RACE AND GENDER THROUGH THE AMERICAN LENS

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Books Reviewed:

Duffy, Jennifer Nugent Duffy, *Who's Your Paddy? Racial Expectations and the Struggle for Irish American Identity*. New York: New York University Press, 2013.

Leslie J. Lindenauer, *I Could Not Call Her Mother: The Stepmother in American Popular Culture, 1750–1960*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013.

Western Connecticut State University professors share a love of learning and a wealth of knowledge with their students in the classroom. Both Professor Leslie Lindenauer and Professor Jennifer Duffy bring a palpable enthusiasm for their respective subject matter to the classroom in a manner that elicits thought-provoking discourse among those taking the courses they teach. Their ardor for scholarship extends beyond the classroom; Dr. Lindenauer and Dr. Duffy recently published books exhibiting their passion for research in their respective areas of interest and expertise. Dr. Lindenauer's book, *I Could Not Call Her Mother: The Stepmother in American Popular Culture, 1750–1960,* explores the notion of the archetypical stepmother as depicted in popular culture, and how the concept of the "evil stepmother" helps determine the constructs of motherhood. Dr. Duffy's book, *Who's Your Paddy?: Racial Expectations and the Struggle for Irish American Identity*, delves into the topic of Irish American identity as it relates to race, including the experiences of Irish Americans as they struggle with strained generational relationships and an American social and political system that lacks color blindness.

What image comes to mind when the word "stepmother" is mentioned? Most would paint a menacing portrait of a woman whose self-centered, caustic personality could not possibly be compatible with childrearing. Even for those with no first-hand experience with stepmothers, the mere mention evokes a powerful reaction. Given the exceedingly high divorce and remarriage rate in America, stepmothers play a prominent role in the dynamics of the American family. Despite

their ubiquitous presence, the support stepmothers, who are often the "substitute mother" after a biological mother passed away, provided to their blended families has often been obscured by negative stereotypes perpetuated in popular culture throughout history. In *I Could Not Call Her Mother: The Stepmother in American Popular Culture, 1750–1960*, Dr. Lindenauer explores the archetypical stepmother through the lens of popular culture, exposing hard truths about how Americans perceive stepmothers, as well as how the notion of stepmotherhood affects the social constructs surrounding biological motherhood.

Dr. Lindenauer has devoted years of research to the study of witches in colonial America; during her exploration of witches, the mention of stepmothers began to take a more prominent role. When asked about the genesis for her research on stepmothers, Dr. Lindenauer replied, "It was almost accidental…[in researching] how witches were perceived, incidents of witches decreased over time, while mention of evil stepmothers increased."[162] This increased presence of the "evil stepmother" in the sources utilized for her research on witches sparked an interest in stepmothers. Why the increase, and why evil?

Dr. Lindenauer sought to answer these questions in a similar manner to her approach to her previous scholarship on witches. Dr. Lindenauer explained that her "commitment to cultural history, pop-culture memory, and identity studies" encouraged her to examine why stepmothers were increasingly vilified, and conclude how that determines one's perception of motherhood.[163] Using popular culture to mirror American's concept of stepmothers, Lindenauer reveals an image of stepmothers whose characteristics – callous, parsimonious, and contemptible – strike a remarkable contrast against the nurturing, selfless biological mother of the early antebellum period.

Was there ever a period in American history where the stepmother did not face vilification or condemnation? In her book, Dr. Lindenauer states, "This is the story of the stepmother. It is a story that intersects with some of the predominant scholarship in women's history–with examinations of enlightened motherhood in

[162] Dr. Leslie Lindenauer, personal interview with the author, April 2014.
[163] Ibid.

the eighteenth century, middle class domesticity in the nineteenth century, and natalism, maternal feminism, and eugenics in the Progressive Era."[164] While the stepmother played villain to the caring biological mother for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Dr. Lindenauer asserts that the late nineteenth century through the Progressive Era offered "periods of time when stepmothers were accepted, but not celebrated." The Progressive Era, during which motherhood became a much studied subject, sentiment moved towards "educated motherhood"; parenting transformed into a skill which to be learned as experts garnered a greater understanding of child development.

Despite gaining greater acceptance, stepparents remained largely a white, middle class phenomenon. The only corollary found in African-American families would be that of the "mammy," a contentious figure regarded as equally nurturing and derogatory. Despite the presence of the mammy as "substitute mother" for children in white families, the notions of either nurturing mother or evil stepmother failed to be extended to the African American community. Dr. Lindenauer explains, "…the tradition of formal and informal adoption and fostering, and the role of extended family units in the black community created a culture wherein the idea of the "stepmother" may have been less important."[165]

The many examples of the vitriol aimed at stepmothers in popular culture over the course of two centuries shed light on how Americans, especially white middle-class Americans, view motherhood. Dr. Lindenauer's message is clear: white, middle-class Americans "value biological motherhood." Even in the present day, popular culture lauds the biological mother, who provides comfort and nourishment from breastfeeding her infant, as the ideal. In a society where stepmothers are suspect and biological mothers face judgment for a litany of parenting decisions made either out of preference or necessity, from formula feeding to daycare, recognition of the unjustified stereotypes surrounding non-biological mothers and understanding of their effect on women's roles serves to advance parenting and lends to greater solidarity amongst women.

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[164] Leslie J. Lindenauer, *I Could Not Call Her Mother: The Stepmother in American Popular Culture, 1750-1960* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), xix.
[165] Ibid., xxiii.

Solidarity eludes many who struggle with racial and ethnic identity in a society that maintains racial expectations. Dr. Jennifer Duffy sheds light on the struggle for Irish American identity in *Who's Your Paddy: Racial Expectations and the Struggle for Irish American Identity*, illuminating the realities of the Irish immigrant experience amidst the neoliberal politics of not quite colorblind America, while examining generational conflict amongst Irish Americans through candid interviews with Irish American informants in Yonkers, New York.

Dr. Duffy's commitment to an interdisciplinary approach to ethnography is evident as she tackles the difficult and often emotionally charged issues of race and immigration: "Race is more than skin color," Duffy asserts. Duffy utilizes the models of the "Good Paddy" and the "Bad Paddy" to underscore the racial expectations involved in the Americanization of Irish immigrants during the complex process of assimilation, while her fieldwork encompasses interviews with assimilated Irish, "white flighters" who left New York City for Yonkers, and undocumented Irish newcomers in Yonkers.[166] Through her fieldwork, one can witness first-hand the struggle immigrants face as they strive to live up to an ideal required for assimilation. "Good Paddies" are hard-working, patriotic, and devoted to family, while "Bad Paddies," or newly arrived immigrants, exhibit behavior inherently offensive to their predecessors. Duffy elucidates, "References to laziness, drinking, potentially threatening behavior, and unmarried partnerships correspond to the ways in which this generation fell short of the racial expectations of being Irish."[167] The chapter "They're Just Like Us" exemplifies this intergenerational struggle; while an assimilated Irish ethnic identifies himself as American, a "white flighter" complains that Irish newcomers tarnish the reputation of the Irish, and an undocumented Irish immigrant notes that her Latino coworkers are "just like us."[168]

How could Latinos be just like the Irish, who on first glance, would be viewed as "white"? Duffy argues that race transcends skin color, and undocumented Irish immigrants experience many of the same difficulties as other races and ethnicities upon arrival, often working alongside one another, with one caveat–

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[166] Jennifer Nugent Duffy, *Who's Your Paddy? Racial Expectations and the Struggle for Irish American Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 11.
[167] Ibid., 86.
[168] Ibid., 123.

while the newly arrived Irish face prejudice, they are "marginalized, but privileged–color does help." Color does help, and lends itself to exclusion from discriminatory immigration quotas, as well as preferential treatment when obtaining visas. Capitalizing on the advantages afforded them, Irish Americans sought to "Legalize the Irish", and upon the crackdown on illegal immigration post-9/11, gained the support of more individual senators than other ethnic groups lobbying for reform. Dr. Duffy cautions, however, "Whiteness alone, however, could not help the undocumented Irish in the United States. Whether they were making a public case for Irish immigrants and comprehensive immigration reform, or private plea for special Irish visas behind closed doors, the undocumented would have to adhere to the model of Irishness well established in the United States."[169]

Irish newcomers needed to conform to a model of Irishness–the "Good Paddy"–in order to be accepted by Americans as well as their Irish American predecessors. Meeting this racial expectation is not always realistic due to obstacles all undocumented immigrants face, nor do the newly arrived Irish desire to conform to this expectation. The path to assimilation is complicated; it does not move in a linear fashion, and the process is rife with struggle as Irish immigrants seek to find their place in American society while maintaining their Irish identity.

[169] Ibid., 219.