

A Child Is Born (1965), by Lennart Nilsson

Dell Publishing in New York City, New York, published Lennart Nilsson's *A Child Is Born* in 1966. The book was a translation of the Swedish version called *Ett barn blir till*, published in 1965. It sold over a million copies in its first edition, and has translations in twelve languages. Nilsson, a photojournalist, documented a nine-month human pregnancy using pictures and accompanying text written by doctors Axel Ingelman-Sundberg, Claes Wirsén and translated by Britt and Claes Wirsén and Annabelle MacMillian. Critics lauded *A Child Is Born* for its photographs taken in utero of a developing fetus. Furthermore, the work received additional praise for what many described as simple and scientifically accurate explanations of complicated processes during development.

Nilsson, born in Sweden in 1922, worked as a photojournalist since the mid-1940s. Using instruments with macro-lenses and wide-angled lenses, Nilsson photographed human fetuses. Nilsson published those images both in *Life's* cover article "Drama of Life before Birth" in 1965 and in *A Child Is Born* a few months later.

Nilsson said that he intended *A Child Is Born* to be a practical guide for the expectant parents. To serve that purpose, Nilsson addressed common anxieties and myths about pregnancy by presenting a photographic account of a fetus's growth from conception through birth. Additionally, he solicited the help of Claes Wirsén, a doctor at the Karolinska Institute in Solna, Sweden, and Axel Ingelman-Sundberg, a professor at the Sabbatsberg Hospital in Stockholm, Sweden, to help him write the text. *A Child Is Born* has thirty-one chapters, and one hundred and sixty pages. They are in chronological order from pre-conception to post-delivery. A myriad of photographs of actual embryos, fetuses, and babies surround the text, in addition to scientific illustrations and anatomic diagrams which accompany descriptions of biological processes.

The first nine chapters focus on biological facts before and during conception. The authors first focus on the sperm and on the egg; they display several microscopic images of the sperm and the egg. They also show photographs of the cervical mucus, or fluid secreted by the uterus that the sperm must penetrate to fertilize the egg. In those introductory chapters, the authors discuss the menstrual cycle, genetic mechanisms of how both parents' genes give rise to characteristics in offspring, and how conception occurs.

In the following six chapters, the authors follow the progression of pregnancy from week one through week eight, when an embryo becomes a fetus. The authors use photographs and illustrations to explain how the embryo first begins to divide and how it embeds itself into the lining of the uterus. The authors also discuss the similarities and differences between human embryos and fish embryos.

In the remaining sixteen chapters, the authors record the growth of the fetus until the birth of the child. In those chapters, the authors depict photos of the fetus's developing blood, face, hands, feet, eyes, and hair. The photographs that Nilsson uses are some of the first pictures to show such details of the fetus in utero. In addition, chapters containing maternity advice intersperse those biological explanations. Sections titled "First Visit to the Doctor" and "Waiting" document the advice that many doctors give to mothers and they seek to dispel myths surrounding pregnancy. The authors inform the reader of the tests that pregnant women take, possible complications that may arise from pregnancy, and they give general advice such as which gymnastic exercises are best to practice to prepare for delivery. The book finishes with the chapters "Delivery" and "After Birth," in which the authors summarize the actual birth process, and they include photographs of the first moments in a baby's life.

The first edition of *A Child Is Born* sold more than a million copies, suggesting its wide appeal. The book underwent five editions, with an edition appearing in 2009. Critics praised later editions as an apt educational tool for both expectant parents and for professionals. Nilsson continued to work on other projects relevant to developing embryos and fetuses, including filming "Miracle of Life," a 1983 episode in *Nova*, a popular science TV series, that won several Emmy Awards.

Nilsson's use of photographs to educate the public about embryos and fetuses contributed to the escalating debate over abortion in the early 1960s. Specifically, one of Nilsson's photographs, which appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine in 1965, focused much public attention on embryos and fetuses rather than on pregnant women.

A Child Is Born was not the first book to document the development of human embryos and fetuses, but it is among the first works that use photographs. Furthermore, some critics hailed it as being the first book to focus substantially on the growth of the fetus and embryo, as opposed to the pregnant woman.

Sources

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