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The Birth House: A Novel



Synopsis

The Birth House is the story of Dora Rare, the first daughter to be born in five generations of the Rare family. As a child in an isolated village in Nova Scotia, she is drawn to Miss Babineau, an outspoken Acadian midwife with a gift for healing and a kitchen filled with herbs and folk remedies. During the turbulent first years of World War I, Dora becomes the midwife's apprentice. Together, they help the women of Scots Bay through infertility, difficult labors, breech births, unwanted pregnancies and even unfulfilling sex lives. But when Gilbert Thomas, a brash medical doctor, comes to Scots Bay with promises of fast, painless childbirth, some of the women begin to question Miss Babineau's methods and after Miss Babineau's death, Dora is left to carry on alone. In the face of fierce opposition, she must summon all of her strength to protect the birthing traditions and wisdom that have been passed down to her. Filled with details that are as compelling as they are surprising—childbirth in the aftermath of the Halifax Explosion, the prescribing of vibratory treatments to cure hysteria and a mysterious elixir called Beaver Brew—Ami McKay has created an arresting and unforgettable portrait of the struggles that women faced to have control of their own bodies and to keep the best parts of tradition alive in the world of modern medicine.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Birth House follows the life of Dora Rare, who lives in a small and slightly isolated village off the coast of Nova Scotia, around the time of World War I. Dora, a young adolescent, is the first girl to be born in many generations of the Rare family genealogy. This alone gives the town enough rumors to spread about her and her family. But when family circumstances force her to choose between staying with her "proper" aunt Fran or the local midwife Miss Babineau for the winter, she chooses

to stay with the midwife. Rumors and stories abound. Many of the local townspeople view Miss Babineau, and now Dora, as witches or something of the like, and most keep their distance from the both of them; that is until a child is sick, a woman has gynecological concerns, or a baby is being born into the world. In all of those instances the townspeople come running to Miss Babineau for help, and soon to Dora as well. The Art of Midwifery The Birth House gives an enchanting example of how the practices of traditional midwifery were passed on from generation to generation. Being a midwife, which means "with woman", was not and is not just about catching babies. In this story, traditional midwifery takes on a role for women that meets their needs and far exceeds the medical model of care. Miss Babineau does much more for the community than attend labors. Her wisdom abounds in many areas such as mixing up syrups and herbs for the sick that bring down fevers and soothe sore throats and coughs. Politics and Society Through this story we also see a political attack against midwifery and a societal misunderstanding of this traditional art. Gilbert Thomas, a medical doctor from a nearby town, continually threatens Dora and Miss Babineau with prosecution.

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