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### The Teeter-Totter of Women and Art

Recently, I recommended Erika Robuck's

novel, *The House of Hawthorne*, to a friend who, like me, is currently "unemployed," which really means we're full-time homemakers and also artists. This book, based on the life of the artist Sophia Peabody, who married the writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, impressed me greatly with its beauty and candidness. Sophia was the light of Nathaniel Hawthorne's life, as he was of hers, and together they had three children. Just as Sophia's family and friends feared, her art was mostly put aside in favor of raising her family. Robuck's writing is remarkable in that it shows how completely Sophia loved and delighted in her family, while honestly portraying her sense of missing her art and her guilt about neglecting it.

Telling my friend about the book sparked a heartfelt discussion about the tension women often feel between being an artist and being a wife and/or mother. My friend talked about her dance and I about my writing; both of us expressed the tug-of-war we play between the spheres of family responsibilities and art.

I don't know if men feel this tension, too. If so, I wish they would talk and write about it. It seems books about male artists usually focus on the inner angst the artist feels, or the tension involved in being an artist and trying to make a living, while women often write eloquently about art and family. We say we try to "balance" these things, but in reality, to me, it feels more like a teeter-totter: up and down, back and forth.

When I became unemployed at the end of last year, I thought I would now have a lot of time to write, and that I could simply slip writing into the space a job used to occupy. This has not been the reality. For one thing, I got pregnant and found this is a job in itself, at least with the level of fatigue I've experienced. (If a job description that includes a lot of compulsory rest sounds great, I can assure you it can be extremely frustrating, not to mention lonely.) I also believe that so far, I fail to value

the work I do for the household in the same way I valued my paid job. Instead of feeling I've done a good day's work and deserve some time to do my own thing, such as writing, I tend to feel that I need to do more for the family in order to justify not having a paycheck. Perhaps this will change over time, probably around the same time I have our child (in August) and find my time is all truly occupied.

I find myself frustrated by books that fail to address this tension in women's lives. I never liked the later books in the Anne of Green Gables series nearly as much as the early ones. Anne became a perfect wife and mother, raising her pack of children, running her household, and attending Ladies' Aid meetings, with seemingly no thought for the lost stories she'd once been passionate about. I can certainly picture being content and fulfilled as a beloved wife and mother, but I would've loved to know if Anne ever took a wistful walk by herself and imagined a new story she didn't have time to write down, or if she scribbled some disjointed thoughts late at night by lamplight.

Cynthia Swanson portrays this feeling that isn't exactly regret but rather a wistful curiosity about how things might be different in an innovative fashion in her novel *The Bookseller*. Kitty Miller, the protagonist, isn't an artist by conventional definitions, but she does run a bookshop, and I think we can agree that is an artistic endeavor. Kitty is an "old maid" whose life revolves around her work, her cat, and her friend and business partner, Frieda. She's perfectly content with this life until she starts having dreams about an alternate life, one where she's Katharyn Andersson, a homemaker who left bookselling to raise her three children. Her "dream life" at first seems ideal, but as the story progresses, we begin to wonder, with Kitty, which life is the ideal one, and which one is even real. Kitty/Katharyn can't do it all in one life, begging the question: Can we?

We each only have one life, and in the end, we must decide what is most valuable to us. I don't see this as a bad thing at all, and it doesn't mean we have to choose only one thing and give up everything else. But there can be some sadness involved; there can be some sense of missing things, and I deeply appreciate literature that recognizes this reality and deals with it gracefully, lovingly, and compassionately.

Amanda MacNaughton currently works as a homemaker, farmer's wife, freelance writer and editor. With her spare time and (lack of) energy, she also writes fiction and reads novels. She lives in Central Oregon with her husband, Australian shepherd, tortoiseshell cat, two Belgian draft horses, and too many chickens.