

Angels of Power

and other reproductive creations



edited by Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein

Spinifex

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Spinifex Press

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CONTENTS

<i>Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne</i>	
INTRODUCTION	vii
<hr/>	
<i>Sandra Shotlander</i>	
ANGELS OF POWER	1
<hr/>	
<i>Susan Eisenberg</i>	
BATTLEGROUND	62
<hr/>	
<i>Carmel Bird</i>	
EVERYTHING IS OVA, DR GOD	63
<hr/>	
<i>Susan Hawthorne</i>	
JUST ANOTHER BIT OF NEWS	66
<hr/>	
<i>Cait Featherstone</i>	
CRIB COLOURS FADE	84
<hr/>	
<i>Atholee Scott</i>	
ANOTHER WORLD	87
<hr/>	
<i>Lucy Sussex</i>	
MOTHER-OF-ALL	95
<hr/>	
<i>Thalia</i>	
RAW MATERIAL	128
EGG HARVEST	
FLUSHING	
IN VITRO FERTILIZATION	
EUGENICS	
<hr/>	
<i>Melissa Chan</i>	
FORGETTING ARACHNIDA	133
<hr/>	
<i>Maurilia Meehan</i>	
ALFALFA SALAD	140
<hr/>	
<i>Susan Hawthorne</i>	
EGGS	147
<hr/>	

<i>Mary O'Brien</i> ELLY	150
<i>Karen Malpede</i> BETTER PEOPLE	159
<i>Rosaleen Love</i> TANAMI DRIFT	228
<i>Barbara Neely</i> A YENGA TALE	252
FURTHER READING	263
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	267
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	271

Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne

INTRODUCTION

Reproductive technology and genetic engineering have been in the news constantly during the last decade. Reports have oscillated from 'miracle cures' for infertility to 'designer children': healthy, happy and 'better from glass'. The community at large has been confused by the complexity of the issues arising out of this new technological wizardry.

At the same time, radical feminists internationally have issued warnings as to who it is that benefits from these technologies and who pays the price. International networks such as FINRRAGE (Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering) have exposed 'benevolent' *in vitro* fertilization for its dangers in its use of fertility drugs and the dramatic emotional and economic exploitation of women. Feminists have pointed out the high failure rates (90–95 women out of 100 leave the programs without a child), and have challenged the hegemony of technodocs and pharmaceutical companies.

Importantly, the feminist critique highlights the sociopolitical dangers inherent in these developments: potentially a society composed of 'children made to order'; the eradication of genetic diversity; and the imposition of a 'norm' that is uncomfortably eurocentric, white and male. Scientists and doctors have fiercely

rebuked feminist prophecies, attempting to discount their logic by calling them hysterical, and 'over the top'. But every prediction, from freezing embryos to flushing them out of women's bodies as well as the attempt at using an artificially constructed womb as an incubator, has proven true. With the advent of 'technologically assisted' surrogacy, that is egg donation from one woman to another, the definition of 'mother' has been undermined. Post-menopausal women in their fifties can now give birth, and we are close to the day when foetuses can become 'mothers' by removing immature eggs from their developing ovaries and maturing them in the lab! Scientists continue to believe that whatever *can* be done *should* be done.

Our predictions that reproductive and genetic engineering will increasingly be pushed on to fertile women and so-called people 'at risk' have also come true. This moves the debate from one that focuses on the 'needs' of infertile people to one about the social implications for the human race in general and, in particular, women's fate. In other words, the consciousness of people is shifted so that we all begin to think that these are necessary technological interventions to guarantee a healthy child.

In the tradition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (published in 1818), the writers in this book have used the technological developments as their starting point in tracing the consequences of reproductive technologies. This is the first contemporary anthology which deals, through fiction, drama and poetry, with these powerful issues. Fictional writing provides a door for looking at issues from a number of perspectives; it also makes it possible to look into the future to see what some of the long term implications of such technological interference might be. In addition, as 'Angels of Power' demonstrates, women can unite across political persuasions to resist the power of the god-like scientists who long to create monsters and angels.

Sandra Shotlander's play mixes the mythic with the futuristic by drawing on three heroines: Biblical Mary, mother of god and in this play, mother of the god/scientist; Greek Athena, proud and virginal, and by some accounts a woman who plays the man's game better than the men; and Roman Diana, huntress, a goddess of childbirth and a figure with close links to nature. In their contemporary manifestations they take on some of their predecessors' mythic characteristics but, of course, attuned to contemporary conditions. These women in the play are all members of parliament and, although ideologically at odds with one another, are eventually brought together by the issues surrounding reproductive technology; issues that affect women's well-being, and which have long term consequences, not simply for affluent women in western cultures, but for all women everywhere, whether fertile or infertile, whether they decide to have children or not.

Amongst the issues raised in the play is that of women's control over their reproductive capacities. Do women know for what purpose their donated eggs are being used? Should any one scientist, or small group of scientists, be permitted to decide who will or will not be born into the next generation? These issues are picked up again in other contributions. In Mary O'Brien's dismal depiction of the future, one in which there is total control over 'quality testing' of people, the social structure has become extremely hierarchical, and Elly, the 'last error' with dark skin, begins to wonder whether girls have ceased to be born.

Some authors have chosen to depict women in control of certain areas of reproductive technology or genetic engineering. Melissa Chan explores the possibility of marriage to men who, through genetic diagnosis, are certain to die of heart failure in mid-life. Maurilia Meehan's *Manager of the Repository for Germinal Choice* pursues a different kind of control when she finds that her friend,

Jacki, has conceived naturally because of the low level of success from artificial insemination at the clinic.

IVF is a central concern for several writers. Carmel Bird takes a humorous look at the procedures in the form of a laconic fairy tale. Susan Hawthorne takes a more contemporary look at IVF, and the adverse effects of hormonal cocktails. She traces the shifting attitude of a journalist who is in favour of the 'miracle cures'. The journalist over time learns more about these dangers, and has to decide whether to expose malpractice or whether to hold to her previous public stance. Atholee Scott looks at the disappointments for those few women who do successfully conceive the 'miracle baby' on IVF programmes. Linley's life is certainly changed, but we are left wondering if it is for the better.

The poets in the collection range over a number of issues, and central to their concerns is the use to which language is put in promoting the new biotechnologies. There are *'the men without skin who want our skin/they pierce, excavate,/turn us inside out'* of whom Cait Featherstone writes; or Susan Eisenberg's *'Knights of the Laboratory/design/test tubes/that will not suffer/nausea or back pain...'*; or Susan Hawthorne's domestic imagery of *'Petri dishes, test tubes – a world/of marital glassware...'* Thalia, in the highly condensed form of concrete poetry, expresses the pain and bewilderment women experience when they enter the high-tech world of modern medicine. Using the tradition of stenography, the sequence represents the interaction between language, representation, politics and science.

The related issue of surrogacy is picked up in Lucy Sussex's story of twin sisters who engage in so-called altruistic surrogacy. She explores the dynamics of the relationship and the 'choice' of those involved in the arrangement. We are left with questions such as: what constitutes altruism? what do we mean by choice? and what is consent?

Karen Malpede's play, 'Better People', looks at the competition between scientists working on the Genome Project/genetic engineering, for the great honours of international prizes, and closer to home, of funding for research from pharmaceutical companies or Departments of Defence. The play draws parallels between the use to which Nazi scientists put their research and those of contemporary scientists working in these fields. The justification for all this competition and for the glory of experimentation is succinctly expressed by Rosaleen Love, whose Dr Neville says of his own 'little experiment' that: 'We did it because it was there.' This collection is a challenge to the scientific ethic that is simply an extension of the colonialist ethic: if it moves, shoot it, if it doesn't, chop it down. In order to survive on this planet, such ideologies must be challenged and their proponents made accountable for the consequences.

This book, with its authors from Canada, USA, New Zealand and Australia, is designed to contribute to the debate and foster international resistance to reproductive technologies. Imagination, vision and a good joke have the power to show up these technologies for what they are and to carry us into a different future: one in which diversity and human variation are not only valid, but also valued; one in which women are no longer 'test sites' for science's fantasies of a grey future; and one in which the Yenga women of BarbaraNeely's tale won't need to search for their cave.

Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne
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