

## Call the Midwife/Erica Wagner

“Try and pretend it’s anything but snobbery,” says Stephen McGann. “But it *is* snobbery. I’ve been a cultural snob myself. ‘Oh, theatre, daaaarling!’” he drawls, laughing. “It’s the same in science. Scientists will talk about ‘the general public’, and there’s an implicit cultural snobbery. But out there, in the real world, where real people live their real lives, people respond to actual stuff that’s crafted well, and crafted with sincerity.”

I have discovered how right he is, for I was such a snob myself, once upon a time. We’re sitting in a cramped, old-fashioned trailer -- cracked red vinyl seats -- on the Virginia Water set of *Call the Midwife*. I’ve been allowed into the new Community Centre to watch the filming of Sister Monica Joan’s birthday party; over and over again, the candles on the cake are lit; over and over, midwives, nuns and extras sing Happy Birthday -- but never with quite enough swing, it seems, which is why the candles on the cake have to be lit and relit, and Judy Parfitt must look delighted again and again. (Regular viewers of *Call the Midwife* will recall Sister M-J’s abiding passion for cake.) By now the series has reached 1963, and I find myself coveting the mid-century modern lamps which adorn the set; goodbye to the postwar drabness of the first series -- set in 1957 -- when the Second World War was still casting its long shadow over all.

This is series seven, with another two yet to come. No wonder: the stories of the midwives and nuns of Nonnatus House in London’s East End has topped the ratings chart since it was first broadcast in 2012, with consolidated figures of over 10 million viewers for each series. Put that another way: one in six people in the United Kingdom watch *Call the Midwife* when it’s broadcast each week. McGann plays Dr Patrick Turner, resident physician to the Nonnatus House crew, one of the many cast members who’ve been with the show since the very beginning. Of course, McGann has an additional loyalty, it must be said: he’s married to the show’s creator, Heidi Thomas. But those 10 million viewers feel just as loyal, it seems.

I never thought I’d be one of them. When *Call the Midwife* first aired I dismissed it as just the sort of thing I wouldn’t like. Seeing stills of the smiling cast, I imagined a saccharine portrait of a postwar world, full of gor-blimey cheeky chappies and plucky young *gels*. I probably also thought: *nuns*? And then -- around the time of the third series -- I found myself far from home and pining for the East End I’ve come to love: I’ve made my home here for more than twenty years. I was in the battered industrial town of Troy, in upstate New York, and staying in a former funeral home which retained rather too much of its original character to facilitate a good night’s sleep. *Call the Midwife* was streaming on PBS -- **it’s been sold in over 200 territories, and while the show hasn’t quite had the same effect on Americans as *Downton Abbey*, each of the past four seasons was among the yearly top 10 viewed programmes on public television. By the banks of the Hudson River I thought I’d at least get to glimpse a stage-set version of my home ground.** Almost immediately, I was hooked, for just as Stephen McGann put it, here was actual stuff, crafted well, and crafted with sincerity.

Here too is a robust defense of the welfare state, needed now more than ever. Here is a reminder -- for the characters in *Call the Midwife* remember -- what it meant not to be able to afford to see a doctor. And here, by golly, are women’s lives, messy, difficult, beautiful, glorious. Of course, I am not the first to notice this. Count on Caitlin Moran to spot the potential of the series from the off. She called the first episode “off the scale ballsy”, not an expression likely to pass Sister Julianne’s lips. “Good on you, *Call the Midwife*,” she wrote. “You dilate those cervixes without the help of pethidine on prime-time BBC One. You freak out viewers with the reality of the female reproductive burden. I raise my glass to you.”

Yet one of the early doubters was Heidi Thomas herself. Thomas is one of Britain’s most successful writers for television; a mistress of literary adaptation who has brought *Madame Bovary* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* to the screen, her three-part adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* followed hard on the heels of *Call the Midwife*’s Christmas special this year. (“*Call The Midwife* writer to dominate Christmas TV with adaptation of *Little Women*”, ran the headline in

*The Mirror*.) Executive Producer Pippa Harris had come across Jennifer Worth's eponymous memoir -- published in 2002, when Worth was well into her sixties -- and thought an adaptation of the book could replicate the success of *All Creatures Great and Small*, James Herriot's tales of life as a Yorkshire vet which had run for ninety episodes from 1978 to 1990. Harris -- now Dame Pippa -- has a nose for a hit. Before forming her company, Neal Street Productions with partners Sam Mendes and Caro Newling, she was head of drama commissioning for the BBC; with Neal Street she has produced *Jarhead*, *Revolutionary Road*, *Stuart: A Life Backwards* and *The Hollow Crown*, just a few of the projects with her name attached. But Thomas had just finished *Cranford* and didn't think the Worth would be her cup of tea. "I thought, ooh, this isn't me -- this isn't 19th-century classic literature! But Pippa urged me to give it a try, and then I couldn't put it down. So I rang Pippa and said yes. I thought the material was utterly compelling."

Thomas strikes a remarkable emotional balance between heartwarming encounters and human frailty, existential struggle. **You may be unable to think of *Call the Midwife* without conjuring an image of Miranda Hart -- as redoubtable midwife Chummy -- wobbling about on her bike to great comedic effect, and comedy has always been part of the show. While Hart had to leave after the fifth series, her scrapes on London's streets have been nicely replaced by Victoria Yeates' Sister Winifred attempting to learn to drive (spoiler: she's a menace). But comedy isn't the show's true heart. Without access to birth control, women attempt kitchen table abortions; there have been clear-eyed depictions of what life was like for gay men and women when homosexuality was illegal ("a lot of the crew, who are quite young, really hadn't believed that it could have been illegal," Pippa Harris says). Daniel Laurie plays Reggie, a character with Down's Syndrome who's now a permanent part of the show -- and, perhaps most strikingly, *Call the Midwife* devoted a long storyline to the discovery that a drug -- Thalidomide -- prescribed for morning sickness was causing terrible birth defects. Midwife Trixie (Helen Rogers) confronted her alcoholism and Sister Mary Cynthia (Bryony Hannah) was institutionalized for depression and underwent electro-convulsive therapy. Over the coming months viewers will meet a new midwife, Lucille Anderson, played by Leonie Elliot, the show's first West Indian midwife; no doubt not everyone in Poplar will be pleased with this development.**

Thomas -- whose late brother David had Down's Syndrome, and whose family has been impacted by suicide -- bristles at the idea that the show is merely a cozy treat. She's still annoyed by a review that claimed *Midwife* presented "an alternative universe of sunshine and lollipops". The review, she notes, was written by a woman. "I think some critics perceive it as soft-centred, as something female and therefore less worthy of their attention. That's a huge issue in our society today, borne out by recent events. What sort of patriarchy do we live in that a woman on a kitchen table being scraped out with a scalpel by a neighbour is 'comforting'? If you think *Call the Midwife* is comforting you are not watching the show."

Worth's books have long been exhausted; storylines come both from research (Terri Coates, a midwife for nearly 40 years and the person who urged Worth to write her memoirs, has advised the series from the beginning) and, sometimes, from the thousands of letters the producers of the show receive. Louise Silverton is the Director of Midwifery for the Royal College of Midwives: she confirms the show's accurate reflection of the work midwives still do. She herself started her training in inner-city Leeds in 1974, and saw levels of poverty that reminded her of *London Labour and the London Poor*, Henry Mayhew's shocking portrait of 19th-century deprivation. "Even though we'd had the welfare state for some time, people were still locked in a cycle of being hand-to-mouth. And health outcomes are still stratified by levels of poverty, levels of education." This experience is reflected, again and again, in *Call the Midwife*: as are the personal relationships, the lack of judgment, on which the profession depends. "As a midwife, I always get through the door," Silverton says. "I'm going to take women as they are. What you see is relationship-based care. Knowing the woman, knowing that the advice and suggestions you give are in the context of her circumstances."

And surely it's important, in what we might call the post-Weinstein era, to pay attention to a show whose driving force is listening to women, and taking what they say seriously. **If the show**

ever errs on the side of uplift I'm inclined to make allowances: that's the warmth, surely, that leads to conversations that can alter people's lives. The Christmas special is a notable example, one of its storylines astonishingly bleak: a charming old chap dies, after which it is revealed that was beating and imprisoning his wife (a marvelous Anita Dobson) for years and also impregnated his 15-year-old daughter, who aborted the baby after the father kicked her out of the house. Mother and daughter are reunited at the end, and if I wondered if they would have been beyond the bounds of *Call the Midwife*, well, it was Christmas after all -- and in truth, stranger things have happened. The possibility of real change in the real world is what keeps Heidi Thomas so attached to this project. "This is my chance to tell stories that matter to me in a form, in a medium, that will never happen to me again," she says passionately. "Sometimes it's really simple: you get a letter from someone who will say, 'I've been able to talk to my husband about the birth of our children for the first time'. I've had letters from the families of disabled people who had not been allowed to live in marital or romantic setups until they saw the Jacob and Sally story in series three." In that episode Jacob, played by Colin Young, an actor with cerebral palsy, and Sally, played by Sarah Gordy, who has Down's Syndrome, form a romantic attachment, and Sally falls pregnant. "I've lost count of the letters I get from women saying 'I was able to come out to my parents because of Patsy and Delia'" -- two of the show's midwives who were in a hidden lesbian relationship. "Sometimes we're changing people's point of view, sometimes we're enabling people to say, this is my story. And I don't think I'll get that chance again."

Not to mention that *Call the Midwife* offers a model of a production almost wholly run by women. Thomas is wryly blasé about her working environment. "A journalist at a literary festival asked me, 'Is it very novel for you to work on a show where women are in charge?' And I said: not really. There's a woman in charge of every show I work on, and it's me." The way to bring about change across the industry, as in any industry, is straightforward, if not simple, Pippa Harris says. "I suppose I feel that the more women are in positions of power the less people like Harvey Weinstein can ever get any traction. There's not going to be a Harvey Weinstein on this set! But it does need women to be working in every area -- and in senior roles. So they can ensure that young women coming through are not put in the path of a person like Weinstein." Part of the change means breaking down received notions of what kinds of stories appeal to people. "When we developed the first series, people would ask, aren't you worried that it's not going to appeal to men because it's all about babies?" Harris says. "No one ever said that when I worked -- with Heidi -- on *Soldier, Soldier*. No one ever said that women won't be interested if it's all about guns and warfare."

*Call the Midwife* offers a portrait of a society which still believes in the idea of society. In austerity Britain, in Brexit Britain, in the age of Donald Trump, this Sunday night viewing offers very much more than an excuse to curl up on the sofa with a glass of wine. "*Call the Midwife* works on many layers," Thomas says. "If you want to watch the show, and just scoop the top layer off, and enjoy the frocks and the music and the relationships, if you just want to be cradled for an hour -- join us on those terms. You are totally welcome. But if you want to dig a bit deeper into the stuff of life, you'll find so much there. This is about women, about the disabled, about immigrants, about the elderly; at every turn we strive to tell the stories of people whose stories are not often told, and are even less often listened to. And that's the challenge. Watch *Call The Midwife* and you will see something of your own experience reflected back."

Jenny Agutter -- sitting on those cracked vinyl seats in the trailer on set, taking a break from filming with a warm bowl of apple crumble, thinks the show offers a different kind of comfort from mere escapism. "I think we live in quite dangerous times, right now," she says. "It's quite nice to see a society which sees where the dangers are -- and that it's human resolve that gets past those dangers. In the end it's the people that make the world that we live in. People making human connections."

There's a knock on the trailer door. A young assistant pokes his head in, apologizes, says that Sister Julianne needs to get back on set. As the young man heads out the door, she turns to me and smiles. "He's great. He'll make a wonderful producer some day." Right now, however, it's his job to call the midwife.

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