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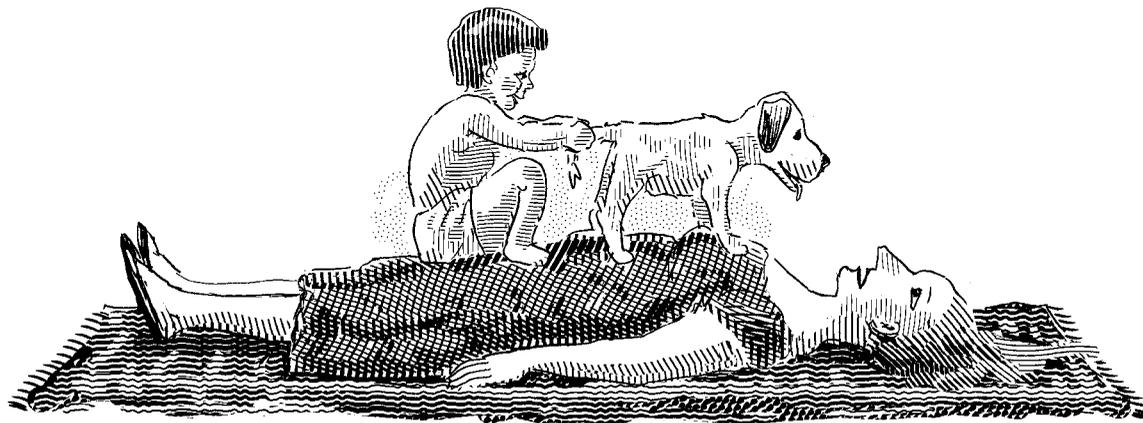
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Book Review by Lauren Weiner

LABOR OF LOVE

All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood, by Jennifer Senior.
HarperCollins, 320 pages, \$26.99



IT ONLY SEEMS LIKE A PARADOX THAT parenthood might be “all joy and no fun.” A few pages into Jennifer Senior’s book, this nice phrase is rendered in academic lingo—bringing up children is one of those “high cost/high reward” activities. The poetry is gone but it sums up the experience pretty well.

I found reassuring—wise, even—the passages in her book that concern teenagers. Parents run out of time to shape their teens’ life habits, and Senior describes very well the dawning realization that last-minute character improvements are not in the cards. This realization brings flashes of doubt and regret, to go along with the warm, closing-of-an-era pang of the proud parent. Senior evokes how unsettling it is for adults to feel, in this sense, way more emotional than those notoriously emotional teenagers. With ours turning 18, the milestones have seemed to rush by at ever-shorter intervals. His first solo vacation travel. His first date. His first job. His first moving violation.

A gifted *New York* magazine feature writer, Senior has built *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood* around slice-of-life depictions of several families she came to know as a part of her research. Although she has gathered valuable examples, her conclusions are another matter.

In a book that feels padded out to its 300-page length—upwards of 50 other books are mentioned, usually cursorily, such as Heidi Britz-Crecelius’s *Children at Play* (1996), Daniel Gilbert’s *Stumbling on Happiness* (2007), Alison Gopnik’s *The Philosophical*

Baby (2009), and Adam Phillips’s *Missing Out* (2013)—there is a lot of reinventing the wheel on the subject of parenting. We already knew that mothers differ from fathers in how they view themselves and the task of childrearing. Senior turns to social science anyway, to document that difference. On average, she writes, women “assigned a significantly larger proportion of their self-image to their mother identity than the men did to their father identity.” Even women holding down full-time jobs “considered themselves more mother than worker by about 50 percent,” she says, adding that “this finding didn’t surprise” the researchers conducting the study.

PRESUMABLY IT SURPRISES SENIOR. AT the very least it poses a challenge to the axiom running throughout the book: moms in the workplace are an unalloyed good. Americans’ “discomfort and ambivalence” about women and work, which are very much connected with the “mother identity” matter, just tick her off. Whenever women have gained a greater “measure of education or independence,” she grumbles, there are “calls for more attentive mothering.”

The ambivalent feelings crop up again and again in the families she interviewed. Early on, we meet a memorable Rosemount, Minnesota, family of four: Wife Angie works night shifts as a psychiatric nurse. Husband Clint works five days a week managing a rental car office at the Minneapolis-Saint Paul airport. They have a three-year-old named Eli and a one-

year-old named Xavier (“Zay”). Mom and dad are exhausted, and mom has a bad back.

The visitor in the home, Senior, sees the one-year-old begin bawling whenever Angie sets him down, whereupon Angie immediately picks him up:

[T]o leave Zay to cry would only compound Angie’s terrible sense that she’s not doing all she can do for him, and she feels bad enough going off to work three or four nights a week—the second the kids catch sight of her in her scrubs, they start to cling. So while she’s at home, she doesn’t put Zay on the ground or in the Bumbo. Instead, she works one-armed and lopsided, straining her back and making the awkward progress of a contestant in an egg toss.

Angie splits the childcare duties with Clint, a gentle and highly organized father. He takes sanity-preserving breaks from parenting (during the children’s naps, for example), and more resolutely claims such moments of respite than does his wife. Thus she’s the more frazzled parent, and, as Senior astutely picks up, “though he may be unaware of it, Clint is exploiting Angie’s guilt, or at the very least recognizes he benefits from it.”

Such vignettes give the book life. The tales of parental struggle are absorbing and often touching, but it’s a disappointment that Senior, groping for ways to alleviate the struggle, falls back so often on tired social-democratic and feminist thinking:



Countries with more generous welfare benefits tend to score well on all sorts of social indices; their corruption levels are lower, their gender-parity levels are higher, they tend to offer affordable health care and higher education. To the extent that parents' psychological strains are financial—and many of them are—countries that provide these amenities go a long way toward relieving stress on couples and single parents alike.

The European countries that fit her description are bankrupting themselves by larding out these benefits and amenities. They have stagnant economic growth, high unemployment, and birthrates below replacement level. (That means fewer parents.) So the search for palliatives should hardly be limited to publicly funded programs.

THE FINANCIAL STRAINS ON PARENTS, here and abroad, are real enough. Why shouldn't the findings on "mother identity" that the author conveys, and the working-mom guilt that she heard from more than one interviewee, lead her to consider policies that might—perish the thought—enhance a breadwinner's take-home pay? Such policies could enable mothers of young children in working-class families to consider staying out of the workforce if they wanted.

Granted, revising our laws and social arrangements—through the tax code, for example—to help fathers discharge their responsibilities is a hard sell these days for Americans in general, let alone center-left journalists like Senior. One statistic of hers indicates why: between 1980 and 2000, "the number of men who consider it their duty to be the primary breadwinner has declined considerably," from 54% to 30%. Feminism's victories have affected how men think.

As she notes, that decline has not been accompanied by heightened enthusiasm for daycare. In fact, the percentage of Americans who "believe a parent should stay at home to take care of a child" is growing—it rose from 33% to 41% between 1989 and 2002. "Our expectations of parents, in other words, seem to have increased as our attitudes toward women in the workplace have liberalized," she writes.

Truly, this is an interesting paradox. The trend in men's opinions on breadwinning can be traced to the modern movement for women's rights. The other one—the trend favoring parenting at home—is, in Senior's view, part of a backlash against women's rights. It isn't that; it's just the gathering force of common sense. (Non-sexist common sense, at

that—check out the wording of the survey question.)

Senior's analysis fails to hit the mark, too, in the section on the sometimes exaggerated anxieties that parents have about child safety. She touches there on the spate of prosecutions of daycare-providers in the 1980s and early 1990s on false charges of sexual abuse. My own view is that the national panic we saw then, which caused grave injustices, was the weird product of well-grounded feelings of parental guilt. Senior leaves the impression that because it was a panic, the parental guilt feelings must have been groundless. Defensiveness about "mothers collecting a wage outside the home" subtly takes a toll on her logic.

SINGLE PARENTS ARE THE LEAST HAPPY parents in America, she reports, citing more social science data. Introducing readers to Laura Anne, a 35-year-old raising her 7- and 9-year-old boys while working full time in Houston, brings out a certain traditionalism in Senior. Laura Anne shows off the school projects she has worked on with her children, telling Senior that nowadays, "homework has replaced the family dinner." She says it cheerfully. Senior is a bit taken aback by this divorcée and Cub Scout mom, a suburban striver in a community of suburban strivers, and her relative contentment with evening after evening spent "helping" her kids make dioramas and photo montages that will earn them top marks.

Explains Laura Anne: "Maybe it's sad, but it's true. Because this is when your children tell you stuff. This is the time you're sitting down with your children and creating something with them." She tells Senior that cooking isn't her favorite thing, anyway: "I always knew my mom cared about me because she fed me, right? ...She put love and time into the meal. But I'm not like that." Writes Senior: "Housewifery was for her mother's generation. Her generation transforms their kitchens into homework outposts." Laura Anne "snips a strip of fabric and hands it to her son. 'So this is me,' she says, 'doing my gifts of service. Putting in love and time.'"

Senior's comment on this scene:

One wonders if *actual* family dinners, whose numbers have fallen quite a bit since the late seventies, might happen a bit more frequently if they hadn't been supplanted by study halls at the dining room table, and if that time wouldn't be more restorative and better spent—the stuff of customs and stories and affectionate memories, the stuff that binds.

Ah, the customs, yes; the restorative act of breaking bread together as a family. She wonders where these went, yet she doesn't step back and connect any cultural dots having to do with working moms or high divorce rates. Moreover, the other factor that's in play here goes entirely unmentioned: an educational system trying to pull itself out of the cellar by assigning loads and loads of homework that today's kids do at the dinner table while eating, out of takeout cartons, the meal that their parents did not have time to cook.

THE COMMUNITARIAN, FEMINIST, AND traditionalist strands in the book don't tie together all that neatly. A virtuous inconsistency is how I prefer to think of it—a sign that Senior is not so thoroughgoing an ideologue as to stick to one ideology. Also she's well-read, an evident humanities student drawn to the work of novelists, memoirists, and poets. The samplings from the likes of William Blake, Milan Kundera, and John Lanchester are often illuminating. In Lanchester she found "a beautiful plea" for the revival of a concept that has been sidelined in our society: the concept of duty. She's right, the passage is beautiful—and it takes us once again to that part-time traditionalism of hers from which she derives, among other things, the "No fun" side of her parental equation.

What we do out of duty and what we do out of love intermingle in childrearing. The interviewee who perhaps best exemplifies this is Sharon, a retired school teacher from North Minneapolis, aged 67. Sharon's adopted daughter Michelle died at 33. The only one that Cam, Michelle's energetic little boy, can now depend on is Sharon. She reappears throughout the book, and her feelings as a parent and grandparent resonate with those, like my partner and me, who have raised a child to whom they aren't biologically related.

"Through nurturing Michelle," writes Senior, "day in and day out, Sharon came to love her, to bond with her, and to wish stubbornly to protect her, no matter how hard Michelle pushed back as a teen or an adult." Sharon's reflections take *All Joy and No Fun* to its conclusion, where Senior affirms that what Cam has given his grandmother "is another chance to be her best self. That's what children can do in the end: give us that shot, even if we so frequently and disastrously fall short of the mark. It takes effort to love generously."

Jennifer Senior's book is unlikely to move us any closer to solving the problems of America's families, but her stories have the ring of truth.

Lauren Weiner is the associate editor of the Library of Law and Liberty.

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