



Playing House: Notes of a Reluctant Mother

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Acclaimed author Lauren Slater ruminates on what it means to be family.

Lauren Slater's rocky childhood left her cold to the idea of ever creating a family of her own, but a husband, two dogs, two children, and three houses later, she came around to the challenges, trials, and unexpected rewards of playing house. In these autobiographical pieces, Slater presents snapshots of domestic life, populating them with the gritty details and jarring realities of sharing home, life, and body in the curious institution called "family." She asks difficult questions and probes unsettling truths about sex, love, and parenting. In these pages, Slater introduces us to her struggles with her mother, her determination to make a home of her own, her compromises in deciding to marry (her conflicts manifesting as an affair on the eve of her wedding), her initial struggle to connect with her newborn child, and the dilemmas of mothering with a mental illness. She writes openly about her decision to abort her second pregnancy and her later decision to have a second child after all. She tells us about the searing decision to have elective double mastectomy and how her love for her husband was magically rekindled after she saw him catch fire in a chemical accident.

It's not all mastectomies and chemical fires, though. Slater digs into the everyday challenges of family living, from buying a lemon of a car and fighting back menacing weeds to gaining weight and being jealous of the nanny. Beautifully written, often humorous, and always revealing, these stories scrutinize the complex questions surrounding family life, offering up sometimes uncomfortable truths.

Playing House: Notes of a Reluctant Mother Details

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From Reader Review Playing House: Notes of a Reluctant Mother for online ebook

Sara says

She says something in the opening like, "Hopefully my honesty will absolve my selfishness." It didn't.

Heather Anderson Silvestro says

A Lauren Slater fan no longer. Some emotions/events in life should remain a secret between spouses or, in the name of love, be withheld from a spouse or child. (Yes, Lauren, love trumps honesty.) Instead, Slater upchucks her emotional garbage for all the world to see. In so doing, she betrays her husband over and over again. Her commitment to being identified as a writer, an essayist --a commitment to self and ego, actually -- is so much stronger than to being a wife or a mother. I would hate to be her child.

Leigh says

I understand the innate desire that pretty much all writers and creative people in general have to get paid for their work. I respect it--I'm the same way. I don't believe that "selling out" is even a thing any more; people should be allowed to get paid to do what they're good at, especially for difficult things like writing well.

Lauren Slater is still one of my favorite essayists, her language has always been particularly striking and beautiful to me. I adored Lying and Prozac Diary, particularly as they address difficult topics like mental health, medication, and their effects on creativity and individuality.

But Notes of Reluctant Mother, culled from previously published essays, feels hollow at times. She's clearly not that reluctant of a mother, given her choice to have two children with her husband. I understand the trepidation she feels, for sure, but I'm not sure if reluctant is really the word I would have used.

These are good essays, of course, and beautifully written. I just think Slater peaked as a writer in the 90s, and she knows it too.

Becky Sandham Mathwin says

"Playing House" is a series of personal essays about motherhood, love, mental illness and other topics. The title is a bit misleading as only a few of these essays address her ambivalence and struggles with parenthood. I have mixed feelings about this book.

Lauren Slater is undoubtedly an excellent writer-very eloquent and descriptive. I particularly liked the chapter about her experiences with Zyprexa (a psychiatric medication with some significant side effects)-her struggle with increased appetite and weight gain mirrors many of the things I've seen with patients/clients I've worked with (the medication helps greatly with their psych symptoms but the side effects are

significant). She writes honestly and articulately about highly personal issues such as mental illness, marital problems, abortion, feeling like an inadequate mother, body image, etc. Self disclosure on that level takes a lot of courage and I can't help but admire her honesty.

On the other hand, I wonder what it must be like to be the spouse or child of someone who writes so publicly about such personal topics. I would be very uncomfortable if she were my mother or spouse—I really would not want to read about my mother's/spouse's personal life, marital issues, parental ambivalence, etc. and I wouldn't want others to read it, either. I love memoirs but I often think about these sorts of things when read them and can't help but feel a bit guilty/voyeuristic at times.

Kate says

Slater is an engaging writer, and the first half of this book felt like a five-star read—I devoured it. However (there's always a qualifier, isn't there), I was expecting a book of chapters, and this is ACTUALLY a book of collected essays and articles organized into more or less chronological order. I think what made the first half work so well for me is that it FELT organic, one piece flowing into another, but this becomes less and less true as the book goes on. Eventually it is clearly a collection of stand-alone essays, each with its own place and time, and its own agenda. Events are often discussed more than once: by the end I just felt like, *Oh, this AGAIN? SIGH.* And so, the five-star beginning got knocked down to three stars overall.

Obsidian says

I always feel badly when I don't care for a particular memoir since those to me are much more personal than fiction or even non-fiction novels.

Reading through Lauren Slater's memoir detailing being a newlywed, mother of one and then two children while dealing with a mental illness will definitely make a reader appreciate their own lives (if not faced with all of her trials and tribulations) and think to themselves how hard society often is on women.

What I really did enjoy is Ms. Slater touches upon the taboo of wanting to work after giving birth since she finds herself bored by her newborn daughter and feeling a sense of accomplishment at her job. I also loved her totally acknowledging the backwardness of her daughter than being provided a mother figure through the nanny and her jealousies of that relationship.

I also loved that she shared her experiences with mental illness and deciding for the sake of her family as it was at that time an abortion was necessary.

All of the above being said I still did not care for this memoir at all. I think the primary reason was that the memoir is written in essay form (which I always find a little over written when I read them in glossy magazines or newspapers) and there was no flow to the memoir. Ms. Slater would jump back and forth in time and not explain incidents.

For example, I was very curious about Ms. Slater's family and childhood and though it was touched upon

briefly it was never really explained what went on there and how did her and her husband's family interact with them.

Another example I have is that at one point we have Ms. Slater explaining that a friendship ended because of X but she seems to look upon it so superficially we don't get a chance to understand her feelings about it. I think honestly that was the main reason I did not care for the novel. If the author looks upon things superficially through her writing and her explanations of past events you don't really find yourself as a reader involved with it either.

Please note that I received this novel for free via the Amazon Vine Program.

Kimberly says

This was a First Reads Giveaway.

This is a collection of autobiographical essays describing the author's life, primarily her adult life after marriage. Since it is a collection, there is some repetition of parts of stories, but not overly so. The author openly discusses her mental illness and drug side effects, her children, abortion, mastectomies, weight gain and several other smaller parts of life. It is raw, visceral and honest. She uses descriptions that many readers may find offensive in their honesty, but I found it gutsy and real. The author gives voice to things many of us don't have the honesty to say, much less write about. This book isn't for everybody due the brutal honesty, but for those readers who want to read about someone's life, in all its beauty and disappointment, it's a tour de force.

Kara says

I have to respect Lauren Slater as a personal essayist -- as a narrator of nonfiction in general. As I read **Playing House: Notes of a Reluctant Mother**, I could tell that her standard for self as well as situational appraisal is very rigorous. She takes her observation and analysis as seriously, if not more so, than her written composition, I'd guess.

I don't know if that rigor always yields the sophisticated and original fruit for which one would wish, but the frenetic energy which is needed to power the constant rhythm of this characteristic intense scrutiny does yield wit and considerable insight for the reader's enjoyment very often. Not surprisingly, this essay collection is not without some real affecting wisdom (although I expect different readers will find it in different places, naturally). This is definitely a worthwhile read.

I feel compelled to offer just one additional comment...Slater's narrative voice is self-empowered, I think, even when it's self-doubting. In speaking her unvarnished truth in these essays, she empowers the reader (or this one at least) in a unique way through her example. This is particularly so because she is a woman writing about family life and owning her ideas and feelings about the topics raised regardless of how they fit with her self-image or her audience's comfort and expectations. Maybe I am making too much of this angle, but this perceived dynamic impacted my reading of this book quite positively.

Please be advised I received a copy of this book through a Goodreads Giveaway.

Jennifer says

Summary:

Slater tells her tales of marrying, becoming a mother, dealing with a mental illness, dealing with her mother, attempting to build a home, aborting a child, and then having another one. Slater is extremely honest about everything she faces. In an essay style, she goes through each tale in a fairly succinct time sequence.

My thoughts:

The title is comical in my opinion, so I expected some humor. While there is humor, it is few and far between. Slater goes through many bad times before any humor pops up. While I fit into some of the same categories that Slater does, a woman who was not exactly thrilled about marriage, not certain about having children, and always dealing with a childhood that was not filled with excellent examples, I did have a hard time getting through each of Slater's essays. I found it hard to relate to her decisions at times which made it easier to put it down than to pick it back up again. While I appreciated her in depth analysis of her personal struggles, I definitely read this one essay at a time in between some more uplifting books that healed my heart a little bit. I only gave this three stars because it was difficult to read without much of a break in between the heartache. It is well written and definitely a good look at the inside of someone's head.

Ashley Lauren says

In *Playing House: Notes of a Reluctant Mother*, Lauren Slater tackles the tough stuff of life from deciding whether or not to have a kid - and then another kid - to dealing with depression to watching her husband catch fire. Her stories were entertaining and insightful while ringing true to anyone who has ever suffered from a mental illness, and anyone who has ever questioned whether or not "playing house" was the right choice for their lives.

However, while I would consider this an interesting read, it was by no means what I expected, nor was it particularly well-crafted. From the title, I expected Slater's stories to center around her home life, especially her children. I expected some ridiculous and quippy stories about her children and her relationship to those children. As with most "mother" books, I expected some sort of moral or message to come out of it all - probably that becoming a mother was the right choice for her, despite her misgivings.

While some of that was present in the book, most of the chapters dealt with her depression and how she dealt with it. While I understand that her depression made her choice to be a mother, and her subsequent filling of her motherhood role, a difficult one, her domestic life did not grace even half of the pages of the book. I don't think this is bad, per se, but I would want the book to be more aptly titled, then, so the reader could know what he or she was getting.

Furthermore, I do not believe the book was particularly well-crafted. Her prose, at times, felt forced. Her metaphors were over-extended. In one breath, she says she despises cliches, yet they rear their ugly heads in almost every chapter of the book. It seems as if she is trying to take her reader on a journey with flowing, poetic writing, but that only serves to pull the reader out of her world and into a world of figurative language. Like most English teachers, I enjoy figurative language when tastefully done, but this seemed to be overkill.

On top of that, Slater referenced much of her past life without giving her reader any back story. She mentions leaving her home for a foster home, several lawsuits brought against her, a friend who completely abandons her, and many other events that would be ripe for a good story, but then just leaves them there in lonely sentences, never to be explained or expanded. Because of this, I was always left wanting more, and left feeling as if I should have been reading other books of hers or her blog (if she has one) first. Or, I felt as if she felt she was famous enough that everyone should know all of her back stories. I have no idea who she is, so that assumption seemed egotistical at best, and bad form at worst. Furthermore, each chapter of this book read like a separate blog post, some occurring in real time, some in the past; some referencing "now," and others referencing posts written earlier that we should have read. I'm a purist when it comes to books: Unless books exist in a clearly defined series (and even then, back story should be explained), each book an author writes should be able to stand on its own. I shouldn't be expected to research or read outside of the book to get the whole picture of what the author is talking about. And if a book is based on someone's blog, which this one appeared to be, it's the duty of the author to edit those posts into book-worthy writing that is cohesive and understandable.

All in all, I would probably not recommend this book to many people unless you're looking for a quick memoir or you're familiar with her writing.

Rebecca Valentine says

I enjoy Slater's writing, and as a middle-aged woman and mother, I could appreciate the topics she writes about. I love the essay form; handled deftly, it can cover a lot of ground. Slater does that well. There is some overlap in subject matter in this book, probably because it is a compilation. At times, I found it a little confusing because the essays are not in chronological order, but overall, I liked this book.

Mary says

Don't be fooled by the title. Though this collection of previously published essays does indeed show how author Lauren Slater plays house in the literal world, the true struggle lies within keeping her mental house in order. As such, the subtitle is perhaps a misnomer. An expectation to gain some sort of universal insight into motherhood by the end of this book is left unsated; fulfilled instead by how Slater survived day-to-day, struggling to best the "Grim Reaper" of her mental illness. A fight she eventually wins through sheer force of will. At times explicit in gruesome detail, chapters could easily be mistaken for diary entries, and sometimes venture too far into a wormhole. Excessive descriptions of a boil on her back and power tools can drift, leaving a void wanting for more nitty-gritty about major life events.

*Received via First Reads program.

Amy H says

I got this book from the publisher in exchange for an honest review

ok, i think i am in a reading funk... this book also didn't do it for me.

this book is about a woman who struggled as a child. She was in foster care, and then worked her way up to having a husband and children

when i thought about the working mom, i was hoping for funny stories about how the everyday mom struggles, but i am always wrong..you know what they say when you assume?!

the only part of this book that I liked was when she was talking about her husband, and his beard. i felt like i can relate and even had my husband read the story. other than that i lost interest and was very very very disappointed.

Sarah says

I received this book as a free copy from the publisher.

My thoughts on this book are...complicated. I had a hard time putting them together in a way that made sense and I totally failed, so here is my bullet-pointed list:

1. This book was an engaging read, but I didn't *like* it. I think I found it engaging because I kept stopping to think about what I didn't like...
2. I tend to think it is important that people write like this ("this" being not sugar-coated, brash), but I was uncomfortable for most of the time reading it.
3. Being uncomfortable is usually a satisfying feeling for me as I believe strongly that's where the real thinking and growing happens, it's where you challenge your perceptions and previously-held thoughts, but would I recommend this book simply because it might be challenging? Was it challenging enough to warrant reading it anyways? Ultimately, don't think so.
4. I sort of felt sad for the author (and felt more comfortable thinking of her as a character, which I believe all written people really are...but that's a topic for another day), and I believe she likely wouldn't want me to.
5. I feel badly for her husband and children (again, don't think she'd want me to), and fully acknowledge that I am getting a *very* small slice of her life.
6. This is clearly a book of essays, not a book. I liked it a bit more when I took time between essays, but still find it more problematic than anything.

Rita Ciresi says

Although I found much to admire in these essays, ultimately I felt overwhelmed by the sadness and despair of the narrator and increasingly uncomfortable with the way that she exposed her husband and children to public scrutiny. There is such a thing as TMI in memoir, and this particular volume by Slater, to my mind, more than amply illustrates that. I recommend reading this book. But you may want to do it in small doses.

Edith says

This book was a compilation of articles and essays written for women's magazines (much like "This is the Story of a Happy Marriage" by Ann Patchett) over the years. Lauren Slater writes of her struggles with depression, marriage, children, work, and more. Her writing is excellent and astoundingly, brutally honest. She does not spare herself in the telling. Her candidness is remarkable and makes this book a fast read. Four stars for this author's blazing frankness and finely honed writing skills.

Those who complain of repetitiveness in these essays need to keep in mind that each of these essays was a separate piece published in different magazines at different times so the author had to set the context in each piece. Thus, this obvious repetition can be forgiven.

Laurie says

Here is an excerpt from my review: "Slater is an excellent writer. She really has a way with words, and her essays are coupled with personal anecdotes and researched facts about the topic at hand. I think that my non-fiction writing professor would LOVE Lauren Slater's writing."

You can read my full review here: <http://cookscreapcraft.blogspot.com/20...>

Gizzard says

Hmm, two books in a month that I finished and was tempted to give one star. If you like all of those "shocking" articles that are so popular on the internet right now, you will like this book of essays. But, she isn't being daring by showing me some universal truth, nor is she showing me a side of life that will bring me understanding of something or others.

I'm not sure if this book showed me that some people need to make money by exploiting the ugliness in their lives, or if Ms. Slater's mental illness makes her focus only on the negative. But any which way, only read this book if you enjoy other's suffering.

Yes, I understand she suffers from depression, but there sure seems like she has a personality disorder too. While I have immense compassion for people with mental illness, I seem to lack it for the sociopathic and narcissistic thing. When those people leave destructive piles all over your life, and couldn't care less you learn to lose sympathy for their plight.

I am truly thankful that her teenagers were spared dissection in this book.

Ellen Keim says

The strongest feature of this book is the author's honesty. She seems fearless about examining her life and

herself. (The only thing she balks at is sex, which I thought was interesting. Why was she so honest about everything else, but can't write about her sex life or sexual experiences?)

This is unlike her books that are about her battles with depression although it does touch on them. Mostly it is an intriguing portrait of a middle-aged wife, mother and writer; I enjoyed reading about her views on things like family, marriage, children, aging and so on.

Because she is so revealing, I felt like I could really relate to her as a person if we ever met. Then again, maybe the person she reveals in this book is hidden to a large extent to the larger world. If so, we're two of a kind, although we might never know that because of our unwillingness to show who we really are to others.

That's what I really enjoyed about this book: it gave me a chance to see behind the author's public persona.

Elaine Brown says

These are autobiographical essays written by a woman who has a lot of strikes against her; ended up in foster care as a child, struggles with serious mental and physical health issues as an adult, etc. but these essays tell how she is handling being married and parenting and adult life in general. She is super honest and talks about difficult issues.
