

Motherhood

Mysteries

By Allison Kaplan Sommer '86

*Harvard Law...
an exciting job...
marriage...*

Ayelet Waldman '86 almost had it all.

*Then she added children to the mix and her world suddenly changed.
What lay ahead was a mystery.*

ROY KATZSCHMIDT



Ayelet Waldman '86 relaxes at her favorite café, Semifreddi's on Claremont Avenue in Berkeley, having achieved her own answer to the conundrum of family values and work life.

The phone started ringing...and ringing and ringing. A jury had just pronounced O.J. Simpson not guilty of murder and from penitentiaries across California, convicts were calling Ayelet Waldman '86, demanding she get them off. On the other end of the phone Waldman was understanding, sympathetic even, but she had a more immediate issue to deal with. "I was fielding calls, trying to explain to them that I was not the Dream Team, trying to make them understand why O.J. got off while they have to sit in jail. At the same time I was trying frantically to get some breast milk out and failing to do it."

Waldman had just returned to work as a public defender in Los Angeles federal court after giving birth to her first child, daughter Sophie, several months earlier. She was sure she could juggle the pressures of her job, caring for an infant, and her relationship with her husband. But at that moment, breast pump in one hand, phone in the other, she had a revelation: maybe she couldn't have it all. At least, not all at once.

Like Waldman, most young women in my class at Wesleyan spent a lot of time planning, dreaming and preparing for exciting and demanding careers. Our class belonged to a generation of women who came of age in the '70s and '80s—weaned on feminism, inspired by the movement's leaders, and often urged on by mothers who had made too many compromises for their families or had come into professional identities late in life and wanted their daughters' lives to be different. We thought we had our lives carefully mapped out: we'd leave Wesleyan, spend our 20s exploring and establishing our professional credentials, then build families in our 30s without missing a step in our careers. By mid-life we would be running the world, side-by-side with our male classmates.

For Waldman, as for many of us, the realities of motherhood came as an utter shock that flipped our carefully laid plans upside down. The birth of a child shifted our professional lives into a labyrinth of unexpected stops and starts, twists and turns: a complex, difficult and often frustrating journey that we never imagined while at Wesleyan. Certainly, parenthood also has affected the aspirations and direction of the men in our class. But whether one argues that the reasons are biological predestination or societal programming, it is undoubtedly the women in our class whose lives and career tracks have been most dramatically affected by child-rearing.

Waldman's journey has brought her to a place she could hardly have pictured back on campus. A resident of Berkeley, Calif., married to Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist Michael Chabon, and the mother of three children, aged 7, 4, and nearly 1 year, she is the author of

two mystery novels. As she tries to carve out writing time between nursing, carpools, and visits to the playground, she often wonders how her biggest challenge in life—balancing her professional fulfillment with the sacrifices of motherhood—was never even a fleeting thought when she was an undergraduate.

"It's the one big thing, the one issue that never occurred to me when I was at Wesleyan. When we were there, it was absolutely assumed we'd have these rich family lives and successful careers. We'd be in these egalitarian marriages, we would be at the top of our profession, we thought it would be easy. It shocked the hell out of me to learn that if I wanted to have kids, I needed to make choices, that there was no way to do it all, and I would have to make sacrifices."

As someone who threw herself passionately into a series of pursuits at Wesleyan, she was more accustomed to doing it all. Freshman year she was "totally into theater, I was sure I was going to be an actress." Next year she discovered feminist theory and became an activist, spending her time "banging a drum in front of fraternities trying to get them to stop screening pornographic movies." She returned junior year to the

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Israeli kibbutz where she had spent much of her life and kindled a romance with a penniless Israeli whom she brought to the United States. With a boyfriend to support, a remunerative career became a priority. Law suited her political bent and flair for drama. So she took the law boards, scored at the top, applied, and was accepted at Harvard Law School.

"Law was perfect for me at the time; it was one of my passions. I started doing criminal defense work. I worked for a law firm to pay off my loans, then I clerked for a judge. The job I dreamed of, wanted, and eventually landed was being a federal public defender in the Southern District of California."

The relationship with her Israeli boyfriend ended, and before long she had met and married novelist Chabon, who offered her what seemed the optimal sit-

uation for combining career and motherhood. He would care for their child while she worked, a plan they implemented when Sophie was born. "I went back to work, sure that I'd come back in the evening, and everything was going to be great. I had this stay-at-home husband, I loved my job, and I was good at it, too." To her chagrin, "it all completely went to hell."

That her job was incompatible with having a baby came as a shock. "Right before I went back to work, a professor from Harvard told me: 'Quit now, so they will remember you competent.' I was so angry when she said that. But it was totally true. I know that there are people who manage it, but I was nothing when I came home. I would spend the day with my clients, giving to them emotionally. Work was so draining because I had no negotiating power with the prosecutors; the judges were Reagan and Bush appointees, and my clients were facing Draconian sentences."

Suddenly, her demanding, all-consuming job did not fit her. "I found that I couldn't handle the stress anymore. Whatever resiliency I had was gone. Something about having kids made that stress less easy to bear."

So she quit her job to spend more time at home, surprising herself as much as anyone by making that decision.

Even as she became pregnant with her second child, she struggled to find a place for herself professionally. She tried academia as a teacher at Loyola Law School, but the fit wasn't good. For a very brief period, she tried to make being a wife her full-time job. "I was going to be Nabokov's wife, Vera. I had this total fantasy and told Michael, 'I am going to be your Vera. All Vladimir had to do was write; Vera took care of all his business, appointments, his life.' I said that. 'All you have to do is be Michael Chabon and I will manage everything else.'" She pauses. "That lasted about two hours."

Chabon chuckles in the background, "Those were two blessed hours."

After two years of not working and devoting herself to parenting, Waldman felt she had hit rock bottom emotionally. "I was very depressed. My conception of myself was eroded. I couldn't handle being a stay-at-home mother. The message I had been getting was that people who didn't work were lazy. We also heard the message that you could do family and career together, you should do both. I don't know any woman my age who doesn't feel that way. So when I wasn't working, I felt like a failure on so many levels. I couldn't be a defense lawyer and a mom, I couldn't find anything else to do, and I couldn't be happy as a stay-at-home mother."

Then, one day, while she was sitting down and trying to write an article for a law review, she began to write a mystery novel instead, and poured out her frustrations at domestic life into her main character, sleuth


Juliet Applebaum. "I had all these feelings about being a frustrated stay-at-home-mother, so I created Juliet, who used her frustration to go out and solve mysteries." Unlike the usual suave crime solver, Juliet runs around her hometown of Los Angeles in search of clues, schlepping her uncooperative toddler and screeching infant along with her, working around their naps and meals. The books in the *Mommy-Track Mysteries* are cleverly titled: the first is *Nursery Crimes* and the second is *The Big Nap*.

Waldman also keeps her hand in the legal world, teaching a law school seminar on "The Legal and Social Implications of the War on Drugs," and doing consulting work related to drug policy. Finally, she feels she has struck an acceptable balance.

"I think I have stumbled on my answer to this conundrum of family values and professional identity, and I have cobbled it all together somehow. As a writer, I have control over my time, which is so key. I can go to the talent show at the preschool and handle school vacations, which are designed to drive traditional working parents insane."

For a time, she felt "pretty resentful" that the sacrifices of parenthood were not brought home to her at an earlier age. It certainly wasn't anything she had been taught in the gender theory classes she took at Wesleyan in the '80s. Still, she is not sure whether a warning regarding what may lie ahead should be delivered to undergraduate women at Wesleyan.

"I think they need to be urged to think creatively about having it all and what that means. It's true that I may not have had the two difficult non-working years if I had been more prepared for full-time motherhood. On the other hand, if I hadn't been so adamant, so certain of my worth, I wouldn't have been so motivated and determined to pull myself out of it and create a professional identity compatible with motherhood. In retrospect, there was a lot to be gained from having that security and assumption of success I acquired at Wesleyan, that sense that I could do anything that I wanted to do."

None of this, she stresses, lets men off the hook. "Yes, we have to be as demanding of men as we have been of women, but it will be a long time before men make the sacrifices for parenthood that women do, and maybe they never will. Maybe there is something inherent in the mothering relationship, which determines that in the period when kids are small we will be the ones who make the sacrifices. It's hard for me to say that—I never thought I would in a million years. I think that if I had heard a fellow student say that when I was sitting in my women's studies classes at Wesleyan, I would have set that person's hair on fire." 

We asked two Wesleyan faculty members with young children: Should the issue of balancing family and career be addressed during the undergraduate years? Do you personally share your struggles juggling your work responsibilities and parental duties with your students? Should these issues be addressed with particular emphasis to women, who tend to be the primary caregivers?

RENEE ROMANO

Assistant professor of history and African American studies

I do sometimes talk about the issue of career and family with my female students, especially when they are seeking advice about different career choices. If they are trying to decide between graduate school and law school, for example, I will often encourage them to consider the issue of family. I tend to think that high-powered lawyer is one of the most difficult careers to combine with family, while academics is much more flexible. I do think professors should be talking to their students about this (both male and female), although it can be difficult because many undergraduates are not at the point of even thinking about it. To many of them, children seem so far away that they aren't ready to talk.

The issue also comes up when a student comes into my office and ponders what to do with her life. When I talk about choices and priorities, I talk about myself. I tell her that for me, personally, family comes first. I could imagine having other jobs, but I can't imagine not having a family. Someone else might make a different choice.

I believe that for women to combine career and family successfully, they must have supportive partners. The negotiations with your partner should happen early. Perhaps there should be more structure for talking to students about these kinds of life priorities, but many 22-year-olds are more concerned with the immediate need to get a job or figure out what they want to do after college than they are about future issues of combining work and family.

On the other hand, a lot of the students today had working mothers, and so they are aware of the benefits and costs of various choices. A lot of them grew up with nannies and sitters, or went to day care, so they have a better sense that both parents working entails compromises.

STEVE ANGLE

Assistant professor of philosophy

The undergraduate years are a time when one should develop oneself unfettered by concerns of family. Only if one develops in that way can one really judge how valuable full-fledged pursuit of a career will be. Besides, we do not live in an age when women must necessarily curtail their horizons if they want a family. This is not to say that each person will actually be able to choose just the partner, life, and career that he or she wants; the world is not always that

cooperative. But there are many different ways to share the responsibilities (and joys) that come with parenting. It would be a mistake to compromise before one knows what one really wants, and what one can really get.

I have, from time to time, talked with students about parenting: it is a natural subject for me, since the Confucianism about which I teach places a great deal of emphasis on fulfilling one's responsibilities as, among other things, a parent. Parenting is not just the concern of women in today's world; at least at Wesleyan, many families rely on fathers at least as much as mothers, and I know of several cases in which the fathers are the primary caretakers. We don't emphasize this a lot with students, but if we have a responsibility in this regard, I'd say it would be to push the idea that there are a diversity of excellent models out there, and men and women should strive to find one that works for both parents, and (of course) for their children.



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