

Push!

Ricki Lake's valentine to the home-birth movement.

By Dana Stevens

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The Business of Being Born, a documentary directed by Abby Epstein and produced by talk-show host Ricki Lake, is a generous-spirited tribute to the practice of home birth. It's full of moving (and surprisingly ungross) footage of home deliveries, including those by Epstein and Lake themselves. Unfortunately, the movie is also a propagandist on behalf of the home-birth movement that's so selective in its presentation of information that it makes M. Lake look like a fat lady in a blindfold holding a pair of scales.

Lake was inspired to make the film after a disappointing experience giving birth to her first child in a hospital (what was so traumatic about it we never learn). She then had her second baby at home in her bathtub, with the help of a midwife, and was so changed by the experience that she briefly considered becoming a midwife herself before deciding to make this film instead. Lake is also joining forces with Rosie O'Donnell and Gloria Steinem to fund a projected \$7 million birthing center in Manhattan. Lake's passion for her new cause is admirable, but the gauzy idealization of the home-birth experience may have the opposite effect from the one she intended. Instead of adding to the store of useful information available to pregnant women, it may serve only to calcify the annoyingly rigid debate between advocates of "natural" childbirth and practitioners of ... well, whatever that is.

Perhaps part of the problem is that *The Business of Being Born* never poses the above question: What does "natural childbirth" mean when we talk about "natural childbirth"? The truth is, there's a vast continuum of choices that separate the crunchydome (having a baby at home with a midwife, a choice made by less than 1 percent of the population, but championed by this movie) from ultra-technologization (celebrities who schedule their C-sections in advance, followed by tummy tucks). The vast majority of American women—99 percent—choose to give birth in a hospital. Of those, about 90 percent opt for some form of pain relief, usually an epidural, while others go drug-free to birthing centers. Most hope for a vaginal delivery if possible, while accepting that unforeseen circumstances may lead to an emergency C-section. And yes, a few do schedule Posh Spice-style planned Caesareans. The movie's roster of talking heads (many of them professional advocates for the home-birth movement) compresses a wide range of experience into a simple either/or dichotomy: The sterile impersonality of hospital births (satirized in *The Meaning of Life* in which John Cleese shushes a laboring woman while demanding a nurse for a "ping!") vs. the sacred beauty of laboring at home.

That's not to say that *The Business of Being Born* doesn't get some things right. One interviewee offers a critique of cable health shows like *Birth Day* and *A Baby Story*, which concentrate on emergency delivery situations for maximum dramatic appeal. It's true that the popular portrayal of birth as something out of a Hollywood movie, best managed by all-knowing doctors and discreetly placed sheets, creates a needless culture of fear. The natural childbirth mantra that "Birth is not a medical event" ignores the unfortunate fact that the percentage of cases in which something goes wrong (as Lake herself says in the movie, about 1 case in 1,000) get very medical very fast. Studies in the United States, Australia, and Britain have suggested that the rate of complications in home births, while still extremely low, is approximately double the rate for hospital births. A statistician

and Lake would have been free to contest—had they bothered to address it at all.

There's so much to critique about this documentary: its unacknowledged classism (Epstein and Lake, like the mothers whose births they document, are white women in a financial position to customize their birthing experience), its reliance on undocumented claims (the [crackpot](#) French obstetrician Michel Odent's suggestion that women deprived of the "love cocktail" of hormones released by natural childbirth will be unable to nurture their babies, for example). But it feels cruel to be too hard on *The Business of Being Born*, which, in spite of its idealistic presentation of home birth in the best possible light, concludes on an unintended counterargument. The director, who became pregnant unexpectedly in the course of filming, goes into breech labor a month before her due date and is delivered by her midwife directly to the hospital, where she undergoes an emergency C-section. In the movie's last scene, when her healthy baby is brought home in a bottle 8 months later, she seems fine with the subversion of her expectations: "Maybe I didn't know he needed to come."

What bugged me most about *The Business of Being Born* may have been Ricki Lake's insistence that home birth advocates, happy as they may be with their own experiences, know what's best for the rest of us. "So many women are missing this amazing opportunity and this life-altering experience," she lectures early on, explaining her motivation for making the film. But who's to say other kinds of births—in delivery rooms, ORs, or, God forbid, taxicabs—aren't also amazing and life-altering too? Maybe some of us want our birth attendants to assure us, in the words of the movie's midwife, Cara Muhlhaun, that they will be "the guardian of safety and the witness of your process." Others might prefer to hear something like, say, "I graduated first in my class at Johns Hopkins." Ultimately, the business of being born ain't nobody's business but our own.

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