



Opting In: Having a Child Without Losing Yourself

Amy Richards

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For contemporary women, motherhood has become as polarizing a proposition as it is a powerful calling. For some women this tension is manifest in a debate over whether or not to have children. For others it concerns whether to stay at home with their children or stay in the workforce. Still others feel abandoned altogether by the supposedly pro-family and pro-mother social justice movement that is feminism and are at a loss when it comes to reconciling their maternal instincts with their political beliefs.

With *Opting In*, Amy Richards addresses the anxiety over parenting that women face today in a book that mixes memoir, interviews, historical analysis, and feminist insight. In her refreshingly direct and thoughtful approach, Richards covers everything from the truth about our biological clocks and the trends toward extending fertility, to parenting with nature *and* nurturing in mind, to our relationship with our own mothers, to what feminism's relationship to motherhood is and always has been. Speaking from the vantage point of someone who is both a parent and one of our leading feminist activists, Richards cuts through the cacophony of voices intent on telling women the "appropriate" way to be a mother and reveals instead how to confidently forge your own path while staying true to yourself and your ideals.

Opting In: Having a Child Without Losing Yourself Details

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From Reader Review Opting In: Having a Child Without Losing Yourself for online ebook

Dr. Marcia Chatelain says

Amy Richards, Third Wave feminist extraordinaire, presents a compelling and humorous look at young women, feminism and the choice to become a parent. She engages some interesting issues including the whole "Mommy Wars" media creation, the struggle for equality in housework among heterosexual couples, and the pressure to be the 'perfect feminist mom.' All and all a great book for young women contemplating motherhood, but her lack of attention to adoption and issues of race and class demonstrates that there is so much more work to be done in the area of how women understand mothering and motherhood.

Ciara says

well, this book could not possibly have been more disappointing. the subtitle is "having a child without losing yourself," & based on that & the back cover blurb, i guess i was expecting a book about balancing motherhood with one's feminist principles, & trying to create a society that values the contributions of mothers as people as well. amy richards is one of the co-authors of manifesta, a popular third-wave feminist book that i found aggravatingly simplistic, elementary, & watered down. i had hoped that she would get a little more specific in writing about motherhood. i had hoped that she might have learned from some of the critiques of manifesta & succeed in writing a book that speaks to more than just the experiences of her specific cohort: white heterosexually partnered women in their early 30s living in new york city & enjoying the relative financial privileges of making a living in a creative industry. alas, if this does not describe you, you are unlikely to get much out of opting in.

the book was written in response to a piece in the "new york times magazine," called "the opt-out revolution. it was a very widely-debated piece about the phenomenon of a certain type of mother (well-educated, reasonably class-privileged) choosing to eschew career for a life of stay-at-home motherhood. when i say it was "widely-debated," i mean that a lot of people threw around a lot of opinions about it without having actually read the article. i read it. i thought it was very well-written & interesting, & far from being the first cannon fire in the new round of early oughts mommy wars or a screed about women shortchanging their kids by going back to work, or wasting their promise wiping noses all day, it seemed to examine the flawed underpinnings of the mommy wars & conclude that success & satisfaction can be defined by the individual.

add richards to the pile of folks who did not seem to actually read the article. she seems to have skimmed it with a lot of pre-conceived notions about its content & then taken umbrage with the conclusions she assumes the author was making. so, from the start, the book is based on a faulty premise. adding to the shaky foundation is richards' conception of herself as a voice for the modern-day feminist--& she is a classic third-wave "i choose my choice/everything i do is a woman's movement" feminist. she had a baby, so suddenly being a mom is an area of feminist inquiry. i do think that being a mom can be an area of feminist inquiry--it just bothers me when people don't realize that until they themselves are moms. especially when they have made a career out of watering feminism down to become basically just an amusing phase for single freewheeling college girls.

even if the book had been less about how to "be a mother without losing yourself" & more a memoir about richards' own experience balancing motherhood & feminist activism (such as her work is activism--does it

still count as activism when it's basically your career?), it would have been better than what we actually got. the book is really just an incredibly boring, tedious rehash of the research on achieving work-life balance. allow me to say that the phrase "work-life balance" is essentially code for "reasonably class-privileged women feel guilty about everything & manifest that guilt as endless judgments against one another & complaining about how difficult it is to be true to yourself in between the latest board meeting & little madison's ballet recital". i've pretty much never heard a poor working mom get all fluttery about work-life balance. it speaks to the privileged bubble that richards lives in that this is where she took her book.

she essentially wrote nothing but an annotated bibliography. the text is a tapestry woven of other writers' research & ideas, & at no point does richards offer anything new & original. she liberally employs barbara ehrenreich's writing about the medicalization of childbirth & misogyny in medicine in the chapter on birth options. she synopsizes judith warner's obnoxious perfect madness when she writes about parenting strategies. it's as if she just camped out in the new york public library like a diligent undergraduate, read her way through a shelf on motherhood, & then regurgitated it all into a manuscript. & because she is a professional feminist, it got published. she includes only the most cursory acknowledgment that there are mothers in the world that are not white &/or class-privileged--clearly hoping to avoid falling into the trap she set for second-wave feminists in exorciating them for snubbing poor women & women of color. but her efforts here are almost painfully tokenizing, & of course, her conception of feminist history is inherently self-serving. richards herself has done rather a lot to help erase the legacy of women of color in second wave feminism by parroting back the viewpoint that they didn't exist or were shunted to the sidelines & it's up to the good white feminists of the third wave to welcome women of color into the movement.

richards also has an obnoxious habit of seeming to celebrate her own ignorance. again & again, she writes about how she didn't realize how serious such & such an issue was until she got pregnant or became a mother. while i appreciate her attempts to not portray herself as an omniscient feminist overlord, some of the shit she never considered until it was directly affecting her is just embarrassing. i personally would be embarrassed to admit that i've been a full-time feminist for fifteen years but had never really thought before about the complications of finding good, affordable child care. i've written before about richards' essay on undergoing a selective reduction when she found herself pregnant with triplets, & how she wrote about being completely unfamiliar with the concept of selective reduction until she needed one herself. really? REALLY? it's like she's admitting to fashioning a completely solipsistic activist career & everyone is applauding her for it!

a quote from the book that kind of sums things up: "i had read susan faludi's backlash & considered myself well-versed in how the media systematically works to undermine women." really? you read one of the most well-known feminist texts in the history of the english language, which is all about how the media works to undermine women, & now you're "well-versed" in the subject? i love how she consumes the research & writing of other women & then spits it back out again, completely unadorned with her own original analysis, & claims that it's knowledge she now possesses. if you want to read 250 pages of this kind of bargain basement "i read a book! now come to my class at the learning annex!" bullshit, this is the book for you. but if you, like me, prefer to spend your time reading books by people who can not just consume & repeat, but can also think, philosophize, & WRITE (seriously, richards is not a great writer--half the time, she employs overwrought sentence structure peppered with words that i don't think mean what she thinks they mean, & the rest of the time, she falls into the jessica valenti camp of hyperbolizing everything until she's not even coherent anymore), give this one a wide berth.

Josie says

I'd give this a 2.5

Like a lot of feminist writing that comes out of an academic context, there are things about this book that bug me...sweeping statements feel very general without a lot of real statistical data to back them up. And she wrote this book as a response to a NYtimes article that is actually quite well written from my perspective.

Nonetheless, I think it's a worthwhile read for people who believe in egalitarian relationships and who want to have kids. It's a good conversation starter. It might also be good for women who don't plan to have kids, who are concerned about the fact that their girlfriends are having kids, because it tackles some larger issues between women...

Allison says

I would actually give this 2.5 stars if I could. It was a very dense read for what I expected, but I learned a lot about feminist theory. I think a lot of the ideas could've been presented in a more practical, applicable, and empathetic way instead of sharing someone's perspective along with broad generalities. My biggest takeaways from this book are: 1. Mothers today should feel free to break from conventions and parent however they see fit but 2. They probably won't because it's very difficult to break from convention in our society not because of the patriarchy but because 3. Women will always be there to criticize and tear down each other's choices. We are our own worst enemy. I guess these bleak ideas will just push me even more to be a critical thinker as a mother — am I making such and such choice because I think it's best for my kid? Is it best for me not only as a mother but as a woman? And then I'll follow whatever answer I get, regardless of what the mommy wars might respond with.

Melissa says

Ever since I wrote my master's thesis (English) about the way motherhood is portrayed in the media, the topics of women's studies and motherhood/media have interested me.

I've read books and articles about these topics, and I think this book does a good job of referencing past research and thought leadership on women's studies and motherhood/media. "Opting In" has a fresh feel to it and is an easy, engaging read. However, from a stylistic perspective, I feel that the author, Amy Richards, can ramble a little bit and also, at times, awkwardly inject her first-person perspective into parts of the book that originally had a more scholarly, third-person feel.

Below are passages from the book that struck me/intrigued me.

1) "The FMLA has limitations in not requiring paid leave, and unpaid leave is a luxury few can afford. Ironically, those who can afford it are often in workplaces with paid leave." (p. 29-30)

2) "Capitalism's successes usually come at the expense of using a disproportionate number of women as cheap labor, nationally and internationally." (p. 31)

- 3) "Working or not working is a serious question because it is as much about values and social status as it is about economics." (p. 48)
- 4) "'Black women's experiences as bloodmothers, othermothers, and community othermothers reveal that the mythical norm of a heterosexual, married couple, nuclear family with a nonworking spouse and a husband earning the 'family wage' is far from being natural, universal and preferred but instead is deeply embedded in specific race and class formations.'" (p. 59)
- 5) "The numbers of gay couples rushing to get married or at least to make their commitments legal are motivated by more than tax breaks and health care proxies; they want recognition and societal acceptance." (p. 88)
- 6) "It ['Congratulations'] is an appropriate response to share in someone else's happiness, but I also want to acknowledge that being pregnant is a common condition and something the majority of women do. I don't want to trump up or overinflate its importance, or leave people feeling that it is a primary source of their value." (p. 108)
- 7) "rewriting our biography even in small ways can make us feel inauthentic" (p. 120)
- 8) "other women become a source of our feelings of inadequacy ONLY when we are unsure of the choices we ourselves have made" (p. 121)
- 9) "'Language is not neutral ... It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas. It is itself a shaper of ideas.'" (p. 174)
- 10) "When Gloria Steinem famously got married at sixty-six, there was an unexpected perk that came with marriage: people respected her privacy and didn't berate her for taking a vacation and letting the movement down ... We should challenge our assumptions; otherwise we overinflate the importance of conventional moments in a woman's life." (p. 212)
- 11) When I asked Judith Warner why some women have a hard time respecting other women's choices, she explained it this way: "As women we have a hard time tolerating being out of sync with those we like." (p. 225)

Excellent "Resource Guide," "Notes" and "Bibliography" as appendices to this book.

Nicole Johns says

When I first started this book I was pissed off and feeling judged. Now that I have finished it. I don't feel judged, but maybe a little inferior. Amy Richards shares details from her own life, and from those it seems like she has it all together. And I don't have it all together. But of course, this is all me projecting.

The book is well-researched and insightful. Basically, Amy Richards highlights some feminist history, shares stories from parents, and explores her own life as woman, daughter and mother. In the end, she asks us to live our values. We must acknowledge that often motherhood is not valued or respected in our society, and we have to make changes in our own lives to demand more (whether that's help with housework, better pay and benefits, a flexible work schedule, etc).

A much different book than many motherhood-related titles. No real whining or scape-goating to be found. I started feeling cornered and finished feeling empowered and challenged.

Chalida says

Trying to negotiate being a new mom with feeling guilty for missing work. Thought this book would help me figure it out, but didn't connect the idea of feminism with my feelings and Amy Richards has me convinced I am a feminist (which I never denied, but never ever clearly put on my identity chart either) so far.

Now having finished the book, I agree with other reviewers with the book not being exactly what you think it's going to be about. It's basically a history of feminism mixed in with balancing motherhood with your partner, work, friendships and your own mother. I enjoyed the history after I got over that it was going to be central to the book. I also liked the chapter about consciously raising your kid without gender expectations and the idea that being a mother doesn't mean being a martyr. In essence, many of my own feelings were validated and I felt less isolated after reading Richards' own story and the stories of the women she interviewed.

Sarah says

From the review I read of this book, I expected it to be mostly about managing a work-life balance. It certainly addressed that, but overall was more about the history of feminism as it pertains to motherhood, and how to choose motherhood without abandoning feminist beliefs (and, further, raising children to have those feminist beliefs). So while it wasn't exactly what I'd expected, it was thought-provoking and very interesting. I was particularly interested in the chapter on how motherhood changes our female friendships, and the follow-up chapter on relating to (and becoming!) our own mothers.

Sarah says

i expected a lot more from this book, which i found to be full of generalities and banal speculation. in the end i decided that you could save yourself the trouble of reading it and just read the summary on the back cover instead. or you could take a few moments to think about the issues she raises and come to the same conclusions: ultimately you have to trust yourself and find your own path as a parent.

Elizabeth says

Really enjoyed this, though I would say that it's more about feminism than about motherhood/parenting. I particularly appreciated the discussions of our relationships with our mothers, the decision/value of returning to work, and the challenges for couples who choose or embody different gender roles.

Penelope says

Really interesting topic - the author lost me though about half way through. The subtitle is totally misleading. This book is about the author struggle with her identity as a feminist and a mom - and how to be both. Unless you strongly identify yourself as a feminist - you won't find this book addressing how to hold onto yourself - it's mostly a tangential person rant.

C says

I thought this book would offer an insightful look at mothering and womanhood from a feminist perspective. In short, it didn't.

It's really more like a dry feminist manifesto, with some stories thrown in for good measure. The author comes across as dull, talking on and on about the history of feminism without delving into the complexities faced by women today. In the right hands, this could be an illuminating book; instead, it simply falls flat.

Most annoying is how she keeps generalizing, without offering any analysis - as one other reader pointed out, this is her sheer speculation, and she seems to only see the surface. I kept reading on waiting for some thoughtful nuggets, but they never came.

A disappointing read.

Jen says

Read in the fall, so my memory is a little foggy - but what sticks with me is being kind of pissed off as I read. She'd have a sentence about how women can do anything they want, work or stay at home, yadda yadda, and then spend the rest of the chapter contradicting that. I felt like she came down pretty hard on women who don't immediately return to work - i.e. women can have anything they want, but hopefully they don't just want to stay home and raise kids. Meanwhile, she has a fairly unique lifestyle - part-time writer, dad who stays at home a fair bit, etc. - that allows her to have her foot in all worlds but agonize about having to choose.

Jessica says

Contrary to what some people thought when I added this book to my list - I haven't changed my mind, I'm still not planning to have kids. But, that doesn't mean that a book like this doesn't interest me. As a feminist I try to keep up with issues that affect women and obviously parenting and motherhood are big issues. In *Opting In* Amy Richards talks about how she feels you can be a feminist AND a mother and how somewhere along the way these two "sides" have been pitted against each other. Richards main point is that feminism's goal was always to broaden women's choices - whether or not to marry, whether or not to have kids, whether to work outside the home or not, etc and as women we shouldn't polarize ourselves so much. "The feminist goal is not just to prove that women can do what men can do and vice versa. It's to broaden the range of what's acceptable, including striving for entirely new models." (p.171) Richards talks about how feminism has affected motherhood in every aspect from whether to work or not, raising children in an egalitarian way, division of labor between parents and how having children affects women's relationships with friends and with their own mothers. Overall, this was a very enlightening book and I would recommend it to any woman

- not just mothers.

Maya says

This book wasn't what I expected based on the title and the few reviews I had read before I got it out of the library. I thought it would have more practical information about literally "having a child without losing yourself." Not so much. This to me read more like a book that would be assigned in a college womens studies class--part academic, part memoir, lots of research involving Ms. magazine. That said, it wasn't entirely unhelpful. I especially appreciated the chapters on egalitarian parenting, how having children affects female friendships, our own mothers, and raising kids today. It did help me look at some of the issues surrounding these topics in a fresh or temporarily forgotten way, which was nice. And the last couple pages do try to tie everything together and gave me a somewhat solid take-away from this book (though I didn't really need this book to arrive at this conclusion): figure out what's right for you, then do the best you can at it; don't forget to make time for yourself. meh.
