

A Conversation with Evelyn McDonnell, Author of MAMARAMA

What inspired you to write *Mamarama*?

I felt like I knew a lot of people, many of us women, who had been trying to lead these unconventional lives in the wake of feminism, civil rights, punk, the '60s, etc., and were now finding ourselves in the most traditional role – parenting – albeit taking it on somewhat later in the game than people did in the old days. I know my friends and I learn a lot by listening to each other, and I figured there was a wider audience of us out there that I could speak to as a writer. There's certainly a growing body of literature addressing this new generation of caregivers, from magazines like *Hipmama* and *Brain, Child* to books like *The Big Rumpus* and *AlternaDad*. But family is about the biggest topic there is: you can't have too many books about it. We all may have a lot in common, but each story is also unique.

What does the word *Mamarama* come from?

From a conversation I had with my friend Susie, photographer and mama. We were talking about our roller-coaster lives and it just popped out of my mouth, of our spinning brains. I immediately felt like it defined something for me—for us. *Mamarama* is not about the balance, so much, as the crazy, wonderful continuum of being modern women with children and agendas.

You don't become a mother until halfway through the book. What took you so long?

That's what my dad asked me for years! This is a book about the journey and the destination, the *rama* and the *mama*. It's almost perfectly divided between the two. The typical coming-of-age narrative ends when you start a family: the last scene of every romantic comedy is a wedding. That's not reality. I mean, I've had two weddings, as have a lot of people I know! I was trying to deconstruct and rework that ad line: "A baby changes everything." Certainly, becoming a stepmother and then a mother were two of the biggest events of my life. But I really wanted to present children as a holistic part of an artistic existence – even though it took me almost 40 years to achieve that holism myself.

You talk about the "new momism." What's that?

In one of the most reactionary and misogynist tomes of all time, Philip Wylie (another Florida writer!) coined the term momism in the 1940s as a frame for his attack on the social and political gains of women. A half-century later, feminist writers have attacked *The Mommy Myth*, the notion that parenting is the key to women's self-fulfillment. I agree with some of the Mommy Myth, but I worry that, like a lot of feminist thought, it sometimes throws the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. I wanted to claim momism as a positive term: to describe the rise of a cadre of women who bring their progressive views to bear on their parenting, and vice-versa. It's just another way of saying women can change the world, that someday a mother will take over the U.S. congress surrounded by children and grandchildren.

Music’s a running theme in this book. Why are you so obsessed with pop?

I grew up in a house not so much of music makers but of music consumers. The years of my childhood, the ‘60s and ‘70s, was a time when a lot of great music was on the air and in the air. You didn’t have to dig through iTunes to find the Beatles, the Jackson 5, Bruce Springsteen, etc. I found the same sort of excitement and escape in songs that I found in books – but unlike the solitary act of reading, music can be connective, it’s communal. My friends and I could sing these songs together and trade 45s and later make each other mix tapes.

When you say “dig the new breeders,” are you celebrating a return to family and heteronormativity?

Yes and no. I’m using the term breeders – a word for straight people used mostly in the queer community – in much the way Kim Deal did, when she made it the name of her great ‘90s all-girl band: I’m “reclaiming” the epithet, tongue firmly in cheek. I do believe in the importance of family but I have a very all-embracing view of what family is. My own is certainly not traditional, though it’s increasingly common: I’ve spent a decade raising another woman’s two daughters. Families by no mean need to have one mother and one father: they can have two of each, or just one of one. Single mothers are some of the strongest people I know.

I’ve been greatly cheered by the way a number of lesbians and gays have understood and embraced *Mamarama*. After all, it’s a story of discovering one’s identity in ways that define and dare the “safe” gender paradigms. Clearly, by being part of a heterosexual married couple, I don’t have to overcome a lot of the prejudices and roadblocks that others may face. But I’m by no means advocating a return to *Leave it to Beaver* days.

How do you feel about the term mom lit?

Okay, as long as mom lit is not mistaken for mom lite. I can’t deny that I’ve had a somewhat chick-lit kind of life, as the first half of *Mamarama* relates. And as with the heroines of those novels, child-caring is now a part of my life. A big part.

But labels are reductive and especially troublesome when they’re connected to gender. One of the biggest inspirations for me was Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which I regard as one of the first of these neo-parenting memoirs but is not usually placed next to *Confessions of a Slacker Mom* on a shelf. It should be. As I was trying to figure out how to be a parent to my stepdaughters, I completely related to Dave’s struggle to take care of his little brother. And of course, my story, like Dave’s, is not just about parenting: it’s about a generational search for identity and place.