AIMS For a better birth...

Book Reviews

Complete list of book reviews on the AIMS website

AIMS Journal, 2015, Vol 27 No 3

- When a Baby Dies: the experience of late miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death by Nancy Kohner and Alix Henley; reviewed by Gill Boden
- The Children Who Sleep by the River by Debbie Taylor; reviewed by Debbie Chippington Derrick
- We were gonna have a baby but we had an angel instead by Pat Schweibert; reviewed by Gill Boden
- Goodbye Baby: Cameron's story by Gillian Griffiths; reviewed by Gill Boden
- Lucy's baby brother by Althea Hayton; reviewed by Gill Boden

When a Baby Dies: the experience of late miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death by Nancy Kohner and Alix Henley

Pandora Press 2001
ISBN 978-0415252768
£15.99



Reviewed by Gill Boden

Find this book on Amazon

When a Baby Dies is still probably the most useful book available for those who lose a baby, and in the UK that will be 8,000 families every year. It was produced first in 1991, last reprinted in 2001, in conjunction with Sands (the Stillbirth and neonatal death charity) and includes letters from and interviews with many bereaved parents. There is information about what is known about why babies die; issues such as hospital practice, professional attitudes, the nature of bereavement, the process of grieving, sources of support and future pregnancies but the most important aspect of this book is that it is told through the voices of those who have experienced this 'loss of a person'. The testimonies have been collected over many years: they are all different but with common themes, and the shared experience in these pages illustrates an intensely personal experience in a way that could, and I'm sure has, provided much comfort.

If this book were to be written today then some of the language might be different - using the word 'birth' more often rather than 'delivery', for instance - and some of the information will have changed, but

fundamentally the experience of loss as told by those experiencing it will not have changed.

One section I particularly liked is, while discussing funeral and other ceremonies, the authors make the suggestion that it is never too late to mark a baby's death. They relate how parents overwhelmed at the time of the birth may decide, sometimes many years later, to mark the death. One such mother several years later, having had a subsequent miscarriage and a live baby, went back to the hospital for a debriefing and 'to her surprise' found herself agreeing to a memorial service.

'He began a simple service and as I heard the familiar prayers, the 23rd Psalm, my weeping subsided. He mentioned Luke and the little girl over and over again and talked of their value despite their brief existence. Profound gratitude swept over me to know they were being acknowledged at last.'

There are accounts where parents are able to support each other throughout, others when the loss of a baby drives them apart - difficulties with sexual relationships afterwards are sometimes apparent - but a recurrent theme is that the process of grieving for a loss is not over quickly.

Care and support from professionals is enormously varied, from insensitive and seemingly uncaring to situations where midwives and doctors freely show their own feelings of sorrow: in one case a health visitor visited a bereaved mother for one hour every week for months until she felt able to cope. As well as help from family and friends, the attitude and behaviour of professionals is obviously crucially important. A study in Norway 12 looked at a sample of women who had a history of three or more consecutive miscarriages: it was found that among those women who had no specific abnormality, increased individual care and support, with no extra 'medical' care, from the professionals looking after them seemed to double the success rate in their next pregnancy. This is a really remarkable finding, and the authors suggest that we take this need for care very seriously. There are many useful messages in this book, but I would suggest that this is the key one for all of us, professional and lay, whatever our own histories, to take onboard ourselves.

References

1. Stray-Pedersen B and Stray-Pedersen S (1984) Etiologic factors and subsequent reproductive performance in 195 couples with a prior history of habitual abortion. American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology Vol. 148, No. 2. January 1984.
2. Stray-Pedersen B and Stray-Pedersen S (1988) Recurrent abortion: the role of psychotherapy. In Beard RW and Sharp F (Eds) Early Pregnancy Loss: Mechanisms and Treatment. Springer-Verlag.

The Children Who Sleep by the River by Debbie Taylor

Interlink Books
ISBN-10: 0940793962 ISBN-13: 978-0940793965



Reviewed by
Debbie Chippington Derrick

Find this book on Amazon

This book draws you into the lives of several generations of women in rural Zimbabwe. It is the story of a young woman, her mother, aunt, sisters and cousins and the ghost of her grandmother. It shows their struggles to survive, but particularly focuses on pregnancy, birth and the healthcare of their children.

The mother is a traditional midwife and nganga; but she is also being trained to attend birth by the medical services. She struggles to reconcile the knowledge that had been passed on to her and that she has developed over many years, with the medical view that is being dogmatically drilled into the group she has joined.

The contrast is very illuminating, showing aspects of traditional midwifery in conflict with medical models. Some are commonly recognisable as conflicts within a UK setting. However, other aspects come over as 'primitive', highlighting the difficulty in identifying the best practices for any practitioner.

The death of babies is important to the story; the struggle to know whether deaths could have been avoided and how these uncommon events drive actions that may or may not help: something that is a huge issue in the drive to medicalise birth everywhere around the world.

I was so drawn in by the imagery of this book that I had an extremely abrupt arrival at Waterloo one morning. I had been totally engrossed in the lives of these people when the tannoy announcement jolted me back from their world, leaving me totally disorientated for a moment or so.

It says that the book was written with the help and encouragement of the World Health Organization and was first published as an Emerging Voices publication.

I only happened upon this book on Amazon in the 'others who bought this' section and as it was published back in 1992, I am disappointed that I had not heard of it before, and will be off to see what else the author has written. This book was not only thought provoking, but a really good read too.

We were gonna have a baby but we had an angel instead by Pat Schweibert and illustrated by Taylor Bills

Grief Watch, Portland, Oregon
ISBN-13: 978-0-9724241-1-0
£5.99



Reviewed by
Gill Boden

Find this book on Amazon

A rather schmaltzy title but nice illustrations of a little boy looking forward to his baby's birth, commenting on how sad his parents and grandparents are and candidly admitting that they are 'sadder than him' but reflecting that having a baby could have been fun. Recommended for children 2 and up.

Goodbye Baby: Cameron's story by Gillian Griffiths and illustrated by Lindsay Macleod

Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 2010
ISBN 978-0-7152-0940-0
£7.99



Reviewed by
Gill Boden

Find this book on Amazon

Gillian Griffiths wrote this after she'd had a miscarriage when her son Cameron was almost three to help her to explain and come to terms with his feelings. What is nice about the book is its practical detail and the fact that the older child has some negative feelings as well as sorrow. Some of the proceeds will go to the Miscarriage Association.

Lucy's baby brother by Althea Hayton and drawings by John Farrell

Eddington Press, St Albans, 1995
ISBN 1-872067-05-0
£3.99



Reviewed by
Gill Boden

Find this book on Amazon

This book has a front cover designed by a 4-year-old, and the illustrations inside are line drawings that could be coloured in. It seems to me a sensitive and child-centred book, told from Lucy's point of view.

She goes to the hospital after her little brother's death and is able to hold him; her teacher at school talks to her about what has happened, encourages her to tell the other children in her own words and comforts her too. I found this a very positive story of how a child can be helped through a sad event by her family and the wider community.