

Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851-1950

Julie Berebitsky

Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001

Reviewed by Amy Cuomo

The history of adoption in the United States is an expansive topic that could prove daunting for a less able historian than Julie Berebitsky. In *Like Our Very Own*, Berebitsky offers a carefully wrought picture of the changing ideology that surrounded adoption in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The author summarizes her book's purpose: "Rather than providing a historical survey of adoption practices, this work examines adoption for what it can tell us about Americans' changing understanding of the family." In order to accomplish her mission, however, Berebitsky gives her reader excellent insight into adoption practice. The author's historical research is meticulous; she cites records from orphanages, social workers' case files, and correspondence from prospective adoptive parents, as well as those relinquishing a child for adoption. Closed adoption records required the author to search for additional material to understand the meaning of adoption. As a result, Berebitsky also considers material found in popular magazines of the day.

Divided into five chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue, the book analyzes the United States' changing perspective on adopted children, adoptive parents, and what these changes reveal about cultural understandings of family. Chapter one explores the foundations of early adoption laws and takes the reader through the early history of U.S. adoption, using specific case studies of orphanages such as the Washington City Orphan Asylum and the Board of Children's Guardians. Reproductions of adoption contracts and orphanages are included and serve as historical backdrop to adoption in the nineteenth century. In addition to developing a legal analysis of early adoption procedures in the United States, Berebitsky examines eugenic concerns regarding "tainted blood." She notes that while many parents legally adopted their children, others chose to raise children without adopting them because they were daunted not only by the legal quagmire attached to adoption, but also by its cost. Thus, the author explores cultural attitudes that questioned the ability of the law to make a family.

Chapter two studies a specific adoption campaign launched by the popular magazine, *The Delineator*. Berebitsky's analysis of the campaign, which endorsed "rescuing" children through adoption, shows how the magazine sought to sway public perception of adoption as less a personal choice than a public service. In her third chapter, Berebitsky examines the cultural stigma

of childlessness in the first half of the twentieth century and the growing concept of what constitutes a “real mother.” The author notes the contradiction that women who adopted children were often denied the “status” of biological mothers but could be considered “superior citizens.” Chapter four depicts a growing prejudice against single mothers who wished to adopt and notes that this change of attitude became pervasive by the 1940s. The author summarizes her research succinctly: “Single women still adopted after 1920; however, there was no longer popular support for their motherhood. And by the 1950s, it appears that virtually no single women adopted.” Chapter five considers the divide between public adoption agencies that employed social workers and philanthropic women who worked with private adoption agencies to find adoptive homes for children.

Berebitsky’s study reveals that “[t]hroughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the demand for children greatly exceeded the supply of adoptable infants.” This demand for infants also spurred social workers to expand their notion of an “adoptable infant.” The epilogue cites current debates surrounding the institution of adoption, including the fear of racial genocide expressed by the National Association of Black Social Workers, which tried to prevent the adoption of black children by white families. Berebitsky further recognizes the effect of *Roe vs. Wade* on adoption, as there are now fewer children available for adoption.

Like Our Very Own is clear, accessible, and thoroughly researched. The book will appeal to readers who are interested in the history of the family and adoption.

A Mother Apart: How to Let Go of Guilt and Find Happiness Living Apart from Your Child

Sarah Hart

Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales: Crown House Publishing, 2008

Reviewed by Diana L. Gustafson

Self-help books for mothers line the shelves of bookstores and libraries. The numbers have grown since the latter-day assertions of Dr. Spock to the current-day pronouncements of Dr. Phil. Many of these books tell mothers how to love, protect, and care for their children at various stages of growth and development. For some women, these books can be a valuable source of information about how best to negotiate new terrain (what is normal and what is not; when to relax and when to seek help)—after all, there is nothing instinctual or natural