

Rediscovering Birth

Kitzinger, Sheila.
New York: Pocket Books, 2000.

Birth Your Own Way: Choosing Birth at Home or in a Birth Centre

Kitzinger, Sheila.
Rev. ed. London: Dorling Kindersley, 2002.

Reviewed by Robbie Pfuefer Kahn

When I gave birth in 1972, social anthropologist and childbirth educator Sheila Kitzinger had published two books. Since then she has become like the many-breasted Artemis, Goddess of Fertility. Readers now can “latch on” to any of her twenty-three books and receive knowledge, vital as the living tissue breast milk provides.

In *Rediscovering Birth*, Kitzinger weaves an historical and cross-cultural tapestry filled with a lifetime’s gathering of stories and images. Ancient artifacts; startlingly beautiful indigenous mothers and their infants; racially diverse Western women and babies, men and midwives enliven the pages of Kitzinger’s book. Kitzinger shows a wall-hanging decorated with a repeating hooked diamond symbol, found in weaving and pottery from antiquity to the present. The symbol looks abstract but when you “look more closely” you see a standing woman with arms and legs bent as a baby emerges. Today, Moroccan men sell rugs bearing this birth symbol. When Kitzinger asked about the meaning of the symbol, men explained that it represented “men at prayer” because they “saw these shapes with men’s eyes.”

Rediscovering Birth looks at birth with women’s eyes: It resanctifies birth, recovers “social birth” and the “birth place,” where women create “birth dances” through spontaneous movements and positions. Kitzinger’s tapestry reduces patriarchal “obstetric colonization” to a misshapen oddity in the hooked diamond pattern. She calls “social birth” political because women’s birth work forms “the warp and weft of society.” By relativizing Western medical childbirth (which threatens to obliterate traditional ways), Kitzinger performs her own political act on behalf of childbearing women worldwide.

Sheila Kitzinger is the daughter of a midwife. In *Birth Your Own Way: Choosing Birth at Home or in a Birth Center*, Kitzinger continues the family tradition. She advocates the choice to give birth outside the hospital. With hospital birth the norm, Kitzinger must persuade women that the power to give birth is theirs. Her word-midwifery draws upon metaphors and concepts

accumulated over 30 years: “In labor you swim with contractions that are like tidal waves sweeping through your body. As you push the baby down, you know the intensity of the birth passion, and then reach out with eager hands to welcome your baby and cradle this new life in your arms. To see love made flesh is to witness a miracle.” Phrases like “tidal waves,” “birth passion,” “love made flesh” flood the reader with elemental energy, instilling a desire to know such moments and lessening fear. The beautiful photographs visually corroborate her language of birth. Kitzinger describes the iatrogenic (physician induced disease or damage) consequences of common obstetrical interventions and of newborn care in hospitals, and the estrangement from “the spontaneous psychobiological processes of birth and the creative energy pouring through [women’s] bodies.” She provides abundant information on arranging a birth without a hospital, finding a midwife, choosing the right birth partner(s), meeting birth challenges in nonmedical ways, and planning the “babymoon.” As Kitzinger states, in a “society that is hostile to freedom in childbirth,” it takes “courage to resist autocracy, dogma and the power of the medical system.” Her words act like a tonic, invigorating women to find strength within themselves; this is the book’s greatest act of midwifery.

Pregnant Pictures

Matthews, Sandra, and Laura Wexler.
New York: Routledge, 2000.

Reviewed by Lisa M. Mitchell

In their introduction to *Pregnant Pictures*, Sandra Matthews and Laura Wexler ask an interesting and provocative question: “What is a photograph of pregnancy anyway?” (xi). For North Americans the conventional response includes pictures of women serene and glowing in a naturalized state, headless pregnant torsos in guides to pregnancy, and increasingly, images of the fetus. Matthews and Wexler’s many photographs, with their accompanying analysis, provide a compelling framework for readers to move beyond the conventional responses and to think critically about how we look at and interpret visual representations of pregnancy.

Matthews and Wexler’s analysis is framed in terms of different modes of looking—scopic, instrumental, clinical, and iconic—each with distinctive and changing implications for the production and consumption of images. Readers who are unfamiliar with visual theory may wish that the introductory chapter was a less dense, more accessible pathway into the subsequent analysis of the images. Mindful that looking occurs within particular contexts, the analysis nonetheless deftly links the act of viewing to changing attitudes about preg-