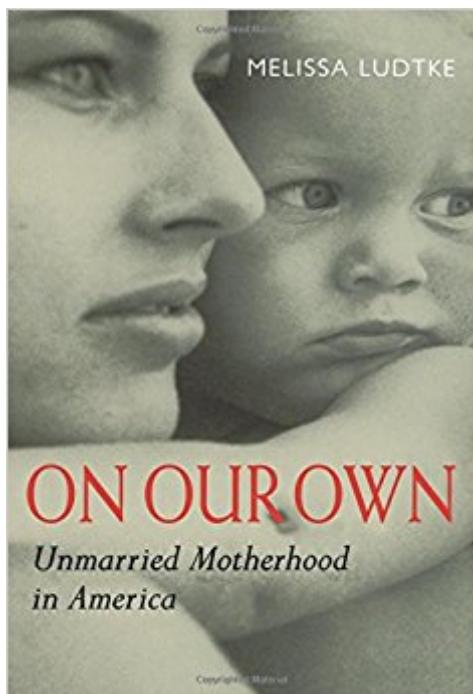


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# On Our Own: Unmarried Motherhood In America



## Synopsis

The U.S. has experienced a dramatic increase in births to unmarried women in recent decades; from 4% of births in 1950, with most of the babies then adopted, to more than 30% today. Melissa Ludtke's book is the only in-depth analysis of this radical change in family formation to compare and contrast the lives of these mothers of varying ages and economic circumstances.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

At the heart of the national debate about "family values" is the population of women who become mothers without first becoming wives. Some critics regard them as monsters, others as brave alternatives to traditional American families. Regardless of the way they're perceived, hundreds of thousands of unmarried women begin families each year. With a reporter's zeal (author Melissa Ludtke is a former correspondent for Time magazine, where her articles--including more than 20 cover stories--focused on family and children), an analyst's thirst for research, and a personal involvement with its subjects, the book is a compelling blend of stories and social commentary.

While much commented upon, unmarried mothers themselves rarely comment on their status, and Ludtke has gathered interviews of women from all rungs on the socioeconomic ladder, from teenagers to fortysomethings. The result is a thought-provoking and timely study that covers complicated issues and offers a forge-ahead attitude to choices often considered unconventional, such as donor insemination--its history and the issues it raises--and adoption. Discussions about accidental and intentional pregnancy, plus true-life stories alternating between the two sets of mothers--teens and older adults--represent only a portion of the ground covered. --This text refers to

the Hardcover edition.

More than one million babies are born to single mothers each year. Although some of those mothers are teenagers, a growing number are women in their thirties and forties who do not see a man in their future. Ludtke, a journalist considering single parenthood, interviewed mothers in both groups as well as psychologists, politicians, and social scientists to gain insight into this trend. Despite the vastly different circumstances of the two groups, she found many common concerns. Both face criticism from society, dealing with the absence of a father, and juggling the responsibilities of parenting with those of work and/or school. While Jane Mattes's *Single Mothers by Choice* (LJ 6/15/94) deals only with the practical aspects of parenting and Naomi Miller's *Single Parents by Choice: A Growing Trend in Family Life* (Plenum, 1992) offers social analysis of older mothers, Ludtke's work is unique in its comparison of younger and older mothers. The interesting interviews and extensive bibliography make this a fine addition to all collections. Highly recommended. ?Barbara M. Bibel, Oakland P.L., Cal. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Having written and completed a graduate level study on black teenage pregnancy, I was very interested in what this author might have to say about the issue. I thought it would help draw a bright line between the polar opposite views of Marian Elderman Wright's book, "Children in Peril;" and Leon Dash's, groundbreaking book "When Children Want Children: The Urban Crisis of Teenage Childbearing." Naturally, after seeing Wright quoted in this book and a single reference to Dash on page 46, I turned immediately to the index and bibliography to see what the author had to say about their respective works. I was surprised and disappointed to discover that neither of these authors books were properly cited or even appeared in either the index or bibliography; and that although Dash was referenced as supposed to have appeared on page 46, no such entry about him was there? Needless to say, these omissions set a new record for sloppiness for a scholarly work, and did so on such an important topic. After discovering this level of sloppiness, I of course could not take the author (or her book) seriously. As a result, I simply scanned the rest of the book and found it to be little more than an apologia for middle and upper class white women. It zig-zagged between rationalizations for the "super single mom" and the "single incompetent mom." All of the socially accepted and cleared rationalizations, I had heard before were rehearsed, and there was very little serious scholarly work in between. And while I can respect the author's intent "to bring the real voice to the public of unwed mothers," to ignore the role class distinctions play in the severity of the

problem is just short of being academically, socially and criminally negligent. There is an interesting subtext to the book which I do hardly endorse. It is that poor parenting, more often than not, leads into cross-generational cultures of out-of-wedlock children and a perpetuation of even poorer parenting skills. I am sure that for readers who trust this author's objectivity will get a lot more out of this book than I did. Since I found her scholarly credibility to be zero, I am giving her one star

In "On Our Own" Melissa Ludtke, a professional journalist, sets out to uncover the experiences of "unmarried mothers" in America for a very personal reason. She is in her late 30s and struggling with the decision to become a mother herself. In a series of alternating chapters, Ludtke discusses the experiences of two disparate groups of unmarried mothers, young, poor women and older, more financially secure women. Three key questions guide the core of this book, why to have a baby, how to raise children and ways to explain the absence or anonymity of "fathers." The book is based on interviews with 30 women with whom Ludtke visited repeatedly over the course of several years. The introductory chapter and the conclusion provide an overview of the status of unmarried motherhood in America and Ludtke deftly interweaves scholarly research about unmarried mothers into her book. However, Ludtke has sidestepped many of the traditional pitfalls in discussing this controversial issue by focusing on individual women who confound ...typical generalizations. Her subjects include a teen mother attending an Ivy League school and an older professional woman whose best-laid plans go awry when she is laid off suddenly. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this book is how unrelenting difficult unmarried motherhood really is. Dispirited teen mothers and successful professional women alike struggle to fit their families into a society that still assumes the nuclear family is the norm. While these mothers share their travails with divorced custodial parents, they live with the knowledge, and sometimes societal condemnation, that they chose this route. Parenting alone is a best second choice for almost all of the 30 women Ludtke interviewed. While few of the teen mothers desired marriage to the men who impregnated them, they work diligently to include the biological fathers in the lives of their children with varying degrees of success. The knowledge that "father" will be an anonymous sperm donor plagues many of the thirty-something women to such an extent that several have engineered ways to have a known father in their child's life while others have found father substitutes. Ludtke avoids the question of whether women should pursue unmarried motherhood by compiling a statistical projections that show that by the year 2004, unmarried mothers will reach 50%. So whether society is ready for them or not, it needs to start preparing to meet their needs. She focuses most of her suggestions on young unmarried mothers who may be less able to care for themselves. While this approach may anger those who wish for a

more polemical ending, it is very in keeping with Lutke's balanced approach throughout the book.

ON OUR OWN examines two groups of unmarried mothers, who are increasing in numbers every year. The author brings together solid research and some insightful interviews with Murphy-Brown older, educated women, as well as with young, uneducated women, who are choosing or have chosen to have babies out of wedlock. It's difficult to put one's emotions aside reading this material, but if you can, you'll find that the "obvious" solutions to the problem of unwed motherhood aren't so obvious after all. Most disturbing is the portrait of the teenage mothers, who feel that having a baby will be the one thing they can do right and get respect for accomplishing--and a number of them who choose to assert power over their bodies in this way are victims of sexual abuse. Clearly, until we start paying some attention to these underprivileged girls' needs before they get pregnant, no amount of "just say no" rhetoric is going to affect them. The stories of the older women having children are just as provocative, and underlying these women's decision to adopt, go to a sperm bank, or have a male friend inseminate them with no obligations, is an unavailability of eligible partners. Are these women really unmarriageable, or does their common plight point out something about American men's attitudes toward marriage and childrearing? It's unfortunate that the book is such a daunting length, but even if you find yourself skimming a bit, it's worth reading to explore this very important subject.

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