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## Book Review: Why Have Kids? A New Mom Explores the Truth About Parenting and Happiness

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**Why Have Kids? A New Mom Explores the Truth About Parenting and Happiness. 2012. Jessica Valenti. Boston: New Harvest. 178 pages. Hardcover (\$23 US). ISBN: 0547892616**

Reviewed by: Rebecca Stevens<sup>1</sup>

Released in 2012, Jessica Valenti's *Why Have Kids?: A New Mom Explores the Truth About Parenting and Happiness* continues to resonate throughout the discourses of feminism, motherhood, and politics. Reviewers are provoked by this "fourth-wave feminist dragging feminism into the twenty-first century" (*Washington Post*); and advocates praise this reshaping of the definition of motherhood influenced by feminist theory.

Co-creator and contributor to feministing, author of several novels, mother, and recognized role model for budding feminists, Jessica Valenti's newest book, *Why Have Kids?* addresses what she refers to as a "stalled revolution" by using provocative topics to open a line of questioning recently unexamined and--as she argues--suppressed. Her rhetoric of provocation, simplification, and persuasion has--as with her other publications--ensnared readers of many backgrounds and opinions, and driven them to ask her same questions, while Valenti narrowly avoids providing an answer of her own.

*Why Have Kids*, is divided into two sub-sections, "Lies" and "Truth" to explore the less-than-neat trend of natural parenting as an ideology, and it's fostering of misogyny in American culture. Valenti argues that this culture strengthens traditional patriarchal roles while undercutting the development of feminist advancement, and manifests itself in the constant striving for an unattainable but constantly reinforced idea of the perfect motherhood experience. Her first section of the text, "Lies," investigates the commonplaces within this ideology to reveal a foundation in nothing more than outdated mores that promote an unattainable ideal. Then, in "Truth," Valenti creates space to rethink motherhood as it is now established and to promote multiple new definitions. Further, she explores the merits of channeling the vigor with which women pursue modern parenthood toward other goals. She concedes that the women about whom she writes are often deemed to be overzealous career-mothers at times, but "perhaps [it] is just the understandable outcome of expecting smart, driven women to find satisfaction in spit-up" (Valenti, 70).

With these natural expectations and manifestations exposed, Valenti examines the patterns and stigmas that create these discourses in the lives of her American audience. Both internal and external dialogues circulate to, in conjunction with Valenti's commonplaces, reinforce the values that keep women and feminine discussions to a more manageable philosophy rather than action. Namely, Valenti deconstructs the mores surrounding natural parenting while concentrating on the issue in terms of twenty-first century American mothers in order to call attention to the improper alignments of natural parenting's ideal and its reality, particularly in light of the model: parents of the third world who do not necessarily chose natural parenting as a method. This deconstruction broadens the scope of Valenti's discussion to question the nature of female oppression. With this unity in mind, Valenti's main argument is an exploration of the American ideal of parenting. She claims the ideal doesn't match the reality of

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mothers' everyday lives, and that there are broader social and political issues that are truly what detract from the joy of parenting.

As a study of rhetorical style, literary merit, and feminist textual significance, *Why Have Kids?* makes a concerted effort to, while discussing a singular issue for first-world nations, illuminate the varying degrees in which the examples set forth affect those in other nations, of other socio-economic standing, sexual orientation, etc. Valenti's newest book engages in a deliberate inclusion of many types of women, while recognizing her own inability to fully appreciate and relate to their individual struggles as she does her own.

In this sense there are echoes of Betty Friedan's "problem that has no name." In *The Feminine Mystique*, that problem was aligned with the ennui and malcontent exclusively within the upper-middle-class white American community. Similarly, Valenti's discussion picks up where Friedan left off fifty years ago. She argues, "[t]oday that problem has a name (and often, poop diapers). The problem isn't our children themselves; it's the expectation of perfection or, at the very least, overwhelming happiness. The seductive lie that...blinds Americans to the reality" (xii). Further, a close reading of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*'s (specifically chapters nine and twelve) show the continuous development and advancement of a mother's lack of fulfillment in motherhood and in her own life, and the repercussions of that mother and the society in which she is engaged.

In terms of rhetorical style, Valenti uses several modes of persuasion for her audience in a balanced and forthright manner. Her *ethos* as both a feminist and a mother provides an intriguing and seemingly equitable approach for her topic of exploration. In addition, Valenti peppers her chapters with enough statistics, facts, and figures to make the jaw drop amidst her recitation and deconstruction of commonplaces such as "Breast is Best," and "Mother Knows Best."

Valenti also deliberately includes anecdotes from her own experiences with motherhood, both as a child and as a parent. These pauses in her measured, logical argument and use of *pathos* strengthen her argument and validity as an authority on the subject. Her confessions--sometimes dark, sometimes funny, and at times all too relatable--humanize Valenti and make it acceptable for the reader (whether parent or perspective parent) to admit to their own misgivings, concerns, and disappointments in this American ideal. Valenti's success in this book is in placing herself as both a victim and a mobilizer. In this way, she can lead by example, and stimulate readers that as victims of this system, they too can affect change.

By the end of the book Valenti has removed the stigma surrounding discontentment with parenting, and created an open discourse on the negative manifestations of natural mothering. She furthers her initial thesis by arguing for unity of women--those for and against the current state of parenting--to bring the larger social issues of maternity to light: specifically maternity leave and pay, the division of labor at home, and the larger political system that delegates housework and child-rearing to women as the better and more naturally-suited gender. She concludes that women and mothers must unite to confront these issues that detract from the joy of parenting and promote a culture of competition rather than support. Only then can a feminist agenda be preserved and harnessed to move forward.

Valenti's book is part manifesto, part memoir; investigative and essayistic. Although Valenti does not name an answer to the question posed in her title, she explores the namelessness of the problem Friedan documented over fifty years ago and asks the question of her readers: if we don't act now, what will the state of this problem be in the fifty years to come?