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The Mom Thriller: Motherhood on the Edge

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"A New Crop of Mom Thrillers Taps Into Our Worst Fears" proclaims an essay by Jen Gann published in February 2018. While trolling for information about crime fiction from the mother's perspective, Gann's captivating essay about motherhood-themed thrillers sent this researcher on a quest for more examples of this seemingly new subgenre. The sleuthing paid off, yielding a rich and varied trove of "mom thrillers," most published in recent years. Despite the growing popularity of the genre, a search for a definition or critical discussion of the "mom thriller" came up empty. In the hopes of beginning to fill this gap in scholarship, this article examines the image of contemporary motherhood projected by this intriguing subgenre, considering how it employs and disrupts generic conventions to deliver its message.

To be included in the grouping considered "mom thrillers," the narrative must be matrifocal, that is, narrated from the mother's perspective—at least in part—whether in first or third person. This definition thus excludes daughter-centric narratives privileging the daughter's voice, which have dominated maternal tradition (Podnieks and O'Reilly 16). The mom thriller's matrifocality is a significant departure from traditional crime fiction: When the latter evokes the mother figure, more often than not it is to account for the criminality of the murderous son, the iconic case being Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

The mom thriller typically focuses on the mother confronting a threat or danger to her child—a crime or other type of wrongdoing—and, of course, it is a thriller. According to Martin Rubin, a thriller is characterized by suspense, fright, and mystery with an emphasis on visceral, gut-level feelings. There must be a sense of extraordinary danger arising out of an ordinary

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situation, usually accompanied by a strong sense of contrast between two different dimensions—specifically the mundane and quotidian coexisting with a dark and mysterious realm that is eerie, uncanny, or frightening. The reader's response is key. We are enthralled, captive, spellbound. Something is deliberately withheld from us: We are anticipating some revelation that keeps us turning the pages. We ourselves suffer as we identify with the characters who suffer (Rubin 5–7 and 14–17).

Lee Horsley's study *The Noir Thriller* couples "thriller" with "noir," pointing to their close relation, and her discussion of noir brings in additional traits that characterize the mom thriller. Horsley equates noir to the crime novel in which characters and their psychological makeup is the basis of the story, with an exploration of guilt at the core. Noir plots turn on falsehoods, and the dark secret of a respectable society is only thinly disguised by reputable pretense. A key structural element is the shifting of roles within the character triangle of crime fiction: victim-perpetrator-investigator. Noir often radically questions some aspect of the law, justice, or the way society is run, Horsley states, thus the noir potential for social critique.

"Suburban noir," "domestic suspense," and "domestic noir" are terms that have been used in recent years to describe narratives of crime or suspense dealing with the home, the family, and domesticity, and the mom thriller can be considered a subgenre of this grouping. The appellation "suburban noir" was popularized by the blockbuster book and movie *Gone Girl*, and "domestic suspense" is Sarah Weinman's term for her anthology of trailblazing tales from the 1940s to the 1970s, *Troubled Daughters and Twisted Wives*. However, "domestic noir" may have eclipsed these terms. In 2018, Palgrave Macmillan's Crime Files series published *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, a collection of studies edited by Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton. This authoritative overview of the genre seems to have established "domestic noir" as the

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leading term for fiction that deals with "the female experience," "family, motherhood, children, marriage, love, sex and betrayal" and "a subversion of the idea of home as sanctuary" (Crouch vii).

While the trend in novels with "girl" in the title seems to have peaked in 2016 (Alter), 2018 was a big year for books about motherhood. Several essays and book reviews examine this phenomenon, including Parul Sehgal's article, "In a Raft of New Books, Mother From (Almost) Every Angle." Before launching into her review of Jacqueline Rose's new book, *Mothers, An Essay on Love and Cruelty*, Sehgal takes note of the recent swell in books about motherhood. "The girls are mostly gone now," she writes, referencing the popularity of "girl" titles, and continues: "It seems they've been replaced, improbably perhaps, by mothers." Essays by Willa Paskin and Sarah Blackwood also discuss the burgeoning group of motherhood books, and Lauren Elkin asks, "Why All the Books about Motherhood?" She concludes that there is a new interest in "the interior lives of mothers." These articles focus on what Elkin considers "serious" books about motherhood, only two of them making passing reference to "mom thrillers." And yet, mom thrillers have captured the imagination of readers, pushing the motherhood theme beyond its "niche" appeal and into the popular culture arena. Many have achieved bestseller status, received prestigious book prizes, and merited attention in major publications such as *New York Times* and *The New Yorker*; a handful have been made into movies.

In their introduction to texts about motherhood, Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly tell us that a matrifocal perspective has emerged only over the last few decades. Their volume examines "how authors use textual spaces to accept, embrace, negotiate, reconcile, resist, and challenge traditional conceptions of mothering and maternal roles," bringing to light narratives

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that "unmask" motherhood, admitting ambivalence and anger (1–2). The mom thriller answers this call, exploring the anxieties and tribulations experienced by mothers.

Western dominant discourses around motherhood since early modern times have created daunting expectations for real mothers, stressing the necessity of the mother's central role in the home and reinforcing her role as subservient to the patriarchy (Podnieks 9). A paradigm shift emerged in the late 1960s and the '70s as feminist movements provoked a rethinking of scripted gender roles, especially maternal ones. Adrienne Rich's seminal *Of Woman Born* (1976) called out the patriarchal arrangement of motherhood as an idealized and oppressive institution constructed for male need and desire. In recent decades, however, these feminist advances seem to have been eroded by a "highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet" (Douglas and Michaels 5). Blaming target marketing and media constructions of the perfect mother, cultural critics Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call this mentality "the new momism." Deeply contradictory in that "it both draws from and repudiates feminism" (5–7), the new momism is centered on the ideology of "intensive mothering," described by Sharon Hays as "a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children" (x).

Psychologist Shari Thurer discusses the social pressures on mothers along with the guilt feelings and judgmental mentality brought on by expectations created by the media:

> Our society has become unabashedly prenatal . . . Never before have the stakes of motherhood been so high—the very mental health of the children. Yet never before has the task been so difficult, so labor intensive, subtle, and unclear. . . . Media images of happy, fulfilled mothers, and onslaught of advice from experts, have only added to mothers' feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and anxiety. (340)

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> As a psychologist I cannot recall ever treating a mother who did not harbor shameful secrets about how her behavior or feelings damaged her children. . . . A sentimentalized image of the perfect mother casts a long, guilt-inducing shadow over real mothers' lives . . . We have become highly judgmental about the practice of mothering, and especially about ourselves as mothers. (331)

Jacqueline Rose speaks to the "neo-liberal intensification of mothering" that we are currently witnessing and its pernicious effect on women: "perfectly turned-out, middle-class, mainly white mothers, with their perfect jobs, perfect husbands and marriages, whose permanent glow of self-satisfaction is intended to make all women who do not conform to that image . . . feel like total failures" (17).

The appetite for certain fictions reflects broad cultural trends, and mom thrillers serve as a reaction against this cultural imaginary of maternal perfection promoted by the media along with mixed messages regarding careers and motherhood, critiquing a neoliberal, postfeminist cultural landscape.[1] The noir aspect—arising from crime, wrongdoing, or a false pretense—is central to the mom thriller and generates a myriad of narrative schemes that explore maternal agency and the performance of motherhood in an atmosphere of high anxiety. Noir is ideal for conveying the malaise that can result from a misfit between the ideal and reality. Mom thrillers explore the guilt Thurer has observed in her patients, the ambivalence women experience about having a career or being a stay-at-home mom. They portray the what-if scenarios that populate a mother's worst nightmares. Danger always lurks—whether in the form of strangers, acquaintances, partners, accidents, or the mother herself. Social norms and the judgement of others may work against the mother.

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The readership for "tales of the dark side of marriage and motherhood" is certainly not new, exemplified by Weinman's anthology of trailblazing tales. Most of these stories, however, are not told from the mother's perspective, thus not conveying her inner drama. Still, we can identify notable forerunners of the current miniboom in the mom thriller from the last three decades of the twentieth century. Two consecrated women crime writers penned novels of suspense from the mother's perspective. Mary Higgins Clark's 1975 *Where Are the Children?*—made into a movie in 1986—explores a social aberration: a mother accused of killing her children. Ruth Rendell's *The Tree of Hands* (1984) considers another topic that will reappear in twenty-first century mom thrillers: a mother-figure who kidnaps a neglected child.

This article now turns to representative novels from the recent array of mom thrillers. Beginning with a metafictional novel that showcases how a mom thriller can make use of crime fiction conventions to deliver a commentary on modern motherhood, the discussion then proceeds by grouping the works according to prominent schemes, featuring selected novels in each group.

A Simple Favor: "I Was a Mom Blogger and an Accessory to Murder"

What can the noir thriller tell us about the concepts surrounding motherhood in the early twenty-first century? And how does it do this? A prime illustration is the satirical *A Simple Favor* by Darcey Bell, made into a movie directed by Paul Feig. It deals with the relationship between suburban Connecticut mothers Stephanie and Emily and portrays the discourses driving a mother's degeneration from a champion of motherhood to an accessory to murder.

Glamorous and manipulative, Emily cynically befriends simpleton mom blogger Stephanie, having hand-picked her to be the dupe in a muddled life insurance scam. Replete with

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metafictional references and a suburban "bad girl" who fakes her death, *A Simple Favor* can be considered a riff on *Gone Girl* with mom protagonists and a decidedly ludic tone. It delivers a parodic critique of roles for women in the early twenty-first century—Stephanie enacts motherhood as performance while Emily is the postfeminist neoliberal subject, the envied can-do "cool girl" with a well-paid, glamorous career and a luxurious consumer-based lifestyle.

Mothers of five-year-old sons in the same school class, Stephanie is a stay-at-home mom while Emily commutes to Manhattan where she works as a fashion executive. Emily convinces husband Sean to be her "partner in crime" in a life insurance fraud: She will fake her death; Sean will collect the payout; and the family will eventually reunite in "a European paradise." For the plan they need a dupe—a woman who will serve as Emily's character witness and be temporary caretaker for their son Nicky while Emily is in hiding. Stephanie is chosen for her obsessive quest to be the perfect mom; her desperation to have a mom friend making her vulnerable to Emily's machinations. The plot takes on twists and reverses; Emily fakes her death but eventually reappears and kills the insurance investigator who has uncovered her ruse, framing Sean and Stephanie for the murder.

Crime fiction provides a model for the characters' behavior in this text, as they constantly compare their lives to favorite plotlines, with references to nearly twenty movies, TV shows, and novels. Emily loves the thrillers of the thirties and forties and the couple begins to joke about insurance fraud while watching old movies. "He was the Fred MacMurray, I was the Barbara Stanwyck" (49%)[2] states Emily, referencing the noir classic *Double Indemnity* in which the sensual Stanwyck character lures MacMurray to be her accomplice in a murder and life insurance scam. Patricia Highsmith is another favorite, her cold-hearted devious misfits seeming

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to serve as inspirations for Emily. Emily inspires Stephanie to assist her in the murder cover-up by evoking bad-girl pals Thelma and Louise, one of Stephanie's all-time favorite films.

Bizarrely, it is Stephanie's obsession with presenting herself as a perfect mother, along with her adoration of Emily's lifestyle, that leads her to become an accessory to murder. Emily spots Stephanie at the school pick-up and identifies her as a "Captain Mom": "Captain Mom was what Sean and I called the ones with the backpacks and front packs and harnesses and strollers, the portable cribs and high chairs, the baby harnesses strapped to their bodies" (51%). Emily's ridicule of over-equipped moms critiques rampant consumerism of expensive gear that the media promotes as necessary for the baby's care and protection. As part of this mindset, special classes are vital for the child's development, and accordingly, Stephanie has enrolled her son in toddler yoga, baby dance, and swimming lessons. Stephanie's enactment of peerless motherhood is played out through her blogs in which she portrays herself as the perfect mom who prepares nutritious meals for her son and limits his screen time. Her cringe-worthy blogs are full of platitudes and clichés about "we moms." Referencing the "mommy wars," she reveals her envy of Emily's job: "I've blogged about the silly, hurtful divisions that come between working moms and stay-at-home moms," admitting that she is "a teensy bit jealous of the Emily's career. The glamour, the excitement … while I'm at home … wiping up spilled apple juice" (5%). We learn that Stephanie's striving to be the best mom of all time is a compensation for her guilty secret: Her half-brother is her son's father. Emily perceives the gap between the woman Stephanie pretends to be and who she is, thus calling out her "perfect motherhood" as a performance.

While Stephanie gushes about Emily's elegant lifestyle and the "many gorgeous things in Emily's home" (7%), Emily wants to leave her stressful job and spend more time with Nicky. She realizes she and Sean are slaves to this lifestyle and will need a scheme "if we wanted to

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keep leading the life we were living, the life that was leading *us*—the mortgage, the car, the art on our walls, the clothes that cost plenty" (50%). When insecure "Captain Mom" Stephanie appears, she is exactly what Emily needs to put the insurance fraud scheme into action. Thus, Stephanie's guilt feelings driving her performance of motherhood set the stage for her entanglement in Emily's criminal scheme.

Emily is aware of the fictional genres that we use to define and determine our lives, and she employs them to manipulate the system to her advantage. Bereft of Emily's critical awareness, Stephanie allows these narratives to control her. Just as the crime genre has its established narratives, there is a motherhood narrative that Stephanie buys into and strives desperately to perform. Stephanie's trajectory from one narrative to another—summed up in her utterance "I was a mom blogger and an accessory to murder" (76%)—is encapsulated in the "simple favors" she agrees to perform: first, picking up Emily's son from school, and finally, helping Emily dispose of the insurance investigator's body. Via the path of Stephanie's doomed innocence, *A Simple Favor* makes use of metafiction and parody to critique neoliberal postfeminist ideals of women's roles.

The Kidnapped Child

The child's disappearance, either by abduction or death, is the most frequent plot line of the mom thriller. Since protecting the life and wellbeing of one's child is surely the fundamental aim of motherhood, the thrillers explore the mother's reaction when she confronts these unthinkable situations—provided she herself is not the kidnapper or killer!

Two deftly plotted and twisty takes on the kidnapped child are *The Couple Next Door* by Shari Lapena and *Good as Gone* by Amy Gentry. While the circumstances of the kidnappings in

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the two stories are completely different, the novels share mothers who blame themselves for the abduction of their daughters, accusing themselves of not being good mothers. In *The Couple Next Door* a baby disappears from her upstate New York home. The precipitating situation is set up when parents Anne and Marco are invited for dinner by the couple next door and their babysitter is not available. Marco convinces Anne that it will be all right to leave baby Cora sleeping at home. After all, it will only be a few hours and they will be next door with the baby monitor. But the baby is kidnapped, and Anne feels agonizingly guilty: "Who goes to a dinner party next door and leaves her baby alone in the house? What kind of mother does such a thing? She feels the familiar agony set in—*she is not a good mother*" (3%). She is sure that she will be judged for leaving her baby alone—judged by the police, by other mothers in her group, by the public when it becomes a news story. To make matters worse, it is revealed that Anne struggles with postpartum depression, setting off the suspicion that she was involved in the baby's disappearance. The plot takes another turn when the police probe for a motive and Marco mentions that Anne's parents have a lot of money. Once we learn that Marco is involved in the kidnapping, it seems we have the solution: aha, the *Fargo* plot!—the son-in-law kidnapping a family member to extort his wealthy father-in-law. But plot twists continue until it is finally revealed that Anne's father set up Marco to disgrace the son-in-law he deemed unworthy. Ultimately, Anne is a hapless victim of a perverse patriarchal and judgmental society, robbed of agency by her own self-doubt brought on by the stigmatization of postpartum depression as well as by a double-crossing husband and a ruthless father, both willing to use the baby for extortion and shaming.

Good As Gone is a complex and subtle story that turns on a mother's failure to recognize her daughter Julie's deep-seated spiritual needs. When Julie is thirteen, she is kidnapped from

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her Houston home at knifepoint. Eight years later, a much-altered Julie shows up at the front door, claiming to have been a victim of human trafficking. But Julie's story does not quite add up, and her mother, Anna, wonders if the young woman is an imposter. Anna takes on the detective role, probing to figure out the identity of this "Julie" and the fate of her daughter. Suspense builds around the question of the young woman's identity, playing out an extreme and dramatic case of a mother not knowing her daughter. Religion takes on a prominent role in the plot, as Anna secretly follows the mystery girl to a megachurch led by a charismatic pastor. It turns out that he is Julie's kidnapper and rapist—this youth pastor convinced Julie to run away with him and pursue total surrender to God's will, her staged abduction being part of the divine plan. Julie's search for transcendence led to her becoming prey to this predator. Anna, an English professor who has no use for religion, realizes that she did not know her daughter at all, that she was too wrapped up in her career: "I try to remember Julie asking me about God, but I can't. Who was I, what was I doing that I can't remember? I was finishing up a postdoc, then interviewing for jobs" (88%). "How could I have been so blind? How could I have missed all that? It's like I didn't know her at all . . . I thought everything was good. I thought I was a good mother" (91%). Julie asks her mother to accompany her when she confronts this con man who poses as a pastor. Surely to atone for her guilt, Anna becomes a mother-avenger, taking maternal agency to an extreme. She shoots him (nonfatally) and ends up in jail, producing a memorable mom thriller line: "The women leave me alone. Word must have spread pretty quickly among them that I shot the man who kidnapped and raped my daughter" (80%).

The kidnapping theme takes on variations in other mom thrillers: kidnapping by a mother-figure or the mother herself. Following the plot line of Rendell's earlier novel, Rea Frey's *Not Her Daughter* tells the tale of Sarah, a single woman who spots young Emma, who

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appears to be unloved and abused by her mother. Sarah herself felt unwanted by a cruel and unstable mother, and, eager to save Emma from the same fate, kidnaps Emma to give her the indulgence and attention she deserves. The reader is inclined to root for the kidnapper as she and Emma set out on the lam, Sarah giving the child a new appearance, new name, and new life with an abundance of love and caring. Sarah's criminal but well-intentioned actions raise ethical issues: Who should be allowed to raise the child—the abusive biological mother or the loving abductor? How do we judge Sarah: Does her moral motive supersede the law?

Just What Kind of a Mother Are You? by British author Paula Daly features contrasted mothers: Lisa, a frenzied working mother of three, and Kate, a stay-at-home mother whom Lisa envies and idealizes. When Lucinda, Kate's thirteen-year-old daughter, disappears, Kate blames Lisa because Lucinda was supposed to be sleeping over that night with Lisa's daughter. But plans changed, and Lisa failed to tell Kate that Lucinda did not spend the night at their house. Thus, Lucinda's disappearance is not reported until she has been gone for over twenty-four hours. The apprehension surrounding Lucinda's fate is heightened because a young girl from a neighboring township has been recently abducted and raped. Lisa feels agonizingly guilty and blames herself. The plot takes a surprising turn when we discover that Kate is responsible for her daughter's disappearance—she has been hiding Lucinda in their vacant rental property in an effort to get her husband, who is about to leave her for his second family, to pay more attention to her and the children. And Kate hand-picked Lisa to be the fall gal, knowing that this self-deprecating and overworked mother would immediately assume the blame. It is also revealed that Kate's son with a mysterious eye ailment is a victim of his mother's Munchausen-by-proxy. Thus, the façade of the model mother shatters to reveal an unstable criminal and a dysfunctional

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family. The flawed, self-loathing Lisa is vindicated: She may be harried and distracted, but she is a warm, loving mother, in short *good enough*.

In these novels featuring the kidnapping plot, shifts in the character triangle of crime fiction (victim-investigator-perpetrator) serve to communicate a message about motherhood, tapping into fears of maternal inadequacy and exposing forces that cripple maternal agency. In *The Couple Next Door*, Anne's initial fear that she may have been the perpetrator due to her postpartum depression and her eventual discovery that her husband and father masterminded the baby's kidnapping speak to her victimization by public opinion and a criminally irresponsible patriarchy. Sarah's and Kate's role as perpetrators in *Not Her Daughter* and *Just What Kind of a Mother Are You?*, respectively, highlight dysfunctional families, in the first raising issues of justice and ethics, and in the second, exonerating a self-deprecating working mother. Finally, in *Good As Gone*, Anna, another guilt-ridden mother with a career, responds by assuming agency, taking on the investigative function and using her discovery to avenge her daughter's kidnapping.

The Death of the Child

After the kidnapping theme, the second most common plot line is the mother confronting her worst nightmare: the death of her child. The unnatural death of a child may serve to expose fault lines in the family dynamic. Frequently the death of the child occurs at the onset of the narrative, thus the suspense involves the mother's quest to ascertain the cause of death as she attempts to assuage her feelings of guilt and/or seek justice. Such is the case with *Reconstructing Amelia* by Kimberly McCreight. In this novel, single mother Kate Baron is on fast track to a partner position in a Manhattan law firm. Her fifteen-year-old daughter, Amelia, falls to her death from

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the roof of her tony Brooklyn school, an apparent suicide. Skeptical, Kate attempts to piece together the last days of Amelia's life, spurred on by an anonymous text message saying, "Amelia didn't jump." The novel alternates between Kate's journey of discovery and Amelia's story, constructed through Amelia's voice, texts, blogs, and Facebook posts. Kate is drawn into the teenage world of social media and dark adolescent behavior, rife with cliques, insecurity, status-seeking, peer pressure, jealousy, and bullying. Similar to Anna in *Good As Gone*, workaholic Kate feels intense guilt because she was too absorbed by her career to pick up on signs that her daughter was under stress in the viper pit of her teen social world. Kate tells herself, "She was a terrible, terrible mother. It was too much, juggling her job and parenting by herself" (4%) and blames herself for Amelia's death: "If she had been less busy, if she'd paid closer attention, maybe she'd have been able to prevent whatever had happened to Amelia" (33%). While Kate experiences a redemption of sorts when she discovers that the stay-at-home mom, she had idealized has been covering up her own daughter's responsibility for Amelia's fatal accident, the novel still delivers a damning statement regarding the price of this working mother's divided attention.

The Murder-Suspect Mom

Hank Phillippi Ryan's and Emma Flint's novels, *Trust Me* and *Little Deaths*, respectively, treat mothers accused of killing their children. Both novels highlight social prejudices that cause the public to prejudge the defendants, proclaiming them guilty in the court of public opinion. The media's eagerness to sell a titillating story of a monster mother to a rapt public plays a central role in the stories. Both are inspired by actual cases: Ryan's novel has parallels to the Casey

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Anthony case[3] while Flint's is based on the murder trial of Alice Crimmins, accused of killing her two small children.

Trust Me is narrated from the perspective of Mercer Hennessy, a journalist whose life was shattered after her husband and three-year-old daughter were killed in an automobile accident. Trying to help her overcome depression, Mercer's editor assigns her to write a true-crime book about Ashlyn Bryant, a young woman who is about to go on trial for killing her two-year-old daughter. Mercer, along with the rest of the public, is convinced that Ashlyn is guilty; she calls her "the most reviled woman in Massachusetts, in the entire country, possibly" (3%). And, as a matter of fact, the success of Mercer's book depends on Ashlyn's guilt and the public's hatred of her: "We can't sell a book about a contrite and remorseful victim of postpartum depression," says Mercer's editor (11%). The news reports zero in on Ashlyn's nightclubbing and publish a photo of her in a wet T-shirt, portraying a sexpot mother who killed her child because she was an impediment to her partying. However, when Mercer begins to doubt that Ashlyn was responsible for her daughter's death and we learn Mercer caused the fatal accident that took her husband and daughter, convictions about guilt and innocence are shaken up. "Hating Ashlyn is so much more rewarding than hating myself" (10%) admits Mercer, providing insight into our need to vilify others.

Little Deaths, too, is based on a real-life murder trial. In the summer of 1965, two young children went missing from their bedroom in Queens and were later found dead. Their mother, Alice Crimmins, who was separated from her husband and working as a cocktail waitress, became the chief suspect. Why? Because she did not conform to social norms of how a mother should behave. She worked long shifts in a seedy bar and locked her children in the bedroom

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while she slept late. She dressed provocatively, wore heavy make-up, drank, had multiple lovers. Crimmins was found guilty based on circumstantial evidence and imprisoned.

Emma Flint was fascinated by the Crimmins case, and hers is its tenth reworking. The novel focuses on the character assassination of the mother, here named Ruth Malone. In the real-life case, despite Crimmins's vivid presence in the tabloid photos, Flint observes that "she is strangely absent from each picture. Eyes cast down, lips pressed tight together, she refuses to look into the camera, refuses to engage with the audience" (Turbeville). The novel captures this reticence, portraying Ruth mainly through the judging and disapproving eyes of others, but gives us occasional glimpses of Ruth's subjectivity hidden beneath a mask of make-up and pride. A third-person narrator provides her intimate thoughts, describing her grief: "It came as a stone in her throat, preventing her from swallowing; as a pressure behind her eyes, forcing out tears; as a weight in her stomach. It meant that she could not breathe. That she could not have a single moment of not remembering" (90). At the conclusion of Flint's novel—after Ruth has served four years in prison—Ruth's estranged husband confesses to her that he killed the children to punish Ruth for her promiscuity, to teach her a lesson for not behaving as a mother should.

Both novels explore sensationalized real-life cases of mothers accused of killing their children, critiquing the limited roles prescribed for mothers, in particular the vilification of the sexualized mother. The texts highlight the pernicious effect of a mercenary media, inciting public shaming and the rush to judgement.

Confronted Mothers

Another frequent theme is the confrontation between mothers, the so-called "mommy wars," power struggles between mothers who have different values or lifestyles. In this scenario, the

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underdog or "flawed" mom typically gains the higher ground. Perhaps the most well-known of the group is *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty, made into an HBO series. The novel is set in an idyllic Australian beach town where lives and lies begin to unravel when a single mother with a secret mission moves in with her young son. The story is told mainly from the viewpoints of three mothers of kindergarteners: Jane, the single mother; Madeline, a girlie type who has remarried after being abandoned by her first husband; and Celeste, enviably beautiful with darling twin sons, a rich handsome husband, and the seemingly perfect life. In the beginning, we learn that there was a death—possibly a murder—on School Trivia Night. The narrative then jumps backwards six months and proceeds chronologically. Each chapter ends with witnesses voicing their version of events to reporters and the police, hinting at what transpired and building anticipation as the fateful night approaches.

A confrontation between mothers of kindergarteners is set up when Jane's son, Ziggy, is unjustly accused of hurting a little girl in his class and the mothers take sides. Eventually, the truth comes out that the bullying child is one of Celeste's twins. In the meantime, we learn that Celeste is being abused by her charming and successful husband, Perry. At School Trivia Night, Jane recognizes Perry as the abusive man who impregnated her with rough sex and belittled her with insults in a one-night stand. A scuffle ensues: Celeste dumps her drink on Perry who responds by shoving her harshly to the ground; another mother shoves Perry and he falls off the balcony to his death. The crime at the core of the story is Perry's abuse of women, publicly revealed on Trivia Night, exposing Celeste's charmed life as a façade. Perry's behavior was imitated by his son, leading to the unjust shunning of little Ziggy and the conflict between the mothers. "That's why your son has been hurting little girls," cries out the mother of a bullied child as she accosts Perry (91%).

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Moriarty writes with an easy style capturing the cattiness of the squabbling mothers, their judgmental attitude leading to the shaming of mothers who are perceived to have different parenting styles, and the high stakes of mothering in the early twenty-first century. “Mothers took their mothering so seriously now,” reflects a grandmother (2%). “Who knew that kindergarten could be so stressful?” observes Jane (40%). The novel delivers a serious message about bullying and domestic abuse, and the conclusion speaks to vindication and healing.

The Heroic Mother

Among the many tales of loss and failure, there are heartening stories about the strength of a mother-child relationship and the heroic mom who takes extraordinary measures to protect her child. A prime example is *Fierce Kingdom* by Gin Phillips in which a mass shooter scenario serves to showcase powerful maternal agency. Joan and her precocious four-year-old son, Lincoln, are exiting the zoo at dusk when Joan hears a popping sound, sees fallen people, and realizes there is an active shooter. She heaves her son up onto her hip and runs back into the zoo, searching for a hiding place. The familiar and welcoming zoo becomes alien and threatening as night falls and the humans are transformed into hunters’ quarry. The novel unfolds over three nightmarish hours while shooters roam the zoo and the mother and son’s survival depends on her keeping the four-year-old appeased and quiet. Joan is an intensely dedicated and involved mother, and the narrative emphasizes the exceptionally strong bond she has formed with her son: “She knows she has followed some pale thread from her brain to his. There are a million of these threads between them, brain to brain and the threads tell her when he is getting hungry and when he is about to cry, and they tell her that he will like the idea of using marshmallows for a tiny astronaut’s boots” (96%). Joan’s minute knowledge of Lincoln and how he will react to every

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situation, along with her physical strength and problem-solving skills, enables her to keep him from harm.

Ironically, the novel's title, "fierce kingdom," describes not the zoo setting, but the primal emotions of the human animals: the brute savagery of the shooters as well as the intensity of Joan's feral protective instinct. The novel highlights her single-minded drive to protect her son, spelling out her moral dilemma when she decides not to rescue an abandoned baby out of fear it will compromise Lincoln's safety. During the ordeal, she hears a baby's cries and finds it in a trash container. The mother must have panicked and saved herself, Joan surmises, something unthinkable for her. "Can't Joan understand that?" she asks herself. "No. She cannot" (87%). Joan considers retrieving the baby but guiltily decides not to, knowing its wails would draw the shooters to them. She wonders if God will punish her for thinking her child is more important than another woman's child. While Joan was selfish when it came to someone else's baby, she is selfless when it comes to her child, putting her life at risk for Lincoln. With the shooters on their track, she hides Lincoln under a bush and runs noisily in another direction, using her own body as a decoy to draw them away from her son.

A routine zoo visit turns into a life-or-death situation, testing a mother's nerve and laying bare her feral desire to protect her child above anything else. Using a scenario that plays into US anxieties about mass shootings, *Fierce Kingdom* explores the intense primal relationship between mother and child and resists making Joan a savior by depicting the ignobility along with the nobility of her fierce maternal instinct.

The Evil Child

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In sharp contrast to *Fierce Kingdom* is Zoje Stage's disturbing portrayal of a mother who deals with a child bent on destroying her. Stage's masterfully executed tale of an evil child, *Baby Teeth*, is both horrifying and wickedly funny. Hanna is a diabolical seven-year-old nonverbal child and her mother, Suzette, is at her wits' end trying to deal with her. The narration rotates between Hanna's and Suzette's perspective, giving us access to the thoughts of both as they engage in a battle of wills. Suzette vows to be a loving and attentive mother, everything that her depressed and uncaring mother was not. However, she is wracked with guilt about her ambivalent feelings toward motherhood. It becomes apparent that despite her best efforts, Suzette is ill equipped to parent a difficult childlike Hanna, and Hanna knows it: "Hanna felt it, how Mommy couldn't relax with her in her arms. How Mommy wanted to drop her" (40%). She tests her mother and acts out in increasingly malevolent ways, from tampering with her mother's medication to cutting off a big chunk of her mother's hair while she sleeps to trying to set her mother on fire. This cunning and manipulative child behaves sweetly in her father's presence—father and daughter adore each other—and Hanna considers her mother a rival for his love and attention. Hanna has been expelled from five schools, so Suzette must home-school her, and we watch the parents' frantic attempts to find a solution for the seemingly sociopathic child.

The novel explores the trials of parenting a child such as Hanna and we witness the ambivalence Suzette feels: "The fear that motherhood had been a terrible mistake, the guilt that she wanted to undo it but couldn't" (42%). A central question the text raises is how much responsibility Suzette bears for Hanna's deviant behavior. A portrait of a mother in crisis, we see the deleterious effects of motherhood on Suzette's self-worth, her marriage, and her health, along with her ambivalence, guilt, and her regret for having become a mother. A deeply unsettling story, *Baby Teeth* takes normal parental anxieties to extremes.

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Conclusion

What does the mom thriller tell us about motherhood in the early twenty-first century and *how* does it go about this? While the tones and messages of the mom thrillers vary widely, their central thrust presents the mother in a perilous situation and explores her response to it. In this way, the texts explore maternal agency or the lack of it and the forces enabling or inhibiting it. Some novels portray empowered mothers, while others depict the mother's criminal deviance or explore the mother's vulnerability and enact masochistic fantasies of loss.

Texts that depict mothers as flawed or morally ambivalent and/or reveal something sinister beneath the maternal ideal undermine the essentialist notion that mothers—and all women by extension—are innately nurturing and self-sacrificing. In connection with this, mom thrillers show certain social expectations for mothers to be prejudicial, oppressive, and limiting, making women feel trapped and guilty if they do not conform to them. These portrayals speak to dilemmas women face in a postfeminist, neoliberal age in which neoconservative ideas about mothering coexist with the concept of women's empowerment and choice. A repeated issue is the guilt that working mothers feel. At the same time that women feel empowered, even expected, to become successful professionals, the idealized image of the stay-at-home mom produces ambivalence and guilt. Also important are the novels' political agendas, denouncing domestic abuse, bullying, and the stigmatization of postpartum disorders.

The noir thrillers explore these situations by incorporating and transforming the conventions of crime or noir fiction. First, there is a crime or wrongdoing of some sort, along with the inevitable lies or façades covering up criminality or dysfunction. The crime premise turns family drama into a domestic thriller, with a secret or hidden reality being the driver of narrative suspense. Next is the shifting position of the mother on the character triangle of crime fiction.

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She is frequently portrayed as a vicarious victim via the harm done to her child or a victim in her own right—a victim of society, other people, or of her own child. Or, believing the authorities are incompetent or incredulous, the mother may become an investigator of the crime perpetrated against her child. An even more radical alteration occurs when she is a perpetrator or suspected as perpetrator. Finally, she straddles the line between victim and perpetrator when she is accused, or blames herself, of bringing harm to her child. In this way, mom thriller writers disturb classic crime fiction norms to capture the situation of contemporary women. The mother's shifting role as she confronts situations affecting her child demonstrates her dynamic function, her exercise of power as she moves from women's traditional passive role as victim to investigator. Essential to crime fiction is the question of justice and ethics. If the mother is a victim, the reader is eager to find out if she will achieve justice (or revenge). Then there are the mothers who break the law or commit moral or ethical offenses for the sake of their child, putting the reader in the position of judging whether their mission to protect a child supersedes the law or an ethical imperative.

A popular culture manifestation and frequent bestseller, the mom thriller is testament to crime fiction's ability to "grab the current" of contemporary society, delivering a social critique and opening up ethical questions in a "commercially digestible" package (Sutton 55 and 66). As the above discussion demonstrates, mom thrillers transmit a wide gamut of messages and emotions related to motherhood. What they have in common is that their noir perspective invites in dark thoughts and deeds, analyzing them and appreciating their power. The thriller allows authors to exorcise obsessive concerns by situating them in a text, at a distance, and exercising control over them, with the same effect on readers, tapping into our base fears and confronting them in the thriller. Engaging and enacting the many pitfalls that real mothers confront or fear, mom thrillers critique and subvert the ideal of maternal perfection.

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[1] While postfeminism seems to be a vexed term, Rosalind Gill offers a useful explanation. She underscores its "force as a critical analytical category" that attends to and makes visible contradictions, seeing how feminist ideas can be "entangled with pre-feminist, anti-feminist, and backlash ones" (625).

[2] For citations from Kindle editions, the percentage is used for the locator.

[3] In 2008, Casey Anthony of Orlando, Florida, was charged with first-degree murder in the death of her two-year-old daughter, Caylee. The prosecution sought the death penalty, alleging Anthony wished to free herself from parental responsibilities. In 2011, the jury found Anthony not guilty of first-degree murder, causing public outrage. *Time* magazine described the case as "the social media trial of the century" (Cloud).