



## The Birth House

By Ami McKay  
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### Introduction

*The Birth House* is the story of Dora Rare, the first daughter to be born in five generations of Rares. As a child in an isolated village in Nova Scotia, she is drawn to Miss Babineau, an outspoken Acadian midwife with a gift for healing. Dora become Miss B's apprentice and together they help the women of Scots Bay through infertility, difficult labors, breech births, unwanted pregnancies and even unfulfilling sex lives. Filled with details as compelling as they are surprising, *The Birth House* is an unforgettable tale of the struggles women have faced to have control of their own bodies and to keep the best parts of tradition alive in the world of modern medicine.

### Questions for Discussion

1. How does reading shape Dora's view of the world? How does her love of books play into her relationship with her father? With Miss B.? With Archer?
2. After attending her first birth, Dora observes that, "How a mother comes to love her child, her caring at all for this thing that's made her heavy, lopsided and slow, this thing that made her wish she were dead . . . that's the miracle." What do you think she meant? Do you feel this is true?
3. Folklore, home remedies, women's traditions, herbalism, and a belief in the divine feminine are all part of Miss B.'s way of life. She is determined to pass these things along to Dora. Does Dora try hard enough to preserve them? Should she let them go?
4. When Archer asks Dora to marry him, he tells her that, "love takes care of herself." She chooses to say 'yes'. What does Dora's decision say about her situation and station in life? Should she have chosen to follow in Miss B.'s footsteps instead?
5. Dr. Thomas treats Dora for Neurasthenia (described as "Weeping, melancholy, anxiety, irritability, depression, outrageousness, insomnia, mental and physical weariness, idle talking, sudden fevers, morbid fears, frequent titillation, forgetfulness, palpitations of the heart, headaches, writing cramps, mental confusion, constant worry and fear of impending insanity"). What do you think of this diagnosis compared with Dora's behavior? Do you think his treatment was administered with the desire to heal Dora? Would a similar diagnosis and treatment be administered today?
6. Through a visit to Dr. Thomas's office, Dora discovers that women's sexual pleasure (specifically orgasm) is considered to be a medical function (or dysfunction). Ads of the time, such as the one for the White Cross Vibrator, reinforced this notion. How does Dora come to terms with these ideas? What kinds of taboos surround women's sexuality today?
7. Miss B. says to Dr. Thomas: "Science don't know kindness. It don't know kindness from cabbage." Dr. Thomas replies: "Science is neither kind nor unkind, Miss Babineau. Science is exact." How do these statements show the differences between Miss B. and Dr. Thomas? In moving the birthing experience from homes and birth houses to hospitals, what have women lost? What have they gained?
8. After Dora discovers Aunt Fran's affair with Reverend Norton she writes: "He's been seeing her. He's noticed her so much that now she's his." Why do you think she decided to keep it a secret? Should she have told someone? What would you have done?
9. Dora says this about her mother: "Everything I've learned from Mother, every bit of her truth has been said while her hands were moving." What does this say about her relationship with her mother? Is this kind of communication still an important part of women's lives?
10. The sisters of the Occasional Knitters Society support Dora throughout the book (keeping the secret of Wrennie's birth, taking care of Wrennie when Dora goes to Boston, meeting together for conversations and sisterhood.) What makes their friendship so strong? Are friendships like that possible today?
11. The author uses ephemera from Dora's life (invitations, news articles, sections from *The Willow Book*, folk tales, advertisements, etc.) throughout the novel. How did this affect your reading experience? Do you have a favorite from them?
12. There are many mentions of birthing folklore and techniques, from groaning cake to mother's tea, from Miss B. turning Ginny's breech baby to quilling. What wives' tales about pregnancy and birth do you know? Are there any that you'd swear by?
13. Dora is conflicted when Mrs. Ketch comes to her house for help. Given Dora's past with Mrs. Ketch, Why do you think she chose to assist her in helping her 'lose' her baby?
14. Maxine is very different from anyone Dora has ever met. Boston is very different from Scots Bay. What do Maxine and Boston bring to Dora's life? Have you ever made a change in location or met someone who immediately changed your life?

15. In both the prologue and the epilogue, we see how life has changed in Scots Bay. Other towns in other places have changed over time, some gone forever. Have we gained anything with these changes? What have we lost?

16. After Dora and Hart become lovers, he talks of marriage and she refuses. Why do you think she is so determined not to marry him?

### **About the Author**

Ami McKay's work has aired on CBC radio's *Maritime Magazine*, *This Morning*, *OutFront* and *The Sunday Edition*. Her documentary, *Daughter of Family G*, won an Excellence in Journalism Medallion at the 2003 Atlantic Journalism Awards. When she and her family moved to Scots Bay, Nova Scotia, she learned that their new home was once a birth house.