

Ghost Belly

Elizabeth Heineman.

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REVIEWED BY SUSAN CONRADSEN

In her memoir *Ghost Belly* Elizabeth Heineman shares the experience of the stillbirth of her second son. Heineman is not the typical mother. She had her first child within a 17 years long same-sex relationship, became pregnant the second time within a long term opposite-sex relationship at the advanced maternal age of 47, chose a home birth with a midwife in Iowa, and coped with the loss of her son in unconventional ways including spending several days with the baby at home before the burial. Heineman is a professor of history and of gender, women's and sexuality studies, and is a published author and recognized scholar in German and European studies. This is her first memoir and is written in a non-academic format, there are no sources, and few statistics or similar types of data that one might expect from a professor. Unlike books that combine statistics with personal experiences, such as *Misconceptions* (Wolf), this memoir focuses entirely on her personal experience. There are places where legal issues are briefly mentioned to provide context, such as the fact that home births were illegal in Iowa until 2008 (Heineman 59) and that 1 in 115 live births in the United States results in a stillbirth (178). But such data are sporadic and uncited. If one is looking for a book filled with theory, facts, birthing culture and myths, or a more thorough medical and statistical discussion of stillbirths or home births versus hospital births, they will be disappointed. An appendix with this information, including resources to learn about current state laws and relevant organizations helping women would be a good addition, but is not the intent of this memoir.

If gaining a realistic understanding of what it would be like to experience a stillbirth is the objective, this memoir is an excellent choice. From the first few pages the author's writing style engages you; her narrative is so compelling and raw it is as if you are hearing her firsthand. Further, her technique of going back and forth in time to tell her story generates an interest in learning how the puzzle pieces will ultimately connect. This dance between various time periods did an excellent job in foreshadowing and providing context. By delving into the events of the birth and her mourning and then stepping back into history or forward into the present created lulls in emotional intensity which enables the reader to digest the raw emotion more easily.

Throughout the book Heineman discusses outside factors and decision points that led her to choose a home birth. Her ability to address this hot button issue in an objective but complex way is another strength. The reader is carried along as the author navigates the various angles of legal issues, safety, competing interests between medical doctors, direct-entry midwives, and nurse-midwives, and social opinions on home birth (and how heated these angles can be on all sides). Each issue is touched on, but the focus is on Heineman's process of trying to make sense of all the information within her own life and her specific overriding question, "Would it have turned out differently if it hadn't been a home birth?" (177). Unwittingly, the reader is drawn into learning about the politics of home birth and the complicated grayness of causality while following Heineman's quest for answers.

The major contribution of this memoir is that it is a deeply moving, intimate spotlight shone on an experience often kept hidden in the shadows. She vividly describes how she was creating memories of her son, of handling daily life and friends and their conversation while being overwhelmed with her emotions, the logistics of insurance and legal issues following death. All of these details educate on a topic that is glaringly absent from societal conversations. As Heineman points out, there are "roughly 10 times as many stillbirths as cases of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)" but much more public education and awareness is geared towards SIDS than stillbirth (178).

The writing style makes it amenable to any audience, and it would be extremely useful to anyone who has experienced a stillbirth. In the academic arena, it would be a good supplement to classes teaching about grief, mothering, and politics of birth. This memoir would resonate with students and provide great discussions that could then be enhanced with outside research and centered within theories learned in the class (e.g., stages of grief or feminist frameworks on patriarchy and birth).

References

Wolf, Naomi. *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood*. New York: Anchor. 2003.