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Book Review: A Midwife's Story: Life, love and birth among the Amish by Penny Armstrong and Sheryl Feldman

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A Midwife's Story: Life, love and birth among the Amish by Penny Armstrong and Sheryl Feldman; reviewed by Deborah Hughes

Pinter & Martin, 3rd Edition, 2017 (first published 1986)
Authors: *Penny Armstrong and Sheryl Feldman*
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Paperback, 238 pages

Reviewed by
Deborah Hughes

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I first read this book in the late 80s and it inspired my sister (then living in an Amish-settled area of Maryland) and me to take a road trip to Lancaster County in Pennsylvania to visit the Amish country where Penny Armstrong worked. Thirty years on, it has the same effect – the glimpse it gives of the land-focussed, seasonal and sustainable life of the Amish people is tantalising and increasingly relevant. Of course, the Amish lifestyle raises as many questions as it answers, not the least of which is its patriarchal basis. But one is still left with the feeling that, whilst the Amish may have held on to the bathwater as well as the baby, they nonetheless have a message for the world.

Widespread homebirth, quiet support for midwives, community support for new families and young children, universal breastfeeding, acceptance of unavoidable perinatal bereavement, calm and quiet approaches to labour are all part of the Amish way and described in this book. The Amish narrative is interlaced with Penny Armstrong's own story of becoming a midwife and then becoming a midwife to the Amish of Lancaster County. It is a relatively short and easy read, and again left me wanting more, especially to know more about the inner lives of the women whose birth stories it tells.

I am glad that Pinter & Martin have decided to reprint “A Midwife's Story”, as it is an interesting account both of becoming a midwife and then how a midwife becomes part of the life of a specific community. Being the midwife to a defined population, living among and being available to that population (“Call the Midwife” also illustrates this) is something that has become sorely tenuous in most parts of the UK. The ideal of “Better Births” is to re-establish these links, and this book demonstrates why community-focussed midwifery is so important and mutually beneficial for midwives and families.

Reviewed for AIMS by Deborah Hughes