



Birth: A Literary Companion

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In this vibrant literary collection of short essays and poems, sacred hushes fill in pregnant days, women anguish at night, parents travel through the dissonance that occurs when the raw invasion of life head-butts doting smiles, the veneer of parenting joy. The writings of fifty authors (many well-known) explore the mysteries of childbirth and parenting, from conception to late infancy, from otherworldly dreamtime moments to hands being tied, against will, for Caesarean delivery.

There is terror, here, and pain, along with transcendence and beauty, and it's all gorgeously written. "Who could have known how called / we were to what we were doing? How godlike / it was, how delicious / how holy?" Kate Daniels writes in "Genesis 1:28." Women describe their unborn babies as sharks, as dreamed-of light. As Lisa Lenzo prepares to deliver, she writes: "Dr. Cal and Ray don't seem aware of the threat right now. I keep smiling, pretending to be oblivious, too. But I remind myself not to get too happy, that there's power here far beyond our control."

Bodies transform, lives transform, relationships transform with arrival. This collection covers a range of childbirth and parenting experiences, gay and straight, mothers and fathers, married and single, adoptive and biological. Writers range from literary icons like Sylvia Plath and Gary Snyder to contemporary award winners.

Both editors are authors and teach creative writing, Kovacic at the Creative Performing Arts High School in Pittsburgh and Barrett at Florida International University in Miami. Kovacic's short fiction, essays, and poetry have appeared in many literary magazines, including *Kansas Quarterly* and *Cimarron Review*. Barrett is an Edgar Award-winning short-story writer and author of *The Secret Names of Women* and *The Land of Go*.

In this rare collection of birth literature, the bliss is there, along with people running smack-dab into their own, often unexpected, inadequacies. Who doesn't have a maternal instinct? Lots of people find, to their shame, that they don't.

Charles Baxter, in "Saul and Patsy Are in Labor," writes: "He has a secret he has not told Patsy, though she probably knows it: he does not have any clue to being a parent. He does not love being one, though he loves his daughter with a newfound intensity close to hysteria. To him, fatherhood is one long unrewritable bourgeois script. Love, rage, and tenderness disable him in the chairs in which he sits, miming calm, holding Mary Esther."

Birth: A Literary Companion shares the intimacies of this mysterious passage, a collage of the beauty and beastliness of parenting. The short bites make it easy reading for time-pressed new parents. It is a much-needed addition to shelves of parenting books that teach nursing methods and exalt birth, à la Hallmark, without delving into the alarm, tender glories, and transformations it brings.

LORI HALL STEELE (November / December 2002)

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