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Great with Child: Reflections on Faith, Fullness, and Becoming a Mother (Book Review)

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Book Review

Great with Child: Reflections on Faith, Fullness, and Becoming a Mother, Debra Rienstra (Tarcher Putnam, 2002), 295 pp., \$23.95 Reviewed by Sherri B. Lantinga, Associate Professor of Psychology, Dordt College.

Mostly as a joke, in our last year of college my husband and I decided to have a little race: whoever finished graduate school first got to pick where we would work and live. This was a friendly competition, just some motivation not to get stuck in a 20-year dissertation, but we didn't account for the stubborn competitiveness of two first-borns. The starting line required completed applications to about six graduate schools for each of us, and the race was on! But I didn't get accepted, and my husband did—everywhere he applied. Do you hear the violins yet? After a year of angst and temporary jobs, I got accepted to a good school in the same city, so with a year's handicap the race heated up. We read and wrote and finished our Master's programs almost neck and neck; continuing into our Ph.D. programs, we read and wrote and proposed our dissertations within four months of each other when HEY! God tossed a baby into the mix.

Well, babies are nice and all, but what about the race? More importantly, what did this birth mean for our perceived callings as professors—folks who happen to need Ph.D.s? As a woman, should I drop out of school to care for baby Sam so that my husband could finish and become a financially responsible professor? Did I have to put my vocation on “call waiting,” or should both of us get right into the diaper fray, possibly slowing down both of our dissertations and academic careers? What would God have us stubborn, selfish, competitive Christian folks do?

With this as background, upon the birth of my third child my in-laws gave me Debra Rienstra's book *Great with Child*. The cover intimidated me: a sepia-toned photo of a woman's very pregnant (and stretch-mark-free) belly was not something I was ready to handle as I bemoaned my own abdominal waterbed. A few months later, I decided to give the book a try, and I could barely put it down. Rienstra loves life—and not just the happy, shiny side of it. Her first-person reflections are a vulnerable look into living as a contemporary Christian woman who is wife, mother, daughter, English professor, and member of Christ's body while she carries her third child's body within her own. Rienstra weaves together a rich collection of thoughts on things like marriage, the place of professional ambitions, the creative power that comes with fertility, the Greek myth of Psyche, and Scripture. Through it all, she reveals

much about her own sweaty work of love for her children, her husband, and her career.

Don't get all moony-eyed though. This is no naive, soft-lit, precious-moments approach to Godly living; it's a barely PG-13 version of Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions*, but with two more kids and a husband. It's also not a how-to manual with advice for those of us who haven't figured out the elusive work-family balance. Even better, it's an honest record of a gutsy journey through irrational fears, quirky body functions, furious nesting, earthy birth, and stupid marital fights. Rienstra lets us accompany her as she struggles to wrest wisdom and peace from daily living, finding foolishness and joy along the way. Her warm, personal writing style aptly expresses the true-to-life thoughts and anxieties of many struggling Christian women who want to serve God well amidst a cacophony of “supposed to” messages from relatives, colleagues, and culture. As I read the last few chapters, I wanted to jump up and down and triumphantly shout “HOORAY! I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE!” but I was afraid that I'd wake the baby.

I especially like that Rienstra openly wrestles with how Scripture doesn't always capture everyday experiences. She doesn't just complain about it but thoughtfully tries to work through her struggles rather than take a hit-and-run approach; one of her repeated refrains is, “The only way out is through.” For example, after an admittedly self-pitying fight with her husband, Rienstra writes,

These are the times that I find Christian teaching about love thoroughly annoying. All that self-denial and sacrifice and patience and kindness comes off as simperingly sweet and even dangerous.... I can't even do the first phrase [of 1 Corinthians 13] successfully. “Love is patient with him constantly leaving his stupid empty soda cans in the car even though I've explained a million times that this bugs me.” I wish St. Paul had written it more like this: “Love keeps at it. Love knows it's all right to be mad at each other as long as you are both committed to working it out somehow. Love knows that a little time apart and a good nap can make apologies come out much more easily.” Now that I could work with. (129)

As much detail as we get into some aspects of Rienstra's life (including adventures in baby poop or depression after weeks of needy-baby syndrome), we don't see some of the daily struggles that should be there. For example, her husband makes her crazy sometimes, but what about the older kids, especially during the early, exhausting days of teaching a new baby to nurse and keep a livable schedule? Or, how do she and her husband manage the daily details of negotiating work schedules and other responsibilities? Even with these omissions, this book assures the reader—myself included—that being a professional, Christian woman

isn't straightforward for anyone. Rienstra doesn't offer easy answers but passes on her hard-won wisdom and wonder to those who accompany her. The reader walks alongside Rienstra, much as one would with an open, honest friend, and learns much from the fellowship.

Sherri Lantinga (lantinga@dordt.edu) won the race and now teaches psychology at Dordt College in Sioux Center, IA. She does the cleaning, and her husband Nick is in charge of food as they together raise three red-heads.

Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People. Cape Town, South Africa and Charlottesville, Virginia: Tafelberg Publishers and the University of Virginia Press, 2003. Xix+698 pp. Paper, R 295, \$39.50. ISBN:0-8139-2237-2. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor of Political Studies emeritus, University of Illinois at Springfield.*

For hyphenated Americans like myself who take pleasure and pride in the word Dutch as the leading word in such a construction, *The Afrikaners* will be an absorbing read. It is a saga of immense proportions that parades before the reader an engaging list of people, places, and concepts that are at once familiar, distant, foreboding, challenging, and distasteful. Among the people are Jan van Riebeeck, Andries Pretorius, Paul Kruger ("Oom Paul"), H. F. Verwoerd, Jan Smuts, Cecil Rhodes, Lord Kitchener, Abraham Kuyper, Joseph Chamberlain, several Bothas, F.W. De Klerk, and Nelson Mandela. Even if we do not know them all, we recognize them as players in a significant history that both imposed and endured great suffering. They played their parts in places with echoing names such as Cape Town, the Blood River, the Orange Free State, Zululand, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand, Kimberley, Bloemfontein, and Sharpeville. They forged a vocabulary that made known to us Hottentots, colored, trekboers, Broederbond, Voortrekkers, and apartheid.

My anticipation to read this book was whetted by a recent visit to South Africa. My maternal grandfather came with five children to this country after the turn of the last century. It was his second choice. His father forbade his earlier desire to go to South Africa to fight on the side of the Boers. My wife's paternal grandfather came here, but in the 1890s, during a wave of Dutch migration to South Africa, his older brother chose that destination. When we met our distant cousins, they immediately engaged our love, fellowship, and compassion. We could absorb only parts of the stories of their lives. This book fills out the picture of both their pride and their pain.

Hermann Giliomee's magnum opus is not called *The*

History of South Africa or *The Saving of a Beloved Country*, a play on the title of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. This book is *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*. I note the alternatives because a history would require a dispassionate description of popular movements and conflicts over a landmass that does not identify the author with the players. The other title would call for a subjective scrutiny that expresses emotional accord and slanted sensitivity. Giliomee has given us a book that is better than either of those. It is a cultural tapestry that identifies with a unique people but sees with analytical eyes the range of their aspirations, risk taking, victories, reversals, sins, and suffering.

One of the ideas that the book explains is the uniqueness of the Afrikaners. Of course, it can be argued that any particular people are special in some manner. Giliomee observes "a sense of being Afrikaners rather than being Dutch or French or German had crystallized by the end of the 18th century" (51). The "volk" spread east and north from the original Cape Town settlement, tending their livestock and finding farmland. They were people of limited culture and literacy. No Dutch language newspaper emerged until 1830, but its name helped affirm the identity of the community it served: *De Zuid-Afrikaan*. The Afrikaner identity was as much about what it was not as what it was. It, of course, was distant from that of the natives – Hottentots, Khoikhoi, Xhosa, Zulus, and others. It was different from that of the "colored," those people of mixed race emerging from early miscegenation in the Cape community. It contrasted sharply that of the English. Among the Afrikaners the English were occupiers who exuded an offensive air of superiority and cultural dominance. The legality of their occupation was by assignment from the