

Adoption Separation

Then and now

Adoption separation, then

The first part of this book contains the narratives of parents who experienced adoption separation in the last century. They span a period of more than thirty years, from 1958 to 1989.

In the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of children were adopted in the countries represented in this book, in circumstances very similar to the ones described here. It is difficult for members of the generations who did not live through this period to understand why so many adoptions occurred. I hope that reading the words of those who experienced adoption separation in the twentieth century will shed some light for them on the social environment of the era.

I have chosen not to try to explain the feelings expressed in this book, but to allow the stories to speak eloquently and powerfully for themselves. Readers who wish to gain a deeper understanding of the emotional issues around adoption separation and reunion could benefit from reading my other books.

Shame is a recurring theme in the narratives of those who have been separated from a family member by adoption. One definition of shame is: 'a painful feeling caused by an awareness of guilt'. The countries which are represented here have all been heavily influenced by the Judeo-Christian ethos, which traditionally attached shame and guilt to sexual relationships outside of marriage.

Pregnancy provided public evidence of the parents' sexual behaviour, which often exposed them to harsh judgment. This resulted in intense social pressure for adoptions to take place.

Shame can also be defined as: 'cause for regret'. Looking back, many now feel that it was a shame that so many adoptions occurred and many parents who have been separated from their children by adoption have expressed regret that they were unable to prevent the adoption from taking place.

I have been involved with post-adoption support services around the English-speaking world since 1986 and I have been struck over the years by the similarities in experiences in all of these countries. I decided that it would be useful to produce a book which would bring them together.

I sent requests for contributions to this book to friends, colleagues, acquaintances and to organisations. I requested that contributions be brief, in order to be able to include as many as possible. There is, of course, much more to all of these stories.

I know that it has been therapeutic for my contributors to have told their stories in their own words and that they feel that their experiences are validated by having them published. I am grateful for the enthusiasm, the courage and the generosity which they have brought to this project.

*This collection provides a vivid and moving picture of each parent's adoption experience and allows readers to understand exactly **how it happened**.*

Adoption separation, now

*The first section of this book, **Adoption separation, then**, contains the words and thoughts of others about adoption in the twentieth century. This second section contains my words and thoughts about several aspects of adoption in the twenty-first century.*

There have been enormous social changes since the middle of the twentieth century. The ideal of the traditional, nuclear family is less dominant than it was. Many children do not live with both of their parents in the same home and it is not uncommon for siblings to have different fathers and different surnames. The stigma attached to illegitimacy has all but disappeared and we are more tolerant of different family structures.

The influence of religion has reduced noticeably in the major English-speaking countries and there is much less shame and guilt attached to sexual behaviour. Social activism has increased awareness of the long term grief and loss associated with adoption separation and has changed attitudes to parenting.

Some of those who want children and are unwilling or unable to produce them by natural means are now using scientific means, such as donor conception and surrogacy to 'create a family'. Medical science has to some extent replaced religion as a vehicle for providing children. Adults who were created by these methods are now experiencing feelings of genealogical displacement, similar to those experienced by adults who were adopted as children.

*The parents who have contributed their stories for this book have described how they were advised to put their experiences of birth and adoption behind them and 'get on with their lives'. Clearly, this was an unrealistic and unhealthy expectation. It is obvious that these parents cared about their lost children and continued to experience feelings of grief around the separation, often for many years. In **Picking up the pieces**, I explain how, in most locations, there is now an official recognition of the losses created by adoption separation and attempts are being made by governments to help those affected to manage those losses.*

*In spite of the knowledge we now have about the long term impact of adoption separation, there are still children being born and adopted in the countries represented here. However, each country manages adoptions in its own way. More than half of the adoptions described in this book occurred in Australia and the United States. In **Different approaches**, I compare the way adoptions are managed in the twenty-first century in these two countries.*

*Tragically, there are locations in the world where women are still being shamed and blamed for becoming pregnant and are labelled immoral or irresponsible. They are being punished by having their children taken from them. Many people are striving to highlight the social inequities of present day adoptions. However, there are societies which have very different attitudes to parenting than our traditional western approach. In the chapter entitled, **In the country of daughters**, I describe one such society, in which not only are all babies born given an equally warm welcome into the world, but women are traditionally expected to have many sexual partners.*

In the countries represented in this book, the number of children born to unmarried parents has increased considerably in recent years. At the same time, the number of children born in those countries, who are being adopted, has decreased. In the twentieth century, adoption was widely considered to be in the best interests of many children, especially those whose parents were not married. In the twenty-first century, we understand that loving care, combined with genealogical continuity, are actually in the best interests of children. This is another reason for the reduction in the number of adoptions.

*The number of children being adopted within the countries represented in this book began to reduce around the middle of the 1970s. Subsequently, those wishing to adopt began to identify other countries with which adoption arrangements could be developed. In **The***

intercountry stolen generation, I have highlighted some of the outcomes of these arrangements.

*Finally, in 2010, Western Australia became the first government in the world to apologise officially to those whose lives had been adversely affected by past adoption policies and practices. In **The Times They Are A-Changin'**, I explain how and why that happened and what it might mean for the future.*

I hope that my readers will gain a deeper understanding of the global impact of adoption, in both the past and the present centuries and that this understanding can be used to ensure that, in the near future, adoption, in every country in the world, will cease to be used to separate children from their mothers, fathers, families and heritage and will be replaced by more child-centred alternatives.

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