



That Kind of Mother

Rumaan Alam

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From the celebrated author of *Rich and Pretty*, a novel about the families we fight to build and those we fight to keep

Like many first-time mothers, Rebecca Stone finds herself both deeply in love with her newborn son and deeply overwhelmed. Struggling to juggle the demands of motherhood with her own aspirations and feeling utterly alone in the process, she reaches out to the only person at the hospital who offers her any real help—Priscilla Johnson—and begs her to come home with them as her son's nanny.

Priscilla's presence quickly does as much to shake up Rebecca's perception of the world as it does to stabilize her life. Rebecca is white, and Priscilla is black, and through their relationship, Rebecca finds herself confronting, for the first time, the blind spots of her own privilege. She feels profoundly connected to the woman who essentially taught her what it means to be a mother. When Priscilla dies unexpectedly in childbirth, Rebecca steps forward to adopt the baby. But she is unprepared for what it means to be a white mother with a black son. As she soon learns, navigating motherhood for her is a matter of learning how to raise two children whom she loves with equal ferocity, but whom the world is determined to treat differently.

Written with the warmth and psychological acuity that defined his debut, Rumaan Alam has crafted a remarkable novel about the lives we choose, and the lives that are chosen for us.

That Kind of Mother Details

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From Reader Review That Kind of Mother for online ebook

Afoma Umesi says

I really oscillated between three and four stars for this one.

Rebecca Stone, a white woman in the 80's bonds with her black nursing coach, Priscilla. The women strike an odd friendship that continues for a few years until Priscilla becomes pregnant and dies in childbirth. Rebecca decides to adopt Priscilla's son. The story is a slow exploration of the lives of Rebecca, her sons, family and Priscilla's family for the next decade.

This is a very quiet novel. Alam's writing is incisive and often meandering. While I enjoyed the way his writing creates snapshots of the family through the years, there were times I just wanted him to hurry up and tell the story. Many times, it felt like there was no real story. The reader is just led along the lives of these characters.

As expected, the novel dissects race relations, motherhood and what friendship really means. At the end of the novel, there is a sense that one never fully knows the people they love.

I enjoyed this to a large extent and definitely recommend slowly reading it, patiently. It may not be everyone's cup of tea, but if you like slow novels exploring the inner lives of women, this is perfect.

E-arc received from publisher via edelweiss, in exchange for an honest review.

Ginger says

I would give this six stars if I could. Excellent writing, excellent story.

Mary says

If you're looking for an insightful, though provoking book about the struggles of a white woman (Rebecca) raising a black boy, you won't find that here. There are almost no difficulties and that those that do occur are how they impact Rebecca not the child and the novel seems to have rewarded her for adopting this child with success as a poet. Frankly I'm surprised this was written by a man of color, without the author information I would have assumed a white woman wrote this.

Angela M says

Setting this aside . May come back to it at another time . Just not connecting .

Stephanie says

The description of this book was more interesting to me than the actual book. I didn't find Rebecca interesting or likable and I felt the the author danced around the issues of race that were raised in the story. All in all I just was left wanting there to be more to the story.

Melissa says

This book was simultaneously beautifully written and intensely boring. I kept waiting for something to happen, but nothing really did. Even the big things that happened felt so small. I think the book was just too subtle for my liking. I think I would have enjoyed it more as a short story.

Celeste Ng says

THAT KIND OF MOTHER dives deep into big questions about parenthood, adoption, and race: Is mothering something learned, or that you're born to? How far can good intentions stretch? And most of all, can love can really overcome the boundaries of race and class? With his unerring eye for nuance and unsparing sense of irony, Rumaan Alam's second novel is both heartfelt and thought-provoking.

Emily says

2.5 stars

I didn't pick this book up to read about a privileged white woman who never really addressed her privileged whiteness.

karen says

my new quarterly literary fiction box from pagehabit has arrived!! better get cracking!

Tess says

I wanted to love this. And while it is excellently written, line by line, I became increasingly frustrated and annoyed as the novel wore on with the characters and in many ways, the plot itself, which started to seem

irrational.

There are parts of motherhood, and the trauma/chaos of giving birth, and the loneliness/exhaustion/tedium of tending to young children, that this male author gets exactly right, and the stream of consciousness way he relates those feelings are at times, quite beautiful. At first, I really related to Rebecca's reliance and feelings of profound gratitude for Priscilla, because you do tend to form a special connection with those who are there for you at this profound (and profoundly confusing) time in your life. I even--mostly-- understood when Rebecca wanted to step in and help with baby Andrew after Priscilla's untimely death.

But Rebecca's increasing attachment to baby Andrew and the way she seemed to forgo her husband, for one, and in a way, her flesh-and-blood son, for a child who, in reality, belonged to a woman who had a very one-sided relationship with Rebecca (Rebecca knows practically nothing about who Priscilla the woman is/was) started to feel more like a symptom of mental illness to me than anything else. The fact that we are supposed to believe this woman is a National Book Award-nominated poet when she can't even fathom why Priscilla's son-in-law could ever possibly be made to lie down on the street by cops after being pulled over in a BMW "I just don't understand. I just don't understand!" became laughable.

I wasn't really sure what point the author was trying to make about Rebecca. Were we supposed to sympathize and agree with her or see her as a naïve and foolish optimist? What I don't think the author was trying to do was make her seem unhinged, but that's exactly how I started to see her. I also found the relationship between Rebecca and Priscilla's daughter confusing, with too much resentment and aggression simmering under the surface. But at the same time, if Cheryl had so much obvious resentment and aggression towards Rebecca, why did she so easily (too easily) hand her baby brother over to her to adopt in the first place? By the end of the book, I couldn't help but feel like ten years was built on a total lie, and really, what was the point?

Overall, a lot of mixed feelings. If the writing itself wasn't so well done in parts, I'd give it two stars.

Erin Glover says

After reading 50 pages about breast feeding and La Leche League, I didn't understand how this book got published. It describes the mundane aspects of early motherhood in too much detail. Really, who cares about what it takes to get an infant to latch onto the breast? Who cares that it's colostrum, not milk that comes out at first? Not mothers. Been there, done that. All of us could have written those 50 pages. I almost stopped reading. Then the story finally moves along and we see the first 50 pages were the setup for a friendship between a new white mother, Rebecca, and the breast feeding consultant, Priscilla, who is black.

Priscilla becomes Rebecca's nanny, while we watch Rebecca's marriage to her English diplomat husband deteriorate. Rebecca needs a nanny so she can continue writing her poetry. She was once awarded a prestigious prize. But Rebecca uses the time to get to know Priscilla better and further her obsession with Princess Diana of Wales. She's got a little writer's block.

It's an exercise in suspension of disbelief, that almost doesn't work, but with little mention that Priscilla is pregnant, much less no discussion of who the father might be, Priscilla dies in childbirth. Predictably, Rebecca adopts the black child Andrew. She's clueless about life for black boys. Luckily, Priscilla's daughter Cheryl and her husband Ian, with a new baby of their own, are around to point out that life for black boys is different. Rebecca must have "the talk" with Andrew. Black men are treated harshly by the police. Rebecca

learns on her own that he is treated differently in school. He's the trouble maker where it would be normal behavior if he were white. And so on. Rebecca lives under a rock apparently. Or maybe racial discrimination wasn't so obvious in the 1980's. I doubt it.

There are endless pages of tedious children's play and Rebecca's monotonous life of mothering two boys as her marriage deteriorates. Again, I wondered how this book got published. I realized a man wrote the book and stopped myself from saying, "Oh, that explains it." Because so many women must have written novels like this that were passed over. But the spin of Rebecca's complete naiveté raising a black child added an interesting dimension.

Rebecca's child raising experience ultimately transforms her and her writer's block is broken. That's good.

The novel has problems. It's a good story. But the dialogue is stilted. It doesn't feel like real people are talking. It's too formal. Except for Priscilla and Rebecca's English husband, I couldn't tell much difference among the speakers. And Rebecca's sexual feelings were jarring. I'm sorry. That's when I knew the novel was written by a man. Yes, middle-aged women get horny, but they don't typically think the same way as men. It's less "come here and fuck me" as he wrote in the book about her thinking about sex and more "he drove me crazy with desire". Or even, "I felt myself get wet." There were a number of places I didn't feel like I was in a woman's head. Also, all the writing had a weird, almost British style writing to it.

Black children raised by white families is a very relevant topic. Maybe the author could have spent more time on that subject.

Canadian Reader says

It's not surprising that Celeste Ng blurbed this book. Superficially, at least, Rumaan Alam is concerned with many of same issues as Ng and his novel has some of the same features as her recent *Little Fires Everywhere* : tensions within a privileged upwardly mobile family, interracial relations and adoption, motherhood, female creativity and ambition. However, Ng's work is a far more symphonic one than Alam's: many angles are presented; multiple voices are heard, and there is a far more complex plot. *That Kind of Mother* , on the other hand, has a single focus: Rebecca Stone, a character with an extraordinary fixation on herself. Everything that happens in Alam's novel is filtered through her. Characters are always depicted in relation to her; there are no chapters or even sections of chapters from the points of view of others. The issues that are raised appear to be less important in themselves than as tools the author can use to expose his protagonist's narcissism.

Alam's novel begins in a Maryland hospital in the mid-1980s. Rebecca is in her early thirties and in labour. (The then fairly recent birth of England's Prince Harry in 1984 is an early—and, we later learn, fairly significant—reference point in a novel which will span several years.) After the arrival of her son and while still on the maternity ward, Rebecca, as a first-time mother, receives instruction on how to breastfeed her son. Priscilla, a warm and encouraging black woman in her early forties, is the coach. Priscilla's calm manner and her apparent unconditional positive regard for the younger woman intoxicate Rebecca, who soon engages her as a nanny. It's not Rebecca who pays Priscilla's generous wages. (Rebecca has no money, and before marriage relied on the financial generosity of her parents). No, it is her British diplomat husband, Christopher, who foots the bill. Nevertheless, Rebecca basks in the Lady Bountiful role. The fact that

Priscilla's 25-year-old daughter, Cheryl, a nurse, had gone to some trouble to get her mother the maternity coaching job doesn't even register with Rebecca. Her own need for a nanny is paramount. She needs "alone time" to get on with the serious business of being a poet. Yes, a poet. In the early days of Priscilla's employment, however, the now-liberated Rebecca does little writing. She sequesters herself in her office only to look at fashion magazines, rearrange her desk, and daydream.

Rebecca fancies herself a progressive liberal, sensitive to issues of race. She tells herself that she considers, and indeed treats, Priscilla as a full member of the family. She lunches and talks with the nanny, and she invites her to birthday parties and family celebrations. She is appalled when her elderly mother-in-law treats and later refers to Priscilla as a servant, and is entirely unaware of the ways in which her own behaviour casts her "almost friend" in the role of a discreet and deferent mammy, who wouldn't dare pass judgement on her mistress.

Just when all seems to be going smoothly, with Rebecca "in the zone", feeling more psychologically secure than she ever has and beginning to produce some poetry, Priscilla makes a surprising announcement: she is pregnant. (She had been 17 and single when she had Cheryl 25 years before.) Priscilla continues to work for Rebecca, but then dies suddenly immediately after giving birth to a son. Recently married and soon to give birth herself, Cheryl is relieved when Rebecca offers to take care of her infant half-brother, Andrew. What begins as a temporary arrangement turns into a permanent one: legal adoption. Christopher attempts to raise objections to the plan; he demonstrates a willingness to provide Cheryl with some financial support so that she and Ian, her husband, can raise Andrew with their own daughter. But Rebecca gets what Rebecca wants: Andrew. Why exactly she wants him is not initially clear—at least it wasn't to me. However, it becomes evident that Rebecca models herself after Princess Diana, whom she regards as a glamorous elder sister, a role model of sorts, committed to good works. She imagines that the two have a mystical connection. Both have older, emotionally detached husbands, and now, with the adoption of Andrew, Rebecca (like Diana) has two sons. Ever sensitive to the reactions of others (worried that her own mother dislikes her, that Cheryl is unimpressed by her person, and, later, that her editor finds her uninteresting) in this case, Rebecca allows herself to believe that the act of adopting a black child has brought her "a sort of fame" and that the parents at the Montessori school "admire" her and regard her as "a legend". Rebecca's enlightenment and good works will ultimately extend to exposing Andrew to Bill Cosby's TV show, books about Martin Luther King Jr., and the music of Michael Jackson.

Much of *That Kind of Mother* focuses on the interactions between Rebecca's and Cheryl's families, who maintain fairly close, but hardly intimate, contact. Rebecca is incapable of intimacy—"people did not interest her"—and as Cheryl angrily points out, Rebecca also doesn't listen. "You think I'm an extension of you," she tells her angrily. "A character in your world, a supporting role. It's not fair. I'm not that, I'm a person, your son's sister. Your friend, sort of." Rebecca accepts no guidance from Cheryl and Ian about the significant challenges Andrew will face as a black youth. She is offended when his fourth-grade teacher observes that he is disruptive and appears to suffer from "a maturity gap" (apparently he's not unlike his adoptive mother in this regard). Rebecca is similarly blind to her husband's needs and the work he does to fund a life in which she lacks for nothing. Their marriage, which to her resembles a performance for which she cannot remember her lines or a party at which small talk is required, not surprisingly fails—shortly after Charles and Diana's does. For Rebecca, reality never quite meets the promise of fantasy. As for her professional life: the prestige of being a prize-winning, celebrated poet is of far greater importance than the creative work itself: the thinking and writing and playing with words.

In the end, it is hard to know quite what to make of Alam's book. The issues raised in it—about interracial adoption, the abusive treatment of African Americans by police, the naïve (essentially self-serving) do-gooder-ism of the liberal well-to-do class—are pretty obvious ones. They've been done before. Alam's

characters are somewhat flat, and their dialogue is occasionally wooden. Perhaps the biggest problem of all, though, is that it's almost impossible to imagine a person with Rebecca's qualities being a poet. Throughout the book, various characters comment on her "optimism", but it's hard for a reader to regard her as anything but sheltered, shallow, and naïve—possibly mentally ill (at one point, she has a conversation—or hallucinated exchange—with Lady Di), and maybe just stupid and annoying.

Is it possible for a writer to interest readers in a protagonist who is so remarkably self-involved? Does the frustration of other characters with her self-centredness constitute adequate tension to keep a reader interested for 300-plus pages? Can a novel actually work if the protagonist undergoes no real change—is, in fact, incapable of change? I'm not sure. What I can say is that this is a puzzling and unusual book, which is not about what it at first seems to be about. That's a kind of accomplishment—even if an inadvertent one.

Rebecca doesn't want to be "that kind of mother", the kind that talks endlessly about and lives through her children. In this she succeeds: she *is* another kind of mother—a narcissistic one who has created or adopted children to be her hoped-for future audience. She imagines them coming back as men and marvelling at all she has done.

Naima Coster says

I read *THAT KIND OF MOTHER* because I was intrigued primarily by the situation the book would examine: an interracial family made by adoption, a relationship between two women across lines of race and class, and the differences between two brothers in society who are equally beloved by their mother. I was curious about the potential for drama here, and I did not expect to find myself so immersed in the mind of just one character in this web of complicated relationships. *THAT KIND OF MOTHER* offers exactly this: a close look at one white woman's inner life, her desires, ambitions, experience as a mother, and, most significantly, her uncertainties and blindspots. What Alam is able to render and question here about white womanhood, art making and class, intimacy and connection across gradients of difference and power, as well as our deep tendency as a culture to optimistically narrativize American progress, is profound. I read the book in under a week, engrossed by Rebecca's efforts, missteps, misinterpretations, and the way the characters around her (chiefly Cheryl) resist her version of things. This book also left me wondering about all the silences and uncertainties in the family that were not uncovered—these mysteries are yet another strength of this rich, sticky, and compelling novel.

Jennifer Blankfein says

Rebecca Stone desperately needs help with her newborn and Pricilla, a La Leche nurse from the hospital comes to her rescue. Pricilla, having mothering experience herself as she was a single, teen mom many years ago, leaves her job at the hospital to become the nanny for Rebecca's baby. Rebecca feels close to Pricilla, confiding in her and voicing her fears, hopes and dreams while learning how to care for her child and what it means to be a mother; she looks up to her and relies on her stability and competence, and in some cases, due to the fact that Pricilla is black, she causes her to think about the world in a different way. After an unexpected turn of events, Pricilla becomes pregnant, has the baby and then is gone, and Rebecca volunteers to adopt the newborn. Rebecca feels this is the least she can do to thank Pricilla for all she has done. But there is a lot Rebecca does not know about raising a child of a different race. And she is blinded by her rose colored glasses when she looks at life.

This story brings up a lot of questions and it is difficult not to pass judgement and have an opinion on Rebecca's thoughts and actions. Is she "saving" this black baby by bringing him into a white, wealthy family, or is she doing him a disservice by not allowing him to grow up with black parents who can teach him what it means to be black in America? She doesn't know much about being black; how to take care of black hair and skin, and she doesn't think much about what prejudices he might face as a black man. That Kind of Mother is about the challenges of motherhood, race and how family can be created without being blood related, but it is also commentary on selfishness disguised as selflessness, lack of understanding blinded by positivity and hopefulness for the future.

Rebecca's view of her relationship with Pricilla is so much different than what I saw as a reader. She believes they are connected, the closest of friends, and she feels loyal to Pricilla because of what she has been taught about mothering and due to the support she has felt from her during the most stressful part of her life when she was responsible for her brand new baby. But my opinion is this: the relationship was one sided. Pricilla was doing a great job being a nanny, supporting the mother, teaching her how to care for her child, listening to her talk, and providing her with the time to be independent. But did Rebecca know anything about Pricilla? Her family? Her home life? Her hopes and dreams? Did she ever ask her? Rebecca may have been privileged – white, wealthy, recognized in her field, and able to provide an adopted child a financially solid home, but I believe this perceived friendship, combined with her own self centered outlook on life (regardless of race) misguided her and adopting this baby was not necessarily the best thing for him or for Rebecca's family.

To give you something more to think about, this book was written by Rumaan Alam, the son of Bangladeshi immigrants, married to a white man and raising two adopted black sons in Brooklyn, NY. Alam does a great job writing from a woman's perspective as he explores women's friendships, describes giving birth, breastfeeding and articulating thoughts inside the head of a woman. He also shows how families are formed in many ways and can be very different, but they all have things in common too. Parenthood is a challenge no matter who you are, and acknowledging what you don't know can be a good thing – often it takes a village. I highly recommend this book, and particularly for bookclubs as it has so much to discuss.

For all reviews and recommendations follow me on <https://booknationbyjen.wordpress.com>.

Ellen Gail says

Have I read this yet? No.

Has Penny snuggled with it? Yes. And it was adorable. May this book be as good as the kitty snuggling it.
