

# *Letters to the Midwife*

Correspondence with the author of  
*Call the Midwife*

With an introduction by  
Philip Worth, Suzannah Hart  
and Juliette Walton  
and a foreword by Miranda Hart

Includes previously unpublished writing  
by Jennifer Worth

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## *Foreword*

For those of you who have read *Call the Midwife* you will know that Jennifer Worth creates the most wonderful imagery with her writing. She portrayed such vivid pictures of an extraordinary time in British history and of truly extraordinary women in the midwives who devoted years to their vocation and saved many women's lives. Midwifery and women's health truly mattered to them and they were, in my view, heroines.

I owe Jennifer an awful lot. She wrote to me in 2010, sent me a copy of her book and told me that I reminded her of her friend Chummy and if *Call the Midwife* ever got made into a television series she would be thrilled if I played the part. I immediately turned to Chummy's entrance in the book and fell in love with how she portrayed this clumsy woman appearing at Nonnatus House in the East End – a fish out of water determined to follow her heart's desire and do herself proud. I knew I had to play the part. And I will always be incredibly grateful to her for the opportunity.

Sadly, I never got to meet Jennifer. I wish I had. To have been able to thank her. But here we are lucky enough to have further insight into her life through her correspondence and a chance to wallow happily in her beautiful writing. Thank you, Jennifer.

Miranda Hart



*Caroline Slack first wrote to Jennifer Worth in 2008, suspecting that one of the most beloved characters in Call the Midwife – Sister Julianne – might, in fact, have been her aunt. She received this reply from Jennifer:*

Dear Mrs Slack,

I was overjoyed to get your letter and to know that you are a relative of Sister Jocelyn, who is Sister Julianne in my books, and who was probably the most influential person in my life. She was a saint.

I would love to meet you and to hear more about Auntie Jocy. I attended her weekly during her last illness, and went to the funeral service at the convent in Birmingham . . . Sister Jocelyn was a serious artist, watercolours and a big pile of her pictures went to the family after the funeral. I took two pictures which I treasure and they are framed and hang in my bedroom to this day. [These pictures are also mentioned in the correspondence of Sister Jocelyn, see page 56–57.]

*Caroline writes:*

It was so exciting to get [the letter] as it confirmed that the Sister Julianne I had been reading about in *Call the Midwife* was my aunt Jocelyn. Jennifer sounds just as excited as I was!

She was a remarkable woman and for me and my cousins and brothers an extraordinary link with our much loved and respected aunt who had died 18 years before. Our aunt had always been there for us but about her friends and professional life we knew very little. Jennifer reveals this warmth and love for Sister Jocelyn, her friend, godmother and nursing colleague, in her letter.

*This was the beginning of a long correspondence and friendship:*

We were struck by Jennifer's dynamism and energy when she came to our house for lunch shortly after sending me this letter. She arrived in her cycling shorts with her bike and at the end of the afternoon set off home on an arduous 9-mile bicycle ride, putting us all to shame!

*In May 2009, Caroline wrote to Jennifer after reading the last book in the trilogy:*

Dear Jennifer,

The only sad thing about reading *Farewell to the East End* is that I've come to the end and there are no more of your wonderful stories to read. I thoroughly enjoyed the last book that you so kindly sent me. I hope you didn't think me very rude for not thanking you sooner but I wanted to read the book first.

You have such a talent for all the details that transport one to the scene so easily – the crunch and the crackle, the whiffs and the wafts – and with such warmth and tenderness. And of course for me it is so personal. Sister Julianne or Jocelyn was *so* much a part of my childhood and adulthood. She was 'ours' but of course I realize now that she was so much more. Learning of the love and respect she earned in her professional life has been quite sobering. Families take themselves so much for granted. But I think she needed us too. Remarkable that she could have handled all the different demands on her life: the monastic discipline, the midwifery and the ups and downs in the lives of her mother, her five brothers, three sisters and all their children. We owe you a great debt for the books you have written about the dedicated and hard-working and courageous nursing nuns. So often when I mention nuns I get treated to stories of the abuse meted out by cruel school teachers, etc. in convents. You have done them a great service.

Caroline



12 February 2008

Dear Jennifer,

I hope you won't mind me writing to you like this. I was given your book *Call the Midwife* for Christmas by a friend. It was of great interest to me as I was working on the District Midwifery team at the London Hospital in the 1950s. Our area was a mile radius of the London, so we must have overlapped with you in lots of areas. I had no idea that there were other midwives in that area.

Your book brought back so many memories. We lived in a house in Turner Street. Sister Haynes was in charge of us, we had all completed our training but it was my first post as a Certified Midwife. I had completed the first part of my training at the London and the second part in Gloucester. My home was a little village in Suffolk so like you it was a complete culture shock for me. I delivered babies in a brothel, the Tower of London, Blackwall buildings that were terrible places, and in Brick Lane on a Sunday morning with the market going on outside the window.

Sister Haynes ruled with a rod of iron, but she was a wonderful Christian lady. Those of us who were committed Christians had to attend church every Sunday. When she had a weekend off she would ask the chaplain if we had been. I can't imagine young women putting up with that in these days. Sister had been there all during the war and I am sure would have been able to tell some tales.

Sometimes riding a bike at night could be scary but we always had a medical student with us. The bikes also had THE LONDON HOSPITAL painted on them and the hospital was so respected in the area we felt safe.

I haven't written anything down but I do give talks in the

area to local clubs. It always amazes me how having a baby brings so much interest and discussion.

If you were not too busy I would love to know if you knew of our existence in Turner Street. You might even have known Sister Haynes.

Yours sincerely,  
Jill Fryer-Kelsey

*The following extract is from a history Jill Fryer-Kelsey wrote for her children:*

Sister Gladys Haynes was in charge of the four of us who were all State Certified Midwives. I was the junior, the newest qualified. We all had our own room which among other things had a point to plug in the telephone when we were the first on call at night. Being woken at 3 a.m. by the porter in the main hospital telling you that Mrs Jones was in labour in such and such a street, and did you know where that was, was quite daunting until you got used to it. The London Hospital had a system which entailed a white card which the husband or friend brought to the reception. If you didn't know where the street was the husband would wait for you and take you there. Sister Haynes had been there during the war and told this story. She was following a husband and she thought he was going through an underpass but too late found out that it was the men's toilet!

After breakfast each day we had a staff meeting to discuss the day's calls and get an update on any new arrivals. For the daily visits we had a chauffeur-driven car which looked very official, especially when we had to drive into the Tower of London.

The Tower of London was in our district, there were servicemen and their families living in apartments. In the early hours of the morning I was called out to a mum in labour. The problem with the Tower was having to have a password to get the

gates open at night. The husband was there to let us in but because the password had to be changed each time we came and went, it was easier to stay there – which turned out to be a long time.

Wapping was sometimes difficult to get to when the bridges were up. Our drivers tried to beat the boats coming up and get to the next bridge before it went up! Delivering a baby in the Customs House which was right by the Thames was an experience. The mother's contractions stopped and she fell asleep. The student and I sat there quietly when suddenly the room began to shudder and there was this very loud throbbing noise outside, when I looked out there was the top of a big ship going past the window. It turned out to be the pleasure boat coming back from Southend. The mum was obviously used to this as she never stirred. These apartments were quite luxurious as they had indoor toilets and baths; they also had lifts to the various floors.

In contrast Blackwall buildings were the worst. The stairs up were on the outside and were open metal. In the winter they were often icy and in the summer the local children would delight in looking up our skirts! Four flats on a landing would share a tap and a toilet. However the resourceful East End ladies managed to keep them clean and tidy.

It was a very hot summer when I was there; often windows in the rooms wouldn't open but when they did there was little fresh air. Delivering a baby close to the Royal Mint, I opened the window only to find I was looking into a large noisy room where notes were rolling off a press. They were suffering with the heat too and I suppose working with all that money would make you hot under the collar!

I was called out in the middle of the night to an unbooked case. It was in one of the seedier areas of the district so I was glad I had one of the medical students with me. The student carried the gas and air machine on his bike and the midwives



took the delivery bag. Everything we needed was in that bag. We only asked the family to supply a pile of old newspapers, a clean sheet, a towel to wrap the baby in and two pots, one for hot water and one for cold. As this was unbooked we hadn't visited to see if they had these things. When we arrived I was horrified to find that I was in a brothel! It wasn't the most comfortable situation and I was glad it was a quick delivery.

The uniform at the London was quite old-fashioned even in the 1950s. The dresses were gathered into a yolk and then again into the waistband, which didn't do much for your figure. The sleeves were puffed and were starched in the hospital laundry so they stuck up all the time. Our outdoor coats had the same puff sleeves to accommodate them. Our outdoor hats could only be described as pork pies!

When I married in 1959 I had to leave the district post and as my husband and I were living in Hampstead I went to work at Queen Mary's maternity home, which was an annex of the London Hospital, until I started my own family.



Read more letters to Jennifer in *Letters to the Midwife*

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