Reading Guide

Author’s Introduction -
Writing The Birth House was truly an adventure for me. One that was fueled by tales from the past, me to peel off layer after layer of old newspaper from the walls of my attic, and ultimately, one the ask questions…some easily answered, some left hanging in the air.

I hope the novel leads you to some questions and conversations of your own. Thanks for reading. Please keep in touch. I’d love to hear from you!

Ami
ami@amimckay.com

Here is the Reading Guide as a Word document for easy printing. Right click the link and se "save as" to download to your computer.

Description -
The Birth House is the story of Dora Rare, the first daughter to be born in five generations of Rare. in an isolated village in Nova Scotia, she is drawn to Miss Babineau, an outspoken Acadian midwife healing. Dora become Miss B's apprentice and together they help the women of Scots Bay through difficult labours, breech births, unwanted pregnancies and even unfulfilling sex lives. Filled with compelling as they are surprising, The Birth House is an unforgettable tale of the struggles women have control of their own bodies and to keep the best parts of tradition alive in the world of moder.

Reading Group Questions

1. Early in the novel, Dora's Aunt Fran quotes from The Science of a New Life: "It is almost impo woman to read the current 'love and murder' literature of the day and have pure thoughts, and when of such literature is associated with idleness - as it almost invariably is - a woman's thoughts and fi be other than impure and sensual."
What do you think she meant?  
Do you feel this is true?

3. Folklore, home remedies, women's traditions, herbalism, and a belief in the divine feminine are Miss B.'s way of life. She is determined to pass these things along to Dora.

Does Dora try hard enough to preserve them?  
Should she let them go?  
What traditions do you hold dear in your life (and why)?

4. According to medical texts and advertisements of the early 1900's, women who were prone to "hysterical behaviour" were often labeled as hysterical. A poster in Dr. Thomas's office reads:

*Feeling Anxious? Tired? Weepy?*  
*You are not alone. The modernization of society has brought about an increase in neurasthenia, greensickness and hysteria.*  
*Symptoms of Neurasthenia include: Weeping, melancholy, anxiety, irritability, depression, outrageousness, insomnia, mental and physical weariness, idle talking, sudden fevers, morbid frequent titillation, forgetfulness, palpitations of the heart, headaches, writing cramps, mental confusion, constant worry and fear of impending insanity. Talk to your physician. He can help.*

Do we see this kind of questioning today?  
Are women's emotions still targeted by advertisers?

5. When Archer asks Dora to marry him, he tells her that, "love takes care of herself." She chooses

What does Dora's decision say about her situation and station in life?  
Should she have chosen to follow in Miss B.'s footsteps instead?

6. Through a visit to Dr. Thomas's office, Dora discovers that women's sexual pleasure (specifically considered to be a medical function (or dysfunction). Ads of the time, such as the one for the Whit Vibrator, reinforced this notion.

How does Dora come to terms with these ideas?  
What kinds of taboos surround women's sexuality today?

7. Miss B. says this about Mabel's home birth: "The scent of a good groanin' cake, a cuppa hot Mo time. Most times that's all a mama needs on the day her baby comes."

She later says this to Dr. Thomas: "Science don't know kindness. It don't know kindness from cabi"  
Dr. Thomas replies: "Science is neither kind nor unkind, Miss Babineau. Science is exact."

How do these statements show the differences between Miss B. and Dr. Thomas?
9. Dora says this about her mother: "Everything I've learned from Mother, every bit of her truth has while her hands were moving."

What does this say about her relationship with her mother?
Is this kind of communication still an important part of women's lives?

10. The author uses ephemera from Dora's life (invitations, news articles, sections from The Willo tales, advertisements, etc.) throughout the novel.

How did this affect your reading experience?
Do you have a favourite from them?

11. There are many mentions of birthing folklore and techniques, from groaning cake to mother's t B. turning Ginny's breech baby to quilling.

What wives' tales about pregnancy and birth do you know?
Are there any that you'd swear by?

12. The sisters of the Occasional Knitters Society support Dora throughout the book (keeping the e Wrennie's birth, taking care of Wrennie when Dora goes to Boston, meeting together for conversation sisterhood.)

What makes their friendship so strong?
Are friendships like that possible today?

13. Dora is conflicted when Mrs. Ketch comes to her house for help. Given Dora's past with Mrs. I

Why do you think she chose to assist her in helping her 'lose' her baby?

14. Maxine is very different from anyone Dora has ever met. Boston is very different from Scots F

What do Maxine and Boston bring to Dora's life?
Have you ever made a change in location or met someone who immediately changed your li

15. In both the prologue and the epilogue, we see how life has changed in Scots Bay. Other towns have changed over time, some gone forever.

Have we gained anything with these changes?
What have we lost?

16. After Dora and Hart become lovers, he talks of marriage and she refuses.

What do you think about Hart's decision to marry?
Contact Ami via E-Mail
Why do you write?
I have a studio in the loft of the barn.

When do you write?
In the afternoon. Sometimes I skip dinner and keep going into the night.

A WRITING LIFE: A Conversation with Ami McKay
Lives: In an old birth house in Nova Scotia, Canada.
Family: Married to Ian. Two sons.
Educated: Indiana State University (Music Education and Musicology).

Born: 1968, Indiana, USA.

About the Author
by Ami McKay
The Birth House
An Exclusive Behind-the-Scenes Look at The Birth House

P.S.
If you weren’t a writer what job would you have?

Beauty, chance, fate, desire, laughter, tears, hope.

What or who inspires you?

Isabel Allende. Her stories feel brilliant and limitless to me.

Which living writer do you most admire?

She's reading over my shoulder as I write.

I keep my grandmother's lacquer on my desk and always pour a spot for her as well. She was a fantastic reader, so I like to think breaking up is hard to do. I wrote four different endings for The Birth House before I was satisfied. It was over.

And finish?

With The Birth House. Does it happen with my next novel as well? I suppose I start by trying to find the right voice to carry the narrative.

How do you start a book?

As far as writing for publication goes, it was because my husband dared me to do it! When I was a closet writer for most of my life, it was a personal and private act of expression.

What inspired you to write?

Music without words. I try to find music that will fit with the mood I'm trying to create. With my writing.

Silence or music?

First, fountain pen in sketchbooks. Then I enter it into my laptop for editing.

Pen or computer?

To make sense of things—past, present and future.
Marie Babineau is far from typical, so as proud as she is of her Acadian heritage, she’s someone who is always shaping more about her “roots.”

Miss B. draws her wisdom from an eclectic array of sources. Would her beliefs be typical of an Acadian? Can you say a bit someone always knew you would.

My favorite saying came from the marginalized of one of my husband’s grandmother’s cookbooks: “No matter what you do, sweet by raspberryl heel. information alone is one another. Some of it is just as useful today as it was in the past. For instance, many pregnant women have a sense of pratical magic in them. There’s useful information needed to folklore in every entry … This is how women pass down from my Great-Great-grandmother to my mother and then to me. Other remedies were from turn-of-the-century. The remedies and wisdom included in The Willow book section of the novel come from many different sources. Some items

What or who were your inspirations for The Willow Book and do you have a favorite remedy from it?

was how I was able to arrange my words as well, by making a literary scrapbook out of Doctor’s days.

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What’s your guilty reading pleasure?

L., probably, still be playing my harp for weddings and funerals, Yikes.
In the UK, there has been a recent emphasis on a less interventional and more “natural” approach to childbirth. Do you

hospital birth with a physician. Worse of all... their fear mongering worked. Organisations and clubs are pushing midwives and telling women they were bad mothers if they didn’t choose a

leading voice in obstetrics at the time stated, “The midwife is a relic of barbarism.” Doctors essentially went to women’s

absolutely. When I began researching the history of midwifery in early-20th-century North America, I was horrified to

Here’s a battle in the book between traditional wisdom and modern science, the midwife versus the doctor. Was this a

Your birth experiences are very vivid. You have had children of your own but did you assist other births for research?

Know who I truly am, catch me while I’m in the kitchen. I have two sons. One was born in a hospital, the second was a home birth with the assistance of two wonderful midwives. I

Food and cooking play a major role in the novel. Do you enjoy cooking?

more about it right now, but there’s more to her past and her youth to be explored one day...

A patch of my surrounding landscape, so it seemed only fitting that Malone would serve as the embodiment of that history. Her

academic), in Louisiana today. It is a fascinating tradition, one that includes strong religious ties (usually Catholic). Knowledge

tradition, religion and her midwifery practice with experience and wisdom. That said, the gift of the prenatal (the folk health
bound to the home? Do you rely on female friendship in your life?

Dora is supported throughout by her friends of the Occasional Knitter's Society, especially when they look after Yvonne.

Dora's move to Boston was a popular phrase from the time period in which The Birth House is set. It was also used as a human voice.

The biggest change for Dora came as a result of her stay in Boston, but she decided to return to Scars Bay. You moved if

The best parts of Maxine's book are the ones when she's writing about the people in her Childhood and her own life as a woman. She's an artist, she's independent, but most importantly, she's fearless. Dora could have seen

archetypal "new woman" who has it all.

Modernism is seen as a positive force in some respects in the novel, particularly in terms of women's sexuality. Is Maxine

The birth of Dora's child is guided in many ways. Yes, she represents the "new woman" of the twentieth century, and she also

She opens Dora's eyes to books she wasn't allowed to read in Scars Bay: now did you find out what would have been in

Maxine is seen as a positive force in some respects in the novel, particularly in terms of women's sexuality. Is Maxine

surrounded by perception of childhood and skipped away, it's a good thing.

nothing and relics of atmosphere where few interventions and nearly interventions were shocked. I think any time the layers of fear that have

mother-to-be finds herself in a situation where she's completely out of control of the birth process and in the end she's led a

It's been proven that one medical intervention in childbirth often leads to one or more additional interventions. I think this

not completely. While it's true that my home in Scars Bay is the place where I feel most grounded and open to my writing,

Chicago to Scars Bay. Have you turned your back on city life?

love the energy, variety and muscle of big cities. I visit at least a couple of my favorite cities every year just to get my

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long list of books and plays that had been banned in Boston at the time.

Maxine's reading list came from under attack by the Watch and Wary Society, if your books were banned at their meetings. Maxine's reading list came from

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Another novel about women's lives and women's health. It's set in New York City in the 1870s and is inspired by the life of a great-great-grandmother. She was one of the first female physicians to graduate from medical school and practice in the city.

What are you writing next?

Forums, etc. is fascinating to me. I loved putting together my website. Hopefully I've created a virtual kitchen table, a space where readers can come and share their thoughts and stories with me and with each other.

Women's lives and women's health. More than ever, I see how people, and specifically women, have created new networks of connections, friendships and women's wisdom via the Internet (through websites, blogs, etc.).

I've learned from our friends, neighbors, and community leaders in the way we used to do things when we can and it always feels like "home." These are the women who give me wings. I hope I do the same for them.

The Birth House is with the coming of electricity to Sears Bay. Does the advent of modern technology and communication and friendship.

I don't think you have to be a homemaker or live in a small community to have a close circle of friends. The things that pull a
I began to daydream about the woman who had once held this spoon so many days of her life, how she must have handled it. I stood at my kitchen sink, washing the dirt off of the wheaten stalk pattern in the spoon had been worn down to an angle. As I soaked an old silver serving spoon, it had been used so often near the edge of the bowl of the broken china, and my favourite tank—an old silver serving spoon. If I had been used so often near the edge of the bowl. I uncovered some small relics of the past. Medicine bottles, bits of.

Every time I learned a new patch of earth for my gardens, I uncovered some small relics of the past. Medicine bottles, bits of...
Thrumming—a knitting technique used in Newfoundland and most of Atlantic Canada—is a process where pieces of routing

Cross sloughs "Knit Your Bit" and some such as "I Wonder Who's Knitting For Me" become part of the popular culture. During World War I many women all across Canada joined together in the practice of knitting items for the soldiers. The

The Occasional Knitter's Society

Kinder, Vindicators, and INT


Kinder's

Biography: The Birth House was created. Why her mother had gone away from home in the first place. Out of my need to fill in the spaces of Mrs. Steele's limited once taken an extended stay in the U.S. but her only child, an adopted daughter now living in a nursing home, could lift the skirt. Perhaps there were no traces left of her life as a young woman. A brief account in The Bermudian mentioned that she is

photonraphs of her, and although the older residents of my community could remember her kindness and her round, man

Having died in 1933, she had been gone just long enough to start to fade from people's memories. I could find no

Although I enjoyed writing and producing the documentary, I had also been frustrated in my efforts to uncover the midwife

Mary's memories led to a documentary and accompanying workbook. Stories from the community began to read the names of all the women who had given birth in her mother's house. The stories from the community and

The St. John's City Hospital. Mary took a piece of paper from her pocket and read the names of all the women who had given birth in her mother's house. The stories from the community and

by their stories. Not only had the midwife, Mrs. Rebecca Shortt, delivered to other homes in the Bay, but she
captivated by her stories. Not only had the midwife, Mrs. Rebecca Shortt, delivered to other homes in the Bay, but she

assist in a home birth, neighbours began telling me tales about the history of my home, which was once a midwife's house.

By spring I was pregnant. As word spread around the community of my "condition" and that I was looking for a midwife to

over the stove, stirring, tending her work, giving tastes to a husband or child as they passed through the kitchen.
You've heard me rave about Ami McKay's first novel, The Birth House -- winner of numerous awards and a bestseller on many lists including holding the top spot on the Canadian Booksellers List for Canadian fiction.

Today, we get to meet Ami through an interview she did for this blog in moments between promoting her book, teaching a writing course, writing a play and healing an injured back! Thanks, Ami! I don't know how you manage to juggle it all.

In 2000, Ami moved to Nova Scotia from Indiana and became intrigued with the history of her new home - the former house and birthing centre of midwife Rebecca Steele. Ami began researching and basis for The Birth House was born.

Here is Ami's story of her road to publication.

What a road the past few years must have been for you! How did you transition from music teacher to documentary producer and then to novel writer?

Even through music school and university, I was always a writer. I kept a journal filled with scribbles, but I preferred to...
found we had a shared love for poetry and fiction and eventually I admitted to him that I had written some poems and short stories. As the relationship grew, we wound up having an “I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours” exchange with words. After we got married, he kept after me to continue writing. It was his encouragement that led me to putting my writing into the world - first in the form of an impulsive thank-you note that landed me on the Oprah Winfrey Show, then to taking a workshop on writing for CBC radio, and then he cheered me on when I decided to write a novel. His support made it all feel “meant to be” and possible. As unrelated as my choices may read when listed side by side, it’s always felt as if I was following a very natural path.

Can you tell us a bit about your research? How was your interest in the history of your home piqued and where did you go from there?

My research for The Birth House sprang from a serendipitous journey. Not long after we moved into an old farmhouse in Scots Bay, NS, I became pregnant with my second child. My pregnancy sparked conversations with my neighbours about Mrs. E. Rebecca Steele, the midwife who had once owned the house. She lived in the house from the turn of the century to 1947 and she opened her home to the other women in the Bay as a birthing house. The entire time I was pregnant, I was hearing these wonderful tales of the midwife and the women of Scots Bay coming together to support one another through pregnancy and childbirth. Their stories led me to wonder many things - How many of us can tell our own birth stories? Why are midwives no longer an important part of today’s medical system in North America? What kind of world would we have if communities honoured the birth of every child?

When did you think: “I’ve got something worth telling in this story?”

That was a pretty clear moment for me. It was during a trip to a nursing home to visit Mary Huntley, the adopted daughter of the midwife. Even at 89-years-old, she had clear, beautiful memories of the past and of growing up in the birthing house. At one point in
Can you describe your writing process for The Birth House? Did you stick to a writing schedule? How long did it take to complete? How did you hone your work? (i.e. did you belong to a writer’s group, have a mentor, etc.)

I started out on my own, writing whenever I had a little extra time (often while breastfeeding my new baby.) I wasn’t sure what I creating at first, especially since I was trying my best to avoid the vast territory of the novel. Writing a novel seemed too daunting, and too much of a commitment. But once I made the decision to go for it, the writing felt stronger and it actually became easier to sit down and write on a regular basis. After I had a fair chunk of writing, I submitted an application to the WFNS (Writers’ Federation of Nova Scotia) Mentorship program. I promised myself that if I got a spot in the program, I’d make the novel a priority and write a rough draft in that time period.

Happily, I did get a spot and was able to work with Richard Cumyn, a wonderful writer and mentor. With his encouragement and feedback, I reached my goal. It’s only a nine month program, so the draft was incredibly rough (and very different from what became The Birth House)...but it was wonderfully liberating to have it in hand! It’s so important to set goals for yourself and to celebrate each milestone.

As a mother and wife, I had a lot of guilt about taking the time and space to write. I wouldn’t have finished the novel (and the subsequent drafts) if I hadn’t set do-able goals along the way.

In all, it was a three-year journey. Aside from one creative writing course I took, the mentorship, and some amazing feedback from my husband, I wrote alone. Writing groups can be havens for some writers, but they don’t seem to work for me - I wind up writing the same thing over and over again and never make any progress. I tend to be pretty tough on myself and don’t mind going back and revising.
Let's talk about finding a publisher and an agent - two things on every writer's mind. Did you get an editor or an agent first? Would you describe the steps you took from completion of your manuscript to landing an agent and a publisher? (Copy of Ami's query letter.)

I went for an agent first. Agents work with editors every day and they know what sparks the interest of specific houses, publishers and editors. I had no connections in the publishing industry and had no idea who might want to publish my manuscript.

Either way, (whether I wanted to query publishers or agents) I knew I was going to have to do a lot of research to figure out where to send it. So, I started sleuthing around to make a list of my top 15 choices for agents based on the kinds of books they had sold and the authors they represented. I subscribed to Publisher's Lunch via Publisher's Marketplace. (It's a free e-newsletter that comes to your inbox. It tells you which agents are selling what and where they are making their sales.) I started reading the deals section of Quill and Quire's web site. I read up on how to write a query letter.

I wrote draft after draft, working to make the letter as tight and interesting as possible. The time you spend researching agents (and/or publishers) as well as the time you spend writing your query letter is just as important as the time you spent writing your novel. Don't toss off something in a hurry because you're anxious to get published. (And because there are crooks out there waiting to take your money, remember this: you should never ever have to pay an agent to look at your work!) In the end, I had a handful of agents really interested in the manuscript and wound up working with Toronto based agent, Helen Heller. She really seemed to get what I was trying to do with the novel and (more importantly) with my career as a whole.

Prior to publication, your book won second prize in the Atlantic Book Awards for unpublished fiction under the title, Given. Did this award help you in the query process?
Others have noticed you along the way. That said, don’t stress out if you don’t have a long list. Quality trumps quantity every time. The main thing is to hook the agent or editor in those first lines of the query. You want them eager to read the manuscript and anxious to get their hands on the rest of the story. Your list of writing credits is like icing on the cake.

*The story described in your original query letter has some differences from the final book. Would you tell us about the editorial process?*

The query letter on my website was the one I sent to agents after I had tightened up the rough draft I completed in the mentorship program. It’s for *Given*, which was a story of two women’s lives—one in the past, one in the present. When I first began conversing with Helen Heller, she put her finger on something that I had secretly been hoping no one would notice...that the present-day protagonist was a much weaker character than Dora (the midwife protagonist from the past.)

Having once been an editor herself, she expressed her concern that the other character wasn’t strong enough to support her own storyline. As soon as she said it, I knew she was right. (I’d made the mistake a lot of first-time novelists make — I had written myself into the novel!) I told her I’d be willing to go back and give the entire novel to Dora (which meant throwing out nearly half of my manuscript) if she’d be willing to stick with me and have a look at it when I was finished. She said she couldn’t make any promises as far as selling the revised manuscript, but she let me know she would definitely be there whenever I thought I was ready to show her the new version of the novel.

I went back and tackled it again (and then yet again) and when I felt that I had written the story I wanted to write all along, Helen agreed that it was ready to send to publishers. It didn’t take long before she had it in the hands of the editors at Knopf and we had a deal.

Changes made during the editorial process at the publishing house...
He and I worked together. We shaped the novel in genuine but important ways so that the narrative flowed. Dora’s voice was always top priority. It was Dora’s voice, along with her journey that had captured the publisher’s heart from the start. As she once told me, “I was willing to follow Dora anywhere.” Needless to say, that comment left me feeling elated!

*Do you have any advice on how an unpublished writer can get the attention of an agent or editor? For a first book, is it better to seek one or the other first?*

I’m not sure I can say which should come first. Having an agent has been extremely important for me. I know I couldn’t have shopped the manuscript around to the big houses without her. On the other hand, I know some authors who represent themselves well and are happy with that. For instance, short story collections are sometimes a hard sell to agents and big houses - but smaller presses are willing to take a chance with them. It can be an excellent way to build a career. There’s also nothing that says you can’t approach publishers with a manuscript and then, once you have their interest, seek out an agent to help you make the deal.

Try your best not to get distracted with deal making tactics while you’re writing. Don’t worry about the market, or what’s hot - these things are subject to change. Always strive to become a better writer. Write the stories you want to read.

*Does this differ between Canada and the U.S.?*

I think the US market is harder to break into without an agent. It’s such a circus down there! Editors and their assistants are constantly changing houses and it’s difficult to keep track of who’s who.

*Your novel was published in hard cover in 2006 and in soft cover this year. What promotional activities have you undertaken? What has your publisher done for promotion? Were there elements of promotion that you were expected, as the author, to provide, for example book signings, etc.*

The Moon is a card of magic and mystery - when prominent you know that nothing is as it seems, particularly when it concerns relationships. All logic is thrown out the window.

The Moon is all about visions and illusions, madness, genius and poetry. This is a card that has to do with sleep, and so with both dreams and nightmares. It is a scary card in that it warns that there might be hidden enemies, tricks and falsehoods. But it should also be remembered that this is a card of great creativity, of powerful magic, primal feelings.
Fae of Fiction for 2009: It’s a program that introduces debut novels (and occasionally short story collections) to booksellers and to the public. (Other authors who have come through the program have included Yan Martel, Ann-Marie MacDonald, and Beth Powning, among others.) That program, along with my commitment to connecting with readers and book clubs through my websites (my husband is my amazing web designer) really helped foster a readership in Canada.

I have different publishers in different countries, so my experiences have been varied outside of Canada. My readership in the UK is smaller, but very loyal. Reviews there were strong. US readership has been very slow in the making. I haven’t really toured there at all and sometimes I wonder if it’s just harder for them to warm up to a “Canadian” novel? -- even though I’m originally from the States.

The expectations placed on me by my publishers have been reasonable. Their part in all of it (how much marketing, publicity, etc. to expect) usually doesn’t become clear until you’re almost to the pub. date. To be honest - it’s difficult to guess what the response will be for a debut novel. Marketing budgets are small for first novels and publicists are constantly scrambling for precious face-time in the media.

I’ve tried to do my part by building the web site. My philosophy behind my web site is, the more I can help my readers directly connect with my work, the better. I wrote my own reading group discussion guide, I set up a blog, a facebook group, etc. It’s my way of reaching out to readers and inviting them consider my work.

Have you begun to think about a second book?

I’m currently working away on my second novel as well as writing a play for the Nova Scotia based theatre company, Two Planks and Passion. It’s crazy to be working on two big projects at once, but it’s loads of fun. They are set in the same time period, so a lot of ideas, themes and topics overlap.

What Tarot Card are You?
Take the Test to Find Out.
My husband works from home as well, so we live by the motto: “we’re all in this together.”
Our goal is that we make time for one another’s dreams. So far, so good.

*Many thanks for taking time away from your busy schedule to give pre-published authors some insight into the creative and business sides of writing life.*

For more information about The Birth House, including a reading guide, recipes, news and more, please see:
http://www.thebirthhouse.com/

Ami’s personal web site: http://www.amimckay.com/

Get in touch with Ami via -My Blog - incidental pieces:
http://amimckay.blogspot.com/

Facebook - The Occasional Knitter’s Society Group:

My Space: http://www.myspace.com/amimckay

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*More good news!*

There is a second part to Ami’s interview that I’ll post as soon as she’s able to get to it and the marvelous Maureen Hull will be dropping by on Monday via her interview.

I hope you’re finding these interviews helpful and inspiring. I am delighted our NS arts community is so accessible and we pre-pub authors are able to learn from the best.

Colleen
4 COMMENTS:

Stephen Parrish said...
Another great interview! You have a knack for this. Please keep them coming.
AUGUST 25, 2007 4:49 AM

SmartlikeStreetcar said...
Brilliant, Colleen. Just brilliant.

This is wonderful, and I am grateful to Ami for being so forthcoming, honest, and genuinely helpful.

I am so enjoying your author interviews.
AUGUST 25, 2007 11:26 AM

JK said...
I was really taken with your last question/answer. I can imagine two parents working from home, with two home-schooled kids can have it's challenges... but it sounds kind of idyllic too.

It was a pleasure to read something that inspired for a change, rather than the dreck I keep exposing myself to in the news.

Thank you for the time, the effort, and the wonderful end result.
AUGUST 26, 2007 3:01 PM

Colleen said...
Gentlemen: Thnaks for your positive feedback. As soon as Maureen responds, I'll have that posted.

JK: I believe that we get on that rodent wheel and race away because it's what we think life is... but it can be something different if we choose... I'm figuring out what I want mine to be... homeschooling has shown me that education can be more sane... I think that's a lesson my son will carry with him. Life doesn't have
A Room of One's Own by Virginia Woolf

The Female Malady by Elaine Showalter

Birth Crisis by Sheila Kitzinger

The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vagina, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction by Rachel P. Maines

Giving Birth in Canada, 1900-1950, by Wendy Mitchinson

A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812, by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

FURTHER READING

In December 6, 1917, nearly 2,000 people died in the Halifax explosion, many killed instantly by the "biggest man-made explosion the world had ever seen" (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation). Some 9,000 others were injured and 6,000 were left without shelter. More Nova Scotians were killed in the explosion than were killed in World War I.

THE HALIFAX EXPLOSION

Early in the twentieth century, portable home units were advertised in women's magazines and advertisements, thus making the purchase of a personal vibrating massager through mail order a popular alternative to visiting the doctor for prescribed treatments. "In the late 1980s, British physician, Joseph M. Grenville, was searching for a better way to "cure" hysteria. In his female patients, Grenville would then use his vibrating massager to make his patients feel better and more relaxed."

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE VIBRATOR

(To make almost anything for a pair of socks knitted by a Newfoundlander).
The National Childbirth Trust: www.nct.org.uk

UK birthing website: www.willhovmam.co.uk

Sheila Kitzinger's website: www.sheilakitzinger.com

On birthing practice:
The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Halifax Explosion website: www.cbc.ca/halifax/explosion

The Library and Archives Canada First World War website: www.collectionscanada.ca/education/firstworldwar/index-e.htm


On the history:
See Amy McKay's own website for The Birth House at www.thebirthhouse.com

Interesting Websites
History of the Acadians

The Acadians began as a group of (primarily French) settlers in 17th century Canada. Over the years, they have been subjected to numerous hardships that usually result in the disappearance or assimilation of a culture. Acadians were able to retain large portions of their identity, even after their homeland was taken and they exiled. Although some were later incorporated into other cultures and societies, their heritage is still evident in the lives of their descendants.

This online presentation will begin with the origin of the Acadians. We will then look at the Acadians as they settled a new land and created their own culture. The next major chapter in Acadian history is the Grand Derangement ... when the Acadians were stripped of their land and exiled. Following this tragic dispersal, the Acadians found themselves in new lands. Although scattered, there still remained large numbers of Acadian places. Those who escaped (and returned) to Canada developed their own Acadian culture (in Canada) in areas. The other major group of Acadians found themselves in Louisiana and became today's Cajuns. Also you will find several other aids, such as a History Timeline, Maps, and Additional Resources.

Acadian History thru the years

Raynal wrote about Acadia in 1779 (A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the European and West Indies). He was born in 1713, but never visited the country. But the work does reflect the ideas of France at that time. Chandler Haliburton wrote a history of Nova Scotia 40 years after Raynal. He stated that Raynal's account wasn't far from the truth, lived in the area, and in fact was a judge there. His book was published in 1829. Rameau wrote La Franceaux Colonies in Colonia Feodale en Amerique in 1889. Beamish Murdoch wrote the History of Nova Scotia in 1865. The volumes of Nova Scotia Archives were started in 1857 and completed in 1869, though the compilation by Akins may have on material that held the Acadian point of view. Both the History of Nova Scotia by Campbell and Histoire de l'Acadie by Morin were completed in 1873. Hannay completed his History of Acadia in 1879. Philip H. Smith wrote Acadia - A Lost Chapter in an History in 1884. Casgrain wrote Pelerinage au Pays d'Evangeline in 1888. Parkman's work Montcalm and Wolfe, which includes information on Acadia, was done in 1884. Murdoch really didn't express his own opinion. Most (except for Parkman and Hannay) held the same view as Haliburton. Richard's Acadia (written in 1895) tries to take the Acadian point of view. It focuses its attention on the deportation and the events leading to it. Bona Arsenault's History of the Acadians, done in the 1950s, also seems fair to the Acadians' plight. Many other works, such as the recent (1995) A Land of Discord Always by Charles Mahaffie, try to present the true story that was hidden for so long.
In *The Birth House*, author Ami McKay tells the story of Dora, a young woman growing up in early 1900s Nova Scotia. Apprenticed to the local midwife, Dora learns first-hand the miracle of birth and the special bond among women. Following the midwife's death, Dora becomes the sole provider of care for women in need; but when a medical doctor threatens the continued practice of midwifery in the region, Dora is forced to take a stand against modern science and its impersonal practices. Here's what the author had to say about her debut novel.

Q: I'd like to start with the inspiration for this book. It was not long after you moved to Scots Bay, Nova Scotia from the U.S. that you first learned about the history of your home as a birth house. How was it that you came to learn this and what prompted you to make it the focus of your debut novel?

A: When I first moved into the house, I had no idea that it had once been a birth house for the community. It wasn't long after, however, that I became pregnant with my second child. When the news spread that I was going to have a baby, my neighbor and other women in Scots Bay began telling me stories about the midwife who had once lived in the house. I was fascinated by the things they told me - their shared stories of wonderful tales of birth, tradition, dedication, and caring. I knew I wanted to find a way to share those stories with others. Having written freelance radio documentaries in the past, I decided that I would record as much oral history as I could and go from there. In the meantime, I also began researching modern midwifery and looked for a midwife to assist at the birth of my son. The more I learned about past and the present, the more I knew that I wanted to have a homebirth. My son Jonah was the next in a long line of babies born in my house. Shortly after his birth I began making my first efforts towards writing what would become *The Birth House*.

Q: How did the experience of a home birth differ from that of your first child, and how critical was it to your decision to write this book?

A: The two births were very different. I was in my mid 20's when my older son was born. I was living in Indiana and in graduate school...
docs and push!” I did and happily Ian was born.

My homebirth experience was the complete opposite. I felt that my choices lead the way for the day. I did the things I wanted to do. I took walks, I ate enough food to sustain me. I even played my celtic harp. The midwife and her assistant came early in the day and we played stories, tea and they made my husband, my son and me feel confident and comfortable. In many ways, I feel that this birth healed som of the trauma from the first. I felt much more connected to the birthing process and my older son was thrilled to witness his brother’s birth. Hours, days and weeks after my homebirth, I was showered with care and help from my midwives as well as the women in my commun. They brought enough food for weeks. Their kindness truly touched my heart and also made me question why we had lost this “commun birth” in so many places around the world. At that point, I wasn’t sure how I would go about it, but I knew I wanted to share these though with others.

Q: Where did you look for inspiration for your characters? Is Dora based on anyone in particular?

A: My characters come from a real ‘soup’ of things going on in my head. They are usually made up of traits taken from people past and present, some I’ve known, some I’ve only heard or read about. Dora was certainly formed that way. I had visited Mary Huntley, the real adopted daughter of the midwife who had lived in my house. The first thing she said to me was, “My mother died when I was three days. When no other family could care for me, the midwife took me in as her own.” Right then, I knew I had a story I wanted to tell. Also, in preparation for my visit, Mary had written down all the names of the women who had given birth in the house and all their children’s names. She sat in her chair, her 89-year-old voice wavering a bit, as she proudly read each name out loud. After that visit, I tried to find out who could be Mary’s mother. Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything left behind from her days as a young woman. I wondered what had become the midwife for the community, especially at a time when the medical establishment was trying to eliminate midwifery. I began digging around in county and provincial archives, reading letters of women from that era to try to find a voice for this young woman. And inevitably, there’s also a bit of myself in Dora as well...I was a bookish and strange girl.

Q: This story is an emotional and thought-provoking look at childbirth and a woman’s right to exert control over her body in the 1900s, some would say that it has implications for contemporary times. Do you agree?

A: Absolutely. I don’t think I would have written this particular book if I hadn’t felt so passionate about what’s happening with women’s I and childbirth today. Without a doubt, we’re currently seeing the backlash of the medicalization of childbirth. Women like Sheila Kitzinger, Ina May Gaskin have lead the way for years...I felt part of my work in writing The Birth House was to create a piece of art, a work of fic that would stir up questions, open up conversations. It’s been an amazing thing to tour across Canada during the past few months. Every place I go, I meet readers who are anxious to share their thoughts about the book, to tell their birth stories, to get to the heart of what’s happening with their physical and emotional well being.

Q: In the book, there is a sharp distinction in the attitudes of women from Scot’s Bay and those who have come from outside the community. These “women from away” are throughout the book Dora’s closest friends and confidants. In your mind what separated these women from those of the community, and how important were their characters to the telling of this story? Does Dora also become a “woman from away”?

A: On a very simple level, this is a tradition that’s gone on in small communities forever. The women of The Occasional Knitters Society all W.F.A.’s “women from away” have all come from Newfoundland via marriage to men from Scots Bay, a fairly common practice. Dora, even though born and raised in the Bay, has been an outsider in the community from the moment she was born. She’s the only female in several generations, she was born with a caul on her face (a sign of psychic ability), and she grew up under the wing of Miss Babineau, the community’s midwife and wisewoman. The idea of ‘the outsider’ and the implications that come with it have always been compelling to me. They see the world in a different way, they can act as magnifying glass of sorts, and they can offer friendship to Dora in a way that she’s never known.

Q: You made a big change moving from the bustling streets of Chicago to the quiet of Nova Scotia. Do you think of yourself as a “woman from away”?

A: I was definitely considered as someone ‘from away’ when I moved to Scots Bay. I’m sure that money was probably lost from a few pockets after we made it through the first winter and decided to stay! For the most part, it’s always been good-hearted teasing and fun. That I’ve lived here for over seven years, I’ve grown to understand it. This is such an isolated place and those who have lived here for generations and have strong ties to the land and the sea have earned the right to call it home. They are protective of their stories, traditions, and the land, and I have a great respect for that.

Q: How have the people of Scot’s Bay responded to your book?
Q: The novel is recently published. Do you feel that your journalism background benefited you in any form?

A: My journalism background definitely helped with my research. I have a real passion for hunting down information and for collecting. The difficulty came when I realized that I didn’t have enough information to put together a non-fiction book and that the only way I’d be able to write the story I wanted to tell was to write a novel. I resisted the idea of writing a novel for quite some time...the idea of it was intimidating. But once I settled on Dora’s voice, the literary scrapbook form followed and the entire process became a wonderful adventure for me. I wanted the novel to reflect the way women live their lives, the way mothers collect bits and pieces of the day in their pockets. A recipe letter from a friend, a magazine article, a note to be placed in a journal. We are constantly recreating life and making sense of things in a way.

Q: Much of what Miss Babineau passes on to Dora is knowledge of tradition, symbolism, and folklore. How did you go about researching this information and were the people of Scot’s Bay integral to this process?

A: Marie Babineau’s knowledge comes from many different sources. She’s a traiteur (a folk healer) as well as an herbalist and a midwife. I read books on Acadian and Cajun folklore and healing, books on the native plants of Nova Scotia, and books on turn-of-the-century aboriginal midwifery. I talked to my neighbors, my mother and my husband’s grandmother about home remedies that had been passed through the family. I love to garden, so I planted my own herb garden to see what would and wouldn’t grow here. I walked in the woods behind the house to see what could be found. I also took many long walks with a good friend who is a midwife.

Q: When reading The Birth House, I couldn’t help but feel that this is a different kind of love story. Do you think this is a love story?

A: I love that you saw it that way! I do think it’s a love story in a few different ways. There’s Dora’s notion of what love should be (largely learned from Jane Austen novels) and then there’s what she learns about relationships in the end. There’s Miss B’s love and care for the men’s (like Dora’s father) love of the Bay and the land, and there’s the members of the OKS’s love and sisterhood for one another. Most importantly, I wanted to convey how remarkable a mother’s love for a child is. There’s a line in the first part of the book where Dora, has witnessed her first birth and she comments that she feels that birth isn’t really the miracle, but “How a mother comes to love her child at all for this thing that’s made her heavy, lopsided and slow, this thing that made her wish she were dead...that’s the miracle.”

Q: This is your debut novel, are you working on anything else?

A: Yes, I’m currently working on my next novel, The Virgin Cure. It’s set in 1870’s NYC and is loosely based on the life of my great-grandmother, one of the first female doctors in the city. She was studying syphilis at a time when men thought that de-flowering a young woman would cure them of the disease. This is a myth that we are seeing played out today in a devastating way in African villages in connection with AIDS. So again, I’m writing about women’s history and health, but tackling issues that will remind readers of things that need our attention right now.

That sounds wonderful. I can’t wait to read it. Thank you for your time.

Ami McKay lives with her family in Nova Scotia. The Birth House is her debut novel. For more information on Ami and The Birth House, you may visit her online at www.amimckay.com.