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Marianne Novy

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# Transcultural Adoption Literature for Pediatricians and Parents

MARIANNE NOVY

**ABSTRACT:** Pediatricians are now giving adoptive parents good advice based to a large extent on adoptees' recounting their experiences. Following the Medical Humanities approach, recent memoirs, novels, poems and films could be useful in helping pediatricians and adoptive parents develop more understanding of adoptees' experiences such as racism, loss, insecurity, and isolation.

**KEYWORDS:** adoption, medical humanities, race, memoir, novel

When dentists and doctors ask  
The old blood questions about family line  
I tell them: I have no nose or mouth or eyes  
To match, no spitting image or dead cert,  
My face watches itself in the glass  
—Jackie Kay, *The Adoption Papers*

Doctors are among the few professionals that adoptees meet who are likely to have knowledge of their adopted status. One of the most widely shared experiences of adoptees is confronting a family medical history questionnaire in a doctor's office (or online) and having nothing to write. It is closely related to the experience, also evoked in Jackie Kay's poem in the epigraph, of not knowing anyone who looks like you.<sup>1</sup>

Racial difference, which Kay experienced, is the most obvious and extreme example of this, especially difficult to deal with when the adoptee is a member of a stigmatized group and is brought up with little acquaintance of adults of similar skin color.<sup>2</sup> Doctors usually know which of their patients are adopted, yet even before the current speed-up required in most medical practices, it has been unusual for them to bring up this topic with their patients (Leonard).

However, the professional organization of one medical specialty has taken a stand on acknowledging racial difference and a number of other issues relating to the complexity of adoption—pediatricians. The American Academy of Pediatrics deals seriously with racial and ethnic difference. Their official journal includes these sentences as part of a clinical report titled “The Pediatrician’s Role in Supporting Adoptive Families”: “Relationships with others of the same race or ethnic group, including adults and children, may be very helpful to a child. . . . Parents who have not experienced racism personally may need to pay extra attention to teaching their children effective ways to respond to racism” (V. Jones et al. e1045). The *Handbook of International Adoption Medicine* has a “checklist for awareness by potential transracial adoptive parents.” It contains forty-eight items (Miller 425–26).<sup>3</sup>

Pediatricians have also taken a stand against denying the importance of other aspects of a child’s preadoptive experience. The American Academy of Pediatrics has issued a statement endorsing the right of adoptees ages eighteen and up to their original birth certificate.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to the view that at least same-race, same-ethnicity adoptions can be handled by enough love without special preparation, the Academy has now stated that adverse early experiences such as neglect in foster care are common enough that pediatricians, just as they test for symptoms of disease, should “assume that all children who have been adopted or fostered have experienced trauma” (American Academy of Pediatrics 7), though some may have avoided it or survived with resilience.<sup>5</sup> And contrary to many parents’ wish to ignore adoption in their relationship with their child, “The Pediatrician’s Role” emphasizes the need for parents to talk about adoption with their child from the very beginning.<sup>6</sup> Discussing adoption should not be a one-time event but a continuing conversation that takes place at different levels as the child’s ability to understand develops.

According to research published in 2016, “Americans are a bit Pollyannaish when it comes to adoption, generally feeling quite ‘warm and fuzzy’ about adoption overall and believing that the system is in relatively good shape” (Donaldson). However, the majority of states in the US still make it difficult for all or some adoptees to find their original name and that of their original parents, thus reinforcing the age-old association of adoption with secrecy and shame (Carp; Samuels).<sup>7</sup> And according to the same survey, only forty-seven percent of the general public feel that race issues need to be addressed postadoption.<sup>8</sup> Why are pediatricians so far

ahead of the laws on the openness issue and ahead of the general public on the need for special efforts in transracial adoption?

Some have observed the experience of their patients. Books about adoption medicine refer to or include research by psychologists and other professionals.<sup>9</sup> But to a large extent, the pediatricians' recent official statement about openness is the ultimate result of adoptees telling their stories in their memoirs and activism, in the adoptee rights movement led by Jean Paton, Florence Fisher, and Betty Jean Lifton.<sup>10</sup>

And the movement also benefited from a narrative televised in 1977, the dramatization of Alex Haley's book *Roots*, so widely watched and influential that E. Wayne Carp credits it with sweeping away "the idea that searching for one's birth family was unnatural or a sign of mental instability" (163). *Roots* had a special impact on adoptees whose ancestry was African, as we will see in the story of Jaiya John. But other storytelling also influenced the pediatricians' statements on race. For example, as international adoption became more frequent, Korean adoptees came of age. They were the first group taken to the United States in noticeably large numbers, and their writings became influential.<sup>11</sup> Now there are many memoirs by adoptees and adoptive parents, and some pieces of fiction, usually written by people who have drawn on others with direct experience of adoption, that have been helpful and could be helpful to more pediatricians and parents.

People write memoirs and novels for many different reasons, and readers respond to them in many different ways. But at least since ancient Greek tragedy, many authors have written, at least in part, because they want to promote understanding of others who have experiences like those they describe, and many readers gain such understanding out of memoirs and novels.<sup>12</sup> One of the novelists most explicit about this purpose, George Eliot, expressed what would later become her goal when she wrote, "The greatest benefit we owe the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies" (270).<sup>13</sup> Many later critics have also found this possibility in the novel. More recently, explaining the closely related term of empathy, Elaine Scarry writes of "the capacity of literature [and this includes memoirs and films] to exercise and reinforce our recognition that there are other points of view in the world, and to make this recognition a powerful mental habit" (42).<sup>14</sup> Even a theorist such as Dorothy Hale, who critiques the idea of empathy as colonizing, can still find literature valuable for confronting readers with another consciousness that they do not understand.<sup>15</sup> Scarry's phrase "recognizing that there are other points of view in the world" does not assume that the recognizer's understanding of those viewpoints is perfect and thus avoids some of the dangers of colonizing that such assumption might presume. When I use the term "empathy" it will be in line with Scarry's interpretation.

In the past forty years, a movement called "medical humanities," or sometimes "health humanities," has emphasized how reading literature and seeing

plays or films can help health professionals of all kinds to be more understanding of the experiences of their clients (Crawford et al. 48).<sup>16</sup> In the introduction to her important anthology, Therese Jones considers literature's capacity to develop empathy, along with other goals such as developing narrative competence (3). For young adoptees, and adult ones because of the impact of early experiences, obviously pediatricians' understanding is particularly influential, since they are in a position to influence how adoptive parents treat their child as well as to help the children survive baffled parents when they become teenagers.

I have worked with Sarah Springer, a pediatrician who specializes in caring for internationally adoptive families, to arrange a short (four evenings) course on adoption for medical students—hoping especially to attract future pediatricians. We have invited a few adult adoptees to visit and discuss their experiences. Guest speakers have been available, and inviting them seemed more practical than assigning books to busy medical students. There are a number of readings that could be helpful for pediatricians as well as for adoptive parents: Cheri Register's *Beyond Good Intentions: A Mother Reflects on Raising Internationally Adopted Children*, Joyce Maguire Pavao's *The Family of Adoption; Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past* by Betsey Keefer and Jayne E. Schooler; and *An Insider's Guide to Transracial Adoption* by Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall, all of which provide understanding partly by telling stories.

But a book-length narrative, whether of the author's experience or those of imaginary characters, can have more impact partly because of its involvement of both the readers and the characters over a period of time—impact that can be heightened by more specifically literary techniques, such as presenting unspoken thoughts. Novels, plays and memoirs can make the experiences of adoptees more vivid. Paton and Lifton evoke sufferings caused by secrecy in adoption and argue for openness by recalling stories in literature as well as in their own lives. Paton begins the introduction to her book *Orphan Voyage* with these words, invoking the story of Oedipus: "In Greece, about twenty-four hundred years ago, there was written the first adoption life history" (15). The first epigraph of Lifton's adoption memoir, *Twice Born*, is taken from Tiresias's question to Oedipus: "Do you know who your parents are?" (1).<sup>17</sup>

In this essay I discuss several recent memoirs and novels that portray adoptees' experiences as children and therefore could be helpful to adoptive parents and pediatricians. Some show what it feels like when parents do things wrong; some show parents making a mistake and correcting it with love; in other cases, no matter how many things parents do right, racism still has an impact. In the chapter titles of *Beyond Good Intentions*, Register identifies several of the most common pitfalls that many internationally adopted adults she knows personally or through their writing experienced in their upbringing, often telling part of their stories. I've used her chapter titles: "Believing Race Doesn't Matter," "Raising Our Children

in Isolation,” “Holding the Lid on Sorrow and Anger,” and “Wiping Away Our Children’s Past,”—in my section heads, since the works I discuss illustrate them so well.<sup>18</sup> Closely related to the denial of race, difficult emotions, and the past are the refusal to talk about adoption—found in same-race as well as transracial adoption—and the insistence on keeping adoption secret—generally impossible in transracial adoption. In order to avoid these practices, parents need to be aware of two experiences whose portrayal I will describe, common to many adoptees but especially salient and painful for transracial adoptees: looking different from your family and other people around you and feeling like you have two identities. In addition, transracial adoptees frequently describe events in public in which others don’t see them as members of the adoptees’ own families—and in a few cases, direct racist abuse at them. Some adoptees, especially those who were previously in foster care or orphanages and were neglected or abused, may have problems that parents need therapists to help with. The problems resulting from racism also extend far beyond parents’ ability to fix them even if they give their children tools to deal with them, but nevertheless the memoirs show the difference between the outcome when parents fight racism, for example, and when they deny it. I will begin by discussing examples in memoirs of problems especially related to transracial and transnational adoption and a few examples of better approaches and outcomes, then turn to a few novels that show those problems and some others.

## Double Identity

The issue of double identity is dramatized in many adoptions by the change of name, and adoptees’ memoirs often emphasize this.<sup>19</sup> Very early in *The Language of Blood*, for example, Jane Jeong Trenka begins one paragraph, “My name is Jeong Kyong-Ah,” recites the names of her ancestors and her citizenship in Korea, and then writes, “Halfway around the world, I am someone else. I am Jane Marie Brauer, created September 26, 1972, when I was carried off an airplane onto American soil” (14).

Jaiya John’s memoir, *Black Baby White Hands*, recalls his early months in an African American foster care family, where he was named Scott, then the transition to a white family and the official change of name four years later to John Scott Potter. In Los Alamos in 1968, a few months after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Scott’s future white parents had been asked whether they would accept a black child. They believed in integration and said yes, becoming the first white people in New Mexico to do so; they were unaided by any support groups or follow-up education (26–27). They worked hard to take care of him as best they could, for instance working his muscles to overcome some of the effects of his months neglected in foster care (31). In her best effort to support his ethnic identity,

his mother sang him Negro spirituals and plantation songs (32). The Potters later adopted a second black child so Scott would feel less alone (34).

But by the age of five, Scott looked at his classmates in preschool and, he writes, “recognized that my hair was shorter and more tightly curled than that of most other people and that my nose was broader. . . . I was self-conscious of my race to the point of withdrawing” (36). He also felt left out because of the whiteness of the television shows the family saw and the stories his parents read to him (38). He was constantly wondering what he should do to fit in and how much of himself would be lost in the process. Although there were calls for more diversity in popular culture at that time, today there are many more people of color on television and resources for parents looking for multiracial representation in children’s books. Scott’s experience shows how necessary these changes have been, though transracially adopted children may still have difficulty integrating their double identities.

The same disconnect between the transracially adopted person’s two identities might be seen in Catherine McKinley’s memoir, *The Book of Sarahs*, which begins with a visit to Scotland with her family when she is eleven. She sees a group of brightly clothed African visitors in a pub and has a flashback to an uncomfortable moment in a shop earlier that day when she was asked, “Are you Scottish?” as she, visibly of African American descent, was looking for the McKinley tartan. McKinley’s dual identities include those framed by racial-national definitions: the assumption is that no black person can be Scottish, and yet McKinley claims her family’s Scottish tartan as hers, as of course it is, given that the McKinleys are in all ways except the biological her family.<sup>20</sup>

Deann Borshay Liem’s film *First Person Plural* in its very title dramatizes the idea of multiple identity. Like *The Language of Blood*, the film emphasizes the different names the adoptee was given before and after her adoption. Pictures from her high school show her trying hard to look like the other girls in her class with no more trace than necessary of her Korean ancestry, but while in college she begins having dreams of scenes from her life before adoption, and she embarks on a search for more of her history.

Puzzling about how to live with an appearance, race, and heredity different from that of one’s adoptive parents is almost inevitable for a transracial adoptee still living with them, and dual identity may also be an issue for a same-race adoptee especially if transnational, but very few adoptees have written about getting much help from their parents in figuring this out. Reading these memoirs would, in a few cases, provide adoptive parents strategies on how to support their children in this concern and in more would help them recognize how general this need is for children who are transracially or transnationally adopted.

## Difficulty Talking about Adoption

One of the moments found in most memoirs is an adoptive parent's difficulty in answering a question or continuing a conversation about adoption. Same-race parents may want the children to keep their adoption a secret. With transracial adoption, secrecy about the fact of adoption is hardly ever possible. But memoirs show that in such families, adoption is still hard to discuss. McKinley, by ancestry part African American and part Jewish, does not get a total brush-off from her mother when she asks, as they are taking a break on a climb up a hill in Scotland, her parents' ancestral land, "Mummy, why did you adopt me? Why didn't I get adopted by an African—an Afro-American—family?" But after saying, "we'd waited a long time. . . . How could we have refused you?" her mother rushes up the trail: "Come on, let's not waste time" (McKinley 9–10). Asking about adoption often seems the way to end a conversation with parents.

Trenka presents a moment when she asks about her history as the moment of transition from believing in her adoptive mother's love to doubting it and her own goodness as well. In kindergarten, having shown her birth mother's photograph and her Korean clothes at school, she asks, sitting on her mother's lap in a rocker, "Why did she give us away?" Her mother stops rocking, stands up, leaves the room, and as far as Jane remembers, the house. She concludes, "I must be rotten. . . . I could also be returned to the store. . . . I must be very, very good so my mommy will keep me" (Trenka 22–23).

A more open adoptive mother appears in the recent memoir *Red Dust Road*, by Kay. Kay, Scottish and Nigerian in origin and adopted into a white family from another part of Scotland, is one of the first and still most influential creative writers to deal with their transracial adoption. At the age of seven, Jackie finds out that she is adopted. Watching a cowboy and Indian movie with her mother and brother, "she thinks, 'the Indians are the same colour as me and my mom is not the same colour as me'." She asks, "Mummy why aren't you the same colour as me?" "My mum says, Because you are adopted. I say, what does adopted mean? My mum says, It means I'm not really your mummy. . . . I am crying for real now because I love my mum so much and I want her to be my real mummy and I am worried . . . that she is going to disappear or dissolve" (Kay, *Red* 12).

Kay's poem "Chapter 6: The Telling Part," from her earlier book *The Adoption Papers*, gives a dream image for what she feared at this point: "Mammy's skin is toffee stuck to the floor / And all her bones are scattered like toys" (56–57).<sup>21</sup> But the memoir recounts how her mother sees her pain, weeps in sympathy, wipes her face, and says, "But your dad and I love you more than all the tea in China, more than all the waves in the ocean and will love you till all the seas run dry. . . . Everyone needs cuddles, so they do. Come here and let your mummy give you a big cuddle" (*Red* 13). Her mother does not know the term "birth mother" or "first

mother,” but she knows how to deal with mistakes and a hurt child. Jackie knows that she is loved. Often this is the main thing parents need to communicate when adoption is discussed.

### **Erasing the Past, Believing Race Doesn't Matter, Raising Children in Isolation**

At the opposite extreme from Jackie's mother, Jane's parents never mention adoption or Korea after the day when her mother suddenly abandons her in the rocking chair. They have no understanding of how to give Jane and her sister support against the various kinds of racism they experience. Furthermore, Jane's American family frequently talks about physical similarities in the biologically connected family and she feels left out, wondering, “what does it feel like to pass a mirror and *not be surprised*” (35).

The parents depicted in the documentary film *Off and Running* are more cosmopolitan and educated, but they have been similarly in denial about their daughter Avery's race. Avery lives in a Jewish household in Brooklyn with two moms (one wears a Harvard sweatshirt) and two transracially adopted brothers she loves very much. At the beginning of the film, as she writes a letter to her birth mother, she appears to be flourishing. But, having gone to Jewish schools, she says, “For years I felt so out of place among black people.” She starts at an all-black high school and says, “I am very new to black culture and I don't fully understand it.” As the film continues, the birth mother writes a few times but stops, her older brother leaves for college, and her sense of alienation from her mothers increases—“I don't feel that they understand anything about who I am.”

In other memoirs, parents make some attempt to acknowledge their child's race, but it is not enough. For instance, McKinley's mother connects her with a black church where she is accepted and makes friends, but, she writes, “my weekend life at John Wesley remained almost completely separate from my life at home or at school” (51). In John's memoir, when Scott was in high school, his parents once invited over two visiting black female college students, but the result, perhaps predictably, was an uncomfortable silence (130). His parents made little attempt to compensate for their adopted sons' difference by making “African American considerations . . . an inherent strand in our family life” (130) with regard to either friends or cultural activities. Transracially adopted people need continuing connection with people whose bodies are like theirs and a sense, so these memoirs suggest, of “their own” ethnicity tied to their embodiments. Without this, they feel isolated, lonely, and disconnected from their families and their identities. Reading these books, adoptive parents might be able to see the danger and react in their children's best interest, finding them the connections they need.

Transracial adoptees' memoirs often mention their pain from the reactions of observers to their family. Trenka includes a vignette in which white diners in a restaurant first shout questions such as, "Do they speak Chinese?," then "touch them as if they are dolls," and scream, "I don't want my kids to play with those girls. Go back to where you came from" (31). John describes how he would "go into a store with a sibling or parent, and the employee would come up and ask the other family member first if they needed any help. Then the employee would turn to me and ask, 'And can I help you with anything?'" (129).<sup>22</sup>

Scott enjoys the Hispanic and Pueblo presence in Los Alamos, but nevertheless, "no appreciable Black community existed within 100 miles" (49).<sup>23</sup> When he does have a "Black sighting" he feels both "excitement like when you're in a place where no one speaks your language, and shame, because seeing another Black person reminded me of that same Blackness in me that I was at odds with" (49). His white cousins accept Scott and his brother, but a later conversation he overhears confirms his early impressions that his grandfather on his mother's side had a hard time with those adoptions. He says that most of his relatives showed him "the shaded love of people who spent their lives distant from people who looked like me," and he learned to discern the difference between "embrace" and "ambivalence, tolerance, and disdain" (78).

In this all-white community his hair is one of the most obvious signs of his difference. For a while he uses its ability to hold objects such as pencils and coins to make his peers laugh, but nevertheless it causes him "excruciating" physical pain from his mother and the local barbers (none within a two hours' drive experienced with such hair) as well as shame in public (100–1). This account will help parents of transracial adoptees see that their child might be experiencing many different kinds of pain that they themselves might not even perceive and might motivate them to find ways to avoid or at least heal from these woundings.

Some of these texts show the adoptees themselves negotiating their difficulties. John recalls making his persona generally comic and nonthreatening, in spite of his feelings of discomfort and anger. As a result, he becomes so popular that his white sister, born into the family, feels rejected. Ironically, he hardly notices, let alone enjoys, his popularity (115). He keeps feeling like an outsider as his parents frequently remark on physical similarities between their three biological children and the rest of the family (127). When he tries to discuss with his parents his feeling that people are staring at him, again his parents miss the opportunity to discuss race. His father says, "People stare at me all the time because of my beard" (180).

In his twenties, he finally succeeds at having a conversation about race and his adoption with his parents. His father recalls that when asked about this by an African American man earlier, he had acknowledged his ignorance and limited life perspective, saying, "All I can do is try to teach him what my father taught me, and hopefully that will provide him the tools and the strength of character to

figure out the rest on his own" (287). In a later conversation, his mother says, "I tried to treat all you kids the same" (296). In other words, he writes, she had tried to deny "the facts of our adoption and race" (296). With the limitations of their experience, his parents had no idea what they were getting into. Although they showed their belief in racial equality when they agreed to adopt Scott, his mother's behavior, especially, exemplifies the deep-seated nature of implicit bias, which research shows can go against one's conscious beliefs (Dovidio et al.). Neither of his parents understood their own privilege as white people, a lens of analysis not yet widely known, which clarifies the difficulties of adoptees in this and most of the other memoirs discussed here (McIntosh).

### **Holding the Lid on Sorrow and Anger**

Register, considering Trenka's account of her relationship with her parents, speculates that difficulties inevitably arise when "Thousands of Korean children, by heritage seething cauldrons of Han, profound and prideful anger at a history of occupation and oppression, have been or are being raised by placid Scandinavian Americans and tight-lipped German Americans, who struggle to keep the lid down and not get scalded" (55). One may wonder about attributing an inherited temperament to a child only a few months old when adopted, as Jane was, but her memoir clearly shows her adoptive parents as stoic, especially her mother, who told her father not to cry at his mother's funeral, and her Korean mother as more emotional (53). Parents who deny the importance of race and adoption are also likely to deny the importance of feelings of sadness or anger related to race or adoption. This is probably part of why Jane's mother did not answer her question about why her birth mother gave her away. Showing a similar difficulty in dealing with painful feelings, when in the film *Off and Running* Avery is upset because, during her adjustment to an all-black school, the brother to whom she was very close goes away to college and her birth mother stops writing back to her, one of her mothers says, "It's like something really traumatic happened to her, but I don't think anything did."

Likewise, Scott's mother tries to deal with his feelings of sadness by saying, "Quit hanging your lip," leading him to an even greater sense of rejection (64). When he is nine, Scott becomes totally absorbed with the televised series *Roots*, identifying with the characters too much to hide his emotions. His parents miss this opportunity for a discussion leading to more understanding; rather, his mother says, "You've been acting weird. I'm not going to let you watch that show anymore if you don't straighten up" (158). These memoirs provide many examples of the harmful effects of repressing adoptee sadness, fear, and anger and may motivate parents to look for more helpful approaches.

## What Can Parents Do to Help?

Two transracial adoptees have particularly adept parents and are especially appreciative of their parents' support on racial issues. Mei-Ling Hopgood, as described in her memoir *Lucky Girl*, is raised by parents who call her their "beautiful adopted baby" (69), hire Asian babysitters, hang Asian art on their walls, and eat Asian food. She has two younger brothers adopted from Korea (77). She writes that she did not feel uncomfortable about being adopted, and emphasizes, "My parents tried to counter any racism. They did their best to explain ignorance and hate, dismissing the offenders as idiots" (78). However, she still felt isolated as an Asian, unable to discuss her sense of racial shame with her family. She writes that in fifth grade, "I wondered if a boy would ever like a Chinese girl" (73). Even the Asian Students Association, which she encounters in college, is not initially a congenial place for her because her experience as an adoptee is so different from that of someone both born and raised in an Asian family. But by graduation, she says, "I figured out that I actually liked being Chinese American" (158). Her memoir continually emphasizes her close relationships with and admiration of her adoptive parents. Temperamentally more similar to her outgoing father, she has special times with her mother as well—and these positive experiences contrast markedly with her experiences in connecting with her Chinese first parents. In reading Hopgood's memoir as an example of transracial adoptive practice, adoptive parents might conclude that even if it isn't everything, what Hopgood's parents do is ultimately enough. Near the end of her memoir, she affirms her connections with a large extended family by envisioning what her daughter might inherit.

Kay's parents, like the Hopgoods, give their daughter images that reflect her race. They have a poster of Angela Davis and praise her for her bravery (*Red* 35–36). The Kays' neighborhood in Scotland is not racially integrated, but because they are active members of the Communist party they meet and host many visitors from Africa: Kay remembers the "dark life lines" on the hands of one who visited when she was four (50). Her mother encourages her to fantasize: "Maybe your father was an African chief. . . . Maybe you are an African princess" (41).<sup>24</sup> When Jackie meets racism at school, she tells her parents; they complain to the teacher and try to comfort their daughter (*Adoption*, "Black Bottom" 18–71). She remains close to them, and in *Red Dust Road* this closeness is intensified as she describes to them her strange reunion with her Nigerian birth father.

Barbara Katz Rothman, an adoptive mother and sociologist, already lived in an integrated neighborhood and had black friends and colleagues before she adopted. In her sociologically and historically informed memoir *Weaving a Family*, she tells of experiences similar to Scott's, of an ice cream vendor not seeing her relationship with her young child and of having to perform motherhood by referring to "my daughter" when accompanying her to a violin lesson with a new teacher

(4). Most of the adoptive parents described in memoirs do not realize the need to be explicit about their parenthood and other extra efforts they need to make. Kay's and Rothman's accounts, however, give examples of how adoptive parents can face some of the difficulties they might encounter.

Memoirs that contain instances of parental failure and adoptee pain may also portray more helpful moments. Scott's father and his paternal grandfather contrast markedly with his mother and her family. He remembers being seven years old and sitting on his grandfather Potter's lap, reading his grandfather a story he wrote in school, and hearing his grandfather tell Scott's father, "This boy's going to be a writer!" (81). The grandfather, a year later, writes him a Christmas card note: "I know that someday you will be a very important man and will do a lot of good for everybody" (80).

Jaiya John (the name Scott eventually gives himself) ultimately sees the positive in his parents' attitude to him. He comes to appreciate his parents' "steady support" in spite of their lack of understanding, and he concludes, "Mom and Dad gave all their children a precious and rare gift: the permission to be ourselves" (303). This is similar to the way McKinley concludes her memoir, which is also full of protest at the way she was raised: "I can see that I had a childhood unnecessarily complicated by my parents' choices and circumscriptions. . . . But their emotional steadiness . . . was a bedrock as I wavered and grieved. My parents gave me the tools to go forth and figure out an American Black woman's life" (289). Memoirs by Hopgood, Kay, Rothman, John, and McKinley, though they detail hardship, provide many possibilities for discussing adoptive parenthood and seeing it in a larger context.

### **"You Came from Somebody Good"**

After she has gotten to know both of her birthparents and has established relationships with them, however difficult, Kay writes, "All anyone adopted really needs is a good imagination: more than genes or blood, it offers the possibility of redemption. . . . All you really need is to think you came from somebody good" (*Red* 149, 150). She is immediately referring to how she thinks about her first parents now, but her words are also related to how she feels about the stories her adoptive mother told her about her birth mother. "Not for a single second was my mum thinking that there might be another somewhere who never bothered to think about me on my birthday" (45). "The Pediatrician's Role" implies something similar, about coming from someone good who cares about them, when it emphasizes the need for parents to answer the child's "questions in a way that promotes self-esteem" (Jones et al. e1044). Avoiding language like "real parents" (still used even by some college-educated people) and "illegitimate," let alone "trash" or "irresponsible," is certainly important.

There is one kind of “positive adoption language” promoted by pediatricians, however, that the people who have experienced what it describes generally find offensive, and that is “make an adoption plan.” Lorraine Dusky, for example, writes, “I relinquished, surrendered, and gave up, but I no more made a ‘plan’ than a person who falls overboard from an ocean liner makes a plan to swim to the life preserver thrown to her” (1). As Register, an adoptive parent of now-adult Korean children, writes, children “don’t ask, ‘Why did my mother make an adoption plan for me?’ but rather, ‘Why did she give me away?’” (59). Pediatricians and many adoptive parents apparently think that the child’s self-esteem requires emphasizing the birth parents’ choice, but, as Dusky writes, this “totally obfuscates the emotional crisis that precedes any relinquishment” (1), and it also fails to acknowledge the child’s likely feelings.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of tone-deafness to language at this point, however, “The Pediatrician’s Role” does acknowledge that there are losses in adoption for all those affected by it. That acknowledgment could be stronger. “In confidential adoptions, biological parents have an obvious loss of a relationship with the child they have conceived” (13). The qualification is an understatement. Even in an open adoption with regular contact, the relationship is usually much less than the birth mother wishes she could have, as is implied throughout one of the few recent memoirs of such an adoption (Seek).

Not all parents will take advice from pediatricians. Class resentment and value contrast may prevent it. Some resist the medicalization of adoptive child-rearing, though they might still listen if pediatricians explain that they are passing on the experiences of adoptees. A few memoirs by adoptees show parents who would much rather have an obedient child than one with initiative or self-esteem and who find an interest in reading strange. Yet these books might still be of interest for showing the exaggeration of attitudes that other adoptive parents might be able to see in themselves in a more subtle way. For example, in *Belief Is Its Own Kind of Truth, Maybe*, Lori Jakiela writes, “I don’t know where you came from, my mother says when she disapproves of something” (120). John’s mother had more information about where he came from, and she never used that language, but he still felt her sense of disapproval at his differences from her. And in his case this effect was heightened because he was surrounded by a culture that was always likely to subordinate or suspect him because of his color.

### Three Recent Novels about Adoption

In the rest of this paper I will discuss three novels that present the experiences of adoptees in ways that could be helpful for pediatricians and adoptive parents to read.<sup>26</sup> Although the authors of these books, unlike the memoirists I have discussed so far, were not themselves adopted, their acknowledgments indicate that

all of them have learned from the experiences of adoptees and adoptive parents. These novels give us insight into the feelings of imagined adoptees at an age when they would be too young and inexperienced to get a memoir published, and also explore the imagined experiences of adoptive parents and (in one of them) a birth mother. Novels are more likely than memoirs to help the reader imagine feelings of people with a variety of relations to adoption, not just that of the author of the memoir, and they may be even more vivid than memoirs in presenting the feelings of children and teenagers.

### *THE LOVE WIFE*

Gish Jen's novel *The Love Wife* includes in its acknowledgments these words: "This book draws to an unusual degree on the stories and perceptions of a large number of people" (381).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, its picture of two Asian American adopted children, Wendy and Lizzy, growing up with an Asian American father, Carnegie, a European American mother, Jane, called Blondie, and a younger brother, Bailey, who was born into the family, portrays many incidents similar to those adoptees mentioned in memoirs. The novel is constructed as a conversation in which each character (except baby Bailey) tells their part of the story or their view of it, sometimes for a line, sometimes for pages at a time. Thus the reader has the opportunity to see many conflicting points of view, to observe characters changing over time, and to understand how they see themselves as well as how others see them.

As in memoirs by Trenka, John, McKinley, and Hopgood, the transracially adopted children in *The Love Wife* have to deal with racism. For example, six-year-old Wendy has a schoolmate, Elaine, whose first words to her are, "You're Chinese," and who, when Wendy says, "I'm Chinese American," insists, "I'm real American" (205). And as especially in memoirs by John and Trenka, a European American parent does not understand how much prejudice her children are facing: Blondie inquires, "Do people ask you where you're from?" (213). Memoirs by adoptees, as well as by other Asian Americans, Latinxs, and people from the Middle East, show the annoying frequency with which this question is asked, often repeatedly if the first answer is within the United States. Like many parents in the memoirs, Blondie denies the significance of race: she thinks, "What did it matter how a family looked? Beholding my daughters, I did not see Asians. I saw persons I knew better than I had known my parents" (246).

Blondie's portrayal is complex. Unlike the parents in *Black Baby White Hands* and *The Language of Blood* she frequently takes steps to acknowledge her children's racial difference. She joins Families with Children from China, gives the girls Asian dolls, and sends them to Chinese culture camp. She runs the risk of the pitfall identified by Register as "keeping our children exotic." Blondie's situation is different, however, because she had already studied Mandarin and lived in China before she married her Chinese American husband. Nevertheless, focusing on Chinese culture is also a denial in this case because her older daughter, Lizzy, who was left on the

steps of a church in the American Midwest, looks Asian but may well be racially mixed rather than purely Chinese.

Lizzy says, "It's not fair that Wendy's adopted from China and speaks Chinese, while nobody even knows what I am or where I came from. I hate being 'soup du jour' [the family term for being ethnically mixed]. . . . I'm like the only kid in my class who's soup du jour. . . . It's probably how come my real mother abandoned me, don't you think it's how come?" Her mother responds, "I think she left you at the church because she loved you and knew she couldn't parent you" (212). This doesn't help Lizzy's feelings of being rejected, and she retorts, "You're just saying what it says in the adoption books you should say. . . . I could tell by the way you said 'parent' like that. That is like straight out of a book" (212). Recall the problems with using "make an adoption plan" discussed earlier. At the climax of this conversation, Lizzy exclaims, "If you were my real mother, you would understand! If you were my real mother, you wouldn't be this brick wall!" (214). She has a point, because Blondie, like some of the adopted parents discussed in memoirs, wants to keep a lid on unpleasant feelings like sadness and anger.

Blondie has always prided herself on her openness and lack of prejudice and tries to instill these values in her children by echoing her mother's words: "In this family, we do not generalize [she does not see the internal contradiction here]. . . . In this family, we keep an open mind" (6). And yet the novel brings her to the realization that she does feel uncomfortable about racial difference. When Lan, a Chinese relative, comes to help out and relates to her daughters in an easy way she envies, she is struck by the contrast in appearance between Lan, Carnegie, and her daughters on one hand and herself and her baby son on the other. She tries to picture this as the group that would gather around her deathbed, and she feels it would be like "dying abroad—in the friendly bosom of some foreign outpost" (248).

The picture of adoption in *The Love Wife* is also complex because the two adopted girls are very different. While Lizzy is dramatically rebellious and feels like an outsider in the family, Wendy feels more at home there, though less comfortable at school. Wendy is unusually empathetic for a young child; shortly after the conversation between her mother and sister quoted a few paragraphs earlier, she understands that her mother wishes she could talk in a way that calms Lizzy down, saying, "I know because in that way I'm just like Mom. Even if she isn't my birth mother, I'm like her anyway" (212).<sup>28</sup>

The combination of Lan's appeal for the others in the family and Blondie's fascination with little Bailey's blond similarity to herself heightens the tension and for a while threatens to break the family apart—though as the girls grow and Lan pursues her own goals, it is clearer even to Lizzy that Blondie is their real mom. Retreating into a little world of same-race mother and child is tempting to Blondie, but the novel shows both the understandability and the instability of that attempt. The term "adoption" begins to stretch so that Blondie is spoken of as adopting her

birth child (363), and near the end the family book that arrives from China shows that adoption is much more prevalent in their family history than they expected. In this novel, the characters are continually forced by their own thoughts or by others' reactions to wonder what is natural, what is real, and what is a family, but finally family is what they are, as natural and as real as anything—and answering Blondie's image of being among foreigners at her death, this insight comes through Wendy's viewpoint in a hospital waiting room.

### *THE LEAVERS*

*The Leavers*, by Lisa Ko, is another recent novel that draws on the author's research about the experience of transracial and transnational adoption.<sup>29</sup> In a long section of acknowledgments, Ko includes Trenka's memoir, *Outsiders Within* (a collection of essays mostly by transracial and transnational adoptees), the Transracial Abductees website, the transracial adoptee Grace Lee, and many others. She goes beyond many novels about adoption in giving the detailed perspective of a birth mother, Polly/Peilan, as well as of an adoptee, Deming/Daniel. The separation of mother and child here comes from deportation, which may seem like an idiosyncratic cause, but this is an increasing threat for US immigrants and for transnational adoptees whose parents did not have them naturalized. For much of the novel neither the first-time reader nor the adoptee knows about the deportation, and the experiences of both Polly/Peilan and Daniel/Deming are those of many other birth mothers and adoptees.

Both Polly/Peilan and Daniel/Deming repeatedly feel a duality in their identity, suggested by their name changes, linking the experience of adoption with that of immigration. Deming may be an American surname, but in this case it is a Chinese name meaning "virtue bright" and must be given up so the boy can fit in. Peilan comes to the US when she is pregnant and becomes Polly. The characters' fascination with doubling, a recurrent issue for immigrants as well as adoptees, shows up many times. Soon after his return from China, at age six, her son describes the game she makes up as they walk around Chinatown: "There could be a Mama and Deming who live here, too, another version of us" (34). They find "a boy Deming's age and a woman his mother's height," haircut, and coat color (34). When he finds Polly again, about fourteen years later, this is one of the memories he shares with her on the phone. Both of them frequently think about how some of their experiences belong to different selves. His years after joining a white community as a fifth grader make him feel like "an expert at juggling selves, a slideshow perpetually alternating between the same two sides" (95). This sense of adoption dividing someone into different identities, as was earlier mentioned, is found in many adoption memoirs. In Daniel/Deming, as in others, it also relates to a repeated feeling of being fake (14)—"the real him remained stubbornly out there like a far cruise ship on the horizon" (16). Until close to the end of the novel, he is torn between wanting to please his adoptive parents and wanting to please

others, first a friend he plays music with and then his birth mother. The duality is further emphasized because the novel has many flashbacks and often moves back and forth between “Daniel” and “Deming” as names for the same person.

Like many transracial adoptees, Daniel/Deming frequently thinks of the difference in appearance between himself and others around him. A few weeks after Peter and Kay Wilkinson take him as a foster child with the hope of adopting him, he thinks, “now it was his face that seemed strange when he saw it in the mirror” (63). However, after he moves to China, he finds that in spite of his similarity in appearance to others, “he still stood out. The bus driver eyed him for a beat too long. . . . When the other teachers asked what he did for fun and he said he liked to walk around and listen to music on his headphones, they laughed” (315). This sense of being caught between worlds, out of place in both, is also expressed by Trenka after her return to Korea (*Fugitive*) and in the film *Somewhere Between*, when teenage Chinese adoptee Fang wishes for an ideal place she calls “Fangtopia,” where she can combine China and the US as she wants to.<sup>30</sup>

The presentation of Daniel/Deming’s adoptive parents, Peter and Kay Wilkinson, is not as internalized as that of his first mother, who tells her story in the first person, or as that of the adoptive parents in *The Love Wife*, but it is a picture that readers can learn from. The Wilkinsons are well-intentioned people who want to help their son. Much of their behavior is similar to mistakes that adoptive parents are often shown making in memoirs. For example, they live in an all-white community and send Daniel/Deming first to a mostly white college, and when he can’t handle it, they try their best to get him into another all-white one where they teach. Peter believes that “kids of all races have struggles with belonging. . . . issues are colorblind” (57), and Kay persuades Daniel/Deming to see the similarity between his struggles in college and hers as an awkward, bookish nerd, like John’s father, who says that he too gets stared at because of his beard. Kay does answer Deming’s question, “Why am I here?” but she gets very pink (i.e., uncomfortable) and changes the subject somewhat to ask him if he feels anxious about school (54).

Peter and Kay are not just caricatures. Kay expresses some awareness of the problem for their son of living in their all-white town. Daniel sees that Kay is on his side when she says, “It’s okay, you don’t have to smile” (88) when he is pressured by their overbearing friends who have adopted from China. Peter has a treasured stereo and record collection, and when he sees Daniel’s furtive interest, he invites him to play. Daniel picks a Jimi Hendrix record, and from that time music becomes his continuing passion (67). But Peter is convinced that he will not earn enough money as a musician, and so music is the one subject Daniel is not allowed to take in college (25)—though he is going to SUNY Potsdam, which has a big and well-established music education program (unmentioned in the novel, probably indicating that Daniel doesn’t know about it and did not have an effective high school guidance counselor).

When Peter and Kay phone Daniel in China on his birthday and over the phone meet his mother, with whom he has reconnected, they try to be nice. Peter acknowledges that they look alike. Kay says, "Thank you for taking care of Daniel. . . . He must be having the time of his life in China" (320). He returns to the US and stays with them for Christmas, but he can't take it when Kay talks about Polly with condescending generalizations about Chinese women and starts to plan to endow a scholarship at her college for a female Chinese student. He remembers all the things that they wanted to improve: it seems to him that for them, "Mama, Chinese, the Bronx, Deming: they had never been enough. He shivered, and for a brief, horrible moment, he could see himself the way he realized they saw him—as someone who needed to be saved" (332). This is the point at which he decides he can't live with them. In this conversation Kay is falling into the pitfall Register calls "judging our country superior," and this parallels what Daniel feels is Kay's constant attempt to improve him.

At the end of the novel, he is using both sides of his identity by teaching music in the two contrasting neighborhoods of the Upper West Side and Chinatown (he prefers the latter), and after the scene just described, readers learn that he has found a home sharing an apartment with Michael, his almost-brother, with whom he and his mother lived for years after he returned to the US at age six. Michael, and to some extent Michael's mother, make up Daniel's chosen home and closest kin. He has chosen them partly because of their similarity and shared histories as another Chinese American family—the doppelgangers he has long been looking for—and also because of Michael's own loyalty and respect for him. Daniel—the name he keeps—is finally writing the kind of music he wants to.

Daniel, like many adoptees, has wondered whether going to China and reuniting with his birth mother would tell him what his life should be like. Like many adoptees, he has also found it helpful, but not something that provides a simple answer. He develops a life based on many parts of his own history, including both the music that he learns in his adoptive home and the teaching that visiting his birth mother in China, where learning English is of great interest, enables him to try.<sup>31</sup> His memories of her are fond, and even if as a deportee she may not be able to enter the US, he is likely to see her again. And, given the fact that he is at least twenty, his preference for living with Michael rather than Peter and Kay is understandable.

For any parent, it may be counterproductive to impose on a child goals that do not fit, but it is especially dangerous for adoptive parents, as *The Leavers* suggests. Some authors write as if all adoptive parents are able to avoid this, but they are not.<sup>32</sup> In an open adoption, birth mother Amy Seek is impressed by the attitude of the woman who has adopted her son, who says she was always aware that her kids were on a "completely new adventure called themselves" (302). Claude Knoble, by contrast, who also writes about learning to respect his Ethiopian adoptive

son's individuality as a model for his relation with his other children, stresses the difficulty of this process (56–57; see also Watkins and Fisher 14–17).

Kay's lack of interest in Peilan/Polly is particularly striking to the reader because the novel has presented her so vividly in the sections in which she speaks, in a narrative that is addressed to her son and breaks into the novel after he makes contact with her (113). Few novels give as complex a picture of a birth mother, challenging the usual stereotyped images through which they are often imagined by adoptive parents and their children. As novelist Kaitlyn Greenidge writes, she is "brash, brave, and heartbreaking." Although Polly had unsuccessfully attempted to get an abortion, she decides, "I want you to know that you were wanted, I decided: I wanted you. . . . two months later, when I gave birth to you, I would feel accomplished, tougher than any man. . . . No one had told me I could have such love for another person" (143). We see the details of her poverty, coming to the US on a loan, rooming with immigrant friends, finding daycare impossibly expensive, and taking her son to her job in a shirt factory simply impossible. Like her roommates, she sends him back to China, until his grandfather there dies; when he returns, once again she has poverty-level wages and an insecure job and living situation. But even worse, just as she is thinking about a job possibility in Florida, ICE raids the nail salon where she works, and she is taken to Ardsleyville, a fictitious name for a real detention center in a distant state, without the possibility of communicating with any family members, and eventually deported. No one knows where she is, and this is why Deming goes into foster care and is adopted by the Wilkinsons.

However, she is resilient. Although her time in the detention center is so traumatic that she is reluctant to describe it, and it leaves her with a sense of walls constantly threatening her and another kind of lost identity, when Daniel, aided by the family with whom they lived in the Bronx, reconnects with her, she has made a new life in China as an English teacher and the wife of a wealthy owner of a textile factory (probably an even more exploitative version of the factory where she once worked).

Some months after this, after Daniel leaves her, Polly leaves her husband to teach at a school in Hong Kong and feels the "lightheaded uncertainty . . . fear and joy" (325) of her earlier self, which she feared she had lost in Ardsleyville. Part of that joy is a moment with her son at the age of ten, shouting their names across a bridge over the Harlem River in the summer evening. "There was always this game, this song" (327). Although they are now separated, this passage emphasizes the persistence of their relationship. They are both leavers—he has left his adoptive parents and she her husband—but that is not the only truth about them.

Like Kay's mother imagining Jackie's birth mother (*Red* 43–44), *The Leavers* pictures a birth mother who leaves her son only under utmost necessity. It has a similar affect to that of Dusky's image of falling out of an ocean liner and clinging to a life preserver. Thus it might help adoptive parents assist their children,

as Kay's mother does, to have empathy for birth mothers and imagine that they do still love their adopted-away children.

### *HALF A WORLD AWAY*

While most of the writings discussed here focus on problems of adoptees resulting to a large extent from white racism they experience after being adopted, adoptees also experience problems resulting from neglect, abuse, and abandonment before their adoption, often during a period in foster or institutional care (Springer 1042). In the memoirs discussed here, John briefly mentions neglect while in foster care, and Trenka opens her memoir with a letter from her birth mother explaining her relinquishment as an attempt to save her daughter from her husband's abuse. But their memoirs do not show behavior that could be easily considered as the effect of neglect or abuse. However, many internationally adopted children today have been neglected or abused before their adoption, often while in foster care or in an orphanage, as have many domestically adopted children.

Relatively few memoirs or novels deal with the experience of adopting a child with this kind of past. One that presents the child's point of view after such an adoption is Cynthia Kadohata's *Half a World Away*.<sup>33</sup> Kadohata herself adopted a child from Kazakhstan, where much of the novel is set, and lists many other people, including a number of other adoptive mothers and former Kazakhstan residents, in her acknowledgments. This novel is written for young adults but not limited to that age in its insights, so it is probably the easiest book mentioned here for young adoptees to read and discuss with their parents. The main character is twelve-year-old Jaden, who was placed in a group home in Romania when he was four and lived in three other group homes there in the four years before the Americans Penni and Steve adopted him. After the trauma of abandonment—more dramatic than in the other works I have discussed, partly because Jaden was four and can still remember his birth mother—he experienced a lot of fear, neglect, and hunger. At the beginning of the book, he believes that he can't love anyone, feels Romania is his true home, and wants to cry all the time. He shows some behavior typical of traumatized, institutionalized children, such as stealing and hoarding food, money, and other people's photographs, and telling lies. He has cut up his sweaters and burned a teddy bear his parents gave him. Nevertheless he has the ability to empathize with other neglected children and enough intelligence that he can sometimes see that his adoptive mother loves him.

As the novel begins, while Jaden is suffering and clearly difficult to live with, there are hints of his potential for growth. He has a fascination with electricity that can distract him from something upsetting and give him a sense of purpose and competence. Although he feels distant from his adoptive parents, he observes them carefully, noticing when they are nervous. He has had many therapists, and though he is skeptical of most of them, he benefits from some perspectives that they have

given him. For example, he remembers that his favorite said to him, "You need to find the part of yourself inside that can save you" (193).

His parents show some sensible flexibility: for example, they let him sleep on the floor at night and order two entrees at a restaurant dinner.<sup>34</sup> They understand that some psychiatrists, such as the one who objected to his sleeping on the floor, are not a good match for him. In spite of the difficulties that they have had with him, they are willing to take the risk of adopting again. The main action of this novel is their trip with Jaden to Kazakhstan to adopt a younger child.

While challenging for them all, this trip provides new experiences that are helpful to Jaden. The orphanage's driver, Sam, is, as my student Olivia said, "blunt and straightforward" in a way that is easier for Jaden to connect with than his father or the other adult men he knows. Jaden can also laugh at Sam's misunderstandings about the United States, and this helps him feel more American. Sam takes Jaden on a trip to see an eagle pursuing her prey, an adventure in which he is fascinated by the eagle's power but also feels sad about the hare that she kills, showing his increasing empathy. He identifies with the children at the orphanage and develops a friendship with a four-year-old whose physical and mental problems indicate that he probably will never be adopted, and he finally bonds with the two-year-old who is his new younger brother, to the point of walking with him for hours to calm him as he cries.

In spite of its relative realism about Jaden's past difficulties, this is a hopeful novel, suggesting ways in which different experiences might bring out new possibilities in a troubled child. As often happens on a trip to an adoptee's homeland, Jaden realizes ways in which the US is his real home. Getting lost makes him realize how much he misses Penni and Steve. The novel might give adoptive parents some ideas about giving their children opportunities to meet different kinds of adults and children and observe animals in natural surroundings, even if they cannot make a roots trip.

## Conclusions

My approach in this essay, with which I attempt to contribute to the medical humanities, follows a long tradition of seeing novels and memoirs as chances to extend readers' awareness by enabling them to see that other people have points of view they have not considered. The novels, films, and memoirs discussed here help others to imagine something of what it feels like not just to be confronted with your lack of medical history in every doctor's office, but also to be surrounded by people of different-colored skin than yours, to be constantly asked, "Where are you from?," to wonder about your origin and about what your first parents thought was wrong with you, to expect that anyone who seems to care about you may leave. These books suggest possibilities of what transracial or transnational

adoptees might be thinking that they hesitate to say to parents who are uncomfortable with discussing adoption and race. They are reminders to anyone who might adopt someone of a different race that they should already have adults of that race in their life (not just as menial workers) and preferably in their neighborhood. Parents who adopt transracially should consider the application to themselves of recent scholarship about the depth of white privilege and the pervasiveness of unconscious racial bias. They should also do what they can to counteract the stereotypes and erasures in popular culture that are likely to surround their child.

But these memoirs and novels can give them hope. Kay and Hopgood present parents as practically role models (though by the analyses of many adoptees today, the fact that they raise their children in all-white communities might still be considered a serious mistake). *Black Baby, White Hands* suggests that even if they make mistakes, as all parents do to some degree, they may eventually be able to have more open discussions with their children, as John eventually does, and their children may be resilient enough to forgive them. Lizzy, the long-rebellious teenager in *The Love Wife*, eventually comes to have some empathy for her mother, as her sister apparently has always had.<sup>35</sup> Even if an adoptive parents' child is like Jaden, suffering from the aftereffects of neglect or abuse, *Half A World Away* suggests that with a lot of help, that child too may be able to find a saving resource within, such as a feeling of understanding and solidarity with others who have been similarly injured.

As a same-race, same-nation adoptee, my experience was different from that of the transracial or transnational adoptees in most of the readings discussed here. I did not have to deal with neglect, abuse, racial prejudice, implicit bias, or a lack of white privilege. While I was uncomfortable that my adoption was a secret, many adoptees are uncomfortable that their adoption is all too visible. But we share experiences of loss and of being in a nonnormative family, and many of us have shared the experience of parents finding adoption a difficult topic to talk about. I am pleased to find pediatricians who are opening it up for further discussion, and I hope that the writings and films mentioned here will be useful for them and for adoptive families.

## Notes

1. Homans (204) gives examples of this language in adoptees' words as well as critiques of it.
2. Although race is much more complicated and socially constructed than skin color, it is in terms of skin color that children and adolescents most often think of it.
3. Miller's book is very thorough, with chapters such as "Attachment," "Dysfunction of Sensory Integration," "Culture and Identity," and "After the Adoption: Unspoken Problems" as well as discussions of medical issues in the strictest sense. She emphasizes-

es the need for role models of the child's race and for survival skills for dealing with racism (418).

4. This is a controversial issue: according to the "State Adoption Legislation" page on the American Adoption Congress website, only nine states currently consider this an absolute right, twenty-one completely seal those records, and the rest allow or refuse it depending on the year of adoption or the consent of birth parents (American). The pediatricians' statement can be found as an endorsement of the Open Access Policy: adoptees, at age eighteen, should be granted access to their original birth certificates (National Adoption Center).
5. Thanks to Sarah Springer and Kelly Ryan Schmidt for "Helping Foster and Adoptive Families Cope with Trauma."
6. See also Springer 1049–50.
7. Using different archives and coming to different conclusions about dating, both Carp and Samuels show that before the Second World War, adult adoptees were generally allowed information about their origins. Carp documents other kinds of secrecy around adoption earlier and from the World War II era and immediately after (102–37), with many social workers promoting secrecy of records and, along with psychiatrists, advising parents against telling children they were adopted (118–37). A recent memoir by Eileen Costello, a pediatrician, reveals that the mother of one of her patients is, bizarrely, not telling her husband that he is adopted because of his parents' wishes (120–21).
8. Fifty-seven percent feel that identity issues need to be addressed, which could include race—it's possible that the people who said race did not need to be addressed were thinking of the fact that the majority of adoptions are white-white—still, 43% of people thinking that identity did not need to be addressed is a large percentage.
9. Mason et al. includes a chapter by psychologist David Brodzinsky and another one by Joyce Maguire Pavao, whose degrees are in education, social work, and family therapy.
10. Carp 138–66. Carp also contextualizes the increased visibility of the adoptee rights movement with the increased number of adult adoptees and with other rights movements of the time (142–43). He notes, critically, the literary references in writings by Lifton and others (154–55, 163).
11. Springer, who specializes in helping families made by international adoption, has one of the earliest books by Korean adoptees, *Voices from Another Place*, on her reading list for medical students interested in adoption.
12. A striking example from ancient Greek tragedy is Euripides's play *The Trojan Women*, in which women from the city Athens has defeated in war describe their sufferings at length.
13. Eliot later wrote Harriet Beecher Stowe, discussing her novel about a cross-cultural adoptee, *Daniel Deronda*, "There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs" (qtd. in Haight 487). Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one of the most famous examples of a novel written to inspire empathy for slaves and political activism.
14. Scarry is explaining the argument of Steven Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, with which she agrees, that the novel is in part responsible for the humanitarian reforms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

15. See Hale, particularly her explanation of Judith Butler's view in *Just Being Difficult?* that *Washington Square* does this by "refusing to explain the motives that drive its heroine . . . to reject her suitor" at its conclusion (900). It has also been argued that surgeons, for example, need to limit their empathy to be effective during surgery, but this qualification would not apply as much to pediatricians in their verbal interactions with parents and children, and it applies more to emotional empathy than to cognitive empathy.
16. Some other books in the field are Cole et al. and the collection edited by Whitehead and Woods.
17. I discuss Paton's and Lifton's especially numerous references to *Oedipus* in *Reading Adoption* (37, 46, 48–49).
18. The relevance of her chapter "Judging Our Country Superior" is explicit only in *The Language of Blood* and *The Leavers*, among the works I discuss. Register includes discussion of several other pitfalls I have not mentioned: "Hovering over Our 'Troubled' Children," "Parenting on the Defensive," "Believing Adoption Saves Souls" (relevant to Trenka's memoir), and "Appropriating Our Children's Heritage."
19. I will generally use the surname under which the author published the book when referring to the author as an author and the given name being used at the time when referring to the author's younger self as represented within the book.
20. Kay grew up with the same duality, and yet in 2016 she was named Scotland's Makar, the Scottish equivalent of poet laureate. In 2006 she was named Member of the British Empire.
21. Kay changed some details from her life in writing *The Adoption Papers*: the sudden availability of a child after her mother says "We don't mind the colour" ("Waiting Lists" 16) comes from the earlier adoption of her brother (*Red* 22). But the poem is autobiographical enough to be treated as a memoir; see Rustin.
22. For similar incidents recounted by another transracial adoptee, see Branch.
23. John capitalizes both White and Black when applied to people throughout his book. McKinley capitalizes Black but not white. Kay capitalizes neither, nor does Rothman.
24. McLeod says this gives her "an opportunity to play with a range of fanciful and possible pasts" (215).
25. Springer follows up her recommendation for "making an adoption plan" by saying sympathetically, "Most birthparents work long and hard on their decision to place a child for adoption," and she also encourages ongoing contact with birthparents, referring to positive results in research (1050–51).
26. I am assuming that adoptees would also be interested in them.
27. Jen had published two previous novels and won many awards when she wrote *The Love Wife*. In interviews, she mentions that it also draws on her own experience as an Asian American married and co-parenting with a very blond Irish American.
28. Callahan emphasizes that their contrasting roles of maverick and empathetic chameleon are their created identities responding to their position as adoptees (150).
29. Ko's first novel after she had received much recognition for her shorter fiction, it received the Pen/Bellwether Prize for Fiction for a novel that addresses issues of social justice.

30. See also Homans's discussion of the complexity of feelings about return trips shown in adoptees' memoirs and interviews (150–77).
31. His situation at the end might be related to McLeod's concept of "adoptive being" (27–28).
32. For this assumption, see Pertman (172), and more emphatically Miller (422). For counterevidence, see Jakiela's memory of her mother's words, above.
33. Kadohata wrote six novels for young adults or children before *Half a World Away* and won the Newbery Medal, the National Book Award, the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, and the Pen USA Book Award for three of them.
34. Keck and Kupecky emphasize the importance of flexibility and the counterproductive-ness of many forms of punishment for traumatized adopted children. See Springer on allowing unlimited access to food (1047).
35. She says of Blondie, who is moving her things to another house and doesn't want Carnegie to see what she is taking, "She just wants her privacy" (365).

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