Television

Call the Midwife, BBC1, January-February 2012.

Call the Midwife is a BBC period drama set in London’s East End and based on the bestselling memoirs of the late Jennifer Worth (née Lee). Worth’s midwife trilogy has sold over a million copies and spawned a new subgenre with titles like Twelve Babies on a Bike and Catching Babies. Adapted for television by Heidi Thomas and starring Jessica Raine as Jenny Lee, the series was a surprise hit: nearly 10 million viewers watched the opener and a second series is planned for 2013. A laudable landmark in a genre customarily obsessed with emergency wards and white-coated male doctors, Call the Midwife explores a lost world of pregnant women and heroic midwives. Though occasionally described as a 1950s version of One Born Every Minute, the Channel 4 reality series shot in a Southampton maternity hospital, most reviews present Call the Midwife as a human version of James Herriot’s All Creatures Great and Small, the series that inspired a generation of veterinary surgeons. This hard-to-resist analogy is not accidental. Worth was inspired to put pen to paper by a 1998 call by midwifery lecturer Terri Coates in the Royal College of Midwives’ magazine for someone to do for her profession what Herriot did for vets. Worth sent Coates a handwritten manuscript and she agreed to correct the misremembered clinical content. The producers of Call the Midwife subsequently asked Coates to help maintain clinical accuracy on set with authentic-looking props: glass rectal tubes, Pinard stethoscopes, fake blood and umbilical cords, pigs’ placentas and real babies. As much about death and dying as it is about childbirth, each episode is worth watching, not only for the historically accurate delivery scenes, but also for the portrayals of routine urinalysis, antenatal clinics, district nursing, pelvic models and sex education in the 1950s. Yet, attention to detail aside, comparing Worth to Herriot, midwives to vets, and tales of East End women to animal stories highlights some problems with the show.

Since pregnant women have more agency than farm animals, their experiences and networks should play more of a role, even in a drama about midwives. This may be clearest in the decision to have an abortion. Worth’s books demonise backstreet abortionists and in the Guardian she attacked Mike Leigh’s film Vera Drake (2004) as “implausible.” Yet, as historians Stephen Brooke and Emma Jones have noted, Vera Drake offers perhaps the least sensationalised and most historically accurate portrayal of what illegal abortion was like before the 1967 Abortion Act. Vera could have been one of the abortionists interviewed in Holloway women’s prison by Moya Woodside in 1963. Oral history interviews with district midwives disclose how they viewed such women as providing an important service and protected them from prosecution, and a few convicted abortionists were themselves registered midwives struggling to make ends meet.

Although Worth practiced for only seven years, David Kynaston’s recent social history of the 1950s, Family Britain, has already drawn on her authority to doubt the existence of “real-life Vera Drakes”. This highlights a significant problem with relying too heavily on Worth’s memoirs as a historical document: the vast majority of women who successfully ended their unwanted pregnancies in the 1950s did not call the midwife, or at least not one as hostile as Worth. So while the Telegraph has plausibly endorsed the show’s relevance to current debates over the safety and cost-effectiveness of homebirths under the NHS, Call the Midwife is best watched alongside Vera Drake to remedy the conspicuous absence of abortion in the former. Both should be viewed with an eye for the complexities of representing a contested past, whether in nostalgic memoirs, cosy television, kitchen sink cinema or social history.

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Episode 4 of 6 begins with Shirley Redmond (Emma Noakes), whose previous baby was stillborn, going into labour. In this publicity still, which differs slightly from the show, Jenny (Jessica Raine) listens for the fetal heartbeat through a Pinard stethoscope, a 19th-century invention, as Sister Evangelina (Pam Ferris) counts the seconds on her wristwatch. Followed by X-rays, urine tests and ultrasound, stethoscopes were among the earliest technologies used by doctors, nurses and midwives to disclose the hidden contents of the womb. © Neal Street Productions.