

Maclean's magazine encourages women to regret having children

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The article's headline was meant to grab women's attention, and I am sure it did: "'I Regret Having Children,'" a feature article in the February issue of Maclean's mag, throws a positive light on what the author, veteran journalist Anne Kingston, seems to believe is the opening salvo in a brave new epoch of female liberation, the desanctification of motherhood.

The article is presented as an objective piece of reportage, but in fact it is anachronistic and ideologically biased. Here is the executive summary of its thrust: A (statistically nugatory) number of western women publicly report regretting having had children; this is not a bad thing—in fact it is a sign of liberation from superannuated gender expectations; and isn't it lovely that they have the courage to publicly wound their children with open admissions of their regret.

The article's implied takeaway: Let's make this thing happen, ladies. Step up to the mic and admit your regret; we'd like to see this trend go viral.

Although irritating for its constructed air of breathless urgency, the article was rather amusing in its own way—it is such a perfect example of the small ideological bubble feminists inhabit, yet assume is representative of the larger world from which it is hermetically sealed.

The article begins with what Kingston presumably believes is a typical example of the #MotherhoodRegret syndrome, 34-year old "Amy," who works full time and whose life revolves around her five-year old son.

She loves him, but says she wouldn't have made that choice if she could go back in time. But wait: According to Kingston, "She never wanted children (emphasis mine)." It was her husband who wanted a child. Having the child caused tension between them. Duhh. And now she's divorced.

Well, of bloody course she is regretful. The whole point of the motherhood-regret phenomenon, as Kingston herself goes on to explain, is that the regretters were convinced that they did want children, because -patriarchy, etc.

They had accepted the traditional premise that maternal satisfaction was genetically encoded, and then later discovered the "truth"—that it's all just another social construction, a trap women fall into designed to keep them in the role of Atwoodian "handmaids."

So Kingston's opening choice as a poster girl for this thesis—a woman who wasn't drinking the social-construction Kool-Aid in the first place, and already knew motherhood wasn't her cup of tea before she had any, and is therefore its antithesis—is not a persuasive beginning; the astute reader should be suspicious of what follows.

Nevertheless, Amy is "part of a growing and contentious conversation about parental regret," alleged proof of which is a few Facebook groups with several thousand members, one—"I regret having children"—with 9,000 members.

Nine thousand members?

That is not exactly evidence of a viral interest.

There is an "Elvis Lives" Facebook page with 28,000 "likes" on it. It doesn't represent a trend; it represents the fact that there is no idea so bizarre that it won't attract a certain number of followers.

Nowt so queer as folk, eh?

Or, for a gender example, in 2009 chat rooms were ablaze with voices of women, so devastated to learn that they were having male rather than female babies that they had to go on anti-depression medication, or expressed the wish to abort or to put their male children up for adoption.

There were a number of sites dedicated to normalizing the distress of these women, with names like Dreamofgirlz, Praying4Pink, and PlzBeABoy. Maybe there were 9,000 such sexist moms? Could be. Was it the beginning of a trend? I see no evidence that it has taken off. It's still just a group of weird and narcissistic moms no rational observer would consider worthy of respectful attention.

I don't judge mothers who regret having children. I know how lucky I was to have healthy children, a steadfast father for them, and the material resources to lighten the tedium of caregiving in the early years.

We had the good fortune of being able to provide for all their educational and recreational needs and all without material sacrifice for our own needs and wishes.

I can think of many situations in which I might have experienced regret. In which case the only people to know about it would have been people close to me I could trust to keep such information private.

Because this is certainly not information my children or the world would need to know. Why would I wish to wound my children by broadcasting the fact that I regretted having them?

That in my books would be at the very least unethical, and even quite an abusive thing to do. And to what end? Kingston says it is the last “taboo” for that reason: that women don’t want to hurt their children. That strikes me as a good reason for it being a taboo. But Kingston doesn’t delve below the surface on this.

The feminist academics cited by Kingston overtly applaud women who overcome this taboo. That’s because radical feminists only care about women. If men or children are collateral damage in boosting a woman’s morale, too bad for them.

The feminists Kingston consulted apparently consider a child’s pain in being exposed as a cause for maternal regret of lesser importance than a woman’s right to vent about her unhappiness. (Naturally the article features a regretful U.K. mother, who posted her regret online—“I felt like, and still feel like, I made a mistake”—and her daughter, who claims to feel no ill over it. “She’s always been there,” says the vulnerable daughter. Stockholm Syndrome?)

So my irritation with this article and the momentum behind it mainly comes down to a few simple questions: Why does a normal human response to bad luck or disappointment of any kind have to be turned into a freaking political movement?

Why is motherhood regret something to be celebrated? Because that’s what this article seems to be doing. And because the article was written with an agenda, it’s carelessly written.

For example, Kingston cites a 1975 column by famous Chicago advice columnist Ann Landers, who asked readers if they would have had children if they had it to do over again. It is true that of 10,000 responses, 7,000 said they would not. But what does that prove?

If Landers had asked childless readers if they’d have had children given a second chance, perhaps she would have gotten 50,000 responses from people who realized too late that their youthful aversion to children had modified once the option was no longer available.

In other words, there was no control group, the solicited responses were a case of selection bias and the numbers, considering Landers’ readership of many millions, are not impressive. Kingston does not even know the circumstances of those regretful mothers. Maybe a bunch of them were rotten mothers and unhappy when their kids turned against them. Who knows? So really, what is the forensic benefit of this “evidence” in establishing an actual falsifiable theory?

Polemically speaking, it is worthless.

Moreover, this was 1975. If all these women felt free to tell Ann about their regret, then why the breathless excitement about the current “trend”? If motherhood regret were going to actually “trend,” why has there been no movement since 1975? I’ll tell you why: It never was a trend, just a collection of personal experiences from a very small sub-group of mothers.

For another example, Kingston respectfully cites “the first scholarship on regret,” a 2015 book, *Regretting Motherhood: A Study*, by Israeli feminist Orna Donath. Donath teaches Gender Studies at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. Her analysis was based on interviews with 23 Israeli women, aged 26 to 73, five of them grandmothers.

There are a few warning flags here. Twenty-three study participants is a risibly low number for any credible academic study. That’s not what most social scientists would call “scholarship.” It’s what one would call a handful of personal anecdotes.

Second, motherhood regret in Israel of all places really is an outlier attitude. I say “of all places” because Israel’s fertility rates are the highest in the West, even though it is the most egalitarian society one can imagine. The ultra-Orthodox have the highest rates, but even secular Israelis have more children than other western countries.

Nobody is forcing them to. Israelis have created a buoyantly confident culture, and voluntary fecundity is a symbol of that optimism. Israeli women as a whole have proved that the family does not have to be a threat to feminism or to women’s full self-realization, but you wouldn’t be aware of that if you only consulted far-left academics who are completely detached from mainstream life.

Donath lives in the bubble I mentioned earlier. She has an ideological axe to grind, and she is clearly making a mountain of a molehill to further her academic career. (I would add—and would not expect Kingston to know this—that Israeli feminists and other academics are amongst the most radical and culturally self-hating in the world, the exact opposite of ordinary Israelis.

Some years ago, a Hebrew University sociologist wrote a thesis arguing that the reason Israeli soldiers did not—not—rape Palestinian women in wartime was because they were racist. Now there’s a Catch-22 you don’t see very often. She won a department award for it. Do you believe me now?)

Another of Kingston’s “experts” is Andrea O’Reilly, a professor of—surprise!—Gender Studies and the author of 18 books on motherhood. Yet O’Reilly is so insulated in her woman-centric bubble that she has no idea what fathers feel about

fatherhood. She says to Kingston: “Some men may feel their children are central to their identity, but I’ve never seen it.” Wow, 18 books (!) on motherhood and she has “never seen” evidence of the centrality of children to fathers’ identity. Yet I, a mere journalist, see examples of passionate fatherly devotion almost every day. I could send her hundreds of men to “study” for proof that fatherhood is important to men.

Maybe she should take a look at the dramatically elevated male suicide stats during divorce proceedings, where so many men get shafted in Family Court and become infrequent visitors in their children’s lives. (Now that by the way is in fact a true social “trend” and deserves further study, if journalists could take a minute off from their fascination with women’s grievances.) Anyone who can spend an entire career on mothers and maintain a complete ignorance of fathers should not be taken seriously as a scholar.

The regretful mothers Kingston chooses to quote are keen students of feminism, either consciously or by cultural osmosis. You can tell from the jargon they employ in framing their explanations for their motherhood regret. “I felt oppressed by my constant responsibility for them”; “it feels like their amazing life comes at the expense of my own.” (Emphasis mine.)

Over and over we see mothers expressing astonishment that someone’s needs could come before theirs, and that this situation could be normal. You can see that these women have been indoctrinated to believe that unless a woman’s own self is the centre of her universe most of the time, something is out of whack. How are these immature women admirable?

I mentioned earlier that this article is anachronistic. Kingston maunders on about the “sanctity” of motherhood that is presumably the norm in our society, applauding the courageousness of women who push back against it. But motherhood “sanctity” isn’t the norm, and hasn’t been since the advent of The Pill, when the sanctification of reproductive choice for women took pride of place in our culture.

Where has Kingston been? This is Canada, after all, where it is not motherhood that is “sanctified,” but abortion—so sacred in fact, that anyone who dares to suggest we might regulate it is demonized as an enemy of the state—and where any mention of the established risks attached to multiple abortions attracts such nasty blowback (as I can personally attest) that gynecologists and obstetricians don’t dare inform their patients of them.

For me, even though I support the right to abortion in principle, motherhood-related courage in our culture is when women step up to the real plate, where hardball pitchers aim for you, not your bat, to say that unborn babies are more than zygotes, and that abortion is morally wrong. Such women endure shaming, the likes of which a motherhood regretter can’t even imagine, let alone suffer. But I digress. Back to the bravery of mothers whose regret allegedly dares not speak its name.

One of Kingston’s subjects, “Angela,” had post-partum depression after the premature birth of twins. She felt cheated in failing to experience an instant bond with her babies. Understandable. But then she goes on: “[E]veryone talks about motherhood like it’s this wonderful thing and you’re going to love those children the second they come out. Nobody talks about how hard having children can be, how exhaustion can affect you and how sometimes love has to be developed.” Excuse me? Nobody talks about it? But they do. In fact, they never shut up about it. Read almost any issue of *Chatelaine* magazine (which reaches millions of Canadian homes). I have rarely seen a *Chatelaine* in which the difficulties of juggling work and family life for women isn’t explored.

I have seen countless articles on postpartum depression, on the physical toll of child-bearing and on every complaint any woman has ever had about life with infants and small children.

Look, I get that Angela had a tough time, and maybe her Newfoundland doctor wasn’t as sympathetic as he or she could have been, and maybe Angela and her circle don’t read magazines or newspapers or books, or even watch the CBC, so she is unaware of how much postpartum depression has been studied and discussed. But Kingston is well aware that this subject has been bruited far and wide for many years. So really, one has to wonder why she is beating this anachronistic social horse.

In any case, the article is supposedly about mother regret, not postpartum depression, which lasts a few months. Ask Angela in ten years if she regrets having those babies. I am guessing she will be as happy as most other mothers, which is not to say that every minute of every day is a trip to the moon on gossamer wings for parents, only that on the whole, having children constitutes a more fulfilling life than a life in which accumulating possessions and enjoying oneself is the whole point of existence.

Finally, I really have to object to Kingston’s cherry picking of “happiness” studies. As evidence that children do not add to human happiness, she points to a 2010 American Sociological Association study concluding that parents were more

likely to be depressed than their child-free counterparts, and that childless (or “child-free” in the politically correct version) couples were happier than all other groups. Well, that was one study. There are others. Some find that childless couples are happier; some find that parents are happier; some find that there’s no difference.

A 2012 study by researchers from the University of California, Riverside, the University of British Columbia and Stanford University, for instance, finds that parents are happier and more satisfied than their childless peers. In their tender years, children can and do cause stress in parents’ lives, so at that stage parents will often feel regret and unhappiness. Later on, satisfaction in parenting grows.

Parenting happiness also depends on many factors, including income, social services, community resources, family structures and support, etc., as common sense would tell us.

The study indicates that the unhappiest parents are those whose children were born when they were young themselves, age 17-25 to be precise, before they have had a chance to explore and grow into full adulthood. Again, common sense.

Here’s another thing common sense can tell us: Just about everyone experiences regret about some decision or other that had what they perceive as negative consequences. That’s life. Women’s regrets aren’t unique.

In my generation and well into the next, men who were artistically creative, but knew they would have to provide for a family, became dentists or went into the family hardware business instead. They worked 40 or 50 years at jobs they had no love for in order to offer their families material security. I never heard a single male peer complain about this.

That was of course back in the day when a man’s role as family provider was the “sanctified” cultural norm, and men were expected to do whatever they had to do to fulfil that obligation. You don’t find reporters beating down their doors to interview them about the sacrifices they made for family, or the regret some of them must feel.

Individuals who have good reason to regret motherhood deserve our sympathy, but not so much sympathy that we endorse the public humiliation of their children. Let these women talk out their regret to their sisters, friends and therapists. Motherhood regret as performance theatre is a tawdry spectacle.

Nobody would be promoting such expressed regret as a social model for others to follow if she did not have a certain contempt for the family as the basic unit of a healthy and productive society.

As far as I can tell from Kingston’s article, the only people seeking to turn a relative handful of disgruntled individual mothers into a cultural trend worth encouraging are privileged white feminist elites, who apprehend the family as a threat or a rival to their political objectives. Why Kingston and Maclean’s are so eager to abet their family-subversive agenda is beyond me.