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Book Reviews

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- The Hypnobirthing Book: An inspirational guide for a calm, confident, natural birth by Katharine Graves; reviewed by

The Hypnobirthing Book: An inspirational guide for a calm, confident, natural birth by Katharine Graves

Katharine Publishing 2012
978-0957144-50-7
£12.99
Some versions are also available with an accompanying CD.



Reviewed by
Jo Dagustun

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This book is offered to women searching for a good companion for their journey through pregnancy, birth and the early postnatal period. If hypnobirthing is a new concept for the potential reader, then the key to understanding the aim and content of the book is in the subtitle. In pregnancy, we know that many women claim to desire such a 'calm, confident and natural' birth. But we also know that the reality is often very different. So what might make a difference?

The hypnobirthing approach is explained early on in the book. We are told it is a form of hypnotherapy, and asked to put aside any preconceptions of the hypnotists of the Music Hall tradition.*'Hypnotherapy is merely the use of words: words used in a more focussed and positive way to help people let go of some of the negative ideas that they have acquired in life.'* Thus, much of the book is about encouraging women, together with their chosen birth partners, to prepare the way for birth via a series of frequently practised guided meditations/visualisations. The purpose of these is to clear the mind of doubt and fear, in preparation for a calm and peaceful birth. There is no attempt to conceal the commitment that couples are advised to make to this preparation during pregnancy. The extent of this 'pre-labour labour' may be off-putting to many, but it will be the reader's choice about the extent they wish to engage with the advice offered.

In encouraging women to engage in this form of birth preparation, on the basis that*'it always makes a difference, and a very big difference'*, this book offers advice that perhaps runs counter to our mainstream culture, where birth events are commonly seen as quite unpredictable, a discourse which subtly acts to disengage women from their responsibilities in preparing for the physiological process of birth. Rather, this book is clear about the centrality of the woman's role in achieving a good birth. That said, it is careful not to offer glib guarantees of a perfect pain-free birth but explains how the approach can help in all sorts of circumstances: *'a calm mother can help her baby even during a complex or challenging birth.'*

In addition to its focus on the hypnobirthing approach, this book covers a good range of topics around preparing for birth generally. It has strong sections on birth physiology, linking neatly with advice on exercise, posture and nutrition in pregnancy. The focus on responsibility and choice is done well, including around the vexed issue of labour induction. I particularly liked the advice not to get too fixated on (and to never tell people exactly) your estimated due date. I was unsure about the section devoted to perineal massage, as I fear that this is yet another 'birth technology' which might subtly act to reduce women's confidence in their body's ability to birth well. There is excellent advice on strategies to adopt in labour, including making a clear announcement to the staff attending you that 'we are doing hypnobirthing', to reduce the possibility of disturbance. This would seem to be a good assertive addition to the phrasebook for birthing women, although it does highlight how our maternity services do not have protecting the physiological birth process at their core, and, of course, why should only 'hypnobirthing women' receive calm, quiet and unobtrusive care?

If 'First, do no harm' is a baseline criterion for book recommendations for pregnant women, then this book, subject to one significant concern, must pass with flying colours. The approach may come across as a bit 'airy-fairy' to some, especially when most of us have little experience in guided meditation. But for the vast majority of pregnant women, a thoughtful reading of this book should make a positive difference to their birth experience. My main concern is that it will undoubtedly come across as unwelcoming to some pregnant readers, given its very obvious presumed audience of heterosexual married couples in highly-functional and stable relationships, and more specifically women whose partners are willing to join them in daily meditation practice. It would be good to see this addressed in a second edition, while

maintaining the insistence on the importance of a birth companion whose role during labour is to 'protect your space and be your advocate' (sadly a role which midwives within the NHS system too often seem unable to perform).

This book is one of a growing range of hypnobirthing books on the market; the UK focus makes it particularly good for a UK audience, and the experience, warmth and care of the author make for a very comforting book. The title could be off-putting for many, who may only have a vague idea of what hypnobirthing means. But it would be a shame if the book were only read by those 'in the know'. It is an accessible, supportive and friendly guide to preparing for a positive birthing experience, and I believe that it deserves a place on all good birthing book lists and on the shelves of local birth resource centres. I wish someone had given it to me a few years ago!