

*Dear Fatty* by Dawn French  
Published by Random House in 2008

One of my Christmas presents last year was *Dear Fatty*, by Dawn French. The book is a memoir and is produced in a series of letters to various people who have been important in Dawn's life. The *Fatty* in the title is Jennifer Saunders, with whom Dawn has worked since they were students together. Most of the letters in the book, however, are addressed to Dawn's father, who suicided when Dawn was nineteen years old. Personally I found the book difficult to read as the content, for me, was at times uncomfortably crude and at other times excessively sentimental. However, I was particularly interested in her outlook as an adoptive mother.

Dawn and her husband adopted a daughter, Billie, when she was a baby. They have no other children. Billie is now sixteen years old. Dawn talks in the book about how angry and vocal Billie is and describes how Billie shouts and screams at her, apparently on a regular basis. Dawn attributes her adopted daughter's anger to the "rejection" by her original mother. This is an unfortunate assumption, as I have never yet heard a parent who had been separated from a child by adoption describe the experience in terms of rejection.

I also found it disappointing that, although Dawn mentions the grief she expects will be experienced by Billie's original mother, nowhere in the book does she acknowledge the possibility that Billie might experience grief at being separated from her families of origin. There is also no mention of the notion that it might be in Billie's best interests to have contact with her original families or even information about them, either now or in the future. Dawn feels that she and her husband have been able to offer Billie a 'better life' than her original families would have been able to offer. They certainly have fame and fortune, but we all know that these do not necessarily bring happiness and fulfilment. Although Dawn stresses in the book that her husband and adopted daughter are more important to her than her wealth and career, she admits that both she and her husband have found it difficult to be faithful to each other during their twenty-four year marriage.

I found it interesting that Dawn describes in the book how her mother has worked hard to establish and manage an organisation which helps mothers who are at risk of losing custody of their children. They are supported to become capable parents, so that their children do not find themselves living in adoptive families, but instead are able to be raised with their families of origin. I wonder if Dawn has ever considered that if Billie's original mother had had access to such a support organisation, then the adoption may not have taken place.

Dawn states in the book that she gained her sense of self-worth from her parents and she is clearly aware of the value and significance of family relationships. While it seems to be very clear to Dawn that her family members were very important to her as she was growing up and she speculates about the qualities she may have inherited from them, she does not acknowledge that it may also be significant that Billie has been separated from her parents, perhaps siblings, grandparents and other relatives. Dawn writes about how much she has gained by learning about herself from those to whom she is related, yet she does not seem to understand the importance for her adopted daughter of having connections with the people to whom she is related by blood.

Dawn goes to great lengths to explain how attractive Billie was as a baby and suggests that because of her physical beauty, she deserved to be loved. On the other hand, Dawn claims to be content with her obesity (although she points out that she was a size 12 on her wedding day) and scoffs at those who maintain their fitness. Dawn seems to be presenting mixed messages in the book. On the one hand, she suggests that babies who are unattractive are in danger of not being loved; however, she also proposes that adults need not concern themselves with their appearance or health, but should expect to be loved for who they are, not how they look.

Dawn has taken the opportunity in her book to say very complimentary things about the people that she clearly adores and admires and to be rather nasty (which does her no credit) about those she clearly does not. For example, she criticises Madonna for adopting an African child and suggests that the child might be angry about being adopted and may not consider that being adopted by a rich, famous couple was naturally preferable to growing up among his own people. Dawn does not seem to consider that the child whom she has adopted may have similar feelings.

Because Dawn French is famous, it is likely that many people will read her book. This could have been an opportunity for her to use her position as an adoptive mother to educate other adoptive parents about the value and significance for their adopted children in building relationships with the people from whom they are descended and to whom they are connected genetically. Sadly, this has not happened.

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