

A note on the photographs

The photographs in this book depict midwives attentively and warmly observing and interacting with women in labour in a way that clearly shows mutual trust. The immediacy of these photographs describes a unique set of relationships between midwives, mothers and the babies themselves. It is precisely this that is often invisible to others.

These photographs were taken on behalf of and at the request of parents, yet the emphasis is clearly from the midwife's point of view, focusing on the mother's physical progression and her emotional experience. Birth is a dynamic process and difficult to record. Apart from photographic restraints such as limited light, tight interior spaces and awkward positions, as the baby begins to crown the camera is angled straight at the mother's genitalia, directing our gaze towards the baby's head (or bottom) as it emerges from the mother's body. Perspectives of this kind – the midwife's perspective – are seldom if ever depicted either in a medical or in an artistic context.

It is this vast wealth of experiential knowledge of the birth process accrued over time that has been visually transmitted in these photographs, and which has also moved me as an artist. Prejudice against midwives' acquired knowledge is well known within the profession. These views of birth are unlikely to be the ones published in antenatal literature and yet they are the very ones that could help prepare pregnant women for birth.

Fear of women's bodies is so profoundly embedded in our culture that even within the contemporary medical establishment in this country the birth scene is taboo. The photographs in this book break this taboo. They attest to a new aesthetic of birth that resists obscuring the scene with sanitised photographic platitudes, and in its place shows a new aesthetic, a different beauty and one that uses realistic images and language to fight fear.

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