

The Colours in Me: Writing and poetry by adopted children and young people

Perlita Harris (ed) BAAF 2008
220 pages £12.95

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This is a beautiful and moving anthology of prose, poetry and artwork by adopted children and young people. The book is very accessible and well arranged in five sections exploring different aspects of growing up as an adopted child. A broad variety of experiences is included: there are over 100 contributors aged between four and 20 years old, adopted from care in the UK and from overseas and now living in all sorts of different family structures. This range of first-hand accounts and experiences from children reflects their current understanding of what it means to be adopted and helps us to understand what is important to them, how they interpret their experiences and the sense they make of their lives. Reading their stories, it was a privilege to step into an adopted child's world, although this was not always a comfortable place to be.

The Colours in Me is not an easy book to read and at times the complexity of being adopted is laid bare. As Rhona Cameron observes in her Foreword: *The complexity of adoption and the void it leaves us with must be hard for those not adopted to understand. I recognise the theme of the void in many of the stories and poems written in this book.* We are taken on a journey through the many colours of the adoption experience, moving from a short poem by a six-year-old, to a longer piece of prose by a 20-year-old and on to a piece of artwork. I was reminded that, at times, we can perhaps underestimate how much children remember and internalise about their previous experiences in their birth families, and, for some, the intense longing and sadness that accompanies living apart from them. We move from the intense and candid 'Bottom of the bottle' (pp 14–18) to the sometimes amusing, concrete reality of what adoption means for other children: 'You go on more holidays when you are adopted' (p 27). The style of the book held my interest throughout and I particularly liked the interview format for some stories. I really felt as if

I were present during the conversation. The artwork included is at times more powerful than the words in illustrating how some children manage their feelings about living between two families. 'Broken heart' by Heather (p 97) portrays her *everyday life* and the *missing bit*, an image that many adopted children perhaps may be able to identify with but cannot overtly express. There are many other examples that clearly and simply express the inner experience of adoption as 'an extra secret life', making this book a useful resource for helping adopted children to explore and voice their own experiences, memories, thoughts and questions.

The concluding section is entitled 'Messages'; these messages are perceptive, poignant and positive and offer encouragement to other adopted children and young people. Luke, aged ten, offers the following advice: *Parents can help us by loving who we are – maybe they imagined a different kind of child but if they try and shape us too roughly to become someone else we will probably break . . . I have no idea of social workers because I was too young, but they should never stop anyone being a parent because they are different from their ideas of what an adopter should be.* (p 165)

This is an important resource for us as adults involved in supporting adopted children – parents, social workers, therapists, teachers and anyone else who wants to understand what it is like to be adopted. In these pages we can step into a child's shoes, listen to and hopefully better understand their experience of adoption today. If we take the time to do this, we will be in a better position to support them.

As Fiona Higham writes, 'Where am I supposed to put all these feelings inside me?' (p 124). I wish that, as an adopted child growing up, a book like this had been available for me to read. Perhaps it would have helped me to feel more connected and to articulate my inner thoughts and feelings which for much of the time I kept hidden. It is so important that children are encouraged to think and speak for themselves about their adoption experiences. *The Colours in Me* challenges us to do exactly that.