



## The Bitch in the House

By Cathi Hanauer  
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### Introduction

Women today have more choices than at any time in history, yet many smart, ambitious contemporary women are finding themselves angry, dissatisfied, stressed out. Why are they dissatisfied? And what do they really want? How do they negotiate the immediate demands of their families with the exigencies of their careers? How do they satisfy themselves and the expectations of others? How do they forge lasting, meaningful relationships with others in the midst of fragmentary, hectic lives?

These questions and others form the premise of this passionate, provocative, funny, breathtakingly honest collection of original essays in which 26 women writers invite readers into their lives, minds, and bedrooms to talk about the choices they've made, what's working, and what's not.

With wit and humor, in prose as poetic and powerful as it is blunt and dead-on, these intriguing women -- ranging in age from 24 to 65, single and childless or married with children or four times divorced -- offer details of their lives that they've never publicly revealed. And in turning their magnifying glasses on their own lives, these writers expose many of the surprising realities of everyday life for women.

The result is an intimate sharing of experience that will move, amuse, and enlighten. This is the sound of the collective voice of successful women today, in all their anger, grace, and glory.

### Discussion Questions

1. In "Excuse Me While I Explode," E.S. Maduro (not her real name) describes an ongoing dilemma: "Almost as if to entitle my anger, to justify or even fuel a frustration that's already there, I will -- for now, at least -- refuse any help from anyone, then bask in the fury of having too much to do and no time for myself." Can you relate to Maduro's problem? Do you find yourself exasperated by the stresses and responsibilities of your everyday life, and yet at the same time, proud of what you are capable of accomplishing on your own?
2. Daphne Merkin, in "Memoirs of an Ex-Bride" describes possible byproducts of marriage as "the loss of identity, the potential claustrophobia, the feeling of being utterly trapped." Can you identify with these feelings in any way? Do you think that they're exclusive to a marital relationship? How do they compare to your own experiences?
3. In her essay, "A Man in the Heart," Hazel McClay (not her real name) describes a level of emotional intimacy with her partner that is not matched by an equal level of sexual passion: "[G]reat married sex rarely seems to involve the romance-novel stuff -- the quivering, the melting, the physical passion." Were you surprised by how forthright the authors in this anthology were about their waxing and waning sex drives? Did you find any of their accounts of sexual passion resonated with your own experiences?
4. "The problem is that the marital negotiation, by its very nature, can suck the passion and mystery out of any relationship." Do you agree with this statement by Cynthia Kling? Does familiarity necessarily breed contempt or dispassion in love? Have you found ways of making your romantic relationships "new"?
5. In "Daddy Dearest," Laurie Abraham discusses her young daughter, Edie: "There is no one in my life whom I've ever been so grateful to escape and so grateful to see -- moment to moment, day in, day out." Does this reflect your experience (or the experiences of those you know) as a parent? Could the same statement be made of a lover, a spouse, or a family member, or is this phenomenon unique to parental love? Did Abraham's account of competition with her husband for Edie's affections strike you as unusual?
6. Did you envy or abhor any of the disparate paths chosen by any of the women in this anthology? Did any of the essays in *The Bitch in the House* make you laugh, or enable you to see yourself more clearly? Which ones?
7. Jill Bialosky writes in "How We Became Strangers": "I knew that my imagination and longings were central to leading an authentic life." How would you describe an authentic life? Are you living your life in a manner that allows you to be true to your beliefs and your passions? What, if anything, would you change about your life if you could?
8. In her essay, "The Middle Way," Ellen Gilchrist writes: "Family and work. I can let them be at war, with guilt as their nuclear weapon and mutually assured destruction as their aim, or I can let them nourish each other." Do you think that family and work are diametrically opposed in the grand scheme of life? Have you found a way that enables these aspects of your life to "nourish each other"?
9. Was the substance of *The Bitch in the House* what you were expecting? Was there any subject addressed that you were surprised to see in this book? Was there any topic not explored that you would have liked to see included?

### About the Author:

Cathi Hanauer, the author of the novel *My Sister's Bones*, has written articles, essays, reviews, and fiction for *Elle*, *Mirabella*, *Self*, *Glamour*, *Mademoiselle*, *Parenting* and numerous other magazines. She has been the monthly books columnist for both *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle*, and was the relationship-advice columnist for *Seventeen* for seven years. She lives in western Massachusetts with her husband, the writer Daniel Jones, and their daughter and son.

