

Barbed bouquets for mother

Just in time for Mothering Sunday, when the recipes for Simnel cake and the tiny purple non-books of verse come into bloom, these three volumes offer a rich selection of mother and daughter experiences. Both the Billington and the Women's Press anthologies yield food for thought, while Slavenka Draculic's novel *Marble Skin* comes labelled "Unsuitable Gift For Mother".

Draculic is a Croatian novelist and journalist, a co-founder in 1979 of the first feminist group in Yugoslavia, and the author of the non-fiction *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*. There are no laughs in *Marble Skin*, an intense and claustrophobic narration of a daughter's survival of life with mother. Soon after the story opens - "I thought I had already forgiven my mother for everything" - the daughter, now grown-up and a sculptor, makes a nude statue and exhibits it under the title "My Mother's Body". When visitors to the show, challenged by the sculpture's sensuality, leave dirty finger-marks on mother's skin, the daughter feels nauseous but also, "a strange excitement gripped me at the thought of all these people doing what I had never been able to do, at the thought of the forbidden gesture." Mother sees a photograph of the reclining nude in a newspaper and attempts, not for the first time, suicide. Why

MARBLE SKIN by Slavenka Draculic

The Women's Press £5.99, 188 pages

THE GREAT UMBILICAL: MOTHER, DAUGHTER, MOTHER, THE UNBREAKABLE BOND

by Rachel Billington
Hutchinson £17.99, 238 pages

DEAR MOTHER... WOMEN WRITING TO OR ABOUT THEIR MOTHERS edited by Marijke Woolsey and Susan King

The Women's Press £6.99, 173 pages

is the daughter so obsessed with her mother's body, and what has the unhappy woman done to inspire such revenge?

Mother, in flashback, is a beautiful and deeply sensuous young widow. Not unnaturally, she attempts to conceal her private life but the child, plagued by her mother's silence on matters physical, grows into something of a Peeping Tom. Mother is also fanatical about cleanliness, and when a rare guest spills wine on her white tablecloth the incident inevitably predicts trouble at menarche. She

remarries and before long the stepfather is visiting the girl's bedroom and she shatters the veneer of their lives by telling her mother that he has raped her. Mother sends her away for years and not until she is old, broken and alone can her daughter forgive her. Draculic's telling of her bleak, inverted Oedipal tale is masterly, her prose by turns spare and sensual, but her narrator's stony egotism chills.

In *The Great Umbilical* Rachel Billington traces the progress of an imaginary little girl from babyhood to grandmotherhood, with many reflective stops along the way. The author's views that the influence of the female line is stronger than that of father to son, and that there is an unbreakable bond between mother and daughter that is a positive force for good in society, will neither shock nor challenge, but her enthusiasm is another nail in the coffin of the "blame mother for everything" movement so fashionable a few years ago. This is a book to dip into, packed with mini-case histories and opinions which will infuriate and intrigue.

Dear Mother... which has its share of embarrassments and duds, contains three or four outstanding pieces and several of interest, as well as familiar but none-the-worse-for-that extracts from Virginia Woolf, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker. In *An Indian Woman Speaks*, the anony-

mous narrator tells the immensely cheering tale of a mother travelling to England to rescue her daughter from a hideous arranged marriage, and Catherine Cookson - good to see her up there with the serious sisters - writes compassionately about her own poor dissolute mother.

The collection's gem, however, is taken from May Sarton's *A Wild Green Place*. This has a dual mother/daughter theme as it evokes marvelously a period in Sarton's mother's childhood when she was sent to stay with an old Welsh woman and her disturbed and violent daughter. Astonishingly, Judith Arcana who introduces the anthology says of this strange and moving story only that it "shows us the desperate importance of knowing our mothers in terms of their own lives before we were their daughters, before they were anyone's mothers." It does, but it shows us much more, as do the best ingredients of this celebration of mothers and daughters.

Shena Mackay

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