

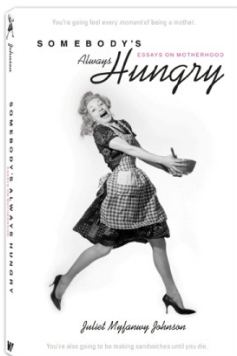


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Book Review: *Somebody's Always Hungry*

April 23, 2008

Somebody's Always Hungry: Essays on Motherhood by Juliet Myfanwy Johnson (Nell Books, \$24.95, 9781932279924 hardcover/\$15, 9781932279870 paperback, May 11, 2008)



Although the subtitle of this charming book is slightly misleading--rather than essays on motherhood in general, it is more a memoir of Johnson's experiences with her own children, Nathan and Emma, from their births to age five--its emphasis on the personal doesn't detract from its universal appeal. Like all mothers of toddlers, Johnson's focus is necessarily trained on the immediate--those key events in the early years when every day is a time of wonder and discovery, a time when children take initial steps toward individuality and independence. But by avoiding sweeping philosophical statements on the nature of motherhood and wisely allowing the children themselves to do the talking, Johnson creates a simple, eloquent narrative.

There is a great deal of both humor and sweetness in Johnson's account of the mundane but momentous events in early childhood to which any reader can relate. For example, the demise of a pet tortoise forces an explanation of death, which is further complicated when a replacement bunny also expires. Story time at the library turns into an impromptu lesson on social skills when Nathan leaps on top of his sister, who is sprawled at the storyteller's feet. The first day of pre-school is traumatic for Nathan but a welcomed event for Emma, who is just as fearless about learning to swim. Both kids are immensely appealing, and Johnson has captured their sweetness and innocence perfectly. It would take a stone heart not to smile when Nathan loses his first tooth and exclaims, "MY TOOTH! I BLEEDED!" or when Emma unceremoniously tosses her dead bunny into what Johnson calls "the Death section of the yard." Johnson's own personality, which shines through these pages, is equally sunny and ingenuously quirky, occasionally giving rise to some truly odd (but nonetheless endearing) metaphors. For example, as a newborn,

Nathan is described as both a "pile of spent birthday candles" and "a meatloaf" and Emma becomes at one point "a hard butter stick of love." If there is any complaint to be made about this breezy, short collection, it is that there is some unnecessary repetition that more judicious editing could have prevented. Nevertheless, Johnson never belabors any point long enough for this to cause too much of a distraction.

Other than the sheer delight and awe she takes in mothering, Johnson doesn't have an angle--no side she wants to take in the Mommy Wars and no revelations on child rearing. Nor is this needed; the universality of her experience will touch all mothers, even (perhaps especially) those whose children have long grown beyond those precious, fleeting first five years.--[Debra Ginsberg](#)