Surrogacy? It

After years of pain, Alice Jolly decided to pay someone to carry her child. By

Helen Rumbelow

hey travel 5,000 miles to a cowboy restaurant in the back end of Minnesota, and wait. Who are they waiting for? Their baby of course, who is due to be born the next morning. Except that Alice Jolly and her husband won't recognise her as she is being carried in the womb of a woman they have never met.

They stare at the signs saying "No Dancing On Tables In Spurs", and the longer they wait the more nervous they become. Surely the money this British couple have given for an American stranger to carry their surrogate child is part of a big con-trick?

"I don't think I'm going to live through a weirder moment in my life than that," says Jolly when I meet her at her kitchen in Gloucestershire.

Which is saying something, as that long wait to meet their daughter was part of a very modern and unusual story. It is fortunate for us that Jolly became one of Britain's surrogacy pioneers, as she is also a writer of much feeling and little sentiment. You get the measure of that from the title of her memoir, Dead Babies And Seaside Towns, a summary of what happened when she and her lawyer husband Stephen tried to conceive a sibling for their firstborn son.

It's also an attempt to speak of things we hate to talk about. First, the grief of losing a child. Second, the ever-stranger ways of outsourcing fertility. As I read deeper into these dark taboos before meeting Jolly, I expected to cry and I did; but I didn't expect the laughs.

In the book she recalls this conversation with her husband: "We have just embarked upon the most complicated pregnancy that ever existed. The combination of stillbirth. four miscarriages, failed IVF, failed adoption and then surrogacy, I've never heard of it."

"It does make the Virgin Birth look fairly straightforward," her husband replies.

While this kind of surrogacy — with two separate mothers employed for egg donation and pregnancy—is a booming industry in America, with celebrity endorsements to prove it, it is rare in Britain. Those that do surrogacy normally operate by stealth. As Jolly writes, "I know nothing of how a surrogate pregnancy works. Elton John does, but I don't feel able to call up and ask.'

Stephen had flown to a different American city nine months earlier to deposit his, er, genetic material at a clinic. "The moment is both momentous and ordinary," Jolly writes of that trip, "I kiss him goodbye, shrug, 'Well, have a good wank in San Diego". The egg is fertilised with eggs

makes the Virgin Birth seem easy



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from a donor, a nurse in her 20s, and implanted into the surrogate, a lesbian.

Later Stephen reflects: "So I'm now pregnant with a woman in a single-sex relationship in Minnesota, whom I've never met?" Jolly corrects him. "No, you're now pregnant with a nurse of Estonian origin and we don't know her name or where she lives." Stephen: "Well, either way I've been getting around a bit."

Black humour only earns its place against the darkness of what it defies, and there is much of that. Some of Jolly's friends warned her that the title,

Dead Babies, was too shocking, but her publishers supported it, saying the "book earned it". They mean her history of trying to carry a baby to term, which involves round after round of bloody cruelty. Their souls become mortally wounded by the stillbirth of their daughter, Laura, and they rebel against what the well-meaning public want — for families to "move on" from the death of a baby or the desire for one.

I am nervous to talk to Jolly. There is so much here that feels unspeakable. At one stage in the book she imagines Laura in her grave: "I suspect she is just a bit of dust and some tiny bones now — something like a chicken carcass that has been picked clean." Her point is exactly that — we have to say it to understand it. So, in her cosy country kitchen, I ask uncomfortable questions.

"Both stillbirth and surrogacy are shrouded in secrecy. I wanted to break the taboos," Jolly says. "There is no other book about surrogacy, people keep the lid on it. And one of the reasons they never manage to cut the UK's high rate of still birth is that it's still a dark secret. People can survive the death of a baby, threy tend not to be able to survive the silence. For me, this book is a plea for open discussion."

They tried repeatedly for another baby, and failed. She felt "haunted by babies, dead, unborn, and unclaimed." People must have told her, I say, to make peace with bringing up her son as an only child, for that to be their ending.

"In my twenties, I wasn't interested in children. I heard a woman on the radio who had 14 miscarriages, and thought she was an absolute fool, she had to stop. Now I see it so differently, I understand it as such a devastating thing. There is a horrible struggle between your rational mind and some instinct that has been there since

Alice Jolly with Hope, now three, at their home in Stroud

Adam and Eve. I couldn't get control of it: I told myself hundreds of times, we're not going to have a second child, move on. But when you think about it our species continues because we have an incredible urge to reproduce."

They were even turned down for adoption by a social worker who said they were disqualified by their house renovations. By the time they reapplied Stephen would be disqualified by the age limit of 50. "We had been told a lot of horror stories of that kind. I always thought people were exaggerating. So it just came as an absolute shock how negative they were."

Her husband had always been interested in surrogacy, but Jolly found the idea "immoral and exploitative".

"Then, on the fifth anniversary of our daughter's death, I remember saying to him: 'This hasn't really got any better has it?' He's always quite positive, but he said to me, 'no it's exactly what it always was"."

Jolly researched surrogacy and found that in America the field seemed well-regulated and guarded against exploitation, unlike in the UK where surrogacy cannot be paid for, or in developing countries where surrogates' poverty is easily exploited. She met, online, British people who had done DIY surrogacy outside the

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law, in one case meeting at Doncaster railway station, with the wife dashing with a cup of her husband's sperm from the gents to hand to the surrogate mother in the ladies (the pregnancy was successful).

"I don't think the case for surrogacy is clear cut. It is a tricky subject, but we need to have a better level of debate about it without the shockhorror headlines. The UK says the strength of our system is that no one does it for money. But what other huge and important job do you expect to do free? For me that looks like exploitation."

"There is some sexism in it. Women are expected to be selfless and caring. This idea that motherhood is about purity, you can't mix it with money. If it was men being surrogates, I think they'd charge. You are meant to feel bad about the grubbiness of paying, I felt the opposite: we can't have someone do this for us and not pay."

It soon became clear why the few British people who have used overseas surrogates were often lawyers: Jolly and her husband were the first to want to bring a surrogate baby home from Minnesota and had to marry Minnesotan, American and British law. Compared with that, the conception was easy. Stephen was always more comfortable with surrogacy, and Jolly realised that men by definition always use surrogates.

"He was always behind it. He said: 'A father always has some woman have a baby for you.' Men don't

give birth, so that aspect of it is never so personal to them."

Jolly, by contrast, had long phone conversations with her surrogate, Amanda, to satisfy herself she truly wanted this: "I was sure she wasn't in desperate financial circumstances." (Their surrogacy agency held a social event for their surrogate mothers, in which one came in fancy dress as a positive pregnancy test stick.)

"I had huge faith in her. It was odd, as I hadn't met her. Even now I'm kind of overwhelmed by the size of what she did. Some women are jealous of their surrogate mother. I wasn't at all, I realised this baby was safe inside her, but would not be safe inside me. It was a huge relief to me. While also being very strange."

Before long they were flying out, as a family, for the birth. Their son Thomas, then nine, had a crash course in same-sex relationships, assisted reproduction and genetics, but mainly bonded with the surrogate over a shared love of cars.

"I would have preferred him to sort out the birds and bees," Jolly writes, "before getting on to the duck-billed platypuses of the reproductive world."

They nickname the foetus "Hope", an "idea so sentimental that it embarrasses me," she writes. "The Black Humour Department of my brain points out that should she die, then that will be the Death of Hope. But then that is what it will be literally and metaphorically ... at least for the moment we have Hope."

Amanda wanted them in the room for the birth. Jolly was reluctant, traumatised by stillbirth. "I couldn't find anything about the etiquette of how we do this. The surrogacy agency said: 'If there's anything abnormal, report it.' I was thinking the whole bloody thing is abnormal. In the end we just wanted to make it easy for Amanda. For her, part of what she wanted to get out of the experience is what happened, to see us just overwhelmed, weeping with joy."

Stephen cut the cord, and Jolly was handed their baby. She cried as Hope cried, relieved she was alive. They considered changing her name but her brother Thomas insisted she could not be anything but Hope.

In the heady weeks in America after the birth Jolly had a bad dream in which Hope was breaking into pieces. She worried that in the "hierarchy of Hope's various mothers, I have no claim". I ask, now I am surrounded by her three-year-old's splodgy paintings, how different it is for Jolly knowing she is not genetically her own: "She feels completely ours." It's love; ordinary, extraordinary.

When they appeared back in Stroud with a newborn they had to tell the whole story over and again. I read the children's book they have constructed for Hope, showing the story of her birth, with smiling photos of the large cast involved. She can meet her genetic and surrogate mother, if she chooses, when she is older. For now she has grown out of her name. She's not hope. She just is. **Dead Babies and Seaside Towns**

(Unbound, £14.99) is out now. Half of the proceeds will be donated to Sands, the Stillbirth and Neonatal **Deaths charity**