



Birth Chairs, Midwives, and Medicine

Amanda Carson Banks

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There was a time when birth was treated as a natural process rather than a medical condition. Before 1800, women gave birth seated in birth chairs or on stools and were helped along by midwives. Then societal changes in attitudes toward women and the practice of medicine made birthing a province of the male-dominated medical profession.

In *Birth Chairs, Midwives, and Medicine*, Amanda Carson Banks examines the history of the birth chair and tells how this birthing device changed over time. Through photographs, artists' renditions of births, interviews, and texts from midwives and early obstetricians, she creates an evolutionary picture of birthing practices and highlights the radical redefinition of birth that has occurred in the last two centuries.

During the 1800s the change from a natural philosophy of birth to a medical one was partly a result of heightened understandings of anatomy and physiology. The medical profession was growing, and with it grew the awareness of the economic rewards of making delivery a specialized practice. In the background of the medical profession's rise was the prevailing perception of women as fragile invalids. Gradually, midwives and birth chairs were relegated to rural and isolated settings.

The popularity of birth chairs has seen a revival in the late twentieth century as the struggle between medical obstetrics and the alternative birth movement has grown. As Banks shows through her careful examination of the chairs themselves, these questions have been answered and reconsidered many times in human history. Using the artifacts from the home and medical office, Banks traces sweeping societal changes in the philosophy of how to bring life into the world.

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