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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Representations of Adoption in Contemporary Realistic Fiction for Young Adults

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Abstract: In this critical content analysis of thirty-seven contemporary realistic fiction books about adoption, the authors examine how adoption and adoptive families are depicted in young adult (YA) literature. The critical literacy theoretical frame brings into focus significant social implications of these depictions as the researchers illuminate and resist stereotypes in an effort to advocate for inclusiveness and respect. Analysis reveals a strong presence of literary archetypes such as Orphan and Seeker, age-old patterns of narration that resound with readers at deep but not necessarily conscious levels and thus may lend a sense of credibility and familiarity to even problematic portrayals. These stories provide a content for exploring cultural and social identities but are also rife with negative stereotypes, including adoption as a shameful secret, a problem to be solved, or a legally suspect event. Negative portrayals of birth parents and imbalanced gender perspectives suggest that adoption is a feminine story and marginalizes fathers. Overall, adoption literature raises significant questions about what family structures and contexts are valued, who has power and choice in relationships, and how adolescents are positioned and viewed, but the complex picture of what adoption looks like and means for those involved needs to be more carefully considered.

Keywords: Adoption, Young Adult Literature, Critical Literacy, Diversity, Archetypes

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We are teacher educators, so diversity and equity is fundamental to our work.[1] In public school classrooms, we look and listen for it and learn from it. In our university classrooms, we engage teacher candidates in conversation and inquiry about it. For each of us, understanding and advocating for diverse perspectives is a core aspect of our scholarship and a guiding principle for professional and personal action. In our ongoing conversations about and inquiry into diversity and equity in education, we noted that adoption was rarely mentioned as an aspect of diversity. When we researched in classrooms, adoption was not part of the community conversation. In discussions with practicing educators and teacher candidates, we were almost always the ones to broach the topic. Other aspects of diversity made their way readily if not easily to the forefront of the conversation, but adoption, though richly relevant in the lives of many children and families, seemed shadowed at best—perhaps even avoided. We observed that adoption, while significant in the lives of children and families, was a silent diversity in these crucial contexts.

This study began when Suzii (Sue), observing in a public school, took a moment to search the library catalog for books featuring adoption. Of the few books available, each description suggested a character struggling with a problem related to having been adopted. Struck by both the limited choices and the consistency of a problem-based message, she wondered, "If a reader read just these books, what images and understandings about adoption might he or she construct?" This question expanded into a conversation that turned into an extended exploration. We wondered, "How might the ways authors write about adoption position various readers in relation to their experiences and their understandings of others?" "What else is out there?" These early musings solidified into the research question guiding this work:

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[1] We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that many pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals our writing. Throughout article, we used gendered pronouns only when the gender of the individual was clear and specific to that person; for instance, when the character in the book was clearly gendered in a particular way. Otherwise, we used gender inclusive language, including using the pronoun "they" as singular to refer to multiple possible gender identities.

How are adoption, adoptive families, and participation in the adoption process depicted in contemporary realistic fiction for young adults?

In this article, we articulate our critical content analysis of depictions of adoption and adoptive families in contemporary realistic young adult (YA) fiction books. Through our literature review, we discuss social and historical contexts regarding adoption as well as frequent themes about adoption, often negative and stereotypical, commonly expressed in various media. Following the literature review, we explore critical literacy as the theoretical frame through which we conducted our content analysis. We explain how we found and selected the books used in this study then go on to address our process of content analysis. We describe content analysis as method in general then directly articulate the specific ways our research team engaged in critical content analysis to reveal our findings. Following articulation and discussion of our findings, we provide guidelines for selecting books with authentic and respectful portrayals of adoption that may engage readers in critical conversations about adoption as a significant aspect of social diversity.

Adoption is a part of family experience for many youth. According to the 2010 census (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014), there are 2.1 million adopted children in the U.S. alone. The 2002 National Adoption Attitudes Survey (Harris Interactive Inc., 2002) indicates that about 65% of Americans have a personal connection to adoption, as do three of the four researchers on this study. Two researchers are adoptive parents—one adopting at birth and the other from the foster system; another's spouse was adopted, and a fourth has no personal connection.

"Despite its prevalence, adoption is often unrecognized as an aspect of identity, yet it is significant in the lives of youth and their families."

Despite its prevalence, adoption is often unrecognized as an aspect of identity, yet it is significant in the lives of youth and their families. Considering Bishop's (1999) insights about the importance of literature serving as mirrors, in which readers see their lives and experiences reflected, and as windows, revealing possibilities they had not yet experienced, we considered how adolescents might see adoption depicted in relation to their own lives and the lives of others. Indeed, adoption is an intriguingly complex aspect of diversity, encompassing international, transracial, single mother and father, older parent, LGBTQ parent, foster, and kinship adoption—all related to themes of gender, race, class and privilege, religion, and social contexts specifically noted as important to consider in literature for young adults (Young Adult Library Services Association, 2011). In this article, we explore how adoption and adoptive families are represented in YA literature, examining recurrent themes across texts and highlighting embedded and cumulative perspectives.

Adoption in Literature and Other Media

Much scholarly work on how adoption is represented in literature focuses on classic works (Novy, 2005; Reimer, 2011), historical perspectives (Matthews, 2010; Novy, 2005; Wesseling, 2009), or topical bibliographies (e.g. Miles, 1991). The few studies that have been conducted focus primarily on how adoption is represented in literature for very young readers. Kokkola's (2011) analysis of Allen Say's work revealed both complex visual allusions to the complexities of cross-cultural adoption and troubling oversimplifications. Bordo (2002) and Ayers (2004) both noted that while portrayals of adoption in current children's books and media offer more realistic images than earlier stories, depictions

are still slanted toward outdated tropes related to gender, ethnicity, and the nature of kinship/motherhood, especially in relation to birth parents and adoption circumstances. Jerome and Sweeney (2014) looked specifically at portrayals of birth parents in books for young children, noting that birth parents are usually depicted as inadequate. Further, inclusion of birth parent stories varied according to ethnicity, with Latino and African American birth parents largely absent from the literature altogether. Inaccurate, oversimplified, and/or biased representations are particularly problematic given that families seek out literature to help children understand adoption (Bergquist, 2007; Mattix & Crawford, 2011).

Related YA studies largely address teen pregnancy. Davis and MacGillivray (2001) noted eight common messages related to sex and experiences of teen pregnancy as depicted in YA novels, concluding that the narratives were "silent" on important topics such as race and class, prenatal care, and birth control. Each of these topics, however, play a role in adoption decisions and are related to historical and social contexts of adoption, such as gender rights and roles, wealth and privilege, and race and culture. Nichols (2007) compared portrayals of teen pregnancy in YA books to the actual experiences reflected in data, noting mismatched portrayals of teens who choose abortion (40% of actual vs. 1% in books) or adoption (3% of actual vs. 35% in books). Emge (2006), on the other hand, found that while YA books addressing teen pregnancy have begun to acknowledge agency and choice, protagonists rarely viewed adoption as a good option.

Portrayals of adoption in television, movies, and documentaries have increased significantly in recent years. Gailey's (2006) research on adoption in film revealed iconic images and reiterated story lines that represent, shape, and perpetuate widespread stereotypes. Such messages are the frequent subject of written commentary by adoption advocates and

scholars. Pertman (2011, 2012) asserted that inaccurate, sensationalized, and unbalanced broadcast and print portrayals of adoption in entertainment and informational media perpetuate problem-based views. *Adoptive Families* magazine features a regular column that addresses positive and problematic treatments of adoption in the media and marketplace. Concerns often focus on adoption punch lines or taunting scenes that suggest adoption as problematic, imply that adoption is a financial transaction in which children are bought and sold, or implicate adoption as a lower form of family membership. Again, such portrayals are significant because, without careful interrogation, all forms of media can affect how we view ourselves and others (Cortés, 2000).

Readers and viewers develop understanding of their own lives and the world around them through the stories with which they engage. YA literature, specifically, has been shown to influence readers' empathy and understandings of themselves and others (Gardner, 2008; Kidd & Costano, 2013; Jacobs, 2006; Meixner, 2006; Sherr & Beise, 2015). In YA, as in all forms of media, active and accurate inclusion and critical analysis of texts depicting diverse life experiences are power and equity issues (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Kellner & Share, 2005). Depictions of adoption matter because unexamined assumptions can permeate discourse and weaken healthy development of adopted individuals and adoptive families (Smith, Surrey, & Watkins, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

We approached our reading and analysis from a critical literacy perspective in which literacy is conceptualized as a practice with significant social implications. In this view, texts are created, embedded in, and reflective of particular social and historical contexts. Reflecting those contexts, texts of all types position and influence readers. Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) work offered metaphors

embraced by the researchers for considering representation in texts. Books are mirrors that offer an opportunity to see one's self reflected back in the literature; for those with a personal connection to adoption, a text can serve as that mirror through which one sees one's self reflected. However, it is vital that the literature offers a number of diverse, realistic, and relevant mirrors for readers. A fun-house reflection that distorts or misrepresents identity or experience can be highly problematic, particularly when this distortion is repeated across multiple texts. The most grotesque distortion of all, as Jones (2008) noted, is the absence of any reflection of a significant component of a reader's identity in a body of literature that purports to represent young adult experiences. Misrepresentation is problematic; invisibility is a different but also potent form of disrespect.

Conversely, when an array of realistically drawn characters (not perfect but portraying a positive image overall) is reflected back, it can be a valuable opportunity for a reader with a personal connection to adoption to explore their identity. Bishop (1990) went on to discuss books as windows and sliding glass doors through which, in this case, those outside the adoption triad (a term commonly used in adoption literature to describe the interdependent relationship in the adoption process between birth parent, adopted child, and adoptive parents) can glimpse or even step into the world of an adoption-created family.

Texts, print or non-print, are never neutral; they privilege and legitimize particular ways of being and knowing and have the power to shape our perspectives on ourselves and the world around us (Cortés, 2005; Edelsky, 1999). They foster some points of view and marginalize others (Leland & Harste, 2000). Critical literacy is directly concerned with exploring and exposing systems of privilege and

> **"Texts, print or non-print, are never neutral..."**

justice, such race, religion, gender, class, sexual orientation, and education, that privilege or diminish access and voice for individuals and communities (Edelsky, 1999; Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & O'Garro, 2005). Viewing and engaging with texts through a critical lens is at once an act of hope and focused intent; we illuminate and resist stereotypes in an effort to advocate for inclusiveness and respect. As Fowler (2006) reminded, "Stories have power but I want to make a distinction between a story and a narrative. A narrative includes not only the story, but also the teller, the told, the context and conditions of the story telling, and the reasons and intentions for narrating" (p. 9). Rather than ignoring our identities, they are an integral part of the analysis. We work as a team to recognize, articulate, and examine our potential biases and/or blind spots, while also "[valuing our] own perspectives which can lead to insights derived from a particular way of seeing" (Kramp, 2004, p. 115), working to heed Fowler's (1990) plea "to attend to the hidden truths in ourselves" (p. 78). As Johnson-Bailey (2004) noted, "It is well to remember that the exotic, entertaining, and harmless 'Other' can only exist in contrast to the uninteresting, observing, and authoritative norm. Therefore, the essentialized average or representative culture occupies a place that is replete with power" (pp. 128-129). Thus, we considered our respective positionalities and the ways these texts position readers, ourselves included.

We offer our work not only as one application of critical literacy but also to purposefully position adoption as an aspect of diversity that warrants our attention and reflection. YA novels, in this case, are indeed narratives: the reader as the "told" and the author as the "teller." With this in mind, we work to anticipate through our analysis what readers with

little to no personal experience with adoption (as is so for author two) are potentially being shown through what Bishop (1990) called the mirrors and sliding glass doors of the text. We have established that while adoption-formed families are common, meaningful opportunities to explore what that means for individuals and families may be much more limited; alternately, as is often so in TV and film, it is both abundant and stereotypical. Indeed, the reasons and intentions behind the narrative may be conscious or unconscious, making our task all the more urgent as we carry out our own work with adoption as an aspect of identity that must be considered in conversations around diversity, representation, and the meanings we each make through story.

To engage with a text from a critical literacy perspective, a reader must be actively aware of social tensions related to power and justice. Leland and Harste (2000) reminded us that every story is told from "a particular point of view" and is "undeniably colored by this perspective" (p. 3). The reading act goes well beyond comprehending what a text "says" to considering the ideological stances and interests being served (Janks, 2009; Luke & Freebody, 1997), noting what perspectives are privileged, questioning what voices are missing (Edelsky, 1999), and considering the resulting social and educational implications. Engaging as readers in critical examinations of social representations and inequities in texts is vital if we are to develop a language to speak for inclusion and respect (McLeod, 2008).

As adoption is seldom viewed as an aspect of diversity, the existing power dynamics are very often ignored, overlooked, essentialized, and/or underestimated. Similarly, Wegar (2006) explained that the pervasive discourse surrounding adoption has taken a "noncontextual psychopathological bias" (p. 3) that situates adoption as inherently problematic and adoptive families and adopted

individuals as the other in a biocentric paradigm. Instead, she suggested a sociocultural stance that considers how adoption experiences are framed within historical and social contexts, acknowledges the complexity and diversity of adoption experiences, and focuses on agency—an approach we take here. Viewed from the broader context of critical theory (McLaren, 1992), "literacy may link hope to possibility through developing various means of resisting oppression so that a better world can be summoned, struggled for, and eventually grasped" (p. 10).

Method

Data Collection

We began searching the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (http://www.clcd.com) using the terms "adoption," "adoptive families," and birth parent," narrowing the search for books published after 1990 ranging from early childhood to young adult levels. We also did basic Internet searches (Google, Amazon), but the books we found were included in the results from CLCD. This initial search yielded 383 books. We decided to narrow our focus to contemporary realistic fiction (books portraying experiences realistically representative of current sociocultural contexts) because of the power it holds for readers who are seeking to understand their own journeys. We further narrowed our scope to YA literature in response to our recognition that these books could bring forth some particularly interesting conflations of adolescence and adoption.

Since we were interested in the portrayals young readers would encounter in their personal reading, we searched school and public libraries in three nearby cities and popular online and brick-and-mortar bookstores to determine which of the books on our list were readily available. Any book that required extensive effort to find was removed from the list. We decided to focus on books published

after 2000 as the most relevant selections to our audience. We did include one 1998 publication that was a partner to another book by the same author. After this narrowing process, we ended up with 37 recently published, contemporary realistic fiction books that were likely to be readily available to teen readers, thirty addressing adoption from the adoptee perspective, five stories of expectant parents, one from the perspectives of both adoptee and birth parent, and one from the perspective of the biological child of a parent who had placed another child for adoption.

Data Analysis

We explored our question through qualitative content analysis, an approach through which researchers analyze and interpret texts "in the contexts of their uses" (Krippendorff, 2013, p. xii). Content analysis may be approached in a variety of ways, depending on the nature of the text, the focus of the research, and the theoretical stance of the researcher (Weber, 1990). Hseih and Shannon (2005) explained that what binds the various applications is "the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 2). It is an approach that is particularly well-suited to making, applying, and considering inferences across multiple contexts; in this case, multiple texts and multiple researchers. Krippendorff (2013) noted that qualitative content analysis is rooted in traditions of literary analysis, social science, and critical scholarship, and involves close reading of text for the purpose of interpreting with awareness of the researchers' own socially constructed understandings. In this case, our critical literacy framing brought us to interrogate socially constructed assumptions about adoption as represented in these texts.

Multiple authors read each selection twice independently: first for a general overview then to note and code aspects relative to adoption. Our analysis process was reflexive and cumulative; we read and analyzed individually an agreed upon set of books then met to discuss our analyses and come to shared understandings. Early meetings resulted largely in identification and explication of categories from shared insights. With these categories in hand, we returned to our reading, applying categories to new books to find supporting data and also identifying new, emerging categories. Coming together again, we entered new data from the texts that supported and/or refined existing categories and added categories that emerged from our readings of new books. We continued this recursive process through the reading of all 37 books, resulting in 23 data categories and supporting text data for each (See Table 1 for categories).

Inferences about how adoption and adoptive families were depicted in the literature developed as we refined categories and reflected collaboratively on data recorded under each, looking for emerging patterns and themes. We kept extended memos of developing insights, adjusting and refining as each new book added angles or solidified developing understandings. We not only considered the various literary interpretations but also referenced our experiences as teachers and family members and sought additional insights from reading/viewing adoption-related scholarship, media, websites, and blogs. Our assertions stem from distillation and analysis of data across texts, categorized, collected, and interpreted through this process.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis revealed a variety of themes that illuminate particular perspectives on adoption while obscuring others. While these stories offer potentially valuable contexts for dialogue about social and cultural expectations of family, analyzed cross-textually, they also reveal perspectives that may privilege and

legitimize limiting and stereotypical views of adoption.

Throughout this discussion, we use terms generally accepted as positive adoption language (Borchers, 2003) but with some thoughtful adjustment. Since we are discussing and at times comparing depictions of the parents in the triad, we clarify those roles as "adoptive parent" and "birth parent." We do not, however, refer to the woman who is pregnant and considering adoption as a "birth parent" but rather as the "expectant parent," since no adoption action has taken place. Additionally, while a child in a family is just a child—there is generally no need to differentiate according to how the child joined the family—we do use the term "adopted child" as needed for clarification. For clarity, we refer to adoption books by title rather than just author. After the initial listing, titles are abbreviated to conserve space. Our findings, addressed and discussed below, reveal reiterated themes and images across texts that together construct a narrative about adoption that reveals some troubling assumptions but also open the door to important discussions about cultural and social identities, power and choice, and how adolescents are positioned and viewed.

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Archetypal Structures

Although archetypal literary analysis was not a goal of this study, we quickly became aware of archetypical structures present in these depictions of adoption. The concept of literary archetype stems from the work of psychologist Carl Jung (1968) who noted that human beings tell varied versions of essentially the same stories again and again across time and place. Jung observed that human beings universally recognize certain character types and

scenarios, suggesting that we share a collective unconscious that shapes the way we conceptualize and play out our lives. Jung called these recurrent motifs archetypes.

Campbell (1973) applied the concept of archetype to his study of mythology, illuminating consistent and pervasive archetypal themes and structures across cultures. In particular, Campbell's work focused on The Hero's Journey, an overarching narrative archetype in which the hero, confronted with a danger to home and heart, sets out on a journey during which he must overcome great challenges, but is also supported by guides and mentors, before returning home a changed being with solution and insight (See Vogler, 2007, pp. 8-9 for a helpful graphic overview of the Hero's Journey archetype.) Pearson's work (1986, 1991) further detailed the archetypical concept, articulating twelve common archetypes subsumed under the journey archetype, suggesting that by recognizing these shared human narratives we can better understand and influence our own personal journeys. Also, addressing the relevance of archetype to contemporary life, Vogler (2007) contended that writers who intentionally use archetypical narratives in crafting stories tap into the human psyche and, thus, tell stories that connect to and resound powerfully with an audience. Readers can instantly recognize and connect with archetypal patterns in stories. In essence, familiar archetypes serve as capsules for complex meanings that readers may take in with little effort or even overt awareness because they are so culturally familiar: "They reside in the heritage of imagination that is ours as humans and they carry meanings for us that arrive in our conscious imagination in holistic thematic apprehensions" (Proukou, 2005, p. 62).

Journeys. As noted above, the Journey is an overarching archetype in which the hero of the story is confronted with a problem and sets out from his or her every day existence to seek an answer to a problem, eventually returning home with the means to address that problem successfully. It subsumes other archetypes including, most relevantly here, the Orphan and Seeker archetypes as addressed below. Journeys feature prominently among these adoption stories (approximately 70% of our books), undertaken to find the adoptee's origins or, especially in birth mother stories, to seek physical and/or emotional safe haven. These journeys range from epic treks, potentially fraught with danger, (e.g. *Finding Miracles* [Alvarez, 2004]; *Carpe Diem* [Cornwell, 2009]; *The Wanderer* [Creech, 2000]; *Saffy's Angel* [McKay, 2002]; *Small Damages* [Kephart, 2012]) to briefer journeys closer to home (e.g. *A Brief Chapter in My Impossible Life* [Reinhardt, 2007]; *Bull's Eye* [Harvey, 2007]; *Ellen's Book of Life* [Givner, 2008]; *Get Real* [Hicks, 2006]; *Three Black Swans* [Cooney, 2010]; *Dillon Dillon* [Banks, 2002]), but all serve to help connect the adopted child or birth parent to truths, understandings, resolution, and/or acceptance about origins or situation. Not surprisingly, the Orphan and Seeker archetypes played out significantly in these books, and this strong presence has critical implications. The Orphan archetype deals with abandonment and learning to go through life alone without the parent figure. The hurting Orphan does not bond easily yet yearns to be cared for. In the journey toward such care, the Orphans may discover their own gifts. The Seeker may not have such a wrenching launch but sets forth into the world looking for a better world—a fuller existence. Seekers yearn, and this yearning is fulfilled when we "become real and give birth to our true selves" (Pearson, 1991, p. 124).

Abandoned and damaged. Abandonment plays out here not just as an assumed psychological subtext to adoption—the notion that the adopted child was abandoned by the biological mother and is, thus, wounded (Wegar, 2006)—but in a layered, rather "piled on" fashion. Adopted teens wrestle with the death and/or potentially terminal illness of an adoptive parent (*Ellen's Book of Life* [Givner, 2008]; *The Girl in the Mirror* [Kearney, 2012]; *The Midnight Diary of Zoya Blume* [Cunningham, 2005]; *The Secret of Me* [Kearney, 2005]; *Slant* [Williams, 2008]; *Small Damages* [Kephart, 2012]; *Whale Talk* [Crutcher, 2001]). A death in the immediate family launches the search for a birth parent (*Bull's Eye* [Harvey, 2007]; *Ellen's Book of Life* [Givner, 2008]). A woman is spurred by her husband's death to make an unorthodox arrangement to adopt the child of a pregnant teen (*How to Save a Life* [Zarr, 2011]). Adopted individuals learn about or connect with birth parents only to find the birth parents are dead (*Bull's Eye* [Harvey, 2007]) or dying (*A Brief Chapter in My Impossible Life* [Reinhardt, 2007]). Pregnant teens are abandoned or sent away by parents (*Pregnant Pause* [Nolan, 2011]; *Small Damages* [Kephart, 2012]), and friends and lovers take leave in the wake of pregnancy and birth (*Dancing Naked* [Hrdlitschka, 2002]; *Small Damages* [Kephart, 2012]; *Pregnant Pause* [Nolan, 2011]). Wrenching abandonment scenes are offered as the backstory to two of the international adoption stories: *The Midnight Diary of Zoya Blume* (Cunningham, 2005) and *Red Thread Sisters* (Peacock, 2012). Adoptive parents abandon their children as well: The mother in *Niner* (Golding, 2008) abruptly leaves and never returns, leaving the child to wonder if it was because she, the adopted child, wasn't good enough. A divorce in *When the Black Girl Sings* (Wright, 2008) relegates the father to an absentee parent. In this body of work, abandonment resounds powerfully as a circumstance of the adopted child and thus as a central, ongoing, even defining theme of the adoption experience as depicted.

The orphan's journey. True to the progression of the Orphan archetype, the wounded character may run from rejection to seek and claim freedom from dependence upon the rejecter and a new wholeness. This task is not accomplished, however, alone but rather in collective action. The Orphan finds others, themselves wounded and betrayed in some way, and through being cared for and learning to care, finds their own identity. For example, Mandy in *How to Save a Life* (Zarr, 2011), pregnant from a one-time sexual experience with a kind stranger, responds to a post on a "seeking to adopt" discussion board and boards a train, running from an abusive home to seek safe haven with a potential adoptive parent for her unborn child. She is taken in by a widow and her teen daughter; while the widow and her daughter are both struggling with grief, the widow hopes to find healing in starting anew while parenting another child. In an unconventional ending, strongly reflective of the Orphan tale, Mandy ends up being adopted herself and is able to parent her child in the arms of a healing family. It is interesting to note that this abandonment theme was rife through the birth parent stories on the list, and also strongly realized in the international adoption stories listed above, as vivid abandonment scenes underscored the state of woundedness in the protagonists.

The orphaned protagonists are depicted as determined, even brave; their journeys suggesting agency. However, they also tend to perpetuate a negative view of birth mothers as flawed and lacking agency, birth fathers as uncaring and uninvolved, the adoption process as shady, and adoption as a secret to be protected—all significant themes that arose in our analysis and that will be articulated more fully in this article.

Seeking true self. Seekers, too, set forth in search, but their launch is more due to yearning than reeling from painful rejection. We noted that Seekers often launch from loving contexts. They are cared for, but they feel a call (Pearson, 1991) to know

about their origins and, therefore, to know themselves. Like the Orphans, they find their way in consort with others, but this community is likely to include family and/or friends who accompany them. The search is launched not from rejection but from discovery, a hidden adoption (a betrayal, but not abandonment) or an event that sparks curiosity in origins. True to the archetype, the Seeker in these stories struggles with the decision to set out on the journey, fearing that doing so may compromise their already comfortable family community. In these stories, the search does change the known—the adopted child and the adoptive family—but in most cases, the depiction is that they are richer and stronger for the Seeker's courage. While these stories may well perpetuate the common psychological view that individuals who were adopted are inherently incomplete, they also were more likely to present what we see as a more realistic portrayal of a natural and healthy curiosity to know one's entire story and of the adoptive family as not in danger of being torn apart but rather even potentially enriched by seeking out and connecting with origins. However, some Seekers' journeys lead the character – and the reader – into a dramatic labyrinth of absurdity that paints a picture of adoption as outrageous, dangerous, even absurd (See Table 2 for examples of books that feature Orphans and Seekers).

Thematic depictions of adoption

Overall, though, the strong sense of loss that permeates these books, even the more positive and plausible seeker pieces, suggests overall that adoption is essentially loss. Examined through a critical lens, these journeys may suggest agency on the part of the individual—a determination to explore one's own questions about origin, self, and society (e.g. *A Brief Chapter in my Impossible Life* [Reinhardt, 2007]; *Ellen's Book of Life* [Givner, 2008]; *Finding* Miracles [Alvarez, 2004]; The *Wanderer* [Creech, 2000]*).* Often, though, individuals in these

stories are depicted as incomplete, struggling, or caught up in drama precipitated by the circumstances of their adoption (e.g. *Carpe Diem* [Cornwell, 2009]; *Get Real* [Hicks, 2006]; *Three Black Swans* [Cooney, 2010]; *Bull's Eye* [Harvey, 2007]). Wegar (2006) noted that this deficit view is common in adoption discourse and warrants disruption. Because archetypical conceptualizations factor heavily into the psychological perspectives that undergird much of the prevalent psychological framing of adoption (Wegar, 2006), and because they are so easily, and thus potentially uncritically, ingested by readers, the messages they carry are likely to be readily accepted. Without critical awareness, the traditional themes associated with these familiar structures can easily become fossilized into stereotypes as addressed below.

Adoption as problematic and/or corrupt. Common stereotypes that frame adoption as inherently problematic, potentially corrupt, and even dangerous are liberally present in these books. Often the plot depends heavily upon adoption as a problem experienced by the protagonist that must be solved. While societal attitudes about secrecy in adoption are rapidly changing—statistics indicate that 97% of adopted children know of their adoption at an early age (Harris Interactive Inc., 2002)—in eleven of the 30 books written from a child's perspective, the main character suddenly becomes aware of their adoption or discovers some other hidden way that adoption has been part of the family experience. That startling revelation launches an emotional journey to discovering the truth. For example, preteen Dillon in *Dillon Dillon* (Banks, 2002) is shocked to discover that his birth parents were his adoptive father's deceased sister and brother-in-law. Samara's (*That's Life, Samara Brooks*

[Eherenhaft, 2010]*)* parents tell her on her 12th birthday, and 11-year-old Verbena (*As Simple as it Seems* [Weeks, 2010]*)* learns of her adoption when she discovers a card her mother is sending to her birth mother. In *The King of Slippery Falls* (Hite, 2004)*,* 15-year-old Lewis is told by his birth parents that they adopted him after a mysterious woman with a thick accent handed them a baby in a basket then disappeared. High school junior Nick in *The Lucky Kind* (Sheinmel, 2011) discovers that his father placed a child for adoption years ago. In *Heaven* (Johnson, 1998), 14-year-old Marley learns that the couple she knows as mother and father are, biologically, her aunt and uncle. Nineteen-year-old Sarah in *Somebody's daughter: A novel* (Myung, 2009) has always known she was adopted from Korea, but she learns the story she had been told all her life, that her parents died in a car accident, was untrue, so she launches a search for her birth mother. Discoveries like these seem enigmatic in the current social environment where adoption has become increasingly open, with birth and adoptive families more likely to interact (Pertman, 2011). Although the characters ultimately affirm their places in their adoptive families, this particular plot perpetuates stigmatic views of adoption as a shameful secret.

> "At times, adoption serves essentially as a literary device—the central source of dramatic tension in a narrative that may be strictly possible but is far from plausible or authentic."

At times, adoption serves essentially as a literary device—the central source of dramatic tension in a narrative that may be strictly possible but is far from plausible or authentic. Hidden adoptions lead to shocking revelations; adoptive systems, processes, and even laws are circumnavigated. Twin boys, secretly separated at birth, discover each other by chance and switch lives in *Pinch Hit* (Green, 2012). Samara Brooks (Ehrenhaft, 2010) discovers through a DNA test at school that her father is a mad scientist.

In *Three Black Swans* (Cooney, 2010), the attending physician makes secret and illegal placements for two unwanted triplets with sisters who hide the adoption and raise the girls as cousins, while the third is sent home with the birth parents. The birth mother in *Carpe Diem* (Cornwell, 2009), who is also the mother of the adoptive father, blackmails the adoptive parents into allowing a meeting. They consent to send the child on a dangerous journey with the birth mother in exchange for her keeping the secret. Repeatedly in these stories, parents knowingly and actively lie and scheme to maintain secrecy, seemingly to protect a family structure portrayed as fragile because of adoption. While these stories may grip the reader, the misrepresentation of adoption borders on exploitive.

Images of the adoption triad. Thirty of the books in this study are written from the perspective of the adopted child and adoptive family; the other seven focus on birth parent or expectant parent experiences. Analysis of how birth parents and adoptive families are portrayed reveals issues of agency and access related to social positioning and power, including some troubling assumptions.

Birth parents and expectant parents. In general, birth parents were not represented favorably; rather, characterizations tended to support stereotypes about expectant parents being unable or unfit to parent, a finding in line with Jerome and Sweeney's (2014) study of adoption books aimed at young readers. In the eight books portraying international adoptions, birth fathers are largely relegated to little more than an assumption and birth mothers are presented sympathetically but uncritically. Whether through supposition or a glimpse of the story, they are depicted as doing the best they can in circumstances beyond their control. In *Red Thread Sisters* (Peacock, 2012), there is a wrenching scene in which the birth mother, who has just given birth to a son, tearfully abandons her five-year-old daughter on the steps of an orphanage. Similarly, in *The*

Midnight Diary of Zoya Blume (Cunningham, 2005), Zoya recalls begging her mother to take her home with her only to be tricked , then forced, in an effort to get her in the door of the orphanage. "You take her. I can't anymore," states the desperate birth mother. In *Finding Miracles* (Alvarez, 2004), Millie finds that she was left in an orphanage in the middle of a civil war by young parents caught up in the struggle. Joseph, in *Kimchi and Calamari* (Kent, 2007), searches for his birth mother among tales of women who leave their babies in public places to be found and cared for. This uninterrupted depiction of birth mother as victim to circumstance does not afford a window into the complexity of either person or situation. We see this cumulative portrayal as particularly problematic as international women, already framed as "other" in the United States, are portrayed as lacking agency over their own circumstances.

Domestic birth parents, on the other hand, tend to be portrayed in a less than sympathetic light. The 24 domestic adoptions depicted varied in circumstance, yet over half portrayed or actively implied that the birth parents were either wildly irresponsible, addicted, and/or mentally ill. Thus, the birth parent who is available for potential contact ostensibly presents a tangible danger for child and family. In two cases, *Carpe Diem* (Cornwell, 2009) and *Get Real* (Hicks, 2006), the danger plays out directly in the plot as the birth parent actively overrides the wishes of the adoptive parents and places the child in danger. The birth mother in *Three Black Swans* (Cooney, 2010) is the most stereotypically negative. Cold, evil, conniving, villainous, even criminal (the birth father is the bumbling accomplice), she is a nightmare of fairy tale proportions. These portrayals actively perpetuate one of the most widely held unsubstantiated stereotypes about adoption: birth parents are a danger to the adoptive family (Harris Interactive Inc., 2002).

Expectant parents, all female with the exception of Bobby in *The First Part Last* (Johnson, 2004) and Nick's father in *The Lucky Kind* (Sheinmel, 2011)*,* are young and grappling with difficult contexts beyond the unplanned pregnancy. These young women are pushed out by their parents, literally (*Small Damages* [Kephart, 2012]; *Pregnant Pause* [Nolan, 2011]) or emotionally (*Dancing Naked* [Hrdlitschka, 2002]; *Invisible Threads* [Dalton & Dalton, 2006]), or are escaping abuse (*How to Save a Life* [Zarr, 2011]*).* Kenzie in *Small Damages* (Kephart, 2012) is mourning the recent death of her father. In four of the seven stories, the expectant parent chooses to parent rather than place for adoption. Both the young woman who placed her child for adoption and the one for whom the placement is inferred in the text are shown grappling with the consequences but also finding a clearer view of who they are and the possibilities ahead. When a decision to parent is made, only fleeting glimpses of the teen as a parent are offered (again, with the exception of Bobby). In general, expectant parents are shown as seeking solutions but also clearly victimized by deserting and/or abusive partners and, often, cruelly judgmental adults. We are given only speculative glances of the road ahead, but the message that the world is a dangerous, disparaging place for pregnant teens resounds clearly. Bobby's story is an outlier. Though initially considering adoption, when Bobby's partner dies, he decides to parent his daughter instead. Bobby struggles to shoulder the responsibility but also receives support from his family. *The First Part Last* (Johnson, 2004) offers a complex, but not idealized, picture of single-parenthood and a disruption to the pattern of representation of expectant parents.

Adoptive families. Adoptive families in these books generally reflect statistics from the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents in which 73% of adoptive families identify as white, two-thirds of adopted children live in two-parent families, and 40% of children are of a different race than their parents— 85% of those due to international adoption. When ethnicity is mentioned, the adoptive parents in these books are white and eight of nine cross-race adoptions are international. Families consist mostly of two committed partners, all of whom are married except for one same-sex partnership. One book shows an adoptive mother recently made single through divorce; another depicts a mother parenting alone because her husband is in jail. In *How to Save a Life* (Zarr, 2011), the woman considering adoption is widowed and a single parent of a teenage daughter. The variation in the socioeconomic status of the families, ranging from "money is not a problem in this family" (Zarr, 2006) to middle class, also seems in line with data suggesting families adopting privately have higher incomes than families adopting out of foster care. Families adopting internationally were more likely to be firmly middle class or to struggle financially than families adopting domestically. While these depictions do not seem to perpetuate negative stereotypes of adoptive families, they do potentially perpetuate social norms regarding who gets to adopt (Miall & March, 2006). More diverse depictions could serve to broaden the view of possibilities in this realm.

Thematic portrayals of adoptive family dynamics also reveal some interesting trends and suggestions about the nature of adoption. In families with siblings, the siblings are biological offspring of the adoptive parents. This configuration seems to allow the author to provide insight into the role that adoption plays in the family and may serve to provide background commentary on the strength and quality of the relationship between the parents and the adopted child. Sibling relationships are depicted as being positive and strong, but often the adopted child's search for a birth parent disrupts and challenges the sibling's sense of a safe and whole family. Sibling relationships often need to be

reestablished after the search journey as the family dynamic has been changed. Grandparents are often cast as foils: cold and critical balancing the warm, accepting parents (e.g. *Finding Miracles* [Alvarez, 2004]; *The Midnight Diary of Zoya Blume* [Cunningham, 2005]), solid and wise when the emotional context is chaotic (*e.g. Truth With A Capital T* [Hegedus, 2010]; *The Wanderer* [Creech, 2000]; , the grandparent figure in *Small Damages* [Kephart, 2012]), or in one case of horrid parents (the couple in *The Black Swans* [Cooney, 2010]), heroically nurturing. Adjusting and refining to embrace adoption as a family affair often plays out in a metaphorical sense through the journey, resulting in expanding family borders (*e.g. A Brief Chapter in my Impossible Life* [Reinhardt, 2007]; *Finding Miracles* [Alvarez, 2004]; *When the Black Girl Sings* [Wright, 2008]*) or solidifying existing familial bonds (*e.g. Bull's Eye* [Harvey, 2007]; *Trophy Kid or How I was Adopted by the Rich and Famous* [Atinsky, 2008]; *That's Life, Samara Brooks* [Ehrenhaft, 2010]). Despite often otherwise troubling framing, a common theme is that the love of the family is strong enough to expand and embrace origins. While this is a positive theme for all individuals joined through adoption, the message is impoverished by a negative, marginalizing portrayal of birth parents.

> **"Despite often otherwise troubling framing, a common theme is that the love of the family is strong enough to expand and embrace origins."**

Gender Perspectives

Adoption in these texts is largely a female story focused in many ways on mothering, a finding in line with Hinojosa, Sberna, and Marsiglio's (2006) assertions about the dominance of feminine imagery—and resulting marginalization of fatherhood—in cultural scripts of adoption. Mothers—expectant, birth, and adoptive—are by far the most developed and scrutinized characters in these books. Not surprisingly, and with one exception (*The First Part Last,* Johnson [2004]), expectant parent stories focused on the pregnant woman, but the side relationships also lean the focus heavily toward the feminine. Expectant fathers are usually drawn as unsupportive and distant; interestingly, the two one-night-stands are among the most appealingly drawn of these characters. Pregnant young women tend to have tumultuous relationships with their own mothers who are portrayed as judgmental or too distracted by their own interests and/or problems to actively support their daughters. Their fathers are either absent (dead or long deserted) or deferential to the mothers. The expectant mothers are then left to negotiate the pregnancy with the help of others.

Birth parents are female here, too. When a birth father is considered, it is usually through an imagined lens, often a brief and passing wondering. Birth parents who are fully known to and/or engage with the adoptive family are almost entirely female and often presented as flawed, from mentally ill (e.g. *Lola and the Boy Next Door* [Perkins, 2010]; *My Road Trip to the Pretty Girls Capitol of the World* [Yansky, 2003]*) to reckless and insensitive (*e.g. Carpe Diem* [Cornwell, 2009]; *Three Black Swans* [Cooney, 2010]; *Get Real* [Hicks, 2006]). Present birth fathers do not fare well in the stability factor, either, as each of the three depicted (*That's Life, Samara Brooks* [Ehrenhaft, 2010]*; My Road Trip to the Pretty Girl Capitol of the World* [Yansky, 2003]*; Bull's Eye* [Harvey, 2007]) are shown as morally compromised. Notable exceptions can be found in *A Brief Chapter in my Impossible Life* (Reinhardt, 2007) and *Ellen's Book of Life* (Givner, 2008) in which adoptive families and birth parents develop positive relationships.

Within the adoptive family, the emotional action tends to lean toward the feminine as well. Mothers are generally strong and capable; most either holding relatively high status jobs and/or serving as the primary wage earner. Fathers, when developed as characters, are often portrayed against common gender norms—the nurturing family cook or the approachable, easy to confide in parent. Intimate conflict in the family is most often between the mother (or grandmother) and the child. When women are single, they tend to parent daughters; *The First Part Last* (Johnson, 2004) and *Zen and the Art of Faking It* (Sonnenblick, 2010) are exceptions. Even in *Niner* (Golding, 2008), where the children live with their father, the emotional focus of the story is on the missing mother, with the adoptee struggling with what is presented as a dual abandonment—first her birth mother and then her mother, both for unknown reasons. Furthermore, 70% of the adoptees in this collection are female, and interestingly, stories featuring male adoptees seem to be told with a lighter, more humorous or even irreverent tone than their female-focused counterparts.

Adoption as a Social Context

Adoption challenges dominant notions of family and opens the door to conversations about culture and social identities, including race, religion, gender, sexual identity and social class (Wegar, 2006). Interestingly, some of the books in this study that offered the most intriguing sociological perspectives were also books that used adoption more as a context than a focus. Unlike books that set up adoption as a problem to be solved, in these the family has been open about adoption from the beginning, and the family relationships are depicted as generally healthy and thriving. In this case, rather, the adoption sets the stage for a socially significant issue to rise for discussion. A cross-race adoption in *Whale Talk* (Crutcher, 2001) sets the scene for exploration of racism while another in *Zen*

and the Art of Faking It (Sonnenblick, 2010) invites readers to explore the struggle to embrace complex identities. The cross-cultural adoption in *A Brief Chapter in my Impossible Life* (Reinhardt, 2007) allows for exploration of religious and cultural differences. In *Lola and the Boy Next Door* (Perkins, 2010), the focus is on the teen romance but the loving relationship between her two gay fathers is also central. Laura's desire to alter her eye-shape surgically to escape bullying in *Slant* (Williams, 2008) opens the door to discussion about racism, bullying, and socially defined beauty norms. While we found these books to be particularly well-written and thought provoking, we also noted that this use of adoption as a vehicle for exploration of another social issue has the potential to sideline significant discussion about how adoption is, in and of itself, a complex and meaningful component of diversity.

Conclusions

Adoption narrative exposes the human condition--our hopes, relationships, vulnerabilities, and strengths—and raises significant questions about what family structures and contexts are valued, who has power and choice in relationships and how adolescents are positioned and viewed. Since adoptive families inhabit a small portion of the books readily available to teen readers, each has the potential for providing "the" take on adoption that a particular reader may get. The power of the representations in one book may be counterbalanced by alternate representations in other texts; however, repeated images, collectively, speak with a power beyond the individual circumstance. As Cortés (2005) noted, "The constant reiteration of certain themes, when dealing with that subject (combined with the omission of other themes) can create, disseminate, and/or maybe inculcate a distorted public image" (p. 57).

Leland and Harste (2002) noted the importance of engaging readers with books that make difference

visible, particularly those differences that make a difference in people's lives. Adoption being such a difference, our analysis suggests that the complexity of adoption is not fully represented in the literature readily available to young adult readers. Negative, oversimplified, or unexamined depictions have ramifications not only for how adopted teens and teen birth parents view themselves and their families but also for how those conceptualizing adoption from the outside view others. Too often accuracy and authenticity are lost in pursuit of a gripping tale. The broader picture of what adoption looks like and means to those involved needs to be more fully explored and extended.

Recommendations

As we offer these insights, we encourage those who guide and work with young adult readers to consider portrayals of adoption in selecting materials, intentionally including books about adoption with a critical eye toward balanced and accurate portrayals.

Further, we urge critical dialogue about such books, encouraging readers to question portrayals and entertain possibilities. While many books noted in this study provide opportunities for critical discussion, we particularly recommend the books listed in Table 3 for adoption perspectives and opportunities for dialogue. The following considerations will be useful in guiding book selection overall:

* Be intentional about selecting books that reflect adoption and adoptive families for inclusion in classroom and library collections. Select books that explore adoption, rather than exploiting it as a dramatic context, and that offer multiple perspectives to open the window of possibility of how and why families are formed and who can be part of a family.

* Avoid common adoption stereotypes (e.g., irresponsible, young birth parents; the "dangerous" return of the birth parent; absentee or even cruel birth fathers; high-income, white adoptive parents; adopted children framed as being "incomplete"), especially when the narrative turns on that stereotype.

* Look critically at the role adoption plays in the adopted character's life. Is it one aspect of the experience of a well-developed character, even if the storyline revolves around questioning and seeking? Consider that coming to understand one's identity is a core experience of adolescence, and that while adoption is a significant aspect of identity, it is not all-defining. Rather, identity is layered and varying for individuals at different points in life.

* Is the family dynamic, especially difficult aspects, centered solely around the act of adoption or is adoption one (although significant) aspect? Do families operate as families, with all the flaws and wonders, or is the family story seemingly just a vessel for the drama of adoption? Are characters complex, or is adoption the main focus of their development, especially for the adopted child and his/her relationships with other characters?

* Examine the book for secrecy, as a need to hide adoption points to "a dirty secret."

* Are adopted characters portrayed as either wildly over-achieving (as if the value must be proven) or dysfunctional/damaged (as if the state of being adopted makes one more likely to have problems)?

* Are birth parents and/or expectant mothers portrayed as dysfunctional, passive and blasé, or inherently incapable? For birth parents, are they portrayed as a potential danger to the adopted child and adoptive family? If the birth parent does struggle with circumstances that might make parenting difficult, is the character fleshed out beyond that circumstance? Look particularly at father and mother roles (birth and adoptive): Are father characters present, active, and fully realized,

rather than caricatured fly-by-night bad guys? Are mothers developed in complex and balanced ways?

* Is the context developed, including circumstances and reasons that may lead to adoption as a choice, without demonizing the choosers?

* Are literature collections inclusive of various ethnicities, socioeconomic situations, genders and sexualities, religions, and family structures?

* Are characters depicted with agency and positive intent, especially relative to adoption?

* Consider the view of adoption and adoptive families a reader might take away from reading just this book or multiple books in the collection.

* Consider the language used in relation to adoption. Does word choice suggest less-than positive or overtly negative attitudes or that families formed by adoption are not "real" or "natural"?

* Consider the importance of counteracting common stereotypes, including those that may be historically accurate but less so today, when adding to your collection. While an individual situation may actually "match" a stereotype, large numbers of alternative exposures are needed to counteract it in the broader public arena. Go for the positive and reflective rather than the dramatic problem.

* Whatever your selections may be, it is important to engage readers in critical conversations about texts.

We also encourage authors and publishers to explore adoption in their work, again with an eye toward expanding representation while avoiding stereotypes or exploiting family in service of drama. It is important that this landscape viewed or "experienced" by the reader is a thoughtfully rendered representation, particularly if the author is not personally connected to adoption. We would also urge those who do have personal connections to adoption to avoid inadvertently essentializing their own points of view.

To researchers, we issue an invitation. Individual strands that emerged as a result of our work (e.g. gender identity and expectations, trauma and abandonment, interfamily relationships, race and culture representations, etc.) may be useful as lenses for more narrowly focused work. Viewing adoption as a multifaceted, norm-challenging, and significant aspect of social diversity, we invite research colleagues to further explore adoption in literature, its representations, and the potential implications for teens, families, and those who serve them.

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