

The Importance of Seven Nurse Memoirs Written in Recent Times

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Abstract

In this paper, I try to portray some of the most horrid events chronicled by former British nurses in the early and mid-twentieth century. These books provide an excellent break from the regular undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum texts. I have chosen seven memoirs written by former nurses, some of whom are still alive today. I have found these tales extraordinary and a strong source of courage and inspiration. One can truly learn how nurses and midwives worked under the oddest circumstances and the rigorous training they underwent. These memoirs offer a graphic picture of hospital life, revealing many of its shades, and recount events of barbarity experienced by doctors and nurses during the Second World War. The *Midwife Trilogy* is a unique series that emphasizes the importance of midwives in our lives.

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In the world of classroom teaching and engaging with English classics, one rarely finds sufficient time for popular literature. However, I recently came across a bestselling memoir written by a former nurse, Jennifer Worth, titled *Call the Midwife*. This prompted me to read her second book, *Shadows of the Workhouse*, and subsequently her third, *Farewell to the East End*. These stories were true and quite gripping. I also read four other similar books, which I have mentioned above. I realized the importance of occasionally drifting away from regular curriculum classics to explore recent books, preferably true accounts of real lives and events. Incidentally, these memoirs also provide ample research scope, firstly because they are relatively recent and secondly because they are set against historical backdrops.

The aforementioned titles are all set in early- and mid-twentieth-century England, a challenging time for any nation. Nurses, doctors, and midwives faced immense difficulties. All these books serve as great chronicles of their times. In the *Midwife Trilogy*, the author confronts all odds. In 1950s England, patient care and emergency services were still developing. Midwives were often caught between doctors and patients. Jennifer Worth provides remarkably graphic depictions of 1950s England. Both literarily and historically, these books carry immense significance. Special mention must be made of *Sisters in Arms* by Nicola Tyrer, which is more historical than literary. Many of us, born after the Second World War, have read about the war in books or heard stories from our fathers and grandfathers. However, *Sisters in Arms* is a true account of nurses who fulfilled their obligations during the Second World War.

A common thread runs through all these nurse memoirs: they are a great source of inspiration. We often complain about what we have or have not achieved, little realizing that

countless devoted personnel work tirelessly not merely to earn a living but to demonstrate how to lead an inspirational life. Midwives and nurses are shining examples.

They faced numerous challenges and difficulties—working on snowy mornings, stormy nights, in the driest parts of the Sahara, dense jungles, and other extreme locations. While away from today's sophisticated hospitals, they performed with the scantiest tools and equipment. Even during their training programs, they endured strict regimes under the watchful eye of matrons. Like doctors, they handled delicate situations that sometimes hung in the balance. Therefore, I strongly recommend these books. Trainee nurses, in particular, can draw courage and stamina from them.

Each book provides a slice of hospital life. Typically, we rarely understand what actual hospital life entails, but these books offer readers an inside view. Each writer, being a trainee nurse, describes every step of the training process, from basic skills like bandaging and taking blood pressure and temperatures to the most critical nursing roles. One recurring character, the matron—often feared but seldom revered—is depicted fairly. Despite appearing intimidating, matrons serve as pillars of strength and confidence in critical situations.

In my opinion, the *Midwife Trilogy* is the best series on midwives. Midwives had hardly been acknowledged by authors in literature before this trilogy. Jennifer Worth, perhaps for the first time, highlights the crucial role they have historically played. They attended calls around the clock, 365 days a year, rarely able to refuse their obligations. Many were associated with nunneries, which added to their sense of duty. The trilogy recounts cases where women were unaware of their pregnancies, requiring midwives and nurses to manage all kinds of situations, often with patients who were hostile or ignorant of medical care. The *Midwife Trilogy* vividly depicts London's East End in the 1950s, a relatively impoverished area that received immigrants from across the world and was notorious for shady activities. Midwives performed their duties with sincerity and devotion, even as patients suffered terminal illnesses or other complications. One scene illustrates this poignantly:

"Frank was quietly slipping away into that mysterious borderland between life and death, where peace, rest, and gentle sounds are the only needs. One day, in my presence, he gazed at Peggy for a long time as though he did not recognize her and then said quite clearly: 'Peggy, my first love, my only love, always there, always when I need you.' He smiled and drifted away again."

Sisters in Arms is a true account of historical events rather than a simple memoir. The events occur when the Axis forces were winning decisive battles, and the Allied armies struggled to retain territories. The author, commissioned abroad in several countries, describes the monstrosities of war. Soldiers and nurses were imprisoned in tiny cells, denied basic amenities, and in many cases faced severe cruelty, including starvation, assault, and murder. These gallant nurses worked in the

Saharan deserts of North Africa, where medical facilities were scarce, often operating on the injured under harsh conditions. One excerpt illustrates the brutality of war:

"The war forced them to develop emotional strength that few suspected they possessed. Day after day, they faced terrible sights, but as professionals, they could not afford the luxury of tears. Overnight, they had to put on brave faces, while many of us of the same age were brought up in comfort. Some had both legs amputated; others lived with head-to-toe burns, blindness, mangled chests, or jaws blown away."

In conclusion, these literary works, being relatively recent and based on personal experiences and historical events, merit significant literary and historical research. Some authors are still alive and can be personally interviewed. While the seven books discussed here are not exhaustive, they represent a growing collection of recent nurse memoirs.

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