Maternity Unit
A STUDY GUIDE
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Janette Howe’s documentary, Maternity Unit, offers a privileged insight into the processes of childbirth, an experience that is at once universal and intensely individual.

The film centres on Canterbury Hospital in New South Wales, which caters to an ethnically diverse population. Over eighty per cent of the 1500 births that take place there each year are to parents born outside Australia. Childbirth is already a charged experience; this is further intensified for the couples that feature in this documentary by the precariousness of their grasp of English, their tentative sense of place, and their limited family support. One particularly moving scene shows a young Chinese woman in the throes of labour conversing with an interpreter over the telephone. Her doctor’s urgent instructions regarding the need for forceps to deliver her struggling baby cannot be comprehended without translation. The woman’s fear and vulnerability are writ large upon her strained face as she grapples with the information and her need to make a crucial decision.

Maternity Unit invites us to share in birth as a profound, irrevocable turning point in the lives of these couples. And as different as they all are, each family shares the one powerful, underlying hope: that all will go well and they will be blessed with a healthy baby. The film introduces us to a range of characters, including midwife Rosalie Nunn, whose dedication and commitment to her patients is borne out in every filmed encounter. We meet Hannah from Ghana, who talks about her need for people to guide her, and reveals, ‘I’m scared of being alone’. We meet Hui, who speaks directly of her fears about the birth of her first child. She misses her family back home in China, but with great bravado she says the experience will make her braver, and that it will make her and her husband Guoguang feel more Australian: ‘The baby will belong here. That will make us feel more strongly that Australia is our country’. We witness the precious moment when an eleven-year-old boy admires his newborn brother’s dark, abundant hair, commenting, ‘Oh, it’s grown hair – that’s fast!’ The boy’s grandmother shows him how to gently stroke the baby’s cheek. It’s a scene that conveys something intimate and meaningful about the connection that stretches between the generations and that binds a family together.

The film’s closing shot settles on one of the women, Hasret, leaving the hospital with her newborn baby in her arms. Her husband, Hasan, carries an armload of flowers. As Maternity Unit shows us, pregnancy and birth are rites of passage into parenthood: for Hasret and the other couples we are fortunate to meet in this documentary, the journey has just begun. Finally, we are left with a sense of the best aspects of our multicultural country, where people from disparate backgrounds come together to celebrate birth, respecting and perpetuating the traditions of their homelands, while integrating their families into new communities.

Curriculum Links This documentary would have application in middle to senior secondary Women’s Studies, SOSE/HSIE, Multicultural Studies, Health and Human/Personal Development. It would also be of interest to tertiary nursing and midwifery students.
The Documentary: A Labour of Love

- List five clichés about childbirth that regularly appear in depictions of labour. Does Maternity Unit subvert or reaffirm any of these stock images and ideas?
- Suggest three other possible titles for the documentary.
- Design and annotate a poster to promote the program.
- Who is the audience for this film?
- Write a review of the documentary for the TV guide section of your state newspaper.
- Imagine you are Janette Howe, the film’s director. Write an account of your reasons for making Maternity Unit. What did you hope to achieve? Who did you hope to reach?

Expanding Families: A Range of Characters and Situations

- Choose one of the couples or families featured in Maternity Unit and write a profile of them.

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The Miracle of Life and Birth

‘We all wait for labour …’ – midwife, Canterbury Hospital

- How have childbirth practices changed in the last 60 years? If possible, include in your report anecdotal information from family members. For instance, what
memories does your grandmother have of her birthing experience/s?

• What are the three stages of labour?

• One scene in Maternity Unit shows a group of pregnant women and their partners watching an educational video on birthing. Describe the expressions we see on people's faces. What do you think some of the women might be thinking at this point?

• Hannah seems distinctly lacking in curiosity about the birthing process. She does mention to her husband's aunt, Felicia, that she worries the baby 'might just fall out', but she doesn't ask questions about labour, despite the fact that Felicia has children of her own and is a qualified midwife. Can you explain the possible reasons for Hannah's attitude?

• Lina's second son, Akram, was born just eight minutes after arrival at the hospital. What implications might this have for her next delivery?

• Sarah has two teenage daughters and from past experience she predicts she will become 'irritable' during labour. She says that the last time, 'every now and then, I sort of just lost my mind'. Compile a list of ten adjectives to describe the emotions and sensations of the women we see labouring in Maternity Unit.

• Early in her labour, Hasret says, 'I don't want to talk about the birth. It's private for me'. The camera discreetly leaves the room, along with her husband and children. Her 11-year-old son calls over his shoulder, 'Bye mummy, Good luck'. Other labouring women choose to have the delivery room swarming with friends and family members. If you were a woman in labour, who would you wish to be present and why?

• Make a list of some of the props and strategies used to assist women in labour. (For example, different postures, massage, heat pads, shower, music, scented oils ...)

• What factors impact most upon a woman's experience of childbirth?

• What are the key differences between a birthing unit and a more traditional maternity ward?

• Choose a website from the reference list at the end of this guide. Write a review of the site, looking at the range and depth of the material on offer, its presentation, ease of accessing information, usefulness of references and links, accuracy of information, credibility of contributors, etc.

Planning for an Act of God?

• What is a birthing plan?

• When asked about her wishes for the birth, Hui says her mother and sister both had easy natural deliveries and that is what she expects: 'I'm quite healthy. There'll be no problem'. In what ways does the reality of her experience diverge from her antenatal hopes?

• Essay topic: 'Birthing plans are ridiculous. How can you plan for such a cataclysmic event? All a birthing plan does is create a false expectation of control in the labouring woman and her partner, and an accompanying sense of failure and disappointment when it becomes apparent the plan is not worth the paper it's written on.' Discuss.

Life and Death: Complications and Interventions

'Maybe God just wants to give the sign that you have to be on your feet, you shouldn't forget Me.' – Hannah

• What are the three most common complications during pregnancy?

• What are the three most common complications during childbirth?

• What statistics can you find about still births and maternal deaths? What factors account for the decreasing rate of maternal deaths?

• In what circumstances are forceps used? If the baby is unable to be delivered with forceps, what action would the doctor or midwife probably recommend?

• Hui's sister-in-law, Guo Jun, an
obstetrician, is worried about the greenish colour of the amniotic fluid. Why might this concern her?
• What is meconium?
• Hannah says ‘no-one has been really able to say what went wrong’ with the birth of her daughter. How important would it be for the parents of babies with serious complications to have a clear idea of how the problems may have arisen? Discuss the idea that it is difficult for us to accept that not every incident in life can be matched with an adequate and consoling explanation.
• When Hannah’s baby is delivered, she is not breathing, but midwife Rosalie is hopeful because the baby has a strong heartbeat. Artificial respiration is required and her airways need to be cleared. She spends seven days in intensive care at another hospital (RPA). In these scenes, Hannah appears to be in shock, and the sound of the machines keeping her tiny daughter alive dominates. She prays: ‘God, you gave her to me, you don’t want me to lose her.’ She says later of her daily bus trips to the hospital, ‘Even though I come home, my mind will be at the hospital’. Imagine you are Hannah. Write a diary account of your experience of labour and the subsequent weeks.
• Kwasi touches his baby as she lies struggling for life in an incubator. What might he be thinking?

Give Me The Drugs …
• What are the most common forms of pain relief offered during childbirth? (For example, nitrous oxide, pethadine, anaesthetic epidural.)
• Outline how each is administered. Under what conditions is it safe or unsafe?
• What effect does it have on mother and infant? What are the constituent ingredients? What are the possible side effects?
• Can you find any statistics on the frequency with which these drugs are used during childbirth in Australia?
• What is oxytocin and what is it generally used for? How is it administered?

Episiotomy, The Kindest Cut?
• Can any steps be taken to decrease a woman’s chance of needing an episiotomy?
• What can you find out about the debate over whether it is better to perform an episiotomy or let a woman tear?

‘Ripped untimely from his mother’s womb’: Caesarean Delivery
• What are the current rates of caesarean delivery in Australia? How has this rate changed in the last decade? What reasons might account for the change?
• Why might caesarean rates be higher in the USA than in Europe?
• What are some of the most common reasons for performing a caesarean?
• What can you find out about recovering from a caesarean delivery?
• What are some common complications and side effects of caesarean delivery?
• Are there greater risks with caesarean sections compared to vaginal deliveries? What are the risks?
• Most women who deliver their first child via caesarean are discouraged from attempting vaginal delivery with subsequent pregnancies. Why?
• Hui’s sister-in-law, Guo Jun, says that in China, if the labouring woman can no longer bear the pain, they will elect to perform a caesarean. Is this common practice in Australia?
• Why do the doctors elect to perform emergency caesareans on Hannah and Hui?

A Depressing Experience?
• Can you ascertain whether any links have been established between a woman’s experience of childbirth and her propensity towards postnatal depression?
• Essay topic: ‘Too many women who deliver by caesarean section feel as if they have somehow failed.’ Discuss.
• Essay topic: ‘For many women, the experience of childbirth has been contaminated by the wider culture of competitiveness that has come to define our society.’

Baby Catcher: The Midwife
• How does one become qualified as a midwife?
• What personal and professional qualities would be of advantage to a midwife?
• Describe Rosalie Nunn to someone who hasn’t seen the film. Is she a ‘good’ midwife? What makes her good at her job?
• Write up a job description for Rosalie, detailing her various duties.
• Rosalie says of Canterbury Hospital: ‘It’s culturally diverse, it’s colourful and it’s challenging … My role caters for the different cultures and attempting to link in some of those unmet needs of the women.’ What extra responsibilities might a midwife at Canterbury Hospital have, given the patients’ range of ethnic backgrounds?
• What is Rosalie’s response to the complications facing Hannah and Kwasi’s baby?
• What does Rosalie’s presence at Jaida’s naming ceremony say about her significance in these couples’ lives?
• How does Hannah feel about the support and care Rosalie has offered her during her pregnancy?

New Life: Becoming a Parent
• Why do people so often cry at the birth of a baby?
• How do you think having a child might change you? Kwasi, Hannah’s husband, says, ‘It has changed me physically, spiritually, emotionally. You can’t predict the future. It’s all in the hands of God. I think I’m prepared now to face anything that comes my way’. Hannah speaks of a new sense of responsibility. Make a list of five ways in which a baby might impact on your lifestyle. Now compile a list of more subtle changes that might occur, such as to your priorities, your body, your direction for the future, your ideas about family, the way you see yourself, your relationships.
• At what point does a woman become a mother?
• Guoguang, Hui’s husband, takes a photo of his baby before cutting its umbilical cord. Sarah’s husband, Issa, cheers her on, almost as if he were at a sporting event. Hasret’s husband, Hasan, paces the corridor outside the delivery room. What do you see as the role of the father during childbirth?

Bless This Child:
Ceremonies and Customs Around Birth
• Religion plays a large role in the experience of childbirth. What can you find out about the different customs and practices of different ethnic and religious groups? What do you think of the Scientologists’ belief that labouring women should not scream or cry as it might distress the infant?
• Write an account of the ceremonies performed in two different religious or ethnic groups to welcome the newborn into the community. Present your findings to the class.
• We see Hasret, heavily pregnant, preparing special Kurdish delicacies to offer her guests after the birth of her child. Make a list of preparations that need to be made before the arrival of a new baby.
• Lina’s husband, Badawi, whispers a prayer in his newborn son’s ear. The baby sneezes. What does this signify in their culture?
• At Jaida’s naming ceremony the priest utters the following words: “We give you a taste of water, which represents life, so as a child you can learn diplomacy. And we give you a taste of schnapps, so you can tell the difference between right and wrong”. How important are such ceremonies? What is their significance?
• Imagine you are to become a parent. Write a blessing for your newborn child.

For Further Discussion:
Essay and Debate Topics
• ‘Men have war, women have childbirth.’
• ‘The debate about natural childbirth has been hijacked by upper-middle class academic feminists.’
• ‘Too much emphasis is placed on the nine months of pregnancy and the hours of labour at its conclusion. Labour should be seen not so much as the end of pregnancy but as the beginning of a lifetime’s relationship with one’s child.’
Books

Vangie Bergum, A Child On Her Mind: The Experience of Becoming A Mother, Bergin and Garvey, Westport, 1997
Barbara Bridgman, The Medical Delivery Business: Health Reform, Childbirth and the Economic Order, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2004
Donald Caton, What a Blessing She Had Chloroform: The Medical and Social Response to the Pain of Childbirth From 1800 to the Present, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999
Jennifer Hall, Midwifery, Mind and Spirit: Emerging Issues of Care, Butterworth-Heinemann, Boston, 2000
Sheila Kitzinger, The Politics of Birth, Elsevier Butterworth Heinemann, Edinburgh, 2005
Juliana van Olphen-Fehr, Diary of a Midwife: The Power of Positive Childbearing, Bergin and Garvey, Westport, 1998
Amanda Tattam and Cate Kennedy (eds), Labour of Love: Tales From the World of Midwives, Macmillan, Sydney, 2005

Web Sites

www.cea-nsw.com.au This is the official web site for the Childbirth Education Association of Australia (NSW).
www.maternitycoalition.org.au The Maternity Coalition
www.purebirth-australia.com
www.library.unisa.edu.au/resources/subject/midwif.asp
www.acmi.org.au This site represents the Australian College of Midwives Incorporated.
www.homebirthsydney.org.au
www.childbirth.org A resource website developed and maintained by a group of childbirth experts.

www.babycenter.com/childbirth
www.firstbymb.com/expecting/childbirth/resources.htm
www.childbirthsolutions.com
www.4woman.org/Pregnancy/birth.htm

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