AIMS For a better birth...

Book Review: The Millstone by Margaret Drabble

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The Millstone

By Margaret Drabble

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176 pages

Publisher's recommended price £8.99

Find this book on Amazon

Various editions of this 1965 classic are available

Reviewed for AIMS by Shane Ridley

I was given this book during lockdown and although it is unusual for AIMS to review fiction books I realised that it was an interesting book to review given this is AIMS' 60th Anniversary year. It was first published in 1965 so not quite as old as us!

It tells the story of a young woman in the 60s. Rosamund is a well-educated, well brought-up, daughter of middle-class socialists living in London in her parent's flat whilst they are out of the country. She has a few issues with the new freedom of sexual encounters, but eventually finds herself pregnant after a one-night stand. She tries the 'usual ways' of losing the baby, but soon realises that she really wants to be a single mother.

There follows the most delightful story of Rosamund's experience of pregnancy and birth. The medical students who probe her fundus, listening to the horror stories about birth and getting to hold a baby for the first time and realising they are quite heavy, warm and damp. Then waiting for labour to progress, listening to the chatter of five nurses in the corridor and then … I won't spoil the story, but it's one we still hear today! She enjoyed her stay in hospital 'fortified by the superior beauty and intelligence' of her child.

She takes her baby, Octavia, home and is doing well. But when the baby is a few months old Octavia needs a life-saving heart operation. After the operation, the matron says she can't see her for a fortnight and our heroine reacts ...

This novel is set in a decade long gone, but I would recommend the book as it will remind us of how far we have come in terms of maternity services and how far we have not. It is an incredible feminist novel too, one which I think should be on young people's reading lists, as it is as good and relevant as when it was first published.

I nearly didn't read it because of the title as I don't think of a baby as a 'millstone'. However I'm very pleased I did, as it reminded me of the joy of pregnancy, birth and motherhood. There are, apparently, reasons for the title that I will pass to English graduates to explain!