ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

The Blue Cotton Gown: A Midwife's Memoir
Patricia Harman
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“How did a flower child who had faith that if you just trusted the decency in all people everything would work out become a middle-aged woman who can’t sleep, she’s so worried about everything?” That’s what Harman asks herself as she journals about a recent year in her life as a nurse-midwife.

It’s a turbulent year, occupied as always with the patients at the women’s health practice in West Virginia she shares with her OB/GYN husband, Tom. What makes it even more stressful are Harman’s personal health scares, tax and money troubles, and the possible collapse of their thirty-year marriage.

Patsy, as she refers to herself in this, her first book, self-medicates the insomnia as needed with three ounces of scotch in a little jam jar that sits in her bathroom cupboard. She needs to sleep… “but the stories need to be told because they are from the hearts of women: the tender, angry hearts; the broken, beautiful hearts of women.”

There’s Aran, the seventeen-year-old daughter of a friend who has a full scholarship to college, but instead ends up being a young mother, with tragic consequences; there’s Nila, plucky mother of seven, who leaves an abusive situation; there’s Kasmar, who realized forty years earlier she should have been born a man; there’s Shiana, a nineteen-year-old co-ed who has numerous health issues as the result of an unintentional one-night stand.

Intertwined with the daily visits and tales of these and other patients in their blue cotton gowns they wear while being examined, is Patsy’s personal story. She and Tom are empty nesters who try to work in some leisure time between their hectic schedules. Patsy sometimes idly thinks they should return to their less tumultuous life of years ago—“go back to being hippies.” But she is drawn to the women and gives each of them a voice here. Because of the subject matter involved, some of the language is quite frank, though not gratuitous.

Harman’s descriptions are wonderful: A doctor’s “breath smells of coffee and exhaustion.” Once, during another rough patch, she and Tom “looked at each other with eyes like wounds in our faces.”

While this topic may not appeal to all readers, women, those in the health field, and anyone who just wants to walk around in someone else’s life for a while, will enjoy this not easily-forgotten memoir—and its author.