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“Spock, I Love Him”

by JANE F. LEVEY

GOD, GUARDIAN ANGEL, and trusted confidant. Such was the regard for Benjamin Spock and, by extension, for his magnum opus, The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care, at the dawn of the Cold War era and well into the 1950s.¹ Long before cultural conservatives like Norman Vincent Peale censured Spock for the “excesses” of 1960s youth culture, parents enthusiastically employed him as their guide through the thickets of child rearing.²

Spock was the “It Girl” of late 1940s and 1950s child-care advice. Wherever concerned parents looked, they were likely to encounter him. In addition to Baby and Child Care itself, his views on children’s emotional, physical, and psychological well-being—and parents’ responsibility for fostering them—were prolifically popularized. Countless magazine articles and interviews featured him, he starred in a short-lived television series on NBC, and he served as centerpiece for several March of Time documentaries, to name but a few examples.³

¹ Because the book was published simultaneously in cloth and paperbound editions—a novel phenomenon for the period, long before the era of widespread distribution for mass-market paperbounds—it had two titles. The hardcover edition, published by Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, initially sold for three dollars and was titled The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care. Meanwhile, Pocket Books simultaneously published a paperbound edition, priced at twenty-five cents, entitled The Pocket Book of Baby and Child Care. The text to both editions was identical. Unless making a point about a specific edition, I will refer to the editions interchangeably (either by the title Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care or, because that is unwieldy, as Baby and Child Care or BCC).

² Evidenced, in part, by the multitude of fan mail Spock received, which can be found in the Benjamin Spock Collection (hereafter referred to as BSC), The George Arends Library, Syracuse University. A representative sampling of readers’ enthusiastic accolades includes: “Baby and Child Care is the Bible in my household. I do not know of any book which I admire more” (Peter Schwed to Benjamin Spock, April 11, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC). “As near as my husband and I can figure, your book, Baby and Child Care, has become the Modern Bible of American Parenthood... There is more than one passage that I can quote verbatim... The pages are worn from thumbing many times and it has at least three types of formula, several brands of baby food, and a few worried tears intermixed with the printing...” (Mrs. Gordon P. Sutherland to Benjamin Spock, Aug. 20, 1954, Group 4, Box 2, BSC). “Your name is a household word in the nursery set, Doctor Spock” (Mrs. C.T. Weaver to Benjamin Spock, July 22, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC). “You have really been our baby’s doctor and I feel as though I should send you payment for your services. We’ve had many visits with you for 35 cents” (Mrs. Marvin Task to Benjamin Spock, July 30, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC). “We have such great faith in your ability to help parents do the right thing with and for their children” (Mrs. Robert C. Brown to Benjamin Spock, June 1956, Group 1, Box 3, BSC).

³ Parents occasionally even came right out and professed love for Spock. “Spock, I love him,” is a phrase drawn from an effusive letter from a father to Spock’s publisher, perhaps Charles Duell (Elliot Arnold, undated letter, Group 4, Box 57, “Publication Records, Pocket Books, Inc.” folder, BSC). See also a mother’s letter to him, which opens: “This is a love-letter to you. I have ‘gone thru’ three pocket editions of your book—-one the dog ate, one the kids tore up and one just plain wore out.... I was a Spock convert. I love you!” (Mary Turner to Benjamin Spock, Oct. 25, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC).

³ In addition to Spock’s monthly columns, which appeared in Ladies’ Home Journal from 1952 to 1962, articles by Spock also appeared in American Home, Consumer Reports, Parents Magazine, and Woman’s Home Companion, among others, during this period.
But *Baby and Child Care* remained Spock’s self-proclaimed proudest accomplishment. Reflecting Spock’s training in pediatrics and psychoanalysis, it innovatively combined psychological counsel about children’s emotional development with nuts-and-bolts medical advice regarding their physical care. Breaking with the behaviorist tenets of child-care experts like John Watson, Spock substituted more flexible approaches to infant feeding schedules and toilet training, where rigidity had long been a hallmark in child-rearing advice. The book marked a turning point in pediatric thinking, as it signaled the shift from a biological understanding of mental phenomena to a more psychological one. It then went a step further, taking abstract psychoanalytic ideas and translating them into practical advice about how to raise psychologically healthy children.4

And it caught on like wild fire. The book-buying public flocked to Spock’s compendium upon its publication in 1946 and continued to do so for decades thereafter.5 *Baby and Child Care* eventually became one of the U.S.’s—not to mention the world’s—all-time bestsellers, outsold only by the collected works of Shakespeare and the Bible.6 If parents were reading about how to care for their children as the postwar baby boom got rolling, most likely what they were reading and discussing was *Baby and Child Care*. As early as 1952, with “book sales clicking along as steadily as the birth rate,” over four million copies of *Baby and Child Care* had been purchased; by March 1956, with over eight million paperbound copies sold, Spock’s paperback publisher claimed that “[t]here would now seem to be no question but that the Pocket edition ... has passed every other paperbound book in history.”7 As *Time* asserted, if mothers were “using as well as buying” the book, “then one in every five newborn babies in the U.S. is a Spock baby”; by 1955 a *Newsweek* cover story proclaimed Spock “the unseen arbiter in thousands of American homes.”8

5. By 1973 *Baby and Child Care* had gone through 201 printings and sold over 23 million copies; been translated into 29 languages; and was world’s best-selling title written by an American. For two decades it sold about a million copies a year (Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* [New York: Free Press, 1988], n. 38, p. 293). As early as 1947, Spock remarked upon *Baby and Child Care*’s popularity. To his publisher at Pocket Books he commented: “Every time the supply [of the book] runs out I get verbal and written pleas not only from parents, and relatives and friends of prospective parents, but from schools of social work, medical schools, teacher training schools, etc., who are using the book as a text, from obstetricians and pediatricians who give the book to each new patient, and even from a state health dept which is recommending it routinely” (Benjamin Spock to Robert de Graff, Nov. 3, 1947, Group I, Box 1, BSC). De Graff already had noted the book’s popularity to Spock: “All of us here want you to know how pleased we are with THE POCKET BOOK OF BABY AND CHILD CARE. It is probably unnecessary to tell you that the book has had, in our opinion, a remarkable sale” (Robert de Graff to Benjamin Spock, Sept. 3, 1947, Group I, Box 1, BSC).
6. Immediately and dramatically successful, “The Baby Bible” sold three-quarters of a million copies during its first year of publication alone. What Spock’s book sold in 1946 alone took its nearest competitor, Dr. Luther Holt’s *The Care and Feeding of Children*, forty years to sell.
7. *Time* 60 (July 21, 1952): 37; Freeman Lewis to Benjamin Spock, March 7, 1956, Group 1, Box 3, BSC.
The dramatic response this book evoked in Americans upon its publication in 1946 and immediately thereafter speaks to a specific historical moment. The social stresses of wartime—widespread separation from spouses and extended kinship networks, massive migration, married women’s and teenagers’ new economic roles as war workers—were compounded by the uncertainties of the ensuing peace—symbolized by skyrocketing divorce rates, acute housing shortages, and the bumpy readjustment of returning servicemen to civilian life. Together they combined to lend an almost unparalleled ambiguity to and anxiety about family life.9

In the wake of the turmoil created by wartime conditions, it is not surprising that family togetherness quickly was elevated to both a national ideal and a virtual civic religion, embraced by advertisers, ministers, and newspaper and magazine editors.10 The health and vitality of American families became a national preoccupation, commented upon by policy maker, pundit, and social scientist alike. For the middle-class family upon whom much attention focused, the central issue in the wake of the wartime economic boom was no longer how to make ends meet, as often it had been during the Depression, but how to raise children effectively. And *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* became central to that task, speaking as it did to so many pressing issues of family life.

This article investigates the terms upon which Benjamin Spock’s guide first became the best-selling handbook for parents ever published. More than *Baby and Child Care*, its popular reception serves as a focus for investigating the cultural work required to constitute an ideology of family life in the aftermath of the massive social changes set in motion by World War II. I ask: Upon what terms were family life, women’s roles, and child rearing constructed after the war? Rather than accepting *Baby and Child Care*’s prescriptions at face value, I use popular response to *Baby and Child Care* to inquire: How were these terms understood by those who chose to follow *Baby and Child Care*’s advice and attempted to live out the vision of family life it contained? What was the relationship between the normative models of family life constructed in *Baby and Child Care* and the lived experience of actual families attempting to raise children according to its precepts?

I suggest that these terms were far less stable than often thought. I draw for evidence upon the attention surrounding the publication and circulation of the first edition of *BCC* in 1946, up through and just beyond the issuance of a revised volume in 1957. I focus particularly upon the rich collection of letters, the majority from women, that Spock received in response to the publi-

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9. As Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg note, “The American family was being scrutinized in a new and personal way but in a large public arena” (Mintz and Kellogg, 165). See Chap. 8 of *Domestic Revolutions, Families on the Homefront*, 153-73, for a detailed account of the stresses families experienced during World War II and immediately thereafter. On World War II’s impact upon the liberalization of child-rearing practices and philosophies and Spock as a reflection of this shift, see William M. Tuttle, Jr., *“Daddy’s Gone To War”: The Second World War in the Lives of America’s Children* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 106-11.

10. For an example of this process, see Wendy Kozol, *Life’s America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994).
cation of *BCC* and in reaction to his *Ladies’ Home Journal* column, which elaborated *BCC*’s contents. These letters, of which Spock reported receiving “hundreds” (not to mention the “thousands” his publishers claimed), remain virtually untouched by historians, even while the book itself has been much examined. 11

Collectively, these letters shed valuable light on the process of family formation in the wake of disruptions to the gender order wrought by World War II. They reveal Spock’s influence on postwar conceptions of child rearing and simultaneously how authorial intent and popular interpretation could diverge. *Baby and Child Care* is often named as a cornerstone in the postwar construction of domestic life, and Spock as “the man whose relaxed and uncommonsensical advice on every manner of baby problem … is accepted with the authority of Holy Writ” (so said *Newsweek* in 1955). 12 But was this true? Investigating the variety of responses he and his book inspired suggests that even Spock’s opus, that most canonical of texts of postwar family life, may not always have proved the sturdiest of building blocks. Nor was it accepted unquestioningly even by its most ardent fans.

To read Spock without examining the complex interactions between him and his audience produces a false picture of domesticity’s easy triumph. The letters written to Benjamin Spock illuminate the tensions embedded in domestic ideology at the dawn of the Cold War, when many opinion makers were advocating traditional domestic arrangements as integral to American identity in the postwar world. Here, as in the other material I examine, unresolved issues concerning gender roles, parent-child relations, and excessive expectations placed upon marriage and family lingered just below the surface ideal of familial togetherness. Readers’ negotiations with Spock illuminated a changing social structure that had at its heart tensions over women’s shifting social positions.

Examining how Spock’s primary audience of women related to him allows a more nuanced exploration of female relationship to authority than more text-based analyses allow. 13 Women engaged ambivalently with what Benjamin

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13. I say women for several reasons: in a culture where parenting was clearly gender-typed and mothers seen as primary caregivers, it makes sense to assume that advice literature regarding child rearing was largely embraced by women. Moreover, the implied reader of *Baby and Child Care* was clearly a woman. Though the book opens with a brief chapter entitled “A Letter to the Mother and Father” that is liberally sprinkled with the second-person “you,” two pages later Spock is already referring to what women will need to prepare for their baby’s arrival. The Spock correspondence bears this out—while there are random letters from men, the bulk are from women. Moreover, Spock appeared in a variety of periodicals, but almost all were women’s magazines like *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Redbook* as well as *Parents* (for which he served on the editorial board).
Spock represented. And their ambivalence signals a more broadly ambivalent relationship with the domestic ideology emergent in the immediate postwar era. The elevation of motherhood that Spock came to epitomize simultaneously empowered, emboldened, and circumscribed women; their interactions with Benjamin Spock and reactions to his “Baby Bible” illuminate how.

“You are the nation’s pediatrician.”

When Benjamin Spock went out to promote his book in the late nineteen-forties, to his surprise and dismay he discovered many parents in a state of high agitation. In letters and face-to-face encounters, these parents of the first cohort of the baby boom barraged him with pleas for reassurance and assistance. Said Spock: “Something is wrong with an educational system that makes educated women panic with their first babies,” and he strove, in person and through Baby and Child Care, to give parents, but especially women, increased self-confidence.14

As the book’s readership soared, so did Spock’s celebrity status. The persona of “Dr. Spock, the baby doc,” quite apart from Spock the man and distinct from his book, emerged as a cultural icon. That persona in its own right exerted considerable power. When, in April 1953, Spock lectured in New York City, all 500 tickets sold out rapidly. On the night of the engagement, “over a thousand disgruntled persons … unsuccessfully stormed the doors while uniformed guards held them at bay. Many were young wives and their husbands, clutching pictures of their babies.”15 An editor at Ladies’ Home Journal remarked to Spock that “[e]verywhere [our staff] goes, if there are babies, your name is brought up as the answer to problems and queries.” And the magazine’s editor-in-chief Bruce Gould noted that “[y]oung mothers of this day and age seem to regard you, as we do, as their best guide and mentor.”16

Spock had, wittingly or not, wandered into an authoritative abyss. In the aftermath of the mass destruction of the Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bomb—not to mention the social dislocations of wartime—uncertainty and doubt prevailed where once religious authority or generational wisdom reigned. His audience looked to Spock to assuage their fears, regarding him as a quasi-God and revered elder. Spock also fit well with the elevation of psychological expertise that intensified after World War II, what historian Ellen Herman has dubbed “the romance of American psychology.”17 A friend of Spock’s from the early years of his pediatric practice recounted that “[i]t’s

Among others, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English in For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1978) have interpreted women’s traditional historic relationship to professional expertise as being almost wholly top-down; that is, experts dictate, women follow.

15. Ibid., 33.
16. Peter Briggs to Benjamin Spock, Jan. 12, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC; Bruce Gould to Benjamin Spock, June 4, 1951, Group 1, Box I, BSC.

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a revelation to see audience reaction to him. The women strain toward him, they seem to be saying, ‘Tell me more! ... Reassure me that it won’t be awful if I get angry with my child! Tell me! Tell me!’ It is almost a form of group therapy.”

Although tracing Spock’s actual effects upon either parents’ child-rearing techniques or their children’s subsequent behavior is impossible, his audience clearly took his views to heart. A marketing survey commissioned by Pocket Books reported that 48% of those responding referred to *Baby and Child Care* between two and four times per month, and that nearly one-third of those who owned *Baby and Child Care* consulted it oftener than once a week. “I simply live by my book,” proclaimed one respondent. “*Baby and Child Care* is my closest friend,” confided another.

Spock downplayed his influence. “My critics confuse the popularity of BCC with the book’s influence,” he claimed. “It is popular because it is cheap, complete and friendly. But in the few areas of child care in which I’ve really tried to change things, I haven’t made a dent.”

Yet the evidence suggests otherwise, that Spock’s advocacy could and did affect behavior. Spock supported breast-feeding when few others did; breast-feeding assumed a more prominent role in popular literature about child rearing in the early 1950s after publication of *Baby and Child Care*. When Spock went against conventional wisdom and supported the use of pacifiers, he received a flood of letters from grateful mothers. Spock may not have been omnipotent. But as “the nation’s unofficial godfather” (in perhaps both senses of the word!) he was clearly an authority with which to be reckoned.

“You were my guiding light, my one dependable source, when I first began this career of motherhood.”

The source of that authority derived both from what Spock was saying and how he said it. “Trust yourself,” he counseled in *Baby and Child Care*’s famous opening lines. “You know more than you think you do.” Trust many parents did. But for some it was Benjamin Spock in whom they invested their ultimate faith rather than in themselves.

In the latter 1940s the affable and unflappable Doctor Spock became counsellor to that most intimate of relationships, the one between parent and child. Spock was both a product of, and catalyst for, this trend. See Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology*. 

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21. See Group 1, Box 2, “Correspondence, Jan. 1954-Oct. 1955” folder, BSC.
23. Benjamin Spock, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946), 3. Such was the renown of these words that they were dubbed “the most widely known opening line since ‘Call me Ishmael!’” (Weinman, “Now ‘Dr. Spock’ Goes to the White House,” 26).
24. Such trust was not an isolated phenomenon. Americans increasingly relied on expert advice, particularly psychological, in the decades following World War II, and Spock was both a product of, and catalyst for, this trend. See Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology*.
Members of nucleated, supposedly self-sufficient, families embraced this outsider. They resolved the contradiction of having the allegedly impermeable walls of domestic life breached by an outside expert by appropriating Spock as one of their own. Child-rearing advice literature had been around for centuries, but never before had it, or an author, been quite so welcomed.

Spock was variously considered "an old and trusted" or "close friend," a "counsellor" and "a member of our household," and, as such, his audience had few reservations about taking him into their confidence. They wrote of failing marriages, discipline problems with children, and fears about their adequacy as parents, especially as mothers. Like Baby and Child Care itself, this correspondence reveals concerns about the social realignments of the immediate postwar era—the writers focus on issues like shifting patterns of familial and generational authority, changing female roles, and especially on questions of discipline and permissiveness.

In addition to their assumption of personal familiarity, what is most remarkable about these letters collectively is their tone of avid devotion and gratitude. True, this was a self-selected sample; this was fan mail, after all. But the intensity of emotion still bears noting. Professions of affection—even love—for Spock were commonplace. More than one of the women labeled their communiqués love letters. On goes the litany: "You are one of our household gods." "Your book has been a constant guiding light for me." "My husband and I want to thank you for your pocketbook edition with all your wonderful advice. I doubt that we would have survived the last fourteen months without it." "I have been a Spock marked mother from the outset," punned one mother, "and can happily recommend the results." "To say ‘Thanks’ is not enough, but a generation of better babies and happier mothers will forever pay testimonial to you in improved ways of parent-child relationships," effused another. Another virtually offered Spock the shirt off her back: "If you are ever in Minnesota, and my husband and I can do anything for you, like give you a bed, or dinner, or loan you money, or furnish transportation, we'll be only too glad to do so. We haven't very much ... but what we have is yours."

Some resisted criticism from spouses and relatives for their reliance on the book: "[My husband] thinks it's all 'poppycock'—to raise a child by a book—but then, he hasn't." Even those without children turned to him in preparation: "Although I am not a mother yet, I would like very much to have your wonderful Book so could you please tell me where I could get it. There

25. See, for example, Mary Turner to Benjamin Spock, Oct. 25, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC; Mrs. Rowland Imes to Benjamin Spock, April 17, 1961, transcription, Lynn Bloom interview with Spock, "1961 Problem Mail—II," p. 1, Group 2, Box 1, BSC.
26. Helen Gross to Benjamin Spock, Oct. 7, 1954; Mrs. Maxine Alpern to Benjamin Spock, Nov. 30, 1954; Mrs. Frank Nasakaitis to Benjamin Spock, July 23, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC.
27. Ray Smith to Benjamin Spock, Oct. 16, 1957, Group 4, Box 3, BSC.
28. Mrs. J.S. Boyce, Jr., to Benjamin Spock, Aug. 13, 1954, Group 4, Box 2, BSC.
29. Theona Rasmussen to Benjamin Spock, Sept. 23, 1949, Group 1, Box 1, BSC.
30. Mrs. R.A. Gritta to Benjamin Spock, June 25, 1954, MSS 4, box 2, BSC.
is [sic] so many things I don’t know and would like to know about Baby’s [sic], I have been married for 6 years and this is my very first one, so you see I want to be a good mother.”

Such devotion was of mixed consequence. Spock’s advocacy encouraged some to go against conventional social wisdom regarding maternal behavior. Wrote one: “I know I wouldn’t be breast-feeding Martha without you. It seems to me that everyone but you (and me!) has been determined I should not do so.... I could give you dozens of examples of the anti-breast feeding propaganda I’ve met, but by dint of reading and re-reading what you say, I’ve managed so far.” “You originally gave me courage to use a pacifier,” one mother wrote, “as it was still considered ‘terrible’ by my family and friends.”

It was only Spock’s endorsement of pacifiers (“My husband is always getting after me for using it, but tell any mother who inquires to disregard all criticism.... Otherwise nerve pills are in order for her”) that caused this independent-minded mother’s reappraisal of Baby and Child Care: “Read your book on child care and was thoroughly disgusted with it until this article appeared.”

For others, their strong admiration resulted in diminished self-confidence, as even Spock conceded. Women often derided their own educational and experiential accomplishments in deference to his presumably greater expertise. For some, dependence on Spock’s guidance far exceeded faith in their own abilities or in such traditional sources of authority as their mothers. “I certainly don’t see how I could have managed without your book, and I wonder how other mothers do.... Practically I knew almost nothing.” This from a graduate of the Yale School of Nursing who had worked with child development expert Gerhard Gesell, so she felt “technically ahead of most mothers.”

A woman whose undergraduate degree was in home economics with a master’s degree in nutrition asked Spock how to get her children to eat healthily. “What words of advice and comfort have you for one who has gone down the primrose path—made all the mistakes. How do we set things right once they are wrong?” she wrote. “When I feed my kids the meals I do I feel—well—apostate.... I know that a lot of my problem is personal, rooted in my own emotionalism and lack of control.” That doctors were in her immediate family mattered little to another woman; she reported referring to her book “many times, even though my husband, father and brother are all MDs.”

31. Mrs. Tenoria to Benjamin Spock, Feb. 25, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC.
32. Theona Rasmussen to Benjamin Spock, Sept. 23, 1949, Group 1, Box 1, BSC; Mary Turner to Benjamin Spock, Oct. 25, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC. One mother reported using a pacifier and receiving “much ridicule from relatives and friends. [But] since I could see how beneficial the pacifier proved I continued to use it.” But after Spock’s endorsement, she felt reassured now that “I know that an authority has the same opinion as mine” (Anna Pinigis to Benjamin Spock, July 19, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC).
33. Mrs. G.W. Johnston to Benjamin Spock, July 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC.
34. Theona Rasmussen to Benjamin Spock, Sept. 23, 1949, Group 1, Box 1, BSC. Nurses who wrote Spock often deferred to him, recapitulating the traditional doctor-nurse hierarchy, even when their experiences argued in favor of their own expertise. Anne Boyce, a 1944 graduate of the Yale School of Nursing, wrote that “[e]very time I have a baby I take a new copy of your pocket book with me to the hospital, and I could not get along without it. Even being a nurse I long ago discarded my pediatrics book in favor of yours” (Mrs. J.S. Boyce to Benjamin Spock, Aug. 13, 1954, MSS 4, Box 2, BSC). See also the letter of public health nurse Virginia Knight to Spock, July 19, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC.
35. Naomi Yager to Benjamin Spock, Feb. 21, 1958, Group 1, Box 4, BSC. Mrs. Victor Lazarus to Benjamin Spock, Aug. 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC.
Deference was particularly marked in those for whom desperation mixed with affection. They bowed to Spock’s expertise, much as he consistently—though privately less whole-heartedly—resisted his revered status. “I believe … that parents are helped more by being allowed to express their own questions, problems, frustrations, resentments, objections, than by being told by a professional person what he thinks they ought to do in regard to the topics he chooses,” he professed. “I believe that one of the handicaps carried by many American parents is the attitude they’ve acquired that they are ignorant and bumbling and that only professionals know the answers.” Yet Spock contributed to the perpetuation of that attitude, openly admitting to frustration when his advice went unheeded. “I’ve got a whole satchel full of prejudices,” he confessed to his biographer. “I naturally want to impose my ideas the way an old-fashioned teacher or my mother does and then, once I find I’ve got people in my control, I back away.”

Parents did “express their own questions, problems, frustrations, resentments, objections” in their communications with Spock. But many also relied on him for answers with an almost religious fervor. As “the deity next door,” Spock assumed biblical stature to many who embraced his advice literally as gospel, looking to it as “scripture.” A mother quipped that she was a “Spock Methodist.” “Your pocket book is my baby Bible … God Bless you,” testified another. One father claimed that writing to Spock was “like writing to God or a supernatural power.” Such claims suggest child rear-

37. Quoted in a letter commenting on his short-lived television show, which was conducted in a discussion format between him and groups of parents (Benjamin Spock to Mrs. Kroll, Oct. 24, 1956, MSS 4, Box 3, BSC). Spock expressed similar sentiments to his editor at the *Ladies’ Home Journal*: “It is my fundamental philosophy that the professor should not seem to think he is wiser than the parent. He may, because of his professional training or experience, have access to data that is not known to parents but this does not make him a sage. I am not worrying about the soul of the professional but the over-swing effect on the parents” (Benjamin Spock to Bruce Gould, April 19, 1955, Group 1, Box 2, BSC). See also Spock’s letter to Gould of May 12, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC. There he comments upon the layout of his proposed *LHJ* column: “Be sure if you use a caption not to use the one that says ‘Mothers listen when Spock speaks.’ This is what I’m violently opposed to in theory—that experts know and that parents better pay attention. This is the single greatest handicap of educated parents today.… Parents knew how to raise children for tens of thousands of years before there were any other experts and I hope by being as unauthoritative as possible to help rebuild parental confidence.… I want the tone to be of a friendly, mutually respectful discussion.”


39. Transcription, June 1, 1967, Spock interview with Lynn Bloom, p. 4, Group 3, Box 1, “Philosophy” folder, BSC.

40. The phrase “deity next door” comes from Weinman, 122. The full citation to *Baby and Child Care* as scripture reads: “It has gotten so that when some little thing goes wrong with baby, my husband says, ‘Well, what does the “scripture” say?’ I wouldn’t be without THE book now, and have worn out one copy of the pocket edition already” (Mrs. Robert E.L. Williams, Jr., to Benjamin Spock, July 15, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC).

41. Tina Fredericks to Benjamin Spock, Apr. 20, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC.

42. Mrs. J.S. Boyce to Benjamin Spock, Aug. 13, 1954, MSS 4, Box 2, BSC. For more religious references to *Baby and Child Care*, see, for example: August H. Groeschel to Benjamin Spock, July 26, 1951, Group 1, Box 1, BSC; Marve R. Chandler to Benjamin Spock, July 7, 1953, Group 1, Box 5, BSC (“Your often blessed book *Baby and Child Care* has been my staff while starting to raise my four children”); Peter Schwed to Benjamin Spock, April 12, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC; Margaret Morton to Benjamin Spock, July 12, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC; Catharine D. Zegers to Benjamin Spock, July 20, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC (“I couldn’t manage without my ‘pocket Baby Bible’”); and Bruce Gould to Benjamin Spock, Oct. 13, 1955, Group 1, Box 2, BSC (“I can well see why young mothers refer to your book as ‘The Bible’ and to you as ‘Mr. God.’ And what a world of respect and affection that habit of theirs indicates”).

43. He continued: “But if I wrote to God I’m not sure he would read my letter. I hope you will” (John Boyer to Benjamin Spock, Nov. 15, 1957, Group 1, Series 1: Correspondence, Box 4, BSC).
ing’s position as even more than a paraprofessional pursuit but as a civic reli-
gion. Moreover, his godlike standing precluded engaging with Spock on
egalitarian terms, whether or not his fans wanted to. Rather, it reinforced
hierarchical relationships between him and his audience as their more child-
like quests for affirmation indicate.

The most abject appeals to Spock emanated from parents struggling with
issues of discipline. Many worried that their young children would grow into
juvenile delinquents, a fear that intensified as the 1950s progressed.\footnote{44 For a detailed analysis of the emerging cultural and social panic over juvenile delinquency during the 1950s, see James B. Gilbert, \textit{A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s} (New York: Oxford UP, 1986).} Parents fretted over how to nurture their offspring appropriately, while letting go of
rigidity in child-rearing techniques and instilling discipline, both of which he
advocated. Fear of spoiling set in early, as evidenced by this mother’s pleas
for advice regarding her colicky 19-month-old daughter: “I guess I spoiled
[her] with too much love and trying to help…. I wonder if I will have another
baby like this one, if I do I think I’ll take the gas pipe…. I am so nervous I
literally itch all over and have a hang-dog expression, which I’m sure doesn’t
impair any benefits to my child.”\footnote{45 Mrs. Thomas Gaskill to Benjamin Spock, Aug. 14, 1958, Group 1, Series 1, Box 4, BSC.} 

Children who stole or were disobedient or antisocial often haunted these
missives; personal appeals to Spock were for these parents a last resort.
Quick to blame themselves, they verged on panic as they turned to him.
Difficulties and frustrations harder to express openly coexisted alongside and
embedded within the many paeans of contentment. “I feel so inadequate and
am certain I’ve made oodles of mistakes and could use some good advice.”\footnote{46 Mrs. George E. Bugbee, Jr., to Benjamin Spock, Sept. 12, 1957, Group 4, Box 3, BSC.} “My husband and I are becoming desperate!” wrote another woman, continu-
ing, “I’ve read so many child-care books that I’m convinced it must be my
fault. I will appreciate any light you will shed on this subject. After all, we
don’t want a juvenile delinquent on our hands some day.”\footnote{47 Mrs. Audrey Richards to Benjamin Spock, Nov. 16, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC.} Beseeched a
mother whose son had behavioral problems: “I am desperate because I can-
not seem to help him—or myself. If this letter sounds incoherent—perhaps it
is because I’ve hit rock bottom! I don’t know to whom to turn.”\footnote{48 Mrs. Theodore Ostroff to Benjamin Spock, June 6, 1956, Group 1, Box 3, BSC.} Another
was yet more direct: “I have talked, I have spanked, even used a belt at times,
but nothing seems to phase them. I am at my wit’s end, Dr. Spock. I don’t
know how to cope with the situation…. Please help me, Dr. Spock, and tell
me what I am doing wrong. I feel surrounded … Dr. Spock, I will certainly
appreciate some kind of answer before I am committed to a psycho ward.”\footnote{49 Mrs. Wallace B. Sowers to Benjamin Spock, Sept 10, 1957, Group 1, Box 3, BSC.} As women stretched tautly between idealizations of motherhood and domes-
ticity and the rigors of their day-to-day realization, they cried for expert help
in frustration and dismay. Here again, such desperation hardly fostered an
equal interchange between the expert and his acolytes.
He is as sympathetic and understanding as a woman, that wonderful man!

Why was such trust accorded Spock by so many, especially by white middle-class parents? At what benefit, and at what cost to parents' personal agency? Three main explanations have been proposed by scholars for the almost blind faith placed in Spock and his book. First, there was Baby and Child Care's "colloquial" and familiar tone, its "semi-conversational" and "friendly" style. Spock agreed with this interpretation, and he admitted to cultivating that tone consciously.

Reviewers remarked upon this appearance of accessibility, and his publishers—with Spock's urging—capitalized upon it. "He speaks," noted the frontispiece for Dr. Spock Talks with Mothers, "not from Olympus, but from the ground common to all parents." Spock's accessibility attained near mythic status among his fans. "He makes Freud folksy," claimed one in near disbelief.

His readers felt a strong empathic connection to him; mothers especially felt uniquely heard by him when those in their daily lives—like spouses and relatives—seemed deaf to their concerns and other experts had little to offer them but criticism.

Caught in the isolation of mothering young children, women found solace in Spock's comforting persona, which permeated his writing, even the most purely informational. Relating her travails over giving her children pacifiers, one mother closed by thanking Spock "for letting me finally tell this to someone who understands me." Said another, "You seem so helpful and kind when you talk with your 'mothers' on TV." Yet another noted his "informal, friendly manner." "It's as though I knew you, to read your com-

50. Said Spock: "There's no question that of the perceptive, the letters that get down to saying why this book has meant a lot to them, this recurs again and again. They say, 'I feel as if you're talking to me and as if you think I'm a sensible person'" (transcription, Apr. 25, 1967, Spock interview with Lynn Bloom, p.2, Group 3, Box 1, "Miscellaneous Essays" folder, BSC). Cultural critic Ann Hulbert claims that Spock "spoke like a down-to-earth amateur, who favored the human touch, whenever it was possible, over mechanistic technique" and that "the response was an outpouring of trust in him, as a warmly non-authoritarian authority for an age of prosperity" ("Dr. Spock's Isby," New Yorker May 20, 1996: 82). Lynn Bloom, Spock's biographer, concurs. She emphasizes the book's tone and style as explanation for its popularity (Bloom, Doctor Spock).

51. Such reviews included those in The American Journal of Public Health 36 (Nov. 1946): 1329 ("His style is so engaging and friendly that the book is unusually readable"); New York Times July 14, 1946: 14 ("Writing in the easy, informal vein characteristic of his platform talks, he hews to his line of reassurance... Dr. Spock interprets the best in modern thinking on these subjects, and underscores it with his own wide experience, kindness, and good sense"); and Parents Nov. 1946 ("One is immediately struck with his friendliness toward the people who are to read the book, and there is not a vestige of the carping criticism so often seen in such works"). One mother commented that he wrote "as though you're talking with him in your living room" (quoted in Pollack, "Mr. Baby Doctor," 46).

52. Quoted in Weinman, "Now 'Dr. Spock' Goes to the White House," 121.

53. Commented Weinman of Spock's appeal: "Just what it is he understands doesn't matter; he supports [mothers] against a critical world in general and critical experts in particular... His book elicits much the same response as his presence from women, who constantly send him long, highly involved treatises upon their own maternal trials and triumphs, accompanied by pictures of their children, regards from their families and best wishes to his" (121). The correspondence that has been preserved bears this statement out.

54. Almost any page of Baby and Child Care illustrates this assertion, as Spock repeatedly addresses his readers as "you," engaging them in intimate, if imagined, conversation.

55. Mrs. R.J. Neuman to Benjamin Spock, Oct. 13, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC.

56. Mrs. Charles Cerny to Benjamin Spock, June 3, 1956, Group 1, Box 3, BSC.

57. Mrs. A. Kirschen to Benjamin Spock, May 28, 1956, Group 1, Box 3, BSC.
ments in writing, for you have such a friendly and relaxed way of putting things." 58 "I feel as if you were talking just to me.... You make me feel as if you thought I was a sensible person," wrote one of his early fans. 59

Second, others argue that *Baby and Child Care*’s popularity resulted from its consonance with themes of its time. 60 Some contend that its philosophy of conflict avoidance outfitted children to be members of the bureaucratic and corporate culture that flourished after World War II; others, that its advocacy of traditional gender roles meshed with ideological imperatives towards female domesticity after the war. 61 Finally, the “supply side” argument posits that the book’s popularity grew from its widespread availability as one of the nation’s first inexpensive, mass-market paperbounds. Nor can the shrewd advertising and marketing campaigns waged by Spock’s publishers, at his insistence, be discounted as factors in *Baby and Child Care*’s popularity. 62

As an emendation to these interpretations, I would add that *Baby and Child Care*, with Spock as its personification, filled a void regarding how to parent in the emerging milieu of postwar middle-class suburban isolation. 63 *BCC* was published at a moment of uncertainty over how best to raise the nation’s legion of newborns, just as motherhood was being propagandized as a career for women. Women who adopted that identity evinced consternation over doing it “right” at precisely the time many traditional friendship and family support networks had been fragmented by the massive population shifts sparked by World War II. 64

In the words of one young mother, *Baby and Child Care* was “wonderful. Especially for a new mother away from home who doesn’t have her mother to run to every time something new arises.” A nurse wrote that “in middle-

58. Clara F. Brand to Benjamin Spock, April 16, 1958, Group 1, Series 1, Box 4, BSC.
59. Quoted in Hulbert, “Dr. Spock’s Baby,” 82.
61. On permissiveness and bureaucratic conformity, see Zuckerman, “Dr. Spock: The Confidence Man,” and Graebner, “The Unstable World of Benjamin Spock.” On Spock and gender roles, see Weiss, “Mother: The Invention of Necessity.”
62. Spock often conveyed the impression that his book took off of its own accord, but his papers document a vigorous and concerted marketing campaign directed towards medical professionals and mothers. A rich correspondence between Spock and both his hardcover and paperback publishers exists that reveals his advocacy for promoting the book to as broad an audience as possible, as well as his careful monitoring of his public image. The tone of these letters suggests a shrewd and canny businessman quite removed from his public image as the genial “baby doc” who was devoid of market concerns.
63. This isolation is powerfully captured in the frustrated lament of one correspondent who, in response to a *Journal* column by Spock called “Mothers Need a Break,” wrote: “This is the worst part of the whole thing—being confined with the children without any hope for getting away for awhile. When the tension makes us wild-eyed, when the squabbling drifts to our feet, no matter how often we direct it back to the living room, when the last of grandmother’s precious figurines is flushed down the toilet, and the carrots burn while you change bath-training pants—who wouldn’t love to take off? .... Even with those happy outlets you suggest, these frantic moments are frequent and difficult; without them to anticipate, what keeps us sane through the whines? Sometime, will you write an article on ‘How Can Mothers of Small Children Keep from Being Driven Crazy Inside the House’? And please, please don’t suggest television, spearmint gum, or a long, warm bath for either Mother or the children!” (Jean R. Tressler to Benjamin Spock, March 6, 1958, Group 1, Series 1, Box 4, BSC).
class families Dr. Spock has replaced grandmothers—and their advice—with recommendations very different.” Spock called his book “a substitute for grandmother” at a time when she often was not in close proximity.65

Moreover, Spock fused masculine authority and expertise with female-associated qualities of empathy and caring. “He’s as sympathetic and understanding as a woman, that wonderful man!” effused one of his female admirers.66 As critic Ann Hulbert has noted, Spock was a “warmly non-authoritarian authority.”67 Here, finally, was a male expert who, whether or not he actually did, seemed to listen rather than merely issue grandiose pronouncements.

“I’m not asking for advice....”

WOMEN, AS CHILDREN’S designated primary caregivers, seemed most affected by Spock’s imperatives and taken by his style of delivering them. Just as middle-class women, especially, were struggling with shifting role definitions and expectations, this “user’s manual” to domesticity and parenting appeared, which elevated motherhood virtually to professional status.68 Scholars and popular commentators have noted Spock’s prescriptive, normative bent vis-à-vis gender roles, only vaguely disguised beneath his air of genial tolerance. They document persuasively his conservative outlook on gender roles and mothering and demonstrate the cultural influence those views attained.69 The sexism endemic in Baby and Child Care, they argue, was indicative of broader constraints imposed upon women in the wake of the transformations in female social roles wrought by World War II. When their “closest friend”
urged women towards domesticity, no doubt they were affected by his views, even if they could ill afford to follow them.\textsuperscript{70}

But to stop here would oversimplify the cultural conflict ongoing during this period regarding the gender order. Thus far I have emphasized the negative consequences of adhering to Spock’s tenets—the dependency they bred on external authority, the lack of personal empowerment they could reinforce, the constraints on women’s social roles they promulgated. All endorsed a domestic hierarchy with men on top. But women also read Spock in such a way that the possibility existed of their expanding upon their assigned social roles.

Many postwar parents, anxious about how best to raise their children, turned to Spock as the authority on child rearing and wholeheartedly embraced his views. But the Spock correspondence also suggests how others assimilated his advice on their own terms. They defined their behavior and attitudes in relation—and even in opposition—to Spock’s views rather than being determined wholly by them. Their letters illuminate how readers negotiated emerging norms regarding the family and its place in society and how they struggled to reconcile different ideas about child rearing in the postwar world. They show how readers by turns internalized, resisted, or appropriated Spock’s “expert” authority by filtering it through their own experience.

The vibrancy of this exchange and interplay illuminates the complexity of domestic ideology in both men’s and women’s lives throughout the early postwar period. Historians, taking their cue from Betty Friedan’s \textit{The Feminine Mystique}, have until recently interpreted postwar domestic ideology monolithically. But even for the demographic group that formed the prototype for the “Spock family”—the white, literate middle class—the ideology proves, in historian Mary Poovey’s terms, to have “unevenly developed.”

For one, Spock affected men and women differently. He addressed shifting definitions of both motherhood and fatherhood, and the way men and women responded illuminates the renegotiation of the relationship between the two in the wake of wartime separations.

Although his primary audience was women, Spock’s popularity was not just a female phenomenon. Where some women discovered the power to expand upon their assigned social roles, men, armed with \textit{Baby and Child Care}, found a wedge to enlarge their familial involvement. In a rare resort to addressing men directly, he advised early in the book that “[y]ou can be a warm father and a real man at the same time,” thus providing a popular foundation for the emergence of a postwar model of engaged, yet remote, father-

\textsuperscript{70} See, for example, Spock, “What’s She Got That I Haven’t?” In this article Spock contends that women should take their vocations as housewives and mothers just as seriously as career women did theirs, and that “successful motherhood” is an “occupation which if reasonably well performed requires a better balanced personality than any other job. An occupation that is as influential as any other regular job in the world. Probably the only occupation which, if well done, is guaranteed to give a feeling of full satisfaction for one’s entire life” (p.195).
Spock counseled that men were to be partners in child rearing—especially in matters of discipline—even though he held women ultimately responsible. Moreover, in its sheer volume of data, Baby and Child Care admitted men into the informational loop of traditionally female wisdom. “In largely the same manner that I have previously sat down and studied manuals on the operation of the Contax camera, or the proper upbringing of Irish setters, or the way to strip down a Colt, Cal. .45, I enter the realm of pediatrics with the Good Dr. Spock as guide and mentor,” recounted one determined dad. As if planning a military maneuver, he “read up.... and then feeling that I was enough in advance of the game I reread passages, committing certain esoteric things to memory.... You may imagine to what depth of abysmal ignorance I was relegated, almost automatically and definitely unanimously. But I had Spock.... I talked about baby ailments as though I had done nothing all my life except raise infants. I quoted chapter and verse as I went along and when I was contradicted or challenged I merely brought out Spock.... As the only man around here my delight has been fiendish.... Brother when you can stop your own wife in her tracks about baby matters you got something.” To be sure, a quality of one-upmanship is on display here. Yet this man’s gratitude appears equally evident, on a par with that expressed by women, if not as deferential. Echoing the sentiments of men and women alike, he exhorted: “I swear to Christ there were a couple of times when I would have jumped out of my skin if it were not for the sane, reassuring words of Spock.”

Men aggressively commandeered Spock as an ally. But female assertion often looked quite different. For a man to voice his opinion may not have been surprising; but for a woman to write at all could be considered self-assertive. Most basic of all potential responses was simply writing the renowned “baby doc,” regardless of content. Spock’s column in the Ladies’ Home Journal invited reader input and suggestions, and he generally encouraged his
audience to interact with him. In turn, he incorporated their suggestions into his magazine articles, and when it came time to revise *Baby and Child Care*, he solicited their advice and used it to guide his changes. But even he seemed surprised by the magnitude of response his work generated. There was power in these interactions; they were declarations of self-worth, no matter the disclaimers in which they were couched. Spock may have been “talking with mothers,” to paraphrase the title of a collection of his *Journal* columns. But mothers were just as clearly talking back. Giving and seeking counsel, they considered themselves partners in an ongoing conversation. As women argued, quibbled, and engaged with Spock, they found a forum for being outspoken about gender roles and parenting.

Some sent Spock suggestions that amplified on his advice; others wrote to disagree and express openly contrary opinions. Most were deferential; but others challenged him outright. Most common were those who wrote with suggestions for revisions or additions to *Baby and Child Care*, drawing on the evidence of personal experience to initiate dialogue. Even while placing Spock on a pedestal, they assumed a collaborative stance. “I’m not asking for advice,” wrote one, “but suggesting an article that thousands of young mothers and Fathers would profit by.” She described the stresses when a military father returned home to a daughter unaccustomed to his presence. Contrary to her denial, however, and suggestive of the complexities of female agency, she concluded on a pleading tone: “There are thousands of as young service wives who are torn between husband and child — Please do something!”

Another reader, proffering advice on lactation technique, offered to Spock, in a reversal of role, that “[s]ince there are few aspects of the problem I haven’t given some thought to in the last three months, I would be happy to answer any questions.” Her direct experience allowed her to consider herself an authority in ways that Spock, as a man, never could. Another woman suggested eight ideas for magazine columns and additions to *Baby and Child Care*. Still others requested he give attention to the problems of coping with divorce and unhappy marriages, a subject upon which most authorities were silent.

By no means were Spock’s precepts universally embraced. An absence of letters from correspondents with clearly ethnic surnames or who identified as other than Caucasian suggests that major segments of the population may have been impervious to his advice, considered it irrelevant, or actively

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75. Parents, for example, requested more clarity on the issue of disciplining and permissiveness. (For example, Ruth McGlynn to Benjamin Spock, Oct. 28, 1957, Group 1, Box 3, BSC.) In response, the most notable revision in the second edition is Spock’s advocacy of a firmer parental hand in behavioral matters and his clear delineation of a father’s disciplinary role and responsibility.
76. Mrs. R.A. Gritta to Benjamin Spock, June 25, 1954, MSS 4, Box 2, BSC.
77. Catharine J. Bart to Benjamin Spock, Nov. 2, 1949, Group 1, Box 1, BSC.
78. Mrs. Carol Cox to Benjamin Spock, June 19, 1956, MSS 4, Box 3, BSC.
79. See, for example, letter from Ray Smith to Benjamin Spock, Oct. 16, 1957, MSS 4, Box 3, BSC, in which she requests advice about a “problem undoubtedly common to a great number of women,—an unhappy marriage, and its effects on children.” Also, letter from Clara F. Brand to Spock, April 16, 1958, Group 1, Series 1, Box 4, BSC, which requests information about the effects of divorce on young children.
resisted or disregarded it. Indeed, the intensive parenting promoted by Spock was possible only for those who could afford the time it entailed. Ironically, it was Spock himself who hinted at these possibilities. His letter to colleague Urie Bronfenbrenner relates his experiences with the mostly black, working-class women who by 1957 were his “only real contact with mothers.” They are “distinctly different from the ones I knew in practice in New York City and in the Rochester, MN, Child Care Institute, and I have to confess they are frustrating for the medical students and me. They don’t seem to want or expect medical advice on infant feeding, weaning, toilet training, sleeping arrangements, sleep problems. In fact they silently but firmly refuse to take advice which is pressed upon them, month after month.... I keep saying to the students that it’s wonderful that there still are parents with complete confidence in their own beliefs and traditions, but I must say that it leaves a physician who has gotten his gratification from rescuing anxious parents feeling out of work and unwanted.”80 Paradoxically, those parents who possessed the self-confidence Spock advocated so ardently seemed to be those most likely to disregard his advice.

There were also those who just outright disagreed with Spock. “Your article ... is pure balderdash,” one reader boldly proclaimed.81 Another woman interposed her typewritten objections onto one of his *Ladies’ Home Journal* columns and sent it back to Spock. She initiated a dialogue with him that rendered literal ones that other readers may have constructed imaginatively.82 Another woman roundly chided Spock: “I read your book on child care and was thoroughly disgusted with it.... You made it all sound so easy. All you had to do was feed your baby burp her good and lay her back down and the little angel would go rite [sic] off to sleep. Mine has yet to do that.”83 On the other hand, a mother whose children went easily to sleep scolded him for making children appear too troublesome: “Maybe this will convince you that not all babies are problems.”84 Others took issue with Spock’s traditional gender typing: “Housework is a family affair not for the mother alone. Father can well help out in his own home.” Another differed with his advice on breast-feeding because of the sexual division of labor that resulted. She advocated bottle-feeding because it involved fathers, who became “as efficient and relaxed in baby feeding and care as any mother. Much is made of the

80. Benjamin Spock to Urie Bronfenbrenner, Dec. 19, 1957, Group 1, Box 3, BSC. In this clinic, journalist Richard Reeves noted, “where poor people brought their sick children.... The famous Dr. Spock wasn’t so famous. Nurses said that most of the parents who come to the clinic from Cleveland’s slums have never heard of the book” (Reeves, “Peace, Man, Says Baby Doctor Spock,” 9). Lynn Bloom also noted Spock’s distinct middle-class bias: “Dr. Spock talks about the family structure he knows—upper and middle class two-parent families in which the mother can stay at home with the children while the father works. Dr. Spock assumes a consistent caretaker for the child.... Dr. Spock’s concern is whether the child has a room to himself. He assumes that each child has his own bed.... The doctor of a welfare family has to consider sanitation, rats, roaches, lead poisoning from old peeling paint. Dr. Spock takes for granted a house in good repair, clean, and free of infestation, and therefore doesn’t discuss these problems” (*Doctor Spock*, 143).
81. Florence Byars to Benjamin Spock, June 28, 1958, Group 1, Box 4, BSC.
82. Donna Gibson to Benjamin Spock, July 1, 1958, Group 1, Box 4, BSC.
83. Mrs. G.W. Johnston to Benjamin Spock, July 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC.
84. Mrs. Sam Grist to Benjamin Spock, Sept. 14, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC.
feeling of warmth and security between a nursing baby and its mother, but there is something to be said for letting father know the closeness of feeding his offspring, too.” These women engaged in a lively dialogue with Spock and were hardly docile, passive recipients of his “expertise.”

Mothers of children with Down’s syndrome exemplify those influenced by Spock who also took issue with him. Maternal experience and love here outweighed “expert” counsel. Spock advocated institutionalizing Down’s children; mothers challenged him, asking if he would feel the same were it his child who was affected. “May I request that you do not make the outlook for Mongoloid children so hopeless,” wrote one, enclosing a picture of her daughter. “I will never forget my feeling when I read your brief sentence about them … I would not give her up as hopeless…. [A]s long as I catch a gleam of understanding about anything new, I will fight the battle for her.”

Other interactions with Spock fostered—or at least augmented—women’s increased personal, economic, or political autonomy. The evidence here is tantalizing, if fragmentary. For those women who chose to breast-feed, follow flexible feeding schedules, or use pacifiers, his perceived alliance and support equipped them to defy conventional social wisdom and/or the censure of friends and relatives. Or take Spock’s practice of adapting readers’ letters as the basis for his Journal columns. His correspondents were flattered and delighted to be so chosen. It was as if God himself had anointed their experiences with legitimacy. But the consequences could prove unpredictable.

“Does Ernest Hemingway peel potatoes?”

Spock gained an enthusiastic fan in one such correspondent, Helen Irwin Thomas. Her interchanges with him illustrate well the complexities of female independence and self-assertion during this era of mixed expectations for women, as well as demonstrate the multiplicity of effects that Spock could have.

Thomas, a professional musician turned full-time mother, traveled extensively with her son and husband, a musical director for touring musicals. She reveled in Spock’s attention after he drew on her experiences on traveling with children for a Journal article and for revisions to Baby and Child Care. “Dear Dr. Spock,” she wrote. “You have been such a help to me, and in so many places and so many times, that I will be delighted if you find these ideas and experiences worthy to be passed on. I will feel quite ‘of use to the human race’ if you do…. I am so truly pleased to have been ‘approved’ by you.” She went on to crow, “How about those women musicians in New York who said, when I first became a nervous (and old, yet) mother, that if

85. Mrs. Helen Frank to Benjamin Spock, July 11, 1958, Group 1, Box 4, BSC; Lois Allen to Benjamin Spock, June 20, 1956, Group 1, Box 3, BSC.
86. Joyce Wallace to Benjamin Spock, Nov. 21, 1956, Series 4, Box 3, BSC.
87. See “Dr. Spock Talks with Mothers,” Ladies’ Home Journal June 1955: 92+. This article was later revised and included in Spock’s collection, Dr. Spock Talks with Mothers (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 15-23.
Dean survived at all, it would be in spite of me? Voom, Voom! They’ll never hear the end of this!”

Being Spock’s quasi-collaborator clearly affected Thomas’ self-confidence and her assessment of her professional potential. The article that resulted hewed so closely to her ideas that Spock offered to share his fee with her, to which she responded, “I have been walking on air ever since!”

Disclaimers mixed with ambitiousness: “I am not a writer (although I’ll bet this gives me delusions of grandeur, and I will soon attempt three plays!) and I am quite overcome at this fee for my letters.”

Monetary compensation legitimized Thomas’ professional aspirations, even as she tempered them by reasserting her “complete delusions of grandeur.” “I have finished a small book I started to write some three years ago,” she wrote Spock. “It is called, ‘They Have Lied Through their Teeth About Babies.’ … Indeed I’m very busy dashing between the harp and the typewriter, and trying to cook meals in between!”

Actively juggling roles, she sought to combine motherhood with other pursuits. Yet she wrote her book in her husband’s name rather than her own. It seems self-assertion could only extend so far.

Moreover, the approbation Spock accorded Thomas’ writing allowed her room, however humorously, to question the limitations of full-time motherhood. Her sardonic tone is unmistakable: “The check … arrived today, and it’s been quite a chore for me to get down off of ‘Cloud 27’ long enough to peel potatoes or clean the bathroom! After all, does Ernest Hemingway peel potatoes?” Although Thomas had the support of her husband for her endeavors, her discontent and discouragement remain apparent. “Will sends his thanks…. He is happy for my encouragement as a writer, and appreciates the ‘lift’ it has given me. Sometimes I have felt depressed about giving up the most colorful business of playing harp for a living, in favor of scrubbing hotel kitchens. My next letters, obviously, should be about going from harpist to scullery-maid ‘whilst’ trying to retain your sanity and sense of humor.”

Helen Thomas’ account captures well the tensions in women’s roles at this time. Proud to be a mother, Thomas nevertheless evinced regret at relinquishing her musical career. Sparked by Benjamin Spock’s notice, she attempted a second career as a writer, but only cloaked under cover of her husband’s byline. She ventured into public, but only so far. Spock’s personal attention influenced and inspired her to step out of her role as wife and mother, as much as he and his teachings urged her towards domesticity.

Spock’s influence was contradictory. He was like a cultural Rorschach test: parents read want they wanted and needed into his writings. Spock himself commented upon this phenomenon, stating that “my impression, from
talking with thousands of parents, is that those who tend naturally to be strict think that my book recommends strictness, and that those inclined to be permissive think the book agrees with them.”92 Some parents longed for an authoritative figure to guide them, and that they found; others sought a confidante who would shore up their own instincts. Telling parents to trust those intuitions inspired autonomy in women like Thomas, even while his teachings constrained them to roles as wives and mothers, however professionally defined. Likewise, Baby and Child Care indirectly fostered a spirit of economic entrepreneurship in a select few, even while those who adhered to his views on gender roles (and could afford to follow them) became increasingly dependent on their husbands as primary breadwinners.

Take the Arkansas woman who capitalized on her maternal experience to enter the consumer marketplace. “I am writing to report to you how some of the good advice contained in your pocket edition of Baby and Child Care has started a new industry in the state of Arkansas,” she enthused. Here again there is the presumption of a close personal relationship: “Although you’ve never heard of me, you have been a close friend for lo, these many years through your little book.” Motivated by Spock’s advice about “encouraging a child to feed himself,” which “had more than a little to do with inspiring my brainstorm,” she developed a feeding aid called the Katy Bib and opened a factory that produced over 200 dozen weekly. A year-and-a-half later she wrote to report on recent developments: by now a showroom had opened in New York City, the Katy Bib had been advertised in the Saturday Evening Post, and her factory in Little Rock was thriving.93

This woman’s behavior was exceptional; evidently she must have had access to independent capital to finance her efforts. Yet, as in Helen Thomas’ case, it illuminates the potential in legitimizing female experience. Motherhood became the collateral backing women’s increased public visibility.

In some cases the importance placed on motherhood, as in Spock’s writings, even sparked political activism. Historians have documented how women’s self-appointed roles as “municipal housekeepers” carried them into the political arena during the Progressive Era. A similar phenomenon occurred in the supposedly apolitical 1950s and early 1960s with the advent of such groups as Women’s Strike for Peace, in which women drew upon their sanctioned cultural authority as wives and mothers to protest nuclear armament and the Cold War.94 Spock influenced such activism in a number of ways. The importance he accorded women’s family roles encouraged some to speak from the authority of their experience on broader social and

93. Mrs. Nathan Lipscomb to Benjamin Spock, Oct. 31, 1954, Group 1, Box 1; Mrs. Nathan Lipscomb to Benjamin Spock, Mar. 23, 1954, Group 1, Box 2, BSC.
political issues. Women’s peace groups, for example, enlisted Spock to help them protest the status quo.95

There also was his influential, if contradictory, credo to “trust yourself. You know more than you think you do.” Instructing women to trust themselves emboldened some to trust their instincts and question their assigned roles. While Spock unquestionably advocated traditional roles for women (a traditionalism that only grew more marked in the second edition and for which the feminist movement handily took him to task), his validation of personal experience could lead in unexpected directions. It could be emotionally liberating, even while his traditionalism was confining and constraining.

Finally, there was the political role model that Spock himself provided from the late 1950s on.96 His first public political gesture was in 1956, when he headed a committee of physicians and scientists supporting Adlai Stevenson’s presidential campaign; in 1958 a fundraising letter went out in his name from the Committee to Protect Our Children’s Teeth, which advocated municipal fluoridation. In 1960 he appeared in television commercials for John Kennedy; in 1962 he joined the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE). Then came the full-page advertisement in the New York Times, captioned “Dr. Spock Is Worried” and picturing Spock and a baby, which announced his sponsorship of SANE.97 Spock increasingly became prominent in protests against the Vietnam War, culminating in his very public arrest in 1968 and subsequent trial. When the allegedly “neutral” currency of Spock’s expertise became explicitly politicized, it inspired those on the left, just as it incensed those who disagreed with him. If America’s most prominent child-care expert could speak up politically in the name of children, so by extension could and should their mothers.

Still, much of this explicitly political protest was to follow later. The nature of women’s early discontent was skewed more towards questioning themselves rather than the gender or political systems. But Spock’s influence on women of the immediate postwar era encompassed a broad spectrum with a variety of consequences. Like the Bible to which it was so often compared, people found many different things in Baby and Child Care’s pages, as the variety of their reactions demonstrates so well. There were the overly conscientious mothers who turned to Spock for reassurance and approval (which he happily provided) as they pursued their newfound “career”; and those who worshipped him and hung on his every word. There were those who took his

95. See, for example, “Do You Have a Cold War in Your Child’s Classroom?” a handout (undated) produced by the Whittier, Ca., chapter of W.I.S.P., which led with a quote from Spock about the influence of the Cold War on children’s future psychological well-being (Series 4, Box 28, “Children and the Cold War” folder, BSC). See also the thank-you note to Spock from the Ann Arbor Women for Peace ca. the early 1960s “for your single-minded devotion to the cause of Peace!” (Group 1, Series 4, Box 57, “Politics, Vietnamese Peace Groups—Women Strike for Peace, 1961–64,” BSC).

96. For a description of Spock’s early political activities see Reeves, “Peace, Man, Says Baby Doctor Spock,” and Bloom, Doctor Spock. See also James Sullivan, “Dr. Freud and Dr. Spock.” On Spock and the Kennedy campaign, see Weinman, “Now ‘Dr. Spock’ Goes to the White House,” 26+.

advice to heart and those who rejected it outright in favor of their own expe-
riences. Spock fostered a sense of inadequacy in some by raising the stakes
for being a “good” mother; for others he validated their choice to step outside
the paid labor market. Harder to capture empirically, but still evident, is that
how he addressed women, rather than what he said, affected them. The per-
ception of having a powerful ally who seemed to listen and care about their
situation encouraged some to question, modify, or assume increased public
visibility in their culturally assigned roles.

The letters Benjamin Spock received represent but a small fraction of the
response generated by his book. Doubtless many more engaged in imagined
conversation with him than those who put pen to paper. Nevertheless, this
correspondence, as well as the media attention accorded Baby and Child
Care, illuminates the cultural import of “The Baby Bible” and its influence
upon popular notions of “appropriate” family organization. A cultural text
functioning as a social actor, Baby and Child Care exerted cultural power
over belief systems and social power over behavior. This chapbook of child
care didn’t merely reflect cultural mores about child rearing and parenting. It
actively intervened in their formation and reshaped standards of public and
private conduct as many parents came proudly to dub their offspring “Spock
babies,” reared according to the wisdom and caveats of America’s popular
“baby doc.”

But the book did not merely dictate behavior. Examining the letters Spock
received from his readers extends the possibility of understanding how indi-
viduals actually responded to and refashioned the social prescriptions handed
them. The glimpses of lived experiences thereby gained prove far more com-
licated than scholars working from the published text alone can ascertain.
They show how the relationship between Spock and his audience was far
from one-directional or unidimensional. These letters suggest how families—
and especially women—defined their roles and responsibilities in relation to
Spock’s teachings, rather than being wholly determined by them.

The correspondence between parents and Benjamin Spock illuminates
how people forged meanings from the ideology available to them; they
demonstrate how the vocabulary of domesticity imposed limits on women’s
agency and scope of action while simultaneously allowing unimagined possi-
bilities to transpire. The meaning of domesticity was not fixed; nor, however,
were there an infinite number of meanings assignable to it. This correspon-
dence sheds light upon the parameters within which domestic ideology was
defined and on the possibilities and limits of negotiations with it. “Spock, I
Love Him”? No doubt. But that love, like all love, wore many faces.