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## *When Mothers Kill: Interviews from Prison.* Michelle Oberman and Cheryl Meyer. Reviewed by Mary Ann Kanieski.

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Michelle Oberman and Cheryl Meyer, *When Mothers Kill: Interviews from Prison*. New York: New York University Press, 2008. \$24.00 hardcover.

The murder of a child by his or her mother is one of the most disturbing crimes because it challenges our understanding of motherhood. We want to believe that all mothers have a maternal instinct that assures they will love and care for their children in all circumstances. When a mother kills her child, we are forced to realize that the bond between a mother and child is not enough to overcome the devastations of abuse, social isolation, and poverty.

This book advances our understanding of mothers who are convicted of killing their children by interviewing women incarcerated for these crimes in the Ohio Reformatory for Women. Through open-ended interviews, the authors identified common themes and patterns in the women's lives. While the authors acknowledge that their methodology is limited in explaining why the crimes occurred, the book does tell an important story of mothering under difficult conditions.

The title of the book is misleading because most of the women interviewed did not intend to kill their children. Drawing upon a classification system developed in a previous study, the authors found that most of the women they interviewed were convicted of abuse related filicide, filicide due to neglect, or assisted or coerced filicide. In other words, for most of the women, the death of their children was often a side effect of abuse or neglect rather than a purposive action. Women who had purposely killed their children were underrepresented in the study because they were less likely to be incarcerated either due to reasons of insanity or because women who perpetrated neonaticide, killing an infant within 24 hours after birth, tended to be quite young and received lenient sentences. The authors did discuss such cases in the appendices.

The book is organized in chapters around several themes that emerged in the interviews. What were common to all the interviews were stories of domestic violence, instability, and social isolation. Chapter 2 focuses on the women's violent childhoods and troubled relationships with their mothers while chapter 3 explores the violent relationships the women

endured with the fathers of their children. Chapter 4 discusses the women's experiences of pregnancy as well as their hopes for motherhood. An important finding was the fact that for some of the women, having a child helped them find a place to live, as family members were more likely to support them if they had a child. Even with the support, most of the women continued to be isolated, as they were solely responsible for caring for their children. Chapter 5 focuses on their experiences in prison. Sadly, prison was the first stable and safe environment many of the women had experienced. Chapter 6 was the most important because it focused on the inadequacies of the social safety net. Most of the women distrusted the very institutions designed to help them (such as the health care system, schools and the social services) because they feared that by seeking help, they were placing themselves at risk for their children to be taken away. Ironically, it was love for their children that prevented them from seeking the help that may have prevented their children's deaths. The concluding chapter discusses the policy implications of the research.

The book does an excellent job of presenting the women's stories in their own words. The accounts of these women will be most useful for those in the social services who may gain insight on their clients. In particular, the distrust the women felt toward agencies intended to help them has important policy implications. The book will be less useful for those looking for greater social theoretical understanding of this phenomenon. It would also have benefited from a greater discussion of the prior social scientific literature on child homicide and the contributions of their own work. Nevertheless, the authors have made an important contribution in enhancing our understanding of the lives of mothers responsible for their children's deaths.

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