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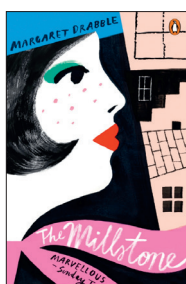
The Millstone

GRIT SMOOTHED OFF AFTER 50 YEARS

The Millstone

Margaret Drabble

Penguin, 2016 (first published 1965), PB,
176pp, £8.99, 978-0241979174



The Millstone, Margaret Drabble's mid-1960s tale of unmarried motherhood, isn't quite the kitchen-sink drama I was expecting. Its narrator's exposure to NHS medicine depicts an overburdened service (no change there) in which a person's class and connections affect the care they receive. The narrator, Rosie, is a postgraduate student from a well-off socialist family, living in a large flat near Marylebone; her parents are away in Africa. Her friends are writers and the man she sleeps with — just once, and decides not to tell — is a BBC announcer.

Rosie's first reaction to her pregnancy is to induce miscarriage with a bottle of gin and a hot bath, but her friends turn up and share the bottle. Another friend gives her the number of an abortionist (then still illegal) but, finding it engaged, she accepts her fate. She finds a National Health doctor behind a 'shabby varnished door', not having the 50 guineas Harley Street would charge.

The waiting room is overflowing when Rosie turns up 2 minutes after the surgery opens. She waits 80 minutes to see a 'harassed, keen-looking young doctor', who says he will try to find her a hospital bed, scarce though they are, and suggests contacting the unmarried mothers people in Kentish Town — 'very nice and helpful about adoption'.

At the antenatal clinic, Rosie observes 'an unbelievably depressed and miserable lot'. The midwife addresses her as 'Mrs Stacey' ... *we call everyone Mrs here*. 'Rosie does not like her, but feels on safe ground — 'safe, chartered, professional, articulate ground'.



Rosie recognises that her address marks her as a special person when the ambulance men take her to hospital in labour. 'Nonsense!' she is told, when asked how often her contractions are coming, but she is right. The nurses gossip outside her room, while with pethidine 'the pain did not diminish but my resistance to it disappeared'. The baby is 'born in a great rush and hurry, quite uncontrolled'.

In those days primiparas stayed in hospital for 10 days, and Rosie — despite feeling a cut above the herd — describes this as 'one of the more cheerful and sociable patches of my life'. Even 20 years later, when our first child was born, a week's stay was *de rigueur* — time to learn mothercraft, breastfeeding, and get over the worst of the pain.

Rosie's baby screams in the taxi going home, but is settled by a feed half an hour earlier than would have been allowed in hospital, daringly encouraged by a subversive friend. Rosie gives up breastfeeding after 6 weeks, fed up with clothes covered in milk and not knowing how much the baby is getting, distinguishing herself from the 'posh middle-class mothers' who breastfeed 'on principle'.

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Six months later the baby starts coughing and wheezing. The doctor is asked to call (and comes without question), suspects a congenital heart defect (no suspicion voiced), and arranges a hospital appointment. The surgeon shows 'little professional sympathy ... his only emotion was professional curiosity', until it emerges that he had been at Oxford with Rosie's father.

After the operation Rosie is forbidden to see her child. The child is distressed, having never been apart from her for so long. She goes away, but comes back more determined. Stonewalled again, marched to the exit, she makes a scene. The surgeon arrives and countermands the nursing sister's diktat.

Rosie meets another woman who has managed to get in, having insisted on being given a letter of permission before allowing her son to be admitted: 'I don't know what one would do without a little influence.'

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