

OFF THE VANIER BOOKSHELF

CINDY GRAHAM

Studies on the relationship between parents and their children almost always focus on the effective outcome of parents and parenting styles on offspring. Jennifer Senior's new book *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood* instead looks at this relationship from the other direction, examining how raising *children* affects *parents*. By combining social science research with observations and reports from a number of families she studied while writing her book, Senior presents an insightful deconstruction of the parenting experience in the modern age. In the process, she uses historical comparisons to illuminate how modern childhood and parenthood have changed over the past 70 years.

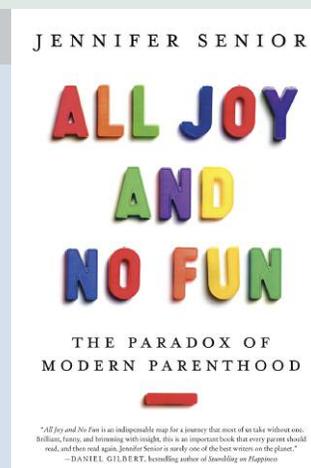
Parents and children have always been subject to economic and social change, but Senior contends that a radical shift occurred in the child's role in the home after the Second World War – from that of long-recognized contributor to the family economy to the protected and treasured focal point of the family. This abrupt transformation meant that children went from being *economic assets* at the turn of the 20th century to being the *future assets* of middle-class families today. No longer relegated to the streets, the mills or the mines to bring in family income, children in the post-war era were to be educated and treasured in their childhood and prepared for their future in a way that would allow them to compete in the adult world.

Senior also describes a parallel shift that occurred in *parenthood* during this time, which she says has become more perplexing in the modern age because many of the traditional roles parents played in the past – educators, food growers, caretakers and clothing providers – have now been outsourced beyond the family circle. The gradual handing-over of these services to schools, factory farms, doctors and clothing stores has paved the way for debate over the best ways to “parent,” a term that gained popularity in the 1970s. Since then, parents have increasingly devoted financial resources to developing their children's physical and social skills through playgroups, recreational classes and music and sports lessons *outside the home*. Directly providing for children's *emotional needs* and *stimulation* became the *raison d'être* of parenting.

To add to the complexity of this shift, Senior argues that as the age of first-time parenthood has risen, modern mothers and fathers have become more aware of the costs of parenting to their personal autonomy. For many

All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood

Jennifer Senior. New York: HarperCollins, 2014.



Senior's inquiry into the parenting experience focuses on how raising children affects parents.

people, having a child in the modern age means *letting go* of a lifestyle, profession and independence cultivated in earnest, based on aspirations and expectations for financial well-being and a freedom to participate in a social life of one's own choosing.

Ultimately, while the book focuses on the real challenges of parenting in the 21st century, it also tries to capture why, in spite of the day-to-day work of raising a family, providing for children creates a *transcendent joy* that is difficult to quantify. The *experience* of parenting, Senior argues, has become an increasingly “high-cost/high-reward activity” that brings with it more lows as well as more highs.

Senior admits that *All Joy and No Fun* is about middle-class families – not *all* families. She avoids focusing on upper-class families because “their concerns aren't especially relatable” to the majority of families, nor does she devote much space to parents living with low income because “poor parents deserve a different kind of book, and far more than one.” Still, her book provides the reader with an interesting inquiry into the complexities of parenthood in the modern age, ideally suited to anyone interested in better understanding the evolution of parenting in the post-war era. ◀

Cindy Graham is a professional writer living in Ottawa.



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