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25 November 2003

Dear Ms Worth,

It is over 50 years since I wrote my one and only 'fan letter' (to Roy Rogers!) and I now feel compelled to do it again to you. The reason is your enthralling *Send for the Midwife*. I could not put it down and returned over and over again to the photographs. What an enjoyable experience and so utterly absorbing.

Both my late husband and I were born in Poplar, and as he died unexpectedly last year my mind has more frequently revisited our courting days. And when I opened your book I was immediately back in my childhood. I could even smell the smoke of the occasional train at the bottom of our street.

I was born in 1937 at home on the corner of Morris Road and Rifle Street at the bottom of Chrisp Street (always pronounced Chris Street). My mother and her mother were also born in the house, as was my younger sister; we all lived together, grandparents, parents and we girls. My Nan and Mum ran our coffee shop on the premises until war damage and rationing closed it. In the mid-50s my parents reopened it as a wool shop. I lived there until I was married in 1957. I don't remember the name of the lady who 'came in' to my Mum when she went into labour even though she has mentioned it over the years, and now, at 95, she cannot hold a conversation.

In 1942 I started at Hay Currie School Infants, then went to Alton Street Juniors and then to Raine's Foundation Grammar in Arbour Square, Stepney, which still holds reunions.

I met my husband, Charlie, at St Michael's and All Angels Church in St Leonard's Road and we were married there. He was born in Spey Street, which was 'over the (railway foot-) bridge' to us. He attended St Paul's Way School, as had my Mum when it was still called Thomas Street School.

Your book came into my hands by wonderful coincidence. I attended a neighbour's funeral and his son-in-law came up from Glastonbury. He commented on having driven through the London traffic and said that he understood why his Mum had never wanted to move back to London. I asked where she was from and he asked if I had 'ever heard of Poplar'. I said 'Not Much' and he mentioned lots of streets which his Mum spoke of but having been born in Somerset he knew nothing about them. He told me of this marvellous book he had seen and bought for his Mum and lent it to me. She had been evacuated to Somerset and so had Charlie's family and she was also born in Spey Street.

When I started my own family here in Dagenham in 1964 my GP believed in first births in hospital (but not the local ones) and subsequent ones at home. So he sent me to Bancroft Road, Mile End for my first and, as was his normal procedure, booked the Salvation Army Nurses and Midwives for the next two at home. What lovely ladies they were, and, as the same midwife attended both times as well as going to my neighbours, their local antenatal clinics were more like a social club of friends. I remember they were based in Clapton or Hackney but their clinic here has long since closed. In spite of my first home delivery resulting in a post-partum haemorrhage resulting in a visit from the 'flying squad' from Rush Green I firmly support home births and local midwives. I feel sorry for current mums-to-be with their quick dash to the labour wards trailing their 'birth partners' followed by an almost immediate return home before she has hardly got her breath back. Much more relaxing to have stayed at home in the first place, though probably most inconvenient to the present-day medical profession.

I am now recommending your book to everyone whether of my generation or not. I was surprised when my 30-year-old daughter asked to read it as I thought it too out of date for the new mums of today but she said it was really good and she did

enjoy it. She was moved by your account of the lady with the premature baby tucked in her clothes. I told her that when we were children our family raised their own chickens and I remember taking my turn to keep the weakest of the 'day-olds' down inside my liberty bodice while Mum and Nan prepared dinner.

I thank you most sincerely for giving me back my Poplar which had disappeared among the post-war development. This book is not a glimpse of the past, it is a visit.

Yours faithfully,
Mrs Norah Dear

Norah Dear adds:

My family still refer to an old childhood friend of mine – we were always close as my Nan had brought up his Mum together with mine – and although his family moved to Wiltshire when he was a teenager he insisted he was East End to the core and loved coming to stay and visit all the old places, changed though they are now. His one regret was that his Mum was in the 'lying in' home in East India Dock/Commercial Road in labour with him when all the mums were moved out hurriedly due to a bombing raid – and to his everlasting annoyance his Birth Certificate shows he was born in Newport Pagnell of all places! He passed away a couple of years ago having never been back there and still insisting he was a Poplar boy.



Caroline Slack first wrote to Jennifer Worth in 2008, suspecting that one of the most beloved characters in Call the Midwife – Sister Julienne – 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 Julienne 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 Julienne 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