

Book Review

MAMATOTO – A Celebration of Birth

From the Body Shop Team, Virago Press, London 1991, 173 pp., 9.99£, ISBN 1-85381-421-0.

M is for mother and it comes from one of the first verbal symbols universally formed by human babies. In Swahili MAMATOTO is one of those synthesizing words which inseparably links mother and child into a single concept. In the words of Anne Morrow Lindbergh:

The drama of birth is over. The cord has been cut, the first cry heard: a new life has begun. An infant, wet and bloody from its long journey experiences an overwhelming barrage of new sensations as it feels the weight of air moving across its skin, feels its lungs expand, sees light, hears sounds of the birth room. The mother – seeing, hearing, perhaps touching her baby – scarcely notices the world suddenly busying itself around her, let alone how much her body aches. She has just participated in a miracle. From the deepest part of her comes a need to reach out and meet the tiny being skin to skin.

MAMA AND TOTO BONDING TIME

And MAMATOTO is exactly the right word to denote one of the most informative, fascinating, imagination and image stimulating books about conception, birth and bonding serendipity has ever placed in my hands. I was introduced to MAMATOTO by chance when I went into The Body Shop at Heathrow Airport to buy the only anti-persperent which works for me. The Body Shop is most known for its dedication to not testing any of its personal care products on animals.

The challenge in this review is to use words to describe the celebration of this book. It is compelling because it is succinctly and succulantly jammed full of snippets of mythic tales and folklore as alive and pulsing as when they emerged from the ancient womb of human consciousness. Tales and facts intermingle with proverbs, poems, chants and quotes from women involved in the one position only a woman is qualified to take – the birthing place. All these jewels are stunningly accented by riveting photographs, prints, and paintings about a topic of compelling interest to anyone who is born.

MAMATOTO is the conception of Anita Roddick, Founder and Group Managing Director of the Body Shop and an inspired creative production team. Ms. Roddick confesses that her entire soul was riveted by the birth practices, others including indigenous cultures had developed for the care of their emotions without being severed by science and technology. Her team has gathered together what she considers to be 'real knowledge' which she admits is at best

absolutely accurate, at worst curiously interesting but none the less dialogue with the reader to spark debate.

But readers should not get the impression that MAMATOTO is all make nice about birth. Having been a human embroidery to an insensitive male stitcher in her last birth experience 20 years ago, Ms. Roddick realizes that she only began to recognize the choices and alternatives women could have in childing when she began traveling the world and talking with women in far places especially in the southern hemisphere. And the more she learned about the alternatives pregnant women have, the more outraged she became. But please let me be clear that this is not a radical or feminist protocol. But, in her Introduction, Ms. Roddick voices articulately an outrage often suppressed by women who have been victimised by inhumane and torturous western birth systems imposed in the name of scientific correctness. We must hear her outrage if we are to respect ourselves and as we would like our patients to respect us:

The more I have learned (from other women) the more outraged I have become. I am outraged that far too many women have given up their bodies to hospitals without a fight. I am outraged that obsolete Western obstetric technology is dumped in third world countries. I am outraged that in litigious America malpractice and the medical establishment threaten to banish midwifery to the history books. I am outraged that we assume the 'scientific' method is superior to the practical knowledge women have gained over a millenia of birth experience.

But Ms. Roddick's outrage is only an expression of the actual sense of helplessness, hopelessness and powerlessness she experienced in her sense of irretrievable loss that haunts western women giving birth. But, her outrage does not dangle in hapless protest. In a black page at the end of each chapter we are given a flashbulb, an example of a silent howl of injustice at the shockingly real tragedies that exist side by side with women's joy. One of the Facts You Don't Want to Know concerns smoking during pregnancy:

Thirty percent or more of women in the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Norway smoke during pregnancy. Between 1957 and 1986 studies of over half a million births reported that women who smoked during pregnancy had infants of lower birth weight (averaging 200 grams less) than women who did not smoke. A father who smokes 20 cigarettes a day while his partner is pregnant is cutting his baby's birth weight by a quarter of a pound.

More than half the woman smokers worry about their smoking and 10% actually increase smoking to handle the stress of guilt. The authors urge women to seek support.

As an instrument of change MAMATOTO is an important book in the lore of human birthing history. It is decidedly panoramic in its scope and breadth. And it is wonderfully entertaining and joyful where it can best do that. A great gift for any occasion. If there is any dissatisfaction it is because the reader wants more. Applause to The Body Shop Team especially author Barbara Aria and anthropological researcher Carrol Dunham which created it.

In a glance to the past Ms. Roddick laments that more prebirth support might have born her the fruit of less argumentative daughters. Her hope for them is that they will make more creative and educated choices about giving birth. She

gifts them the words of Walt Whitman: 'Re-examine all you have been told . . . dismiss what insults your soul'. Her words offer a keynote for the future:

I hope MAMATOTO will help us re-examine all we have been told and remind us of what we already know: that by caring for our bodies and our babies' bodies through the most elemental language of touch – through massage, aromatherapy, bathing and breastfeeding – we can begin to fulfil our hopes for a gentler future.

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