

provides the field of working-class studies with a comprehensive view of how writers have long depicted the labour force. Perhaps Hapke herself best sums up her work in *Labor's Text* when she states that the “very characteristics that have rendered the best work literature controversial have ignited its strengths: a critical engagement with the classism of the everyday; an insistence that identity dwells apart from economic gain; and a humanity that issues from acknowledging rather than disowning working-class origins” (339). If scholars and readers can take away these insights not only from Hapke’s project but also from labour fiction itself, then there is hope that working-class literature will no longer play a marginalized role to the more dominant, canonical discourse.

Lisa Cooper
Texas Christian University

Laurie Lisle, *Without Child: Challenging the Stigma of Childlessness* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

In the midst of the increasingly confused and confusing debate surrounding the implications of new reproductive technologies for individuals, families and society comes a book that addresses the most fundamental question of all. Is it so bad for women not to have children?

Merely posing such a question presents an author with a host of difficulties from the outset. Even finding an acceptable vocabulary to describe women who are without child is an impossible task. As Lisle points out the medical term for a woman without a child, nullipara “comes from the Latin root for empty, void, zero, like the word for a female who has never been pregnant, nulligravida.” Lisle casts around in vain for neutral terms and concludes that she is forced to employ a vocabulary that “polarizes us for or against parenthood but never indicates the dignity of nonparenthood.” Part of her task then is to establish the childless as occupying a fruitful and honourable role in women’s history. This is a theme that is addressed throughout the book, but given particular focus in Chapter Three “Searching History, Remembering our Maiden Aunts.”

Women have lived fulfilling and useful lives without giving birth, even though the dominant pronatalist discourse would have us believe that such an assertion is a contradiction in terms. Despite powerful cultural pressures for women to submit to reproduction, modern contraception, legal abortion and increased economic independence contribute countervailing social forces in the shaping of women’s lives. At the heart of the issue lies the pervasive representation of motherhood as “the essential female experience.” Real women have

children and motherhood is a means of achieving a fully formed female identity, but at the same time we all know the lengths to which women have gone now and in the past in order not to have children.

This tension between the requirement of the species to reproduce itself, society's valourisation of motherhood, individual desires and the real difficulties, even dangers, attendant on motherhood are the real subject of Lisle's book. However, they remain as threads that are never fully gathered together. This is partly to do with the structure of a book that is part advocacy, part sociology and part personal narrative. Lisle is herself "without child" and the story of why this is so unfolds gradually and sometimes intrusively. I am not suggesting that the author should have refrained from personal reminiscence and reflection. This material adds to the book's authenticity, but could have been communicated with greater force and clarity if restricted to a single chapter.

Another weakness of the book is its failure to provide a full discussion of the kinds of alternative forms of mothering that are open to women. On page 108 Lisle observes that not only is it now possible for a child to have two biological mothers, but also a whole range of psychological ones as well, including adoptive mother, foster mother, godmother, lesbian co-mother and so on. The fit between biological mother and the social category of mother is extremely rigid in Euro-American societies, especially when compared to the kinship system of many others societies. Lisle suggests that this could change and that new family formations open up quite different possibilities for childless women than might have been present in the past, but this interesting area warrants much more attention than it receives here.

Sandra Bell
University of Durham

John H.M. Laslett, *Colliers Across the Sea: A Comparative Study of Class Formation in Scotland and the American Midwest, 1830-1924* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

The past twenty years have had an obvious chastening effect upon historians of the labour movement, and nowhere has this been more apparent than in Britain. There was a time when British coal miners were both lionized and envied for their self-evident solidarity, their determination to struggle even in the face of tremendous hardships, their organizational skills, and their vision of a society in which nationalized industry superceded private ownership and capitalist competition. They not only seemed to epitomize the labor movement generally but their initial particularist agenda was eventually writ large as the national