

Ways of Knowing about Birth: Mothers, Midwives, Medicine & Birth Activism. Robbie Davis-Floyd. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2018. 438 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1478633624

Ways of Knowing about Birth is a compilation of Robbie Davis-Floyd's writings spanning thirty years. The selections in this volume offer valuable insights for many readers, from students of midwifery, anthropology and women's studies, to practicing midwives and obstetricians, to women who are seeking to inform themselves about their own childbirth care options. The writings are organized into fifteen chapters in three sections and may be read as selective stand-alone pieces or as a cohesive and complete work.

Robbie Davis-Floyd is a cultural anthropologist who has conducted groundbreaking research into childbirth, midwifery, and obstetrics. She is also a midwifery advocate and birth activist whose work has contributed to greater understanding and transformation of the practice of maternity care. In this book, Davis-Floyd revises, updates, and combines her most popular previously published journal articles and book chapters, adding new material, supplemental discussion questions, and recommended films and readings. The strength of the original writings is maintained and enhanced when presented in the context of this compilation of much of Davis-Floyd's "life's work."

Section one of *Ways of Knowing about Birth* examines the beliefs of society, birthing women, and obstetricians that lead them to either conform to or reject the dominant Western medical approach to childbirth. Chapter one lays the foundation of later writings by describing the technocratic, humanistic and holistic paradigms of health care and childbirth, one of Davis-Floyd's unique theoretical contributions. Technocratic beliefs, such as the body as machine and patient as object, give rise to the Western medical approach to childbirth. The humanistic model recognizes the influence of the mind on the body and seeks to "humanize technomedicine." The "heretical" holistic model views mind, body, spirit, and environment as interconnected energy systems and expects individuals to take responsibility for their own healing in partnership with practitioners. Chapter Two analyzes standardized medical interventions of hospital birth, many of which evidence has shown to be counterproductive or harmful, as rituals which create a technocratic rite of passage. Chapter Three compares the self-image and beliefs of women in the U.S. who either embrace the technocratic model of childbirth or reject it by choosing homebirth. Chapter Four examines the rituals of medical training that serve as initiation for students into the technocratic model and psychologically transform them into physicians. Chapter Five profiles obstetricians in Brazil who are humanizing

obstetrical care to follow best practices and eliminate unnecessary interventions.

Section II of *Ways of Knowing about Birth* studies midwifery from many angles including the historical role and current state of U.S. midwifery, midwives' use of intuition and technology, and how "postmodern midwives" are adept at balancing conflicting ideologies. The relationship between homebirth midwives and the medical establishment is illustrated by reviewing the experience of midwives arranging homebirth emergency transports to the hospital. The final chapter reviews the complicated relationships between professional and traditional midwives. Section III of the book is devoted to birth activism and Davis-Floyd's role in helping to create an international initiative to improve childbirth care and outcomes. The section closes with an article about future technology and "cyborgification" of birth and of the planet. The Appendix of *Ways of Knowing* offers seven pages of advice for women on how to achieve the birth they want, whether in the hospital or at home.

Before my son was born, I read many books on childbirth that informed me of the problems caused by cascading medical interventions, and the advantages of the midwifery model of care. *Ways of Knowing* is different than the childbirth writing I have read previously in that Davis-Floyd's examines *why* the standardized hospital birth has become what it is. She does not just look at systems, but at the beliefs of the individuals within those systems that create and maintain the system. It was eye opening to understand how physicians are psychologically initiated, and follow rituals that become deeply ingrained. For example, evidence continues to accumulate that routine episiotomy is unnecessary and leads to poorer outcomes. The author quotes several obstetricians who understand the evidence, intellectually resolve not to perform episiotomy, yet in the moment feel overwhelmingly compelled to do so out of past programming and fear.

One of the most memorable chapters in *Ways of Knowing* is Anthropology and Birth Activism, which begins with the story of a doula who makes a toast, "for all the women who don't know," in reference to the vast majority of American women who chose medicalized hospital birth. The author explains that while she is "trained to honor and respect women's choices," she is also trained to "deeply question the cultural conditioning underlying all 'choice.'" I have also wondered why women in the U.S. embrace planned caesarian sections and early epidurals despite the known risks. The author explains how birthing women who participate willingly in the technological system have a belief that their bodies are part of this system. The chapter, Technocratic Bodies and Organic Bodies, an ethnographic study of middle class white professional women who have the resources and education to make informed choices, is fascinating and insightful. The women who embrace the technocratic

model view technology as empowering, have a self-image that is separate from their body, and seek a birth experience that allows them to maintain a sense of self-control (including receiving on-demand caesarian section delivery). In contrast, the women who choose midwife-attended homebirth have developed a core belief that “giving up control is far more valuable in birth and in life than trying to maintain it.” They also do not view a dichotomy between mother and baby but believe their needs are one, and therefore “the safest birth for the baby will be the one that provides the most nurturing environment for the mother.”

It is fascinating to read how Davis-Floyd merges the role of ethnographer and participant/activist. For example, in *Renegade Midwives*, she explains how her attempt at writing a short and quick definition and comparison of traditional and professional midwives evolved into a year-long process, involving input from many midwives from both groups, to arrive at consensus for how they identify themselves. Despite scornful feelings of each group towards each other for following or disregarding protocols that govern their practice, the author shows both groups they share a worldview. She asserts that “the spirit of the renegade lives in every midwife,” even those that practice in a hospital setting. As a speaker at a midwifery conference, Davis-Floyd was then “able to speak a truth that every midwife in the audience recognized” to help them arrive at mutual understanding that they all respond to each woman as an individual, using intuition to determine when to follow or disregard protocols during each birth.

Ways of Knowing provides engaging reading and powerful insights into the experiences of midwives, obstetricians, and birthing women. Robbie Davis-Floyd is a gifted anthropologist who makes profound meaning of what she observes. This book is an excellent resource for anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the cultural aspects of the birth experience and of themselves.

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