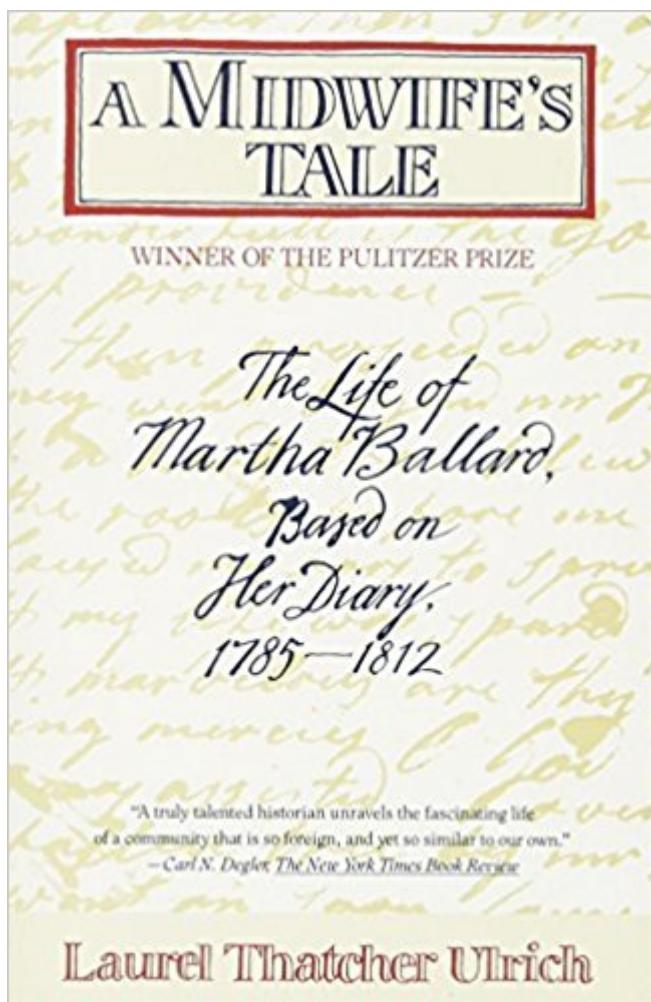


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# A Midwife's Tale: The Life Of Martha Ballard, Based On Her Diary, 1785-1812



## Synopsis

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE Drawing on the diaries of one woman in eighteenth-century Maine, this intimate history illuminates the medical practices, household economies, religious rivalries, and sexual mores of the New England frontier. Between 1785 and 1812 a midwife and healer named Martha Ballard kept a diary that recorded her arduous work (in 27 years she attended 816 births) as well as her domestic life in Hallowell, Maine. On the basis of that diary, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich gives us an intimate and densely imagined portrait, not only of the industrious and reticent Martha Ballard but of her society. At once lively and impeccably scholarly, *A Midwife's Tale* is a triumph of history on a human scale.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The diary of a midwife and herbalist reveals the prevalence of violence, crime and premarital sex in rural 18th-century New England. "Fleshing out this midwife's bare entries with interpretive essays . . . Ulrich marvelously illuminates women's status, the history of medicine and daily life in the early Republic," said PW . Illustrated. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This book is a model of social history at its best. An exegesis of Ballard's diary, it recounts the life and times of this obscure Maine housewife and midwife. Using passages from the diary as a starting point for each chapter division, Ulrich, a professor at the University of New Hampshire, demonstrates how the seemingly trivial details of Ballard's daily life reflect and relate to prominent

themes in the history of the early republic: the role of women in the economic life of the community, the nature of marriage and sexual relations, the scope of medical knowledge and practice. Speculating on why Ballard kept the diary as well as why her family saved it, Ulrich highlights the document's usefulness for historians.- Marie Marmo Mullaney, Caldwell Coll., N.J. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Great book. Much needed type of history that reconstructs the importance of women's role in society in a period when women did not write much. This historian pieces together evidence of what women's lives were like from all sorts of historical evidence, beyond or between the lines of traditional records. She really looks at the documents and "sees" what so many historians before her neglected or minimized.

A true window into the every day life of an early woman and pioneer. Read it for the wonderful historical insight, and then weep like a baby when Martha dies at the end because she has become so real to you by that point....

The book was an amazing insight into the life of a working woman. I really enjoyed the book

Women here are finally given more credit for the hard work they have done within their communities.

This book is one of the most interesting stories that I have ever read. I purchased on a whim when it came up on my book bub list for \$1.99 and am so happy that I did. The beginning/intro was a little tedious but once you get into the actual diary excerpts it is wonderful. It stayed with me for days after I read it and I have recommended this book to many people.

Ulrich brings us inside the life and mind of a regular early American woman in a way unlike any other author. She manages to find what's important and interesting in even the seemingly most mundane aspects of everyday life.

Great buy!! Thanks!!

We've heard stories of how our great-great-great-grandmothers rose before dawn, plowed the lower

forty, baked biscuits and then raised a barn, all before noon. *A Midwife's Tale* seems to confirm this. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich draws upon a remarkable document, the diary of a New England midwife, Martha Ballard of Hallowell, Maine, who recorded the details of her daily life between 1785 to 1812. Ulrich deconstructs Ballard's laconic entries to reveal the complex routine of a woman who kept a household for seven people, ran a cottage textile workshop, and served as midwife at the birth 816 infants during her 27 years of practice. (There were male physicians in the community, but they rarely intervened in this woman-dominated ritual unless there was a breech or still-birth to be dismembered.) Ballard's ministrations, in fact, went far beyond birthing to the practice of general medicine. She could apply poultices, lance abscesses, expel worms, induce vomiting, stop hemorrhages, bring down a fever, and - all else failing -- gently close the eyes of the dead. In this way, writes Ulrich, the midwife "mediated the mysteries of birth, procreation, illness, and death." With the help of collateral documents, Ulrich fills out Ballard's entries to give a more complete view of society in a milling village of the early 1800's. She also tracks Ballard's personal fortunes from the height of her prestige into eventual decline. The author takes pains to point out how much of this misfortune was inevitable (the elderly of any era are of necessity pushed from the center to the circumference of society) and how much was due to the hand dealt by fate: Martha had her daughters before her sons; the girls married and moved out, leaving their mother the care of three rather loutish males. The episode underscores how necessary a reliable pool of labor was to the running of any rural household; southern families had their slaves; northern families had their daughters. Historian John Lewis Gaddis calls this book "an exercise in historical paleontology [that] succeeds brilliantly." Winner of the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for history.

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