

January 2002

Highlights from this issue...

Bridging the ocean

I Love You Like Crazy Cakes by Rose A. Lewis, illustrated by Jane Dyer. New York: Little, Brown, 2000, 32 pp., watercolors, ages 4-6, \$14.95 hardcover.

Wuhu Diary: On Taking My Adopted Daughter Back to Her Hometown in China by Emily Prager. New York: Random House, 2001, 256 pp., \$21.95 hardcover.

Kids Like Me in China by Ying Ying Fry with Amy Klatzkin. St. Paul, MN: Yeoung & Yeoung, 2001, 44 pp., 100 color photos, ages 7-12, \$18.00 hardcover.



From *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes*.

Reviewed by Anita D. McClellan



From *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes*.

THE ONLY CERTAIN THING my daughter carries with her from her earliest months is that someone in China, where she was born, loved her and cared for her very much, enough to make sure that she would live. One of my biggest fears as a new parent was that I would not be up to speaking with her about her life story, so far from my own birth family experience. I worried that I would fail when she asked me about mainland China. How could I help her understand her feelings of love for a relative or caregiver she thinks she might remember but suspects she may never meet again, never seeing anyone her life long who mirrors her features, the sound of her laugh, her walk, her wit? My daughter is a traveler in what to me will forever remain an unknown country. For a while yet she allows me to guide her to its borders, but only she can venture inland.

Each of these books' authors, aged eight to about fifty, plots a bit of the territory that our family has explored. They help readers make their way through some very rough terrain.

I Love You Like Crazy Cakes is an ideal way to introduce a child to any story of transracial, international adoption. All ages can read and reread it together, with a sibling or friend or alone. Jane Dyer's watercolors poetically illustrate a nursery in a fairytale's Chinese orphanage--clean, airy, spacious, in a landscape-scroll-painting's countryside. Her infants share cribs, as they do in Chinese orphanages, and her caregivers are attentive, as they reportedly are in real life. Rose Lewis' simple text focuses on an unpartnered Western mother with a large, welcoming circle of families and friends of all ages and types. How and why babies arrive in the orphanage and which children do or do not depart for adoptive families are not Lewis' subjects. Yet her loving portrait of one such family's first days together establishes a solid foundation from which to move on to more complex issues.

WHEN MY DAUGHTER STARTED to ask me, ready or not,



about her origins, she was three. All at once the wide world had rushed in, and we were exploring unfathomable questions of belonging, of connecting, of family, of roots and branches. I wish I had had Emily Prager's *Wuhu Diary* then. Mindful of all sides of the adoption triad--birth parents, child, adoptive parents--it reads like a mixture of travelogue, soul searching, cosmic discovery and family adventure.



From *Wuhu Diary*. LuLu is front, center.

Prager spent two months with her five-year-old LuLu in the city on the Yangtze River in Anhui Province, eastern China, where she had been found as an infant. Emily and LuLu both wanted to make some connections between LuLu's infancy and her life in Greenwich Village. In Wuhu, if all went well, the Pragers might learn something about LuLu's birth family, perhaps meet her former caregiver. LuLu would go to primary school in Wuhu and return to New York City with some experience of a child's everyday life in the place of her birth. Their mission makes Prager's book relevant to any adoptive family.

As luck would have it, the week after their arrival LuLu's adoptive country in the name of NATO inadvertently bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese citizens. Westerners from NATO countries, particularly the US, were cautioned for many days not to leave their residences or hotels. Ugly anti-US demonstrations took place in many Chinese cities. Nothing bad actually happened to the Pragers during their stay, apart from a few unpleasant run-ins with nasty locals, but the atmosphere generated by the bombing kept them fairly close to their hotel and LuLu's school. In the end they were refused access to people who might have known LuLu as a baby and to the actual orphanage she had lived in.

Mother and daughter nonetheless left China connected to themselves, to LuLu's birth country and to each other in new ways.

It was as if a big black ball of confusion had been pushed out of LuLu's head. She came back from China... having reclaimed, I think, some essential part of herself... One night last month... she had a momentary resurfacing of longing for her Chinese mother, the first in two years, and we wept together again. But there is a location for this grief now, and it no longer sweeps over her being, an incomprehensible maelstrom that threatens her very identity and her attachments. (p. 236)



Unlike Emily Prager, I don't attach a great deal of meaning to my child's orphanage per se--a particular building, room, crib. Just as well, as China has turned into one great construction site, as Prager discovered: many buildings, parks, bridges that existed even a few years ago have been torn down and reconfigured. In our tourist weeks in China in 1999, my daughter and I saw vacant lots where a week earlier we had explored an entire neighborhood.

At the time, when I asked Iona Xiaolu if she wanted to visit her orphanage, she expressed absolutely no interest. Flying kites in front of the Temple of Heaven, visiting the baby twin pandas at the Beijing Zoo, gongxi the ancient alarm, Mulan-style, at the Great Wall to alert the countryside to invading barbarians ("Hey, Ma! That's us!"), digging in the sand at Beidehai or posing for a photo in



Emily Prager and LuLu pose on humpback bridge at Jing Hu Lake.

From *Wuhu Diary*.

a Qipao dress kept her too busy in the present.

I felt relieved that we were not going back to the orphanage. In 1994, during our adopting group's hour-long ceremonial visit to Wuxi Child Welfare Society, I had had no way to process the cultural information I took in. Countless books, panels, conferences, expert opinions and five years later, I did not feel qualified to help Iona Xiaolu make sense of what she might encounter there. Small and well-run as China's orphanages were at the time I adopted my daughter, her

orphanage had few healthy babies and toddlers on site; they were in foster care with peasant families in the countryside. I remember very clearly walking around holding my new baby and looking at concrete floors, thinking about extreme temperatures and no running water, overworked caregivers, the one touchingly inappropriate outdoor play structure (UN-donated, a Northern European castle), an algae-choked ornamental pond in the courtyard, tattered baby laundry drying in the 100-plus-degree sun.

As an adoptive parent, I have had to learn to keep my daughter's story where she is rather than where I am with it. Emily Prager has learned how to do this, and in *Wuhu Diary* she brings her reader right inside her struggles.

There is much in *Wuhu Diary* that reminded me of our return visit to China, though as tourists we had nothing remotely resembling the Pragers' opportunities to make local connections. Like them, we spent lots of time wandering around loose, visiting shops, sitting among locals by lakes, getting very very hot, eating exotic snack foods, watching Chinese TV. Like LuLu, my daughter became addicted to soap operas. Like the Pragers, we survived heart-stopping fluke accidents that might have ended in disaster but didn't.



From *Kids Like Me in China*.
Ying Ying is front, center.

THESE DAYS, THREE YEARS LATER, my eight-year-old wants to return to her orphanage and spend time with the director, the one person she knows by name (and from cards and photos) who knew her and loved her when she was entirely Chinese. We recently attended a book party for Ying Ying Fry, the eight-year-old co-author (with her mother, Amy Klatzkin) of *Kids Like Me in China*, at which a panel of adoptive parents spoke about taking their Chinese-born daughters back to visit their orphanages. Much of the parental advice may be gleaned from *Wuhu Diary*: reach for the journey of a lifetime, which might be awful and might be great but shouldn't be missed for everyone's sake, especially your child's; build in a holiday in China as part of the same trip; travel with another family and child so you have each other; take along a tape recorder and a good translator; take the time to be alone with your child at the orphanage without any other children around; try to speak alone as a family with the orphanage director; expect specific places to have disappeared physically or to have been upgraded beyond

recognition. Stay flexible: prepare yourself and your child for everything that might go wrong, and then expect to miss something obvious that does go wrong; don't expect that anyone has made preparations to receive you, in spite of advance correspondence to the contrary; don't be surprised if your access to people and to places varies widely, even for the same family from one day to the next.

Kids Like Me in China, the first book about returning to a birth country that I know of written for children by a child, leaps off the page. It tackles head on major China-adoption issues in 44 pages illustrated



with color photographs taken by Ying Ying herself, her dad and photographer-publisher Brian Boyd. Ying Ying doesn't shy away from talking about the population-control birth policies imposed on families in China and how they affected her and other Chinese girls' lives. She even speculates, "Maybe I have a sister in China somewhere. Maybe I have a brother. I wish I knew. I hope one day I'll find out... Sometimes I think a lot about stuff like that. But I don't talk about it much. Sometimes I looked at all those babies in all those cribs and I didn't know what to think. Sometimes I just had to leave the room."



Children at the orphanage.
From *Kids Like Me in China*.



Ying Ying with a baby girl
at the orphanage. From
Kids Like Me in China.

Ying Ying visits her orphanage in Changsha, Hunan province, and meets her caregiver, Li Ayi, as the Pragers had so wanted to do in Wuhu. The Fry family, all of whom speak Mandarin, were given unexpected access to the orphanage during their time in Changsha. Ying Ying, who is able to communicate on her own pretty well (local dialect aside), hangs in the nursery with the very young babies (more girls than boys, but she could only tell during diapering), helps the harried caregivers at feedings and play times, visits with Li Ayi, plays with the older babies and toddlers. She visits the orphanage's school-age residents (as many older boys as older girls) on weekends, plays in their rooms, goes up the street with them to buy snacks, and forms genuine friendships. "You're one of us?" one girl asked."

Beyond the baby floor at Changsha, separate from the big kids' floor, handicapped children (an equal number of boys and girls there) receive special help for "really big problems." Until I read *Kids Like Me in China* with my daughter I worried a lot about how to handle this aspect of orphanage life. Where would my so-healthy American girl find herself among this peer group? How about survivor's guilt generally: who gets to leave the orphanage for an entirely new life? Who doesn't get out? Ying Ying Fry's book helped me speak of such things more easily.

The electric part of *Kids Like Me in China* begins when Ying Ying describes her thoughts and feelings about how children in China get to orphanages, why there are more healthy baby girls than baby boys there, how the children are cared for, and what she--a well-traveled, eight-year-old San Franciscan with two loving parents, attending the bilingual Mandarin-English Chinese American International School, a Junior Scout and soccer player--feels about orphanage life.

One of her Changsha friends, a 27-year-old photographer's model, orphanage caregiver and laundress, addresses this directly. Yang Lan, who has lived in the orphanage since she was six, explained to Ying Ying how it had felt to her to enter orphanage life and how difficult it had been for her to adjust to it in middle childhood. As a grown-up she was reunited with her birth family, which lives far away in another province; Yang Lan visits her relatives every year at Spring Festival, but still makes her home and her life at the orphanage. "Yang Lan said we have a lot in common. She has made a good life for herself, and she wants me to have a good life too."

Besides orphanage children, Ying Ying befriends her peers in the wider Changsha community, school children living in families, playing in parks, suffering from homework. *Kids Like Me in China*, speaking straight to her heart, took my daughter to a whole new level in thinking about questions that she must revisit again and again



Ying Ying with her
parents.
From *Kids Like Me in*

throughout her life: questions of lost and found, of culture and identity, of disconnecting and connecting, and of belonging to yourself and to the world as it finds you and you find it. It gave us both a sense of what kids in China are like, be they teenagers, toddlers, or grade-school computer-gamers and Michael Jackson wannabes. Ying Ying's experiences helped both of us to glean a trace of who my daughter might have become had she stayed in China.

China.

➡ [Start a trial subscription](#) beginning with a copy of the current issue!
 Want to respond to what you've read? Send a [Letter to the Editor](#)

A long way from home

Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadow of Affluence by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001, 284 pp., \$19.95 paper.

Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001, 309 pp., \$18.95 paper.

Reviewed by Debbie Nathan



Doméstica, cover photo.

THE COVER PHOTOGRAPH of *Doméstica* is worth the proverbial thousand words. A woman sits on the grass cradling a baby. The baby is the blondest child imaginable, so white that its plump, diapered body shines like the full moon. The baby and woman loll on a blanket, and Mary Cassatt could not have done a better portrait of the woozy bond between a mother and her child on a day in the sunlight.

Except this woman is not the baby's mother. She is as brown as her charge is white, and though in this age of international adoption we easily picture white women with colored sons or daughters, we assume that a child who shines like the moon cannot have as her parent a dark-skinned Latina.

Instead, we know this Latina as the nanny, the baby-sitter, the housekeeper, the maid. Or (depending on what megalopolis we spend time in) we know Caribbeans or Asians who do the same work. We know them because our friends and neighbors employ them--or we do. All over the world now, from

New York to Los Angeles, Houston, Rome, London, Paris and Hong Kong, immigrant women from poor, "third world" countries are raising the children of affluent, first-world professionals. Third-world women are also dislodging first-world pubic hairs from bathtub drains. They are washing floors, buying groceries, cooking dinner. They are making it possible for women in countries like the United States and England and Italy to work at careers once open solely to men, in the days when mothers were supposed to stay home and deal with the kids and the pubic hairs themselves.

Less than a hundred years ago in the United States, most women who worked outside their homes did so as housekeepers and nannies. Most were whites from the US countryside and Europe, or they were African Americans. By mid-twentieth century, the proportion of women who did these jobs had declined so sharply that it seemed domestic work would soon be obsolete. But then came two developments. One was the movement of middle-class white women out of their homes and into the labor market. The other was "globalization," which has moved manufacturing out of industrialized nations and into developing ones.

That move has booted blue-collar US workers out of well-paid jobs and sucked poor, third-world people into low-wage factories newly opened in their countries. All this shifting and decentralizing has required concentrations of managers to push paper and keep spreadsheets. Throughout the world, the big financial capitals have gathered professionals to do this globalizing work. In turn, the professionals need all kinds of personal services, from manicures to psychiatry to mothering for their children.

When the work is low-status, third-world migrants have flocked to it. Childcare and housekeeping are the lowest of all, since they are traditionally seen as "natural" expressions of womanhood, and so not really jobs at all. In a two-sides-of-the-same-coin irony that gender-studies people know well, the most despised labor in the world is also the most exalted. The cleaning and feeding and loving of babies, even if they are not your own, is beautiful, sacred, more like being "one of the family" than being at work. Which is to say that immigrants doing these things are expected to have little interest in a forty-hour week, pay raises, or even the minimum wage.

The arrangement works fine for employers, as well as for the governments of poor "sending" countries and for global financial institutions. The servants live like church mice in cities like Los Angeles and Rome, and wire their earnings home. This supplies their countries with billions of dollars of foreign currency, opens a valve against the mass frustrations of poverty, and pays draconian debt service on loans from the World Bank or International Monetary Fund. Meanwhile, the servants' own kids are hundreds or thousands of miles away in the poor countries, where someone else is raising them at far less cost than if they had followed their mothers abroad. Professionals in the global cities can thus pay low wages and still feel like they're doing immigrant women a favor.

Meanwhile, on every front from public policy to the gender wars, an uneasy truce prevails. The chronic inadequacy of quality public daycare in countries like the United States is disregarded, since the nation's most articulate women now have private nannies. And hardly anyone confronts men's persistent refusal to share housework and childcare, since there's still a woman at home to do it--even if she is the master's maid, not his wife.

Plus ça change? What both *Doméstica* and *Servants of Globalization* make clear is that while housecleaning and nannying have a long and stubborn history, the work's recent globalization makes it particularly insidious.

PIERRETTE HONDAGNEU-SOTELO, author of *Doméstica*, is the daughter of a Chilean woman who came to the United States to clean houses. Now a sociologist at the University of Southern California, Hondagneu-Sotelo reports here on her fieldwork among Mexican and Central American nannies and housecleaners in the tonier neighborhoods of Los Angeles. She also talks with these workers' mostly Anglo *patronas*--female employers--to discover how the two groups get along in the intimate confines of the *patronas*' homes. Those homes, Hondagneu-Sotelo notes, have replaced factories as the first point of entry for female immigrants to the United States.

Much of what Hondagneu-Sotelo covers is old ground, plowed the last decade in several books about contemporary domestic work in the United States. Mary Romero's *Maid in the U.S.A.*, for example, published in 1992, detailed the wrenching segregation and isolation that nannies and housekeepers feel when employers allot them fewer or cheaper amenities than the rest of the family enjoys--everything from rationed food to generic-brand shampoo to different dinner plates. Even living rooms and other communal parts of the house may be declared off limits to "the maid." Books predating *Doméstica* have also chronicled how live-ins frequently are made to work around the clock: sleeping (or rather, not sleeping) on

call in the newborn's room while the parents slumber on the other side of the house; occupying a room next to a toddler who crawls into the nanny's bed at three a.m. That labor is considered "rest" and goes unpaid. In the daytime, according to Hondagneu-Sotelo's calculations, live-in wages in Los Angeles average \$3.80 an hour.

Doméstica is particularly strong in its treatment of *patronas* who torture their housebound employees by giving them the silent treatment. "Good morning, *señora*' and 'Good night, *señora*.' Nothing else. They would speak nothing, absolutely nothing to me!" one woman complains. "Sometimes," says another of her *patrona*, "she wouldn't speak to me the whole day...she'd act as if I was a chair, a table, as if her whole house was supposedly all clean without me being there."

Being ignored this way is devastating to immigrant women, particularly live-ins. Other researchers have tended to attribute employer silence to a combination of vintage racism and equally longstanding American uneasiness with hiring household help. Supposedly the distaff upper class in countries such as England are used to servants and know how to socialize with them in "maternalistic" ways that keep life pleasant even as they bolster labor discipline and class boundaries. But in the democratic United States, *patronas* are so embarrassed at having domestics that they turn mute in their presence.

Hondagneu-Sotelo adds a contemporary twist. Citing the work of sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild on the "Taylorization" of first-world home life under globalization, she suggests that today's professional women are so overworked that they barely have time to talk to their husbands or children, much less the housekeeper. One *patrona*, Karla, describes how she rations conversation with the nanny when she comes home from work: "I always have a lot of questions I want to ask Filomena about...what did [the baby] have to eat...was he constipated...but then it always turns into a whole thing about Filomena's cousin's friend's brother who did this and on and on and on." To avoid having to listen to details of her nanny's life, Karla has moved her home office into her small bedroom because "that's an area that I can be shut off from Filomena."

Housekeepers and nannies are so wounded by their employers' refusal to talk to them like human beings that on the twelve-point demand list of the Domestic Workers' Association "We don't want to be ignored" tops the call for "a fair salary."

The Domestic Workers' Association (DWA) was begun a decade ago as part of CHIRLA, the Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles. Groups like DWA are sorely needed, Hondagneu-Sotelo notes, because though housekeepers are covered by federal wage and hour laws, workers who care for children and the elderly are not, and live-ins are not covered by rules mandating extra pay for overtime work. Nor do domestics have the right to organize. Even so, groups such as the DWA are teaching these workers about rights they do have, and some women have won thousands of dollars in back pay after learning how to keep records of labor they were never paid for. (Hondagneu-Sotelo is donating her royalties from *Doméstica* to the association, so anyone who buys the book will be helping the DWA with its organizing work.)

DOMESTIC WORKERS, Hondagneu-Sotelo writes, need to start thinking of themselves as just that--workers--instead of "one of the family." Simultaneously, they need to organize politically to improve their labor conditions. This is what DWA is about, and *Doméstica*'s dedication to the grassroots group probably is one reason for the book's engaging readability.

But Hondagneu-Sotelo also is dedicated to the people who purchase private household help these days, and her allegiance to their immediate comfort rather than longterm needs undercuts the power of her book. She

admits to having her own house cleaned by an immigrant so that she can work as a professor, and she regrets that her fellow *patronas* tend to see themselves as consumers of products rather than as employers of labor. She is big on the idea that things would improve if people treated their household workers with "personalism." In other words, the *patrona* and her employee should share "a bilateral relationship that involves two individuals recognizing each other not solely in terms of their role or office...but rather as persons embedded in a unique set of aspirations."

This is fancy talk for getting the possibly racist, possibly classist and definitely harried boss to take the time to care about her immigrant worker--who typically is equally harried by the problems of her own family and children living far away in precarious circumstances. Personalism is a lovely idea. But prescribing it to the readers of *Doméstica* seems pointless, unless that recommendation is coupled with much more radical, far-reaching suggestions. Any *patrona* reading *Doméstica* is likely to be politically aware already, and either speaks Spanish or keeps a Berlitz book in the house. As a group, such people are not thoughtless, selfish jerks. But they may well be too drained by their own lives under contemporary globalization to take on the task of getting the nanny a green card, or grappling with her extended family's immigration, medical, educational and legal problems.

This, after all, is what it means for an affluent, educated First-World woman to appreciate her poor, immigrant housekeeper as a "person embedded in a unique set of aspirations." Those aspirations, of course, would not be so difficult to fulfill if these women could bring their own children to the countries where they work, and earn enough money to support them in the receiving nation. Nor would it be so hard for female natives of countries like the United States to listen to them if those natives weren't commuting and laboring sixty-hour weeks and even bringing work home with them--especially if they could get their male partners to make the cupcakes for PTA meetings. But all these "woulds" would constitute a different system: one without private nannies and maids.

ANTHROPOLOGIST RHACEL SALAZAR PARRENAS' *Servants of Globalization* contains no tips for *patronas*, nor is it as accessible as *Doméstica*. It reads like a dissertation--which it originally was--with the usual plodding introduction, end-of-chapter sections that echo previous pages, a droning conclusion chapter, some off-putting jargon. Yet other people besides academics should read it, because it is well worth the effort. Its nuanced accounts and fresh analysis challenge the reader to think deeply, not just about the suffering of immigrant domestic workers and their families, but about the entire global system that creates such labor, and how that arrangement damages all women--even first-worlders.

Servants is remarkable first of all because the workers it examines are from the Philippines, and many of the homes they scrub are in Rome. The past decade's literature on domestic work has concentrated on Latina and Caribbean immigrants in the United States, so Parreñas challenges readers to think about an unfamiliar ethnic group in a European rather than strictly US context. We learn that Filipinas today are cleaning house in some 130 countries, and that they tend to be prized over women from Latin America because so many of them are college-educated and speak English. Employers see them as "high-class"--even when they sneak in over routes as harrowing as any that undocumented Latinas traverse to reach *El Norte*.

Why are college-educated women hopping continents to work as maids? In yet another cruel irony of globalization, the Philippines is so economically depressed that even the middle classes can only afford to feed their children--as one of Parreñas' informants notes--"fried stale bread with sugar." To balance a beleaguered national budget and deal with high unemployment, the Philippine government encourages emigration and calls women who do it "heroes" of the homeland. But homeland is a misnomer, because although they continue to see themselves as Filipinas, many of these women never return to their native

country to live.

Many have emigrated in the first place to escape wife-beating and other forms of domestic abuse, which are common and accepted in Filipino culture. The heavily Catholic country outlaws divorce and, as Parreñas points out, female out-migration leaves these patriarchal relations safely in place. Filipina domestic workers usually are the sole providers for their children. Yet the immigration laws of the countries they move to, coupled with low salaries and long distances, make it financially and legally impossible to reunite their families. The result: mothers typically travel home to see their children every four years, and stay for only two months. Those who eventually return for good often do so after being away sixteen years--the entire childhood of the sons and daughters they left behind. In effect, Filipinas abandon their offspring in places like Manila to raise the children of Romans and Londoners and Riyadhians and Angelenos.

Not surprisingly, the separation is intensely traumatic for children as well as mothers. But the pain of both generations is mediated by gender- and class-based behavior that Parreñas meticulously delineates. For instance, Filipino fathers for years have also gone overseas to work, and have spent long periods away from their families. But since women rather than men are traditionally seen as nurturers of children, male migration has never been thought of as a threat to family life. On the other hand, the more recent wave of female migration has evoked heart-rending disapproval from the children left behind. Parreñas quotes from a magazine catering to Filipina migrants, which prints testimonial letters from Filipina teenagers. One, a girl living in the Philippines with her father, begs her migrant mother: "Mom...I need someone guiding and supporting me and that is you. I don't want to be rich. Instead I want you with me, Mom."

The fact that migrant Filipinas miss their children terribly is underscored by a thicket of brackets in Parreñas' interview transcriptions. "I left my youngest when she was only five," says one woman. "She was already nine when I saw her again but she wanted me to carry her. [Weeps]." To assuage their grief and guilt, the women often ship their sons and daughters designer clothing and other luxuries. In response to this commodification of maternal affection, the children protest that they'd rather be poor (even as they tear into the boxes and don their gifts). In yet another irony, the mothers fantasize returning home, assuming their positions among the middle class and being waited on by their own maids--Filipinas too poverty-stricken to have afforded migration.

The cover photo on *Servants of Globalization* shows a woman by herself, with no baby. It is not as striking as the picture on *Doméstica*, but the pages that follow are more riveting. Women from the United States, Italy, England and other "advanced" countries will get no advice here about how to talk to the help. They will, however, be forced to think deeply about the corrosive ways that--as Parreñas puts it--"global capitalism is forging the creation of links among distinct national systems of gender inequality."

This is fancy talk for a miserable, worldwide hierarchy. First-world women get to do interesting work now, not because their countries have good daycare, not because husbands help out at home, and not because previously all-male jobs have been retooled to give parents time for a life besides work. Instead, first-world professional women have public lives because the poor women they hire have been excised from their own families. In turn, those domestics often hire even poorer women to do *their* mothering--producing yet another cohort of conflicted parents and children.

In an article first published in *Harpers*, and now included in her recently published book *Nickel and Dime*d, writer Barbara Ehrenreich--who spent several weeks cleaning houses to see what the work was like--wrote that the upper middle class should clean its own pubic hair out of its drains. Her suggestion provoked angry responses to the editor from many women, all of whom no doubt had nannies and maids. *Doméstica* rightly

points out that today's international female pecking order will not be going away any time soon. But the sooner *domésticas* and their bosses see this abomination as a product of the current political economy and not just bad manners, the better off all women in the world will be--*patronas* included.

➡ [Start a trial subscription](#) beginning with a copy of the current issue!
Want to respond to what you've read? Send a [Letter to the Editor](#)

Fragile strengths

Rowing to Latitude: Journeys Along the Arctic's Edge by Jill Fredston. New York: North Point Press/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001, 289 pp., \$24.00 hardcover.

Reviewed by Judith Niemi

JILL FREDSTON WOULD BE anyone's choice of travel companion: intelligent, resourceful, courageous and utterly reliable, with flashes of whimsy and wit. Her travels, however, take her to wild places where few would be capable of following. In a frail craft, a hybrid of sea kayak and rowing shell, she follows Arctic coastlines through ice-choked and stormy seas.

Many readers who would enjoy Fredston's company in this book might overlook it, because the wilderness adventure genre so often disappoints both intellectually and aesthetically. Even those of us addicted to it will admit that its pleasures, like those of genre fiction, are often limited and predictable: local color and lore, the adrenalin-stimulating, page-turning thrills of second-hand adventure. Authors who are adventurers first and writers only incidentally too often fall into heroic or self-deprecating poses; they tend to be either utterly unreflective or too absorbed in their internal journeys.

Though this is Jill Fredston's first book, she steers between these dangers with as much skill as she navigates her boat through the fog, between icebergs and floes. She provides not only glimpses of places few will ever see, but a valuable report on how she lives.

She introduces herself in a typically modest, low-key way: "For years my husband, Doug Fesler, and I have led a double life. In the winter, we work together as avalanche specialists. Then, with the lighter days of summer, we disappear (though my mother hates that word) on three-to-five-month-long wilderness rowing and kayaking trips. Somehow, more than twenty thousand miles have slid under our blades, a function of time and repetitive motion rather than undue strength or bravery." These trips are not vacations, nor expeditions with sponsorship and publicity, and certainly not soul-searching trips. They are simply a way of life.

The maps on the endpapers are mesmerizing: the dotted lines wander up from Seattle, through the inland passage, down the Yukon and MacKenzie Rivers, around most of the coast of Alaska. And that's just the front cover--the other map tracks Fredston in Labrador, up the entire coast of Norway, around Spitzbergen (eighty degrees north) and up the west coast of Greenland.

Still, in a time when Shackleton is being rediscovered, and *Into Thin Air* and *The Perfect Storm* have been



Greenland. From *Rowing to Latitude*.

best-sellers, some readers might miss the intensity: no one dies, and Fredston is entirely matter-of-fact. There are plenty of dangers: everywhere local people predict the couple will be destroyed by ice and tides and unpredictable winds, and they admit to close calls. But Fredston is not a bit in love with danger, and never glorifies it. Risk is simply one of the elements of her chosen life.

The most continuous experience of fear she reports was on Alaska's northwest coast, where grizzlies visited their camps almost nightly. "The bears never showed any interest in our boat or our food, just our tan-colored dome tent. Doug was convinced it was my socks that drew them in... I maintained it was his fermenting rubber boots. Quite likely, to an inquisitive bear, our tent bore a striking resemblance in both smell and shape to a bloated walrus." That's in a certain gallant, humorous tradition, but she makes clear that they were often terrified, and it wasn't fun. Still, even after a bear pawed at the tent just over her head, she just went back to sleep. As she said later to her incredulous mother, "We couldn't come up with any better options."

Above all, she's practical. "On this trip we were too exhausted, too scared, and too cold to worry about what might happen; we needed to harbor our energy for dealing with actual crises as they arose." She's very analytical about the forms of mind control they developed. Of course, the next summer they were back.



Home for the night, southeast Alaska.
From *Rowing to Latitude*.

EARLY CHAPTERS set some background, beginning with the five-foot rowboat she got on her tenth birthday: "From the moment I stepped into *Ikky Kid*, at some waterline level, I sensed the potential of using my own power to compose a life." She writes of seeking perfect rhythm in a rowing shell, and designing the unorthodox boat she uses in icy seas. She tells us about moving to Alaska, having the imagination to fall in love with her colleague Doug across an age difference. She's perceptive, but the pace lags at times.

The book gains momentum as year by year their travels take the two of them farther, and as the reader comes to know this extraordinary pair. Each chapter, covering months of travel, centers around one main theme or a few events, but Fredston does not neglect to pinpoint small details unrelated to their travels that bring in some political and environmental context. They pass a place on Alaska's coast which, she later learns, is where Edward Teller proposed to demonstrate peaceful uses of atomic energy by blasting a harbor with a discreet nuclear bomb. There's Norway's long memory of German occupation. There's a cast of interesting, quirky, or helpful characters, the wonderful incongruities of Arctic life.

The trips are not all interesting or beautiful. On the MacKenzie River Fredston is so bored she reads while rowing, *Angle of Repose* bungee-corded to her feet. In Norway there are obstructions with humorless bureaucrats, grim military and, always, too much pollution. Labrador, on the other hand, "scared us, battered us, awed us" but is perhaps the place she loves most. They return, with her seventeen-year-old stepdaughter Sunna, and at first make very conservative decisions. "We traveled much like a young duck family.... It proved liberating to take a step away from the edge...and to let go of expectations about how far we might travel." Fredston is a tactful, light-handed teacher, and soon realizes she can stop coaching Sunna. "I've never seen myself row except upside down, in a reflection. But when I watched Sunna, she looked exactly the way I felt. It was as if we were partners in an intricately choreographed waltz, mirroring each other's movements and timing, mimicking slight nuances in the flow of our bodies. Whatever else she needed to learn she would teach herself."

THE LAST TWO CHAPTERS widen the scope of the entire book. "Reflections from a Hard Seat" is a pragmatic, undramatic look at danger and calculated risks, with stories about some admitted miscalculations and moments of sheer luck. Fredston describes at last the other half of her shared and unorthodox life: predicting avalanches and, too often, searching for victims. "We have noticed a cumulative toxic effect of too many body recoveries and grieving relatives....The night we return from a mission we are as likely to fight as to make love, using each other as targets for our frustration. It is easier to argue than to talk about the blood-soaked snow." This intimacy with death is a reminder of human fragility, but also an encouragement to keep following the water-borne half of their lives. "We are not averse to taking risks," she says, "but have become increasingly discriminating."

It is above all the lure of greater wildness that justifies narrower safety margins. Fredston spells out her guidelines for wilderness travel: evaluating danger impersonally, keeping fluidity in decisions, living by habits and dependability, trying hard not to second-guess themselves. Useful for any head-on meeting with life, she seems to think, but does not belabor the point. To the list she might have added perspective and a light touch. "Paddling exposed coasts requires being part meteorologist, part hibernating bear, part cheerleader (for when the waiting grows demoralizing), and part rabbit (for when conditions get good). My father would add 'and part crazy,' but I think he's wrong."



Night visitors on the Yukon River.
From *Rowing to Latitude*.

In "Looking for Open Water" the balance of worry turns. Fredston's mother develops cancer; the trips continue, at mother's insistence, but are shorter. "Our Greenland trips will always be linked with my mother's cancer, and not just because of the timing. Attempting to row in water that is mostly frozen is an exercise in humility, a study in the limits of human vulnerability, patience, and desire." The remission of her mother's cancer was "an unexpected lead of open water--not only for her but for us." They are reminded of the limited miles in their bones, and at Melville Bay, "the rower's equivalent of Mt. Everest," they finally turn back, without seeing it as defeat.

The final scene is satisfyingly oblique. Fredston recalls flying over Greenland, on the way back from Spitzbergen. Planning to row in Greenland, they are excited to see an expanse of open water, and Doug asks the names of the tantalizing fjords. As anyone who's tried this on an international flight knows, the land below is of no interest to the crew. The Swedish steward asks, then returns to announce solemnly, "'The captain, he does not know where we are.' Doug and I laughed so hard that even the staid steward eventually lost his composure. Holding hands, we laughed until we cried. Then, still holding hands, we sat back to enjoy the view."

Far more interesting than mere "adventure," *Rowing to Latitude* is an honest and self-aware woman's record of her unusual life, and a shrewd analytical look at human existence as a balance of danger and joy.

➡ [Start a trial subscription](#) beginning with a copy of the current issue!
Want to respond to what you've read? Send a [Letter to the Editor](#)

Weekday warriors

Why the work culture of the World Trade Center is nothing to be proud of

By Christina Gombar

IT ALWAYS FELT LIKE a war zone to me. The huge, monolithic buildings. The dearth of sunlight, the vast barren stretches of concrete and, above all, the foreign, giant-scale money culture. It was all a far cry from my liberal arts degree, the left-wing weeklies and glossy literary magazines I wanted to work for that were so progressive they couldn't pay junior people anything at all, with the result that only the sons and daughters of the wealthy could afford to hone their skills there.

But I needed cash, so I went where the money was. Like the army, Wall Street will take anyone. They don't care what school you went to or who your father was. They will find you a job. When I signed on, I quickly discovered a sense of camaraderie, of opportunity--if not quite equal opportunity--lacking in more prestigious academic and creative fields.

Civil rights are abridged in the war zone. There is no racial profiling. Everyone gets fingerprinted, drug tested, hooked up to wires and interrogated upon being hired and at random intervals thereafter. Criminal intention is assumed. Pages-long questionnaires about personal habits, violations of drug and securities laws: only indicted, but never convicted? indicted more than three times?

The first Wall Street company I worked for, back in the mid-eighties, was a huge, mysterious international conglomerate, its ranks filled with ex-army men, "spooks" from the CIA and FBI. We did business with "bad" countries--Chile, Yugoslavia and Arab nations I'd never even heard of before. When I told people this--people who worked at left-wing weeklies, in academia, at literary magazines--they said it was impossible; you can't do business with countries the US government doesn't recognize.

You can. We heard strange stories we didn't know whether to believe: that the company was behind Third World coups and had a sideline in sex tours to Thailand. The top secret organizational chart showed over four hundred subsidiaries. It was said the company was kept deliberately complicated so no one could tell how much money it actually made.

The company was its own fortress, the buildings a self-contained world, with a lower concourse full of shops and services, its own bars and restaurants and, in the upper echelons of its tower, a private dining room that opened its doors to the sky. Here the company chief, in whose presence you swiftly understood the seductive charisma of history's great dictators, showcased photographs of himself flanked by then-President Reagan and the Chinese Premier. The other executives--many of whom had landed at Okinawa and Normandy--were so afraid of him that when he entered a room they would disperse as if a smoke bomb had landed in their midst. At meetings, they couldn't laugh at his jokes.

No one I knew who worked in journalism, or in book publishing, or at left-wing weeklies, had heard of the company. In fact, if you told most people in my circle then that you worked downtown, worked on Wall Street, they'd look at you like you were suddenly speaking a foreign tongue, or you were a Nazi sympathizer.

Wall Street gave me my first inkling that there was another point of view. A Cuban-born Chilean executive explained, quite convincingly, why his adopted country's dictatorship was preferable to Castro's Cuba, which he had been driven from as a child. A girl who interned in my department, the daughter of a Middle-Eastern executive, told me exactly what it was like to grow up sleeping in the hallway every night, a pillow over her head to block out the sound of mortar shells showering her native Beirut, what it was like to see her beautiful city destroyed, building after building, by her twentieth birthday.

I LIKED THE COMPANY, but left for mercenary reasons. The second Wall Street company I worked for put itself up for sale the day I arrived. A demagogue gathered us in a room and told us there would be no mass firings, not in 1987. Two days later the company announced five thousand people would be laid off after Christmas. The acquiring company looked each of us over to decide who would stay, and who go.

Though we knew we would likely be fired, we worked till midnight at a downtown printing press to get our sales letter for the field brokers out on time. One of my coworkers was 23 years old and seven months pregnant with twins. "Maria's a real trooper," our boss said, because Maria could have got her doctor to write her out at six months but soldiered on through this crisis. I remember eating with her in the cavernous, Orwellian cafeteria in Two World Trade Center at ten p.m. on New Year's Eve. She was so ill I had to fetch her her food, and looked so dreadful I couldn't swallow my own. It was my last night with the company. I remember looking at my ill, pregnant co-worker, and thinking, This is no place for women. We got our newsletter out, and before dawn my co-worker gave birth to her twins, each dangerously underweight. She was so ill she doesn't remember any of it, or anything that happened at all for the next two days.

My third and last Wall Street job made *me* sick. I left just when Anita Hill was hitting the scene, and in lieu of filing a law suit, took a little hush money. Before they'd give it to me they made me sign a piece of paper swearing never to tell what happened.

The job wasn't all bad. During the Gulf War, my co-workers, Vietnam vets all, would cluster in my office to listen to Desert Storm on my transistor, whose usage was otherwise restricted to hourly stock market updates. They recalled their own battles, glory days or otherwise, and discussed artillery makes and the pros and cons of various bombers.

At our company, the enemy was internal--the surprise attacks coming from above, a side effect of the prolonged bear market. When I was forced out, my male colleagues considered me lucky--they were equally abused, and a rash of cardiac disease was sweeping the building. But their harassment had no framework of accountability, no legal classification nor protection. It was just business as usual.

When I left that company, I swore I would never go back downtown again. I felt like a wounded veteran, exempt from future service. This is how I always explain myself to people: when I was young, I ruined my health working on Wall Street. It was my own fault. I should have evaded the draft, I should never have gone down there. There's a reason people avoid places like that.

People who've worked there understand. They know about the eleven-hour days, the seventy-hour weeks, the two weeks off a year. It takes a certain kind of person to stick out those conditions, people unafraid of either risk or sacrifice in the name of company, capitalism, the American dream. I wasn't one of them. What I do know is that everyone in those World Trade Towers, hard at work at 8:30 a.m., was already a warrior, long before any planes hit.

✚ [Start a trial subscription](#) beginning with a copy of the current issue!
Want to respond to what you've read? Send a [Letter to the Editor](#)



Portrait of the artist

Gwen Raverat: Friends, Family and Affections by Frances Spalding. London: The Harvill Press, 2001, 438 pp., \$50.00 hardcover.



Gwen Raverat, *Self-portrait*,
c. 1910-11. From *Gwen
Raverat*.

Reviewed by Tracy Seeley

BRITISH ARTIST GWEN DARWIN RAVERAT (1885-1957) has long deserved a biography befitting her gifts, and Frances Spalding's fine book delivers it. A brilliant wood engraver, illustrator and painter, Raverat enjoyed early acclaim and a lifetime of artistic renown. From her first exhibition of wood engravings in 1910, critics consistently remarked on both the beauty of her work and its importance in reviving wood engraving as a fine art. Reviewers linked her work to eighteenth-century engraver Thomas Bewick and to William Blake and praised her imaginative, lyrical and meticulous renderings of everyday scenes. Her technical virtuosity and the fluidity and liveliness of these scenes assured her reputation,

which grew exponentially after a major exhibition of wood-engravers in 1920.

Raverat's success also led to the publication of several volumes of her collected prints, and she became a founding member of the Society of Wood-Engravers. Among this coterie, Raverat was considered by many critics to be the finest. By 1924, she was already the subject of a monograph, with major commissions and exhibitions to her credit. Book illustration, however, appealed most to her sense of design. By the thirties Raverat was devoting herself almost entirely to this art: her wood engravings and illustrations adorn some twenty works, including *The Cambridge Book of Poetry for Children*, tales by Hans Anderson, novels by Trollope and Charlotte Yonge and *Mountains and Molehills* by the poet Frances Cornford, who was also her cousin.



Gwen Raverat, *Jeu de boules, Vence*, 1922, 102 x 152.
From *Gwen Raverat*.

During the thirties, perhaps her most productive decade, she also turned her hand to a variety of other design projects, including set and costume design for Cambridge theatre productions and for Geoffrey Keynes' ballet *Job*, based on the work of the poet-engraver Blake, who had inspired her. During the same period, she also illustrated for political causes, becoming a regular artist and reviewer for the feminist *Time and Tide* and creating poster art for the British propaganda campaign against Franco. Never one to eschew the practical application of art, she even worked for Naval Intelligence during World War Two, drawing three-dimensional maps of the Pacific Islands that her grandfather Charles Darwin had visited aboard the *Beagle*.



Gwen Raverat, *The Fair Fille de
Chambre* from *A Sentimental*

Because art history typically ignores illustration and overlooks artists outside the avant-garde, Raverat's artistic fame faded quickly after her death in 1957. She is now best known for *Period Piece* (1952), the memoir of her late-Victorian childhood in Cambridge amid the Darwin clan and their friends. The book has never been out of print, and Raverat's witty narrative and illustrations of that world have long kept her engaging personality before a faithful audience. That personality obviously attracted Spalding, who was even more drawn to Raverat the forgotten artist.

Sure-footed, funny, determined and unmoved by proprieties or fashion, Raverat appears in Spalding's biography as an artist whose talents, no less than her character, owed themselves to the Darwin line. The family insistence on realism

Journey,
1937, 102 x 84. From *Gwen
Raverat*.

and attentive observation helps explain both Raverat's subject matter and artistic medium. A realist devoted to "the thing seen," she found her subjects in the everyday: the places she loved, the views and daily scenes of Cambridge and

southern France. The Darwin stolidness and no-nonsense rationalism also seem mirrored in the "hard, tight, definite" quality that Raverat loved about wood engraving, and that left "no possible room for vagueness." Her engravings, about eighty of which illustrate Spalding's handsomely designed book, seem equally the product of a naturalist's eye and discipline and a poet's heart. Crisp and luminous, her meticulously worked landscapes are alive with light and shadow and the apparent motion of water and clouds. And though the natural world dwarfs her human figures as they go about their daily rounds, the effect is not to minimize human life but to humanize the landscape. Raverat, Spalding explains, loved the challenge "of relating figures to their setting and making them belong together."

SPALDING OFTEN TALKS about Raverat in relation to place. Mostly, though, she presents Raverat as part of an ensemble, the "friends, family and affections" of the book's title. A host of personalities surround her, beginning with the Darwins and including the artists grouped around Rupert Brooke whom Virginia Woolf dubbed the "neo-pagans." This ensemble approach recognizes that personality is rooted in community and relation to others; it is particularly successful in depicting the women who inspired and encouraged Raverat. Her Aunt Ida hired Raverat's first drawing teacher Mary Greene, despite Cambridge opposition to professional female artists. Pre-Raphaelite painters Mary Stillman and Eily Darwin both discussed art with Raverat and encouraged her.



Gwen Raverat, *Winter Morning*, color wood-
engraving, 1939.
From *Gwen Raverat*.

Later influences included Vanessa Stephen, whose Friday Club sponsored Raverat's first exhibition, Virginia Woolf and classicist Jane Harrison, who introduced Raverat to Sappho. Coming of age amidst talented women, Raverat vowed to let nothing get in the way of her art. Her own mother Maud had given up painting after marriage, as had her beloved Eily. Such domestic sacrifices were intolerable for Raverat. She hated what marriage could mean for women, including her cousin Nora, who was so "delicious" before "the shades began to close on her--the shades of meals and beds.... [It] seems to me so sad--to put a roof on instead of a sky."



Gwen Raverat, *A Gentleman's
Library* from *The London
Bookbinders*, 1950, 94 x 70.
From *Gwen Raverat*.

Gwen Darwin was determined to put a sky on her own life, and when she married French artist Jacques Raverat in 1911, it was with the understanding that they would make artists' lives together. Their partnership proved both a boon and a trial for Raverat. After her husband was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1914, she found that her time was increasingly usurped by his dependence on her. Still, she felt it "a matter of life and death to keep going" at her painting and engravings, and she produced the important work of the twenties that led to so many major exhibitions and publications. Her output in those years bespeaks a woman with extraordinary powers of creative will.

Unfortunately, this is not always the picture that emerges in Spalding's biography. Despite Raverat's refusal to be "quite clean cut in half" by marriage, she very nearly is so by Spalding, who relegates her to a supporting role in her husband's story. The narrative develops a "Gwen, too" pattern, in which her

from *Gwen Raverat*.

husband's new work or accomplishment precedes hers. An apt image for Spalding's story of their married life is that of the disabled Jacques Raverat traveling about Venice by donkey cart, with "Gwen walking behind." Spalding also devotes entire chapters to Jacques Raverat's friendships with André Gide and Rupert Brooke, while Raverat fades into the background, caring for their two daughters. In these sections, Spalding's focus on "friends, family and affections" threatens to erase her subject. Generally, however, family and friends, particularly the Darwin clan, take their rightful place and deepen Spalding's portrait of her subject.

WITH SEVERAL ARTISTS' biographies to her credit, including those of Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant, Spalding comes well prepared to her subject. As a biographer, she is meticulous, bringing to the task a trove of family letters and Raverat's mother's record of Raverat's life from birth until the age of 49. She occasionally lapses in judging how much research is too much. A tedious history of Cara Jebb, for example, precedes the relevant information that she introduced Raverat's parents to one another. In discussing Jacques Raverat's illness, Spalding recounts in detail the plot of *The Journal of a Disappointed Man*, a book by someone else with multiple sclerosis. A page later, she concludes, "There is no indication that Jacques read this book." This reluctance to let go of irrelevant but hard-won information is rare, however, and Raverat's childhood, adolescence and widowed life in London and Cambridge brim with vivid detail.

After Jacques' death in 1925, Raverat returned first to London and then to Cambridge. Although she suffered from depression for several years after her return, Raverat worked steadily on her major illustrations and enjoyed one of her most prolific periods. In her later years, she mentored a stream of young relatives and friends who passed through Cambridge, never relinquishing her enthusiasm for art. One of the book's most memorable images depicts her at 53 leading a sketching expedition of Cambridge art students into the countryside. One student recalled, "Off we would go, with Gwen up front positively billowing on her old bicycle, with her handbag and sketchbook rattling in the old battered basket attached to the handlebars before her." Few scenes better embody Raverat's energy and joyful determination in pursuit of her art. Happily, Spalding's excellent biography brings this complex and talented woman out from the shadows of art history and into her own light.



Gwen Raverat, *Self-portrait*, painted after her stroke.
From *Gwen Raverat*.

➡ [Start a trial subscription](#) beginning with a copy of the current issue!
Want to respond to what you've read? Send a [Letter to the Editor](#)

[This Month's Contents](#) | [Letters to the Editor](#) | [Read About Us](#)

[Subscribe](#) | [WIN a Subscription](#) | [Customer Service and FAQs](#)

[FREE Book Offer](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Classified Ads](#) | [Order Back Issues](#)

[Where to Buy the Review](#) | [Send a Letter to the Editor](#) | [Links](#) | [Home](#)

[SEARCH](#) using the search engine of Wellesley College, our host

• Linda Gardiner lgardiner@wellesley.edu

- The Women's Review of Books
- Wellesley College Center for Research on Women
- Created: April 2nd 1996
- Last Updated: December 19th 2001
- Expiration: No expiration