

Description

Book Review: The Last Midwife by Karen Lawrence

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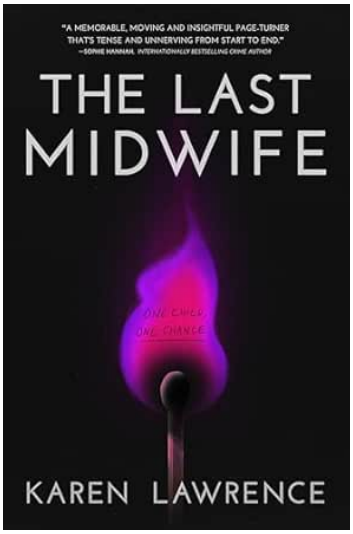

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Following in the formidable tradition of Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*), Chan (*The School for Good Mothers*), Ramos (*The Farm*), and Elison (*The Book of the Unnamed Midwife*), Karen Lawrence's *The Last Midwife* offers a speculative account that functions less as dystopian fiction and more as a cautionary examination of the future of maternity care. The book's central purpose is to explore how reproductive systems might evolve when efficiency, surveillance and politics displace autonomy, ethics and human rights.

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Set in a society where caesarean section is the only legal mode of birth, women wear 'fembands' declaring reproductive status, and population control is normalised with chilling efficiency, the author constructs a future that feels disturbingly proximate. Yet the author moves beyond familiar reproductive dystopia to explore how absolute control over women's bodies may be institutionalised and the ethical consequences of such control for both women and maternity care practitioners.

Through Chiara's journey to becoming "a good nurse" at the Genesis Centre, Lawrence gives tender and unsettling attention to the moral dilemma of providing care within a system that claims benevolence while practising coercion. The tension between humanised care and institutional compliance will resonate strongly among midwives and maternity staff familiar with practising individualised care within rigid regulatory environments; here, politics-based care replaces evidence-based care and dissent carries the ultimate price.

Although fictional, the narrative is grounded in well-established debates within maternity care giving the book a high degree of conceptual credibility. The procedural detail, organisational hierarchies, and institutional culture are depicted with notable accuracy. Despite the pervasive fear that Lawrence cultivates so effectively, there is also hope – though it is risky, and difficult to access. The book is gripping and fluid – I finished in two days from my narrowboat – though readers may need to pause when the narrative cuts uncomfortably close to contemporary realities.

More than a dystopia, *The Last Midwife* is a reminder of what is at stake if we lose sight of midwifery, autonomy, and our individual integrity. Its main characters speak directly to why many of us entered this work at all – and why, in the face of both past and future threats, midwives are and must remain, as Lawrence insists, warriors.

This book is recommended for practising midwives, students, educators, and maternity leaders seeking a thought-provoking exploration of ethics, power, and professional integrity in contemporary and future maternity care.

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