



Title: The Gossips' Choice

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At present the 21st century Covid-19 pandemic is wreaking its devastating effects, and inevitably there have been comparisons with the early 20th century Spanish 'flu' pandemic. Publication of *The Gossips' Choice* (a gossip meaning a female friend invited to a birth) is therefore timely because the historical backdrop of the novel focuses on 17th century England and the Great Plague of 1665, thus facilitating a further comparison with aggressive forms of human disease. Specifically, the novel offers a detailed account of post-Civil War England with an emphasis on childbirth, the main protagonist, Lucie Smith, being a midwife of some 30 years' experience who lives and practises in a small market town.

The author's detailed account of challenging events in 17th century England resonates with the reader despite the disparate social/political aspects of 21st Century life. This is primarily because the book skilfully discourses on the resilience of the human condition during times of severe adversity. Further, the context of the novel expertly reflects the issues women faced, including repeated childbearing and patriarchy, the author weaving a tale of how women bonded through female rites of passage. This is refreshing not only because it circumvents the usual ruminations of male diarists of the era, but also because it offers scarce, but nonetheless salient examples of the art of midwifery. This includes detailed accounts of the remedies prepared by Lucie's apothecary husband at "The Three Doves", her use of the birthing chair and her not-insignificant dexterity in dealing with complicated births, although sometimes with tragic outcomes. Additionally, there are repeated references

to the basic but invaluable tools of her trade, housed in a large chest. For the most part, these consist of linens, blankets and "clouts", or makeshift sanitary wear. (Even today, the need for the latter is still scandalously prevalent for some). Further, and perhaps unusually for midwives at that time, Lucie's literacy permits the documentation of her cases, which she then uses to teach both herself and her apprentice; her publisher son argues for her casebook's publication, so that it can become a midwifery text available to all, but this is a plot twist left hanging.

These fascinating insights into pregnancy/birth are deftly juxtaposed with accurate, historical depictions of the plague (whereby Lucie unusually attends a local family of royal courtiers avoiding London), and the effects of civil and European wars. The spectre of perceived negligence provides a telling comparison between the vicarious nature of Lucie's work and contemporary practice. Her hearing before the Bishop's Court, with its implied defamation of character and the ultimate sanction of removal of her licence to practise, resonates with the risks midwives face today. Thus, despite the novel's historical setting, it is the constancy of the human condition, so compassionately evident, that makes *The Gossips' Choice* such a riveting read.

In summary, the book is an immensely detailed, well researched account of some of the main socio-political aspects of later-17th Century England and of childbirth in particular. At the same time, it is an engaging novel which weaves the reader into the rich tapestry of women's lives, not only that of the main character in the book, but also those of the women in her household, including her young

protégée. More importantly, the stories of the women Lucie attended, regardless of their age and status, articulate shared experiences of the vicissitudes of 17th century life, magnified in the vulnerability of women during what was often a dangerous time in their lives. Childbirth was something most women could not avert and navigated by shared emotional and communal bonds. Here this is depicted through female intuition, humour, and an empathy often demonstrated in their compassion for one another. Ultimately, this depiction of female solidarity is the particular strength of the book.

Carol Hindley, R.M.