On the other hand, the set of photos in this section is well captioned; those in the other two sections are not.

These criticisms notwithstanding, if I were asked to teach a class on peoples of the Pacific in the upcoming academic term, I would certainly give this book a try, while remaining attentive to student feedback. Even if this were the only text used, an instructor has the option to complement the presentation with lectures and visual media. The acid test for any textbook is always what the students get out of it. I am sure the authors will be anxious to learn the answer from their colleagues.

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This book is a treasure. Nuggets of insight and challenge abound throughout, as the authors reevaluate past work with respect to childbearing, offer a sustained critique of the received wisdom from many disciplinary perspectives, and point the way to future exploration of women’s lives and confinement. In every chapter, some gems are clearly visible, the author’s stance and acumen making them shine and sparkle, while other jewels still lie buried in the text, awaiting an astute and careful reader to mine, cut, and polish them.

Birthing is a critical site for understanding the intersection of medical/social/cultural aspects of life (to the extent that these can be viewed as separate domains of inquiry, even heuristically). In her introduction to this volume, Jolly positions birthing as another intersection, as “a fundamental process of all human life, . . . a subject of academic research, and . . . a central concern of health policy deliberation and action” (1). Lukere, in her conclusion, points to other aspects of this intersection and its wide relevance: “Childbirth is a process personal, collective, physical, symbolic, significant in countless ways. It is also a sometimes precarious deliverer of life and death” (201). The authors—four anthropologists, a community health worker, and a historian—use their particular disciplinary and advocacy backgrounds to address simultaneously (in Scheper-Hughes’ phrase) the “poetics and pragmatics” of these intersections. The result is a rich, complex, and provocative volume that puts epidemiology, biomedicine, and social policy into cultural-phenomenological contexts.

Jolly’s theoretical overview demolishes several persistent binaries that so plague much of the general literature on birthing, and debates the deeply entrenched notion of “development” underlying most maternal and child health endeavors. Central binaries discussed are “traditional–modern,” “natural–technological,” “indigenous–colonial,” “passive–active.” Each of the six data-based chapters fleshes out in multiple ways the limitations of binary positions and offers
suggestions for further investigation of birthing as a site of cultural significance, disciplinary regime, acceptance and contestation, and technocratic change.

Divergence in the interpretations and practices of ma’uli (village-based birth attendants in Tonga) and hospital-based nurse-midwives is the focus of Morton’s chapter. Particularly valuable is her discussion of attempts by the state to control reproductive beliefs and practices, and the ironies inherent in a discourse that lauds as the best site for births a medicalized hospital system without sufficient or necessary resources. Fiti-Sinclair addresses the same broad issues, again by contrasting the experiences of and consequences for women who give birth in a village setting versus in Port Moresby’s General Hospital. In juxtaposing the views of the women in labor in the hospital with those of the nurses attending them, Fiti-Sinclair shows how and where they develop similar and different assessments of technocratic intervention.

For Kanak women in New Caledonia, Salomon argues, childbirth had been “an exclusively female domain” (96). The introduction of western medicine, however, subordinated women, reducing their access to and use of reproductive knowledge, both to increase or temporarily restrict fertility; changing reproductive beliefs and practices; and altering gender relationships by insinuating men more and more centrally into the childbirth arena. Lukere examines Fiji’s decision in 1908 to train native women as obstetric nurses, partly in response to serious depopulation, partly as a means to eradicate “traditional midwives,” and partly because of misgivings about the efficacy of male native medical practitioners, particularly in this traditionally female realm. Along with other authors in this volume, Lukere points to a “fundamental underestimation of the constraints upon women in managing these physical and cultural processes [of reproduction] over which they were paradoxically imagined as all-powerful” (121).

In chapter 5, Mallett details the small triumphs and large difficulties of Moses, a twenty-two-year-old male community health worker on the island of Nua’ata in the Milne Bay District of Papua New Guinea, with respect to controlling reproduction. Following the dictates of western-style medical training, Moses treats and construes pregnant bodies and sick women’s bodies as distinct from their individual and social selves, and subjects them to ideas and forms of clinical practice that reject, undermine, or challenge their own beliefs and behaviors about the location and nature of birth. With its focus on understanding a male practitioner’s relation to female patients, this is a welcome addition to an otherwise very sparse literature on this precise topic.

The “darkness” of biomedical and epidemiological portraits of motherhood in Vanuatu, derived from Christian and developmentalist paradigms, is contrasted with the “lightness” emanating from ethnographic studies of women and kastom, traditional activities, and cultural values about birth and child-rearing. Jolly avoids valorizing “tradition” by concluding her chapter with a call for a more nuanced depiction of the shades of
light and shadow, and greater understanding of women as victims, as agents, as objects, as subjects (175).

Lukere’s concluding chapter surveys the epistemology and contributions of maternal and child health literature for Anglophone Oceania, placing the data chapters and Jolly’s framework into a wide regional perspective. In particular, she examines works about the demographic “booms” and “busts” common to many Pacific nations and notes their relative lack of overlap with studies of traditional or contemporary reproductive practices. She dissects the role of colonial medicine as a transformative force in assuring population health and growth, much as she questions the contribution of tradition to these same domains. Among other points, Lukere comments on the lack of investigation into the influence on Pacific reproduction of the urbanization and centralization of services.

Despite the declared intent of this volume to break down binaries, including the male–female one, and brief laments about the extrusion of “Pacific fathers and men in general” in the literature on reproduction (23, 167–168, 192), Mallett’s is the only contribution to sustain a focus on men—in this case, on one male practitioner. Beyond a few broad generalizations, there is in general very little discussion or documentation of men’s responses to family planning efforts or news of a pregnancy; of men’s relationship with the woman during gestation, be she wife, mother, sister, daughter, niece, or patient; or of men’s role in birthing or postpartum.

To be fair, similar broad absences plague the literature on pregnant women and birthing, both in general and in this volume. A truncated and rather peculiar view emerges: pregnant women appear to have no families with whom they interact or negotiate (no other children or husbands, let alone siblings or parents), and no existence outside the state of pregnancy (no economic, religious, kin, legal, political, social, or other pursuits). Despite mentions of the increasing burdens of work (eg, 159) and politics (174–175) and their possible impact on mothering, there is little detailed examination of this larger realm. Similarly, women who act as nurses or midwives, in either village or western-style clinics or hospitals, are usually also bereft of detailed examination. Even their interactions with birthing women are limited to generalization rather than extensive, rounded commentary. While there is clearly a lot to say just about pregnancy and birthing itself, judging by the numerous social science works on this topic over the years, it seems time to sharpen the focus onto more comprehensive investigations of the social and cultural contingencies surrounding reproduction.

It is also time to examine motherhood eschewed, deliberate or otherwise. How do childless women help reproduce Pacific societies, even though they do not do so literally and are completely left out of national policy for women, which so frequently comprises only a maternal and child health agenda?

This volume is notable for covering a somewhat different constellation of societies than is often the case in collected works on the Pacific—the nations represented are Tonga, Papua
New Guinea, New Caledonia, Fiji, and Vanuatu. Lack of representation from Northern Pacific (Micronesian) societies, however, continues an entrenched but unfortunate north–south divide that permeates and thus limits the scholarly literature on the Pacific Basin.

These latter comments notwithstanding, this carefully crafted collection is a very valuable and welcome addition to the literature. It makes a contribution not just to Pacific scholarship but also to the entire arena of maternity in the contemporary world as it lucidly and provocatively uncovers and grapples with central tensions and dilemmas permeating current scholarship. This volume will spur students and faculty in a wide range of disciplines (such as social science, epidemiology, demography, history, and economics, to name a few central disciplines), as well as clinicians, policy makers, and politicians, to (re)examine their assumptions about the science and existential realities that underlie birthing and reproduction.

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Is there an anthropologist who conducted fieldwork in Papua New Guinea during the 1970s who does not dream of returning to the original research site? Wouldn’t we all, like Kenneth Read (Return to the High Valley, 1986), like to return to “high valleys” of our youth and first fieldwork? The journey we envision is a complex personal pilgrimage as well as an intellectual and academic quest: What happened to our friends and the people who meant—and mean—so much to us? Have their lives been altered, experiences been modified, new meanings evolved? Michael French Smith originally did field research on Kairiru Island off the north coast near Wewak in 1975–76 and was able to make brief and informal visits back to the village of Kragur in 1981, 1995, and 1998. In this book he chronicles these visits and reflects on the changes perceptible to him through this period. A variety of Kragur voices (from both village and town) addressing these changes are a strong element in the narrative.

Smith does not claim to have conducted a thorough study of sociocultural change, but he does pick up on significant themes from his earlier published work (Hard Times on Kairiru Island, 1994)—especially the embeddedness of material and moral concerns in Melanesian societies—and thus contributes significantly to our knowledge of transformation in Papua New Guinea. He carefully summarizes data from 1974 and then recounts what he encountered in later years. The puzzles perplexing the people of Kragur in 1974 only intensified as a capitalistic economy, characterized by commodities, competition, and individualism, penetrated the texture of people’s lives and challenged their understanding of value and creation of meaning. The dilemma people face is one that seems to have no satisfactory