

## REVIEWS

### In It Together: A Review of *A Suburban Mom: Notes from the Asylum*

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October 2008

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By Meredith O'Brien (Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing, 2007; \$16)

"Emergency! Emergency! Come see what Hayden did!"  
Careening into the kitchen waving her arms above her head and leaping from one leg to the other, Quinn more resembles a baboon than my five-year-old daughter.

Putting down the knife I'm using to lop the heads off strawberries for the guests who are set to arrive any moment, I warily follow her into the living room. We've been reading "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" lately, and I find myself hoping she's violating the terms of our agreement on what constitutes an emergency.

Rounding the corner, I find two-year-old Hayden staring up at me with a look of uncertain pride. "Look, Mommy," he says as he displays the way he has:

- a) attempted to color every pore of his body navy blue.
- b) covered himself from head to toe in petroleum jelly.
- c) slathered extra-stiff hair gel through his thick, already unruly, blond hair.
- d) decorated his room by fingerpainting the floor and walls with my precious jar of expensive hand cream.

It doesn't really matter what I found. Over time, like most mothers of small children, I've found it all.

Given the generic nature of war stories from the mothering trenches, one wonders why we feel the need to share them at playdates, in "mom-lit" books, and online on the thousands of mommy blogs. The answer is simple: when told well, these stories make us feel less alone at a lonely time for many of us. We imagine we have colleagues slogging it out in the same wageless, all-encompassing jobs. There's something about reading about others struggling with the same issues that eases the pain just a little bit.

The reading part is easy. Writing about challenges with children is tougher than it seems. Ignore the universality of a situation and the stories become self-indulgent and better suited to the family scrapbook. Go too deep and you risk alienating readers who are simply looking for a little escape and camaraderie over a cup of coffee. There is a fine balance.

One writer who comes close to finding the right mix of angst and humor is Meredith O'Brien. In her book, *A Suburban Mom: Notes from the Asylum*, a collection of columns written when she was raising three children (including twins) under five, she provides quick-and-dirty snapshots into her efforts to parent conscientiously through incessant demands.

Entering the world of mothering in an age when it is both exalted as the most important job on earth and fraught with pressure to live up to a glorified ideal, O'Brien found herself floundering as she struggled to keep up with the expectations of a modern parent:

My response to the disparity between my real life and the faux lives portrayed in the glossy pages was to chronicle modern parenting in the American suburbs in essays, pointing out how and where my life differed from the life I thought I was supposed to be experiencing with my kids. . . . These columns. . . trace the evolution of my life as a laid-back yet stressed out, insecure, sleep-starved, TV-obsessed, news-junkie, Generation X parent navigating the labyrinth of modern parenthood.



In this collection, O'Brien adroitly handles the balance between relating what could have been tedious anecdotes about the specific frustrations and joys that come with three young children and offering a universal message. With essay titles like "The Scrapbooking Cult" and "To Yell, Perchance to Scream," it's easy to picture O'Brien as one of your funniest friends, the one who can make you laugh through your tears and shore you up with the all-important validation that you're not alone. O'Brien is not simply interested in being a pal, however. A former newspaper reporter, she uses her engaging storyteller's voice to tackle some meaty issues and explore their underlying social context.

For example, in "Fashion Weak," O'Brien is faced with a sight that would make any feminist mother's blood run cold.

Flashback to the year 2003: A precocious 4-year-old girl with her curly hair cut demurely in a bob, hitched up her omnipresent pink cotton shirt in order to expose her bellybutton. The preschooler then grabbed her size 4T flared jeans at the hips and inched them down her pelvic bone a bit to reveal more of her petite little belly.

In the essay that follows, O'Brien explores the potential influences of her daughter Abbey's fashion sense. Though humor and entertainment is the basis of the piece, she presents the thoughtful ways she tries to shield her daughter from the barrage of magazine and TV ads that indoctrinate girls to be sexy, thin and angry at an alarmingly young age. She also introduces the possibility of nature vs. nurture as she describes Abbey's natural gravitation to all things pink and sparkly. Despite the serious theme, O'Brien never wavers too far from the lighthearted side of the story, evident in her final paragraph: "In response, I decided to pull my L.L. Bean turtleneck up high over my ears to provide at least some cushioning for when I continually banged my head against the wall."

Many of the essays in the book conclude with kind of bewildered shrug, as if to say, "Well, what can you do?" It seems that when O'Brien begins to get too involved with her subject matter, she feels the need to detach before she is in too deep. Readers seeking advice or looking for ideas to change the current system might find her tendency to pull the turtleneck over her ears frustrating. For already exhausted moms who simply cannot add changing the world to their To Do lists right now, they will be happy with the guilt-free approach.

Her writing style, which includes jamming as many vivid word pictures into each sentence as grammatically possible, lends itself well to the subject matter. You can't help but read the columns fast, imagining the frenetic pace at which she must have stolen precious moments to write. A book like this could easily veer into the saccharine "It's tough, but so worth it" or the bitter "Will I ever escape diaper-changing hell?" but O'Brien avoids cliché and captures the complicated emotions mothering tends to generate.

In reading the essays, we get a real sense of who she is and the characters of her immediate family, but those on the fringe are more thinly painted. While this is typical of the genre, she is careful not to veer into caricature by keeping the focus on who she knows best. In "Bowing to the Overachievers," she describes how she measures up to Super Moms:

The mothers of which I speak rarely if ever appear to flake out and accidentally blow off dental appointments or forget permission slips, order forms or that it's school picture day and let their preschoolers dress themselves and "comb" their own hair. (My twins' 4-year-old preschool photos are a testament to my forgetfulness.) They never forget that their school library books were due four weeks ago, never forget that their preschooler DOES have school today (It's not Friday, it's Thursday!) and have to frantically shove everyone into the van and drive to school while still wearing plaid pajama bottoms with a baseball cap pulled down over unkempt hair.

With a healthy dose of pathos, she manages to capture the befuddlement that comes with trying to parent in the face of the opposing demands of children and lurid temptations like fast food and the veritable buffet of kids' television programming. Like many of us, she makes laborious, whole food dinners only to have them resoundingly rejected in favor of mac and cheese, and she takes a stab at cleaning the house despite the fact that it's routinely dismantled while she dashes to the bathroom. She and her husband even try that staple recommendation of women's magazines -- daytime sex -- while the kids are otherwise occupied. Awkward. And funny.

While O'Brien is quite adept at using humor, in certain instances O'Brien's jocular tone annoys. For me, this feeling culminated in "Hide and Seek," wherein she describes the all too familiar way children believe anything yours is theirs.

After feeding her twins breakfast and sending them toddling off to play, she interrupts her efforts to clean the congealed syrup and crushed Cheerios from the floor to feed herself. Snagging the last bagel, all she wants is a moment of peace to inhale it. But one bite in, she hears the familiar patter of feet.

So I did what any hungry parent who didn't feel like engaging in a life lesson about sharing and boundaries and appropriate eating habits at that very moment. I hid. That's right, I'm not ashamed to admit it, I hid from the little buggers to stuff my face.

When I first read this piece, I was juggling the forces that were a four-year-old, a one-year-old and a freelance writing career that had a tendency to fluctuate between an occasional assignment and all-out full-time job. It was a dark time for me and I failed to see the humor in the fact that, yes, I regularly hid from my children to eat too. For me, this act drove home the reality that there were no private moments at all anymore: no opportunities to read the newspaper without interruption or go to the bathroom by myself. I also acknowledged the horrifying fact that sleeping until I just woke up would not be an option for several more years. Years. "That's not funny!" I wanted to wail. Her treatment struck me as glib.

Now that life is more manageable and I am, in fact, able to visit the bathroom by myself, the bagel story is funny. But readers should be aware that this is not the book to reach for when the pressures of parenthood are threatening to overwhelm.

*A Suburban Mom: Notes from the Asylum* is an easily digestible, worthy distraction from the chaos of our lives. It has just the right amount of validation that we're all feeling our way blindly through this motherhood gig. There's something about sharing another's experience as she botches it up too that makes us feel like we're all more or less qualified.

Even when we find our child coated in blue marker.

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