



Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750-1950

Judith Walzer Leavitt

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"Childbirth is more than a biological event in women's lives," writes Judith Leavitt. "It is a vital component in the social definition of women." This book uses personal accounts by birthing women and their medical attendants to show how childbirth has changed from colonial times to the present. *Brought to Bed* describes the traditional woman-centered home-birthing practices and their replacement by male doctors and the movement of birth from the home to the hospital. Leavitt points out that childbearing women and their physicians gradually changed birth practices because they believed the increased medicalization would make birth safer and more comfortable. The irony was that infant and maternal mortality did not immediately decline when childbirth moved into the hospital--because of the danger of infection--and more and more women found the birth experience to be an alienating one. Outside of their homes, they felt "alone among strangers". Leavitt concludes that birthing women held considerable power to determine labor and delivery events as long as childbirth remained at home. Until the 1920s and '30s, birthing women surrounded themselves with a network of supportive women whom they knew and trusted. Women, in strength, negotiated with the various experts they invited to help and determined what would be done to their bodies. When childbirth moved to the hospital in the twentieth century, the medical profession won the upper hand. The book concludes with a discussion of recent events in American obstetrics that illustrate how women are seeking to retrieve some of the traditional woman--and family--centered aspects of childbirth.

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