

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

April 3, 2007

“PARALLEL PLAY” BY THOMAS RAYFIEL

(Random House, \$13.95)

Review by Alexandra Shelley

Thomas Rayfiel’s novel *Parallel Play* is the new kid on the playground. Like the other recent playground literature to which the Random House publicity department likens *Parallel Play* — *Little Children* by Tom Perrotta and *I Don’t Know How She Does It* by Allison Pearson — it stars an iconoclastic mother covering up with mordant wit her feelings of parental inadequacy.

These rebels are riven with guilt over their failure to remember the morning playground snack (*Little Children*) or to bake for the school sale (*I Don’t Know How*). Among the things Eve, the narrator of *Parallel Play*, forgets are the changing pad, her first anniversary, to clean the apartment, to separate whites from colors — basically anything but her own misery.

The play-lit genre provides a refreshing frankness about the transition to motherhood, including its stretches of boredom; failure to “bond” with the infant; loss of self (the “effacement” that begins with the cervix in labor, and is then followed by the rest of the body), strained, sexless marriages. All of the above books feature infidelity, though unsuccessful.

Yet they move as inexorably as the Victorian novel toward revelation, acceptance, and reconciliation. Each has if not an exactly happy ending, then at least the beginning of less unhappiness.

Parallel Play opens at the playground, the Park Slope Tot Spot, where Eve has taken 7-month-old Ann. She is avoiding the other mothers, barricading herself behind a blank journal, when her sexy ex-boyfriend, Mark, happens by. He’s a serpent in construction boots, makes a living growing pot, and rekindles his connection with Eve; although, as it turns out, not for the expected selfish reason, but for a different, selfish reason involving his own marriage.

Toward the end of the novel, when this playground is socked in with snow, Eve sees it as an Eden from which she’s been expelled. But at this point the playground, in fact her entire life, is a treacherous proving ground.

She is practicing loving her baby, just as she’s practicing folding the stroller with one hand. During introductions at the Parallel Play Group, Eve can’t think of any cute fact about Ann. “‘She’s a mistake,’” she says finally, referring to her daughter’s haphazard conception during an early date with Dr. Harvey Gabriel.

Twenty-something Eve, who used to make a living sewing knock-offs of designer clothes, seems to feel that her future has essentially passed: “. . . whatever was due to happen had already come and gone. I was just another yawning, stupid member of the crowd, pushing home my daughter.”

And although Harvey is portrayed as a stand-up guy, she finds no solace in her marriage. This discontent is one of the few things she does share with her husband, “both recognizing, in the other, salvation but also determined, as soon as we stopped concentrating, to screw it up.”

The story follows Eve through a few eventful, life-altering weeks. In fact, events occur so rapidly that at times the narrative seems disjointed, like those snapshots jumbled up in a box that all mothers of young children plan one day to organize in an album. Some of the plot twists are neither set up nor followed up. For instance, Alison, a stranger from

the Parallel Play Group, convinces Eve to leave her daughter at home alone, takes her to a bar, then kisses her. End of chapter.

The next chapter begins with Eve's seeing missing-children posters showing her friend Marjorie's twins. She then shoplifts a piece of fabric for reasons she herself doesn't understand; she finds out that her husband took their daughter to an oncologist, along with his friend Mindy the pediatrician (with whom Eve suspects he's having an affair), to have a possible tumor checked out; he confesses this to her at a restaurant where they've gone to celebrate their first anniversary; there he gets a phone call that his mother has had a heart attack; he tells Eve he doesn't want her to come to the funeral; Harvey takes off for Florida, leaving Eve with Ann, who has an ear infection, and ex-boyfriend Mark insists on coming to the rescue. And that's just Chapter 6.

On the other hand, scattered along the way are these little gifts to the reader, Eve's sardonic observations about the complex mechanics of bringing up baby:

- On breast-feeding: "... made me feel I'd been attacked by a giant toothless rat."
- On parenthood: "Once, I heard a guy say, 'I have muscles in places where other people don't even have places.'"
- On the guilt of using child care: As Eve drops her daughter off at a chaotic family day care for a few hours, she thinks, "... this is definitely the gateway to being officially designated a Bad Mother..."
- On first steps: "Soles that barely touched the ground before, never felt the full weight of their body, with its strange shifting center of gravity, take on that lifelong balancing act."

Mr. Rayfiel nails the mother's p.o.v. despite his gender. And he also has an eagle-eyed perspective on Park Slope, a liberal, family-oriented Brooklyn neighborhood where there are still advice-dispensing butchers (though most of my Park Slope friends are vegetarians who shop at the food co-op). The Parallel Play Group is the kind of crowd that applies feng shui to making love in order to produce a developmentally advanced child. ("It's not just the position but what direction you're facing," Alison tells Eve, in case you were wondering.)

In an interview appended to his novel as part of the "reader's guide," Mr. Rayfiel says this book was sparked by "the dawning realization that women have been sold a bill of goods about motherhood, assured they will instantly fall in love with their newborn child and their newfound lot."

The author, who's put in his own playground time raising two kids in Park Slope, noted "the sharp and funny minds of former lawyers, editors, and artists pretending they were just as content earnestly debating the pros and cons of various brands of disposable diapers or mushed-up carrots. That suggested comic possibilities, the alternative being to blow one's brains out."

What distinguishes Tom Perrotta's handling of the same playground terrain in "Little Children," though, is that he helps us understand the bases of his characters' discontent so that we sympathize — even, to some degree, with the child molester.

In Eve, Mr. Rayfiel has constructed an often unsympathetic first-person narrator, which is fine, but then he faces the challenge of instilling sympathy nonetheless. Eve's voice is in the kvetchier-than-thou vein of John Updike's last Rabbit novel. But at least poor Rabbit has a heart condition and a no-good son. Eve just seems to have a hankering for unhappiness (though part of the book's movement is her coming to recognize this).

She doesn't argue when, toward the end of the novel, her friend Marjorie says, "You know what you need? A kick on the ass. . . . I mean basically, nothing's wrong with you, right? You've got a kid, a husband, you're young. . . . I could never figure out why you were so miserable."

The only hint we have as to the sources of this misery is Eve's upbringing in a religious colony in Iowa where Christmas was "celebrated" with fasting and prayer. But we don't get much detail about this background, possibly because it was covered in Mr. Rayfiel's last two novels ("*Colony Girl*" and "*Eve in the City*").

However, for me, annoyance at Eve's whining is outweighed by the voyeuristic thrill of reading a first-person confessional. As a new mom myself, I've found a distinct appeal in such blunt accounts of parenthood. It's not only schadenfreude, but also relief: I may have my shortcomings as a parent, but I'm not as messed up as she is.

For this relativistic reassurance, you could also go to a "mommy and me" group or to such sisterhood saunas as Urbanbaby.com, in whose anonymous chatroom maternal soul-baring goes on night and day. Type in such search terms as "divorce" or "insomnia" or "concussion" and you come away amazed that any mother survives her infant's first year of life (not to mention that she doesn't kill her unhelpful husband or her prone-to-fall-on-his-head baby).

But the play-lit novels provide more detailed portraits, and these are an antidote to the madonna and child image. Their flawed heroines are finding their own way in the gulf between idyll and reality.

When Eve drops her daughter off at day care and worries that she's a Bad Mother, she looks around the room at all the other kids left by other mothers. Were they Bad Mothers too? "It seemed like it was just a concept used to keep you in line, like Original Sin."

Welcome to the far side of Paradise, somewhere between the jungle gym and the swings.

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Thomas Rayfiel has a house in Amagansett.

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