



MOMMY WRITES

What happens at home stays at home? Not if your mom is a writer. TEXT: DOROTHY WOODEND

A few months ago, I stood in a room while a group of women read from *Double Lives*, a collection of essays about writing and motherhood. My own mother was one of the authors. Afterwards, someone asked me if I felt funny about showing up in my mother's books. "You get used to it," I said. But I didn't really mean it. My sister once said to my mother, "We're all just material to you." To which she said, "No, no darling." But, of course, she lied.

No one exists in a vacuum, and writing about your own life often necessitates writing about other people. If you choose to write about your kids, however, things can get especially fraught. A great many talented women—and men—have wrestled with this decision: Jane Silcott is one of them. Silcott, whose essay *Drafts 1-11 (Not Including 10)* won second prize at the CBC Literary Awards, has two kids—Colin, 15, and Olivia, 13—both of whom show up in her work. "For me, I think it comes down to what I

could say to their faces," says Silcott. "If I can't say it, I can't write it. This, of course, is a little restrictive, but for me, the relationship matters more than the writing. It's easy to sound all moral and pure in theory but much harder to resist the urge to use those perfect bits of real life on the page."

Whether they feel thrilled—or used—at the prospect of showing up in print also depends largely on the personality of the child. "When Colin was five, he and his friends were playing and I was sitting there, writing," says Silcott. "He came over to me and asked if I was writing about them. When I admitted to it, he said 'Don't.'"

Susan Olding, whose book *Pathologies: A Life in Essays* includes a number of essays about her adoptive daughter, Maia, faced particular complexities. "The first piece I wrote about Maia ["At Lingyin Si"] seemed quite benign to me, and I couldn't imagine her objecting to it in any way," she says. "The next piece I wrote ["Push-Me-Pull-You"] was much tougher, and I didn't even plan on publishing it. In the end, writer friends persuaded me to send it out. I sent it to a contest, expecting to lose. Instead, it won, and I had to make a dif-

ficult decision. Obviously, I chose to publish it—but not without a lot of soul-searching."

Fiona Tinwei Lam, the editor of—and contributor to—the *Double Lives* anthology, understands this sense of conflict that women face deeply. "One of the prospective authors in *Double Lives* pulled her essay from the collection after having written a powerful piece about the effect her husband's sudden departure and affair had on her family and her creativity," explains Lam. "She was worried about her children's reactions. The printed word—especially in books—has an enduring quality about it. Writers have to think ahead about the potential impact of their published words on significant relationships when one party is utterly vulnerable."

Lam's own experience as a single parent has had a great impact on her writing. "Having been a single mother from the start, I have to make hard decisions about what writing is appropriate for publication," she says. "Even so, there were some very dark poems ▷

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in my upcoming poetry collection, *Enter the Chrysanthemum*, that I cut in order to protect [my child] and avoid having to answer difficult questions later. Thank goodness for fiction!”

Every writer must make his or her own decision, story or family—and after making that decision, it often has a way of coming back to bite them. Mothers who choose to write about their kids often find themselves on the receiving end when their kids grow up and pick up the pen themselves—just ask Alice Munro or Alice Walker. My mother, having wrestled with the question of ethics while writing her memoirs, says, “You just never know how people are going to react to being written about, even 20 years down the road.” This is especially true when you write about people who aren’t old enough to defend themselves. As Olding sums it up: “At five, Maia constantly asked me to write about her. At eight, she squirmed at the idea. At 13, she may hate me for having written about her. And at 40—who knows?” Writing about anyone you’re in a relationship with requires tact, diplomacy and honesty, but does all of this compromise make art that is inherently soft? The dreaded “momoirs,” warm and fuzzy reminiscences about children?

My mother likes to quote the line about a family being destroyed the minute a writer is born into it, although she can never remember who actually said it. Despite the fact that we now have a couple of writers in the family, we’ve hung together pretty well. Still, it’s a weird feeling to show up as a peripheral character in someone else’s story. It isn’t so much the shock of being a bit player as the strange, angled view you get of your own life through someone else’s eyes—and, oftentimes, agenda. Still, the experience can have unexpected benefits for both parent and child—not the least of which is a shared sense of story. Olding and her daughter have even considered co-authoring a book together. “If she ends up writing about me someday, I’ll be delighted,” says Olding. “She has every right to do that. She has the right to tell her own story. And if she does, I hope she’ll be honest.” □