AIMS For a better birth...

Book Review: Eleven Hours by Pamela Erens

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Reviewed for AIMS by Emma Mason

Eleven Hours

By Pamela Erens

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Find this book on Amazon

This short fiction novel follows two main female characters, Lore and Franckline, through eleven hours of their lives, as Lore labours in hospital and Franckline supports her. I thoroughly enjoyed reading Eleven Hours and almost instantly connected with Lore and Franckline, wondering how their individual stories would develop.

Lore is in labour and has made her way to the hospital alone. At the hospital, she is attended by midwife Franckline. The story is set in New York in 2004, so about 15 years ago. Throughout the novel, however, readers are sent back further in time, following snippets of memories from each character and learning a little more about them and how they came to be in their current situations. As the labour progresses (or doesn't, at times!), Erens explores the effect of different elements of the hospital environment on the birthing process, telling this both from the point of view of the patient and the caregiver.

I found the balance between accurate medical description and captivating storytelling absolutely perfect. I find it essential for any book, fiction or non-fiction, to be accurate in its portrayal of childbirth and this can certainly be said of Eleven Hours. At the same time, when we are looking into the memories of Lore and Franckline, there is a beautiful, easy descriptive style that draws you into the storyline and ignites empathy for both characters. Some readers may find it difficult to follow the sudden jumps between characters and memories, however I personally didn't find this a problem. On the rare occasion that I hadn't noticed a switch in time period, it very quickly became obvious where and when the story had

leapt to.

I found it particularly interesting, and appropriate, that this book has no chapters. It is one long story from start to finish, which I think is an excellent reflection of labour and birth, where one phase simply flows into the next with no defined stopping point. It also makes for a fantastic page turner, as there's never a good place to put it down!

A main theme of the novel is the medicalisation of birth and the failure to respect, or even enquire about, the wishes of the woman giving birth. Initially I assumed, wrongly, that the midwife, Franckline, would be the stereotypical unsympathetic midwife, largely ignoring the detailed birth plan that Lore has written. But this obvious narrative was not drawn on at all and the author uses minor characters throughout to illustrate how care during labour can be seen and felt in a positive or negative way. Franckline is, in fact, a beautiful example of how the correct sympathetic care can have measurable effects on a woman's labour progression. Lore's character is hugely complicated. Although she has carried out a huge amount of research and gained valuable knowledge, she is finding that this hasn't replaced true and continuous support from a birthing partner in the way she had hoped. The book also celebrates how modern medicine saves lives of both babies and mothers, offering something of a juxtaposition against the general subtext of a hands off birthing approach.

I would absolutely recommend this book, although would advise caution to anyone reading it while pregnant, as certain elements may feel worrying to someone approaching the time of their own labour. The descriptive elements are wonderfully absorbing and the characters believable, and likeable in their own ways. The ending is brilliantly indefinite, which for a moment I found frustrating before realising that any other finish would have been clichéd in one way or another, going against the carefully considered realism of the rest of the story.

A short and easy, but involving and thought provoking, read.