

The Popish Midwife - A tale of high treason, prejudice and betrayal

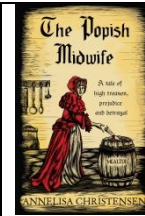
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The last twenty years have seen a blossoming of midwifery tales starting with and inspired by Jennifer Worth's memoirs, *Call the Midwife*. Like all genres there are the good, the bad, and the indifferent and I gather them all. Before Jennifer put fountain pen to paper the midwife was almost completely hidden, missing from literature.

Annelisa Christensen bought a three hundred year old disbound record of a trial over the internet and discovered she had unearthed the trial record of Elizabeth Cellier. Cellier was known as the Popish Midwife; it has taken Christensen many years to write the fictionalised version of this story.

Christensen's first published novel is boldly written as a first-person narrative in the style of Philippa Gregory. It is set in the 17th Century during the reign of Charles II, an era when it was not safe to be a Catholic. As a Catholic midwife Elizabeth Cellier is exposed to religious prejudice, and marriage to a Frenchman also sets her apart within the community. There are some vivid descriptions of the brutality and bigotry of 17th-century life and the Catholic witch hunts led by Titus Oates.

Elizabeth (Lizzie) Cellier uses her status as a midwife to gain entry to Newgate prison to distribute alms to those incarcerated for Catholic observances. The story winds around prison life, friendships unwisely formed with prisoners, brutality, trials and bigotry. Elizabeth is fraudulently implicated in a Popish plot to kill the king, is tried for treason and imprisoned, but escapes the gallows. She was doubtless an unusually strong and articulate woman for her time who remarkably survived imprisonment.

The editorial and grammatical inconsistencies are irritating. Inaccurate spellings such as 'breach' rather than 'breach' and missing capitalisation of proper names are scattered throughout and should have been corrected before publication. The historical anachronisms are even more surprising, for example a description of tucking a dress into knickers (p. 82) is nearly two hundred years too early for such a garment. Dysentery is named but the condition would have been known as 'bloody flux'. There are other inconsistent mixtures of old and modern language conferring on the main character knowledge improbable for the era and unlikely for a woman. However, there are some interesting historical additions, such as a referral to a play by Mrs Aphra Behn. We never have much of a description of Lizzie except for her clothing, but she describes herself as fifty years old and yet she has a baby still crawling and a child of four. This level of fertility would be considered unusual even now with the assistance of modern obstetrics and assisted conception.

As Christensen is writing about a midwife we might expect frequent observations of her practice but they are infrequent and, apart from an early encounter resulting in an improbable post mortem Caesarean section, only briefly described. Amongst the tools carried, Christensen suggests that Lizzie had forceps. Forceps would have been extremely rare and entirely in the hands of doctors at the time. References to normal midwifery and attending labouring women is sparse. Elizabeth Cellier proposed a College of Midwifery but this receives only a single reference near the end of the book. Elizabeth's midwifery is secondary to her involvement with politics and religion.

If you aren't irritated by professional errors and grammatical inconsistencies this could be an immersive read.

Terri Coates

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Midwifery Advisor, Call the Midwife, CTM Productions.

Note: the publisher reports that the typographical errors reported by Terri will be corrected in future impressions.