

# Impressions of the midwife in literature

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## Introduction

**'In childbirth today the obstetrician usually stands centre-stage. The midwife is invisible. Yet historically, ever since the first recorded accounts of birth midwives have had the main responsibility for giving care before during and after the baby is born, and in many societies today the health of most mothers and new-born babies still depends on midwives' (Kitzinger, 1991: p1).**

A review of the midwife as described in fictional and non-fictional birth narratives has been used to explore ways that midwives are perceived in literature.

Written birth narratives, with few exceptions, are largely a feature of 20th century literature. Although this makes most of the available birth narratives contemporary, it does not, however, guarantee the presence of a midwife.

## Nineteenth century images of midwives

Two early birth narratives were written by men (Tolstoy, 1873; Chekov, 1888). Although these are Russian narratives there is no evidence that practices were any different in this country at that time (Carter and Duriez, 1986; Donnison, 1988; Curtis, 1990).

In *Anna Karenin*, Tolstoy (1873) describes the birth of Kitty's baby, a scenario inspired by Tolstoy's own emotional reaction to the birth of his first child.

The midwife, Lizaveta Petrovna, is worthy of note as she is one of the few in literature to be given a name. Lizaveta Petrovna is sent for at the start of Kitty's labour and the doctor keeps the distraught husband company through 22 hours of torment. Lizaveta Petrovna remains calm and resolute, and using 'skillful hands' delivers and resuscitates the baby. The midwife is known and trusted and her skills are respected and appreciated.

Chekov, however, was a doctor, and wrote with professional insight into childbirth. In *The Party*

(1888), Chekov gives a moving account of Olga's premature labour on a stifling and humid day; an interminable banquet is contrasted with the stillness of nature before a storm. A midwife sits with Olga through her labour. At one stage Olga wakes and sees the midwife sitting by a chest with all the drawers pulled out. Later, upon waking (from chloroform) Olga notices the absence of the midwife and the closure of the drawers and realises that her child has been stillborn. The midwife here appears to be merely a symbol of labour and Olga's hopes of a live child. The midwife is not seen to bring any comfort, her departure symbolising the death of the baby.

Tolstoy and Chekov's accounts of childbirth are contemporary and contrast two very different views of midwifery practice. The less favourable account of midwifery is written by Chekov, a doctor. He describes his own profession in a favourable light, and portrays the midwife as a peripheral character during the labour.

The layman, Tolstoy, writes from personal rather than professional experience and praises

the midwife. The midwife is described as keeping close by Kitty and the doctor keeps his distance both physically and professionally.

In England in the same era, Dickens (1844) wrote *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The word 'midwife' had at that time in England lost caste (Donnison, 1988). Dickens chose to describe Mrs Gamp as a monthly nurse, almost apologising for her rather outspoken sign, which boldly proclaimed her a midwife.

In Dickensian England midwives were hardly respectable. The image of the rather garrulous gin tipping and distinctly unprofessional Mrs Gamp was not as bad as other more sinister midwives of the era, known as 'mother midnight' (Carter and Duriez, 1986). Mrs Gamp and other less sober midwives rather overshadowed skilled and educated women who had preceded them. Mrs Gamp, a fictitious character, unfortunately 'established the stereotype of the midwife in history' (Donnison 1988: 70).

## Modern literature

In 1982, Leon Garfield helped to perpetuate the Mrs Gamp image with his short story 'Moss and Blister', one of a collection of short stories for children about apprentices set early in the last century. Moss the midwife, with her apprentice Blister attend women in labour. They ask for mirrors to be covered so that the child will not be born blind, and knots to be untied and drawers opened to hasten the delivery. Their practices are described as 'pig ignorant', but Moss and Blister could deliver babies 'as safely as kiss your hand'.

The tale does little to impress upon young people the work of the midwife, since the other apprenticeships are only portrayed as historical curiosities; such as the lamplighter, the pawnbroker and the haberdasher. This could leave young people believing that midwives are just another curious historical fact, and in this case, the source of some amusement.

*The Midwife's Apprentice*, by Cushman (1997), is another children's story. It is a fictional account of a young girl's attempts to become the respected midwife's apprentice in seven-



Sairey Gamp and Betsey Prig prepare their patient for a journey. (Wellcome Centre Medical Photographic Library, London.)

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teenth century England. Labours and deliveries are vividly described and would strike a chord with any midwife. The midwife in the story, however, is the historical figure, Jane Sharpe. The work of Jane Sharpe is well documented by Donnison (1988) and others. The weaving of fact and fiction is sensitive but simplistic and has been written for a young audience.

Descriptions of birth from the audience's rather than the participant's point of view seems to reverse at the turn of the century. In the twentieth century women novelists pioneered descriptions of birth from the woman's point of view (Bagnold, 1938; Lessing, 1956; Drabble, 1968; Weldon, 1980; Atwood, 1982; Byatt, 1986; McCroy, 1989; Lette, 1993). Where midwives are portrayed, they are, without exception, very minor characters, nameless and seen as peripheral to the birth; they move in and out of the narrative but are not central to the text. The midwife is portrayed not as a source of comfort, but more usually as a source of irritation.

These accounts stick scrupulously to the heroines' point of view, telling the reader only what the heroine could have felt or known at the time, and give an air of authenticity by keeping them free of midwifery or medical jargon. The only notable exception is in *Puffball* (Weldon 1980) where isolated chapters called 'Inside Liffey' are used to describe the progress of the pregnancy separately from Liffey's emotional experiences.

Limb (1986), and Yates (1990), give different perspectives to the birth narrative, with semi-autobiographical accounts of birth. Yates (1990) talks about 'bonding with your obstetrician', and the joys and comforts of using private health care for comfort and convenience when having your baby. The midwife is rarely mentioned, but Yates does have her hairdresser in during labour to ensure that she looks her best for the photographs after delivery.

As a first impression of a midwife in action this book would give the reader the idea that a midwife is useful to have around during labour because she could hold the heated rollers for the hairdresser.

Unlike Yates (1990), Limb (1986) has her baby in the local district hospital's maternity unit and contrasts a kind supportive midwife with the medics who wander in and out to look at the printout from a monitor. Limb's labour is accelerated by doctors using a drug she mishears as 'OXYTOXYCYTOPOXIN'; this she thinks could also be the name of the Aztec God of Misogyny. This view is consistent with Limb's earlier thoughts about the attitude of the doctors when they examine the monitor and ignore her labouring in the bed. Limb describes the midwives vari-



A midwife going to a labour (1811) by T Rowlandson. (Wellcome Medical Photographic Library, London.)

ously as supportive and protective. This book affords the reader a rare view of a midwife at work in believable and modern surroundings. This is the only description of a midwife's work within a birth narrative in a novel uncovered apart from Tolstoy (1873). (One per century seems to be rather slim findings.) Sadly, *Love Forty* (Limb, 1986) is out of print.

In so many of the narratives any member of the midwifery or obstetric team is mentioned as 'them' or 'they' and in the eyes of the patient woman the birth process is portrayed as not just her getting through labour, but also a parallel battle to keep 'them' away, when 'they' want to do things.

In retrospect, was the search for the midwife in the birth narrative unrealistic?

A midwife will attend nearly all births in this country and will deliver around three-quarters of all babies. It has been a huge blow (to professional ego) to find that the midwife is missing from nearly all the literary sources examined. If fictional accounts of childbirth are considered as 'authentic' then they are as valid as any birth narrative; they help the midwife to understand childbirth from the mother's perspective and are perhaps another strategy women adopt to gain control over their birth story.

As Chekov portrayed his own (medical) profession favourably in *The Party*, perhaps midwives need a literary colleague to be a professional advocate. Maybe there is a midwife somewhere who can do for midwifery what James Herriot did for veterinary practice.

## Conclusion

Midwifery and childbirth have all the ingredients required of a blockbusting novel; sex, love, anticipation, excitement, pain, exhilaration of the arrival of a new life, (or the anguish of a lost baby) and the uncertainty of new relationships.

Is it time for midwives to gain control of their profession by portraying it in a literary genre? There is room on the bookshelves for a novel perhaps, somewhere between fact and fiction that would give the general public an insight into the work of the midwife. This may raise the midwife's profile within society, improve the literary image of the midwife and possibly make the midwife as familiar as the doctor or nurse (or vet).

The midwife in literature is almost invisible and it is unlikely that impressions of midwifery are gained to any great extent from literary sources. However, if anyone reading this article knows of any descriptions in fictional literature of labour, delivery or the work of the midwife please get in touch. RCM

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