Review of 'Diary of a first time mum: an uncensored account of all the stuff that really happens' by N Hall, Finch publishing, Sydney, 2009

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BOOK REVIEW:

Diary of a First Time Mum: An uncensored account of all the stuff that really happens, Nicole Hall, Finch publishing, Sydney 2010.

The lived reality of becoming a mother for the first time is delightfully described in this book by Nicole Hall. I found Hall’s six chapter account of life with baby ‘Viv’ and partner ‘Jules’ entertaining and revealing. Beginning at day one with an outline of her birth experience, the chapters are presented as day by day diary entries that gradually became less frequent. Chapter titles such as ‘Endless poo: the first month’, ‘Settling in: one to three months’, ‘Falling in love: three to six months’ and ‘So tired: six to twelve months’ act as chronological markers for key parts of Hall’s experience. In the final chapter Hall discusses life after Viv’s first birthday; the birth of her second baby and Viv’s reaction to his brother are included. Each chapter also contains later reflections made by Hall.

This book is essentially a story about how Hall, as a novice, responded to and came to terms with the unknown. The book begins with the declaration, “we have had a baby”, and this baby is “tiny” and “perfect” as well as “mysterious”; to Hall the lived reality of her situation was a shock (p.2). Using trial and error Hall muddled through the early days of parenting remarkably well. She gradually came to know her baby and to fall in love with him. By the
second six months Hall had gained confidence in her parenting abilities but her personal sense of confidence was severely diminished through chronic tiredness. She was diagnosed with hypothyroidism at 10 months, but interestingly her thyroid levels corrected themselves before she started treatment. Self-correcting fluctuations in thyroid levels were also a part of her experience following the birth of her second baby.

As a midwife I saw the book as a perfect reminder of the unique ways that women change as they experience birth and parenting. I found myself feeling disappointed in the practices of Hall’s midwives during her labour. These midwives ignored her pleas to have the monitor belts loosened and gave directions to push when Hall had no desire to do so. It was Hall’s doctor who gave her permission to remove the monitor and to begin pushing when she felt ready. To me, Hall’s birth story was an example of how the routines and associated fears of hospital based midwifery can thwart a midwife’s confidence and impede the midwife’s ability to individualise practices. Such confidence and flexibility is enhanced through an antenatal midwife/woman relationship, however, Hall’s story indicated that she only experienced an ongoing relationship with her doctor.

Hall’s style of writing is relaxed, fun and easy to read. Throughout the book intimate parts of her life including her sexuality and relationship with her partner are explored. Her joy, frustration, worry and love are beautifully relayed. Right from the start I found myself thinking back to my own first experience of motherhood over 22 years ago. I was particularly touched by Hall’s reflections on how her first time mothering experiences taught her to trust her own sense of what to do for her second son, rather than having to rely only on routines and the advice of others. Hall’s book communicates the uniqueness of her own story and includes suggestions to other new mothers. Hall wished she had had these suggestions before her babies were born. I think this is a great book to recommend to childbearing women and for their partners. As a resource for midwives the book gives some interesting insights into one woman’s experience of childbearing change; the book also acts as a reminder about how very individual that process of change is.

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