

THE TRUTH ABOUT CHILD BIRTH

What the books don't tell you!

Words by **Alana Kirk-Gillham**

The minute you are pregnant, you are assaulted with advice and information.

You read, you absorb, you learn the facts, yet it is impossible to translate the words on the page to a reality you can't quite grasp. So the shock of childbirth and child-rearing hits you like an avalanche, and can leave you reeling. All those lovely pictures of women in books cradling happy newborns bear no relation whatsoever to the wailing creature beside you and the Wild Woman of the West staring back in the mirror. There is so much left unsaid by the books, so much left for you to find out for yourself. So here it is. In black and white. Read it if you dare.

The truth from one who knows.

Let me give you an example

of what the books don't tell you. Hell is sharing a room with five newborn babies and their pained mothers. Tortured hell is trying to sleep in a room with five babies after 48 hours of labour and an emergency C-section. Initially unable to get out of bed because of stitches and tubes, the final insult is that you can't even throw a pillow at the woman snoring beside you.

A symphony of embattled cries – from the Squeakers to the Squealers – can all be captured, at full volume, on a night in a maternity ward. And would they be considerate enough to all follow the same routine? Of course not. Squeaker starts first, lighting up his tune of wailing, wounded animal, finally settling after 15 minutes of stressed hushes from mum. A few moments silence,





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where a cruel interval of sleep finally takes hold, is soon shattered by the Squealer's rendition of a cat being strangled. This lasts 20 minutes until every occupant in the room is wired to pinging point. But it's not over. Screecher and Bellow now kick off the finale leaving you wondering if, in fact, this is some cruel joke and Jeremy Beadle is going to pop his head round your privacy curtain any minute. Of course, once the neonatal orchestra have rested their instruments for a blessed moment's reprieve, before beginning the whole cycle

again, you are just drifting off to desperate slumber when your own angel wakes and angrily screams for her nocturnal feed.

To add final insult to sleep-deprived injury, those annoying mothers who seem to be able to sleep through anything (including their own baby's wailing) kick up a beatbox of a cappella snoring to accompany your lonely feed. And believe me, there is nothing worse than being awake when all you can hear is the satisfied snoring of someone enjoying the one thing you desire most in the world (wait till you get home

and your husband does the same – it's nearly grounds for divorce!). This is hell. You are straddling your catheter, too sore to move, bedsores developing from sitting too long on a hard bed, babies are screaming, people are snoring, nurses are talking, and you know that sleep is now a long lost friend you may never see again.

'Stay in hospital for the rest' people say to you before you give birth. Are they having a laugh?

Let me give you another example, and I apologise now for the – how shall I put it – 'toilet' talk. You are told about the three stages of labour, but every mother knows there is a fourth – the first 'movement' post birth. Most post-partum mums suffer from constipation, and two days after my C-section I gave birth to triplets – hard poo, harder poo and excruciatingly painful poo. In fact, after both my pregnancies, I screamed more on the loo than in the labour ward! Forget packing your hospital bag with lotions and potions and frilly nighties. A family size box of All Bran should take priority over everything.

And then there's the trapped wind. This is also extremely common, yet no book I ever read told me I could expect to be writhing in agony, thinking I was having a heart attack as the bubbles danced in my rib cage and forced me to sleep sitting up for two nights.

Now, shall we talk about breastfeeding? Oh the books rightly extol its virtue as the best way to feed your beloved, and of course it is. But when they refer casually to engorgement, mastitis and cracked nipples, they in no way prepare you for the pain. The god-awful, teeth-clenching, tears-in-your eyes pain. Let's not even go there with the squirty boobs.

So why the hell do we do it? We do it, gladly, because the books also can't tell you stuff that make it all bearable, the stuff that even makes you go through it all again

without a second thought.

Books can't describe the sweaty smell of a newborn's head that you inhale and sends you into a contented coma, and lasts inside you like a magic vapour to dispel any pain and tiredness. Books can't describe the softness of your baby's skin against yours – so fragile, so soft, so in need of your protection. Books can't describe the internal combustion of your heart when, a few weeks old, she gazes at you, and smiles. She connects to you and angels sing. That connection will last a lifetime. Just like no-one can prepare you for the death-defying tiredness, so no-one can prepare you for the love. Just as nothing can prepare you for the pain, the discomfort, the insanity, so nothing can prepare you for the emotion, the sense of protection and destiny, the overwhelming beauty of knowing your life has taken on new meaning and will never be the same again.

Even in the depths of despair during those lonely hours of the night, when hungry screams wake you from the dead, when a gummy gaping mouth clamps onto your sore bruised nipple, making you wince in shocked pain, when the thought of trying to fumble in the dark to change your 20th rancid nappy in 12 hours nearly sends you over the edge of reason, a little hand strokes your skin, one eye pops open, a tiny head emits that addictive sweaty newborn smell that will never be forgotten, and suddenly all is right with the world.

You have begun a journey that will never end. A journey more splendid, more adventurous, more scary and challenging, more rewarding and enlightening than anything you could have imagined – or read about. No person, no book, (and no magazine article) can tell you, because it is your journey. Enjoy it. The pain will ease, the wonder will not.

Just don't forget to pack the All Bran. **MM**