

BOOK REVIEW

Intelligent Love: The Story of Clara Park, Her Autistic Daughter, and the Myth of the Refrigerator Mother *by Marga Vicedo*

Clothback, 272 pages (also available in other formats)

Beacon Press, ISBN 9780807025628

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This excellent book describes the experience of disability for the child and the parent, with both encountering discrimination and hostility. In our age the 'expert parent/patient' is acknowledged and respected. Clara's ground-breaking 1967 memoir, *The Siege* dispelled the pernicious medical myth that autism, then deemed a psychopathy, was caused by a 'refrigerator' mother, who denied her children her 'natural love'. Marga Vicedo, a long established medical historian, explains how this belief came to be so widely held. This book gives a strong, deeply referenced history of the still evolving understanding from a psychopathy, developmental condition, disability, to a spectrum embracing a form of neurodiversity. Even its latest revision, as Vicedo relates, is still an 'unstable entity'.

In my 30 years of paediatric practice, autism referral numbers have increased from a handful a month to overwhelming. It is in this context that this book should be read. There is an extensive biography of Clara before and after she became a mother. Jessy was her 4th child, born in 1958. I wondered whether the measles Clara suffered during the 6th month of her pregnancy with Jessy might have played some part.

There are other running themes; overcoming challenges so that Jessy can live a fulfilling life (which she does as an accomplished artist). At its core is the growing recognition of the complex and emotionally different world children and adults like Jessy live in. The power of words whether 'obsessions' or in Jessy's terms 'enthusiasms' to define how an issue is positively or negatively seen is emphasised. The rise and empowerment of the disability movement, to determine how medical conditions are defined, as well as driving through legislation to achieve social justice, social change and access to state resources. The conflict between medical and social models of disability, both having merits, but neither a monopoly of truth. `

I strongly recommend this detailed, compassionate case study of Clara Park and her autistic daughter Jessy. Any child healthcare professional, medical/social historian, social worker and parent of an autistic spectrum child will find it highly relevant.

Andrew Williams

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