

**Maureen Sullivan, *The Family of Woman: Lesbian Mothers, their Children, and the Undoing of Gender***

**Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004. 312 pages, ISBN: 0-520-23964-4 (paperback).**

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Can lesbian families undo the gender order? Have the changes in social acceptance of same-sex couples, combined with developments in fertility assistance, introduced a new era of gender equality? Maureen Sullivan addresses the multiplicity in family forms made possible by recent social and technological changes in her book, *The Family of Woman*.

Sullivan interviewed and observed 34 families in the San Francisco Bay Area; each was headed by two lesbian co-parents and had at least one biologically related child conceived through donor insemination. Sullivan talked to the parents and observed the families interact over a 9-month period. In the book she explores how these families negotiate with heteronormative expectations, how they divide parenting and household tasks, and how they relate to extended family members, especially their families of origin.

The ethnographic elements of this book are very interesting. For example, Sullivan documents the reflections of lesbian partners' decisions about whether to use an anonymous sperm donor mediated by a third party or to use the sperm of a family friend. For those couples who choose the latter, the stories of the donor's role in the family and in relation to the child reflects both the wide variety of choices in building a family and the stress of uncertainty about which way courts might decide a potential custody dispute. Given that family courts have a long history of privileging biological relationships over all others, families who maintain relationships with sperm donors make sure to delineate clear boundaries and to establish clearly that the lesbian partners, not the male sperm donor, are the "real" parents of the child.

The personal details of the everyday lives of these women, told in the voices of Sullivan's interview participants, add a human dimension to this literature, which often focuses on more abstract discussions of adoption policy, child custody battles, and same-sex marriage debates. Sullivan's work gets to the heart of the interpersonal dynamics of family building with rich discussions, for example, of the work that parents do to construct a family narrative that includes a central role for the non-birth mother. And her descriptions of the changing nature

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34 of her respondents' relations with their own mothers, who often became more accepting of  
35 their lesbian daughters when grandchildren were born, were inspiring.

36 Sullivan's ambitious research question, whether these new family forms might hold the  
37 promise of the "undoing of gender," while provocative, remains unanswered. Other scholars,  
38 such as Judith Stacey and Timothy J. Biblarz (2001) have identified some preliminary  
39 evidence that children of lesbian parents are less constrained by traditional gender norms.  
40 Similarly, the couples in Sullivan's study organized their parenting in ways that differed from  
41 the traditionally gendered, heterosexist division of labor. However, how great a challenge  
42 these acts of non-conformity are to the social institution of gender remains unclear, especially  
43 taking into account the wide variety in families in general. As Coontz (2000) reminds us, even  
44 supposedly "traditional" heterosexual families have not been as uniform as we might expect.  
45 None of this variety, however, has yet undermined the gender order. Even so, Sullivan's  
46 intimate, qualitative study of biologically bound lesbian families provides important insights  
47 and critical analysis of how such families negotiate a partially accepting, partially hostile  
48 social and legal climate, clearly a struggle that will continue for years to come.

## 49 References

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- 52 Stacey, Judith and Biblarz T. J. 2001. "(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?" *American*  
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