

PROFILE: CATHERINE NEWMAN by Lisa Oram

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Parenting Out Loud

Columnist Catherine Newman tells it like it is

When Catherine Newman has a crazy day with her kids, a lot of people hear about it. Not because her whoops of laughter or frustration echo through the peaceful woods around her townhouse in Amherst (though sometimes they do). Rather, tens of thousands of readers log onto the internet each Monday to check out the latest entry in Newman's web journal. There, in candid, comic detail, she chronicles the challenges and rewards of raising her two children, the gentle Ben, seven, and feisty Birdy (a.k.a. Abigail), three.

Newman is something of a rock star in the online parenting world. At ParentCenter.com, which was home to her journal for four years, readers responded rapturously to her columns on the site's discussion board, and her personal weblog draws similar adulation. She's contributed essays to numerous anthologies and national magazines, and is the author of the 2005 memoir *Waiting for Birdy: A Year of Frantic Tedium, Neurotic Angst, and the Wild Magic of Growing a Family*. Additionally, Newman works at the Creative Writing Center at Amherst College, and is a contributing editor at Disney-owned *FamilyFun* magazine. Most recently, she's become a contributor to the print and online versions of *Wondertime*, a new Disney publication where her weekly web journal now appears.

It wasn't the life Newman, 38, thought she was getting into when she graduated from Amherst College in 1990 and trekked out to Santa Cruz, California, to get a Ph.D. in literature.

"We went in at 22 years old and came out at 30," she says about herself and her partner Michael Millner, a fellow Amherst College graduate with a Ph.D. in philosophy, who is now a massage therapist. "By the time we were done, we didn't want to live just anywhere, we didn't want to not be together and we had this baby."

Newman starts laughing at herself. "Neither of us really had the heart of an academic," she says. After getting their degrees, they headed back to Amherst with no jobs, no place to live and baby Ben in tow. Lots of their college friends still lived in the area, and their parents were close by, Newman's in New York City and Millner's in Boston.

If the exodus home makes Newman sound easygoing, those who know her best—no to mention her readers—might

beg to differ. "I used to think I was so laid back, chill; [Michael and I] were sort of hippies," she says. "Turns out—no. Michael tells about what it used to be like to travel with me: nose pressed up against the window of the plane, saying, 'Do you see the duffle bag? I don't see the duffle bag. I see the suitcase, but I don't see the duffle bag. Do you see the duffle bag? The duffle bag has all my shoes...'"

Anxiety and impatience are recurring themes in her writing. "One week, a friend called while I was writing the column," Newman says. "She asked what I was writing about and I said, 'I'm writing about my struggle with impatience.' My friend said, 'Duh, that's what you always write about.'" Newman laughs. "I've been writing this column for four-and-a-half years, and I was like, 'Oh yeah, that's what I always write about.'"

Impatience is something she comes by honestly, she says. The younger of two children, she grew up in New York City, in a family whose members finished each other's sentences. "If someone took a minute to think before they spoke, we were all over them," she remembers. Another legacy of her upbringing is humor. In particular, says Newman, her father was a model in finding humor in all kinds of situations. He was someone who could laugh at things, even while they were happening, no matter how bad they were, she explains. Newman was grateful for a similar capacity she and Millner shared during the "crazy period of having babies." She explains: "Michael and I were cracking each other up, even while it was still terrible, and that's a real saving grace. I know things are really terrible when we can't laugh."

Ann Hallock, Newman's longtime friend from college and an editor at *FamilyFun*, says that Newman's sense of humor and the ability to see the "inherent humor in situations good or bad" is a large part of her hugely appealing voice. "She can make you laugh out loud about something you recognize, and it's such a relief," says Hallock.

Newman's parental anxiety often fuels the humor. The first five years of motherhood were "dominated by worry," she says, the kind that turned every sniffle into pneumonia and every fever into meningitis. "But I'm a lot better," she insists, pointing out that Birdy, who was playing quietly while Newman talked,

had a cold. "It's taken me a long time to believe that being sick could end in being better."

Hallock, mother to children ages three and five, says Newman's writing "captures beautifully the learning curve of being a new parent, the way that parenting is at once exceptionally sweet and also really, really hard."

For Newman, nothing is more central to the experience of parenting than the "twinned profundity of love and fear of loss," and the "heavy-hearted happiness" it creates. "I felt quite suddenly that I had everything to lose," she says. This sense, she believes, has brought her closer to every bit of grief in the world. "People can come to this sensibility in a million ways, but I came to it this way, through becoming a parent."

Newman's response is to look at her fears directly, rather than avoiding them. It's superstitious, she concedes, but maintaining a sort of "preemptive doom" feels like a way to keep her family a little safer. "It makes me hard to live with," she says, laughing.

Her writing helps her face up to her fears, but also to pay closer attention to everything else—to notice the details of her interactions with her kids, and to remember them. "The biggest project is not missing my life as it's happening," says Newman. "There are so many forces right now encouraging us to whiz through our lives, promoting distraction and consumption. Ideally, I'm trying to think about how to be a better person." Her *Wondertime.com* journal is called "Dalai Mama"; her goals, the introduction says, are to "parent mindfully" and "focus on the here and now."

Newman laughs afresh, overcome by the thought that despite her best intentions, she still, as she puts it, fails remarkably. "I've written two pieces now about how I want to be Zen, about sloooowing down and living sloooowly," she says, drawing out her words. "And I can still dart away from reading a bedtime story to check my email. What do I think I'm going to find there? A nomination...to what? A note from a long-lost ex-boyfriend saying he's still in love with me?"

Neither of those emails has showed up in her inbox, but her columns have sparked vigorous online discussion. In her final entry in her ParentCenter.com journal, Newman writes, "On low days, I have read and reread the bulletin boards as if the very



Catherine Newman on her birthday with children Ben and Birdy

key to my salvation were buried in them somewhere." Most of the comments "were like honey to me, like a cold washcloth to the feverish forehead of my anxiety." A "very few" were "so stingingly mean they made me cry."

In the latter category, her son Ben's clothes—reflecting his love of the color pink—occasioned outbursts of criticism: a few readers, Newman says, called her crazy and unfit and canceled their subscriptions to the ParentCenter.com newsletter in protest. "It feels really cruddy to be criticized by strangers," she says. At the same time, she was grateful to realize that "in his actual life, there's none of that." And despite the rare mean-spiritedness, she's been gratified, too, to see how the internet "has changed the world completely for chronically isolated groups of people," among them parents.

Just as the channels of communication for parents have been transformed, so have the messages. "The generation before ours felt incredibly stifled to tell a [real] story about parenting," Newman says. "Everybody loved it, and that's all you heard. I came into parenting during a different moment—[author] Anne Lamont did a lot to break through. She loved, loved, loved parenting, but boy, was it hard."

Newman considers the possibility that the balance has tipped in the opposite direction: it may be easier now to talk about what stinks in parenting than what is wonderful. She finds the hardest columns to write are those in which she

has something heart-warming to say about her kids or about her own mothering. In such cases, she feels shy or Pollyanna-ish—or fears the story isn't funny. "We have a tendency, I think, to cut ourselves off from the whole of the experience," she says.

Hallock believes that Newman's kids are lucky to have her as a parent. "She's an incredibly affectionate person; you can go to her with any problem and she's always sympathetic and honest back with you," Hallock says. Creativity, too, is Newman's strong suit, says Hallock, remembering how "Catherine...was the person in college who had jeans with all sort of patches of different colors and shapes sewn onto them." That creativity serves her well at *FamilyFun*, where Newman writes about crafts and projects with "just the right touch," says Hallock, and at home with Ben and Birdy. Of course, Newman's art-making disasters—involving paper mâché or her overworked sewing machine—are hilariously rendered in her columns.

That's because everything comes back to the story—and how Newman tells it. Hallock sums up Newman's rhetorical lure this way: "You can be at a party, and maybe someone just climbed Mt. Everest or did something spectacular and was telling about it, and Catherine's at the party, talking about going to pick up a gallon of milk at the store...Everyone would be over listening to Catherine."

Lisa Oram is a freelance writer.