This paper explores the rhetoric, performance, and practice of childbirth in the long-twentieth century. In modern history, there have been two periods of revolution in connection with childbirth – and both concerned pain. The first is the anaesthesetics revolution of the late 1840s; the invention of ether and chloroform. The second is what I call the ‘aesthesiological’ revolution of the long 1950s. As opposed to anaesthesiology, or the rendering unconscious to feeling (chloroform and ether of the 1840s), aesthesiology is the celebration of emotional reactions to stimuli in lived experience. What do these two revolutions suggest about ideas about the body, suffering, and gender?

Joanna Bourke is Professor of History at Birkbeck, University of London, and Fellow of the British Academy (FBA). She the author of 11 books, the most recent being Rape: A History from the 1860s to the Present (2007), What it Means to be Human: Reflections from 1791 to the Present (2011), The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers (2014), and Wounding the World: How Military Violence and War-Play are Invading our Lives (2014). Most of her research focuses on violence, war, the emotions, suffering, and gender.