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Book Review: Traumatic Childbirth by Cheryl Beck, Jeanne Driscoll and Sue Wats

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AIMS Journal, 2019, Vol 30, No 4

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First edition, published 2013

ISBN 978-0415678100



272 pages

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This book comes from a collaboration between an academic researcher, a psychotherapist, and a mum who runs a support group for people affected by traumatic birth in New Zealand. All three have a long history of working with women who have had traumatic births, and have previously worked together as researchers.

This book focuses mostly on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of childbirth, but much of the book is also relevant to those who experienced a traumatic birth without a diagnosis of PTSD. The book takes the reader through a journey, discussing first what a traumatic birth looks like from the point of view of someone experiencing it, then looking at the links between traumatic birth and PTSD, and then examining the systems within the brain that lead to PTSD. Cheryl Beck's other research on related issues is then presented, including the links between traumatic birth and breastfeeding, why birthdays can be so hard after a traumatic birth, and what happens in subsequent pregnancies. I found this research really useful, as these consequences of traumatic birth are often not talked about.

Treatments for PTSD are then discussed, and the book ends with a roundup of what was known in 2013 about the effects of traumatic birth on fathers and midwives/intrapartum nurses. (There is no research so far on lesbian partners, doulas, obstetricians, or others who might be present at a birth). The book offers a brief introduction to a number of treatment methods includes debriefing, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR). With the NHS in England

announcing more help for men whose partners experience health problems last year, and with more interest in the issue of traumatic birth generally, this chapter is very useful. As the chapter makes clear, these treatments are not interchangeable or equal, and getting access to the wrong treatment can make problems worse.

I really liked how much women's voices are 'heard' in the book, both directly as short birth stories, and indirectly as case studies from the authors' professional experiences. However, the book is not an easy read. The academic and medical sections are presented in a way that is understandable for the lay reader, but require attention to properly grasp. The birth stories and case studies are so important, but are a difficult read for anyone who has been affected by a traumatic birth themselves. They are also frustrating, as stories from 20 years ago and the present sound so similar, and so many of the experiences related could have been so different with better, more compassionate care. For me, this was perhaps the most important message of the book: there is still so much that we as parents, birth workers and campaigners have to do.

Mari Greenfield is an academic researching maternity services, a doula, and a doula mentor.