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Book Review: Ina May's Guide to Breastfeeding, by Ina May Gaskin

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Ina May Gaskin is an iconic figure in the world of childbirth. I didn't discover her books on birth until fairly late in my own childbearing career, but even at that stage she was well worth reading. The accounts of her midwifery work are inspirational, and I truly believe that my own (and perhaps my friends') birth experiences would have been improved if we had read Ina May's writing earlier.

So when I heard about her new book on breastfeeding in 2009, 'dedicated to all those who work to raise the status of breastfeeding as a gift for future generations', I was keen to read and review it. Even though (or perhaps because) it was published towards the end of my own time breastfeeding my four children, I was eager to read what she had to say on this important topic and to find out whether it was a book that I could usefully recommend to others.

Reading the book at that stage, I did not find it of much practical benefit personally (although I have read reviews by many women who have). But I found that it contained a huge amount of incredibly interesting as well as highly practical material. Indeed, it is the sort of book that makes you think about changing career: there is still so much work to be done to normalise breastfeeding. But did I think that the book would be useful for other women, especially those nearer to the start of their breastfeeding journey?

I had two main concerns on reading the book:

- First, I was unsure about the emphasis that Ina May places on the usefulness of pregnant women expressing colostrum before giving birth (to be better prepared in the case of later difficulties); I worried that this – to me rather strange – advice might have the subtle effect of undermining women's confidence in their ability to birth a healthy baby successfully (*Editor's note: This might be the case when it's offered as a blanket suggestion, although our knowledge is increasing about where this might be valuable in certain cases, for instance where the mother has diabetes and the baby may need additional colostrum at birth to raise blood sugar levels*).

- Second, I was unsure about Ina May's emphasis on stocking up with breast-pumping gear, and so on, before the birth and on the activity of expressing milk more generally. I can accept that this advice might well reflect the needs of a US audience, where short maternity breaks from work are the norm, but I worried again that this acted to subtly undermine the benefits of unmediated attached breastfeeding. For a European audience, with access to greater maternity rights, some adaptations to the text would be useful. It is also probably worth noting here that the text is more generally heavily anchored in the North American context.

These concerns were serious enough for me to allow the task of a book review to fall off my to-do list for a few years. But that was an omission: this is a great book, worth shouting about. Subject to the provisos above, I'd like to wholeheartedly recommend the book to AIMS members as an excellent resource book (and a good read) for anyone interested in promoting the value of breastfeeding. It should be in every local breastfeeding library!