

A Midwife's Tale

Discussion Questions

1. Explain: "it is in the very dailiness, the exhaustive, repetitious dailiness, that the real power of Martha Ballard's book lies... when she felt overwhelmed or enlivened by the very 'trivia' the historians have dismissed, she said so, not in the soul-searching manner of a Puritan nor with the literary self-consciousness of a sentimentalist, but in a plain, matter-of-fact, and in the end unforgettable voice" (p. 9).
2. How did Martha Ballard learn midwifery (pp. 11-12 and 64)?
3. Explain: "the late eighteenth century was not only an era of political revolution but of medical, economic, and sexual transformation. Not surprisingly, it was also a time when a new ideology of womanhood self-consciously connected domestic virtue to the survival of the state" (p. 27).
4. What is a "woman's record" (p. 40)?
5. Why are midwives dangerous (p. 47)?
6. Explain: "what those herbs were and whether they might also have been employed to induce abortion, we do not know. There is no mention in the diary of savine, the best-known English abortifacient, though Martha did gather tansy, a plant association in some herbals with abortion" (p. 16).
7. Most of the so-called 'witches' burned in the early modern Inquisitions were midwives. Midwives, according to various witch hunting manuals (e.g., *Malleus Maleficarum*), learned about birth control and abortion from the Devil; using—much less spreading—this reproductive health knowledge among peasant and proletariat women was considered their worst crime. Discuss.
8. What is 'social medicine', as Ulrich defines it (pp. 61-62)?
9. Explain: "a midwife was the most visible and experienced person in a community of healers who shared her perspective, her obligations, her training, and her labor" (p. 64).
10. Explain: "as the girls grew older they themselves were responsible for negotiating their own terms and collecting their own wages" (p. 81).
11. Explain: "as a midwife she was bound to serve anyone who needed her, regardless of their social position" (p. 97).
12. Can you imagine a powerful judge being publicly accused of sexual assault or rape? Can you further imagine such a judge actually getting away with it?
13. Does this sound in any way familiar to you—"he really believed Mrs Foster was treated as she Complains but he Should Deny the Charg Exhibited against him. He also said he never had the least reason to suspect her virtue or modesty" (p. 116)?
14. Explain: "I mean he is guilty" (p. 117).
15. Explain: "on trial Mrs Foster apeard very Calm sedate & unmovd notwithstanding the strong atemps there were made to throw aspersions on her Carrectir" (p. 117).
16. How shocked were you to discover that rape (of a white woman) was punishable by death in Revolutionary America (p. 118)? Why?
17. Explain: "alone in her house, disconnected from the community her husband once served, her vulnerability was complete" (p. 119).
18. What does the story of Rebecca Foster teach you about the United States? What does it teach you about rape (and high-status males)?
19. How upset does it make you that the rape and assault charges (on the three men who assaulted and raped her over a week) were all dropped, that Rebecca became mentally ill and spent the rest of her life in poverty, and that her husband was unable to get a job and became a quart of rum per day alcoholic (p. 127)? Is this American justice?

20. Explain: "some historians see the mid-eighteenth century as a transitional time in the history of the family, an era when young people began to exercise greater freedom in choosing marriage partners, when romantic and sexual attraction between couples became more important than economic negotiations between parents" (p. 138).
21. Explain: "in the late eighteenth century, romance was still subordinate to the larger process of establishing a new economic relationship" (p. 142).
22. Explain: "more recent studies have emphasized gender issues, arguing that changes in fornication proceedings reflected a larger argument over female sexuality, an argument vividly displayed in eighteenth-century novels of seduction, some of which openly challenged the prevailing double standard" (p. 149).
23. Were you shocked to discover the 1668 Massachusetts law that required midwives to 'take testimony' during childbirth of the 'reputed father' of the child of an unwed mother? Why was this law written?
24. Did the statistics of unwed mothers and out of wedlock pregnancies on p. 152 surprise you? Why or why not?
25. Explain: "fathers as well as mothers were responsible for children born out of wedlock. In courtship, sexual activity was connected with a comprehensive transition to adulthood, to good citizenship and economic productivity. The communal ritual of birth marked women as well as men as sexual beings, and affirmed the obligations as well as rights of fatherhood" (p. 158).
26. Explain: "the old system of justice asked young women to cooperate with old women in witnessing to male culpability. It also required an acceptance of female sexuality" (p. 159).
27. What are the three stages of childbirth and why is it important to understand them (p. 183)?
28. Explain: "alcoholic drinks were a part of lying-in... rum, sugar, and tea were necessary comforts for a lying-in" (p. 190).
29. Explain: "most women went through delivery every other year, summoning a midwife, calling their women, welcoming the after-nurse, returning to their kitchens. For the next year they would breast-feed the newest baby while caring for the older siblings, fitting in work at the loom or in the barn and garden as they could" (p. 193).
30. Explain: "Martha was proud enough of her adventures to write about them... what took Martha Ballard out of bed in the cold of night? Why was she willing to risk frozen feet and broken bones to practice her trade?... money alone cannot account for her commitment... religious faith is also an inadequate explanation. Midwifery was a form of service and a source of material rewards, but even more than that it was an inner calling, an assertion of being. Marth Ballard's specialty brought together the gentle and giving side of her nature with her capacity for risk and her need for autonomy" (p. 203).
31. Explain: "Martha prayed not for ease or for release from her burdens, but for *strength*, for the physical ability to continue the work she had done for so long" (p. 218).
32. Explain: "only by constant effort could a woman conquer her possessions" (p. 219).
33. Explain: "historians have distinguished three general systems of labor in early America: chattel slavery in the South, indentured servitude in the mid-Atlantic region, and family labor in New England" (p. 220).
34. Explain: "historians have connected the political revolution against English authority with a wider revolution against hierarchical relations of all sorts... 'we have been told that our Struggle had loosened the bands of Government every where. The Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters.' English visitors to post-Revolutionary America were astonished at the lack of deference shown by household workers" (p. 224).
35. Explain: "Martha had long used it to measure her own accomplishments. Now she poured into its pages her own feelings, her growing sense of injustice and abandonment, her struggle to overcome despair. Each task accomplished became a kind of witness in her case against Hepsy—or her husband—or the world" (p. 230).
36. Explain: "on November 28, 1800, when she was doubled over in a fit of 'colic' [abdominal pain], he got out of bed, made her some tea, and warmed a brick for her stomach" (p. 230). Why is this so remarkable?
37. What is the "classic double bind" of gender exclusion (p. 251)?