

Childless by Choice
Choosing Childlessness in the 80s
By Marian Faux
Anchor Press/ Doubleday 1984 196pp \$13.95

That Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen, Susan B. Anthony, Willa Cather, Georgia O'Keefe, Eudora Welty and Amelia Earhart were none of them mothers is no small testament to the possibility of full, rich and creative lives for women who decide against parenting.

Although it may seem like biological clock alarms have been rousing legions of women into pregnancy lately, we are not, contrary to popular belief, experiencing a second baby boom even remotely comparable to that of the late '40s and early '50s. In fact, recent and highly respectable population research predicts that as many as 25% of women now in their twenties will never bear children.

Marian Faux, previous author of how-to books including *The Complete Resume Guide* and *Successful Free-Lancing* now presents us with a comprehensive and sensitive work that might be called a how-not-to book about being childless by choice and feeling comfortably resolved about it.

In a relatively spare number of pages, Faux covers much territory, including historical, psychological, and anthropological perspectives on women and childlessness. Her book is filled with anecdotes and chatty interviews as well as hard data from an extensive array of sources. The results of the voluminous research she cites present a good, cogent case for the validity of a life choice that does not include mothering.

Among the rarely startling but interestingly put together information collected are facts such as that: Childless women tend to be urban, white and well educated; tend to have had atypical childhoods themselves, and saw their own mothers as limited by the responsibilities of parenting. Childless women perceive themselves as taking greater career risks and pursuing more unusual activities than they would if they were mothers. Voluntary childless women tend not to be joiners. When married, their relationships tend to be closer than those of their parent peers. Voluntarily childless women tested as, on the whole, more androgynous than did mothers.

One of the most interesting studies described in the book assessed that "while most marriages tend to fall into one of two categories, patriarchal or egalitarian, even for those that start out egalitarian in the early child-free years often shift into a patriarchal mold after the birth of the first child."

Understanding between spouses among women with young children is lower than any other group of women, while the risk of heart disease was higher for that same group. A married couple's time together is typically cut in half by the birth of a baby. One half of all women with preschool age children now work.

My favorite statistic cited a survey of twelve countries that showed that working mothers are busier than most heads of state.

The Superwoman ideal of limitless energy and enthusiasm for career and family, argues Faux, is more media creation than reality. "In fact," she writes, "the darker side of Superwoman is a sense of personal failure and denigration that many women experience when they think they are not managing their elaborate juggling act as well as they might."

Not only are working mothers not adequately supported in their efforts to juggle both career and parenting, but all working women face the same double bind: If they have children, their commitment to hard work is seen as questionable, If they choose childlessness, they are seen as pathologically suspect.

Since before the Teddy Roosevelt equated avoidance of motherhood with avoidance of military duty, even feminists have been reluctant to put forth a case for childlessness. Eager to placate the threatened pro-family, pro-motherhood protectors of the status quo, both waves of the women's movement neglected to support childless women in favor of arguments in behalf of better mothering through contraception,

The reason so many women today choose childlessness explains Faux, though often quite individual and specific to particular circumstances are generally related to career and money concerns. The voluntarily childless woman is often loath to forfeit or compromise other possibilities and pleasures in her own life and work. It's rarely a matter of the lack of the financial resources needed to raise a child (estimated at 2.5X the annual wage of both parents for a normal 18 year period), but rather more a matter of factors that social scientists have come to label as measurable "lost-opportunity costs."

A very poignant point made by Faux concerns the heretofore seemingly unavoidable tensions between women who choose motherhood and those who choose childlessness. It has often seemed that for the sake of self-affirmation and validation, each group has felt at least some scorn for the other, disparaged the

others' choice, and distanced themselves socially from one another. It may be one of the least discussed but saddest tensions on the women's movement today. Mothers often resent what they see as the childless woman's easier and more carefree lifestyle. Childless women often resent the social validation that only mothers get. Were there to be less pressure on all mothers to choose motherhood, argues Faux, there might be more resources and privileges available for those who truly want to parent.

She also presents some very clever and deft arguments against the psychological views of Freud and his followers that all women have a maternal instinct. In cases where, for a variety of reasons, biological males have been raised as female, they showed every bit as much a 'maternal instinct' as is commonly attributed to women.

Childless by Choice does seem to contain a few unfortunate cultural biases that undermine many of its arguments. For example, Faux states that extended families are no longer available to help share childrearing responsibilities. That may be true in affluent white society but not at all so in other racial and ethnic groups. Similarly, Faux fails to acknowledge that other than heterosexual and married women grapple with issues of maternal ambivalence—until the last page when she suggests that single women might benefit from pre-marital decision making about motherhood. Nor does Childless by Choice address the fact that to women ambivalent about childbearing, choices like adoption of older children or foster parenting might lessen the struggle of the juggle Faux writes of, without eliminating parenthood altogether.

Mostly, however, Marian Faux has given us a sorely needed, accessible and informative argument on behalf of reproductive choice and the validity of childlessness as a lifestyle.