



Reviews

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The New Arrival

The Heartwarming True Story of a 1970s Trainee Nurse

Sarah Beeson MBE
Harper NonFiction
paperback, 341 pages, £7.99



THIS BOOK FOLLOWS Sarah Beeson from the beginning of her long career, when she was 17 years old and about to leave the 'small, small world' of Llanelli in Wales to begin a new life as a trainee nurse at Hackney General Hospital in 1969 – just as Britain was waving goodbye to the swinging sixties. As a new arrival to the General, she says about her new accommodation, 'I looked up at the neatly stacked, uniform windows in the plain block; I couldn't wait to know which one would belong to me.'

At this point Sarah was unaware of what she was getting herself into, but she quickly realized that, although the hospital was a place of happiness and new experiences, a place where loving families added to their brood, some babies were not so lucky – brought into the world unloved, unwanted and some unable to make it home. She says, 'I hadn't been in Hackney for 24 hours but I knew that the way I saw life and people had changed forever ... There

Sarah (second from right), eager to get started, lines up with her student nurse classmates in their spotless new uniforms for Preliminary Training School photographs, January 1970.



Sarah receives her MBE from Queen Elizabeth II for services to children and families, Buckingham Palace, February 2006.

was such goodness here but there was a sadness I had never imagined before, and it wasn't even lunchtime yet.'

Coming to terms with the fact that not all children were brought into the changing world with a home to go to shocked and unsettled Sarah to begin with. 'I looked at the mother's back and willed her to turn around and look at her baby,' she silently pleaded with one mother about to give up her child. 'But she didn't. She didn't say goodbye, she didn't look, she didn't move a muscle.'

Despite this speedy realization, Sarah's time at Hackney General Hospital wasn't all bad, as under the watchful eye of the stern matron, she worked with her colleagues and friends – serious minded, politicized Maddox, quick-witted Lynch, nursery nurse Appleton, and ex-musical hall star Wade. Together they got through the long working hours and few days off – some of which they spent at the Adam and Eve pub, which seems to have been, as well as the Hackney General, a central part of the nurses' world.

Through Sarah's recollections we not only learn about life for a young and determined nurse in the 1970s, but also what it was like to live in a time that saw a failing government, strikes, increasing immigration and the struggle for women's rights. It certainly offers a realistic yet at times humorous look into the past. ■

