

CHARLIE'S LITTLE ANGELS

THE MYTH BUSTERS

Can working mothers really succeed in both roles? Mother-of-two Charlotte Butterfield asks two of her favourite women writers their opinion on the conundrum and gets some confusing answers



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“Mummy! Don’t go!” I had one child on each of my legs clinging on like hysterical koala bears. “Why are you going out? It’s the w-w-w-eekend,” my daughter sobbed. I gently prised them both off, knelt down and said, “Mummy has to go now, but I’ll be back before you know it, and you’re going to have great fun with Daddy. Love you both.” And with a swift kiss I shut the door, started my car and felt, not for the first time, like an awful mother.

Now you’d be forgiven for thinking that this little scenario preceded me flying off to the foothills of the Andes for a few weeks collecting samples of little-known plant species that held the secret to eternal youth, because why else would I leave my children on a w-w-w-eekend if it wasn’t of the utmost importance? But the reality was I was heading to the Emirates Literature Festival to hear a few of my favourite authors speak.

As I drove over Business Bay Bridge, I had an attack of The Guilt. I even looked for a U-turn so I could rush back into the loving, albeit snotty, embrace of my offspring and abandon my Me-Morning that I’d, in all honesty, looked forward to for over two months. Thankfully UAE infrastructure makes about-turns almost impossible, which I was very grateful for when I took my seat for one of the most inspiring mornings I’ve had in years.

One of the speakers was Heather McGregor, who writes a weekly column for *The Financial Times* under the pseudonym of Mrs Moneypenny. She runs her own hugely successful business while juggling three children (Cost Centres #1, #2 and #3) and her talk was aptly entitled *Careers, Ambition and the Myth of Having It All*.

As a full-time working mother I constantly feel in a perpetual state of schizophrenia. One half of me is crawling on the floor pretending to be the mouse to my son’s Gruffalo, and the other half is interviewing people responsible for multi-million-dollar projects. As Heather started to speak, I leant forward eagerly to hear how she has attained the elusive balance of personas.

So it was quite a shock to hear her bluntly state, “You cannot be completely successful in your career if your priority is your children.” As a hush descended over the largely female audience, who all looked like carbon copies of me – reasonably smartly

dressed, but with remnants of their children’s Cheerios stuck to their clothes – she continued, “I realise I’m going to be vilified for this, but I have five priorities in my life, and they are in this order, my career, my children, my husband, my friends, and then me.” She went on to say that “to be a good mother, you don’t need to be in the same room as your children.” This was followed with, “I often help my children do their homework over Skype.” (As this sentence was uttered, a sharp intake of breath was audible from the woman in the row in front of me, who obviously hadn’t had time to brush her hair that morning and was taking notes in a Charlie and Lola notepad).

Although the applause at the end of the session was rousing, I left the room feeling disappointed that the myth of ‘Having It All’ was a load of fantastical nonsense.

My next seminar was with Kate Mosse, the best-selling author of *Labyrinth*, *Sepulchre* and, most recently, *Citadel*. She spoke of spending four years intensively researching her latest novel and one year squirrelled away writing it, “talking to hardly anyone and just letting the story write itself”.

After the session, I spoke with Kate and asked her, “As a mother and a writer, do you ever feel guilt at spending too much time working, and not enough time with the children? Or conversely, guilt at playing with your kids when you should be working?”

She looked at me in steely silence for what seemed like minutes and then slowly said, “I am a feminist. And as a feminist I believe that working mothers’ guilt is a wasted and futile emotion. When I am writing, I am a writer. And when I am with my children, I am a mother. And that is all I am. I make every minute count, whether I am working or mothering.”

The whole journey home, my head was swimming with the morning’s lectures and how perhaps women spend too much time emotionally flaying themselves for being in the wrong place at the wrong time instead of concentrating on the now.

As my key turned in the lock, two little balls of laughter hurled themselves at me and excitedly showed me the den they’d made out of my dining chairs and blankets. So I reached into my bag, turned both my phones off and crawled into the ‘spooky cave’ for us all to have lunch together – somewhere safe where the bears can’t find us. Everything else can wait until tomorrow. **A**

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