

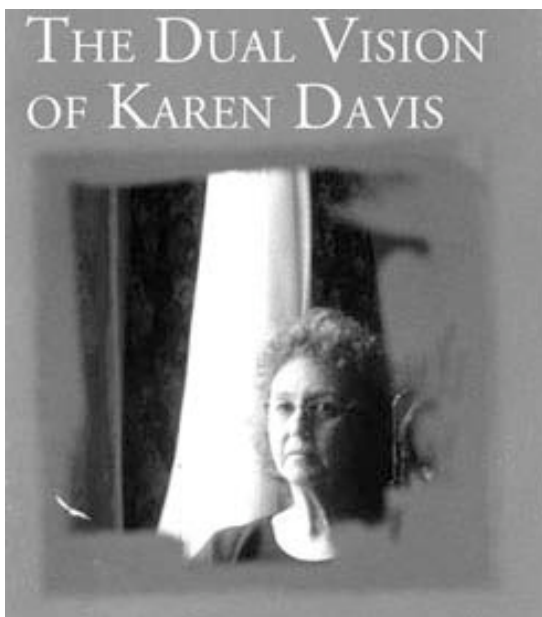
Women's Review of Books

**Our Comeback
Issue**

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PHOTOGRAPHY

THE DUAL VISION OF KAREN DAVIS



*Above: The First and Last Picture of My Mother and Me
Left: Upper West Side Hotel the Day Nyla Was Born*

In alternating issues, Women's Review will feature the art of a photographer and a cartoonist. This month we're showing photographs by Karen Davis, with commentary by Ellen Feldman

The duality of Karen Davis's gaze is brought together in her images. Ever the realist, Davis's work is grounded in the documentary tradition; she is a restless explorer of far-reaching subjects. Along with the direct gaze of the realist, we have the vision of one who soaks up emotional depths and seeks out layers of irony. The portfolio produced here focuses on intimate family portraits. In the diptych "First and Last Picture of My Mother and Me," combinations of youth and age proliferate. The young mother and daughter are preserved in an image cracked and worn with age. Cut to: cracked hands of the aging

mother and daughter - a metonymic short-hand for lives lived - cushioned in folds of cloth soft as baby's skin. One can't miss the irony - and poignancy - of juxtaposing these images of intergenerational touching, one of life ahead, the other of life behind.

In "The McCann Family," Davis's powerful word-image piece on her childhood, she arranges dolls that her sister Cheryl played with long ago in a family portrait. In photograph and text, the child-dolls seem to be the main players, but the subject that gradually emerges in both, perhaps

not unnaturally, is the parents' dominating presence. Davis, like her sister, has created a stand-in family through which the painful truths of family dynamics are expressed.

When you scratch the surface of Karen Davis's photographs, layers of meaning are exposed.

The McCann Family



When we were small, my younger sister Cheryl had a set of four mechanical dolls. She called them the McCann Family. They were a thinly disguised version of the Davis family. There was a boy doll, girl doll, man and woman doll. The Davis family had a mother, father, and two girls. Cheryl decided to play "Tom McCann," the boy doll. I think she liked the idea of being the spunky and adventurous child. I was, "Mary Ann McCann", the girl doll. The man and woman were our parents, "Mother" and "Father" McCann. Cheryl often made Mother say to Tom, "Mary Ann is wonderful", and "Why can't you be like your sister, Mary Ann?" (If I had been the one who owned the mechanical dolls, Tom McCann would

They tease loose memory, the passage of time, and hidden associations.

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be the talented star and Mother would tell everyone, "Mary Ann is average.") At first Tom could stand on his own. Later he lost his balance all the time. Cheryl diagnosed Tom with Polio. She fitted him with crutches and braces just like hers. (Cheryl was born with spina bifida.) Tom thought Mother McCann disliked having a disabled child. He was a chipper kid but he always felt bad about Mother's attitude. Father usually sided with Mother. "Listen to your Mother." One day Father McCann's leg, which had been loose, fell off. Cheryl taped the leg back on as a prosthesis. Tom felt that after he became an amputee, Father was a lot more understanding about his son.

Below: First Grandchild



<http://www.wcwoonline.org/womensreview/>

<http://yesthatkarendavis.com>