

BOOK REVIEWS

MARY CHILDERS

Welfare Brat: A Memoir

New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005

224 pp., \$23.95, ISBN 1 582 34586 4

In a country in which almost 12 million children currently live below the poverty line, it is harrowing to think that any of them, let alone the 500,000 just in New York City, are having the kind of experience described by Mary Childers in her new memoir.

Welfare Brat is the story of Ms. Childers' childhood in the Bronx borough of New York City in the 1960s and 1970s. As one of seven children, it is also her siblings' stories, and the history of their mother, an Irish Catholic woman who herself grew up in the foster care system. It is an account of how one family dealt with poverty, alcoholism, drug abuse, physical and emotional abuse, poor health, and lack of family planning. It is also a story of how the author confronted racism (as a white family living in African-American and Latino neighborhoods), anti-Semitism (having Jewish friends and teachers), and classism (as a poor teenager working in an upscale department store).

The book describes the sad paradox often found in impoverished neighborhoods and families—how those who strive to achieve more are both admired and despised. The author's desire to do well in school grew out of wanting a sense of control in her chaotic environment. Her desire to go to college was not primarily to better herself or prepare for a career, but instead was a means to move away from her family and have a quiet space to herself. Still, despite the dismissive attitudes and cruelty of her mother and siblings as she grew older, she still felt a responsibility and love toward them and returned home from college often to care for her younger siblings.

Although larger societal issues are addressed, the book remains an intensely personal story of the struggle Ms. Childers herself endured, yet avoids the victimhood that she could have easily claimed. Although she finishes the book with the mostly positive news from her own life and her family, the genius of the ending is that it does not feel triumphant. It is a realistic report of people who have had truly hard lives.

This story shows the cycle that is often perpetuated by the welfare system—poor families have fewer educational and social opportunities and consequently remain poor for the next generation. Ms. Childers is an exception, but her siblings show that it is often almost impossible for disadvantaged children to beat the system and lift themselves out of poverty.

Welfare Brat offers a unique perspective on growing up poor in an urban setting 30 years ago. It begs many questions: Have educational opportunities in urban schools improved? Has access to health care services in poor neighborhoods improved? Has the housing situation improved? Have opportunities for success improved? What happens

today to a mother with seven children? How many of our 12 million impoverished children will be able to break the cycle of poverty? Perhaps this book will help decision-makers better understand why our social welfare network is vital in addressing these problems.

*Dona Anderson
Institute for Children and Poverty*

J. S. FUERST

When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago

Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2005

228 pp., \$20, ISBN 0 252 07213 8

In this compelling oral history collection, J. S. Fuerst offers a bittersweet glimpse into an important moment in the history of public housing. Together with his assistant D. Bradford Hunt, Fuerst has compiled and excerpted a collection of 140 interviews with residents and staff to create this touching and thought-provoking testimony to the heyday of the Chicago Housing Authority. Fuerst argues that during the 1940s and 1950s, public housing in Chicago “worked,” providing safe, well-managed communities of opportunity to low-income working families. The first-person accounts offered in *When Public Housing Was Paradise* document the dedicated staff, motivated residents, and the underlying philosophy of success that allowed these early “projects” to become effective stepping-stones out of poverty. Former tenants reminisce fondly about housing complexes with up-to-date facilities, grassy lawns, gardens, and flowerbeds. Throughout this volume, residents speak enthusiastically about the sense of community, mutual respect, and pride that infused these early projects.

As a blueprint for reclaiming the potential of public housing, *When Public Housing Was Paradise* is a mixed success. Fuerst, through the voices of the interviewees, challenges some important assumptions about the nature of public housing. For example, the relative unimportance of the size and shape of the facilities—tenants speak with equal warmth of low-rise, mid-rise, and high-rise buildings—is particularly interesting. Although the modern-day example of successful public housing offered at the end of the book is instructive and encouraging, it seems that most of the elements that allowed public housing to work in the 1940s and 1950s are no longer viable options. Both tenants and staff repeatedly emphasize the importance of carefully screening potential residents, consistently supervising and enforcing specific standards of housekeeping and child-rearing, and quickly evicting “problem” families. We cannot (and should not) deny access to affordable housing to single-parent families in order to maintain living environments that support marriage. Similarly, the inspections and fines that were a regular feature of this housing seem intrusive and insulting by modern standards. Finally, in light of current demographics, it would be impossible to impose quotas on the number of non-working poor tenants and to swiftly evict each “problem” family without drastically increasing the ranks of homeless families. Still, *When Public Housing Was Paradise* is

a valuable work of history, a compelling read, and a moving tribute to a lost time and place.

Anna Smith
Department of History
University of Michigan

JULIE HADEED

Poverty Begins at Home: The Mother–Child Education Programme (MOCEP) in the Kingdom of Bahrain

New York, Peter Lang, 2004

188 pp., \$62.95, ISBN 0 82047 106 2

Studies of the impact of early childhood intervention programs are an indispensable tool for policymakers trying to understand the conditions under which these programs do or do not work. In the case at hand, Julie Hadeed's study of the impact of the Mother–Child Education Programme (MOCEP) in Bahrain on improving the wellbeing of children and their parents lays out a case for state investment in early childhood intervention for severely economically disadvantaged households. Hadeed collected a wide variety of data on households, focusing on parental attitudes and behavior towards their children, and conducted statistical analyses of the data using an experimental design framework, which examines the effect of the program on participating and non-participating or "control" households. The data are potentially rich in descriptive terms, and while the author makes a strong case for the importance of early childhood intervention programs in ameliorating and mitigating the effects of poverty on parental behavior, there are a number of major concerns regarding the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

A more prudent approach would have been to describe in more detail the different components of the early childhood intervention program under study, linking them to the specific objectives and mechanisms for achieving the goals of the program. Instead, the author conducted a wide variety of statistical analyses and reports many different findings, which detract from the main points and arguments. More emphasis on the mechanisms by which early childhood intervention programs can improve the welfare of households through a program such as this one would have been more informative than conducting and reporting on a large number of statistical analyses that are not clearly tied back to a conceptual framework.

The author also does not provide the reader with enough information on the MOCEP program itself, and how the different goals and objectives of the program are carried out. The connection between the goals of the program and the different dimensions that the author examines in the statistical analysis is therefore unclear. While a detailed description of the program may have been provided in previous work, readers unfamiliar with the previous work will find it difficult to make the connection between the specific mechanisms in the program and the changes in the parental measures that the