

Description

Mother Tongue: The Surprising History of Women's Words – by Jenni Nuttall

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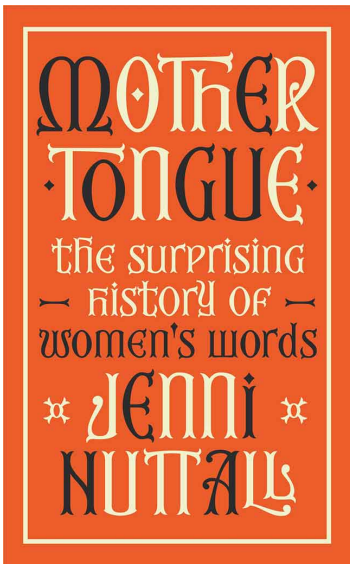
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As midwives we know that words matter. They have the power to engender both courage and shame. Jenni Nuttall's book is a fascinating exploration of the history of many different words that relate to women's lives, including menstruation, the workplace, childbirth and feminism.

She describes how Old English and medieval terms tended to be more literal descriptions of women's bodies and their functions: periods, for example ('an empty, evasive word'), were referred to as 'flux' (flowing) or 'rennying' (running)'.

She discusses how nouns such as ‘pregnancy’ or ‘gestation’ are hopelessly inadequate at capturing the active, life-giving work of growing a baby, and how the word ‘vagina’, after the Latin for the sheath of a sword, centres passivity and heteronormativity. She explores the history of seduction in English writing, and subsequent muddying of the definition of rape.

Dr Nuttall’s book invites us to notice how, just like tidy diagrams of sex organs in a textbook, our current reproductive lexicon of cold scientific words often does not seem to ‘fit’ the many-shaped bodies of reality. This matters, because women need to be able to talk about their bodies and their experiences in plain words that make sense to them. Some of the language we use may be deeply unhelpful; ‘miscarriage’, for example, full of the implication of something let slip. Phrases such as ‘failure to progress’ and ‘incompetent cervix’ have no place in the respectful care we want to offer; this book is a call to us as health professionals to think seriously about the language we use in our daily practice. It is an important read, because continuing to have this conversation requires courage and determination. Jenni Nuttall reminds us that women and birthing people deserve accurate, helpful language that does justice to both their bodies and their lives. **TPM**

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1. Book reviews
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3. TPM Journal

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