

# Five Books, Nine Children

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You really don't have favorites.

There's something special about that first-born though.

You dove into first-time motherhood and first-time book-publishing with the same open-mouthed wide-eyed look on your face as Flounder in *Animal House*, who, as the street parade erupts into a riot, pants "Oh boy, is this GREAT!"

Eagerly and naively, you scurried down the paths and made the appointments and leaped the hurdles that billions (mothers) and thousands (authors) scurried, made, and leaped before you. You marveled at, or whined about, each moment as if it had never happened before to anyone else. The baby's heartbeat! The publishing lunches in Manhattan involving radicchio and goat cheese! The baby's first kick! The editor-in-chief loves the final draft! The surprise baby shower! The great book reviews! And then, alas: the dirty diapers. The bookstores that don't carry your book. The sleep-deprivation. The reviewer that feels your nonfiction narrative overlooked an important milestone in the story.

To this day, she looks almost too slender to you, your firstborn. Your daughter, so slight, and yet strong and vibrant, with a winning laugh, dark eyes, and a fall of glossy hair. Your first book also looks a little too thin. There was that ninety-page treatment of Reconstruction that you tried to defend by telling your editor, "Jane, if they don't read

about Reconstruction, they won't understand the end of the book!" and she snarled back, "Melissa, if they read about Reconstruction, no one will get to the end of the book."

Your second book (unlike your tall, thin, second child) has the opposite problem: a tendency towards chubbiness. Because your first editor wasn't around for your second book, it ballooned. Reconstruction may have been mentioned. When people compliment the book, you want to say, "Oh but wait till it gets back from weight-loss summer camp! It'll really be beautiful then." And there it sits now, next to its older sibling, five years younger but taking up more shelf-space.

You clock your life against the coming-into-being of these creations. You were forever pregnant with a child, or a book; nursing a baby, or a book; or in process with an adoption or a book, usually two at once. Maine 1987: walking along the rocky coast pregnant with Lee, thinking about *Praying for Sheetrock*. Washington, DC, 1992: accepting the Robert F. Kennedy Award for Sheetrock, so pregnant with Lily that you warned Ethel Kennedy you might give birth right there at Hickory Hill before the end of the luncheon, and she, the mother of eleven, laughed and said, "We can do that." Addis Ababa, 2003: researching *There Is No Me Without You*, while tearing around the city by taxi with nine-year-old Fisseha.

Sometimes the burgeoning youth of the household threaten the existence of the incipient prose. Children destroy office supplies, you learn, making them an occupational hazard for a writer. Your precious Espresso fine-point pens—with which you write your books long-hand—are missing. If you can find any of them in the Lego bin or outside in the grass or between the sofa cushions, their tips have been ground down to nubs and

their caps are missing. You reach for a paper clip and find that one hundred paper clips have been linked together; they rise from your drawer like a bicycle chain.

You turn the pages of your private notebook to discover that five-year-old Lily has filled up every last page with the rectangular-faced no-torso Magic Marker creatures she calls the Silly Monsters. At one point, the only copy that exists of the book proposal for *The Temple Bombing* has fifty of its pages welded together by melted Tootsie Roll; “melted” in the sense that the Tootsie Roll went into someone’s mouth, re-emerged, and landed on the book proposal which had been recklessly left by the author in the backseat of the car, itself a collection point for decaying food substances of all kinds, a mobile compost heap. As you scrape the proposal off, drench it, and dab it with paper towels (because computers haven’t been invented yet and you need this painstakingly-typed-out copy), you think, “I should send this proposal to the publisher so they’ll know precisely whom they’re dealing with: a mother.”

Five-year-old Helen arrives in Atlanta from an Ethiopian orphanage in February 2002. She is intrigued by all the middle-class technology, but perhaps most of all by your home-office answering machine. You do not know that she has mastered it. Your messages are sounding increasingly strange:

“Uh... what?... hello? I’m trying to reach Melissa Fay Greene....” [click]

“Oh! This must be a wrong number...” [click]

“Hello, this is ABC News; we were trying to reach Melissa Fay Greene?” [click]

[click]

[click]

[click]

It finally occurs to you to check the outgoing message on the machine. In a sweet high-pitched giggly voice, the office answering machine says: “Hi! This is Helen! And this is my BUTT!” What follows is the loud farting noise of wildly-blown Bronx cheer.

You don’t ever hear from ABC News again.

When Lily is a baby, you are invited to interview the great humor columnist of American domestic life, Erma Bombeck, the Daytonian author of bestsellers like *I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression* and *The Grass is Always Greener over the Septic Tank*. As you dash around trying to leave the house in time, you discover that your business tape recorder is missing. You find it in little Molly and Seth’s bedroom with the Zippity-Doo-Dah tape quadruply wrapped around and entangled with its inner mechanisms. In desperation you snatch the chubby red-and-white Fisher Price preschool tape recorder from Baby Lily’s room and you’re on your way. When you open your briefcase and set up the the preschool tape recorder before your interview subject, Erma Bombeck, to her credit, she does not visibly flinch. You find and remove the Baby Beluga cassette and spin it with a professional flick of the wrist into the briefcase before popping in a blank one. Later, you discover that you’ve conducted the entire interview while wearing a nursing bra with both flaps down. But hey, if you can’t do that with Erma Bombeck, really who can you do it with?

Would you have changed anything in the last 29 years of raising children and writing books?

Nothing big. Maybe fewer tropical fish and reptiles could have been had. Maybe the children could have offered to cook dinner more often.

If you'd had fewer children, would you have written more books?

No.

If you'd written fewer books, would you have had more children?

Possibly.

But let's ask these questions the other way around:

Though it seems counter-intuitive, would you have written fewer books if you'd had fewer children?

Yes, because children generate a spirit of playfulness, imagination, and hilarity that's extremely conducive to the creation of art, literature, or any creative work, in the few hours of peace and sanity they allot to you.

They've all—the books and the children—grown up together. With or without Reconstruction, and whether or not they leave the house requiring reconstruction, you wanted them all.