
One sultry morning in Darwin, hemp-wearing army wife Amy Silva grips a trembling fist around two pink lines on a plastic stick. Struggling to come to terms with her rampant fertility, disillusioned with a haughty obstetrician and infuriated by an inordinate amount of peeing, Amy finds solace in a decision to homebirth. After all, it worked for the cavewomen, right? But as a tropical cyclone threatens to whip down the main street, Amy finds herself facing more than biology. (Back Cover synopsis)

This debut novel by Kim Lock tackles the contentious issue of a woman’s right to make an informed choice regarding her care during pregnancy as well devising an agreed birth plan. A work of fiction, the novel’s light approach does not claim to be authoritative and but slots nicely into the Chick Lit genre.

The central character Amy Silva is living with her childhood sweetheart and now long-term partner, Dylan Brooks. Dylan serves in an army artillery unit that is stationed in Darwin. The humour in the novel is quirky and it contains many funny moments as the story moves between Amy’s present situation and flashes back to moments in her early life. As a structure it works well, making sense of Amy’s reactions and understanding of her personality as she works through the upheaval of her unplanned pregnancy. Her first lesson in the facts of life is laugh-out-loud material:

> The first person to enlighten me with the details of human reproduction was an unfortunate-smelling boy in my grade five class whose name was Barry White – the irony of which would only occur to me when I was almost fifteen. (44)

The liberal sprinkling of expletives as well as colloquialisms and nicknames Australianises the language of the novel. The mind-boggling array of nicknames thrown at Amy by way of introduction to other army wives is wonderful:

Karen – Packo’s missus, Phillipa – Wayne’s missus, Sarah – Clockface’s missus (Clockface? Seriously?) Beth – Big Man’s missus and Charlie – Bricky’s missus. (100)

An ironical moment occurs as Amy recounts the first time she waits for Dylan’s return to Darwin from an overseas army exercise:

I had noticed a camera close by, the huge black lens trained in my direction. My stomach had flip-flopped as I glanced about, convinced the cameraman’s focus was elsewhere. But as my gaze had returned to the camera, warily, he had poked his head from behind the viewfinder, winked at me, then dropped his eyes to my chest, giving me a pointed stare … across the modest swell of my breasts had been a large black peace symbol. (118)

Though not a radical militant alternative life-styler Amy is aware that some of her views are at odds with army life.
The author is married to an RAAF serviceman and is familiar with the love of gossip that Amy hates most about army life and social gatherings; the ‘You’ll Never Guess Who Did What To Whom’ (9) syndrome. The patriarchal life of the army – the obedience to orders – syncs with Amy’s attitude towards the requirements of the medical profession as she begins her pre-natal visits.

Amy and Dylan’s return to celebrate Christmas with their families in the picturesque and bustling township of Woodend in regional Victoria introduces Amy to the home birth option as a viable alternative. The idea takes a firm hold and back in Darwin Amy does her research and meets with a potential midwife. It seems to be an alternative better suited to Amy than the regular urine samples, ultrasounds, and seemingly endless tests that make Amy view the medical process as more concerned with assessing her and her unborn baby for errors than informing, fostering and building self-assurance (76).

The homebirth idea takes firm hold and her resolve to take on a midwife and walk away from the most sought after obstetrician in Darwin (74) is a turning point in the novel. Tensions mount for Amy but rather than giving in, she just digs in her heels and deepens her resolve (209). Dylan, the usually supportive partner, becomes obstinately opposed fearing for her safety at the birth.

Darwin looms large throughout this novel. Having lived there, the author brings to life the community that is Darwin and the quirks of its weather – The Wet and The Dry. She manages convey the heat and the stifling thick-aired humidity as the city swelters through the monsoon season. We can almost hear the annoying buzz of the mosquito inviting us to swat it before it draws blood. We can visualise the dark thunderclouds that promise rain that doesn’t come, or feel the relief when rain does come and relax to the thrumming on the roof as the cicadas serenade outside. The fury of a cyclone, flinging debris, street signs, lids from barbecues, uprooting trees, hurling small rocks like pellets from a shotgun, is well depicted. And as people and emergency personnel emerge and begin the process of checking that no-one has been severely injured and begin to clean up the mess Darwin is ‘scrubbed up beautifully after Tropical Cyclone Kaitlyn tap-danced through her streets with the grace and eloquence of a rhinoceros’ (294).

It takes a cyclone, a phone call that cuts off mid-sentence and a wild drive into the a cyclone as it ramps up its power before the estranged couple reach a point where they can actually listen to and understand each other.

The birth of Amy’s baby at home is beautifully written and is graphic in its telling, which may prove to be a little too much information for the squeamish. It is a very moving, magical and empowering moment for Amy and Dylan so have the box of tissues handy if you are the emotional type.

If any criticism is to be made it is in the stereotyped cliché of the by-the-book medical profession and the equally so view of a relaxed hippie-style midwife. The medicos don’t stand a chance and the midwife is a winner even before she is required to perform. However, a balanced view is not the purpose of this particular story: it is, in the words of Noni Hazlehurst, ‘A beautifully drawn portrait of a woman seeking empowerment’ (Front cover blurb). Criticism aside, I enjoyed it too.

Kay Hart