

## "Midwife" and Marvelous Miranda Hart

I'm a big *Mad Men* fan and love accurate representations of the mid-20th century. (And how funny we can call that "period drama" now. Wasn't it just yesterday...?) So when I heard of this Brit show "Call the Midwife" set in the East End of London in the 1950s, my curiosity was piqued. As it happens, *Midwife* opens in 1957, and since I was 6 months old at the start of that year, I admit that I have always been curious what life around me must have looked like through adult eyes of that era. I thought I'd enjoy this bit of vicarious time travel, even if it meant a jaunt across the pond to a social setting and occupation I had never really given any thought to.

For those who have missed discovering this gem, it is another one of those very-well done award-winning TV shows in Britain that aired in early 2012, had a Christmas special, and is coming back later this year for eight more episodes. It is based on the [memoirs of Jennifer Worth](#), a public health nurse-midwife with the NHS who served people in the East End of London in the late 1950s. So I hunted down the [DVDs](#) and got caught up on this show, and broadened my perspective on a few things along the way.

### A Glimpse Into a (for Americans) Mostly Forgotten Profession



Midwifery is an ancient activity, but with the professionalization of the medical industry in the 19th century this became something one needed credentials to do (or do routinely and for pay) in the industrialized west. In America, midwives were virtually driven out of business by the start of the 20th century, but in Great Britain this became the purview of nursing professionals. In the 20th century their tradition of nurse-midwifery had a standard of care that was so good, in fact, that British nurse-midwives were brought over to Kentucky's Frontier Nursing Service to train the first American professionals in this field in 1929.[1]

It is no surprise, then, that in the 1950s, with the institution of the National Health Service, Britain turned to her corps of nurse-midwives and deployed them where there was great need: in the low-income urban areas desperate for maternity care. They played a vital role in maternity care and community outreach at a time when the post-war baby boom was affecting England's population in the same way it was America's.

### The East End Docklands Come Alive

Although I know this historical context, there is nothing remotely dry or "historical"-feeling about

this show. From Vanessa Redgrave's wonderful voice-over intros to the street life to the young midwives living with idiosyncratic nuns at Nonnatus House, *Midwife* feels like being there. The stories are heartwarming and sometimes tear-jerking, but not because they are crafted for manipulation's sake: they are, rather, real life stories (or based on same) from Jennifer Worth's own experiences. They reflect the odyssey of that initially naive young nurse's growth just as much as they do the events in her world. The voice-over intros and end pieces, with their poetic and thought-provoking observations, are the perfect bookends for the very human stories that unfold in the episodes. They follow events centered around Nonnatus House (a pseudonym) in the Docklands of London.

And there, lumbering through the doors of Nonnatus House, I first met Nurse Camilla Fortesque-Cholmeley-Browne. Nurse Browne as Worth recalls her was 6'2" tall, "with shoulders like a front row forward and size eleven feet." She was dreadfully near-sighted, with thick steel-rimmed glasses, and a plummy, posh accent, yet "everything about her was soft and sweet. Despite her appearance, there was nothing butch about her. She had the nature of a gentle, artless young girl, diffident and shy. She was also pathetically eager to be liked." She is "Chummy" to her friends, for, as her father told her, "long dogs need short names." And so Chummy becomes part of Nonnatus House and the midwives there--and in a cast with many remarkable characters, this one played by Miranda Hart absolutely steals the show.

There is so much that is odd about Chummy, that it would be too easy to play her too mannish or too klutzy or over the top in some manner. But tall and imposing Miranda, a rising star in the world of British comedians, is herself 6'1" and, it turns out, has the perfect demeanor to carry the role of Chummy just as she must have been in 1957. That's not just my imagination, either: it turns out that Jennifer Worth saw Hart's work long before her memoirs were filmed, and thought ungainly Miranda would be perfect for the part of Chummy. Miranda agreed to play the role if the books were ever filmed.

Worth passed away in May 2011 (the series began broadcasting in January 2012), but in addition to the rest of her touching stories, her vision of Chummy lives on in Hart's marvelous representation of this character. Hart's character is sincere and earnest, practical and dedicated. Both she and we know she is a misfit, but her earnest dedication carries her through so many pitfalls even while her vulnerability creates very touching moments in the drama.

So much is conveyed in her restrained performance because of how Chummy chooses to see the world and be in it, and how Hart effortlessly embodies this. Dressed in a fine dress--and such a miracle to find the right thing to fit her huge frame in the first place!--she is on her way to meet her fiancé's parents, but when the household's pig starts to give birth and has a difficult labor, Chummy is in the sty, dress be damned, to help out the struggling mother. For Chummy sees the mother pig as no less deserving of her skilled aid than a human mother would be, and when it comes to muscling around a large sow, well--Chummy's the girl for the job. From mowing down her future husband with a bicycle on their first meeting, to her first nerve-wracked but flawless delivery of a breech baby, to her pig delivery in lieu of meet-the-parents: Chummy is a character to fall in love with. It is not only in how the character is written, but how she is

portrayed.

Who, who, WHO is this marvelous actress playing Camilla Fortesque-Cholmeley-Browne, I wondered? I'd never heard of her before, but now I had to learn more about this large, awkward, poignant, wonderful performer Miranda Hart.

### Miranda Hart the Comedian

I did the expeditious thing, and rather than read a lot about Miranda and her work, I simply watched it instead. She's had two seasons worth of her comedy show *Miranda* on the BBC, written by herself, and I figured that would give me a good idea about what her comedy was about.

At first I was kind of scratching my head. The humor is not exactly American in style (d'oh), and there is a certain amount of slapstick pratfalls that I don't normally care for. But the more I watched, the more it grew on me. By the third show I was finding some of her stuff laugh-out-loud funny. I've found myself compelled to explain galloping to my sister, and looking like a fool doing it, in a feeble effort to convey some of the unique Miranda-ness of her humor. (Hart contends that everyone should gallop, even adults, maybe especially to and from work. I'm not sure I can disagree with that.)

The child's play-gallop/prance-as-if-you-were-a-horse becomes a schtick that makes perfect sense in Miranda's world: it is especially handy when leaving a public place where you have just made a fool of yourself. Which may have happened because you squat down in a gorilla-like hunch to talk to short people, or find yourself compelled to sample food off the forks of strangers in a restaurant or--one of Hart's fortés--have burst into uncontrollable song after telling elaborate lies simply because you are nervous. Always a graceful way to exit the conversation, galloping. Unless you are on the floor because you just tripped over the coat rack.

Well, even if **you** aren't doing these things, Miranda certainly is; these vagaries are not uncommon for Queen Kong, as a boarding school friend calls her. The thing is, after watching her for a while, none of this seems contrived so much as it is just an extension of understandable nervous bumbling. OK, perhaps a bit of a stretch, but still, you see how one could get there from here. Sadly. And amusingly, at the same time.

I am especially taken with her propensity to break the fourth wall. She starts her shows with a 'hearty hello to you!' or similar robust greeting, and then spends a moment catching up--just you and her. Confidential chat, you know? And then, during particularly awkward moments in her ensuing adventures, she will turn to you and give you a knowing look, or a "what the heck's he on about?" expression, or, my favorite, mouth the word "help!" so only you can lip-read it.

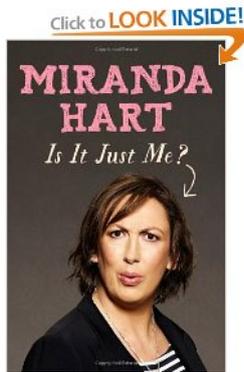
You are part of Miranda's world. You are not just the silent and unseen observer, but rather a confidant she turns to in the midst of the ridiculous situations she is getting herself into. Tall and every bit as awkward as Chummy, Miranda seems equally to be a misfit, and to speak to the misfit in all of us.

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Her humor might be an acquired taste, but I think my favorite comedian right now is in the U.K.



Miranda's show and acting have been nominated for many awards. Among other distinctions, in 2012 she won Best TV Comedy Actress at the British Comedy Awards, and was nominated for Best Supporting Actress for her role as Chummy for the British Academy Television Awards. She has a book out full of great humorous observations on the awkwardness of life, called [Is It Just Me?](#) Hart is [touring her comedy act](#) in 2014 in various UK venues, and later in 2013 will be back on the air as Chummy Browne in Season 2 of Call the Midwife.

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1 For more on this interesting bit of history see this [about nurse-midwifery in the U.S.](#)

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