

# *Adoption Reunion*

## *Ecstasy or Agony*

### *Introduction*

A reunion between family members who have been separated by an adoption can be a very emotional event. For most people there is great joy and excitement, but for some there can be anger and disappointment. Sometimes there is a mixture of both ecstasy and agony. I have written this book to help to explain that mixture of feelings and to increase understanding of the emotional dynamics of the reunion experience. Although I live and work in South Australia, the information in this book is pertinent to anyone, anywhere in the world, who is interested in the outcomes of adoption separation and reunion.

My interest in the long term impact of adoption separation stems from the fact that I am the original mother of a son, who was born in Scotland in 1970 and adopted into another family. I called him Adam, his adoptive parents called him Stephen and he has recently officially named himself Ferg (although I have his permission to continue to call him Stephen). I am very grateful that he has made his own powerful and moving contribution to this book.

Australia has led the English-speaking world in providing legal access to adoption information, which can facilitate reunion between adults separated by adoption. When children are adopted, they are no longer legally related to any member of their original families ie the family of their original mother and the family of their original father. When they become adults, however, many adopted people are reunited with their families of origin.

Formal, legal adoptions in South Australia commenced with the passing of the *Adoption Act 1925*. The peak period for adoptions in Australia was from the mid 1960s to the early 1970s. Numbers of adoptions of Australian-born children by people who were unknown and unrelated to the child prior to the adoption have reduced dramatically since that time. In 1971, there were almost one thousand such adoptions in South Australia; in 2008 there was only one. Although there are very few adoptions taking place nowadays in Australia, there are still many people who are experiencing the on-going impact of adoption in their lives.

In 1982 in Adelaide, South Australia, a conference was organised by the National Council for the Single Mother and her Child. Many mothers who had been separated from their children through adoption attended this conference and subsequently formed support organisations. As a result of pressure from these and other adoption support groups, adults who had been adopted as children in Australia first gained a legal right to access their original birth certificates in the state of Victoria in 1984.

With the passing of the *Adoption Act 1988*, South Australia became the first state in Australia to grant equal rights to access identifying information to adults who had been adopted as children and to their original mothers. This means that when the adopted person reaches the age of eighteen, details of their adoptive identity can be made available to their original mother. At the same time, adults who were adopted as children may access their original birth certificate, which provides the identity of their original mother.

Conducting research into the long term outcomes of adoption separation and the impact of the reunion experience is a notoriously difficult undertaking, as it is impossible to guarantee a representative sample. I first became involved with post-adoption services in 1989 and, since then, I have been collecting material from many people who have experienced adoption separation and reunion and from professionals and volunteers working in post-adoption services.

In this book I have presented the conclusions I have reached after considering that material and reflecting on it. Those conclusions are informed by my personal experience of adoption

separation and reunion and underpinned by my professional knowledge and experience as a counsellor and educator.

This book contains a selection from the many discussions I have had around adoption separation and reunion. Some of those discussions occurred twenty years ago and some in recent weeks. The responses which are recorded here have been condensed in order to provide a broad selection of topics and are, therefore, concise. When these issues were actually presented to me, they were, of course, addressed more fully and in greater depth.

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