

## IN THE LITTLE HOUSE—Jenn Habel

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Reviews by Stephen Payne, Jon Stone and Annie Clarkson

Stephen Payne: Most of these poems are very short indeed (few, short lines), so that the experience of the pamphlet is of reading a single poem, tracing the beginning of a life.

The titles run like this: Conception, Gravida, Gravida, Gravida, Section, Baby, Night, Milk, Milk, Tumor, Scar, Thread, Morning, Night, Morning, Afternoon, Night, Morning, Bath, Fate, Thread, Alice.

Among these Baby titles, 'Tumor' is the shocking Odd-Man. Here is the poem in full:

I asked no questions, not even when he said it was good we found it, good to have it out.

She was at home; she might be hungry— I was almost disappointed when I opened our door to silence. The poem illustrates one of the book's main themes, a surrendering of the mother's self to a concern for her baby. It's a compelling theme, and it's developed through some very attractive lines:

the sun beginning to warm that street belongs to her now. (from 'Night')

Habel's writing throughout is spare and clear, but I don't always find it as compelling as it is above. For me, too many of the individual poems were slight as well as short, the expressed thoughts and the expressions a little too conventional. But perhaps I missed deeper readings, and I feel confident that many readers would enjoy this pamphlet for its concision and its honesty and its occasional touches of real beauty.

The pamphlet itself is nicely made, although its tiny poems make for a lot of white space.

Jon Stone: You only need glance at the contents page—'Conception', 'Gravida', 'Gravida', 'Gravida', 'Section', 'Baby', 'Milk', 'Milk', 'Scar', 'Bath'—to understand what over-arching concept drives In The Little House and if you've had your fill of miracle-of-birth poems, there's little new for you here. Habel, if we are to take this work as autobiographical, has run the full gauntlet—even does

'Tumor'—and covers her experiences in roughly chronological order, beginning with motifs of intrinsic connectedness ('My body half his/ body', 'snow held the sun/ like a possession') and then moving through 'tugging' and 'splitting' to separation and acceptance of the growing distance ('Not once has she belonged to me', 'No one told me it would be so impersonal') in the final poems.

This course is thoughtfully plotted and despite the inevitable accumulation of mother/child clichés, the language is precise and delicate enough to convey a sense of precariousness and heartache. Only once or twice is it too stiff and mannered for its own good, most obviously so in this line in 'Fate':

Not when I wipe her fouled bottom.

Taking poo so seriously leads you dangerously open to derisive smirks.

Despite the care and skill on display, I also can't help but feel that a collection dealing with such an oft-explored subject matter needs more than just a thematic arc to stand out. It would be unjust to decry such a considered response to a human being's personal emotional journey but I often felt, reading these poems, more as if I were glancing through a stranger's diary than reading something that was intended to be shared with me. Part of the reason for this is that the act of growing, giving birth to and caring for a child is such a touchstone of experience that there is little outside it for Habel to reach for as a comparison point. Instead, she relies almost purely on crisp physical description to bring experience to life, something that sometimes falls short if images like 'My daughter on her side,/ face to the crib's bumper,/ growing' are not in themselves something you can relate to.

The pamphlet's production values sell it short, giving something of the feeling of both words and cover illustration having been carelessly dropped into a pre-existing template. Everything from the colour coordination to the font choice suggests a publisher still finding its way around design issues. It's not horrendous; just uninspired. Also, with so many of the poems being less than half a page long (coupled with the connotations of the title and the subject matter) the A5 format seems oddly oversized.

Annie Clarkson: These poems are about the first few weeks and months of motherhood. With simple one-word titles like 'Conception', 'Section' and 'Night' they are spare and illuminating. Many titles are repeated—several share the titles 'Night', 'Morning' and 'Milk'—which gives an idea of the sparseness of this small collection, the emotional focus and the patterns that form in poetry/life.

There is nothing complex at work here. We get small insights into the poet's experience: concentrated moments from pregnancy, birth and the weeks afterwards. The poems are stripped to the bone, conveying the author's bare emotion. It is surprising how unsentimental they are, and affecting. They settle deep into the reader's consciousness, particularly as the chapbook progresses.

Jenn Habel has written a beautiful and devastating series of poems. They resound in their simplicity. Less is more, for want of a better cliché. The space between texts, between lines, is filled with our own reflections and thoughts. These are important words, spoken in the dark of a silent room.

