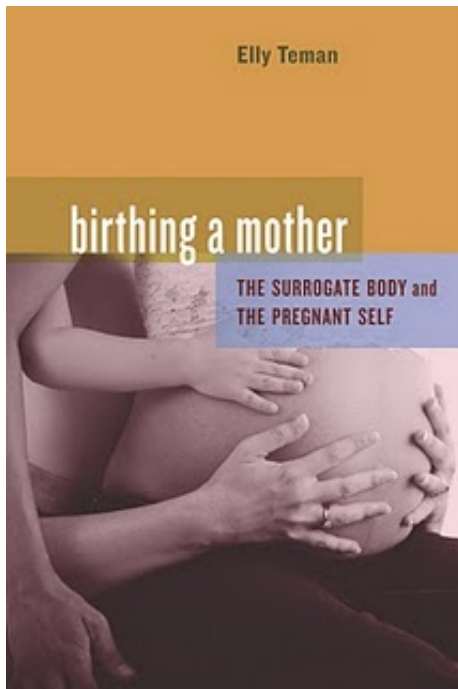


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Elly Teman's Birthing a Mother

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By Lauren Schleicher



Birthing a Mother: The Surrogate Body and the Pregnant Self [Elly Teman](#)

University of California Press, 2010
384 pp.
US\$ 21.95 (Paperback)

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[Birthing a Mother: The Surrogate Body and the Pregnant Self](#) is an ethnographic account of gestational surrogacy arrangements in a Jewish Israeli context. According to Teman, surrogacy as a topic has received increasing amounts of attention in recent years by popular media sources such as *The New York Times* and *Newsweek*. Despite this attention from mainstream media sources there has been little ethnographic interest by anthropologists since [Helena Ragoné](#)'s study over fifteen years ago. Teman suggests that the conversations that do take place on this topic imply "some discomfort with surrogacy, insinuating for instance, that it might be merely another way for the economically privileged to exploit the lower classes by 'renting' poor women's wombs" (Teman, 2). The

women who choose to become surrogates are often depicted as “abnormal,” “greedy,” “emotionally unstable” and/or “overly altruistic to the degree of psychological impairment,” (Teman, 3). Teman’s book is an attempt to rethink “what we believe ought to be true” by examining the experiences of the persons involved, the intended mother and her gestational carrier (terms preferred by the author), to better understand what surrogacy means to the various actors involved (Teman, 3).

Birthing a Mother is the culmination of eight years of fieldwork. During that time Teman focused her research on the relationships formed between Jewish-Israeli gestational surrogates and intended mothers. The choice of fieldsites was not incidental. Israel is one of the few countries that have taken steps to legalize surrogacy. The discussion of surrogacy is further amplified by Judaism and Israeli nationalism. Historically, motherhood and childbearing has been emphasized as a means of insuring the survival of the Jewish people. The significance of this pronatalist idealology is especially relevant given the contemporary Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Additionally, orthodox Jewish rabbis believe that a Jew is born from a Jewish mother’s womb regardless of the progenitor of the sperm and egg. Teman provides this nationalistic and religious background to better illustrate the charged cultural context under which surrogacy arrangements are negotiated. The specific context also serves as the basis for the comparative notes woven throughout the text, which highlight other “local arenas of the global subculture of surrogacy,” specifically, surrogacy arrangements in the U.S. and the U.K. (Teman, 6).

Teman’s work offers a counterpoint to the theory driven feminist critiques of surrogacy arrangements. Such feminist arguments suggest that reproductive technologies and the over-medicalization of childbirth fragment women’s bodies, thus, alienating their body from the self. *Birthing a Mother* indicates instead that such generalities are oversimplified and fail to take into account, as [Marcia Inhorn](#) has argued, the “local intricacies and intimacies of morality” (Inhorn: 365). Teman does not deny that surrogacy—which is controlled by the Israeli State, medically managed, and directed by the needs of the intended parents—is not an oppressive process for the surrogate. Instead, she suggests that the surrogates themselves subversively reinterpret the controlling process into an ordeal that must be overcome, what Teman likened to the surrogates own personal “Hero’s Journey,” a “sacred quest” to “make her intended mother into a mother” and to symbolically, “help this other women carry out her duty to birth the nation,” (Teman: 277). The hurdles that she is confronted with are, according to Teman, opportunities for agency.

Birthing a Mother is divided into three thematic sections: dividing, connecting, and separating. Each section illustrates the process under

which the gestational surrogates “resolve the anomalies of surrogacy in and among themselves,” by orchestrating “moves of embodiment and disembodiment, distancing and appending,” as well as “giving and reciprocating,” (Teman: 283). In the first section Teman explains how surrogates consciously distance themselves from the fetus by creating a mental map of the body. “Body mapping” helps to distinguish between the parts of the surrogates that belong to the self and those which are helping to facilitate the intended mother’s maternity. This conscious fragmentation of the body gives surrogates a measure of control over their body and prevents them from bonding emotionally with the fetus. Next, in the section entitled “connecting”, Teman explores the ways in which the surrogates and intended mothers become linked and interchangeable; they “ ‘shift’ the pregnant body between them,” (Teman: 284). During this process intended mothers are able to “actualize becoming a mother through their surrogates in a prosthetic process of identity transition” (Teman: 284). The final section, entitled “separating and redefining,” explores the post-birth process of separating the two women to restore order and the nuclear family, which is defined by the Israeli State as having only one mother and one father. During this time the intended mother also undergoes the ritual of solidifying her maternal identity, a process encouraged and facilitated by the State and the medical institution. Meanwhile, the surrogate looks to the family to acknowledge her “gift” to them. When satisfactory acknowledgement occurs the surrogates described their experience as a positive experience that facilitated “self-definition and self-realization” (Teman: 284).

Birthing a Mother is a timely and much needed contribution to the anthropological literature chronicling the lived experiences of surrogates and intended mothers in the politically charged context of Jewish-Israeli nation building. Teman convincingly offers a counter point to the feminist critique of surrogacy, which states that women who choose to become surrogates are financially desperate and risk exploitation for financial gain. Teman recognizes the potential for exploitation but suggests instead that the voices of the surrogates themselves hint that the majority of women who become gestational carriers “achieve a degree of appreciation through surrogacy that they do not get otherwise from partners or from society at large” (Teman: 293). Teman concludes, “regular medicalized childbirth may remove any notion of achievement from the woman, surrogacy may, paradoxically, reinstate it” (Teman: 281).

My only critique of this work, and the anthropology of reproduction in general, is the relative absence of the masculine perspectives. Teman asserts that the “intended father’s perspective fades into the background and the relationship between the surrogate and intended mother begins to take center stage” (Teman: 138). Teman concludes that intended fathers are marginalized by the process and excluded from the surrogate-intended

mother relationship. I can accept this premise but I would have preferred to hear from the intended fathers whose voices are not present in this narrative. After all, Marcia Inhorn, in [Local Babies, Global Science](#) makes a strong case for recognizing that men have much to say about reproductive technologies and childbirth.

In sum, *Birthing a Mother* is a beautifully concise and provocative ethnography, which adds a unique voice to the conversations regarding women's health and emerging reproductive technologies. Teman explains that her findings do not appear to be unique to Israel, and consequently, should influence future policy decision pertaining to surrogacy.

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