

Book Review by Susan Merkel

Lucky Girl: A Memoir

by Mei-Ling Hopgood

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In the mid- 1960s renowned adoption professional David Kirk of Canada released the results of his first study on why some adoptees are happier than others, ground breaking research that became the basis for the move to open adoption. Since then, social workers, sociologists, and numerous adoption professionals have pondered the same question and conducted hundreds of research projects to determine why some adoptees adapt and fare better in life than others.

Kirk was the first to empirically show that adoptive parents who acknowledge the different way their family was formed and deal honestly with adoption related loss, embraced the challenges inherent in raising adopted children, and fostered open communication throughout their son or daughter's life about their adoption, also had the closest relationship with their children. And their children tended to fare better emotionally during tough adolescent years and were better adjusted as adults. Conversely, adoptees raised in families who were secretive about adoption issues, rejected or minimized differences between them and their children and tried to simulate a non-adoptive family as closely as possible, tend to have more difficult childhoods and psychosocial challenges as adults.

Numerous adoption communication theories have come along since Kirk's first study, and all have found that open, honest and empathetic communication between adoptive parents and their adopted children have the best result. More recently, the advent of open adoption and prevalence of adoptee and birth parent searches have led to newer questions, such as does the search and reunion with a birth family make an adoptee feel happier or more complete? How do parents best prepare their child to cope with adoption issues and what happens when birth families come into the picture?

These theories and questions come to life in a wonderful novel by first time author, Mei-Ling Hopgood. As this heartfelt autobiography begins, Mei-Ling is a rising journalist in her 20's, working her way through the heady days of a young career woman and living on her own. Renewed contact with the nun that arranged her adoption from Taiwan, and a miscommunication when they meet, result in an unplanned and totally unexpected reunion with her birth family. This meeting takes the author through uncharted waters and brings her face-to-face with disturbing family secrets, betrayals and the resulting pain her birth family has experienced .

The author's honest and often humorous story as she makes her way through the maze of secrets, and complicated family issues, is a must read for anyone touched by adoption. Ultimately Mei-Ling learns to merge her all American Midwest Girl self with her Taiwanese heritage, and discovers along the way that family bonds and love can overcome life's darkest moments. Her personal strength and sense of self shine through the book, and one can see that her parents Chris and Rollie Hopgood did it right. They continue to support and stand by their daughter though the ups and downs of her adoption story and show us that love, not blood, is the most important part of being parents.

Joni: there is more copy below in Q&A format that can be added (this format is used by many magazines and thought it would be a nice creative way to add to the more traditional review above. (I was not sure how many column inches you needed of copy so I broke the review and Q&A up. I used the NY Times book review format.

Q&A With Mei-Ling Hopgood

We had the fortunate pleasure of talking with Mei-Ling at a reading she did in Princeton, NJ for Families with Children from China. What stands out the most when you meet her, is how strong, secure and well adjusted Mei-Ling is. Her parents, Chris and Rollie Hopgood, adopted three children from Asian countries, fostered an open and honest environment, embraced Korean and Chinese cultures part of daily life. We were curious about Mei-Ling's adoption journey and what her parents did right.

Q: What is your first memory of adoption?

A: Adoption was just a word in my family. It was something we always knew and was just a fact of life. I was never curious about my birth mother as a child, but my parent's kept an open and ongoing conversation about our Asian identities and adoption.

Q: What was the hardest thing about adoption for you during your childhood and adolescence?

A: More of what impacted my identity is being different (Asian) in a town where there were very few Asians, and that did not necessarily come from having two white parents. I was very insecure as a teen about being Asian.

Q: Did this change in adulthood?

A: As an adult, when I started becoming more conscious of my "Asian American" identity during college, I did have more questions about my birth family. But it was limited to "I wonder how Birth mom felt about giving me up".

Q: How did you prepare for your first meeting with your birth family?

A: I took Mandarin lessons, mainly and talked to friends about Chinese customs.

Q: What was the best part about your reunion with your birth parent?

A: It was interesting to see where I came from, to clarify who these people were, to feel welcomed there, and to look like other folks.

Q: After reunion did you feel differently about yourself, your parents, life in general?

A: Of course, my whole perspective changed on my past, and who I am. Still, it was much more impacting for me to meet my birth siblings. They were great role models for me, appearance wise, experience wise. I loved having sisters, and being accepted among them. I also saw my life as it very well could have been.

Q: What was the hardest part post reunion with birth family to deal with?

A: The culture and the language barrier have been challenging. The abrasiveness of my birth father and the inability for my birth mother and I to really communicate with each other has also been difficult. Figuring out the role I wanted to play in their lives and their role in mine has also been a big and ongoing challenge.

Q: Since your reunion what has changed most about your life?

A: Obviously the experience changed me. But I think I'd still have the same husband and a similar life. I have more interest in things Chinese. Perhaps I have a more real sense of my place in the world.

Q: Did you ever have any counseling related to adoption issues? Did it help and if so how?

I did seek counseling after a miscarriage and also worked through the death of my dad (American). We did talk about the reunion and my difficult birth father and different birth mother. It certainly helped. But again, the discussion - which lasted about six months or so -- was on a range of issues.

Q: Do campaigns like *Adopt-a-Highway* press your buttons?

A: I think this is so silly. I'm not sure why adoptive parents get worked up by this. I think there is such a danger when you get OVERsensitive to such nonsense -- that's how your child gets oversensitive. In my opinion it's a waste of time to get hung up on words: "offering up" vs. "giving up", adopt-a-"anything". It's the action and the love that counts. Adopt is a verb: You adopt, and a child become part of your family. The second clause is the most significant part here. How you do it, while a key part of the story, is not the end.

Q: Have your thoughts about identity changed over the years?

A: It has evolved, as it does for anyone: adoptee or not, probably in the proper order: being insecure as a teen, searching for your identity as a young adult, focusing on building your family later, in early and mid 30s.

Q: How do you identify yourself today?

A: I guess I'd say a Chinese American woman. But I just think of myself as me now. And all these things are a part of who I am, but they do not define me.

Keys to a Well Adjusted Adopted Adolescent:

World renowned adoption expert David Kirk of Canada is credited as being the first advocate of open communication between adoptive families and adopted children about their family of origin and any relevant birth information. Kirk advocated that parents need to be aware of role handicaps such as unresolved grief over infertility or loss of biological child, and be aware of how these feelings could impact their child. Kirk's Adoption Communication Theory, established in 1964, posited that adoptive parents tended to do one of two things: they either rejected or minimized the differences between them and their children and try to simulate a non-adoptive family as closely as possible; or they acknowledge differences, adoption related loss and embrace the challenges inherent in raising adopted children. Kirk showed that adoptees living in homes where differences were acknowledged were better adjusted as adults.

Related Research

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