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What if your mother (review)

Penelope Scambly Schott

Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal, Volume 11, Number 1, Spring 2006,
pp. 122-124 (Review)

Published by Bridges Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/brd.2006.0028>



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B BOOK REVIEWS

JUDITH ARCANA

What if your mother

Chicory Blue Press, 2005

Penelope Scambly Schott, Reviewer

Judith Arcana's book of poems is strong stuff, beginning to end. Start with the cover painting by Abigail Marble: it's red and black and clearly female genitalia. As for the title, try finishing this sentence: *What if your mother....* Many women know how the question ends: *What if your mother had aborted you?*

Arcana answers that question with a series of what ifs where, with or without abortion, she wouldn't be here anyhow.

What if she loved someone else, not my dad?
Then I wouldn't be here either. What if, what
if.

What's the point of asking this phony
question?

All you could ever answer is, Then everything
would be different, wouldn't it? One thing
sure,

I wouldn't be standing here talking to some
jerk
who asked me that dumb question. I wouldn't
be mad at my mother for doing it—would I?
I think you just have to tell these people,
Get real. That's not what it's all about.

That colloquial phrase "get real" could be the subtitle for the whole book.

While several of these poems have been published elsewhere in such journals as *Calyx* and *Prairie Schooner*, this is Arcana's first book of poems. It is, however, hardly her first venture into feminist issues. Earlier books include *Our Mothers' Daughters*, *Any Woman's Son*, and *Grace Paley's Life Stories: A Literary Biography*.

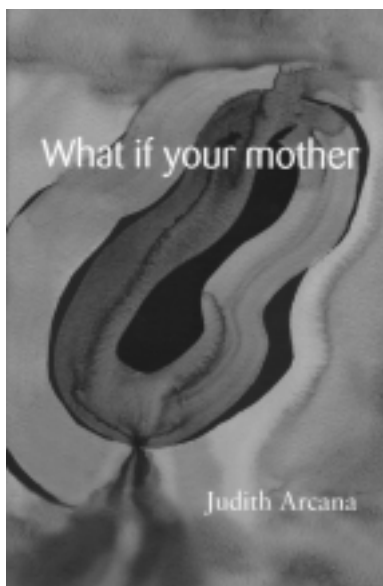
In a sense, this collection was begun many years ago when its author was in her twenties.

In the era before the Roe v. Wade decision of 1973, Arcana thought she was pregnant (she turned out not to be) but it wasn't the right time for her to have a child. As she explored alternatives, she heard of a service called The Abortion Counseling Service of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. But nobody called it that. It was simply "The Service," and the women who ran the service and eventually learned to perform abortions were called the "Janes" as in the anonymous Jane Doe. Arcana worked as a Jane for two years, during which time she became pregnant with a wanted child.

Judith Arcana's development from a Jane to a poet was anything but instant. During the years she was teaching literature and women's studies, she was busy writing expository prose. When, in the 1990s she wrote an appreciation of writer Grace Paley, she began to see that her feminist social concerns could be embodied in fiction and poetry. In her fifties, she started attending women's writing workshops and then some residencies where she had time to work on her own writing. This book of poems is one of the valuable results.

What if your mother is divided into four sections: Separating argument from fact, Information rarely offered, Don't tell me you didn't know this, and Here, in the heart of the country. The first section, Separating argument from fact, includes a poem about standing in the kitchen separating egg whites from egg yokes:

Separating eggs in the kitchen, she is
separating argument from fact...



It was this moment, says the poet in her introduction, which generated the book. "I saw that my work as a poet had rushed, river-like, into a startling confluence with my work as an activist." The second section, Information rarely offered, takes us from the poet's first job, as a car hop, through a whole awareness of sexual development, popular culture, and "The Bible in Everyday Life," where Arcana writes of King Solomon:

The King was ignorant of women (no matter that he owned so many). He thought a woman who let a child die was not a mother; he didn't imagine making her baby die might be the way a mother could be good.

Section three, Don't tell me you didn't know this, contains several prose poems where we hear the clear, individual voices of Suzie, Sheila, and Noreen. One of my favorite poems in this section is "For all the Mary Catholics" where we hear about all those Marys:

Mary Rose shared
my locker, my Kotex, my Kleenex; Mary Ellen
kissed
me on the mouth and laughed; shy Mary Jo
worshipped Audrey Hepburn in the dark;
quiet
Mary Ann died at the Shut-Eye Motel,
blood from her uterus crusted on her thighs;

And in section four, Here in the heart of the country, many of the poems come out of Arcana's long-ago Chicago experiences as a Jane, including "Felony Booking, Women's Lockup, Eleventh & State: A Short Literary Epic."

I've seen mug shots: dark long wavy hair
caught up
at the back of my head, work-ready. In profile
I'm
pigeon-chested: Nursing Mother Arrested for
Abortion
is the caption.

The book has the following dedication:

This work is dedicated to the memory of two women: Annie Solomon Rosenfield, who had an abortion in 1937 and then had my older brother and me in 1939 and 1943; and Gwendolyn Brooks, whose poem "The Mother" was the first one I ever read about abortion.

Brooks' well-known poem begins, "Abortions will not let you forget," goes through all

the unborn children and the lives they didn't have, only to conclude:

Believe me, I loved you all.
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I
loved, I loved you
All.

It is a poem that always makes me cry, both for the baby I aborted when I was fifteen and the baby who miscarried in my thirties. But if I had carried that first baby to term, I might not have finished school, I certainly would not have had exactly the two beloved children I have today.

Nobody I know is pro-abortion. But sometimes it's the best solution. Read Judith Arcana's book for a lived and heart-felt discussion of a difficult issue. She captures the voices of real women and speaks with compassion. Not every poem is equally strong, but the book as a whole is gripping. Don't dip in and out. Make yourself sit down and have the complete experience. You will thank the author for her acutely powerful reporting. This is art that matters.



MIRIAM PESKOWITZ

The Truth Behind The Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes A Good Mother?

Seal Press, 2005

SHARON HAYS

Flat Broke With Children: Women In The Age Of Welfare Reform

Oxford University Press, 2003

Sarah Werthan Bittenwieser, Reviewer

Miriam Peskowitz and Sharon Hays both focus upon the balancing act of motherhood and work in thought provoking books. Each author is concerned with how our society

treats women seeking to maintain—voluntarily or due to economic pressures—some sort of equilibrium between raising children and working for wages. I found it fascinating to