

I wanted to wait a while before writing this article, so that I wouldn't spoil the plots of last Summer's blockbusters for anyone who took a while to get around to them. But the latest instalments of Star Wars and Harry Potter were rather darker than I had anticipated, and both involved a subject that I certainly didn't anticipate: maternal mortality. We already knew, of course, that Harry Potter's mother had died when he was a baby. Then, in the latest instalment, we find that Lord Voldemort's mother (see, I'm not afraid to mention his name!) died an hour after giving birth to him, apparently because her lover didn't love her.

If that wasn't enough, I then trooped off to the cinema to see Star Wars Episode 3, curious to find out how the sweet little blonde child could possibly turn into Darth Vader, and there's Padme giving birth to Luke and Leia from under a very odd-looking grey metal skirt effort, which in itself is enough to destroy all hope for the future of natural childbirth. She manages to live long enough to name her babies, and then dies in the arms of Obi-Wan Kenobi. There's no sign of a placenta, as usual, and I suppose we should be grateful that the film-makers didn't feel the need to take Padme down the route of the thundering PPH, but the net result is another broken-hearted woman dying in childbirth; this time because her lover is making his way to the dark side. I won't even begin to pretend that I can offer any kind of rigorous literary analysis here, but it made me rather concerned that childbirth was again being misrepresented in popular culture, with maternal mortality being portrayed in rather a throwaway, romantic way; almost like Romeo and Juliet with the baby involved.

The Safe Motherhood Quilt Project

In reality, of course, maternal mortality is about as far from romantic as you can get, and women who die during childbirth do not generally die from broken hearts. As Ina May Gaskin discussed in the last issue of TPM, they die - in the US at least - from botched cesareans, from unsafe drugs and, perhaps most worryingly, from neglect.

The practical reality of the Safe Motherhood Quilt Project that Ina May discussed is an amazing example of how a group of people can make a difference. A small army of stitchers have been working on quilt squares representing individual women who have died either during childbirth or as a consequence. The project itself is designed to bring the issues to the attention of the public and maternity care professionals, in the hope that this might lead to some kind of national framework where maternal deaths can be analysed, lessons can be learned and dangerous practices can be brought to the attention of those who are promoting and participating in them. Certainly the quilt is an incredibly emotive

symbol and all of those who have been involved cannot help but feel its power.

A New Quilt Project

It was partly the power of the Safe Motherhood Quilt that led the latest group of midwives who visited The Farm with Lorna Davies and myself to dream up the idea for a new quilt project. This time, though, rather than high-lighting the very serious issue of maternal mortality, the quilt is intended to highlight the very serious issue of just how normal birth can be if women are able to build relationships with midwives who believe in them and their power to give birth. Each square in this quilt represents one of the babies born to women who were attended by The Farm midwives and who, in the vast majority of cases, experienced uncomplicated and joyful birth.

Quilts act as symbols, and this new project - which is fast becoming known as "The Happy Quilt Project" - will symbolise two key things; the importance of connections between mothers and midwives, and the need to create systems which will enable every woman to choose a midwife who can help her have the kind of birth she wants, whether this is at home with her family, in a pool of water at the local Birth Centre, or in hospital with every kind of monitoring device and pain relieving substance available to womankind. Or, in other words, individualised care, which is the antithesis of neglect.

There are, of course, some stunning examples of great practice elsewhere in the world, including the UK, which deserve just as much attention and, perhaps, quilts of their own. It is not simply the birth outcomes that have led these women to choose to focus on The Farm; it is also the knowledge that bigger numbers add more weight, and that two and a half thousand women and babies represented in one quilt is a symbol that will be rather difficult to ignore.

Toward Better Birth?

It seems to me that women and midwives are 'on the move' again; a number of projects are coming together and bringing the attention of the public and politicians back to childbirth and, in particular, to the need for a new model for childbirth and midwifery. By emphasising models of excellence as well as those things that need improvement, and by highlighting the joy that birth can bring when things go well, as well as the sorrow that arises when things do not, we can perhaps help more people to understand the real-life issues that surround birth. Not least of which is that having systems that enable connections to be made between women and their midwives is far, far more crucial to the survival and happiness of the human race than the development of grey metal birthing skirts.