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Book Review: Dead Babies and Seaside Towns. Alice Jolly. London: Unbound, 2015, ISBN 978-1-78352-105-0

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When I first received this book I was somewhat taken aback; I was expecting a fairly traditional academic discussion, I had not expected a memoir. Quickly setting this thought aside I turned to the synopsis, read it, and thought 'okay, I can read this'. I am glad that I did.

Alice Jolly's memoir begins with the loss of her daughter, Laura, who is stillborn. However, Jolly's account isn't just about loss, it's about what happens after this loss, it's about family, it's about love and strength. Her mantra – 'We're all doing fine. This isn't Zimbabwe or the Horn of Africa' – resonates in the early stages of her account. This, for me, seemed to serve as a reminder that things could be worse.

While her stillbirth experience is central to Jolly's narrative, it goes beyond that into a beautifully written, poignant account of what happens afterwards. Her account of the build up to her loss, and then her and her husband's attempts to become parents again, is particularly emotive. In her review of the book, Petra Boynton notes that 'culturally, miscarriage and stillbirth remain taboo. Too upsetting to talk about. Best ignored' (1). While Fiona Johnstone (2) states that the book is 'is a timely attempt to address the double taboo of stillbirth and infertility', which is something Jolly does in her own inimitable way.

In her world – the world of dead babies, which she likens to 'a silent and shuttered place' – Jolly realises that she isn't alone. 'In the UK seventeen babies are stillborn every day. What has happened to us isn't rare, extraordinary. So then why haven't I ever known about it?' she asks. There is a frankness in the way that Jolly tells her story. There is also the sadness one would expect with issues such as stillbirth, miscarriage and the loss of control over one's reproductive choices – each of which are central themes in the book.

The author goes on to detail her miscarriages, noting that 'losses without graves are more difficult'. As I read, at times I was moved to tears of sadness and frustration – and of happiness. We travel with her on her journey from the early stages, as she tries to understand her losses, to the seaside towns that offer a sense of tranquillity. Later, she begins to explore alternative ways of family formation, commencing with assisted conception.

She conveys the challenges associated with trying to conceive using assisted conception: timings, ovulation monitoring, self-injecting, pregnancy testing, managing clinic appointments, invasive examinations, failed cycles of treatment and trying again. Significantly, Jolly questions her treatment providers (they use a private fertility clinic while still living in Brussels) and her suitability for IVF, given her previous history of multiple miscarriages. She questions her own motivations too – and whether she was actually coerced into embarking upon treatment that was destined never to work. Consequently, some of the inner turmoil – the moral questioning and emotion invested in medical intervention – is revealed to the reader.

Jolly considers adoption, both in the UK and abroad, but the complexities of the approval process meant that this was not a viable option. Serendipity then leads Jolly and her husband to consider surrogacy; in particular – because of the current state of UK surrogacy law – surrogacy overseas. In doing so, questions pertaining to the ethics of surrogacy are

played out – commercialisation, exploitation, reciprocity and altruism. In some countries surrogates may be subject to exploitation, and Jolly and her husband opt to explore surrogacy in the US as there appears less chance of this occurring. We hear her first-hand experience of the workings of the US regulatory framework, which differs markedly from regulation in the UK.

She discusses her initial perceptions about surrogates' motivations, questions about genetic relationships (they decide to use donor eggs and her husband's sperm), and the beneficial advice and support provided by lawyers as they attempt to navigate the US surrogacy system. She considers the child's right to know their genetic origins, how this process is managed, and how it differs depending on where the donation is taking place. Jolly and her husband gain insights into these topics by attending a Donor Conception Network (DCN) event, which helps them as they move forward with their intended plan.

Jolly also references some of the negative discourses surrounding surrogacy, found in sensationalist media headlines she encounters as she searches for a suitable egg donor, such as the Daily Mail's: 'Designer Babies for Sale. Couple order six foot blonde with PhD'. She observes that this level of choice would not be possible if she were using an egg donor in Spain or the UK, for example.

The memoir provides the reader with a real insight into the many elements of an international surrogacy arrangement – rules surrounding advertising for and paying surrogates, choosing a surrogate, applying for parental orders, choosing an egg donor, managing the process, and ensuring a child born following a surrogacy arrangement can enter the UK.

Trust is also an important consideration for the couple – finding someone they can both trust to be the gestational carrier of their child, and forming and maintaining a relationship with her and her family despite the distance involved (they can't all always travel to Minneapolis together so her husband travels alone when needed for artificial insemination purposes). How the birth is managed – including who will be there and what happens afterwards; at what point will their child come home with them; whether the surrogate will renege on the arrangement – is an important consideration, and it's clear that surrogacy is by no means an easy option. As she makes clear, if these areas are not investigated it could result in a child not being granted entry into the country where the intended parents reside.

Notably, Jolly questions whether surrogacy should 'become easier in the UK', making reference to the outdated legal framework, suggesting that adoption also might 'become an option for more couples' if the processes are re-thought. She is also acutely aware that having money has made a huge difference – enabling them to pay for their private treatment and for their surrogacy arrangements – and she acknowledges how much harder it would have been without it.

The book wasn't what I was expecting, and I had been concerned that it would be too full of sadness. However, the overarching theme of the book is hope. It is also about friendships and courage. It is not an academic text, but it has the potential to make an important contribution to those working in these areas and it develops our understanding about how stillbirth and miscarriage affect people. It is a human story – you see beyond the medical, clinical, administrative and legal procedures associated with non-traditional means of family formation, with the family at the centre. It helps professionals to see, to think about and consider how they respond to and work with people when becoming a parent isn't a straightforward, natural process.

I would recommend this beautifully written memoir to those working with couples who have experienced stillbirth, miscarriage and failed IVF cycles. It may also be of interest to those doing research in the field of reproduction, assisted conception and family formation.

SOURCES & REFERENCES

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3) [Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. Code of Practice, 8th edition](#)

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