

**Anne Taylor Fleming, *Motherhood Deferred: A Woman's Journey* (Putnam Adult, 1994), 256 pages**

Reviewed by Lesley Rice

Fleming's memoir commences in 1988, a decade after the first birth via in-vitro fertilization, as her own quest for a baby begins in the doctor's office: "I am about to have some kind of sexual encounter, but of this weird new kind: not with a person but with a syringe of sperm." Conscious of the multifold alienation that burdens her mission – which begins here with artificial insemination and progresses through rounds of gamete intrafallopian transfer, zygote intrafallopian transfer, and frozen embryo transfer – Fleming is drawn to revisit her past in search of reconciliation. A journalist by profession, she punctuates uninhibited descriptions of these artificial reproductive procedures with no less gritty chapters situating her four decades of experience being female with an account of gender in America during the same tumultuous period between the 1950s and the early 1990s. The result is a fascinating portrayal, perceptive, articulate, and raw, of the morass of trends in American life to which we owe the ascendancy of laboratory baby-making, and of their meaning, particularly for women.

Fleming's etiology of infertility hones in on women whose adulthood, like her own, unfolded within the frame of the 1950s and the 1980s, decades she derides as "manly" and "pro-family." In her eyes, the 1950s saw a "return to sharply etched male-female roles" and an "effort to redignify American manhood and redomesticate or 'contain'... the American female after her escape from the house into the wartime economy." Fleming's parents, both Hollywood actors, contributed to the idyllic public veneer of 50s family life, but divorced when Fleming was five, well in advance of the American trend.

Fleming takes the domineering father and the frustrated, subservient mother, and the distortion of marriage by *Playboy* and hushed infidelity, to be the typical reality beneath the happy American family portrait at mid-century. Dissatisfied with their parents' relationship and with their own lot as "caretakers," young girls like Fleming learned to "identify with the aggressors" – their fathers – seeking achievement outside the home to avoid the sense of the constriction they saw in their mothers. They became the "Sacrificial Generation of Women," as Fleming puts it, because they came of age with no firm ground to stand on, in a culture eagerly dispensing with every conventional script to make room for the tenuous freedom to invent oneself.

"We were the golden girls of the brave new world," she writes, "ready, willing, and able to lay our contraceptively endowed bodies across the chasm between the feminine mystique and the world the feminists envisioned." But the "liberation" of sexual mores and gender roles gave rise to decisions with consequences that no one anticipated, not the least of which was the seemingly obvious new choice to delay motherhood.

Fleming finds that her own eleventh-hour desire for a child demands a day of reckoning, a re-examination of the bracing feminist rhetoric that has been a mainstay of her life and work, from the new vantage point of the fertility clinic. Now a "baby-hungry object of embarrassment to the feminists, an object lesson for the counter-feminists," she winces at the fact that she is succumbing to the "revenge of the wombs," the reassertion in her own body of the rejected maxim that biology is destiny. She grapples incisively with the meaning of feminine fulfillment,

never abandoning the aspirations or resentments of feminism, but nonetheless taking stock of its limits.

For all her desire to be free of gender-related strictures that might limit her career or define her relationships, she wishes that women would achieve this freedom while retaining their “female ethnicity,” what others have called the “feminine genius.” But what she perceives, first in gender relations and in the workplace, and now in the technologized, goal-oriented fertility industry, is a masculinization of womanhood and of motherhood. And though she objects to it, she herself has been taken up into this logic: her quest for a baby, for all the authenticity of her maternal desire, is a project with a deadline, carried forward by long-disciplined ambition – and it is *her* project, though her less-invested husband co-operates.

Fleming’s searingly frank consideration of relations between the sexes, and of sexual relations, in the throes of both contraceptive and artificial reproductive technologies (ARTs) exposes a twofold instrumentalization of sex. Although her genuine insights, and her quest for reconciliation, are limited by the absence of a transcendent horizon capable of illuminating these signs of the times in their full depth as matters of love and the failure to love, matters of sin and redemption, *Motherhood Deferred* offers an important perspective, from an early moment in the ascendancy of ARTs, on the reconfiguration of personal relationships and the social order in light of these technologies and the movements that gave rise to them.

Fertility technologies demand painful treatments and may still end in barrenness, to be sure, but perhaps the more significant cost is that they represent a new phase of the estrangement from one’s body and one’s spouse that contraceptive technologies inaugurated, leaving women resolved to catch up with themselves in a race against time that defies femininity itself.