

BOOK REVIEW



BABY CATCHER

Chronicles of a Modern Midwife

By Peggy Vincent

Published by Scribner, New York, USA. 2002

www.babycatcher.net

When my American sister-in-law said she was sending me a book about a midwife working in California that I might find interesting, I do admit to groaning and thinking "Oh please not another "Midwives" saga to plough my way through and get depressed about!" I had read Chris Bohjalian's "Midwives" when on holiday one summer and had decided, resolutely, that I would never again take a book about work away with me on R&R!

So when 'Baby Catcher' arrived, I put it on the shelf and promised myself I would look at it sometime. It wasn't until my Kiwi sister picked it up and started reading extracts out to me with comments like, 'hey, listen to this, doesn't this sound like that birth you went to the other night?' that I thought I had better have a good look.

It was about nine pm when I started it and three am when I finally wrenched myself away from it. This was the book I wanted to write. As I read each birth story I felt I was there with Peggy, as each of the women's experiences were so similar to those I had been

witness to within my own home birth practice.

Baby Catcher follows Peggy Vincent's autobiographical journey from student midwife, to hospital midwife and eventually to her own home birth practice. The book starts in the 60s and ends in the 90s, so we are able to follow the political changes within maternity care in the US but also the ways in which this affected the lives of midwives and women. In the US, home birth is a much more radical birthing option than in New Zealand (although sometimes I wonder!) and with the fear of litigation, midwives' practice is controlled largely by the amount of insurance they can afford. So it was with great delight that I read about a midwife providing truly women-centred care, in an environment which couldn't be more unsupportive.

This book is one entertaining birth story after another. Peggy goes to Megan who is labouring in a leaky boat during the worst storm in history. Sofia's father is a doctor and totally paranoid about home birth. Yet he insists on being in the house during the labour and actually tries to burn the house down. Susannah, who gives birth so quietly that neither the midwife nor the husband realise the baby is born already! The overly amorous husband who should be paying more attention to his labouring wife than the midwife! (Oh yes, I've been there too ...shudder!) The territorial cat who will bite and claw to keep you away from her labouring owner. The stories of long long labours where everyone works together to finally see the woman hold her baby at last. Each story is beautifully crafted and Peggy's sense of humour as well as her belief in birth, pervades this book.

The most significant reason I enjoyed this book however, was that although it is a midwife's memoirs it is the women who speak. There is such an understanding that birth is not about midwifery but about women and their families. Peggy talks of how everything she has learnt about birth has been from the women.

" Each time she knelt to "catch" another baby, Peggy Vincent paid homage to the moment when pain bows to joy, one person becomes two, woman turns to goddess, and the world moves aside to make room for one more soul".

This book isn't about the midwife but about trusting the normal process, home birth and the strength of women.

When I gave my copy to my colleague Julie Richards to read, she rang me the next day and said, "Why didn't you tell me I'd need a box of tissues just to read the acknowledgments!" I gave it to my other colleague, Jacqui, the Sunday night before her holiday so that she could enjoy it at her leisure. She rang me the next morning to say she had planned to peek at it but had finished reading all of it in the wee hours of that morning and did I have another book for her to take on her holiday?

OK, so we like it. It doesn't tell us anything new about home birth and midwifery but it is such an entertaining read and wonderful to have a book out there which celebrates birth at home. It is hoped that all student midwives get a chance to read this and any women thinking about their birthing options or who have any interest in women, families, pregnancy and birth. Enjoy!

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