



Orgasmic Birth: The Best Kept Secret

By Deborah Pascali-Bonaro, and Kris Liem. Westlake Village, CA: Seedsman Group, Inc., 2008. \$35, DVD, color, 85 minutes.

Reviewed by: Jessica L. Cundiff, MS.

At first, the title seems to be an oxymoron. How can childbirth, an event we have been told is dangerous, painful, and to be feared, be described as orgasmic—a word associated with sexuality and pleasure? In her first documentary film, childbirth expert and activist Deborah Pascali-Bonaro expands traditional conceptions of what is possible by exposing the powerful potential of birth to be a profoundly sensual, sexual, and empowering experience.

The film honestly portrays the intimate home birth experiences of six couples. Although these births are portrayed positively, they are not romanticized; the women are shown laboring through the pain and some express their fears that “something’s going to break in there.” However, the message is clear: when women are in environments that are safe, relaxing, supportive, and uninterrupted (i.e., environments conducive to lovemaking), birth experiences can be empowering, enlightening, and joyous.

These birth stories are interwoven with commentary from childbirth experts, midwives, and physicians. The commentary serves to educate viewers by providing evidence-based, jargon-free information about the natural biologic processes of birth, the role of hormones, and the factors that can both facilitate and hinder birth processes. Importantly, midwives are shown to be professional experts of childbirth and women’s health, countering negative stereotypes of midwives as untrained and unknowledgeable of evidence-based practices.

The six home birth stories are strategically interrupted by a portrayal of a medicalized birth in the hospital. The hospital scenes evoke negative emotions in not only the laboring mother, but also the viewer. The bright lights, distressing sounds, and anxiety provoking atmosphere of the hospital contradict the dim lights, soothing music, and relaxing atmosphere of the home births. Interjections of expert commentary highlight the probable causes of the overuse of technologic interventions in birth, but additional commentary regarding the historical transition of birth to the hospital and the subsequent regulation of midwifery may have enhanced viewer understanding of the current politics of birth.

The hospital in and of itself, however, is not portrayed as necessarily problematic. One woman is shown having an unmedicated birth in the hospital, with dimmed lights, supported by a midwife and family, and without the standard technologic interventions that are commonplace in many hospital births.

This reviewer appreciated the inclusion of this woman’s experience because it illustrates to women who may be uncomfortable with home births that it is possible to have an empowering, noninterventive birth in the hospital.

Importantly, the film focuses on a diversity of voices. The families depicted in the film are from various ethnic backgrounds, including a Maori woman who describes the cultural significance of her birth experience. Issues of sexual abuse are highlighted by a woman with a family history of abuse. Her birth narrative is coupled with still photographs, rather than video footage, which intensifies the power of her message that “birth became the most powerful thing that has happened to my body.” However, the film fails to address other important issues, such as the fact that black women in the United States are three and a half times more likely than white women to die around the time of childbirth. Although this statistic is briefly mentioned in the DVD extra “Birth by Numbers,” the film would have benefitted from an in-depth critique of this issue. Access to adequate health care is a serious concern for many women, not only in the United States, but also globally. It is important to not only inform women of options for birth but also make those options accessible to all women.

The overall message of the film, however, remains powerful. The purpose of renaming birth as orgasmic is not to put undue pressure on women to achieve orgasm during birth. Rather, this renaming of birth highlights the sexuality of birth and pushes current conceptualizations to new heights. By showing positive images of birth as joyous and transformative, Pascali-Bonaro successfully shows how birth can truly be orgasmic in the broadest sense of the word. These positive images are not meant to alienate women who have had traumatic birth experiences; rather, they provide an alternative view of birth that counters the negative images that permeate society. This reviewer feels that Pascali-Bonaro successfully achieved this goal. The incredible editing skills of award-winning editor Kris Liem and the beautiful and serene musical compositions of John McDowell and Sabina Sciubba enhance the film’s extraordinary depiction of birth.

This revolutionary film should be viewed by physicians, midwives, nurses, doulas, childbirth educators and activists, and anyone who plans to have a baby. Although the length of the film may hinder complete screening within classroom settings, the film is divided into chapters that allow portions of the film to be easily incorporated into childbirth education classes, women’s health courses, and sexual health courses. Positive birth stories need to be told, and this film provides a meaningful way to share those stories.