

THE MOTHER QUESTION

writing about the diversity and complexity of contemporary motherhood

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An exegetical essay on the novel 'The Hum of Concrete'
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
DECLARATION	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
PART I	
THE COMPLEXITY OF CONTEMPORARY MOTHERHOOD	3
Maternal Feminism	6
Motherguilt I	11
Working Mothers I	16
PART II	
THE DIVERSITY OF MOTHERS IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION	21
Writing Motherhood	22
Motherlove I	28
Problematic Mothering	34
Dissatisfaction	39
Diversity	43
In and Outside the Home	47
Motherguilt II	55
PART III	
WRITING CONTEMPORARY MOTHERS: <i>THE HUM OF CONCRETE</i>	59
Ordinary and Extraordinary	59
Working Mothers II	67
Conflict and Tension	68
Motherlove II	71
PART IV	
CONCLUSION	74
BIBLIOGRAPHY	80

ABSTRACT

My major work, 'The Hum of Concrete', is a novel that takes the form of a series of stand-alone stories or meditations. It has five main characters, all women, and is set in Malmö, Sweden. The city itself plays a part in the narrative. The characters include Nassrin, a Muslim cleaner; Rhyme, a troubled street kid; Bodil, a middle-aged doctor; Estella, a black postie and Susanna, a lesbian teacher for immigrants. Each main character is presented in three stories, initially as a young woman and later as a partner and then mother.

Nassrin walks into the sea fully clothed with her new baby in her arms because she cannot cope with the fact that the child is of indeterminate sex. Rhyme spends the lead up to Christmas on a park bench and is offered ten dollars for a blow job. Bodil arranges her mother's last birthday party while coming to terms with being pregnant with her first child in her forties. Estella tries in vain to write a sexy story stumbling into new realms of her own sexuality as she does her research. Susanna is thick-skinned and stands between the violent boys and a fight. The stories in 'The Hum of Concrete' are stories of loss and lust, of grief, happiness, love and despair. They represent the diversity of life for women and mothers in the city today.

The minor component of the thesis, an exegetical essay, is a reflection on writings about motherhood: my own as well as others. Motherhood is an aspect of life that most women (and many men) take very seriously. However, motherhood must be balanced against work and other family commitments, relationships outside the family and other fulfilling personal activities. The exegetical essay argues for the diversity and complexity of mothering by focusing on fictional mothers who struggle with

some part of motherhood, whether it be pregnancy, labour, bonding with infants or coping with children as they grow older.

To what extent is a mother defined by her motherhood? Is a mother only a mother? The essay discusses a selection of texts that have influenced my own novel in one way or another. My interest in working mothers includes mothers who are writers. I discuss the concept of maternal feminism and draw on my Swedish background to explore the complex relationship between childrearing and work, showing how this relationship can differ between cultures in the Western world, depending on the support structures available to mothers. The essay explores the process of writing as a mother as a specific case of the challenges that face working mothers. Finally, I suggest that love between mother and child as well as realistic expectations might be key components when successfully balancing mothering.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree of diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I give consent to this thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if accepted for the award of the degree.

Anna Solding

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Several of the chapters in 'The Hum of Concrete' have been published as short stories: 'Loneshine' in *Cracker!* (Wakefield Press, 2003); 'The Beginnings' in *The Body* (Wakefield Press, 2004); 'Decisions' was highly commended in the Wirra Wirra Short Story Competition and subsequently published in *Time Fractures* (Seaview Press, 2005); 'Frozen' in *On Edge* (Wakefield Press, 2005); 'A Walk in the Park' in *staples #3* 2006.

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