

***The Market in Babies Stories of Australian Adoption*** By Marian Quartly, Shurlee Swain and Denise Cuthbert. Victoria: MONASH University Publishing

The removal of children from their biological or first families is inevitably contested. This controversy is in part testament to the enduring power and privilege attributed to the social institution of the family, where biological bonds created through blood, though severed by adoption, endure. This book reproduces this perspective and the reader is left in little doubt about the strength and sanctity of blood ties. This familial ideology is further legitimised by the historical accounts of exploitative practices, through which adoption is represented as being a danger to families.

The reader is taken on an historical journey through the development of adoption legislation in Australia where unpalatable examples of unregulated practice, abuse and exploitative tactics are highlighted. These scandals are not unique to Australia, as like other countries, Australia has particular periods of history where children, mothers, families and minority ethnic groups were exploited and abused in the name of adoption. Each example undermines the contemporary aim of adoption which is to provide a family for a child, and reveals that frequently this aim was not at the forefront of the decisions made.

An explicit and intentional ideology of children as a commodity runs throughout this text. The authors set out their claim of adoption as a market in the first pages of the introduction and the language of the market is used throughout to reinforce this position. The chapters highlight the ways in which children have been variously valued for their gender, their capacity to labour, their ethnicity, their hair and eye colour and their infancy. Yet, however distasteful such commodification is, it cannot be laid exclusively at the foot of adoption practice but must be seen as part of a wider discourse surrounding children, the changing state of childhood and its role in nation building over the two centuries discussed in the book. Adoption has always taken place within such discourse and, as a social practice it makes explicit the changing values placed on children more generally.

The text does not shy away from emotive language which at times inhibits the reader from determining for themselves how to interpret the legislation and the reader is left in little doubt that in Australia 'adoption is now a dirty word' (75). This book provides insight into why adoption is perceived this way and details how this contemporary perception has emerged through decades of poor practices which have, in some cases, necessitated state apologies to 'stolen generations' (97). A very powerful narrative which runs through the early chapters of the book is the voices of adoptees and first mothers. These individual stories provide a vivid reality to the practices outlined in the chapters and illustrate the injustice, inequality and uneven power distribution at play in the adoptions described. Relinquishing mothers have risen as a social and political force and are revealed here as being instrumental in the call for broader definitions of family to be embraced, the opening of sealed adoption records and the move towards more open adoption in Australia.

The book successfully balances a discussion of policy development across the states in Australia with personal accounts and individual cases that demonstrate the impact and consequences of particular policies. However, in contrast to the emphasis afforded first mothers, the stories of first fathers remain absent. Whilst this is indicative of the social construction of motherhood in contemporary

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society and specifically the role of mothers in kinship making, the absence of father's accounts leaves some stories unheard and therefore provides a partial view of first family perspectives.

Throughout the text adoptive parents are frequently pitched as oppositional to first families and to adoption reform, which provides insight into the tensions and divisions between all those involved in adoption in Australia. With the exception of one or two examples the stories of adopters are also scarce. This is to the detriment of the debate given the extent to which they are identified as key protagonists in creating and driving a market in babies. This consumer role is articulated explicitly in the summative chapters on intercountry adoption and surrogacy. Adoption is construed as being, 'at best allowing the adoptive parent access to other people's children' (138). The voices of adopters might have further justified the authors' prevailing argument but also allowed alternative perspectives to be considered.

Adoption numbers are decreasing in Australia as in other countries. In the growing global disquiet about surrogacy as an alternative for childless adults seeking to create a baby, it is important to retain what adoption can be for some existing children who need a family. Children's best interests are most frequently served in a family, biological or adoptive as the conclusion exploring open adoption describes. This book reminds us that adoption policy must be regulated and reformed with full acknowledgement of previous abuses to ensure that adoption can still be part of how we provide welfare for children.

SARAH RICHARDS  
University Campus Suffolk