

Review of *Professor Mommy: Finding Work-Family Balance in Academia*

Maria Gillespie

Professor Mommy. A century ago, these two words would have been considered an oxymoron. Now they are the title of a book by two mothers who “made it” in academia—or should I say, by two professors who made it as moms?

In this book, Rachel Connelly and Kristen Ghodsee lay out their own personal how-to guide for young women who are interested in pursuing both academia and motherhood and are wondering (a) whether doing so is even possible, and (b) what a life involving both would entail. The authors draw upon their own experience and the experiences of a handful of other successful mothers in academia that they interviewed for this book. The book reads as an encouraging—but brutally honest—tour through the challenges and rewards of being a mother in academia, at every stage from graduate school up through the final promotion to full professor.

Their main thesis: Yes, it is possible to combine motherhood and academia, and no, it is not easy.

The introduction states clearly from the outset what the book does *not* address. For one, it does not discuss alternative career paths outside of academia for mothers who have a PhD, and the authors helpfully refer the reader to other sources which do address this. It also is not a guide for fathers in academia. While they acknowledge that this is an important topic, the book focuses on mothers,⁷ for whom the biological realities of pregnancy, miscarriages, fertile years, and breastfeeding often interact with academia in particularly incompatible ways. Finally, *Professor Mommy* is not a book geared particularly towards mathematicians—the two authors are in the humanities and social sciences, so their experiences reflect that perspective. However, throughout the book, the authors consistently point out when their advice may not apply as well to STEM fields.

The first chapter shares the success story of Connelly herself, as an uplifting anecdote to contrast the sobering numbers seen in studies (from the time period 2002–2004) of women who dropped out of academia before reaching tenure. The authors do discuss these sobering statistics, but it wasn't clear to me, as the reader, why Connelly managed to be an exception at the time and why the statistics were

what they were. I would have liked to see a more in-depth discussion of those issues.

That being said, Chapter 2 is where the advice really takes off, starting by dispelling nine common myths about academia, motherhood, and their combination. As someone who entered graduate school believing many of these myths (including “An academic job will allow you to spend more time with your kids” and “Getting and being pregnant will be easy”), I found myself nodding along as the authors expertly countered each myth, wishing that I hadn't had to learn these things the hard way. If I had to recommend that young women with aspirations of both academia and motherhood read one chapter from this book, it would be Chapter 2.

The next two chapters discuss how to tell if academia and motherhood are right for the reader. They thoroughly explain what each entails, and share some statistics and a handful of other womens' stories to demonstrate that their claims are not just based on their own experiences. The statistic that I found the most surprising was from a study showing that, when restricted to a given gender, parents in academia are more productive (by several measures of productivity) than non-parents in the same field. I would have been very interested in a more thorough examination by the authors on possible explanations for this phenomenon.

Chapter 5 starts the guided tour for readers who decided in the previous chapters that they really do want to aim for both motherhood and academia. This chapter focuses on writing your dissertation in graduate school, setting aside enough time for it, and what to do if there is a baby in the mix. The chapter ends with an interesting “text box” in which the authors discuss possible changes to academic jobs and the tenure system that can make it more family-friendly without doing away with tenure itself or replacing it with more low-paid part-time positions. One suggestion, which has already been implemented in a few places, is “half-time tenured” positions that allow more flexibility for a mother in the academy.

The tour continues into Chapters 6–7, discussing motherhood during the pre-tenure years on the tenure track. Their description of having young children while working towards tenure pulls no punches:

Now that that time is over for both of us, we feel more comfortable making an objective judgment: *it was hell*.

And that was just the start of Chapter 6. Chapter 7 ends with the following encouraging paragraph:

Finally, with all of these responsibilities, it is inevitable that you will forget about yourself. This is what you need to do. It stinks. Get over it. You can go shopping and get manicures galore after tenure. Until then, buckle down and just try to get enough sleep.

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⁷The book, written ten years ago, does not distinguish between cisgender and transgender women.

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Oof. And here I was thinking it was just the pandemic.

Tough words aside, Connelly and Ghodsee do a magnificent job providing concrete tips for getting through the tenure track years with young children around. They cover childcare options, strategies for squeezing more working hours into the middle of the night, networking, what to put in your tenure packet, how to account for gaps due to maternity leave, how to manage your time at home and be fully present with your children, and much more.

The final chapters focus on the post-tenure years, promotion to full professor, and juggling the (usually lighter) needs of older children in these years. Having nodded along with the chapters on graduate school, and having been glued to the page during the discussion on the early tenure track (my current stage), I appreciated reading this part of the book to get a sense of what might lie ahead. It was again an encouraging but honest read, and particularly focused on how to avoid being completely overloaded with service responsibilities in these years.

The authors conclude with a list of five main points that sum up their book well:

1. Academia is hard.
2. Academia is hard for everyone, both men and women, with or without children.
3. Although times have changed considerably and things are improving, it is still a proven empirical reality that it is harder for women with children to achieve tenure compared to men and women without children and men with children.
4. Although it is difficult to be both a successful academic and a mother, it is absolutely possible. Knowing what you are getting into will help you beat the odds.
5. Although it will require a lot of hard work, it is worth it. You get to read what you want, write about what interests you, and influence a new generation of students and scholars. And then you come home to someone who calls you Mommy.

It is worth noting that this book was published in 2011, and the landscape of academia has arguably changed significantly in the last decade. I would be interested to see an update at some point from the authors, whether as a new version of the book or as an addendum in the form of a blog post or article, to see their perspective on what has changed and whether the changes were for the better.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic alone radically changed academia and childcare, possibly for the long term, and many of these changes have made life particularly difficult for academic parents of young children. Housing prices and college tuition have generally gone up since 2011, making the financial considerations of when to have children a potentially different calculation than the simple choice that the book laid out at the time it was written. Infertility is on the rise, potentially due to environmental pollutants, and the ongoing climate change crisis is causing many young people to rethink how many children, if any,

they might want to have. It is worth keeping such factors in mind when reading through *Professor Mommy*.

All in all, the book is an excellent tour through the challenges and stages that one will encounter when pursuing both motherhood and academia. As the authors say in their introduction:

The truth is that many of the women who are successful professors and mothers simply do not have the extra time to write about their experiences, and so their voices are not heard.

It is indeed remarkable—and appreciated—that these two women wrote such a detailed exposition amid all of their other responsibilities, both to those who call them Professor, and to those who call them Mommy.



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Credits

Photo of Maria Gillespie is courtesy of Maria Gillespie.

Review of *The Unwritten Rules of Professional Etiquette*

Catherine M. Hsu and Allison N. Miller

Instead of saying "The book is not very good," say "I am having a hard time relating to the author's way of presenting the material." —Ryan Sharma

Given the acute need for transparency in professional expectations during graduate school, we were intrigued by the potential of clinical psychologist Ryan Sharma's guidebook, a resource that aims to help students navigate "the complex world of academic relationships." Unfortunately, we hesitate to recommend this book to current or prospective graduate students due to its rigid perspective and consistently harsh tone. We also warn graduate students in

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