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In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories, by Rita J. Simon and Rhonda M. Roorda (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). 480 pages. \$20.00 (pb). ISBN 0-231-118295. Reviewed by Pamela Adams, Professor of Education, Dordt College.

Twenty-five to thirty years ago a number of white Reformed Christians adopted children from African-American or mixed racial backgrounds. Several social and political forces led these couples to consider transracial adoption. One force was the Civil Rights Movement that made many whites aware of the racial inequities in society. Another was their pro-life stance. These couples saw adoption as an important social structure for giving children in foster care a permanent home. Some of these families were originally seeking to adopt a white child but were open to transracial adoption when they were told of the need for adoption placements for black and mixed-race children. Others actively sought the adoption of a black or mixed-race child. There were also a number of families who were providing foster care and decided to adopt one or more of the children who were already in their care and some of these children just happened to be black or mixed-race.

My husband and I were one of these white Reformed couples. We were in our early twenties, had one birth child, and began to think about adding another child to our family. We grew up in the fifties and sixties and were aware of the Civil Rights movement, but it was not until we were married and joined a Christian Reformed Church in Connecticut that we were confronted with the horrors of past and present racial discrimination. Our minister preached passionately about these issues to our all-white church. This moved my husband and I to read some important books about slavery and its heritage and to realign our thinking about politics and race. At this same time, my mother-in-law began her many years of foster care for Bethany Christian Services. Seeing the infants of varying colors that she lovingly cared for created in us a desire to adopt rather than have another biological child. This all led to the adoption, in 1970, of our son David who is biracial. David is one of the adoptees interviewed for *In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories*.

Shortly after we adopted David, the climate for transracial adoption changed. The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) argued against transracial adoptions because the organization felt that this practice would lead to black children losing a sense of their racial identity and would affect not only the children themselves but also the entire black community. William T. Merritt, president of the NABSW, made the following comments in 1971:

Black children in white homes are cut off from the healthy development of themselves as Black people. The socialization process for every child begins at birth. Included in the socialization process is that child's cultural heritage which is an important segment of the total process. This must begin at the earliest moment; otherwise our children will not have the background and knowledge which is necessary to survive in a racist society. . . . We have committed ourselves to go back to our communities and work to end this particular form of genocide. (7)

In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories allows us to hear the arguments for and against transracial adoption, become aware of adoption statistics, and listen to the voices of twenty-four transracial adoptees. While the adoptees interviewed for this book were all from black or mixed black and white racial backgrounds and were adopted into white families, their stories are valuable for all people interested in adoption. I would particularly encourage anyone interested in adopting a child from another racial background to read this book. It will help them not only in the decision-making process but also in being better parents to their child should they choose to adopt.

One of the co-authors, Rhonda Roorda, is herself a transracial adoptee, a black woman raised by a white Reformed couple. After reading Rita Simon's work on adoption, Roorda contacted Simon and they agreed to work together on this book. Roorda conducted all the interviews but one: she herself was interviewed by Simon.

Simon and Roorda divide their book into three parts. Part I, entitled "Argument, Rhetoric, and Data for and Against Transracial Adoption," describes the history of transracial adoption and the efforts to block these adoptions. In the fifties and sixties in the United States and Canada, agencies were formed to connect black children with black parents. When these efforts failed to find enough black families, they turned to white families and some of the first transracial adoptions occurred. In the seventies, the NABSW started waging a campaign against transracial adoption while at the same time other groups worked to place as many black children as possible in permanent homes. A number of legislative acts sought to prohibit the use of race to delay or deny the placement of a child. The NABSW fought against the spirit of this legislation because they believe that for

black children foster care is preferable to placement in a white family. William T. Merritt believes that black children raised in white homes suffer identity problems, and fail to develop coping mechanisms for dealing with racism, and that transracial adoptions often end with the child being returned to the foster care system (8).

Simon and Roorda summarize the various studies of transracial adoption, which suggest there is no evidence to support the charges made by Merritt. When compared with white adoptees placed in white families, transracial adoptees fare very well in terms of racial identity, self-esteem, attachment to parents, and other measures of contentment with their adoption placement.

The longest and most important section of the book is Part II, "Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories." This part is indeed fascinating because, as the subtitle states, the children (now young adults) have the chance to tell us their stories. Roorda's questions sought to explore whether the NABSW's strong stance against transracial adoptions has merit. Roorda's interview schedule includes questions about family and the early years, attachments to parents and siblings, and self-identity. Roorda challenges the interviewees to consider not only whether they are happy with the family they were adopted into but whether their placement in a white family affected their perceptions of themselves as black Americans living in a society where race is a key factor.

The vast majority of the adoptees are very happy and indeed grateful that their families adopted them. They felt their families loved and accepted them. While many felt that being adopted by a black family would have been better for them, they felt grateful that their families rescued them from being victims of the foster care system. Several of the interviewees became social workers and see everyday the hardships that foster children face. Even when the foster care family is a good one, the lack of permanence deeply affects the children who long for a family of their own. Shecara expresses her thoughts about this in the following quotation:

I'd rather have been adopted as a baby by a white family than have been in long-term foster care until a black family came along to adopt me. I'd rather have been in a family setting, black or white, than in foster care. I know too many people, white and black, who are totally messed up to this day because they didn't have any family background. The bottom line is that race isn't as important to me as being placed in a family (115)

Even today the number of black, mixed-race, and special needs children seeking a permanent home is still very large. But as Jessica Pelton, one of the interviewees, said, "I'm completely happy with my family and love my family. I wouldn't ask for another family, but I think the issue is complex and goes deeper than first

impressions" (61).

The issue is indeed more complex, and identity becomes an important issue. While the families that adopted the children were very loving and accepting, the adoptees must live their adult lives in a world that may not be as accepting as their families. I believe Simon and Roorda made a wise decision in interviewing the adoptees during their young adult years. Since most of the interviewees were in their twenties at the time of the interviews, the issue of identity was particularly relevant. High school and college years are times of searching for all young people, and transracial adoptees have additional issues to deal with. While some felt that they had the advantage of being able to relate to both blacks and whites, some felt caught between the two worlds, not being truly white or black. This problem seemed particularly true for those who were biracial.

Roorda asked most of the interviewees whether their parents introduced them to black culture. Some said that their parents did and some said that they hadn't. This question was particularly interesting to me because my son David said in his interview that we had not done this, and this initially shocked me. However, after reading this book I understand his answer and perhaps the answers of others in the book that say their parents did not introduce them to black culture. It was not that we did not talk to them and read them books about black culture, it was that this information was filed along with the other things we taught our children. This information did not stand out because black culture was not something we knew personally but something we ourselves learned about second hand. There were times when I felt my oldest son, who is white, took more interest in African American issues than did David. Sometimes I wondered if David was trying to avoid thinking of himself as an African-American, but perhaps it was more that his older brother had more of an interest in history and was much more of a book worm. In this sense, I believe the NABSW is correct. Even the best-intentioned white family does not know what it is really like to be a black person in America and will have difficulties in preparing their transracially adopted child for many of things he or she will have to face in a racist society.

Iris, one of the more troubled interviewees, had some interesting insights into the troubles transracial adoptees face. Iris felt that her personal bitterness stems from being not white enough for whites and not black enough for blacks. The complexity of raising a child from another race is explained by Iris:

If you raise the child like he or she is your own, you run the risk of the child feeling alienated from his or her black side. But if you raise the child as if she is different—raising her as a black child and taking her to black cultural events—then the child

can't help but feel her parents see me as being different. (173)

Despite her many achievements, Iris and a few other interviewees are bitter about their inability to be truly comfortable in either world. While the biracial adoptees expressed this bitterness most frequently, several black adoptees also mentioned this problem. While their skin, hair, and facial features might look black, they speak, dress, and in other ways act like whites. These factors became barriers for them as they tried to build ties with the black community.

While the interviewees for this book may not be typical of all transracially adopted people, their stories are instructive. To some extent all of the adoptees have or had some confusion about identity, but all, with one exception, are adamant supporters of transracial adoption. As Nicole Tremitiere Yates said, "I'd rather someone ended up confused but had the opportunity to grow up in a loving family, regardless of race, than for the child to remain in foster care all of his or her childhood" (152). The interviewees did face confusing times in their lives but felt that the support, love, and values that their families instilled in them helped them to overcome their insecurities. The very strong faith of many of the families and adoptees was one of the key factors that helped

them in times of difficulties. Most of the interviewees were raised in Christian families, many of them Reformed, and it is this thread of dependence on God that makes this book so relevant to Christian adoptive couples.

Part III concludes that transracial adoptions can and do work. However, certain cautions are given. Agencies and adoptive families should make sure that the child is taught about his/her racial background and that the child's culture be a part of his/her everyday life. Denying a child's racial background can cause the development of a weak sense of identity. While we can't control all of the negative forces in society, we can teach the children about their cultural heritage. Making sure that they meet other transracial adoptees can also be helpful, particularly if the child's brothers and sisters are white.

Rita Simon and Rhonda Roorda have not only written a very interesting book but one that is extremely informative. Thirty years ago, the only book suggested to my husband and me when we were considering transracial adoption was *Edgar Allen*, a novel about an unsuccessful transracial adoption. Couples who are considering a transracial adoption today will be much better served by reading *In Their Own Voices*.

Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts, by Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Solway, 1999). 212 pp. ISBN 1-900507-82-X. Reviewed by Joanne Alberda, Professor of Art, Dordt College.

Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin have produced an academic but delightfully written book designed to fill a significant need for students who are contemplating a career or some active involvement in the arts. It is addressed to participants in all of the arts—visual, music, theatre, film, or any combination of the above—as well as interested observers and consumers of art.

The book began as a study guide written by Chaplin, and then it was developed into book form by Brand. In the preface, the authors acknowledge Chaplin's academic and philosophical input and Brand's inclination toward practical hands-on issues. The combination brings a lively discussion between the two which makes the book rich on both fronts. The authors employ the intellectual contributions of Francis Schaeffer and Hans Rookmaaker from the 1960's and 1970's as a foundation for the work of later writers such as Calvin Seerveld, Leland Ryken, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and others, each of whom "works from a deep commitment to biblical truth" (viii). The illustrations are rich and varied, and the text sparkles with relevant examples and down-to-earth language.

Art and Soul is divided into five parts, each made up of three or four chapters. In the first section, the authors provide a colorful description of the post-modern world as we might experience it at an exhibition, in the market place, or even within our homes. Beginning with the optimistic tradition of modernism, characterized by man's belief in his own capacity to understand and control the world, and followed by a more pessimistic post-modern era, where all truth is relativized and one's identity defined by one's self, the authors graphically illustrate how artistic activity has not been an easy journey for twentieth-century Christians who desire to work with integrity. Although *spirituality* is fashionable in the post-modern world, it has little to do with the spirituality embedded in the work of the great religious traditions of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Following the upheaval of the Reformation, the relationship between the church and the artist continues to be a painful one. One of the most satisfying characteristics of the book is that the authors not only offer windows of hope and opportunity for Christian artists, but clearly believe that they can and must work within the system to provide