

*Review of Defiant Birth: Women Who Resist Medical Eugenics*  
By Melinda Tankard Reist  
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*Reviewed by Selena Ewing, January 2007*

This book is unapologetic in exposing the eugenic attitude underpinning the unrelenting medical surveillance of pregnant women.

Most pregnant women and their babies are likely to be swept along with the status quo, being screened and assessed, both herself and her baby, to ensure they meet current medical standards of lives worth living and women worth being mothers. They will endure routine tests either being unaware of the procedures and implications, or worrying that something will be 'wrong' with their baby.

In this prevailing culture of worry and precaution during pregnancy, this book gives women the power to be unafraid. The author hoped that the book would give courage for women to resist the deadly drive for perfection, the utilitarian and soulless practice of prenatal testing and abortion. She succeeded. For me, the driving out of fear was the overwhelming theme of the book.

Many women will wait three months before announcing a pregnancy. By that time, they have had the routine 19-week ultrasound, and they will be reassured that 'everything is okay'. Perhaps they hide or explain away their nausea and vomiting. Maybe the thrill of pregnancy is suppressed while invasive tests confirm that there is something to be officially joyful about. Tragically, some women are shuffled through a quality control system only to emerge with no baby and no-one with whom to share their grief – because they withheld the news of pregnancy, and the early termination was their own 'choice'. Other women have their babies terminated late in pregnancy, a painful procedure with devastating psychological consequences for the parents.

Women who make these difficult decisions often do so with fear of disability and suffering, explicit or implicit pressure from doctors, nurses and families, shattered dreams of the perfect child, panic, confusion, and misinformation.

But some women in these situations don't allow their babies to be torn from their bodies. The women in this book describe with refreshing honesty what happened when they chose, against the flow, to give birth anyway.

In many ways, this book is about the medical profession. In a few stories, health professionals treat mother and child with dignity and respect, restoring the reader's faith in doctors to work in the service of humanity. But most of the other stories stir up fear and mistrust towards health professionals, especially where babies are misdiagnosed, mothers are coerced towards abortion, and parents in their grief or shock are treated callously as though there is no person worth grieving. It fosters in the reader a wary, questioning approach to the care received during pregnancy. This is not a 'buyer beware' attitude that one might necessarily adopt in a privatized health system. It is an attitude of resistance to tax-payer funded, routinised and sanitised prenatal practices, that serve the interests of anyone but the two patients involved – mother and baby.

Ultimately, though, this book was about courage. It dissolved my own lurking fear of something being 'wrong' with my babies.

One woman talks of her "wonder child", Layiah who has Down syndrome. Teresa, who carried two children to term knowing they would both die, writes that "carrying this beautiful person is an honour." Sandi's baby Grace was expected to have skeletal dysplasia but didn't; she says that "even if the diagnosis had been correct, the hours or even minutes holding her would have been easily worth the pain and suffering." Julia Anderson writes of her son Andrew, who died at seven months, that "this small cheerful soul left behind a storehouse of memories and lessons which we are still mining today." Michelle's daughter Ciarra has Down Syndrome and "is the closest thing to an angel I will ever see." Amy writes that "Gabriel was going to die, but first he was going to live," that "aborting the pregnancy would have meant denying ourselves the life-changing, bittersweet, exquisite experience of holding our beautiful full-term son and hearing his cries."

Are these the experiences that most health professionals will relate to pregnant women when faced with similar situations? I am not confident.

It seems that some things are omitted from medical textbooks, such as the indescribable bond between mother and child. Or the amazing and unique gift that is every single person, no matter how long they live, no matter how much they vary from the norm. One can't measure it, nor sell it, nor fully explain it. Instead, one might read in a textbook about quality-adjusted life years, cost-benefit analysis of aborting babies with Down Syndrome, or the concept of reproductive 'choice', void of any acknowledgment of the intense pressures on women, particularly women with disabilities, to choose termination. These are the concerns of a health industry obsessed with cost-containment and perfection. But real flesh-and-blood, warts-and-all people – like these women and their families – move through this health system.

The author does not only provide these women an opportunity to tell their stories. She draws their experiences together in a thoroughly researched introduction which chronicles the disturbing march of eugenics; not a 1930s relic, but still with us today. True to feminist tradition, she locates women's private individual experiences in their broader social and historical contexts, and reveals some of the processes and pressures culminating in women accepting the medical technologies of prenatal testing and abortion. We see how women's bodies bear much of the burden of society's fears of imperfection, difference, and suffering.

These women refused to let their unborn, less-than-perfect babies be dehumanised and discarded. They stood up to discrimination and a medical profession permeated by eugenic ideas. They show us that it is women's courage to accept and celebrate and support life that can turn the tide.