in the group never to have been pregnant. Perhaps understandably, then, when my friends begin to swap their birth stories, competing for the title of best mom, I always feel lonely and alienated and even a bit insecure. Without the pregnancy and labor experience, I wonder about the merits of my journey to motherhood. Do others perceive me as a real mom, given that I do not have that defining moment of delivery, either natural or otherwise?

Considering my own insecurities, I began reading Debra Rienstra's [Great with Child: On Becoming a Mother](#) with some caution, as the book promised to take its readers on "the fascinating journey of understanding the power and meaning of birth." An acquaintance at a professional conference had highly recommended the book upon discovering I was the mother of two small children -- but then, she had not known my boys were adopted. And thus, the first few pages of Rienstra's text set me on edge: here was another woman sharing her pregnancy woes and describing the "harrowing intensity of birth." I imagined once again feeling alienated, this time reading a book-length narrative about the journey I will never take.

My begrudging willingness to stick with Rienstra's story, though, proved valuable in the end. Although the narrative of [Great with Child](#) turns on the pregnancy and labor of the author's third child, the book offers much more than a run-of-the-mill chronicle one might expect in a birthing memoir. Instead, Rienstra uses the account of her son Philip's birth to explore themes important to mothers of every kind. Her individual



experience becomes, in a number of ways, universal, as she describes what it means to desire a child, to sacrifice one's self wholly to the child, and to discover, in that sacrifice, a greater sense of self, of purpose, of God. Even though I did not take the same path toward becoming a mother as did Rienstra, I could still resonate with her in most every aspect of that becoming.

A summary of the book perhaps seems unnecessary, as the text follows -- at least structurally -- the usual trajectory of pregnancy and childbirth. Rienstra, an Associate Professor of English at [Calvin College](#) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, begins her story with the initial thrum of maternal desire and the attendant decision to have another child: "Between meetings and paperwork and meal plans and financial decisions and the seemingly more substantial everything of life, it drifts quietly toward resolution, takes hold in a little crevice of the mind, and begins." In the following pages, Rienstra describes the hoped-for beginnings of Philip, the hard work of conception, the disappointment of a miscarriage, the projection of futures for a child who may or may not happen. And then, the embryo holds, begins to form, becomes a son who will complete Rienstra's family. A fairly normal pregnancy precedes a fairly normal labor, though of course extraordinary in its own way. The final third of Rienstra's book captures the exhausting months following a child's birth, more harrowing it seems than the birth itself as Rienstra suffers through insomnia and teeters on the edges of post-partum depression. In the last chapter, Philip celebrates his first birthday, Rienstra's "little man" becoming his own clearly defined self. Rienstra is changed, too, her sense of purpose fortified by this miracle child she is now raising.

And Philip is a miracle; the gathering together of mother and child is in itself a blessing to celebrate. Rienstra compellingly shows that this "miracle" and "blessing" is not a convenient truism, not the provenance of card companies and baby showers. Rather, in describing her own journey, Rienstra portrays motherhood as a magical, miraculous, mysterious, even transcendent experience. She leads her readers to consider the extraordinary, complex biological process that produces humans and the almost inexplicable relationship that binds mothers to their children, calling us to an overwhelming love for infants who cannot reciprocate. She illustrates how motherhood is the most unique experience imaginable, despite evidence that it is, paradoxically, an experience a good number of women share.

Of course, not every woman (or even every mother) will be afforded the joy of biological motherhood, and, I suspect, Rienstra's depiction of her own child's birth may force some readers to revisit the pain they have felt in longing for a gift so many others have received. Yet, as I read Rienstra's story, I was struck by the number of ways her experience resonated with my own. At times, I almost felt as if we are walking parallel paths through motherhood: the footing on that path has been different, certainly, but the scenery is alike in many, many ways. For those who wonder if another type of motherhood might prove second best to biological, Rienstra's narrative may, at least, affirm that any journey toward becoming a mother will be in its own way remarkable.

For example, in a chapter titled "Fear," Rienstra explores her own anxiety about the unknown being within her: Is the fetus healthy? Is he growing? Would he emerge from her body weakened by disease, his life compromised by disability? As in other chapters, Rienstra uses her story as a starting point for deeper reflection, a "slightly darkened discharge" sending her "into a quiet panic." She attempts to allay her fears by consulting pregnancy books, which describe worst-case scenarios that accelerate her alarm; friends and acquaintances offer little consolation as they relate horror stories they have heard second- or third-hand. Still, in narrating the potential difficulties in her own pregnancy, Rienstra aptly describes the fears that beset anyone willing to take a risk that all might not be well, that a child's future cannot be divined by pregnancy books, by Dr. Sears, by others who have had dissimilar, frightening experiences. That is, she aptly describes fears that are a birthright of motherhood.

Before we adopted our sons, we received a medical report and a thumbprint picture of each. For months and months, this was all we had: the only clues to who our sons were, to whether they were healthy or not. As Rienstra studied her body for evidence that something was amiss, I scrutinized the medical reports for new information, consulting adoption books that presented frightening diagnoses for internationally

adopted children; when others heard we were adopting, they offered their second-hand stories of adoptions gone wrong. Rienstra's own story drew me back to this fear, a gut-wrenching anxiety that compelled me to stare at small pictures, seeking clues that I would never find. Underlying this fear was the sense that my life was sufficiently blessed, that a healthy child was too much to ask for, and that, like Rienstra, "I don't deserve another joy anyway."

Rienstra does not leave her readers here, dwelling in fear. Instead, she mines her faith for ways to resolve -- or at least accept -- her anxiety: in doing so, she brings her readers along with her. Because Rienstra believes much of a mother's fear can be about loss -- loss of a child, of a child's health, of a dream for perfect motherhood -- she explores what the Bible and other important works of literature tell us about loss and grief. Her Christian faith leads her to believe that because God loves us deeply and because God loves us enough to make us autonomous beings, we will not be spared grief in this world. Yet, she believes, God will hold her in her fear and will grieve with her in her loss. She writes, "In the midst of fear and doubt, I find testimony that the God who heals the world attends to singular griefs. I still live with my fears for my children and myself, but here in this place I see God's tears -- falling to earth to water and transform."

Rienstra's unabashed reliance on her faith and on scripture, in this chapter and elsewhere, may sit uncomfortably with readers who do not share her Christian commitment. Yet while her Christianity informs much of -- perhaps all of -- what she writes in [Great with Child](#), the text should not be considered an Evangelical tract or devotional bent on converting the masses to the author's own faith perspective. Indeed, Rienstra also relies on other significant texts to inform her understanding of motherhood, including the plays of Shakespeare, writings from the mystic Julian of Norwich, poems by Adrienne Rich and Sharon Olds, the stories of Greek mythology, and even the [The Epic of Gilgamesh](#). Rienstra nicely integrates her consideration of the Bible and of world literature into her personal narrative, making the texts feel wholly accessible to her readers. And, by including these texts, she shows again how the experiences of motherhood -- portrayed in literature and art by everyone from Dante to the apostles, from Julian to Shakespeare -- is both ordinary and transcendent.

[Great with Child](#) succeeds because it is honest, humorous, and thoughtful. It is able to convince readers of the seeming paradox that our journeys toward becoming mothers are unique gifts given us, no matter the course we each take, and that, conversely, each journey to motherhood will have many similarities, like-characteristics that have bound women together through time. In presenting this paradox, Rienstra moves far beyond the pregnancy and labor stories -- those my friends tell, those found in contemporary literature -- that feature a superwoman protagonist giving birth in the most unprecedented way possible. Instead, [Great with Child](#) calls us to celebrate together the journeys we have taken and the stories we have to tell. This is the kind of affirmation that all of us -- real mothers everywhere -- certainly need.

Melanie Springer Mock

Melanie Springer Mock is a Professor in the Department of English at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon, and mother to two ten-year-old boys. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *Christian Feminism Today*, *Adoptive Families*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Mennonite Weekly Review*, and *Literary Mama*, among other places. Her most recent book is *Just Moms: Conveying Justice in an Unjust World*, published this year. She blogs about (and deconstructs) images of women embedded in Christian popular culture at *Ain't I a Woman*.