

## Book Review

### New age nanas: Being a Grandmother in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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*New Age Nanas* is a culmination of research by Rosenthal and Moore examining the characteristics, attitudes, joys and difficulties experienced by grandmothers living in Australia today. The aim of their book was to present the common and unique attributes of grandmothers and reflect upon the lessons learned from previous generations. They explored how the women that participated in their research adjusted to the new role that was thrust upon them, and what this meant for the women's identity. They researched what it is that today's grandmothers do, as grandmothers and as women, and indeed what their grandchildren do for them. The authors also reflect upon how grandmothers navigate the sometimes complex relationships with the grandchildren's parents and some of the pitfalls in grandparenting - such as when one's health fails and when the grandmother is the primary caregiver for the child.

Both Rosenthal and Moore are professors in psychology and highly accomplished researchers. Rosenthal's research has focussed on public health and women's health, and Moore's research area has focussed on lifespan development issues. While the authors are both grandmothers themselves, this book is not their stories but rather a synthesis of survey and interview data gathered from many grandmothers from many parts of Australia. The authors have used their research expertise to ask pertinent and insightful questions of their participants and have presented a vast amount of social science data in a format that is accessible to all.

The authors have successfully condensed a considerable amount of research data - over 1,000 surveys and 24 in depth interview protocols - into a very engaging text, that would captivate grandmothers

and grandmothers-to-be, as well as other family members. The book is divided into short chapters, focussing on key themes, such as the role of the grandmother, and their relationships with their children's partners, and including some less common situations like step-grandparenting. Using a combination of the summative data from the surveys, and anecdotes from the interviews, they present both the research trends as well as highlighting some of the more unusual situations. The themes are presented in a warm, curious style, without judgment, simply a reflection of the data that was collected. This approach allows the reader to identify with various characters and situations presented. At the end of each chapter is a list of helpful suggestions and ideas for grandmothers related to the specific chapter topic. These sections are supportive, empowering and practical and appear to be derived both from the experiences of the participants as well as being informed by developmental psychology.

From a technical perspective the book is written for the lay person, and is successful in presenting the material in a simple and logical format, with chapters and a table of contents. An appendix is provided containing a record of the interviewees' details including, a pseudonym, age, number of grandchildren and whether or not they are partnered and if so the nature of the relationship. The text does not use references, although it is clear that the authors have drawn on existing psychological theory to explain or understand some of their findings. The level of detail about the sample demographics, the questions asked, and the results obtained, is understandably limited.

There have been several other books written about modern grandparenting, addressing the changing face of grandparents in the modern area. Most of these are presented as guides to grandparenting, the focus being on giving advice about various aspects of the role. Some of them offer advice on specialist topics, such as being the grandparent of a child with a disability. *New Age Nanas'* unique contribution is that it is a book based on research of Australian grandmothers, and the book is essentially a presentation of the participants' reflections on their role as grandmother.

As *New Age Nanas* is not intended as guide or manual, and therefore it is unlikely to be used as a resource book. Nonetheless, the target audience -

grandmothers, prospective grandmothers, and others - will find it helpful and supportive to understand the breadth of grandmother's role today. Furthermore, those who are experiencing more stressful situations, for example, familial relationship difficulties, may find comfort in the knowledge that others also experience less than ideal circumstances as grandmothers. The authors did not shy away from asking personal and difficult questions, and the honesty of the participants in sharing their experiences enriches the readers' understanding of the joy and struggles of the grandmothers' experience.

This book may also be of interest to psychologists and other counsellors working with families to give a greater perspective of role of the modern grandmother and to promote healthy attitudes towards the role of grandparent. In its current form the data that that was collected and interpreted in *New Age Nanas* is probably of limited use to researchers, and indeed that was not the intention of the book. However, the actual raw data collected is potentially of great interest to researchers. To have a quantitative and qualitative snapshot of Australian grandmothers could be important in identifying potential needs and resources. Despite a bias in the sample toward healthy, educated, employed and partnered women, and a relative absence of data on grandmothers who are more vulnerable, a problem common to many field of research, Rosenthal and Moore collected a large, rich sample of data.

In summary *New Age Nanas* fills a gap in the market by providing sensitive research-based reflections on what it means to be a grandmother today. It is a great resource for Australian grandmothers and prospective grandmothers, who will be presented with a wide range of 'types' of Nana's along with the greatest pleasures and difficulties inherent in the role. At the very least *New Age Nanas* gives a voice to the opinions and stories of the women surveyed and interviewed and in so doing gives permission to other women to define the role of grandmother in a way that suits them, and to not be restrained by stereotypes of years gone by.

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