

**Jenkins, Claire. *Home Movies: The American Family in Contemporary Hollywood*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2015.**

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1 Throughout *Home Movies: The American Family in Contemporary Hollywood*, Claire Jenkins brings to light the disparity between the changing American familial norms and those presented in popular films. As the title communicates, all of the ideas and theories presented in this book revolve around the family home and the experience of family in contemporary America, be that a black working-class family or an animated superhero one. A scholar of popular media at the University of Leicester in the UK, in her past work, including book chapters on superhero families in *Sky High* and *The Incredibles* and aging women in *Mamma Mia*, Jenkins studied how media presents women and children. In this monograph, she both summarizes circulating opinions on a variety of topics, including the interpretation of black male presidents in disaster films, and contributes original and much-needed examinations, including her study of the father-daughter relationship in American popular films.

2 Divided into six chapters, Jenkins engages in both genre and star studies, combining historical and sociological research and scene analysis to augment her arguments. She in turn focuses on the relationship between fathers and daughter, Meryl Streep as the ultimate Hollywood mother, the action-melodrama's narrative of uniting dysfunctional families, the intersection of race and class in presentations of American families, and finally on Hollywood's alternative families, including those led by single parents through in-vitro fertilization and homosexual couples. By engaging with so many different types of families, Jenkins's academic approach endeavors to be as inclusive as possible. In her fifth chapter, "Race, Class and Hollywood's 'Alternative' Families," she crafts separate passages to deal with both middle-class black fathers and black mothers, while in her final chapter, "Single-parents, Homosexual Unions and Reproductive Technologies", she covers divorce, gay male couples, and lesbian couples. Throughout she refers to her previous arguments and concludes the book with a clear and concise restatement of her overarching thesis: that while Hollywood remains a patriarchal institution and as such is inexorably tied to a traditionally male-dominant familial

structure, recent popular films display a tendency towards liberalizing the family's on-screen representation.

3 Drawing heavily on Stephanie Coontz's research on American families and marriage in postwar America, Jenkins frequently invokes the wide disparity between the imagined American family presented on film and on television, and the realities of the American family (much more ethnically and socio-economically diverse) throughout modern American history. Jenkins connects the mother's position to three maternal character types: the domestic mother, the working mother, and the action mother. In an intriguing chapter, she looks at how all three types are played by arguably the most important American film actress, Meryl Streep. The most crucial element to the overarching argument is that even when the roles are inhabited by someone who, like Streep, is an outspoken feminist, the mother's stories are co-opted by different characters or the mother's actions are only in the service of others, never of herself. In so doing, Jenkins also highlights a recurring problem in Hollywood films: that of the expectation that all women of childbearing age are either mothers or desire to be mothers.

4 Though most families have included mothers who work outside the home, the maternal character that seeks personal and emotional fulfillment from her work continues to be coded as masculine (such as Annette Bening's Nic in *The Kids Are Alright*) or as unfeeling, and thus un-feminine (such as Meryl Streep's Miranda Priestley in *The Devil Wears Prada*). These instances, however, are also presented as examples of how legitimate pressures facing modern working women are being included in, and occasionally sensitively treated, in major Hollywood films. Jenkins' decision to include superhero moms and their families in her argument also reflects the growing concern for working mothers. In both *Sky High* and *The Incredibles*, the fathers' inability to accept the domestic home life endanger the family. On the other hand, the mother, who in the case of Josie Stronghold/Jetstream (Kelly Preston) is also fully engaged as her husband's business partner, provides the emotional and (superhuman) physical support to get her family out of trouble. The mother's position as the family's bedrock is never in doubt, just as there is no doubt that she would feel the same paternal need to seek out more adventure from the world than her own family can provide.

5 This maternal inclusion in Hollywood narratives is also reflected in the contemporary portrayals of ideal fatherhood. While the action films of the pre-1980's focused on the son's need to distance himself and establish himself against the father (such as in *Back to the Future*), the father-daughter films of the 1990's and beyond privilege the father. Instead of the daughter benefiting from a close relationship with a paternal figure, the father becomes a better, more compassionate and more interesting human being because of his interactions with his daughter. For example, in *Father of the Bride*, George Banks' (Steve Martin) reacts absurdly to the news of his beloved daughter's upcoming nuptials, but through the film's narrative develops not only into a more thoughtful and emotionally expressive father, but also into a better husband and friend. Similarly, in films involving a tomboy daughter, this playing out of masculine qualities is framed positively, as a point of pride for the fathers. Jenkins points out, quite correctly, that if the reverse were true, and sons started exhibiting feminine behaviors associated with their mothers, this behavior would not likely be celebrated.

6 By focusing her research on Hollywood films, including many box office hits, Jenkins seeks to address the representations of families that families themselves are most likely to see. She acknowledges the importance of seeing oneself reflected on the screen, and accordingly praises the emerging images of lesbian mothers and black middle class families while acknowledging that there are only so few examples on which to draw. Another area of marked improvement in accurately depicting the lives of American parents is the recognition (and subsequent growth in number of) sexually and romantically active single parents. The sexual love between parents (such as in *Spy Kids* and *Friends With Kids*) makes the individuals better parents, which is a vast departure from the established and traditional understanding of parents (particularly mothers) who become sexless and entirely devoted to their children.

7 By describing the many representational changes coming from Hollywood in the last twenty-five years, the book is also instructive about earlier Hollywood family portraits. It provides insights into infrequently acknowledged subgenres, such as the mom-com (comprising such films as *The Back-Up Plan* and *The Switch*), and into little-studied narrative tropes, such as the family superhero film. Most of the films she references have been produced post-2000, and so *Home Movies* provides a very

contemporary outlook. In her conclusion she also points to areas for future research, including the dearth of materials on adoptive families and on teenaged families.

8        This book will appeal to those wishing to gain a broad understanding of the American family's gender relations as presented in popular Hollywood films. As stated in the introduction, the two aims of the book are establishing the "tropes of the contemporary Hollywood family" and providing case studies through which to analyze Hollywood's familial values (5). The work pairs easily with the growing amount of material that points to the new era of "soft fathering", in which "good fathers" take on increasingly maternal characteristics for the betterment of their children.