AIMS For a better birth...

Book Reviews

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Water birth: stories to inspire and inform, edited by By Milli Hill

Lonely Scribe 2015
ISBN 978 1905179138



Reviewed by
Katie Roberts

Find this book on Amazon

This is a book of lovely birth stories collated and edited by founder of the Positive birth Movement Milli Hill. All the stories are positive and uplifting, with a clear sense of the wonder and magic of birth and the calming, healing power of water. The births featured in this book are a far cry from the 'ordinary bad birth' that is currently so common in the UK and they will certainly inspire others to see labouring and birthing in water as a unique way to manage the sensations of labour and create an environment of relaxation. It had the added bonus of making me feel enormously broody, hoping that if I have another baby it is again born at home, in water.

However, I was disappointed with bits of the book. I think it was a missed oppor tunity as it frequently shifts the focus away from the women whose births are featured, 'passing the buck' back to the carers, which gave me the message that even though women are fighting so hard to reclaim their births, the focus is still on the carer.

Nor does it have enough depth of information to be truly useful to professionals who are seeking water birth confidence or women who wish to make a case for water birth to family, friends or their care-team. I felt that the personal stories from professionals were a little out of place, because, whilst they were positive stories, I didn't feel quite comfortable that they were being told by 'exper ts' ratherthan women

themselves.

The other splinter in my finger was how pervasive the image of birth attendants being somehow 'in charge' is; so much so that it has seeped, seamlessly, even into books such as this. The use of the word 'delivery' rather than reclaiming the word 'birth' felt like a huge oversight for me as an AIMS-educated campaigner. I was saddened by the realisation that virtually all the stories, with the notable exception of Melissa Thomas's planned unassisted birth in the bath, have an element of midwives being the gate-keepers. The incidences of the midwives setting store by dilation, telling women it is OK to push, being the first to touch the baby (even if it is to 'guide' or 'nudge' baby to mother) all stood out as stark reminders that even in a lovely book of extremely positive birth stories, it is hard to find examples of a truly 'hands-off' birth. I suspect that is much more a reflection on how far we still have to go in reclaiming our birthing autonomy than a criticism of the book, and if you want to immerse yourself in positive water birth stories, and don't mind the bits that irked me, this book is one of the good ones.

Do we need midwives? by Michel Odent

Pinter and Martin 2015
ISBN 978-1-78066-220-6



Reviewed by
Gill Boden

Find this book on Amazon

A ludicrous question or a very provocative challenge? It's hard not to be goaded by Michel Odent's insistence that we step back and ask some unlikely but vital questions about childbirth, midwives, and the future of humanity. Not all of these questions are new ones; he has been pursuing these trains of thought for some years and through his 14 previous books. Frustratingly, he does not provide many simple answers.

His interdisciplinary Primal Health Research Database (www.primalhealthresearch.com, www.wombecology.com) throws up fascinating links which demand to be followed up: risk factors for autism in the perinatal period, the dangers of neutralising the laws of natural selection and the effect on the evolution of Homo Sapiens in relation to the way babies are born are just a few. An example of one of the recommendations which emerges is that after the recent paradigm shift in brain science he argues that questions must be phrased differently: it should not be 'how to control labour pain' but 'how to make birth as easy as possible so that the physiological system of protection against pain is as effective as possible.'

Odent has been highlighting the importance of the microbiome for many years, well before the crowdfunded film Microbirth (2014) brought to our attention the work of scientists, as well as

epidemiologists and anthropologists worldwide who are now researching variations in gut microbe populations and their impact on health. He refers to the film and speculates that microbes picked up in the passage through the vagina might not in fact be crucial as he believes that in prehistory many babies would have been born in the caul.

His argument is that before the Neanderthal revolution women tended to give birth alone so that the innate 'fetus ejection reflex' was uninterrupted, and that since then the socialisation of childbirth has resulted in much increased difficulty in giving birth. His thoughts on this, as well as on every aspect of giving birth, especially, in my view, the importance not only of small, dark, quiet environments but, critically, of feeling unobserved, are incisive and exciting. 'Let us imagine a laboring woman in a small, dark and warm room. There is no one else present except for one experienced and silent midwife sitting in the corner knitting': this is the picture I want to take away to inform my campaigning.

Freebirth - Self Directed Pregnancy and Birth by Sarah Schmid

Riedenburg E.U. 2015
ISBN 978 3902943866



Reviewed by
Hannah Robertson
Hannah is a mother, doula and antenatal advocacy worker

Find this book on Amazon

When I became aware of this publication I was really quite excited. There were a couple of YouTube births that had inspired me. One, a birth at night outside surrounded by trees and one during the day whilst she stood, goddess-like, and birthed standing up in a doorway. These births were unassisted and no health professional was present. When picking up the title to read, I had expected personal accounts and a theme of the power of woman, intrinsic knowledge and a simplicity that only comes with undisturbed births: for the most part, I was disappointed. The introduction and second chapter were by far the highlights of the book. The second chapter focuses on responsibility, fear and safety. There are a lot of words that encourage reflection:

'Our pregnancies are influenced in one way or another by other people's fears. But the most treacherous of all is a birth professional's fear.' (p20)

There is a train of thought running through this chapter about getting women to own and face their fears which is something often ignored in antenatal education. Often, pre-birth, fears can be masked over with positivity without the time spent exploring them. The author acknowledges that fear is how modern obstetrics has become the beast it is.

The chapter on nutrition is great, but I guess women need to be at a certain place in their life journey to

follow such a prescriptive diet.

The next part of the book really disappointed me. It was so complicated and quite medical in its focus, which made me feel like I was reading a do-it-yourself midwifery manual rather than a guide to a freebirth. It advocated women needing to know the position of their baby, which is simply not true, and there was lots of talk of measuring and analysing data. This felt dangerous. I am not sure I would want to have an obstetric mind whilst trying to switch off and go with what my body needed. This whole section reinforced a view of women not knowing enough intrinsically and that took away from a theme that I would have expected - that women are already the experts of their own bodies and babies. The sheer volume of information may have really over-stimulated some women and put women off having a freebirth, which is much simpler than this book suggests.

The chapters on birth stories had some pleasing elements, like hearing the views of men/partners. This would be helpful for partners unsure about taking responsibility. But the format was again overcomplicated and at first I did not know where to look on the page. It could have been simpler, instead of having a lot of repetition with bits of stories under separate paragraphs illustrating other points.

In conclusion, this may be a good book for a woman planning home birth with midwives and who is perhaps a person who needs to run through every scenario in order to feel less anxious. However, I do not think this is a great book for anyone planning a freebirth because it overcomplicates the simplest act of childbirth when alone without interference.