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Book Review: How to have a baby: mother-gathered guidance on birth and new babies, by Natalie Meddings

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Reviewed for AIMS by Maddie McMahon

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Tucked up under a blanket on my sofa reading How to Have a Baby, by Natalie Meddings, the phrase that kept playing on a loop in my mind was 'fairy godmother'. Because this beautifully written and designed book is a blessing, not only on the baby but on the mother. Natalie arrives, I imagine, on a new mother's doorstep with magic wand in hand; ancient homespun wisdom on her lips. She is wisewoman and witch; keeper of the secrets and curator of the old knowledge: motherlore.

The theme of blessings returns at intervals throughout the book. Mothers tell their stories of words of blessing, hope and faith from families and friends. Blessings come in the form of top tips for birth and parenting. Gifts are given in the form of food, expressions of love and social cameraderie. This book doesn't profess to be an expert telling you what you should and shouldn't do. Natalie is all your mothers, your sisters, your aunties and your friends arriving bearing the gifts of their experience and wisdom. Nothing this book shares with us is useless; every page holds a nugget that could make birth or parenting easier or more beautiful.

Reading the section on labour I felt I could hear Natalie's warm, kind voice, holding my hand as she passed on the deep, intuitive knowledge that can only come from years spent accompanying parents through labour and birth. The phrases and analogies she uses to explain how birth works and how to ease the passage are ones I often find myself using as a doula, so I know from long experience that there is a deep truth and effectiveness in her words.

'How to Have a Baby' is much more than the formulaic baby manual books of mass appeal. It offers so much more than the usual fare of judgmental advice from nannies or conflicting opinion depending on which book you flick through. Although it is brimming over with practical suggestions and concise explanations of the physical and emotional progress of pregnancy and birth, the overwhelming feeling of this little tome is one of comfort and the tone is non-directive. The size, page layout, fonts and beautiful full colour photos all create a sense of calm, of peaceful contemplation and a connection with the miraculous process of growing, birthing and feeding a baby.

Like the repeated waves of labour, Natalie gently describes and repeats an elemental message: that we must feel safe to give birth and that therefore parents, particularly the birthing person, must be treated gently, with the utmost respect and kindness. With precision she paints a picture of the environment conducive to birth, paying particular attention to the birth companions. Because it is our lovers and handmaidens who create the safe space that allows,

> *"A mother [to] unwrap her body and produce her baby like a gift - just like that."*

Doulas really are a combination of your best friend, your mum and your favourite auntie - without any of the possible attendant baggage. Natalie's writing makes this book a true 'doula in your pocket', bursting with homespun wisdom, simple recipes and reassuring words of comfort. Yet underpinning all this is a no-nonsense factual accuracy, with references to research and evidence-based guidelines that can aid responsible, grown up informed decision-making.

I truly hope 'How to Have a Baby' reaches a mainstream audience and becomes a classic. It deserves it. Yes, I'm quoted in the the book and yes, I count Natalie amongst my friends but I can honestly say that this review would be the same whether I knew her or not. I know I will want to lend this book to all my clients but I suspect I won't want to part with it. Looks like I'll have to buy a few more copies. I urge you to do the same.