

On the Brink

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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1/2/20

על הצוק

הצעה למחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לבלשנות וספרות אנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

ליאורה זלצהאור למברט

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2/1/20

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Aims and General Description

On the Brink is a humorous first-person novel written in diary form. The protagonist, Jennifer, is a married forty-one year old mother of three who writes about her ambivalence as a stay-at-home mother and wife. The diary entries in *On the Brink* explore the lives of stay-at-home mothers in suburbia. From spousal relationships to mother-child relationships, complex female friendships and child rearing, the entries show the intricate lives that exist behind the beautiful facade, venetian blinds and Facebook posts (twitter and instagram are too advanced for her.) Using witty commentary, *On the Brink* will take the reader into the darker side of motherhood and marriage that, unfortunately, is all too often not shared. With unfiltered candor, Jennifer's diary will reveal the Pandora's box that exists within her home, her mind and in all likelihood in the minds and homes of the readers.

Having forgone her career as an investment banker to become a full-time wife and mother, Jennifer's ambitious nature propels her into the competitive world of mommying and perfectionism. Outwardly, Jennifer is the quintessential mother, putting inspirational quotes into her children's lunchboxes and volunteering at their school. Her mommy facade is so flawless that she is certain that if there were an Institutional Investor ranking of mothers, like there was in her previous career/ life, she would be on the top of the list. If there was a bonus pool at the end of each school year, she would be in the first bucket and be paid an astronomical amount of combined cash and stock, out-earning her husband. Headhunters would be banging down her door instead of cookie-selling girl scouts and proselytizing Latter Day Saints (don't they know that this is a Jewish neighborhood, the telltale sign being the mezuzahs on nearly every door? And everyone knows, Jews don't convert out, even when they intermarry!). But in the harried selfless world of Mommying there is neither monetary nor emotional compensation, and when Jen

crawls into bed at night, it is only her alone that pats her own left shoulder and congratulates herself on another day well done, no ER visits, no car crashes and all children accounted for.

But internally, Jen has endless fantasies. Some days she dreams of running off into the sunset and never seeing her family again, either with her very hot trainer – which she knows is so clichéd and somewhat pathetic, but still very appealing – or entirely alone, which seems eternally calm and blissful. Other days she dreams of joining the ranks of -- heaven forbid -- the working moms that she simultaneously despises and admires, or smothering her pre-teen child before he turns into a full-fledged raging teen (if she kills him before the acne sets in and the peach fuzz thickens, she will at least remember him as her sweet baby boy). When the crazies in her head are let out, she sneaks her child's Ritalin to suppress her appetite so that she can 1) fit into her New Year's dress for her husband's holiday party that he claims spouses are not invited to OR 2) pull an all-nighter to finish her daughter's science project (which has become infinitely more complicated than the exploding antacid volcano that won the prize back in her day).

Throughout the novel, Jennifer struggles to understand who she is and where the real Jennifer went since she became a mom. She wonders why mid-drive, she can't remember where she is driving to, and when sex became the last chore on her ever growing to do-list. She can remember the names of all of her ex-boyfriends and their favorite sexual positions, but stares blankly at the ATM machine trying to recall her PIN number when the heartless machine sucks up her card and refuses to return it. The story is set in picturesque Scarsdale, New York, a seemingly affluent suburb outside of New York City where the bank owns all of the houses (hush!).

Conceptual Background

My greatest influence in writing this novel are the books that I have read throughout my journey as a single woman and as a wife and mother. From my eight-year experience as a single professional living in New York City while searching for my very own Prince Charming to my twelve years as a stay-at-home mother, I have gravitated towards books that I can humorously identify with. In my twenties, I lived through the “Chick Lit” genre which included the popular essay collection turned sitcom, *Sex in the City*. Stories about chasing unavailable men, wasting “disposable income” and ultimately finding “true love,” brought me hours of joy. I laughed hysterically throughout *Bridget Jones’ Diary* and fell in love with Helen Fielding’s style of humor and format. The utter candor of Fielding’s heroine, her self-deprecation, her quest to lose weight as well as shed all of her vices while dealing with her dysfunctional family left me literally falling off the treadmill as I read it. In these books, I saw multiple facets of myself and the family I came from, the good and the bad, and realized how common the shared experience truly is. As my life paralleled the “chick lit” genre, I devoured multiple books of the same ilk by authors such as Jane Green and Jennifer Weiner. They made me laugh while offering me companionship. Their challenges mirrored mine, but their often exaggerated actions lightened the severity of the situation and left me with a sense of both, at least I’m not that bad off and at least I’m not alone.

When I turned thirty, I finally married and moved abroad to follow my husband’s career and our dream to live in Israel. When we later had five children in quick succession, I quit my job and embraced motherhood. With that, I moved into the “mommy lit” genre, finding my solace in the novels that depicted the chaos of motherhood, the mounting laundry (done predominantly by my housekeeper,) the loneliness, the competitiveness of parenting and the sexless marriage. I have read several books in this genre that are so relatable that they have made me simultaneously laugh out loud and cry, depending on the day and my hormonal mood swings. To write

about motherhood without a tinge of humor, I believe, would be too depressing. If nothing else, misery loves company. In the “Mommy Lit” genre, I have enjoyed many novels including those written by Allison Pearson, *I Don't Know How She Does It* and *How Hard Can it Be?*, as well as Gill Sims’ *Why Mommy* series, which is written in diary form. These novels depict such outrageous scenes and emotions and yet they are so very real to a mother. When the protagonist in *I Don't Know How She Does It* finds herself in the far-fetched scenario of being infested with lice during a job interview, the mother of a young child can both laugh and cry at the realistic absurdity of this likely/ unlikely situation (and scratch her head incessantly while reading the scene.)

While I personally love the escapism that these novels provide, I sometimes feel that they wrap up too nicely and further perpetuate the Disney myth. I often wonder if they are too trite and predictable and do not delve far enough into the solitude and darker side of motherhood. Perhaps the journey of motherhood does not ever wrap up “happily ever after” because a mother’s job is really never done. In Pearson’s follow up novel, *How Hard Can it Be?* the protagonist’s story ends with the unlikely yet fantastical scenario of her being whisked away by the fabulously wealthy love of her life that is seemingly perfect in every way, while her kids are in a great place. Although I enjoyed the book, the ending left me with an incomplete feeling, as I did not want my heroine to be a fairy tale princess, I wanted her to still be stuck in the thick of it. With her success, I could no longer relate to her. In *Where’d You Go, Bernadette?* by Maria Semple, the protagonist provides humor as she insults and laughs at the other school moms. As the story progresses we see that she is nearly driven to insanity when her life is consumed by mothering and her creativity and her sense of identity are no longer healthily expressed. It is only after her life nearly falls apart and she runs away that she can tap into the woman she used to be and return to being a professional, a mother and perhaps a wife.

While the “chick lit” and “mommy lit” books I have read for pleasure have varied in stylistic forms, the books that I have most enjoyed were those written in the first person, the diary form nearly making the characters come alive for me. In my coursework at Bar Ilan, I enjoyed reading memoirs and autobiographies and once again found the epistolary and diary--form novels most pleasurable. *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates are two memoirs that stick out in my mind. The first-person narration of *Girl, Interrupted* has a self-deprecating humorous tinge to it. Though recounting painful experiences, Kaysen tells her story with a wittingly sharp tone that is deeply engaging. In *Between the World and Me*, the father writes a letter to his son and while his pain, anger and resentment are real, I saw an undertone of hope and humor.

Shape of Project

The narrative format of the novel will be first-person, told solely by the protagonist. While this form is most limiting, it is also the most appropriate, as a diary is the only place where Jennifer can truly reveal herself and share her innermost thoughts and turmoil. The novel will consist of numerous diary entries of varying lengths and frequencies. I aim for the voice, humor and tone of each entry to be fairly consistent, while also allowing for an honest representation of the ups and downs of the life of a stay-at-home mother. Although the subject matter may sometimes be serious, the humor inflected in the story will provide a degree of levity. I have chosen the diary entry format because it is what I enjoy reading most, and because I believe it will enable a busy mother to squeeze a short story into her life and get the respite she deserves.

Themes explored in *On the Brink* include sisterhood, family, marriage and parenting. The diary entries can be read as short, quick stories, allowing for the busy overwhelmed mother to pick up a story in the midst of her own chaotic life, laugh and return to her family reinvigorated and mostly hopeful. The stories are intended to lessen the loneliness of motherhood and to empower sisterhood. They are meant to show that inside every home is the same level of dysfunction and to allow the reader to accept and love the life she is blessed with.

I would like to write beyond the clichéd stories and go where the anger and greater disappointment may lie; to write what no one will say out loud for fear of having their family taken away from them or that the family will be angered and hurt by their words. I want my fiction to touch on the part of a mother that can empathize with the mother who drowns her own child in the bath (I am certain a jury of mothers would never convict a mother of filicide.) To write about the part of the mother that is one step away from being institutionalized. There is humor to be found in our darkest thoughts, and my hope is to deliver these stories in a way that is both empathetic and humorous. The intent is for the reader to feel a kinship with the author and an acceptance that motherhood is truly hard and that is okay to simultaneously feel love and despair.

In writing this work, I have many personal fears. I worry about exposing myself and how it might impact my family despite the fact that it is a work of fiction. I worry that people will say the book is really non-fiction or that it is too whiney. I worry that the plight of the upper-middle class-white woman is no plight at all, but rather just the complaints of an ungrateful, spoiled brat. I worry that there is nothing unique in either the subject matter or my voice. I worry that by the time I finish this novel, my readers will have moved on to “granny-lit” and I wonder if I should write about the drama in the senior communities and the ailments that accompany aging such as hip replacements, cancer treatments and the food at shiva homes, though this too I’m afraid has

already been written. I am concerned about developing a plot, character development and movement throughout the novel and I am struggling with how to create it.

As I work through my personal insecurities, I am examining the critical context of “chick lit” and its place as real literature. From *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan in the 1960’s and *Chick Lit: The New Women’s Fiction*, edited by Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young, as well as various articles on the genre and the history of the feminist movement, I have come to realize that the genre is not at all as “fluffy” as I once worried that it was but rather that it too has a legitimate place in the world of literature.

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