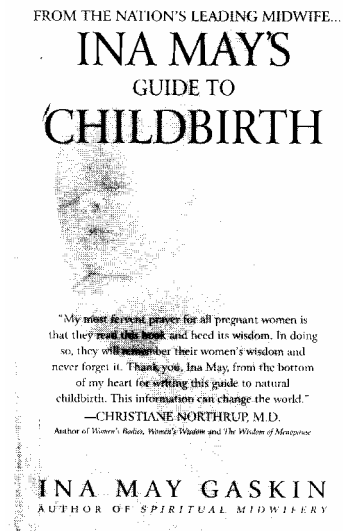


Ina May's Guide to Childbirth

Authored by Ina May Gaskin

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Reviewed by Anitra Carr



Ina May Gaskin's first book *Spiritual Midwifery* was first published in 1977. It was revolutionary in that it was one of the first North American books about midwifery and birth. In it she discussed her beginnings as a self-taught midwife in a small community in Tennessee called The Farm to running a fully-equipped birthing centre which accepts women from all over the country (she is now considered to be the nation's leading midwife). The first half of this book is devoted to birth stories told by the women, men and midwives of the community and the second half is comprised of information and directions for practicing midwives.

According to Ina May, "... the return of the birthing process to women is important to society at large ... The way babies are treated at birth is likely to affect them forever. The way women are treated during childbirth affects them in all their relationships for the rest of their lives."

What impressed most people about her first book was the statistics, ie, most of the women (96%) on The Farm give birth at home naturally without drugs or other intervention, which is impressive considering that in those times women were completely knocked out for hospital births and their husbands were not allowed to be in attendance. Up to the year 2000, their cesarean rate was only 1.4% (and their forceps and vacuum extraction rate was 0.05%); compare this with the US national cesarean rate for 2001 which was 24.2% (and instrumental delivery rate which was about 10%).

Thus, Ina May wrote her second book *Ina May's Guide to Childbirth* in order to explain how they are able to accomplish what they do. In her

words, "Birth is a normal physiological process. In no field other than midwifery could my partners and I have entered as amateurs, arranged for our own education, and still have managed to safely produce results that far outstripped those of medical professionals in hospitals with the most up-to-date technology."

Like her first book, her second book also begins with birth stories which are very moving and empowering and are compelling reading. The second half of the book discusses the essentials of birth, whether you are planning on giving birth at home or in a hospital. In this section she discusses the powerful mind/body connection, including how the wrong environment can stall or even reverse labour, and the pain/pleasure riddle in which she discusses examples of painless and even orgasmic birth. "There is no other organ quite like the uterus. If men had such an organ, they would brag about it. So should we"

Another interesting chapter is "Sphincter Law", where the properties of (excretory and reproductive) sphincters are discussed, eg, sphincters do not obey orders, sphincters function best in an atmosphere of familiarity and privacy, sphincters may suddenly close when their owner is startled or frightened, and laughter helps open the sphincters. In the forgotten vaginal powers and episiotomy chapter Ina May has this to say: "Men take it for granted that their sexual organs can greatly increase in size and then become small again without being ruined. If obstetricians (and women) could understand that women's genitals have similar abilities, episiotomy and laceration rates might go down overnight."

She goes on to compare and contrast the two models of maternity care, ie the midwifery or humanistic model and the techno-medical model, with respect to nutrition, prenatal testing, induction of labour, fetal monitoring, and pain relief. What you least expect when you're expecting discusses the US maternal death rate problem and the risks of new technologies and obstetric fashions. She also devotes a chapter to vaginal birth after cesarean (VBAC).

The book is well referenced, and includes a number of illustrations, including positions adopted by native cultures for labouring and giving birth. It is a wonderful book and I highly recommend it for anyone who is going to give birth.