

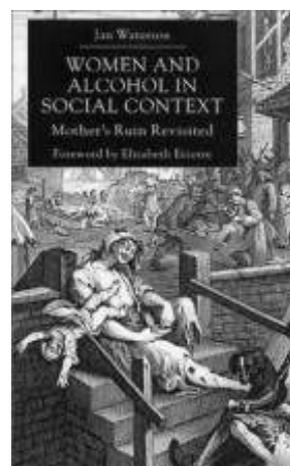
Women and Alcohol in Social Context: Mother's Ruin Revisited

(Palgrave, 2000, 198 pages)

by Jan Waterson

Reviewed by Susan Bullers¹

Women and Alcohol in Social Context: Mother's Ruin Revisited offers an insightful exploration of the cultural assumptions concerning women's alcohol use and abuse. The author introduces a perspective on women and drinking that questions cultural assumptions about the causes of women's drinking patterns and the effects of women's drinking on themselves and their children. More importantly, it questions the tendency to focus on a child's well being at the expense of the mother herself, as well as the tendency to focus on the negative effects of alcohol at the expense of the



¹ University of North Carolina- Wilmington. E-Mail: BullersS@uncw.edu

positive effects. This perspective presents “Mother’s Ruin” as a powerful social construction that serves to control women’s behavior and to shape our beliefs about women’s drinking.

The author first reviews the research on alcohol consumption patterns emphasizing women’s unique consumption patterns. She also reviews current theory and research on explanations for these patterns focusing on social acceptability, availability, and employment issues. The study participants and interviewing methodology are then introduced. There are 60 women in the study representing four groups; heavy drinking professionals, light drinking professionals, heavy drinking non-professionals, and light drinking non-professionals. Throughout the interviews, these four groups are compared. The author first describes these women’s views on recent increases in rates of women’s alcohol consumption as well as their criteria for distinctions between heavy drinking and problem drinking and their views on drinking while pregnant. The women’s lifetime drinking careers are then covered, with an emphasis on the effects that childbirth had on their drinking habits. Because many women alter employment after the birth of a child, the direct and indirect effects of employment on drinking patterns come into play as well. Relatedly, the effects of women’s social circles on drinking patterns are then explored. The next two chapters deal with the use of alcohol as a coping strategy. The author ends with chapters on harm prevention and suggestions for applying the findings to promote fairness in practice.

Waterson presents a perspective that is often at odds with the western biomedical model and risks downplaying the dominant cultural views on the dangers of alcohol. While traditional policy tends toward enacting universal guidelines to define and stem the extensive psychic and physical damage caused by alcohol in our society, Waterson suggests that women’s drinking patterns are not necessarily the destructive force they are portrayed to be. She suggests that women can, and do, make their own informed decisions based on their own needs, desires, and opportunities. Waterson keeps us mindful of the important pleasures and benefits derived from drinking and so presents alcohol problems in a cost/benefit framework that emphasizes the (often ignored) context that underlies these women’s drinking choices. She also illustrates that, as with other resources in our society, drinking opportunities have been unequally distributed according to class and gender.

This is a well-written and well-executed study. The theoretical grounding is sound and the author consistently presents population statistics to contextualize patterns found in the interviews. The tabulations and figures are also helpful and well-placed. Some of the more interesting findings concern the social class differences regarding in-home drinking and social networks. Findings regarding correlates of heavy drinking, and the distinctions between heavy drinking and problem drinking are insightful as well.

The application section was bit disappointing in that, as is often the case, the author called for increased funding, more individualized patient-centered services, community involvement, a change in social ideology, and widespread economic equality. Given that this is unlikely to materialize in the near future, it might be more helpful to provide an outline of specific steps needed to enact a change of approach at the service provider's level.

This is one of those rare books that really does appeal to a varied audience. The pervasiveness of alcohol in our society insures that the topic is of interest to many, and the language and analyses are accessible to the general public. The book should also prove insightful and thought provoking to those in the health professions. In addition to the practice suggestions, it could provide a new perspective from which to view, and perhaps compare, client narratives. It is also good sociology. It offers a relevant subject through which to view many social structural issues. The theory and methods are rigorous and the findings are interesting. Whether or not you adhere to Waterson's perspective, the book is thought provoking and sparks an investigative interest in the issues surrounding women's drinking.